

Reviews

Grub For Sharks A Concession for the Negro Populace

Anthony Downey

In 1840 J M W Turner painted *Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming on (The Slave Ship)*. The subject matter concerned the ‘Zong’, a slave ship that had departed from Liverpool in the 1780s en route to Jamaica where, on arrival, the master of the ship had slaves – both dead and alive – thrown into the shark-infested seas. This nefarious practice was regularly employed by slave traders to claim insurance monies for slaves who had become so enfeebled by the journey they could not be sold on arrival. The issue was one of remuneration: if sick slaves died a ‘natural’ death, the ship’s owners received no compensation; if, however, slaves were thrown overboard in order to expedite the ship’s passage in the face of a possibly ruinous storm, the insurers would pay out. In sum, the loss of a few slaves, when compared with the loss of a ship, was infinitely more palatable to insurance brokers and slave traders alike.

For her first solo show in England, Kara Walker has turned to this Turner painting, alongside a historical account of the Liverpool slave trade, for inspiration. Whilst Turner’s vision of the ‘Zong’ presents a phantasmagoric swirl of colour and violence – complete with a fierce West Indian sunset giving way to the shape of manacled limbs flailing in the foaming seas – Walker’s phantasms are black silhouettes fixed to the white walls of the gallery. On a formal level, *Grub For Sharks* does bear a circumstantial relationship to Turner’s painting. Its cyclorama-like installation imitates a category of history painting in the round that was popular in the eighteenth century and the central ‘panel’ depicts a swirling mass of clouds with a disembowelled figure at its core. Elsewhere, a top-hatted figure throws a

fettered female into a pool of water whence an up-turned hand reaches. However, and despite some resemblances to Turner’s painting, *Grub for Sharks* is more to do with Walker’s perennial subject matter: the ante-bellum American South and the narrative of slavery that marked (and continues to mark) the history of American states such as Georgia, where Walker grew up as a teenager. Although not necessarily meant to be read in a clock-wise fashion, the narrative trajectory takes in a grotesque vision of nineteenth-century plantation life as gleaned from popular folklore, cartoons, and movies. (Walker worked in a bookshop for a year where she developed an interest in so-called Harlequin Romances and slave narratives.) And herein lies part of Walker’s success and part of the problem with her work: although increasingly popular on an international scale for her engagement with the legacy of slavery (in the southern states of America) – not to mention her expert use of the silhouette as both visual conceit and formal device – these works do not necessarily ‘translate’ from, or indeed eschew, their original context. This is not to discount Walker’s work *per se*; on the contrary, it is to enquire into the extent to which her work maintains its sociopolitical purchase, and therefore its symbolic relevance and impact, in its present context.

In broad terms, Walker’s images constitute a virtual abecadarium of racial and sexual abuse: disembowelled women lie prostrate on patches of turf; children suck on the phallic heads of sticks; fellating women dangle from the penises of top-hatted men; women and children are lynched from trees; and men, with whips, ride on women’s backs just as a jockey would on a horse. Although this is – literally and figuratively – graphic stuff, this catalogue of abuse, in its excessiveness and frequency, can also border on the carnivalesque: an oblivious child plays ‘catch’ with a decapitated head; three-legged women root around in a prostrate man’s orifices with a broom; children defecate with abandon; and, floating nonchalantly above this infernal apparition, flatulent angels survey the proceedings. Apart from the recurrent subject matter, Walker’s vignettes also share a formal characteristic: they are invariably black silhouettes in which black racial features have



Kara Walker, *Grub For Sharks: A Concession for the Negro Populace*, 2004, Courtesy of the Artist and Brent Sikkema, Photograph Tate Liverpool 2004.

been exaggerated: a thick-lipped, shock-haired man in profile appears here to have a coconut tree for a penis, whilst elsewhere a Hottentot-like Venus prances in an archaic dance-like fashion. It is precisely for the use of images such as these that Walker has attracted equal amounts of both opprobrium and critical acclaim, not least in America. Her detractors see these images as sexist, derogatory, and a sop to the mainly white liberal arts institutions of America. A central issue underwriting these criticisms concerns a singular and pervasive question: what are the responsibilities of an artist (particularly a black artist) when representing black subjects? A further inflection to this question concerns the extent to which – having long been the locus of a representational racialisation that not only produced but actively disseminated the shorthand of the stereotype – there is an ethical responsibility to be observed when employing stereotyped images in the work. Neither of these questions, needless to say, would have critical purchase if Walker was not explicitly and enduringly employing the genre of the black stereotype. For her supporters, Walker's use of stereotyped imagery is a critique of the stereotype

and its residual historical and contemporary resonances. The graphic exploration of race, sexuality, and gender in these tableaux is often seen as a critique of how the stereotype is promulgated: a literal and nominal 'silhouette', the stereotype is a simplified, 'flattened', one-dimensional (and shadowy) figure set against a pervasive (white) system of thought that tends to both dehistoricise and derogate the racialised subject. Walker's work formally replicates this economy of representation – a two-dimensional 'black' figure against an all-encompassing white ground – and in doing so draws attention to its conceptually abbreviated tropes and stunted means of reification. The silhouette, in fine, is a synecdoche for the stereotype and its ubiquitous circulation.

