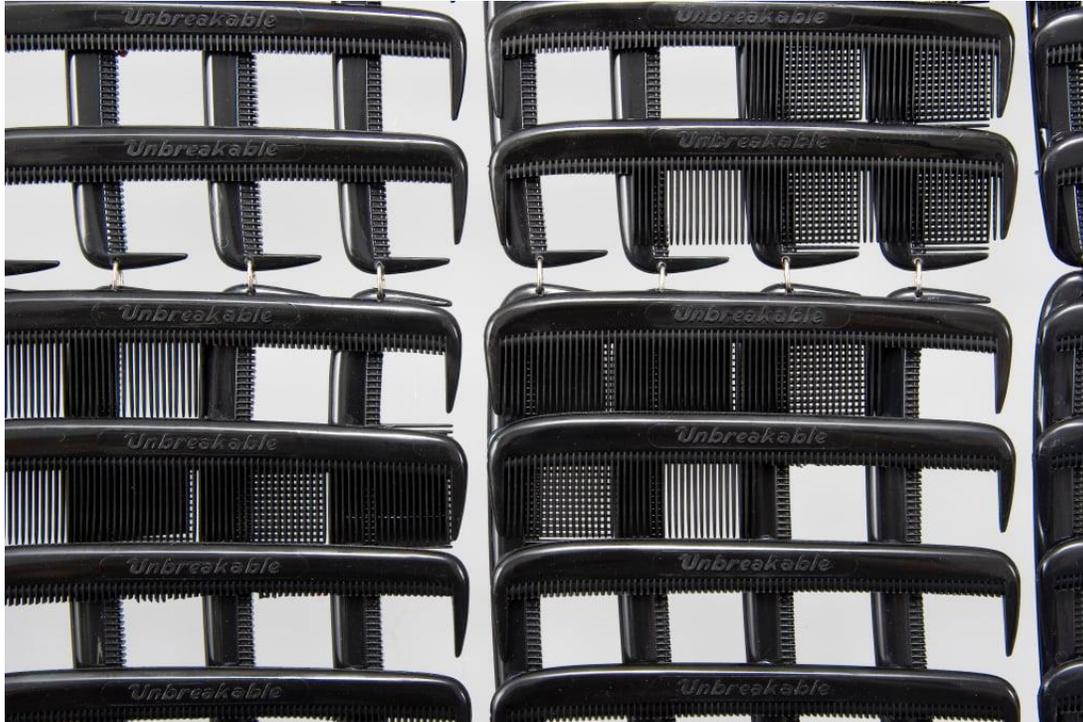


BURNAWAY

Tactile Grace: Sonya Clark's We Are Each Other at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta

By Bryn Evans
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Detail of Sonya Clark, *Madam C.J. Walker*, 2008, combs, 122 x 87 inches, Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin. Photograph courtesy of the artist and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

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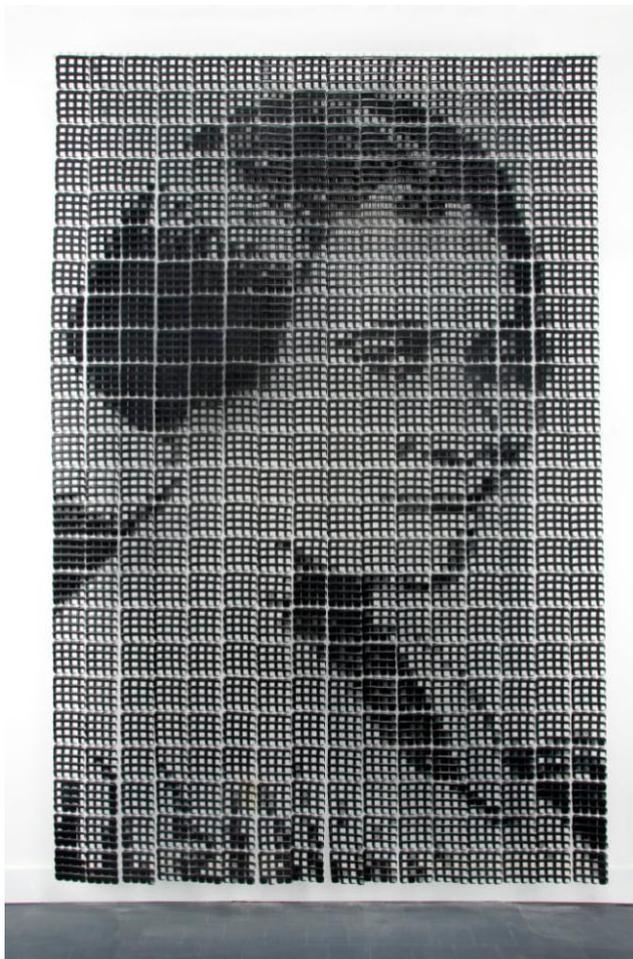
after We Are (2023)

Prayers watch over me as I enter the exhibition space for Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. A constellation of curio line the gallery walls, each representative of an individual prayer or intention. No two are the same. The space beckons a reverence akin to a memorial or shrine.

The Beaded Prayers Project is an ongoing communal art project by textile artist Sonya Clark that has engaged over five thousand participants in dozens of countries. On the walls of the exhibition's opening gallery, beaded amulets adorn brown panels, created in community art-making workshops led by Clark since 1998. The project originates from Clark's research, activating the shared etymology of the words "bead" and "prayer." While the Old English word, *gebed*, and Middle English word, *bede*, signify the bead's purpose to remember one's place in prayer, Clark engages the amulet form as a sign of protection and power from African diasporic traditions. This idea resonates with multiple religious and spiritual practices from around the world.

