

National Museum of Women in the Arts

Sonya Clark: Tatter, Bristle, and Mend

March 3–May 31, 2021

The large-print guide is ordered presuming you are entering the exhibition from the passenger elevators.

On the center pedestal:

Cornrow Chair, 2011

Upholstered chair and thread

On loan from Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

The precisely stitched black thread braids covering this found chair exemplify the contributions Black Americans have made to this country in the form of enslaved labor. Clark notes that many viewers read the sculpture as an homage to Madam C. J. Walker (1867–1919), the Black

entrepreneur and social activist who became the country's first female self-made millionaire through the success of her hair care products.

Standing in front of the exhibition introduction wall text, to the right:

Esther Mahlangu's Touch, 2015

Glass beads

On loan from the artist

This beaded panel depicts renowned South African Ndebele artist Esther Mahlangu (b. 1935) painting a mural for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond, Virginia, in 2014. Clark served as chair of the craft/material studies department at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond for eleven years. She challenged students there to respond to Mahlangu's work at the VMFA, an assignment she modeled in this panel.

Standing in front of the exhibition introduction wall text, to the left, and then continue around this gallery counterclockwise.

Hemi, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Purchase through the Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

Unum, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Purchase through the Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

Twenty-one, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

Cranbrook Art Museum, Gift of Christina Heidrich

Crown, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

On loan from the artist

Hair Necklace 5 (Branches), 2006

Human hair

On loan from the artist

Hair Necklace 6 (Pearls), 2014

Human hair

On loan from the artist

Composed of tightly wound hairballs that form pearls of increasing size, this necklace poses questions of heritage: what gets passed down through generations, who receives it, and how we value its legacy. In some families, jewelry is an heirloom, inherited through generations—much like the DNA found in hair. To craft such a piece from hair rather than gems suggests that hair itself is the

heirloom, a crowning jewel comprised of the fiber of one's ancestors.

Hair Necklace 3, 2012

Human hair

On loan from the artist

In her Hair Necklace works, Clark rolls, twists, balls, and loops human hair to create necklaces of many styles and forms. She created this gradated dreadlock by combining her dark hair with her mother's white locks, intertwining their DNA. Clark recalls childhood memories of having her hair styled by family members and the feeling of being tethered together during the process.

Hair Necklace 2, 2012

Human hair and beads

On loan from the artist

Hair Wreath, 2002

Human hair and wire

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection

In Hair Wreath, Clark's earliest sculpture to include human hair, she embraces this essential fiber for its connection to the individual body as well as its ancestral roots. "My hair is the glory of all my ancestors who have come before me, and it is a great material for artists to work their magic in," she says. A wreath typically adorns the head as a decorative ornament. Clark's version, crafted from dreadlocks given to her by a friend, celebrates hair itself as a worthy embellishment.

Nap, 2012

Glass beads and board

On loan from the artist

Chromosomes, 2004

Glass beads

On loan from the artist

Chromosomes hold the DNA molecules in each cell within every living creature. Often x-shaped, chromosomes contain the instructions that make each living being. Made with gleaming black beads, the sculptures composing this installation allude to Clark's individual heritage and story as a Black woman. Since we are all descended from the first humans who lived in Africa, these chromosomes might also signify humankind's collective story.

Behind Chromosomes, in the large case to the left:

Plexus, 2002

Glass beads, wood, and paint

On loan from the artist

Behind Chromosomes, in the small case to the right:

Skein, 2016

Human hair

On loan from the artist

More than 80,000 individual hairs from the heads of anonymous Black women come together in this dreadlocked skein. This number represents the approximate number of Africans forcibly migrated as chattel slaves in just one year at the height of the transatlantic slave trade. Through her work, Clark often unravels complex racial, social, and cultural issues. While this skein is tightly wound, a loose end emerges—an

invitation to viewers to begin the difficult but necessary work of unwinding these issues alongside the artist.

Continue clockwise in the niche to the left of Chromosomes.

Hair Craft Tapestries, 2014

Thread and plastic combs

Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr.

