

# DAMN

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on information overload



# Slave

# Romance

If there's one thing you can always guarantee about the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall commissions it's that they always provoke. Monuments tend to celebrate the good, great, but also the really bad. American artist Kara Walker addresses a whole host of critical moments of modern history in her monument, what is remembered and what is forgotten. Inverting, subverting and reclaiming, *Fons Americanus* is an "origin story of the African diaspora" whose contents are very much still with us even if they are often ignored or rewritten.



Andy Warhol, when quizzed about life threw out the statement: "Being born is like being kidnapped, and then sold into slavery." And as strange as it sounds to couple our significance on Earth with slavery, Warhol was always addressing so many issues in a single utterance. His predicament was to do with the unease of being in and of the world. Because as much as he conquered the modern moment with his instant artworks, Warhol was constantly wrestling with his inner demons of being impressed by an avalanche of attention, to his wanting to be left alone. But outside it was also the moment of American apartheid, when black Americans were subject to bigotry and bloody encounters for the colour of their skin. And just as Warhol was turning popular culture into Pop Art, so the popping of pistols and police sirens were turning the city into an asylum for African Americans. In hindsight what Warhol was to say about being born appears more befitting of fellow American artist Kara Walker. Her work often draws attention to the subterfuge of the Commonwealth's subjects as slaves that overshadowed the interests of the New World. Warhol might well be guilty of glibly appropriating such sentiments, but possibly his anecdotal attitude to everything was to draw attention at the time to the plight of the black American all over again.

An admirer of Warhol, Walker is committed to understanding how images and information have set everything in stone, as though what happened in history was somehow an inevitable part of globalisation. In her accompanying catalogue essay for the recently

commissioned Tate Modern work *Fons Americanus*, Walker tallies up a list of the offending evidence against the rest of the world. The list includes Captain Paul Cuffee, who in the 18th century was born free into an African American family, becoming one of the wealthiest men in Massachusetts; the Black Loyalists, Africans who would join British military forces during the American Revolutionary War; and the Royal African Company, a trading company of the 17th and 18th century, whose regal title was cover for the movement of thousands of white and black men, women, and children to the American colonies where they served as field

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and farmhands for the residing landowners. Poignantly, Walker also includes her own English ancestry by way of a James Thorpe, who fathered a Negro son having gone from England to the United States in the 19th century, and subsequently saved her grandfather from "being entirely black." As she says, that allowed for him to "move up in his station", emphasising that to be black at certain moments in history was to fail to be regarded as a human being.

The work *Fons Americanus* becomes better addressed in her following paragraphs, about how the Black Atlantic was as much overwhelmed with the movement of people as it was of the commodities of coffee, cotton, and tea that

they were enslaved to harvest. The 13-metre tall sculpture becomes the latest in a long line of monumental installations and interventions in the entrance space of Tate Modern, appearing like a perverse trophy to slavery. There has been quite a reaction for Walker showing her work at Tate Modern stemming from the Tate galleries relationship to the Tate and Lyle companies (the two merged in 1921). Henry Tate made his fortune as a sugar refiner in the 19th century, bequeathing his considerable collection and donating £80,000 to the founding of what today is Tate Britain - and obviously the galleries take his name.

The Tate galleries have had to address the issue of its association to slavery, to the extent that they asked researchers at the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership at University College London to analyse the debate. Their conclusion was put out as a statement last year: "While it is important to emphasise that Henry Tate was not a slave-owner or slave-trader, it is therefore not possible to separate the Tate galleries from the history of colonial slavery from which in part they derive their existence." All of which Walker acknowledges as difficult ground, but it is also about taking her art to the pavilions and platforms of art where it will be noticed. It is about engendering a debate about what we understand of something, and of how it may well have come about. Less sugar and more solid structure, the Tate Modern has become central to the contemporary art experience in Europe

Walker's new work as a fountain is aesthetically devoid of the beauty we associate with these kinds

Hyundai Commission: Kara Walker: Fons Americanus  
Photo © Tate photography (Matt Greenwood)









*Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees  
Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh  
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop*

