

ARTFORUM

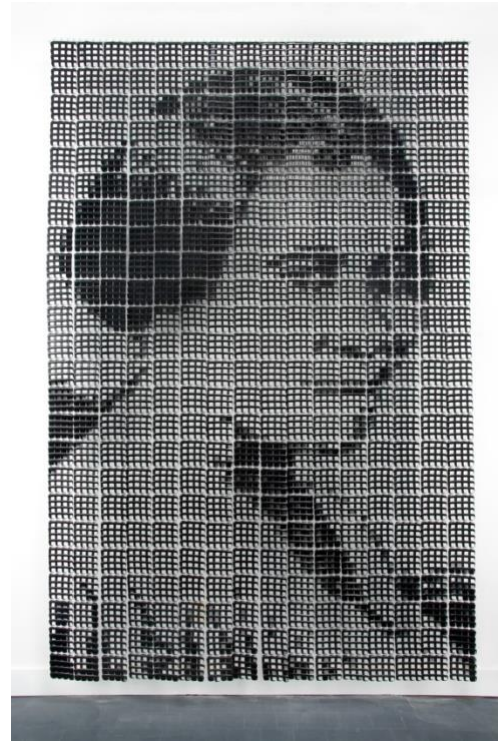
Sonya Clark

MAD - Museum of Arts and Design

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By Jodie Bass

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Sonya Clark, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 2008, combs, 10' 2" x 7' 3".

"Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other" showcases a multifaceted approach to the polemics of race and societal perceptions, spanning multiple media (including sculpture, video, photography, installation, performance, and poetry). Featuring works made over the past ten years of the artist's three-decade-plus career, the exhibition chronicles her dedication to community engagement.

Though her pieces are seductively attractive, the artist never shies from sticky historic narratives. Using hair as medium and metaphor, Clark magnifies the nuances of Black life by celebrating its beauty. *Madam C. J. Walker*, 2008, is an ode to the African American cosmetics impresario of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, who used her considerable wealth to support Black women. The work is made from plastic combs that form a pixelated portrait of the titular figure. The texts being recited in the audio component for *1-877-OUR CURL (Twist Key)*, 2022—an actual phone number you

can call to hear verse, à la John Giorno's *Dial-A-Poem*, 1968/2012—appear on a corresponding group of prints. The glyph-like font used for the texts, titled *Twist*, 2016, was created by Clark in collaboration with graphic designer Bo Peng; the letterforms resemble graceful strands of coiled hair.

Elsewhere, works such as *Monumental Cloth (sutured)*, 2017, and *Unraveling*, 2015–, demonstrate the persistence of racist symbols and their undoing. The former is based on an unsung dishtowel remnant used by Robert E. Lee's troops to signal their surrender to the Union Army near the end of the American Civil War. For this piece, Clark wove two halves of the cloth and then stitched them together with contrasting thread, turning it, according to her, into "a monument of peace," an object for "healing [a] deeply festered wound." The latter is a reproduction of the Confederate flag that the artist deconstructed with the help of volunteers in various performances. The piece underlines the need for cooperation and unity in successfully taking apart oppressive histories.

Clark repeatedly proves how simple gestures serve as extraordinary forms of protest. This exhibition is a powerful reminder that established hierarchies can be adeptly dismantled by simply pulling a thread.