These sculptures portray eleven Richmond, Virginia-based hairdressers with whom Clark collaborated on her Hair Craft Project (2014), as well as Madam C. J. Walker, the renowned early-twentieth-century businesswoman who made her fortune through hair-care products. Clark formed the portraits by wrapping thread around the spines of black pocket combs. The densely packed threads stand in for hair and also function like pigment, which the artist uses to build shapes and shading.

Madam C. J. Walker II (Comb Tapestry), 2019

Plastic combs and thread

On loan from the artist

Madam C. J. Walker, 2008

Plastic combs

Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin,

Purchase through the generosity of Marilyn D. Johnson;

Beverly Dale; Buckingham Foundation, Inc.; Jeanne and

Michael Klein; Fredericka and David Middleton; H-E-B;

Joseph and Tam Hawkins; Carmel and Gregory Fenves;

The National Council of Negro Women (Austin Section);

Lone Star (TX) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated; Town

Lake (TX) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated; National

Society of Black Engineers-Austin Professionals; Greater

Austin Black Chamber of Commerce; National Black MBA

Association Austin Chapter; and other donors

This portrait depicts Madam C. J. Walker, born Sarah Breedlove in 1867 in Delta, Louisiana. She developed hair care products for African American hair and achieved extraordinary professional and financial success prior to women's suffrage and long before the Civil Rights Movement. Clark used 3,840 pocket combs to assemble this image based on a 1912 photograph of Walker by Addison Scurlock. "Together, the thousands of combs become a monumental tapestry, signifying Walker's magnitude and success despite her humble beginnings," Clark says.

Madam C. J. Walker and Me, 2013

Artist's hair, contact paper, and paper

On loan from Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

Twisted Diaspora, 2011

Primed canvases and cotton thread

On loan from the artist

Thick twists of cotton affix themselves to small mounted canvases in this abstract composition that speaks to the spread of the African diaspora around the globe. If the work is visualized as a Mercator-projection map, which centers Europe and the Western Hemisphere, the most concentrated cluster of twisted threads lands in the vicinity of Africa. The remaining cords are dispersed from the center to increasingly distant locations.

Rooted and Uprooted, 2011

Canvas and thread

On loan from the artist

Twisting and braiding black cotton threads into thick interwoven plaits, Clark references her ability to trace the European roots of her ancestry back to Scotland, while it is more difficult to know her family's African origins due to the forced migration of enslaved people from the continent. The "rooted" half of the sculpture pulls taut

between two mounts, securely planted on both ends. The “uprooted” half hangs freely, signifying a search for genetic history that concludes with loose ends.

Melanin, 2002

Glass tube and glass beads

On loan from the artist

Clark arranged the multicolored beads within this work to represent the genetic code for melanin, the pigment that produces color in the skin, hair, and eyes of humans. Naturally occurring genetic mutations of melanin have produced wide variations of skin color within populations since the beginning of the modern human species. Clark’s sculpture gives shape to a genetic material that has taken on a disproportionate significance in American culture and racial history.

Mom's Wisdom or Cotton Candy, 2011

Photograph

On loan from the artist

Clark's ancestors include people of the Yoruba culture in West Africa, who associate the color white with wisdom—and see white hair as an outward sign of knowledge. In this image, the artist's hands cradle her mother's white hair. Clark's mother's forebears were forced from Africa to the Caribbean as part of the slave trade that fueled the sugar industry (sugar being the main ingredient of cotton candy), which flourished in the region from the sixteenth century.

Pearl of Mother, 2006

Hair and wood

On loan from the artist

A small hand shaped from the artist's dark hair cradles a miniature pearl of her late mother's white strands in this personal and reverential work. While white hair is often viewed as an undesirable sign of age, for Clark it signals knowledge, peace, and a connection to her ancestors. The title's wordplay on the phrase "pearl of wisdom" elevates her mother's experience and knowledge. The object's minute size and placement make it all the more precious, as if a treasured keepsake.

Two Trees, 2003

Wool, felt, cotton, and wire

Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Mr. and Mrs.