Strange Fruit, Abel Meeropol, published as a poem in 1937



Opaque, still, Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz  
Installation with super 16mm / HD, 10 min., 2014  
Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Werner Hirsch

of superlative outdoor ornaments, with it temporarily resting on the concrete floor of the Turbine Hall and not given licence to be outside antagonising the atmosphere of the country's long colonial history. But for her choice of material, replacing marble with more malleable softwood, and the situation and circumstances of the commission's intended location, the work at the Tate Modern is tailored for an art audience who will already be able to understand the illusion by looking at the fountain as art, and not a feature of our commemorative culture. Extending the artifice by seeing it as a place to rest and remove one's shoes, and tentatively poke a toe into the shallow waters of slavery.

The work is based on the Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham Palace, designed at the turn of the 19th century by British sculptor Thomas Brock to celebrate Queen Victoria, who is favourably flanked by personifications of *Justice, Truth and Victory*. Walker's icons appear much more troubling. Her fountain of recycled cork and softwood looks slightly idiotic for the intended clumsiness of the characters, a mish-mash of fanciful figures that appear either misplaced or uninvited as they are encircled by shark-infested waters. This isn't a monument celebrating the great and the good. Walker's fountain climbs up to the roof of the Turbine Hall, a memorial to all of the ills that have injected history with a kind of amnesia from its problematic past.

The artist is reluctant to participate in interviews, preferring to let her work speak for itself, which is wholly understandable if you have to address history head-on. Yet the sentiment and sensation of this

kind of work deserves greater engagement on her part. It cannot be that we are allowed to re-examine history alone, because it all-to-often becomes a lethargic exercise in which we approve of no one and pardon everyone. Walker's involvement is part of the activation of the work, and we need her sensibilities explained to us.

She explains something of that conundrum when she speaks, saying, "I think what is interesting - and maybe a little bit of a trap that I set myself - is I didn't want to be making work about slavery and I wasn't. Then I said 'the only thing people want to hear from me is about slav-

### Walker's new work as a fountain is aesthetically devoid of the beauty we associate with these kinds of superlative outdoor ornaments ...

ery because, apparently, the only thing I am is black.' So I said, 'I am going to take everything I have about power and desire - and use the tropes of the slave narrative or the slave romance, like the antebellum romance, as the way to talk about these themes, because it is something that clearly won't go away.'" Adding, "it will just keep being an unaddressed bugaboo in American culture". By appointing herself as an ambassador for such atrocities, speaking politically rather than poetically, isn't Walker allowing herself to be the subject of a softer slavery, by which we expect her, but the colour of her skin, to rally in favour of her families' family.

Taking from Warhol, Walker might well have severed her straightjack-

et, and removed the responsibility of being black by making work that is entirely her own - colours, faces, fashions, that are as likely of a white European as a black American. It is art that could turn on a knife-edge with her choice of titles, labels that are entirely slave driven, and that lambast the modern world for its inertia. They let her be a woman artist first, and black after. But that contradiction of being allowed to think for oneself, and to act on behalf of others, is a choice between ego, as Warhol enjoyed it, and greater interests, as Walker appears willing to take on.

All of that said, Walker's work is incredible for its monumentality. This is the case with the *Fons American* fountain and was also in evidence in *A Subtlety* (2014). Housed in the Domino Sugar Factory that was due to be demolished, the latter appeared as a sphinx and was formed by sugar, polystyrene, plastic and molasses. The woman rose from the floor of the former foundry Godzilla-like, and was as problematic for the artist as it was profoundly moving. To recall her obligation or intention, that of her role as spokesperson for slavery, only Walker could have made that sculpture. Ballooning black into the city's stratosphere, it engaged as many people as it enraged. The new work employs many more characters that explore our attitude and indifference to slavery, spilling batheable water and not blood over its two-tiered base. Her figures appear entirely misplaced, sabotaging the stage, in a moment of impossible ugliness in a world more orientated to beautiful things. In that sense, the work works, for its intrusion on our silence as subservience to everything that has gone before. Appearing almost like a comical cake, Walker's work is in no way testa-



ment to her ability to sculpt in the fashion of Nicola Salvi or Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The artist's contemporary take on the Italian baroque is to bastardise it with these slightly grotesque caricatures of the civilians and villains of modern history, who have suffered with, or enslaved the idle and the innocent.

