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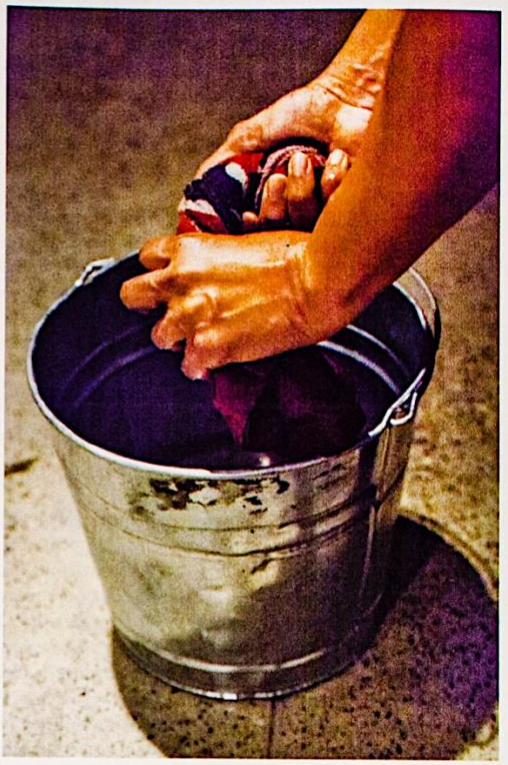
Below: **Sonya Clark, *Many* (detail)**, one hundred linen flags, each 18½ × 36". Right: **Sonya Clark, *Reversals*, 2019.** Performance view, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, March 30, 2019. Sonya Clark. Photo: Carlos Avendaño.



Sonya Clark

THE FABRIC WORKSHOP AND MUSEUM, PHILADELPHIA

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM IN PHILADELPHIA

Nell McClister

NEARLY A DECADE AGO, during a research fellowship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, Sonya Clark noticed a small object that has preoccupied her ever since: a portion of a humble dishcloth, displayed in the same exhibition as Abraham Lincoln's top hat at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, that had been offered in surrender at Appomattox, a crucial final battle of the Civil War. Clark recognized the potential of this emblem of peace in an increasingly polarized nation and set out to "amplify" it during a two-year residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia (aptly located in a former flag factory). Her culminating exhibition there centered on *Monumental*, 2019, a huge re-creation of the dishcloth, laid out on an angled platform similar to that used in the Smithsonian's display of the equally huge Star-Spangled Banner from the early 1800s. Clark's flag was woven in three sections, on a loom five feet wide, from linen yarn "aged" with tea. On another platform, she arranged *Many*, 2019, a grid of one hundred white re-creations of the object at its original size. On the second floor of the Fabric Workshop were nine looms on which viewers could weave more of the flags' white fabric (*Reconstruction Exercise*, 2019) and nine school desks whose surfaces had been laser-cut in a waffle-weave pattern so visitors could make take-home truce-flag frottages in white chalk on black Tyvek (*Lesson Plan [Confederate Truce Flag]*, 2019). Part corrective history lesson, part hands-on craft workshop, the show constituted a kind of master class in material culture and antipropaganda.

Of Scottish and Afro-Caribbean descent, Clark learned to sew from her maternal grandmother, a tailor in Jamaica, and is attuned to cloth's social and political dimensions. In 2011, she wove a bolt of the family tartan out of bagasse, the fibrous by-product of sugar manufacturing. The narrative qualities of textiles draw her inexorably toward performance. Since 2015, she has invited participants to join her in picking apart the threads of a Confederate battle flag. While performing this task, many participants speak about their connections to textiles and their experiences with racism and the flag. Clark emphasizes that this laborious process must be mirrored in the world, by calling out and resisting insidious forms of everyday racism. In *Propaganda*, 2019, she listed on the Fabric Workshop's wall more than 250 items that come printed with the Confederate battle flag (yoga mats, holsters, wedding rings, seasoning mixes). Today, the design has mostly lost its specific historical meaning: Never the standard of the Confederacy, it was the local battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia. It became identified with the Confederate cause only after Southern government officials, the KKK, and other hate groups adopted it for propaganda purposes decades after the war. As such, it has gained new meaning as a "patriotic" emblem of racial hatred and violence. The provocation at the heart of this show—what if the flag we associate with the Civil War were the truce flag rather than the battle flag?—was also a proposition to replace the constructed symbol with a gendered, domestic object of political consequence, a historical object ceremonially offered to Union generals by Robert E. Lee himself, a document of humility and concession, at once too profound and too plain to be commodified. Clark's proposition is itself an exercise in unraveling. Her truce flags—painstakingly, collaboratively, locally handmade—offer a slow and thoughtful antidote to expedient propaganda, mass-produced and rapidly distributed.

What if the flag we associate with the Civil War were the truce flag rather than the battle flag?

