SONYA CLARK
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Snyderman Gallery
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
October 1, 2011 – November 19, 2011

Southwest School of Art
San Antonio, Texas
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Front Cover. Adrienne’s Tale

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Foreword

It is an honor to present Sonya Clark’s solo exhibition at the Southwest School of Art. Her works, charged with meaning and message, are made even more powerful by the evocative materials and physical processes she employs. Trained in the fiber arts, Clark today weaves together not threads but ideas and symbols in order to produce elegant yet demanding works of art.

The visceral but quotidian properties of her works, as well as their exquisite execution, force our attention, compelling the viewer to grapple with their sweeping implications. To explore the poignancy and potency of lineage and the biases of history through works of art requires unique cognitive and perceptive skills.

We are grateful to Sonya Clark for sharing those skills with us and also to Rick Snyderman of Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia, our partner in this exhibition, and to essayists, Ashley Kistler of Richmond, Virginia and Namita Gupta Wiggers of Portland, Oregon.

PAULA OWEN
President, Southwest School of Art
Acknowledgements

Recently I gained a new ancestor. He was a man who understood if you possess passion, work would never seem burdensome, challenges blossomed into opportunities, and dedication yielded blessings. My father, Ranville Clark, taught me these life lessons in his relentlessly kind way. This exhibit is dedicated to him.

My father also taught me to be grateful. Friends, family, and mentors including Darryl Harper, Lilleth Clark, Henry Drewal, Joyce Scott, Bill Gaskins, Johnnetta Cole, Lowery Stokes Sims, Nick Cave, Gerhardt Knodel, and Leah Gilliam have exemplified how to walk in the world as creative people. The Dean’s Office at Virginia Commonwealth University, my right hand in the Department of Craft/Material Studies, Deborah Quick, and my studio assistants Meg Roberts, Andrea Donnelly, and Amy Weiks have helped this exhibit come to fruition. Ideas for the newer pieces came while I was a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow where I had access to the outstanding curators and collections. I am indebted to the essayists and each of the individuals at the Southwest School of Art and Snyderman Gallery for their perspectives and assistance.

Artist Statement

I investigate simple objects as cultural interfaces. Through them I navigate accord and discord. I am instinctively drawn to things that connect to my personal narrative as a point of departure: a comb, a piece of cloth, or a strand of hair. I wonder how each comes to have meaning collectively. What is the history of the object? How does it function? Why is it made of a certain material? How did its form evolve? These questions and their answers direct the structure, scale, and material choices in my work.

Charged with agency, otherwise passive objects have the mysterious ability to reflect or absorb us. I find my image, my personal story, in an object. But it is also the object’s ability to act as a rhizome, the multiple ways in which it can be discovered or read, that draws me in. To sustain my practice, I milk the object and question the viewer about these collective meanings. My stories, your stories, our stories are held in the object. I work in series to reframe the object as a mediated compilation of our stories. In this way, the everyday “thing” becomes a lens through which we may better see one another.

– Sonya Clark, 2011
www.sonyaclark.com
Cornrow Chair
Sonya Clark: Corporeal Materiality

NAMITA GUPTA WIGGERS
Curator, Museum of Contemporary Craft, in partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, Oregon

Hair, as Sonya Clark reminds us, is a primordial fiber. It is the first thread we handle, a deceptively mundane material we often dismiss or ignore in its singular form despite its ability to quietly contain our genetic history within each individual strand. When still intact on our heads, this collection of strands is shaped to communicate our identities, tortured into submission if it does not obey our desires, and most frequently made to behave in direct opposition to its natural state. It is here, in the space where hair functions as a cultural signifier that Sonya Clark’s artwork resides. But it is not hair in general which occupies the questions in Clark’s work; it is hair that belongs to her and from those in her community, that resides on the body and is manipulated through her cultural experiences and history. Her work calls our attention to black hair, hair which — for and on Clark — is tough and tightly coiled in its natural state, but can be made straight, braided, shaped, flattened, woven, and extended.

The use of hair as a “ladies craft” is not new. During the Victorian period, for example, hair was used in a wide variety of ways, from sections of braids displayed under crystals in the manner of gemstones to braided bracelet chains and elaborate wall displays with hair shaped into flowers or rings with private chambers to hold a loved one’s locks. Clark’s work, however, is not overtly sentimental, romantic, or part of the better known memento mori tradition. It operates, instead, in multiple public realms from the contemporary artscape to the global culturescape.