The Tate Modern notes that the figures covering Walker's monument are derived from an array of art, historical, literary and cultural sources, which include J.M.W. Turner's *Slave Ship* (1840) and Winslow Homer's *Gulf Stream* (1899), amongst many others. Individually Walker explains the involving of figures like that of the capsized *Ship*, placed on the lowest tier of the fountain, close to the ground, "which gets nowhere without the sea to carry it;" that drifts in the general direction of *A Maroon Rebel*, dreadlocked and appearing to bedevil the water. To the rear of the sculpture is *The Pietà of Emmett Till*, who was a 14-year-old African American boy, tragically lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for mistakenly offending a white woman in a grocery store. Appearing like that of the body of the Unknown Soldier, it becomes more symbolic than specific. Bullet-holed, beaten, and bereaved of expression, Walker's figure appears to transcend the sins of slavery for salvation with God. Our upward gaze is then led to a second or inner tier, upon which a series of symmetrical sharks encircle the fountain. Uneasy in this thin layer of water, they appear washed up from beneath the concrete floor of the gallery. It's a play on British artist Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a shark in formaldehyde. Walker replaces 'death' with 'blackness', and 'living' with

'white', to refer to her conundrum, that of *The Physical Impossibility of Blackness in the Mind of Someone White*. Thrown in with this school of sharks is a solitary swimmer, who is more at home in a shallow pond than the open sea, desperately making his way to the edge of the fountain to where the audience is.

Walker's coupling of life and death is explained in her catalogue contribution as the intention to replace the mythological melting pot of nymphs and serpents that commonly ensnare monuments, with an unwritten reality. Above them is the unceremoniously seated *Cap-*

**"The only thing people want to hear from me is about slavery because, apparently, the only thing I am is black."**

*tain*, as a reference to Paul Cuffee, and *The Emperor Jones*, played by Paul Robeson in the 1933 black and white film directed by Dudley Murphy with an original story by dramatist Eugene O'Neill, about former Pullman porter Brutus Jones, a resourceful, self-assured African American who kills another African over a dice-game. Re-released in 2007, the play has since been heavily criticised as a 'racist relic'. To the left of the captain, included on an opposing side of the plinth is *The Kneeling Man*, who by a twist of fortune, and an encircling revolution, is repentant for his association with slaves. And then to the right of the sitting captain is a Goyaesque tree entitled *The Angel*, tied to it a rope that doubles up as a noose. That, as Walker would wish, amplifies Billie Holiday's lyrical version of Abel Meeropol's poem *Strange Fruit* (1939), of "Black

bodies swinging in the southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree". At its rear, likely a derogatory comment on Walker's resentment of the residing monarchy, is *Queen Vick*, or Queen Victoria. Cut in cork close to her chest is a coconut, which Walker explains as symbolic of 'ego', 'economics', and a source of 'energy'. Whilst under her heavy skirt is a cowering figure that draws attention to the Queen's longstanding melancholy.

Contorted figures are crowned at the pedestal's peak by a distressed-looking Venus, for which a particular source of inspiration was "the 19th century slave propaganda image *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*." Arms aloft, she appears to be surrendering to her fate of falling back into the water from whence she came. A steady spray falls from her breasts and mouth, mother's milk as seawater. More brutal than beautiful, Walker's Venus as she explains it, is a figure akin to a 'whore,' a 'host' and transformatively 'the daughter of waters.' Unlike the conventional image of Venus as the goddess of love, sex and beauty, here she is a chastened woman who is entirely at odds with everyone else around her. As with every element of Walker's fountain, the figure gives the work another layer of symbolic significance, even if aesthetically it fails to flourish as a fountain. /

Hyundai Commission 2019:  
Kara Walker: *Fons Americanus*  
Tate Modern, London, until 5 April  
[tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk)

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