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The Artist Unraveling American History

Best known for her series of deconstructed flags, Sonya Clark offers poignant, clearsighted reminders of this country's legacy of racial violence.

Sonya Clark in her studio in Massachusetts. Clark works frequently with organic materials, including hair. Credit...Nicholas Calcott

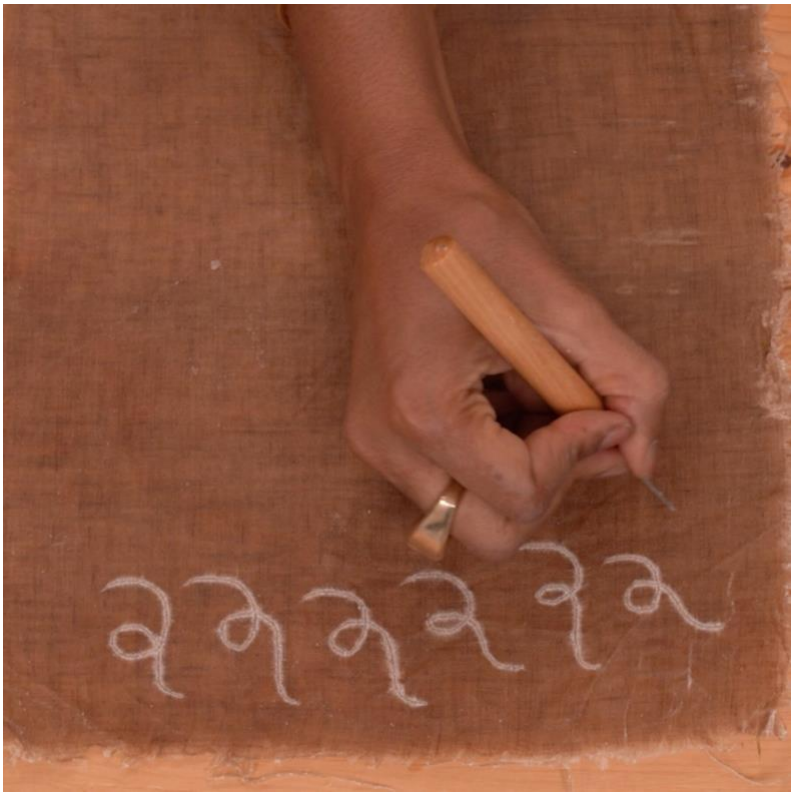
By Jasmine Wahi | Aug. 10, 2020

Sonya Clark's work is unequivocally political: Her 2019 wall hanging "These days. This country. This history." consists of the remains of an unraveled American flag onto which the unmistakable X of the Confederate battle flag, also in tatters, has been woven, the two flags hopelessly intertwined. She believes the election of Donald Trump added fuel to her fire, and indeed, these days, as we witness the continuing state-sanctioned murder of Black people, her work feels especially relevant. Yet the western Massachusetts-based Clark, 53, isn't making work for the news cycle. While some political art can, like Trump himself, feel temporary, a product of and for its time, Clark's goes to the root of longstanding injustices and hypocrisies woven, if not into the actual flag, then into the metaphorical fabric of American culture.

Materiality is at the heart of Clark's multidisciplinary practice. Here, a detail of a work in progress featuring thread-wrapped combs that she started at the Black Rock Senegal residency.
Credit...Nicholas Calcott

Clark is not only a maker, but an esteemed professor of art. Shown here, in one of her studio spaces at Amherst, is her archive of catalogs and print materials from previous exhibits.
Credit...Nicholas Calcott

Born to a Trinidadian psychiatrist father and a Jamaican nurse mother in Washington, D.C., Clark didn't always know she wanted to be a maker. As a lover of math and logic, she followed a more traditional path and received her first bachelor's degree, having majored in psychology, from Amherst College, where she recently joined the faculty. (Her husband of 25 years, Darryl Harper, a jazz musician, also teaches there.) During her time there as a student, though, she became interested in African diasporic art and the ways objects hold identity. "I took a couple of classes with an African art professor who is now my colleague," she says. "His name is Rowland O. Abiodun, and he helped me feel these connections between my Caribbean heritage and Yoruba culture, these deep, straightforward connections to West Africa, and I realized that that's also home."



