In the mid-1990s, when Kara Walker revived the quaint medium of cut-paper silhouettes, the no-holds-barred contemporary-art world was preoccupied with the dynamics of racial, sexual, and political power. She employed deftly scissored figures as characters in room-scale narrative tableaux, as shadow puppets in stop-action films, and as subversive commentaries upon historic illustrations of the Civil War—all offering wildly absurd, alternate histories of African Americans. Filled with caricatured images of slaves, masters, lynching, rape, and bestiality, Walker’s work played fast and loose with stereotypes and violence, leaving few feathers unruffled. It offended an older generation of black artists for seeming to reaffirm white racism, and it offended a post–civil rights-movement generation for offering no escape from self-loathing. Walker is aware of these criticisms but views as fraught the very act of depicting African Americans. “Every image of ‘us’ is mediated,” she writes on an illustrated diary page, “filtered through the grounds of years of misrepresentation, bitterness, and suspicion.”

In the lithograph *I’ll Be a Monkey’s Uncle*, Walker opens the Pandora’s box of American racist iconography with typical fearlessness. Depicting on the left an archetypal pickaninnny—a young black girl with unkempt hair, ragged clothes, and bare feet—and a long-tailed monkey in male clothing standing on a stump on the right, the work is rife with charged allusions. The monkey’s tail loops forward to become a phallic pointing at the girl, and the dripping do-rag, hair braid, or disembodied tail held aloft by the girl suggests amputation, castration, or possibly even the scalping of a white woman for her desirable, straight “good hair.” The work’s title also conjures up false associations of people of African descent with apes and a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder.

Walker discovered that the very flatness and emptiness of the silhouette medium provided a powerful vehicle for traversing the minefield of racial representation:

I had a catharsis looking at early American varieties of silhouette cuttings…. What I recognized, besides narrative and historicity and racism, was this very physical displacement: the paradox of removing a form from a blank surface that in turn creates a black hole. I was struck by the irony of so many of my concerns being addressed: blank/black, hole/whole, shadow/substance, etc.

*I’ll Be a Monkey’s Uncle* may be open-ended, offering little resolution for age-old problems. But the work’s black humor and black imagery, along with its title—a common expression of consternation—provocatively remind us of the urgent need to evolve beyond our exasperating and poisonous fixations on race.

Toby Kamps

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1. The present entry builds on ideas and research the author developed in *The Old, Weird America*, exh. cat. (Houston: Museum of Contemporary Art Houston, 2008), which surveys the resurgence of folk themes in contemporary American art.
Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE
ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

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