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# THE SUBVERSIVE CLOTH:

## Weaving in Sonya Clark's Exhibition

by Lin Qiqing



**ABOVE:** Sonya Clark, courtesy of the artist.

**CENTER:** Installation view of *Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photo by Jenna Bascom; courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design.

No immigrant to the United States arrives being entirely unfamiliar with the country. All around the world, the US is unavoidable. I grew up in China, where as a student I had to remember American historical dates such as Independence Day. I remember when the first McDonald's opened in my hometown. Still, there are many things I don't know. When the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) asked me to work as a weaving instructor in an exhibition by Sonya Clark that includes her work on the symbols of the Confederacy, it was a crash course in Civil War history.



**ABOVE: *The Hair Craft***  
**Project: *Hairstyles on Canvas*,**  
2014, **Sonya Clark.** Silk  
threads, beads, shells, and  
yarn on canvas. Photo by  
Jenna Bascom; courtesy of  
the Museum of Arts and  
Design.

Central to the exhibition is Clark's *Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know* series. In 2011, while Clark was a Smithsonian Artist Fellow at the National Museum of American History, she saw the Confederate Flag of Truce displayed next to President Lincoln's hat. She asked, "What if it were this flag rather than the Confederate battle flag that occupies people's memory of the Civil War today?"

The exhibition *Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other* opened in March and will run through September 22, 2024. Clark is an African American mixed-media artist. Over the past thirty years, she has worked on topics about race, visibility, and American history, often through participatory art-making projects. She uses fibers, hair, combs, beads, and activities with repetitive labor in her performance such as weaving, sewing, unraveling, and cleaning.

Clark often facilitates interactive art-making projects, including several throughout the *We Are Each Other* exhibition. Called *Reconstruction Exercise*, as part of the *Monumental Cloth* series, I set up a loom to show visitors how to weave the *Truce Flag's* sixshaft waffle weave pattern on a fine linen warp. Every Thursday and Saturday afternoon, I instruct visitors on the handling of the big Leclerc Nilus II floor loom. On Fridays and Sundays, these tasks are taken over by fellow textile artist Terumi Saito.

The loom is set up right next to a giant replica of the *Truce Flag*, laid flat on a wooden panel. Enlarged to 100 times its original size, the piece was woven on an industrial loom in three pieces and then stitched together. The fabric was tea-dyed to



ABOVE: Lin Qiqing instructs a visitor to weave on the loom and participate in the *Reconstruction Exercise* project on May 4, 2024, the Museum of Arts and Design. Photo by Nayeli Martinez.

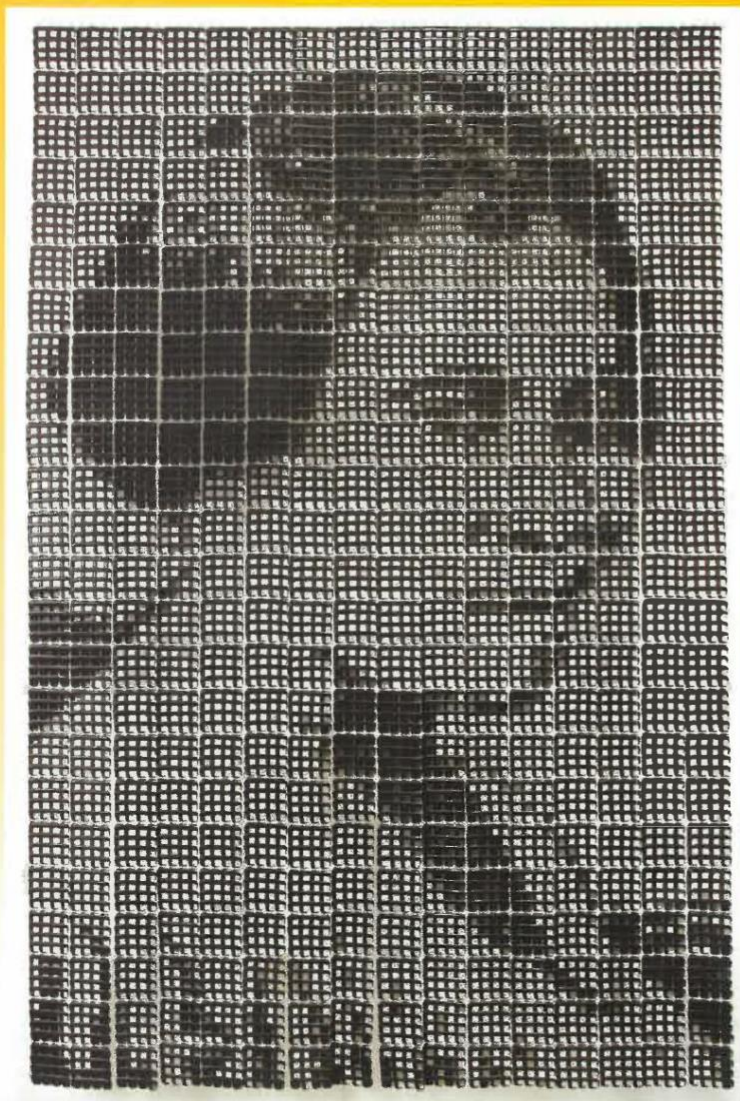
make it look appropriately aged, and the weft for the red stripes was dyed with madder root. The cloth is the very first thing that confronts visitors as they walk into the space. Sometimes the exaggerated size of installation art is abused as a trick to impress the audience, but in this case, it strikes me as a necessary choice. It gives the common dish towel a heroic existence, forcing people to look at it and hear what the artist has to say.

