IS POLITICS GOOD FOR ART?
By Carl Swanson

Ferry Saltz: My Failure as an Artist

I.M. Pei at 100
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The Carb Artist
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The Mess at The Met
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Plus Home Design Living in Art
By Wendy Goodman

Featuring: Kara Walker
How Do You Follow The Sphinx?
By Doreen St. Felix
I can’t only dance naked in private. I have to dance naked in public. A lot.

**HOW DEEP** is my lack of artistic character? Pretty deep, it turns out. After I hadn’t seen my art for 20 years and had assumed that it was gone, amazingly, three portfolios of my work surfaced as I was writing this article. No altars, just pieces that were somehow surviving. And within the extraordinary three weeks ago, I refined a perfect repeat of my entire artistic journey. I went through those newly discovered portfolios. One by one. Drawing by drawing. I traced them all. I knew almost everyone by heart; the ones I didn’t remember were revelations to me. I knew what every move and mark meant. My breath was taken away. I felt myself in love with my work. I was astonished at how beautiful much of it was. How full it made sense. I thought, These are fabulous! I am a great artist. I looked and locked. I was stunned. There were tears of joy in my eyes. Belief.

Soon, I went to get Roberta. I told her the news and asked her to come see. She came into my office and started looking. For a long time. Longer than I had. One by one. Studying, not saying a word. After a while she turned to me and said, ‘They’re okay.’ Stricken. I said, ‘Okay?’ What do you mean ‘okay’? I think they’re beautiful. Aren’t they great?’ She turned back to the drawings, looked a little longer, and finally said, ‘They’re generic. And impersonal.’ No one would know what these are about. And what’s with the triangles? Are they supposed to be women?’ I asked, ‘No, They’re hell!’ She talked about how many artists ‘never get better than their first work.’ And just like that, I was right back to where I was when I quit crushed, in crisis, frozen, panic!”

Looking at it now, I understand Roberta’s reaction. A number of other Wilde ideas apply here. He wrote that art ‘that’s too obvious, that’s too quick, that’s too intelligible, fails. The thing not worth looking at is the obvious.’ This sort of art tells you everything in an instant and can only tell you the same thing forever. My work had the opposite problem. It was vague, obscure, and therefore obsolete. Only I could decipher it.

Wilde also wrote that ‘the vague is always repellent.’ My work was ‘generic’ and ‘impersonal’ because of the 1970s post-minimal ways I was working. I wanted to transcend memories, achieve accessible complexity, and enter history from the side. Instead, my art might be able to produce flashes of beauty but couldn’t gain emotional traction; create depth, mystery, impart its secrets, tears, drama, or cross the threshold of history. I was blinded by the rules I made.

I used to tell myself that I wanted every decision that I made in my work to be about beauty. Badlycarrications believed that beauty had two parts. First, timeless—like the form of a Greco-Roman urn. The other part of beauty is something absolutely fleeting, like a fashionable dandy on the street. My work had something of the timeless beauty of older geometries and hermetic diagrams and illustration. The color was pretty. But my art didn’t have the look and feel of my own time. Yet I mean it with all my heart. Which was another problem. At that time of our age of irony, I was totally sincere. Wilde has something to say about this, too. ‘All bad poetry,’ he wrote, ‘springs from genuine feeling... It is with the best intentions that the worst work is done.’ Of course, he also wrote, ‘Criticisms demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does.’ Boom! Let’s fight about that in public.

For more images of Stalin’s artwork, and a video of him reviewing it, visit mymag.com.
KARA WALKER,

HER NEXT ACT: TRYING TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF POLITICS IN ART.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

AFTER SUBLTLETY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARI MARCOPoulos
World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant. The sculpture was a feat of reinvention, its materials not only sugar but also the events running through it: the brutal repurposing of black human life for the march, commercial lusts of white supremacy, the emphasis on black female biological potential over black female creativity; the imposition of a gaze on a site previously occupied by the people who had once evaluated it. She wanted to see how the moment of encounter with the colossus could change their faces. But Walker’s presence disturbed things; she says, “as soon as viewers noticed, their eyes turned from the idol onto her, then they focused in her direction. She was slightly exhausted by that, and so she still means a bit surprising, ‘I don’t know. I thought maybe people would be focused on the white-black gigantic idol!’”

Commissioned by the downtown public art fund Creative Time, a tribulations, or the Marvellous Sugar Baby, initiated, like any Kara Walker work, an equivocal ceremony of looking—who looks, at what, and how. The central sculpture—a Sugar Baby with the bejeweled head of a war nymph, her breasts unadorned, her vessel prominent—stood 35 feet by 70 feet, a chimera of unwarned American desire, protected by an infantry of black-boy figurines carrying agricultural bounty, built from Walker’s sketches by a team of nearly 200 fabricators, the 1-D sculpting and painting firm Digital Attire, and Sculpture House Casting. A foam skeleton overlaid with 14 tons of sugar, water, and resin, the Sugar Baby was the largest piece of public art ever erected in New York City. It was a site-specific installation on the site of one of the last remaining sugar refineries in the city. As Naté Thompson of Creative Time told me, “Kara Walker immediately understood what a different form public art can be.”

The Sugar Baby was not meant to be a crowd-pleaser; it was too challenging for that, with compressed politics that were the result of what Walker calls “sensual thinking.” The Sugar Baby, extended title referred to the workers who had been degraded, dispossessed, and killed by its factories like this one: “an American Slavery to the capital had overthrown all the rights of her country, rendering the

"WHAT ARE THEY DEBATING, REALLY? MY RIGHT TO EXIST?"