To note as much, nonetheless, is to recall our original question: does this work have an impact beyond its formal dimension within the historical, social, and political milieu of today. On the basis of this showing, I would have to argue that it does not; and this may have to do with the historical immediacy and consciousness of slavery in the American South and its far from diminished substance if we

consider issues such as contemporary political and economic disenfranchisement. To suggest that Liverpool, as a trading post for slave traders, contributed to the slave conditions of the ante-bellum South is all very well, but it does not actually tell us that much about either the slave trade or Liverpool itself. Given the emphasis on the site-specificity of the work, and its avowed attempt to explore precisely those issues, this would seem to be an important, if not deleterious, oversight. This may appear harsh, and whilst I would not suggest that Walker should slavishly follow the esteemed source of its inspiration or give us a lesson in the slave trade, there is a sense that we have a Walker-by-numbers installation that merely re-covers the same ground. That may appear doubly harsh when we consider Walker's undoubted virtuosity with the device of the silhouette – on both a formal and a conceptual level – but it is difficult to see exactly what contextual connection there is between this work and, apart from a few visual clues, Turner's original painting; and, therefore, what connection, if any, this work has to its broader institutional and historical context in Liverpool or the UK. The question of whether or not Walker offers a critique of the stereotype and its visual signifiers, or, conversely, offers a stereotyped stereotype, so to speak, is largely unresolved – and this unresolvedness, I would argue, is present in *Grubs for Sharks*.

Whilst this could certainly point to a shortfall in the work itself, there was also the added problem here of the unimaginative installation of the work. This is to note that the project space at Tate Liverpool is the first gallery you enter on the ground floor and, whilst that much is unavoidable, no effort was made to differentiate the space from the foyer. Given the inherent theatricality of Walker's work, it does not appear that much thought went into the lighting either, which gives the installation a curiously matter-of-fact appearance – a magic-lantern-like quality without the magic. This is not to argue that Walker's work is without subtlety; and its reworking of the genteel practice of the silhouette is a disarming stratagem when we consider the subject matter in hand. On a conceptual level, her silhouettes are not only fastidious but disclose a series of ambivalences that revolve (but are not necessarily resolved) around the parts that have been left out rather than what has been revealed. A case in point is the figure mentioned earlier with the tree/penis appendage. That the tree extends from his pelvis, and thus corre-

sponds with a penis, could be the result of a visual coincidence: he could have just been walking past the tree at the time. That the tree assumes the visual role of a penis is as much to do with our reading as it is with Walker's (albeit intentional) visual prodding. Elsewhere, a man's hand could be – given the flatness of the silhouetted figures portrayed – either rummaging around in the bowels of a woman or resting on her pelvis. Another woman, holding fast to a tree, could be either chopping it down, leaning on it for support, or have been left lashed to it. This is the productive ambiguity of the silhouette: the imagination furnishes that which has been left out. It is precisely on this level that Walker's work comes into its own, circulating as it does as an itemised account of the ambiguities that attend racial stereotyping and the visual economy involved in fantasising the other.

Turner's original painting, precisely because of its lurid colourfulness and odious subject matter, remained unsold at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1840. In 1844, John James Ruskin, father of the more renowned John, bought it for his son who was said to admire it. In a diary entry for 1 January, Ruskin wrote – with the painting then in his possession – that he was not only grateful for its presence but that he would 'never want another oil of his [Turner's]'.¹ In 1872, finding the subject matter of men being effectively sacrificed to sharks for insurance purposes too gruesome to contemplate, he sold it on to an American collector. The painting now hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where it would be interesting to enquire as to whether its subject matter, not to mention its emotive power, has translated to a different historical context. For all its formal virtuosity, it is on the latter score that Walker's work – albeit on the evidence of this one, far from resolved, showing – would appear to fall short.

Notes

1. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, eds, *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, 3 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956–59, vol 1, p 257.

'Kara Walker, Grub For Sharks: A Concession for the Negro Populace' was at Tate Liverpool, 1 May–31 October 2004.