As it turns out, I was not the only one who had never heard of the *Truce Flag*. During a recent gallery tour led by Clark herself, she asked a group of American visitors, "How many of you have seen it before?" People shook their heads. "This is what artists do," she said cheerfully.

Clark was born in Washington, D.C. to a psychiatrist from Trinidad and a nurse from Jamaica. When she graduated from Amherst College, her parents gifted her a trip to Africa, where she learned to weave for the first time. The exhibition includes Clark's *Gele Kente Flag*, which merges an American flag and Ghanaian strip cloth. For her thesis project at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1995, she took photos of women from Detroit wearing the piece as a head wrap. It marked the start of her early approach in discussing race and history through textiles.

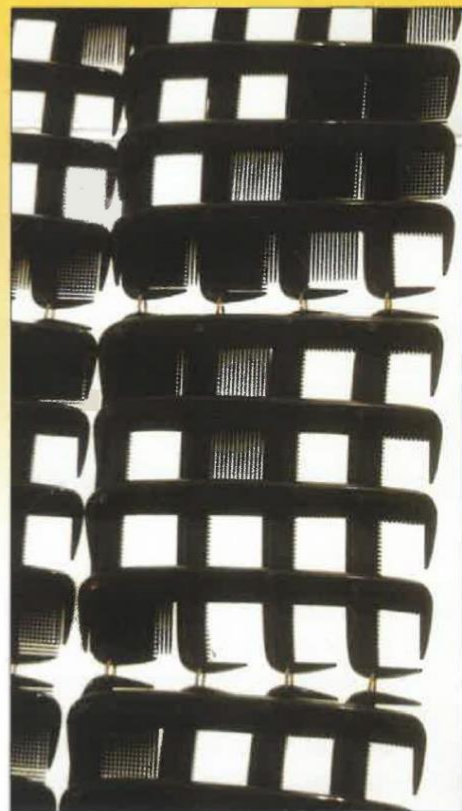


ABOVE: Detail of *Monumental Cloth*, 2019, Sonya Clark, woven linen and madder dye. Photo by Lin Qiqing.



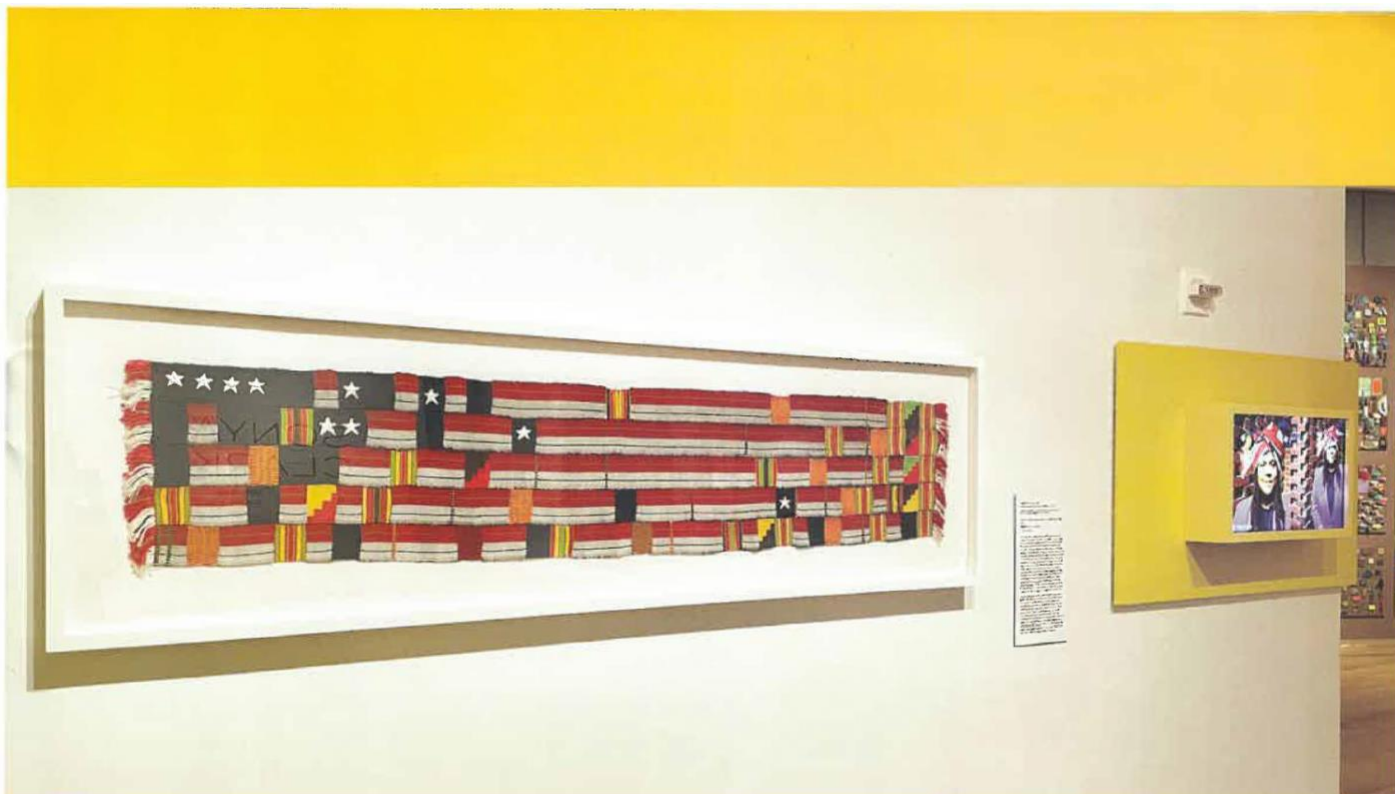
**ABOVE:** *Madam C. J. Walker*,  
2008, Sonya Clark, Plastic combs.  
122 × 87 inches. Courtesy of the  
Museum of Arts and Design.