Through Clark’s hands, hair exits the messiness of the studio and is tamed for the white cube. Here, too, Clark’s work is distinctive. The hair to which she calls our attention is curly and highly textured; it is not the silky, long tresses Hrafnindur Arnadottir manipulates into hairpieces, a substitute for embroidery floss as used by Anne Wilson to “mend” wounded linens, or reduced to a single line as in Melanie Bilenker’s “drawings.” The hair to which Clark calls our attention is that which forms a tangle of fibers, a ball of fibrous energy that can be barely contained between two hands (Mom’s Wisdom or Cotton Candy, 2011). It is hair that makes dreadlocks and from a friend which Clark hangs in Adrienne’s Tale (2008), creating long, pendulous sculptural forms reminiscent of Eva Hesse’s material explorations. Clark embraces the specificities of her hair, challenging the preconceived cultural notions embedded in such polarities as rough versus silky.

Madam CJ Walker looms physically and psychologically large in Clark’s work. Self-made businesswoman Sarah Breedlove McWilliams, a.k.a. Madam Walker (1867-1919), became the first African American millionaire through the sale of hair care products to “help” women transform “bad” hair into “good” hair. Constructed out of meticulously manipulated black plastic combs, Clark monumentalizes Madam Walker with the very tool that most African American women with naturally curly hair, including Clark, simply do not use; that is, unless the hair has been altered as in Untitled (Comb Rubbing and Burning, 2009). Her Afro Abe (Progression, 2008-2012) provides an extreme contrast on the other end of the spectrum, by manipulating “natural” hair into bigger and bigger forms, the growing Afro dwarfing the five dollar bill and the president responsible for emancipation of enslaved Africans.
(Abraham Lincoln) while simultaneously referencing how hair was engaged during the rise of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Most of the writing about Clark’s work to-date emphasizes her connection to the cultures of West Africa, Yoruba in particular. Clark, who is of African and Scottish Caribbean descent, speaks eloquently of being part of a continuum that connects her to an invisible and unknown past. It is in her most recent pieces that the charged nature of this aspect of that continuum comes to the forefront. Using black thread to create corn-rowed stripes and Bantu knots for stars, Clark’s Black Hair Flag (2010) deliberately places the “body” of black slaves into the history of the Confederacy. This new direction of object-based work continues with 3/5 (2010), in which Clark weaves three of five potential braids into a man’s dress shirt, referencing a pre-Civil War compromise of 1787 in which enslaved Africans were counted as partial human beings for taxation purposes and to determine the number of officials that could be elected from any given state to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Flat Twist on a Remnant of Idyllic Days (2010), in which Clark obscures scenes of pastoral frolicking with specific types of braids (called flat twists), likewise, functions similarly to Fred Wilson’s co-location of slave shackles with an enormous silver urn in the exhibition Mining the Museum (1992-1993) at the Maryland Historical Society. Both works call attention to enslaved Africans and their bodies whose physical labors enabled such privileged lifestyles.

Regardless of the medium, Clark’s hands are always embedded in her process. As she notes, slaves removed from Africa may have arrived apparently empty-handed, but in fact their hands held memories of particular ways of working, making, and moving materials carried from Africa to the “New World.” An embodied practitioner and educator, Clark’s explorations through her material practice remind us of the complexities of culture and reify its otherwise invisible origins.

NOTES
1 See Lowery Sims, Fiberarts, Jan/Feb 2009, for a discussion of the connections between African American culture and contemporary African American artists in relation to Sonya Clark’s work.
2 Other artists who use hair in their work include Richard Artschwager, Nick Cave, David Hammons, Dario Robletto, and Lorna Simpson, amongst many others.
Above. Detail. In Her Own Words | Right. Detail. Mom’s Wisdom or Cotton Candy
During a program aired in February 2010, shortly after the death of novelist J. D. Salinger, broadcast journalist Charlie Rose asked his guest and New Yorker essayist, Adam Gopnik, what he, as a writer, had learned from Salinger. In response, Gopnik stressed the importance of identifying the story that seems most crucial to tell and “learning to recognize that your authentic obsession... is your real material.”

