



Sonya Clark's 'Healing Memorial' returns to Detroit with Cranbrook exhibit

The fiber artist's 'We Are Each Other' exhibition spans 25 years of her career dismantling white supremacy.

By Randiah Camille Green
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Sonya Clark's "Healing Memorial." - Randiah Camille Green

I scoured the dark room with constellation tapestries hanging from the ceiling searching for the Big Dipper to no avail. I began to feel a bit hopeless with only the stars to guide me and a flashlight to light the way.

Perhaps, I think, that's the point of Sonya Clark's "Finding Freedom" installation — to know the feeling of desperation enslaved Black people felt when they traversed the Underground Railroad in the dark.

"That was not my intention but that is something that can happen. That's the capaciousness of art," Clark tells Metro Times. "What the Big Dipper does is point you to the North Star, but all the Big Dippers in there are pointing in different directions. So all the stars that you saw, potentially, are points of freedom that have been denied to people in this nation for whatever reason."

"Finding Freedom" is one of several installations on display at Cranbrook Art Museum for Clark's We Are Each Other exhibition, which spans the museum's entire first floor. It examines Clark's commentary on race, social justice, healing, and the symbolic dismantling of white supremacy she's been weaving for the past 25 years of her career.

In “Finding Freedom” Clark has made a map of the sky with cyanotype reactive fabric, and visitors use a blue light flashlight in a dark room to view the constellations. Interestingly enough, the idea to use a blue light flashlight to illuminate the piece was a suggestion from an inmate when Clark presented the piece to a group of incarcerated men. It’s one of the many ways in which her work invites collaboration from all who interact with it.

“You’re holding the light that is there because of someone who has been made unfree in this nation... He helps you see the piece that he can’t see because he’s locked up,” Clark says. “That bit of poetry, of finding our freedom through the light that we’re holding in our hands because of someone who has been made unfree, that just makes a whole Harriet Tubman metaphor and the Underground Railroad metaphor that inspired the piece that much more poignant.”

Clark isn’t from Detroit, but her ties to the city run deep. She graduated with her MFA in fiber from Cranbrook in 1995. Since then, she’s been trying to get the city to adopt her, she says over the phone from Massachusetts where she lives.

“When I was a graduate student at Cranbrook people like Sabrina Nelson, Shirley Woodson, and the late Gilda Snowden took me under their wing,” she says. “I have a special place in my heart for the city of Detroit, especially for the cultural producers of Detroit. I find that it is a city that is so incredibly important to American culture.”

Clark first brought her “Healing Memorial” project to the city in 2021 where Detroiters made pouches to honor their loved ones lost in the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 4,000 pouches were displayed on a massive wall during the memorial’s first display at Huntington Place and the Cranbrook Art Museum. Now it’s returned to Cranbrook and visitors are invited to add more handcrafted mementos to the wall.

“The self-assuredness that Detroiters have is a special brand,” she says. “It’s not that other places don’t have that. I don’t want to get in trouble with my hometown of [Washington, D.C.] but I didn’t grow up as being an artist in DC. I was in Detroit at a very, very important part of my life and Detroit was hit hard by COVID. Black and brown communities in particular were hit hard by COVID in this place that I feel connected to as an artist.”

In addition to making a memorial pouch, the exhibition offers several chances for visitors to be part of the work including weaving on a loom alongside teaching artists and making their own cyanotype constellation at workshops in community gardens to come later this summer.

The “Healing Memorial” itself is part of Clark’s “Beaded Prayers” project, which she started in 1998 as a way of ancestor veneration.

“Most of the beads used in this project are made of glass and other materials that will outlive us,” she says. “There’s a certain size of bead that is called a seed bead and several seed beads are used in the ‘Healing Memorial.’ When you think about what a seed is, a seed is holding all of the substance of a plant, all of its genetic material.”

She makes a similar connection to hair as, “the fiber that we grow.” In her “Hair Craft Project” Clark asked hairstylists to use her head as a canvas, creating intricate braided patterns. On display are also textile wigs of Black hairstyles that Clark made in the 1990s after graduating from Cranbrook.

“I was making headdresses to honor our ‘ori’ which is the Yoruba word for destiny or head because the seat of your soul in Yoruba culture is your head,” she says about the wigs. “They look like headdresses or hats but really I was thinking about them as altars of our collective and individual destiny... Think about a strand of hair. Every single person that came before you is encoded in the DNA that’s in that

strand of hair. It's like an umbilical cord to your entire family tree. So a strand of hair is not just a strand of hair. It's not just how you style it. It is your ancestors."

In her "Hair Craft Project," Clark asked hairstylists to use her head as a canvas. - Courtesy of Cranbrook Museum of Art



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Taking it a step further, Clark had a font created based on her curl pattern called "Twist." It's her way of creating her own decolonized alphabet. Her "1-877-OUR-CURL" project took poems from Black femme writers and printed them in the "Twist" font. It's also an actual hotline you can call to hear the poets read their work, but if you dial extension "708" you can hear all the poems read layered on top of each other as a chorus.

All of Clark's work is rooted in honoring Black ancestral lineages, but in the back room of the museum lies one of her most controversial works, "Unraveling." There are several mangled Confederate flags on display and a video about the work, but Clark has performed this piece around the world where she invites visitors to help her unravel a Confederate flag thread by thread.

She says that in past performances, participants who join her one at a time have made emotional confessions as she's standing shoulder to shoulder with them.

"The Confederate flag is part of the fabric of this nation, so what does it mean to undo it?" she says. "I had a white woman who told me that her uncle and her father were both in the KKK. She told me the reason she came was that she was embarrassed and felt horrible that men in her family were involved in this white terrorist organization. And to her, I had to say, this is symbolic. This is not the work. You have to contend with your uncle and father and deal with that. You can't just come to an art project, take a couple of threads out, and then say, 'Oh look what I did today.'"

She continues, "Then I had a young Black woman who was so triggered by the flag because of things that have happened to her. Her hands were shaking and she couldn't even touch it. And to her, I had to say, 'It's just a piece of cloth. We can do this.'"