

## **Kara Walker**

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- Materials by [Creative Time](#) about Kara Walker, *A Subtlety* (2014):
- Gretchen Holtzapple Bender, "[Why World Art is Urgent Now: Rethinking the Introductory Survey in a Seminar Format.](#)" *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, (2017), pp 13-14.

I was inspired to incorporate an in-depth discussion of Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* in my art history survey class based on Gretchen Holtzapple Bender's discussion in her article; she credits it with producing "perhaps the most invigorated session" of her class, and it had similar results for me. Creative Time has published a wealth of material related to the project online: a short video documenting the project and its inspiration, a lengthy curatorial statement, visual and textual resources used by the artist, and visual and textual resources related to the exhibition's themes. I presented Walker's work for discussion at the end of a thematic class exploring representation and the body in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, but it would also work as an interesting contemporary tie-in to a discussion of ancient Egyptian art, monuments in the ancient and/or modern world, or the use of historical references in art history. After giving students time to review institutional materials related to the project, they applied their own close looking and formal analysis skills to interpret the project and its effects for themselves.

### **Learning Goals:**

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Differentiate between and compare institutional perspectives on a work of art, audience response, and their own analysis.
- Draw connections between Kara Walker's work and other artworks, applying Lisa Farrington's arguments from her article "Reinventing Herself" as one critical framework.
- Discuss the stakes of figural representation and the use of stereotypes in the particular context of the black female body, and extrapolate the implications for the representation of other marginalized communities.
- Evaluate the success of Walker's work (both in terms of her intentions and audience response).

### **Activity:**

- Before class preparation:
  - o Before class, I had students read Lisa Farrington's 2003 "[Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude](#)" from *Women's Art Journal*. I found this article to be accessible and fruitful for an introductory survey level class:
  - o Alternatively (or additionally), Lorraine O'Grady's "[Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity](#)" (1994) would provide another excellent ground for discussion.
- After discussing Farrington's article in some depth (c. 10-15 minutes), we watched the video produced by Creative Time and I gave students some time (c. 10 minutes) to explore the other resources given on the website (curatorial

statement, artist's inspiration, responses to exhibition themes). I invited students to use their laptops/phones to access these, but I also brought a few printed copies of some of the written materials so that students could read them without a device. Following Bender's article, I framed all of these materials as the institutional perspective on the work.

- In class or in small groups, have students identify formal characteristics (scale, site, color, material, art historical reference for example) as a groundwork for discussion.
- In my class's discussion, students were particularly interested in the monumentality and the historical reference of the sphinx and Walker's use of exaggerated stereotypes and sexualization, particularly in relation to audience behavior (ie the many selfies in which viewers present themselves pointing to the figure's nipples or vuvla).
  - o Comparisons to Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) and Faith Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (1983) helped us explore debates over the different ways black female artists have engaged the mammy stereotype, and students were able to articulate other comparisons based on the Farrington article.
  - o Students were divided about whether or not Walker's work succeeded in producing the "giddy discomfort" the artist professes to seek, and the politics and ethics of that affect. There was a lively debate around what Bender beautifully articulated as the key question: "does the work compel viewers to practice and thus recognize their own racism in ways that are de-stabilizing productively—revealing the operations, heaviness, violence, and long history of racism and sexism? Or does it reside in the zone of spectacle in which people engage in a performance that does not result in 'ripples' ...that have real impact?" (14).