

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Arlene Shechet Pace Gallery

The 14 large sculptures in the suggestively titled “Skirts,” Arlene Shechet’s recent exhibition, appear to have both hidden and overt agendas. The title word, as noun and verb, conveys ideas of outskirts and borders, as well as dodgy movement; it also describes an item of female clothing and can double as (disrespectful) slang for women themselves. Each sculpture responds to the worlds of nature, art, and culture, displaying disparate faces and views replete with composite parts, openings, protuberances, and contrasting materials, textures, and hues.

Iron Twins is simultaneously literal and figurative in its imagery, stylized profiles, breasts, and other anatomical possibilities perhaps winking at different periods in art history. Placed about an inch apart yet “facing” in opposite directions, the forms may or may not be identical. They seem to have embedded signs of individuality. From one direction, the two parts create a T shape. Their abstracted forms could point to Cycladic sculpture (c. 3000–1000 BCE), while the use of iron calls to mind the Iron Age (about 500 years later). The twins may make a further allusion to

the Industrial Revolution, around 1760, when machines improved cast iron production and products. Regardless of historical inspirations, for me, *Iron*



Twins raises philosophical questions about how and why similar identities may turn out differently. Most striking is the beauty of the tall “necks” and squarish, eyeless “heads.”

In terms of disposition and persona, *Via the Moon* differs radically from *Iron Twins*. The white oak trunk base, weathered by heat and water treatments, is riddled with intentional vertical cracks. Three wooden butterfly joints bridge the largest splits. The water-soaked, hand-painted acrylic pastel finish seems both natural and unnatural. On top of the base, a roundish, many-layered ceramic construction with a mottled, pock-marked surface evokes the moon. The many holes, fissures, sprues, valleys, and interior chambers may also

suggest bodily organs or ancient caves; most of all, it’s a hyper-convoluted abstract form. The title suggests madness disguised as beauty—going way, way out of the way to arrive at a destination. *Via the Moon* is more wound up than Tony Cragg’s most convoluted sculptures.

Each human-size to larger piece featured in this exhibition has its own embedded secrets and stories, from the cast bronze *Oomph* (installed on the terrace) to the equally bulbous *Grammar*, to the elongated forms of *Fancy* and *Magic Matters*, to the somewhat figurative *Under cherry trees/ There are/ No strangers. Deep Dive*, like *Iron Twins*, is a unique marvel. Its wood and steel base curves like a favorite sofa to hold three clay parts with alternating smooth or velvety surfaces colored chartreuse, pale green, and bold blue. Seen together, this new body of work demonstrates bold approaches to the juxtaposition of abstract forms, processes, and elemental materials. Shechet has maintained her trademark trajectory as an artist, keeping in the outside lane and not repeating herself.

—JAN GARDEN CASTRO

LONDON

Kara Walker Tate Modern

Kara Walker’s *Fons Americanus*, created for Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, is a brilliantly trenchant and brutal anti-monument to Britain’s shameful, often overlooked role in the slave trade. Rich in allegorical detail, it loosely echoes the



LEFT TO RIGHT:
ARLENE SHECHET
Deep Dive,
2020.

Glazed ceramic, painted
hardwood, and steel,
40 x 40 x 23 in.

Installation view of
“Skirts,” 2020.

iconography of the Victoria Memorial, a wellspring of patriotic fervor topped by a gilded bronze Winged Victory and flanked by statues of Queen Victoria, Truth, Justice, and Motherhood. Walker's four-tier fountain, in contrast, tweaks the symbolism. An exuberant Venus of African heritage crowns the composition, her head thrown back in an ecstatic pose while water spouts from her neck and breasts. Below her, the four cardinal points are occupied by a lynching tree with a noose and three figures who challenge official narratives of British colonialism and black representation. Queen Vicky, presented as a voluptuous woman in African headdress, bears a coconut, with a naked figure cowering in her skirts; a Kneeling Man symbolizing a wily European plantation owner pleads remorse or obsequiousness; and the Captain—an amalgamation of historical black heroes such as Haitian revolutionary fighter Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743–1803) and fictitious black characters like the megalomaniacal Emperor Jones of Eugene O'Neill's eponymous 1920 play—sits hands on knees with an expression of defiance or determination.

The sculptures placed on two tiers surrounding the base allude to the Middle Passage, weaving together art historical representations of slavery, blackness, and sharks. Distressed figures in shark-infested waters recall J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840), which depicts slave traders throwing their human

cargo overboard as a storm approaches. (Walker's large-scale watercolor *Terrible Vacation* [2014] offers another response to Turner's painting.) On the lowest tier, a shark lunges at a boy in a boat, a clear reference to Winslow Homer's 1899 painting *The Gulf Stream*. In the catalogue notes, Walker links these marine predators to Damien Hirst's stuffed shark of 1991; she titles this portion of her fountain *The Physical Impossibility of Blackness in the Mind of Someone White*.

Walker also included a second, smaller element in the installation. *Shell Grotto*, a giant scallop shell of the type that carries Venus to Cythera in countless paintings, appears to be approaching the fountain. Rather than bearing a triumphant goddess, this shell engulfs a black boy. His tearful face peers up as if from a well, alluding to the punishment for rebellious slaves at a West African trading fort.

Walker is best known for her cut-paper silhouettes, drawings, and sculptures that unflinchingly depict antebellum tales of racial and sexual atrocity—works that shine a light on the enduring trauma of slavery. In 2014, she created her first monumental sculpture in a former sugar factory in New York. The ironically titled *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* consisted of a colossal sphinx with a mammy's head, constructed from polystyrene blocks coated in sugar to highlight the ignominious link between slavery and the sugar industry. The 26-foot *Fons Americanus* shares the



bleached white color and caricature aesthetic of *A Subtlety*, although the fountain is made from reusable cork, metal, and wood. Tate, too, is indirectly connected to the legacy of slavery through its founder, the sugar merchant Henry Tate, who benefited along with the rest of the industry from slave labor.

A wall label sardonically employs the lexicon of the fairground as a guide to response: “Gasp Plaintively, Sigh Mournfully, Gaze Knowingly And REGARD the Immaterial Void of the Abyss etc. etc.” Turbine Hall can indeed invite a carnival atmosphere—the collective Superflex filled the space with swings in 2017—but it can also become an arena for solemn reflection, as with Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003),

which drew early attention to global warming. Walker's sculpture, bestowed as a gift to the “citizens of the Old World,” stands as a reproof to British complacency at having championed abolition at home while ignoring and profiting from the slave trade practiced in its colonies for decades afterward.

Fons Americanus gets under the skin. Appropriating the bombastic language of increasingly challenged colonial memorials, Walker has made a provocative and explicit monument to an ugly past whose legacy continues to reverberate today. Coinciding with Britain's exit from Europe and a worrying nostalgia for its imperial “glory,” Walker's gift has become an urgent and opportune warning.

—ELIZABETH FULLERTON

KARA WALKER
Fons Americanus,
2019–20.
Mixed media,
installation view.