This indispensable lesson shares an objective with the rite of passage known as imori (“knowing the head”), traditionally practiced among the Yoruba of West Africa to determine a newborn’s inner nature and destiny. Although the cultural contexts and particulars of these two situations differ vastly, both stress the essentiality of discerning and sustaining a path of genuine self-realization and expression. As professor Bolaji Campbell notes in the opening lines of an essay on the work of Sonya Clark, “Like the Yoruba diviner, we must perform the rituals of imori — that is, knowing the path...”

Clark’s authentic obsession springs in part from the potent, multisensory memories of having her hair combed and braided as a child. Seated on the floor, between the legs of a female family member or friend, she recalls the feeling of being literally tethered to that person as her hair was dressed. Her description evokes an image of birth. The space thus demarcated for this intimate activity assumed ritual, even sacred dimensions; it was where some of life’s most important lessons concerning cultural precepts and spiritual knowledge were first imparted, and surely where the many facets of an individual’s identity began to take on greater relief.

As Clark has become the accomplished maker that she is today, she has used hair as her medium and her message. She thinks and works cyclically, extracting meaning and nuance from themes that have long preoccupied her as a way of expanding her story. Some years ago, as if the muscle memory embedded in the hands of an attentive elder — remembered as rhythmic tugs on her own small scalp — was another form of knowledge passed on to her from previous generations, Clark began adopting hairstyling techniques as a textile art form. Her Wig Series from the late 1990s features elaborate coiffures sculpted out of black thread atop rounded cloth caps. The honorific Afro Abe (Progression, 2008-2012) comprises seven altered five-dollar bills in which the artist crowns Lincoln’s head with an embroidered, increasingly volumetric afro. In a new group of works included in this exhibition, she augments found, sometimes historically loaded images and objects with multiple black cornrows of braided and knotted thread that blanket and dangle from their surfaces. By stitching these signifying elements onto her chosen artifacts, she layers an alternate, overtly political narrative that speaks of perseverance and continuity.

Actual hair constitutes Clark’s fiber of choice for many pieces, including the strand of small felted black balls whose title, Heritage Pearls, affirms the instructive legacy of intergenerational connections. Several recent works reinforce this theme in intensely personal ways. Mom’s Wisdom or Cotton Candy, a new photograph that reprises an earlier work entitled Pearl of Mother, depicts the artist’s cupped hands gently cradling a nest-like mound of her mother’s light gray...
hair as if holding a treasured keepsake. To make Coming of Age, Clark shaped her mother’s hair into a dreadlock whose black fibers gradually fade to nearly white at the bottom of the thick strand. She envisions using it to create a second version of Long Hair; when unfurled, this digital print depicts a single 30-foot-long dreadlock that conceivably measures the growth of an individual’s hair over the course of a lifetime. In these works, Clark fashions hair into lifelines that mark the passage of time and the accumulation of wisdom.

Clark extends her obsession to also embrace a basic grooming implement. She manages to wrest multiple personalities from one of the most banal objects imaginable, though her use of the plastic fine-toothed pocket comb reminds us that its connotations of racial assimilation are hardly benign. Clark has configured many hundreds of these black combs into wall-mounted, freestanding, hanging, and floor sculptures that sometimes mimic the texture and character of hair: Twist, Wavy Strand, Curls, and 7 Layer Tangle name a few. Clark exploits the comb’s formal properties to also produce seductive abstract pieces like Carpet, as well as image-based works like Madame CJ Walker (large), in which she employs the teeth of the comb as her warp and weft to weave a portrait of the legendary black hair-care entrepreneur. For Clark, missing or broken teeth offer “evidence of struggle.” In Gold Teeth, she repairs the progressively greater number of missing teeth in a series of seven combs by inserting cast-gold replacements. These precious substitutes commemorate a legacy of hair culture, while the resulting black-and-gold pattern extols the visual rhythm of what Clark has called “a new order.” Finally, in a drawing of sequential images entitled Consequences, two combs assume a figurative presence as they enact an age-old ritual dance of coming together and pulling apart. Considered within the context of these inventive works, the lowly comb apparently has a great deal more versatility as an artistic medium than it does as a hairdressing tool.