An example of Clark's latest body of work, "Twist" (2016-) — a written alphabet created from strands of the artist's curl pattern — in action. Credit...By Nicholas Calcott

In the summer of 1989, just after graduating, Clark took a trip to Ivory Coast, where she learned how to strip weave. Sitting at the traditional hand-loom, she says, "sealed the deal" on her trajectory. After arriving back in the States, she enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied under the artist Nick Cave, whose own work, often made with untraditional materials such as fabric, thread and utilitarian objects, also addresses racial dynamics and identity, and who remains a mentor and friend of Clark's. "He would just say, 'No, you're not bringing it.' I could talk the talk like nobody's business, but you had to bring your soul to it," she recalls. "In his class, I felt like I had oxygen in my lungs for the first time." For her M.F.A., Clark attended Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, and it was there that she delved more deeply into fiber art, an exploration that she had begun while at SAIC. Her interest in

social critique had been formed long before. “When you’re from other places, you know inherently that there are other histories,” she says.

Bronze combs and a hot comb — studies from a previous work of Clark’s that she may incorporate into another. Credit...Nicholas Calcott

For her thesis, Clark presented “Gele Kente Flag” (1995), a composite cloth that references both an American flag and Kente cloth, which was recently acquired by the Muscarelle Museum at the College of William and Mary. This meditation on materials, symbols and meaning became the first in a series of flag works to which she has been adding for over 20 years. For Clark, the idea is always to create something uroboric: Her flags consume the past to forge a future rooted in shared history. “I was interested in the way the cloth was speaking in the U.S., because it is a very specific cloth from Asante people in Ghana that became Pan-African and was then adopted by corporations for capitalist purposes,” Clark says of “Kente Flag,” which has only become more poignant in the years since she made it: Two and a half decades later, we’ve seen a steady stream of corporate press releases proclaiming solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Her ongoing collaborative performance piece “Unraveling,” which she first unveiled in 2015, inviting viewers to pull a Confederate flag apart string by string as they stood shoulder to shoulder with her and engaged in conversation about the experience — a sort of sewing circle in reverse — also feels eerily apposite amid the overdue toppling of colonial monuments. Some of her partners were defensive, some chatted casually about dismantling white supremacy and some struggled to find the words for what was to them an unfamiliar conversation. But, of course — and this is part of Clark’s point — these issues and national wounds have been here, hanging like loose threads, all along.

A lifelong lover of literature, Clark often uses both fiction and non-fiction to bring new perspectives to her practice. Credit...By Nicholas Calcott

In one of Clark's recent works, "Twist" (2016-), which was named by the former poet laureate Rita Dove, whom the artist met at a dinner party, the "thread" is Clark's own hair, which she's using to create a novel 26-letter font. Clark was inspired by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's book "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" (1986), in which he urges African writers to write in their Indigenous tongues. Clark realized that even if this came to pass, the printed texts would always be in a Western script. "In order to get to your language, you have to go through the gatekeeper of the Roman alphabet — that's how centric Europe still is," she says. To counter this reality, she worked with a graphic designer, Boqin Peng, to create a digital font that is based on the curl pattern of her hair, each strand of which holds the genetic material of her ancestors. Clark also worked with the Massachusetts-based Swamp Press to make the alphabet printable on a letterpress, and is now teaching herself to read and write in the language. She's transcribed a section of the 13th Amendment using it.

She hopes the public, too, will soon get an opportunity to experiment with "Twist," entertaining the possibility of another mode of communication, another story. In addition to having work in a number of upcoming group shows, she's scheduled to have several solo exhibitions next spring, one at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in her hometown of D.C., and then twin shows at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Mass. Who knows where, exactly, the country will be by then, but Clark's voice will undoubtedly be needed. "Racism is not just a Southern problem," says the artist, who was previously the chair of the craft/material studies department at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. "It's an everywhere problem." Her work reminds us of that, and of the fact that while the past cannot be undone, it can, if we fail to change, repeat itself, over and over.