

CULTURAL

Sonya Clark Uses Common Fibers to Weave Together Craft, Community, and Activism

By Grace Ebert
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"The Hair Craft Project: Hairstyles on Canvas" (2014), silk threads, beads, shells, and yarn on canvas, nine at 29 × 29 inches and two at 33 × 33 inches. All images courtesy of High Museum, shared with permission

In a poem devoted to the singer and activist Paul Robeson, Gwendolyn Brooks writes, "We are each other's harvest, we are each other's business, we are each other's magnitude and bond." Sonya Clark draws on Brooks' words in her mid-career retrospective at the High Museum as she wields the power of collaborative making to illuminate issues of racism, sexism, and capitalist imperatives.

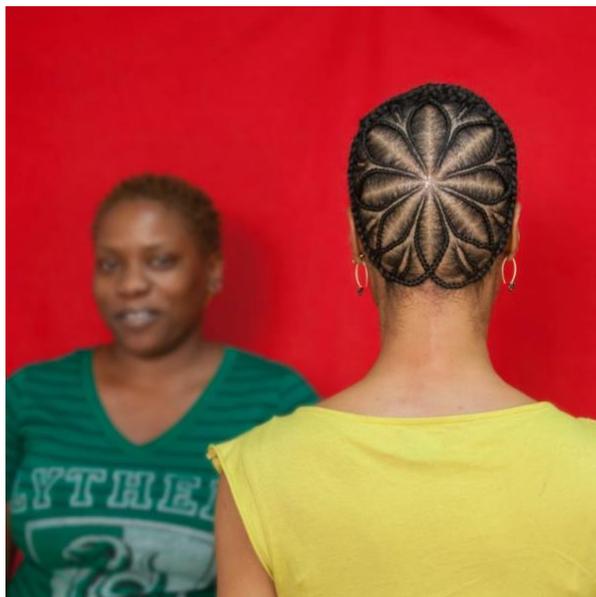
Titled *We Are Each Other*, the exhibition encompasses 25 years of the artist's participatory works that highlight the inextricable links between craft and community. Fiber becomes both a connective tissue and transmitter in Clark's oeuvre, which uses materials like books, hair, found fabrics, and flags to untangle the narratives and structural inequities of American life. "How do we address and challenge our shared colonial past, and how do we hold ourselves accountable for and claim agency in what happens next in the future of our society?" she asks.



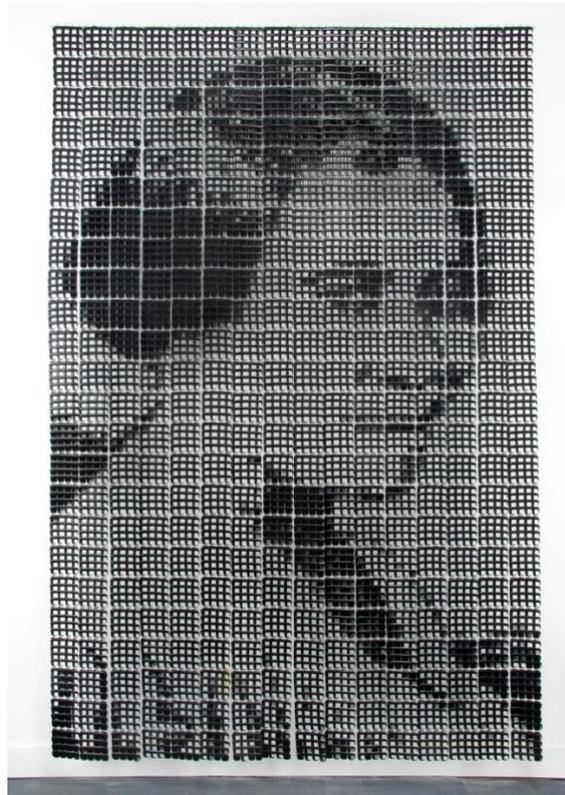
Detail of “Solidarity Book Project” (2020–present)

Included in *We Are Each Other* are several works created in collaboration. “The Hair Craft Project,” for example, photographs stylists’ elaborate braided designs done on Clark’s head to both celebrate their artistry and connect contemporary hairdressing with broader textile traditions. Similarly, a large-scale portrait uses more than 3,000 plastic combs to portray Madame C.J. Walker, the first woman to become a self-made millionaire in the U.S. by establishing an immensely successful hair-care business. Walker then used much of her wealth to advocate against lynching and race-based violence, and Clark’s depiction honors this impulse toward activism and unity.

Other pieces on view are “Unraveling,” a performance-based work that asks volunteers to deconstruct symbolic objects like the Confederate flag, and a portion of the ongoing “Solidarity Book Project.” Emphasizing the importance of reading and knowledge sharing, this project offers instructions for carving a raised fist, the symbol of Black liberation, from the pages of a book. *We Are Each Other* is on view through February 18, 2024, in Atlanta. Dive deeper into Clark’s works by picking up the exhibition catalog and checking out her Instagram.



“The Hair Craft Project: Hairstylists with Sonya: Sonya Clark with Jamilah Williams” (2013), inkjet photograph, 28 × 28 inches. Photo by Naoko Wowsugi



"Madam C. J. Walker" (2008), combs, 122 x 87 inches



"The Hair Craft Project: Sonya with Kamala Bhagat, Dionne James Eggleston, Marsha Johnson, Chaunda King, Anita Hill Moses, Nasirah Muhammad, Jameika and Jasmine Pollard, Ingrid Riley, Ife Robinson, Natasha Superville, and Jamilah Williams" (2014), pigment prints on archival paper, eleven framed, 30 x 30 inches each



Detail of "Madam C. J. Walker" (2008), combs, 122 x 87 inches



"Solidarity Book Project" (2023), installation view. Photo by Alphonso Whitfield