William B. Ansted Jr. Art Fund, 2003.19,

DiscoverNewfields.org

The bold shape of this sculpture conveys essential ideas about branches, roots, and growth, as well as family trees. Clark is deeply inspired by her ancestral heritage. She

observes, “[My art] strengthens the tether to my African heritage, not to return to the past, but to better understand my place in the present.”

Spider, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Purchase through the Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

Fingers, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Purchase through the Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

To demonstrate the connection between fiber art processes and hairdressing, Clark used dark thread as a stand-in for hair in this series. “That which is carried on the head is often indicative of what is within the head,” she

says. Twists suggest an energetic, animated state of mind, while crown shapes convey a regal mood.

Triad, from the “Wig Series,” 1998

Cloth and thread

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Purchase through the Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

Greet, 2004

Glass beads

On loan from the artist

Clark’s beaded sculptures depicting hands reaching toward one another, nestled together, or opened wide reference physical touch, a connecting force among family and friends. Her hands are also symbolic, pointing to the processes of “reaching through history” or “handing down” traits, stories, beliefs, and customs within families and communities.

Inner Hand (Blue and Green), 2002

Glass beads

On loan from the artist

Palm Masks, 2003

Glass beads

On loan from the artist

These beaded squares replicate the lines within Clark's palms, drawing attention to a body part that reflects each person's individuality as well as their heritage. The popular belief that the creases of the palms can reveal the course of one's life also relates to the artist's commitment to seeking out the family journey that began with her ancestors.

Back:

Pitchy Patchy, 1995

Silk, cloth, and wire

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst,
Massachusetts; Museum Purchase

“As a medium, fiber permits me to claim my place in the African textile continuum that was brought to the western hemisphere during transatlantic slavery,” Clark says. This headpiece is inspired by Egungun ancestral masquerades practiced by the Yoruba people of West Africa and adapted in Jamaica (birthplace of the artist’s mother) as enslaved Africans were forced to the island. The festival figure of Pitchy Patchy usually wears a garment made from colorful cloth strips.

Front:

Blued, 1998

Glass beads

Private collection

Clark's early work includes a variety of symbolic headpieces expressive of the Yoruba concept of ashe, a divine life force sited in the head. Blued is one of a number of blue-hued headpieces the artist created that reference both Yoruba artistic traditions and the encounters between Africa and the Western world. The chain connecting these two caps makes clear reference to the slave trade that bound Africa with colonial Europe and the Americas.

Behind Blued, on pedestal with element suspended from ceiling:

Touch, 2002

Glass beads

Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery

Behind Blued, on pedestal next to Touch:

Reach 2, 2017

Glass beads

Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery

Enter the gallery to the left of the large comb portrait titled Madam C. J. Walker.

Clockwise:

Lexie's Curl, 2008

Plastic combs

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection

Named after a close friend of the artist, this work combines plastic combs into a tightly wound, spiraling curl. As Clark describes, after moving to Richmond, Virginia, the eponymous Lexie went in search of a hairdresser. Much to her chagrin, she exited her new salon with Shirley Temple curls—not her desired style.

Uncurl, 2009

Plastic combs

On loan from the artist

In Her Own Words, 2008

Plastic combs and thread

On loan from Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

In this homage to Madam C. J. Walker, the first female self-made millionaire in the United States, Clark wraps thread around the teeth of black plastic combs to transcribe a quote by the hair product entrepreneur:

“I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. I was promoted to the washtub. I was promoted to the kitchen. I promoted myself to the business of hair. . . on my own ground.”

Hair Craft Project Hairstyles, 2014

Eleven color photographs

On loan from the artist

In this collective work, Clark partnered with eleven hairstylists working in Richmond, Virginia. Observing that hairdressers, who work with hair fibers, are also textile artists, Clark invited each of them to create a style for her own hair. The photographs show the back of Clark's head as well as the hairdresser who created each design. "I became a walking art gallery of their hairstyles," Clark recalls.

