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Art Review | 'After the Deluge'

Kara Walker Makes Contrasts in Silhouette in Her Own Met Show

By ROBERTA SMITH

Following in the footsteps of the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery in London and many others, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has invited a living artist to assemble an exhibition using works from its collection. As nearly as the museum can ascertain, this is a first for the Met.

The artist is Kara Walker, and she has mixed art from the Met's collection with some of her own work to create a superb exhibition; it demonstrates that bringing together artworks from different periods almost always generates new perceptions, and not just regarding art. The show markedly revitalizes the Met's relationship to contemporary art, even though some of the special power and pertinence is owed to Hurricane Katrina.

About a year ago, Gary Tinterow, the curator in charge of the museum's newly formed department of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art, issued a carte-blanche invitation to Ms. Walker, who is known for parlaying the genteel 18th-century art of cut-paper silhouettes into scathing, racially charged installations. She could do whatever she wanted in one of the underutilized mezzanine galleries in the Met's 20th-century wing: a show of her own work, of work from the collections, or a combination of the two. She opted for the combination and began to sort through the museum's holdings in American, European and African art.

But the project turned unexpectedly urgent for Ms. Walker when Katrina struck New Orleans, exposing racial inequities with a starkness perhaps unequalled since the time of the civil rights movement. The post-Katrina spectacle of deprivation, malfeasance and ineptitude inspired Ms. Walker to focus her exhibition on the murky confluence of race, poverty and water in art from various periods. She named it "After the Deluge."

The show's fascinating flow of images, ideas, styles and mediums has as many crosscurrents and undertows as the average river. Race or water figure, blatantly or subtly, in every item in the dense salon-style hanging: a selection of mostly American 19th-century paintings and cut-paper silhouettes, punctuated by Ms. Walker's own works, including a wall-size silhouette piece, three large framed works and 20 works from a series of small framed cut-paper pieces called "American Primitives" from 2001.

The candor with which Ms. Walker has explored America's seemingly insoluble knot of race, gender and sexuality can seem shockingly impartial. Her art plays no favorites; it openly courts political incorrectness similarly to the work of Sue Williams, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Vanessa Beecroft and the newcomer Tamy Ben-Tor. That she is an African-American woman seems to be the last thing on her mind: one of her central messages is that slavery visited degradation equally on all concerned and that its tragic legacy poisons life for all Americans.

Ms. Walker's artistic means are ingeniously apt to her assumption that the past is still with us. She came across the cut-paper medium while studying art at the Rhode Island School of Design in the early 1990's. She first expanded the medium into an ephemeral, twisted, thoroughly original form of installation art, and then pursued its implications in drawings, gouaches, magic-lantern projections and puppet-show videos. (Her wide range is also evident in her show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in Chelsea through April 1. It contains her latest video and a suite of small silhouette collages notable for using cut-outs in various colors.)

Ms. Walker's art is richly graphic in all senses of the word. Her stark black-on-white narratives — which render all people black, by the way — have persistently conjured up the antebellum South as an absurdist sideshow, where encounters between the races tended toward the grotesque: variously violent, sexual, scatological or bestial. Her installations in particular cast the figures as nearly life-size, and in our own time and space, like demonic memories that refuse to be suppressed. Her vignettes shift between the metaphorical and the credible, but manage to retain an engaging realism of gesture and expression.

If, like Goya, Ms. Walker is a pitiless satirist who skewers the human condition with a grace and precision tantamount to tenderness, you could almost say that Katrina is Ms. Walker's equivalent of Goya's Napoleonic Wars. But not quite: "After the Deluge" includes no post-Katrina work by Ms. Walker. Instead, it reminds us that poverty and even water have also been longtime themes for Ms. Walker; if anything, her work warned of the pathologies that Katrina unleashed.

For example, Katrina's devastation emphasized the marginalization of many black Americans. At the Met, Ms. Walker underscores the point with "Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)," her portfolio of lithograph-silkscreen prints completed last spring, and recently acquired by the Met. In them, her black silhouettes haunt enlarged versions of Harper's original engraved scenes of battle, death and retreat.

The role of water in the history of black people in America is shown as beginning with the Middle Passage from Africa, the subject of a hallucinatory five-panel gouache work by Ms. Walker. Nearby is John Warner Barber's fold-out book, illustrated with wood engravings, of the uprising aboard the Spanish slave ship Amistad, while a Congo power figure from the Met symbolizes the land that has been left behind. Other Walker pieces in this show allude to Mississippi River paddleboats and the cotton trade.

A short distance away hangs an anonymous copy from around 1778 of John Singleton Copley's "Watson and the Shark," which shows several people in a boat trying to rescue a pale white man from the jaws of death. Mr. Tinterow's label notes that that the prominent role of a black man in the rescue effort has provoked "continuous commentary." Next to it is Winslow Homer's "Gulf Stream" of 1899, a staple of the Met's American Wing, which depicts a muscular black man alone on a disabled boat in stormy, shark-infested seas. Its label informs us that questions about the man's fate were so persistent that Homer eventually added a small vessel on the horizon to suggest that help was on the way.

The numerous vintage silhouettes have an air of Victorian propriety that accentuates Ms. Walker's liberties with the form. Primness prevails even in "South Sea Islanders" by Auguste Edouart, which shows extravagantly dressed warriors engaged in ritual battle.

Other cut-out works, like Edouart's elaborate "Magic Lantern" — in which an excited white family enjoys the new form of home entertainment while a black servant boy peeks through a door — presages Ms. Walker's own use of projection. It also lushly exemplifies the 19th-century practice of adding painted settings to the cut-outs, which Ms. Walker continues in her "American Primitives" series. Her figures are silhouetted against dark gouache renderings that seem backlighted by the sun or the moon. The nocturnal mood is especially evocative of Goya; the stage-flat effect also suits her sense of burlesque.

Several European works refer to floods both actual and metaphorical. "Christ's Descent Into Hell," painted in the mid-1500's by a capable follower of Hieronymus Bosch, depicts a swamp rife with depravity and torment. A large etching by the Dutch artist Pieter Nolpe (1613-53), "The Bursting of St. Anthony's Dike, 5 March 1651," depicts that event with an apocalyptic air that, post-Katrina, feels quite accurate.

One of the most beautiful sights Ms. Walker has unearthed is the dark, desperate vista of Joshua Shaw's "Deluge Towards Its Close" (about 1813), an oil painting given to the Met by William Merritt Chase. It centers on three lifeless bodies lying on the ground while a frightening dog howls over them. The image has an otherworldly lack of substance; the silvery bushes behind the bodies seem to have been dabbed on with a sponge, the desolation beyond is even sketchier.

The sheer, ephemeral nature of this image heightens your consciousness of Ms. Walker's own attraction to the ephemeral. Perhaps the immense, painful subject at the center of her art is best handled with a supreme lightness of form. The exhibition she has created accomplishes something similar. It tilts the great weight of the museum's holdings in a new direction and makes the Met feel like a different place.

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