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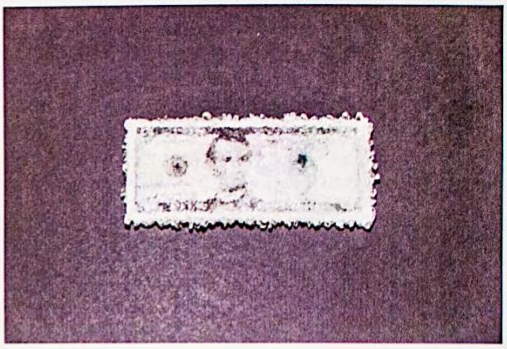
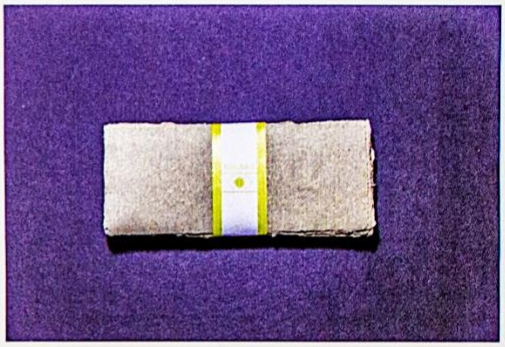
jigsaw puzzles
piggy banks
action figures
nipple pasties
pet collars
dog leashes
dog bandanas
ski masks
beach towels
playing cards
beach bags
skateboards
golf balls
guitar picks
coolers
hockey masks
gloves





Left: **Sonya Clark, *Propaganda* (detail), 2019,** vinyl, dimensions variable. Below: **Sonya Clark, *Writer Type*, 2016,** human hair, Remington typewriter, 7 × 10 × 11". Right, from top: **Sonya Clark, *Encrusted*, 2017,** five-dollar bill, sugar crystals, 2½ × 6". **Sonya Clark, *The Price*, 2016,** bagasse, ink-jet print, 2½ × 6 × 1".

Similarly, the poetic small works in "Self-Evident," Clark's survey on view at the African American Museum in Philadelphia through September 8, tease out disproportionately weighty personal, cultural, and economic meanings from a variety of materials. In *Gold Coast Journey*, 2016, more than five thousand inches of fine eighteen-karat gold thread—one inch for every mile of ocean between Cape Coast, Ghana, and Richmond, Virginia—are wound around a spool of African ebony. In *Sugar Freed (necklace)*, 2018–19, a circle of teeth made from *pastillage* (a sugar paste now used to make the wedding-cake figurines popularized by Queen Victoria) frames a poem by Eduardo Galeano about the Jamaican Maroon rebellion led by the warrior Queen Nanny, who wore "necklaces made of the teeth of English soldiers." Nearby, *Encrusted*, 2017, a five-dollar bill bristling with sugar crystals, is juxtaposed with *The Price*, 2016, a stack of bills handmade from bagasse and wrapped in a printed band reading $36,683—the price, in today's dollars, that the artist calculates she herself would have fetched at the height of slavery. These talismanic works balance delicacy and violence, targeting systems of value using a principal crop of the antebellum South.

"Self-Evident" also features many of Clark's works employing hair as a symbol of personal, racial, historical, and political DNA. She used cornrow-weaving techniques on cotton thread in *Three-Fifths*, 2010, and generated Op- and Minimalist-inspired wall works from plastic combs in *Whole Hole and Hole Whole*, 2015. In the modest photograph *Mother's Wisdom or Cotton Candy*, 2011, she holds a ball of white hair gently between her hands; at once creepy and eloquent, the image evokes a baby's head, mortality, and female strength. She also incorporates actual hair (her own, as well as trimmings sourced from a salon in Richmond) into her work across many media. Here, it is often employed as a kind of silencer. *Till Earth and Heaven Ring*, 2019, includes a small Liberty Bell, its clapper replaced by a ball of the artist's hair. Hair also wraps the keys of a vintage "noiseless" typewriter in *Writer Type*, 2016. In the installation *Edifice and Mortar*, 2018, neatly matted black hair replaces the mortar between the bricks of a wall, calling to mind the African American labor that was integral to the empire of the South, from Virginia's brick factories to the plantation hierarchies. Clark aims to render visible and politicize these forms of hidden labor, which also linger in textiles. In talks accompanying her exhibitions, she likes to observe that our bodies are touching textiles almost constantly. She reminds us to ask who made them, under what conditions, and with whose money. What stories do these materials tell?

The silenced, invisible laborer here is often female. Clark's work establishes tensions among value systems and various forms of "women's work"—from the dishcloth that became a flag to the styled and braided hair; from the handwoven textiles to her own fine-art production. In *Reversals*, 2019, a performance at the Fabric Workshop, the artist donned a dress modeled on that of the cleaning woman in Gordon Parks's *American Gothic*, 1942, and, using a commercially available Confederate-battle-flag dishcloth, washed dust taken from historical sites in Philadelphia from the stone floor, on which passages from the Declaration of Independence had been inscribed. Intriguingly reminiscent of Mierle Laderman Ukeles's maintenance art, *Reversals* positions housework as cultural caretaking, a form of patriotism. Judging from visitors' left-leaning responses to gallery questionnaires, Clark is preaching to the choir, but her messages should be heard by a broader, non-art audience. Imagine her tending to the Founders' words on a monument to the Civil War itself, wringing out that filthy, debased battle flag in the public square. The fact that staging such a performance at a Confederate monument would surely be dangerous for Clark only underscores her larger point.

In her quest to challenge this society's habituation to all kinds of social and historical injustices, Clark zeroes in on the economic mechanisms that assign significance to materials and objects—and, of course, bodies. Breaking down the structures of white supremacy involves exposing its underlying cultural and economic histories, as well as deconstructing its symbolism. As Clark pointed out in a talk recorded for the *Monument Lab* podcast, part of an ongoing initiative driving civic debate and public-art commissions in Philadelphia, while a stone monument can be resited, recontextualized, or toppled from its plinth, a flag, with its symbolic afterimage, tends to live on persistently in our mind's eye. Clark's truce flag is a call to arms, demanding we do the difficult work of brokering peace and justice on an everyday basis. Surrender is only the first step toward reconciliation. □

"Self-Evident" is on view at the African American Museum through September 8.

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