Clark’s preoccupation with hair not only reasserts the importance of this attribute as a conveyor of countless aspects of human identity and experience; it also underscores the significance of its carrier, the head, which she likewise accords sustained attention. Gele Kente Flag, one of two early works from the mid-1990s included in the exhibition, anticipates the sculptural headdresses and intricate wigs she began shortly thereafter. Its construction reflects techniques she learned during a 1989 trip to Cote d’Ivoire, working on a strip loom in a traditional setting. The pattern of her elongated weaving intersperses blue squares with white stars and the multicolored motifs of Kente cloth across a field of red and white bands suggesting the stripes of the American flag. The syncretic design of Clark’s textile reflects her desire “to strengthen the tether to my African heritage,” in keeping with the content of many of her other pieces, as does its function as a wrap intended to embellish the head. By acknowledging the head as something worthy of adornment, she affirms its status as the cardinal site of personal empowerment so integral to the spiritual beliefs of her Yoruba ancestors and herself.

One of the most profound images in the exhibition is also one of the simplest.
Clark once again pays tribute to that sacred site but, in this instance, she attends to a very particular head. Within the rounded contours of her minimal ink-on-paper drawing, she inscribes the pattern created by the stubble on top of her husband’s shaved head—a constellation of marks as singular and distinctive as a fingerprint. Indeed, many aspects of Clark’s authentic obsession coalesce in this lovingly rendered image.

NOTES
1 www.charlierose.com/download/transcript/10841
4 Ibid.
Detail. Afro Abe (Progression)... five-dollar bills
Artist Biography

EDUCATION
1995 M.F.A., Cranbrook Academy of Art
1993 B.F.A., School of the Art Institute of Chicago
1989 B.A., Amherst College

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND RESIDENCIES
Art Matters Grant, New York, New York, 2011–12
Culture Works Grant, Richmond, Virginia, 2011–12
McColl Knight Residency, Charlotte, North Carolina, 2011
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Professional Fellowship, 2011
Cranbrook Distinguished Mid-Career Alumni Award, 2011
Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, 2010 and 2011
Virginia Commission for the Arts Fellowship, 2009
Outstanding Woman in the Arts for the State of Virginia, 2009
Rockefeller Foundation Residency, Bellagio, Italy, 2006
Pollock Krasner Grant, 2006
Ruth Chenven Foundation Award, 2005
Red Gate Artist in Residence, Beijing, China, 2005
Romnes Award, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004
Lillian Elliott Award, 2000
Wisconsin Arts Board Artist Fellowship Award, 2000

SELECTED ONE AND TWO PERSON EXHIBITS
2009 Combs: Pieces and Parts
List Gallery, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania
2008 Loose Strands, Tight Knots
Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
Groom Room
Delaware Contemporary Art Center, Wilmington
Transformers (Sonya Clark and David Ellis)
  Corridor Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
2006 Sonya Clark: Tangles, Teeth, and Touch
  Cannon Gallery, North Carolina State University, Raleigh;
  Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin
Sonya Clark
  Sherry Leedy Contemporary Arts, Kansas City, Missouri
2003 Sonya Clark
  Galerie Goettlicher, Krems-Stein, Austria
2002 Sonya Clark and Syd Carpenter
  Stella Jones Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana
2001 African Inspirations
  University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City; Indianapolis
  Art Museum, Indiana
Couples, Duples and Dopplegangers
  Anderson Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan
2000 Cultural Memories
  Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, Virginia
1999 Heads and Tales
  Wisconsin Academy Gallery, Madison
1998 Parted, Plaited and Piled
  Leedy Voulkos Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
Diadems
  Museum of Decorative Art, Montreal, Canada