French Braid and Cornrow, 2013

Cloth, thread, and wood

Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery

Pigtails, 2013

Canvas and cotton thread

Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery

Long Hair, 2005

Digital print and wood

On loan from the artist

Hair often acts as a life marker, denoting the passage of time through changing hairstyles or different lengths. This thirty-foot-long, digitally printed dreadlock depicts the total possible length this type of hair could reach if it grew unbroken over the course of an individual's lifetime. When this scroll is unrolled, the elongated strand acts as a timeline, drawn forth by the oldest part of the hair. As it unfurls, it exposes newer experiences and wisdom gained over decades.

In the large case in the middle of the gallery, left to right when facing Hair Craft Hairstyles:

For Colored Girls, A Rainbow 1, 2019

Afro wig, plastic combs, and thread

On loan from the artist

Clark began this series shortly after the death of playwright Ntozake Shange in late 2018. Shange's best-known work, the choreopoem (poem choreographed to music) for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, premiered in 1976. Clark wrapped the spines of black combs with vivid threads, bound the combs together, and nestled each "tapestry" into an afro wig. The wrapped combs' array of colors calls to mind the characters in Shange's production (Lady in Green, Lady in Blue, Lady in Orange, etc.).

For Colored Girls, A Rainbow (Green), 2019

Afro wig, plastic combs, and thread

On loan from the artist

On pedestal:

Ties That Bind, 2013

Wood and thread

On loan from the artist

Enter the gallery to the left of Long Hair.

Clockwise:

Being Invisible and Without Substance, 2018

Altered copy of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

On loan from the artist

Clark altered this copy of Ralph Ellison's novel after recalling pinhole-lens eyeglasses her mother purchased to focus her vision. "When looking through," Clark says, "something larger emerges. The holes make a new kind of

awareness.” By piercing Ellison’s words, she illustrates his observation that the Black community is not perceived with full consciousness. “Being invisible and without substance . . . what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?” Ellison wrote.

Writer Type (Pen and Sword), 2016

Remington Noiseless 7 typewriter and artist’s hair

On loan from the artist

In some works, Clark replaces parts of common objects with her own hair—in this case, the keys of a vintage typewriter—asserting a Black presence into places where it has been pointedly omitted, such as the field of creative writing. This particular typewriter, a Remington Noiseless, was produced in the 1920s and ’30s, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance.

Black Man (Invisible), 2016

Copy of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and glass beads

On loan from the artist

The beads in this sculpture fully encase a copy of Ralph Ellison's book Invisible Man (1952). Sewn closed, the beads bar access to the author's words, vivifying the narrator's central theme that his experiences, dreams, and concerns are not perceived by others.

Erasure, 2015

Pencils and human hair

On loan from the artist

Swapping pencils' erasers with tufts of dark hair, Clark probes questions about who writes history and whose histories are erased. The writing instruments also serve as a reminder that anti-literacy laws existed in the United States well into the nineteenth century. These laws, which

prohibited anyone from teaching enslaved people to read or write, arose from concerns over organized uprisings.

Throne, 2016

Found salon chair, cloth, and glass beads

On loan from the artist

Clark beaded this salon chair to resemble a West African throne, and she sometimes sits on it during performances in which her hair is dressed by a stylist. These performances allude to her childhood memories of friends styling her hair as well as her study of West African hair art and adornment. Observing both the continuity and adaptation of styles through time, Clark states, “Hairstyling is not just an art form, but a ritual act, too.”

Rubbing and Burning, 2014

Crayon rubbing on burned polyester

On loan from Amy Raehse

Clark created this image by placing a sheet of polyester over fine-toothed combs and vigorously rubbing with a crayon to transfer the shape and texture of the combs beneath. By manipulating the sheet to the point of breaking it down, she alludes to cultural pressure to over-work textured hair to smooth it and force it to conform to a racially biased beauty standard.

Long Hair Book, 2015

Digital print

On loan from the artist

Hairbows, 2014

Artist's hair, blond hair, and violin bows

On loan from the artist

By restringing violin bows with human hair—one with a dreadlock made from her own hair, and the other with straight, blond hair—Clark connects music and identity.