**RIGHT:** Detail, *Madam C. J. Walker*.  
Photograph by HGA.



Another example of Clark's unconventional use of textiles is the portrait *Madam C.J. Walker*, a large wall hanging made with black plastic combs. Walker (1867-1919) became the first female self-made millionaire in America through her successful business of hair care products for black women. Clark strategically removed teeth from the combs and interlaced them to render a pixelated image of Walker's most well-known portrait. The combs become warp and weft. It is a thoughtful piece that excels through both its multi-layered meaning and innovative technique.

Most textile work can be categorized as visual art, but Clark's approach is often more conceptual. For example, the *Truce Flag*, which is essentially a simple white linen dish towel, is not the most exciting weaving project. But it is the story of the cloth, and the collective recreating process that makes it special. Clark acts like a



ABOVE: *Gele Kente Flag*, 1995,  
Sonya Clark, Handwoven cotton  
and silk. Photo by Lin Qiqing.

provocateur, digging deep into heavy themes of race and history, while using fiber, textile, and weaving — mediums that feel light, intimate, and inviting to the audience.

For this exhibit, it is often the pure attraction of the loom that draws people in. Many people have told me, wide-eyed in excitement, that they have never even seen a loom in real life, let alone had the chance to weave on one. I have also received music-related comments, referencing the shape of the loom and treadles — “It’s like a piano!” — or when showing people the set-up chart of the weaving structure — “Is it like reading music?”

Textiles invite touch. The security guards sometimes have to stop people from reaching their hands out to the pieces of cloth on display. But at *Monumental Cloth’s Reconstruction Exercise*, visitors can enjoy a tactile experience. Before they start weaving, I encourage them to caress and feel the rough texture of the linen, and the little pockets created by the waffle-weave. Once they start, they experience the pure joy of weaving for the first time. Ten throws of the shuttle later, they will have made a fresh row of waffles.

Visitors who try the loom range from children to retirees, people who have wandered in from a contemporary exhibition on another floor, to experienced weavers. I have enjoyed many memorable interactions. I think it is an admirable decision for the artist and the museum to go through the effort of procuring and then placing a large floor loom in their gallery space. The cost and the challenge of fitting a large loom into a tiny New York apartment keeps many people away from the craft.

Martha Gutierrez, a 70-year-old visitor, wove for the first time at this exhibition. I saw her examining the loom in the gallery so I invited her to give it a try. She was initially hesitant, worrying about damaging it, but she eventually wove a few picks successfully. She told me that while growing up in Columbia, she would constantly



ABOVE: A group of visitors took  
turns weaving, May 4, 2024.  
Photo by Lin Qiqing.

see relatives and neighbors crocheting while chatting. She was told that crocheting, and anything like it, was a waste of time and she should get a good education instead.

In 1970, when she was 15, Gutierrez moved to New York. She learned English, raised two daughters, and later grandchildren. Recently, her youngest grandsons have reached their teenage years, and she can finally retire. Gutierrez is an art lover. She is a frequent visitor of the MAD and she spoke passionately about the crochet pieces in the museum's permanent collection. When I asked her if she would like to one day make something like the works she admires, she answered, "I don't know! I never had the opportunity. It was always about raising kids, working, and being able to stay here."

She mentioned she had come across a weaving studio in Park Slope in Brooklyn a few years ago, but that it had unfortunately closed down. I wrote down the name of another weaving studio in the city for her, one that offers introductory weaving classes. With a few weft picks now under her belt, who knows where this first experience will lead her?

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