Each amulet holds a written prayer; each one unique to its maker. Green fronds pattern one amulet fashioned into an envelope, a single chartreuse button donning the fabric seal flap. Another features a grey and white cloth wrapped around a small stick. Ruby-colored beads cluster like wild berries along the branch. A miniature brown face tied to the cloth wears the red jewels like a crown, two yellow and red beads sewn as eyes to its face.

Of the infinite utterances that could coexist in this space, these are the hopes that exist here together. The panels are textured intentions, beadwork blessings. A tactile grace.



Sonya Clark, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 2008, combs, 122 x 87 inches, Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin. Photograph courtesy of the artist and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

We Are Each Other opens with *The Beaded Prayers Project*, an intentional gesture that contextualizes Sonya Clark's commitment to community engagement and highlights its centrality to her creative practice. The majority of the works included in the exhibition are crafted in collaboration with Clark's community—*The Hair Craft Project: Hairstyles on Canvas* (2013) and *The Hair Craft Project: Hairstylists with Sonya* (2014) with twelve hairdressers based in Richmond, Virginia; the ongoing *Solidarity Book Project* with Amherst College and global participants; *Finding Freedom* (2019-2020) with students, researchers, friends, and a group of incarcerated men. The exhibition title epitomizes the artist's dedication to communal work and responsibility. Drawn from a quote in Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "Paul Robeson" featured in the poet laureate's collection *Family Pictures* (1970), *We Are Each Other* articulates how integral meaningful human connection is to our individual and collective survival.

Brooks' poem is transliterated as gallery text in the exhibition, using Clark's *Twist*, a hair-based font named by fellow poet laureate Rita Dove. Reading the curls beneath the Roman alphabet on the gallery wall, I think of my own head full of thick, shoulder-length locs. After wash day, small coils gather on my shower floor. The curls entwine themselves in my towels and blankets, a comforting nuisance that reminds me that life lives here. Clark created the *Twist* font as a reclamation for African-descended peoples, a literal return to our roots. The font animates the poem, which subtly references Paul Robeson's performance of "Ol' Man River" in the 1936 film

adaption of the musical *Show Boat*. The song is a moving ballad that juxtaposes the toil and labor of Black folks working along the Mississippi with the river's incessant indifference. Sonya Clark resurfaces Robeson's performance in the musical as a cultural artifact that necessarily recounts the structural racism and violence endured by African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Clark's strands mimic the flow of the Mississippi whilst centering the Black kin who labored on it, were carried as chattel through it, and navigated to freedom along it, coils bending liquid and free.



Sonya Clark, *The Hair Craft Project: Hairstyles on Canvas*, 2014, silk threads, beads, shells, and yarn on canvas, nine at 29 x 29 inches and two at 33 x 33 inches, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, Frederick Brown Fund, Samuel Putnam Avery Fund, and Helen and Colburn Fund. Photograph courtesy of the artist and the High Museum of Art Atlanta.

Further along in the gallery, the film *We Are* (2023) acts as a visualization of Clark's *Twist* iteration of Gwendolyn Brook's poem, commissioned by the Cranbrook Art Museum, choreographed and performed by Jennifer Harge, and directed by Jeremy Brockman. The video runs for nearly twenty minutes in the gallery as Harge gathers Belle Island soil in her hands, rubbing her shaved scalp into the silty dirt. As noted in the gallery text, Clark intended for the performance to exist as "embodied writing," a technique that draws on ancestral communication and wisdom, a pertinent gesture due to Belle Island's historical significance as a crossing point to Canada on the Underground Railroad. In the film, airplanes, bird, tide, and dirt form an ethereal soundscape, accompanied by Harge's breath. Brown green blue black women noises color the nature scene.

Sonya Clark understands the head as "a sacred place, the center where cultural influences are absorbed, siphoned, and retained, and the site where we process the world through the senses." Thus, her treatment of hairdressing as the earliest form of fiber art reflects a connection to ancestral artistic practices, a link between the head and spirit. *Haircut for a Poem* (2016) is a participatory project created for O, Miami Poetry Festival. In it, Clark invited folks to recite a poem in the barber's chair in exchange for a free haircut. The exhibition includes a video clip of several men reciting "The Distant Drum" (1976), a poem whose speaker states: "It

is I who weep, laugh, feel pain or joy, / Speak this because I exist.” With this work, Clark invites an interpretation of the barber shop as a shared site of cultural memory in which folks, specifically Black men, witness each other as whole beings, hold space, and celebrate their right to exist.

The Hair Craft Project (2013-2014) similarly honors hairdressing as a communal art practice. With this work, Clark collaborates with twelve Black hairstylists, inviting them to create original art using the artist’s own hair. The artists were also asked to style hair on a complementary textile panel, sewing strands onto a blank canvas. The resulting presentation is a hair showcase where cornrows form the petals of intricately braided flowers, and two-strand twists become a basket for white tulips peeking out from the coiffed design. By engaging hairstylists as textile artists, Clark invites museum visitors to reckon with the implicit designations of “low” and “high” art or craft and how these divisions contribute to the separation of vernacular spaces like hair salons from art institutions.



Sonya Clark, 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, collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy of the artist and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other, co-organized by the High, the Cranbrook Art Museum in metro Detroit, and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, presents numerous large-scale, collaborative works by the multidisciplinary Caribbean American artist. Discussing the exhibition, Clark shares: “I am a collaboration, as is each artwork. A collaboration, a generational connection, a tie between us. From the ancestral substance that makes up my bones and blood to the engagement with community, all of it functions as a means to do the necessary work.” Rooted in her deep relationship to kin, community, and craft, We Are Each Other offers a thoughtful survey of Sonya Clark’s oeuvre, rich with artistic intention and technical prowess.