With hair as a holder of DNA, the bows present the possibility of bringing ancestral voices to life. In a 2018 performance, “Sounding the Ancestors,” jazz musician Regina Carter used the bow strung with Clark’s dreadlock to play Francis Scott Key’s “The Star-Spangled Banner” and James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” known as the “Black National Anthem.”

Now and Then, 2010

Plastic combs, thread, and cloth

On loan from Rebecca A. T. Stevens and Gary G. Stevens

For Clark, the ubiquitous fine-toothed comb is an emblem of our nation’s hair culture, which is shaped by gender and race politics. She associates this type of comb primarily with white men, who generally desire a full head of hair easily managed by this type of comb. In this work, Clark suggests that hair is an emotional center of identity for many people.

Gold Teeth, 2008

Seven plastic combs and bronze

On loan from Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

Clark occasionally anthropomorphizes the elements of combs that share names with human body parts, such as the spine and teeth. In this set of combs, she repairs broken and missing teeth with bronze replacements, reminiscent of gold dental prostheses. As the combs ascend, more and more metal fills the space between the remaining tines, adding value to these inexpensive, commonplace objects.

BREATHE, 1994

Found hand mirror and mica

Collection of Rita Grendze

One of the earliest works presented in this exhibition, this sculpture embodies Clark's longstanding observation that

visibility empowers the Black community. The word “breathe” resonates powerfully in contemporary culture, recalling the police killings of George Floyd, Eric Garner, and many others. The evocative word is also the title of a recently published book by scholar Imani Perry, whose writing Clark admires.

Straight Ways, 2017

Plastic combs, dyed blond human hair, and synthetic hair

Private collection

Wrapping the spines of two combs with locks of smooth blond human hair and dark synthetic hair, Clark brings to light the hegemony of straight hair. The tamed strands pass easily through the combs’ narrow teeth, raising questions about what types of hair these commonplace styling tools are created for. Clark challenges the view that straight, smooth hair is “good,” while the kink, curl, and volume of Black hair is often deemed “unruly.”

Exit this gallery, walk through the previous, and enter the gallery to the left of French Braid and Cornrow.

Clockwise:

Triangle Trade, 2011

Cotton thread on canvas

Collection of Minnesota Museum of American Art,

Purchase, Acquisition Fund, 2016.07.01

The term “triangle trade” describes the network of economic exchange between Europe, Africa, and the Americas in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Transatlantic triangular trade routes enabled the exchange and plunder of enslaved people, cash crops, and manufactured goods. Clark’s use of cotton thread and a cornrow braid—sometimes called “canerows” in the Caribbean, for the region’s sugarcane production—reference the crops that perpetuated the cruel system.

Obama and Lincoln (Penny Portrait), 2011

Inkjet print

On loan from the artist

Clark formed this image of President Barack Obama from digital images of the U.S. one-cent coin that features another Illinois statesman, Abraham Lincoln. After issuing the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, which declared the freedom of enslaved people living in the Confederate states, Lincoln became a symbol of African American liberation, paving the way eventually for fuller Black participation in American political life.

Braille Emancipation, 2011

Digital print

On loan from the artist

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in 1863, granted freedom to enslaved Black Americans living in

secessionist Confederate states during the Civil War. Clark translates the document into braille characters formed from digitally scanned images of balled hair. At the time of the proclamation's enactment, anti-literacy laws prevented most enslaved people from learning to read. By printing the braille (reliant on touch) in flat dots, Clark renders the document similarly inaccessible to most viewers.

Flat Twist on a Remnant of Idyllic Days, 2010

“Idyllic Days” cloth and thread

On loan from the artist

Sugar Eye, 2016

Photograph

On loan from the artist

Iterations, 2008

Plastic combs

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D. and
Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2015.218

Composed of 1,025 black, plastic combs, this sculpture expands a single “root” into a layered network of more than 180 branches. Reminiscent of a family tree, the work addresses the question of who is unable to map their familial roots. Those of African descent often find their genealogical history disrupted by the forced migration and enslavement of Africans from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The iterative nature of this artwork signals the lasting impact of trauma on these people’s descendants.