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITS
2011 Material Girls
  Reginald Lewis Museum, Baltimore, Maryland
2010 Global Africa
  Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York
New Material World: Rethreading Technology
  Sheldon Art Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska
True Self
  Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin
Hand+Mind
  Contemporary Art Museum of Houston, Texas
The New Materiality: Digital Dialogues at The Boundaries of Contemporary Craft
  Fuller Museum of Craft, Brockton, Massachusetts
Social Skin
  Anderson Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
7th International Fiber Biennial
  Snyderman-Works Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Wearing Spirit
  Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute,
  New York, New York
2009 Generously Odd: Craft Now
  Lexington Art League, Kentucky
Black
  DCAC, Washington, D.C.
Rockstone and Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art
  Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut
Dress Codes: Clothing as Metaphor in Contemporary Art
  Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York
Complex Weave
  Stedman Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey; Center for the Arts Gallery, Towson University, Maryland; Lore Degenstein Gallery, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania
Cheongju International Craft Biennale
  Cheongju Arts Center, Korea
Taking Time
  Birmingham Museum of Art, England; Doveco Studios, Edinburgh, Scotland; Harley Gallery, Worksop, England; Millennium Court Arts Centre, Portadown, Ireland; University of Hertfordshire Galleries, Hatfield, England; Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, England; Platform Gallery, Clitheroe, England
Uber Portrait
  Bellevue Arts Museum, Washington
Upcycling
  Architecture and Design Museum, Los Angeles, California
Hair on Fire
  Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, South Carolina
Political Circus
  Ritter Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton
Manufactured
  Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon
Second Lives
  Museum of Art and Design, New York, New York
Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits
  UCLA Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, California; Chazen Museum, Madison, Wisconsin; National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.; Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California
6th International Fiber Biennial
  Snyderman-Works Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
The matter at hand
  Memphis College of Art, Tennessee
National Black Fine Art Show
  NCA Gallery, Puck Building, New York, New York
SELECTED PRESENTATIONS AND LECTURES

MUSEUMS
American Folk Art Museum, New York, New York
Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin
Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan
Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York
Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon
National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.
Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri
UCLA Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, California
Urban Institute of Contemporary Arts, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Walters Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

SCHOOLS
California College of Art, Oakland, California
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
East Carolina State University, Greenville, North Carolina
Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Michigan
BOOKS AND REVIEWS

Halper, Valerie, “Trinket to Talisman”, MetalSmith, Vol. 24, No. 5, p. 37

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Hampton Museum, Virginia
Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection, Madison, Wisconsin
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin
Mead Art Museum, Amherst, Massachusetts
Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, Quebec, Canada
Musees d’Angers, Angers, France
Sprint Collection, Overland Park, Kansas
University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

2006–present Professor and Chair, Craft/Material Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, Richmond
2004–2006 Baldwin Bascom Professor of Creative Arts, University of Wisconsin, Madison
2002–2005 Associate Professor, Environment, Textiles and Design, University of Wisconsin, Madison
1997–2002 Assistant Professor, Environment, Textiles and Design, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Left. Detail. Penny Loafers
Right. Detail. Counting Change
Exhibition Checklist

Abacus
2010
wood, human hair and metal
5 x 5 x 0.5 inches

Adrienne’s Tale
2008
human hair and wire
60 x 6 x 4 inches

Afro Abe (Peacock)
2010
1 of 44, only one with feathers
five-dollar bill with stitched peacock feathers
4 x 6 inches

Afro Abe (Progression)... five-dollar bills
2008–2012
five-dollar bill and thread
36 x 12 inches

Barbershop Pole
2008
combs
96 x 10 x 10 inches

Basketweave Cornrows
2011
handwoven, embroidered and braided cotton
unframed, 17 x 15 inches

Black Hair Flag
2010
paint and thread on canvas
52 x 26 inches

Counting Change
1994
cloth, screening, pins and pennies
30 x 12 inches

Flat Twist on a Remnant of Idyllic Days
2010
Idyllic Days cloth with thread stitched as flat
twist hairstyle
42 x 54 inches

Gele Kente Flag
1995
handwoven and embroidered silk and cotton
15 x 72 inches

Gold Teeth
2008
combs and bronze
5 x 10 inches

Heritage Pearls
2010
found box, human hair and silver
8 x 5 x 5 inches

In Her Own Words
2008
combs and thread
45 x 140 inches

Long Hair
2007
digital print
30 feet x 2.5 feet
as shown | 120 x 4 x 2.5 inches

Madam CJ Walker (large)
2006
combs
132 x 96 x 12 inches

Mom’s Wisdom or Cotton Candy
2011
photograph
36 x 24 inches

Penny Loafer
2008
pennies and copper
10 x 4 x 2.5 inches each

3/5
2010
found men’s dress shirt, hanger, and embroidered thread
30 x 21 x 3 inches
Twisted Diaspora
2011
primed canvases and cotton thread
60 x 84 inches

Consequences (Comb Rubbing)
2009
polyester
framed, 35 x 32 inches

Untitled (Comb Rubbing and Burning)
2009
polyester
framed, 18 x 20 inches

Untitled (Cornrow Chair)
2011
found chair, thread
36 x 20 x 20 inches

Untitled (Drawing of Darryl’s Head)
2009
pen on paper
32 x 24 inches