Cotton to Hair, 2009

Bronze, human hair, and cotton

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather
and Tony Podesta Collection

Juxtaposing tufts of natural hair with bolls of cotton, Clark connects the commodification of Black bodies through the slave trade with the crops that their forced labor produced. The delicacy of the sculpted cotton plant contrasts with the cruelty and violence inflicted on those who harvested it.

Proclamation, 2017

Ink on linen

On loan from Sarah M. Williams

This fabric is printed with a facsimile of Abraham Lincoln's handwriting at the top of his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, drafted in September 1862. In the document, Lincoln declared his intention to free all enslaved people in the Confederate states. Clark pulled at the warp threads of this cloth and destabilized the appearance of Lincoln's words, noting that the opposing principles of democracy and subjugation remain the "warp and weft of our nation."

Back:

Signet Rings, 2016

Sterling silver, cotton, hair, and sugar

On loan from the artist

Traditionally, signet rings represent familial heritage and often bear a family crest or coat of arms. In this trio, Clark replaces gemstones with cotton, sugar, and hair. The three materials—each representing commodities of the triangular trade—stand in for a crest, a stark reminder that for many, chronicling family ancestry leads back to the barbarities underpinning the origins of the U.S.

Front:

Engagement Rings, 2016

Gold and sugar

On loan from the artist

Sugar replaces the traditional diamond in this pair of golden rings. This type of ring often represents a legal union through marriage. Clark uses it to illustrate the binding ties between slavery and goods such as sugar, a major cash crop of the slave trade.

Gold Coast Journey, 2016

18K gold wire and African ebony

On loan from the artist

5,242 inches of gold wire comprise the thread wound tightly around this hand-carved African ebony spool. The length equals the distance in miles between Cape Coast, Ghana (once known as the Gold Coast), and Richmond, Virginia, the second-largest port for human trafficking at the height of the transatlantic slave trade.

Encrusted, 2015

Five-dollar bills and sugar

On loan from the artist

By growing sugar crystals onto five-dollar bills and over the figure of President Abraham Lincoln, Clark created a powerful visual emblem linking the United States, the sugar trade, and slavery. Sugar was a major commodity driving the transatlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century. Reflecting on Encrusted, Clark says, “Sugar preserves. It also rots. Lincoln abolished slavery in the U.S.A. What remains of the institution is sugar coated.”

The Price, 2016

Bagasse paper with inkjet print

On loan from the artist

This stack of blank, brown bills, crafted from handmade bagasse paper (from the pulp of sugarcane), succinctly

exposes the commodification of Black bodies from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. The price printed on the band—\$36,683—is the equivalent in 2016 for which the artist could have been purchased at the height of the slave trade. By listing the price in today's dollars, Clark illustrates how the legacy of slavery extends to the present.

Sugar Freed Necklace, 2018–19

Sugar paste and etched leather

On loan from the artist

Clark used sugar-paste icing to form this circle of thirty-two teeth arranged on a piece of leather; her allusions to the body—teeth and skin—are clear. The leather is engraved with a poem by Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano (1940–2015) describing the eighteenth-century Maroons of Jamaica and their fierce warrior queen Nanny. The

group lived free in the mountains of the island, avoiding slavery on British-owned sugarcane plantations.

Afro Abe Progression, 2008

Five-dollar bills and thread

Private collection

Afro Abe II, 2010

Five-dollar bill and thread

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection

Just before Barack Obama became President of the United States, Clark embroidered her first afro onto the head of Abraham Lincoln on a five-dollar bill. Her needlework on legal tender invokes the promise of Black social and political agency. Regarding the new hairstyle she gave to President Lincoln, Clark says, “First, Lincoln looks much better with an afro. Second, it’s crowning the

Emancipator with the hair most associated with Black liberation and Black power.”

Schiavo/Ciao, 2019

Neon

On loan from the artist

Exhibited here for the first time, this illuminated sculpture toggles between the word “schiavo,” the Italian word for “slave,” and “ciao,” the informal salutation that extends from an Italian phrase meaning “I am your slave.”

Excavating language is one way that Clark exposes latent racism that passes through time without reflection. People around the world toss a “ciao” to friends each day, but few know that the phrase is borne of a casual reference to slavery.

In the center case:

Cotton Candy Flower, 2016

Sugar and cotton pods

On loan from the artist

Enter the gallery to the right of Iterations.

On the right center pedestal:

No Passing, 2017

Plastic combs and cotton thread

On loan from the artist

Clark wraps comb edges with thread to create two concentric yellow stripes; on highways, these indicate a “no passing” zone. This sculpture was inspired by the

words of Rebecca Solnit, who wrote, “There are two kinds of borders: those that limit where we can go, and those that limit what people can do to us.” Marking a division between what is inside the circle versus outside, the work questions not only who can pass through, but also who can pass as. The combs highlight hair texture as a racial signifier, probing the effects of perceived racial identity on our lives.

On the left center pedestal:

Kente Comb Cloth, 2011

Plastic combs and thread

On loan from the artist

Clockwise from the gallery entrance:

Split Ends, 2007

Plastic combs

On loan from the artist

Tendrils, 2009

Plastic combs

On loan from the artist

Barbershop Pole, 2008

Plastic combs

Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr.

Much of Clark's work signals respect for hairdressers, whom she considers fiber artists in their own right. Crafted from numerous black pocket combs, this sculpture stands in tribute to barbers and their businesses. Historically,

barbershops have provided both a practical and social function for Black communities in the United States. Often regarded as sanctuaries for Black Americans, the shops serve as spaces for people to gather, talk, play games, and, of course, get haircuts.

Whole Hole and Hole Whole, 2015

Plastic combs

On loan from the artist

Woven Combs, 2012

Plastic combs

Collection of Memphis Brooks Museum of Art; Purchase with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Peter Formanek, Elliot and Kimberly Perry, Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Boyland, The Boule Foundation, Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Callihan, Kaywin Feldman and Jim Lutz, Mr. and Mrs. Willie Hughes, Marina Pacini and David McCarthy, Dr. James K. Patterson, Dr. Rushton Patterson, Dr. Linda Tharp, Marianne and Ronald Walter, and the citizens of Memphis, Tennessee

Black Cross Worn Thin II, 2012

Plastic combs and thread

Delaware Art Museum, Acquisition Fund, 2012

Toothless, 2014

Plastic combs and zip ties

Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr.

Clark sometimes applies a reductive sculpting technique to combs, snipping away teeth to make new forms and shapes. To create Toothless, the artist tied together hundreds of plastic combs, evoking a tapestry. As the combs descend, they lose more teeth, and the remains pool below, drawing more attention to what is missing than what remains. “The word ‘comb’ has roots connecting it to the word ‘teeth,’” the artist says. “The work, in that sense, attempts to bite back.”

Exit this gallery, walk through the previous, and enter the exhibition stairwell entrance to the right of Afro Abe.

Curls, 2005

Plastic combs

On loan from the artist

Clark builds many of her larger pieces by fastening together hundreds of small, black, plastic pocket combs.

“When I started working with the tools of hairdressing, the tool that I picked is the most ubiquitous, the most common, the most well-known, the most average of combs,” she says. Combining these instruments on a monumental scale, Clark constructs colossal, cascading curls that hang in tight coils. Dangling at various lengths, these towering tendrils come to life from a tool that cannot tame them.

Enter the gallery to the left of Curls.

Clockwise:

Unraveled Persistence, 2016

Nylon Confederate battle flag, thread, and flag pole
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy,
Andover, Massachusetts, museum purchase

Clark made this work in the months after a white supremacist killed nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. After the murders, Confederate battle flags were removed from the shelves of many major stores, but they remain readily available. Inexpensive nylon flags like this one feature designs that are printed rather than woven. The weft threads of this cloth have been removed, but the image of the flag remains.

Unraveling, 2015

Cotton Confederate battle flag

Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery

Clark developed this work to metaphorically enact the social progress needed to redress the legacy of slavery and the Civil War. She activates the cloth in performances, inviting people to stand beside her and join her in unraveling the heavy cotton flag, thread by thread. The painstaking work emblemizes “the slow and deliberate

work of unraveling racial dynamics in the United States,” Clark explains. “I think there’s poetry in what we’re trying to do together.”

Unraveled, 2015

Cotton Confederate battle flag

From the collection of Angel and Tom Papa

The year 2015 marked the 150th anniversary of the end of the American Civil War. Seeking to visualize through cloth what the end of the Civil War might look like, Clark unraveled a Confederate flag into three discrete piles of red, white, and blue thread. The colorway evokes the U.S. flag, and the soft mounds of thread convey a more subdued mood than the Confederate flag from which they derive.

Blackened and Bleached, 2015

Cotton flags, bleach, and dye

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT;

Douglas Tracy Smith and Dorothy Potter Smith Fund

Clark recognizes that the emotions stirred by all flags, including the Confederate flag, can be potent and not easily diffused. She manifests that phenomenon in this work by removing the color from one flag and covering it in another. The bleached fibers began to disintegrate, even as the composition of the flag remained visible. Similarly, a dark dye does not obscure the flag's structure.

Black Hair Flag, 2010

Paint and thread on canvas

Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr.

In this work, Clark used thread to represent hairdressing techniques and signify the presence of African Americans.

In 2010, Virginia's governor proclaimed April to be Confederate History Month in the state. Clark observed his evasion of the fact that Virginia's—and the nation's—wealth was built on the labor of enslaved people. Over a canvas painted with the composition of the Confederate battle flag, she stitched Bantu knots and cornrows that form the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag.

Plain Weave, 2008

Plastic combs and thread

Private collection

Thread Wrapped Blue, 2008

Plastic combs and thread

Arizona State University Art Museum, Purchased with funds provided by the Windgate Charitable Foundation

Octoroon, 2018

Canvas and thread

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA

The title of this work is an antiquated and discriminatory term used to describe a person with one eighth African ancestry. The word persisted as part of a racial classification system sustained by Jim Crow laws in the U.S. after the Civil War. Divided into eight segments, Octoroon depicts the U.S. flag stitched with black thread that simulates hair. Braided cornrows, an allusion to the labor of Black Americans, form an eighth of the composition, while the remainder is cloaked by densely hanging threads.

Gele Kente Flag, 1995

Handwoven silk and cotton

Muscarella Museum of Art, Acquired with funds from the Board of Visitors Muscarella Museum of Art Endowment

The handwoven strips of cloth in this textile are made with a Ghanaian weave structure known as kente. Clark plaited the strips into a composition resembling the U.S. flag. As part of a performance that brought together “both Africanness and Americanness,” Clark recalls, she asked fifty Black women to tie this cloth on their head in the form of a gele, or Nigerian head wrap, and record their thoughts about kente cloth, the American flag, and the term “African American.”

Cotton with Hair, 2017

Khadi paper and hair

Courtesy of the Jessica & Kelvin Beachum Family
Collection

Flag with Hair, 2017

Khadi paper and hair

Private collection

Monumental Cloth (Sutured), 2017

Linen replica Confederate truce flag and silk thread

On loan from the artist

At the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Clark viewed part of the Confederate flag of truce, a dish towel used by Confederate troops to surrender at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, marking the end of the American Civil War. The Smithsonian's relic forms half of the original cloth; other fragments are kept in numerous collections. In Monumental Cloth (Sutured), she reweave the now-yellowed cloth at an enlarged scale and used black suture thread to stitch the two halves together, as if binding a wound.

Center:

Monumental Fragment, 2019

Linen

On loan from the artist

A small piece of the Confederate flag of truce, a white dish cloth with red stripes that was waved in surrender, leading to the end of the Civil War, is preserved at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park. Clark removed that fragment of the towel at 10:1 scale, magnifying its significance. “Everyone knows the Confederate battle flag. After seeing the truce flag . . . I realized it wasn’t hidden, but it also wasn’t elevated,” she says. Clark continues to make work related to the cloth that she describes as “the flag we should all know.”