ENTERING ANY ROOM, Kara Walker redshifts the flow of attention. She is tall, and her posture is distinctly vertical, nearly lax, as if she were coiled to the goings-on of a higher plane. Standing in the foyer of her Fort Greene brownstone, the artist wears a red dress, black workplace, Timberland boots, and her hair in a chignon.

Walker first became famous, quite abruptly, at 35, with her landmark 1994 show "Home: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Days of One Young Negro and His Heart"—a stunning mural installation of cut paper silhouettes depicting the lives of African Americans. She was one of the biggest in another sense: the show attracted 150,000 visitors, briefly lived a consolatized life as a coveted social-media guru and was even on the cover of the New York Times. The show has since traversed the country, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The "Home" show was, of course, an exercise in blackface, a form of art that has been used to dehumanize and dispossess African Americans. But Walker’s work is not about blackface; it’s about the history of slavery and the way it has shaped our society. Her work is a call to remember and reckon with our past, to see ourselves in a more truthful light.

Clockwise from top left: In her studio, wearing a skirt from Stannard, Georgia, with handler in Brooklyn, at the Whitney Museum in New York in January.
events in stark black-and-white contrast on a paper tablecloth, paintings, drawings, and homemade fries. A picture of a little girl in profile she found in an academic text aroused a point of entry for her early on in her education. In grade school at six, she guessed the basically vulgar, sugary, light style, which allowed her to outline the ideology of cartooning with a way new pigs. Out of the pulp and the details of slavery, which included—the content of the disembodied male arms emerging from a child’s book, a creature’s penis approaching the lynching man—a woman—Walker makes problematic work that begins not to the black bourgeois ethic of psychic uplift nor to the art world tradition of producing marketable art.

Now, and a kind of public decline thanks to the Sugar Baby, Walker remains suspicious of herself, and of the world, however much it has come to redefine her, expressing to me the senselessness of a thinker for whom no level of success can stamp out a photo of personal self-satisfaction—or, worse, infidelity to craft. We talk at her home, by phone, and in her studio, where she brings me one cold day in March. She can be especially acerbic in talking about the predilections of the famous black fine artist, a position she’s occupied for 23 years. “We’re in too much of a celebrity culture,” she says. “At least that means I can be a disappointment to others.”

Walker’s 2001 traveling retrospective “My Complement, My Enemy, Opposition, My Love,” which drew enormous crowds to the Whitney in New York, confirmed her status as a present-day master—and one with an especially urgent set of concerns. The art Walker has produced to this date as the retrospective is loaded with references to contemporary concerns that compound, rather than replace, the lynching, rapes, murders, and carnage of Walker’s translation of the pre- and post-Reconstruction South. The last few years have brought events that since the street’s false promise of post-Racialization of the social-optimistic optimism: I fear that Michael Brown and Trayvon Rice and all the rest were killed as proxies for The Black President,” she wrote in an essay called “Assassination by Proxy,” published last September.

Walker didn’t watch the inauguration of President Trump, she tells me, having brought home to the Garment District studio she has occupied for seven years. Instead, she painted The Crossing, a 9-by-12-foot watercolor that references Levittown 1983 painting. Washington Crossing the Delaware. The painting, which I’ve not hobbled-wrapped behind her wall, went up in The New Yorker in February. Currently, she’s working on another watercolor. One of the most important creations will be finished in a few months,” she says, pointing to the most striking feature—a naked black woman—wiping a police officer dressed in riot gear. Walker’s reference for this painting sits on a bench outside the drawing paper and Cotman—The Slave Trade, by Frédéric-Auguste Barthélemy, in the fourth volume of The Image of the Black in Western Art.

But her next two projects will be public works, a sign that the Sugar Baby might have been the beginning of a new period, however cautiously Walker has found herself vacating it. “After 6, Stability, everybody was asking me to do something in a grid, a fence, or a secession.” The view, she says, is that art is the only place where the space of the world is not divided into kitchens, two areas for her two assistants, and a work space for Walker to produce her paper art. She’s still affectionate for the old space.

“The Garment District is certainly not hospitable to making art, which is why I live here,” Walker says, back in midtown. Every artist patently lives in their工作室, where the relics of failures and half-thoughts are scattered in serious arrangements. The trick is that the organization of a studio is closed to everyone except for the artist and her assistants. Walker and one of her assistants had recently described the old studio, in the midst of the move, as messy, but her space looks orderly to me. The counters in midtown space is stacked with boxes labeled books, office, overhead storage. Somewhere else, photo albums, historical books for reference, her mother’s quilt. There is a grey ladder she’s owned for more than a decade. On a gray mat in a gigantic big box Walker bought from a nearby pharmacy store, after a tough day. Beside it, Italian hard paper. She smiles down, putting on a spontaneous show.

She fingers over a box labeled “1983-1992.” Walker moved to New York in 1999, after having accepted a teaching position at Columbia University. Before that, she’d been living with her then-husband, the jewelry designer Klaus Biegler, and their young daughter, Octavia, in Providence. Walker delayed the initial move to New York for months, a time she remembers as folding laundry in a house in Maine, where Biegler had a teaching position. She gave up the Maine house and a black Jesus, who sometimes misses diving around the city, the divorce was only finalized in 2004. “I certainly had no

“I WOULDN’T MAKE ART IF IT WERE PURELY AN EGO-DRIVEN EXERCISE.”
problem with getting successful at the age that I did,” Walker says. “But I wasn’t the only one in the marriage.”

“SHE ISN’T A DIVA,” says the novelistZadie Smith, the author of the new book, “Life of pi,” which won the Booker Prize in 2008. “Fame is not a part of her persona. She is a writer who has been professional and committed to her craft for a long time.”

Walker has struggled with this perception. “I have to be careful about how I present...” she says. “I have to be careful about how I present my identity to the world. I don’t want people to think that I’m just a...”

Walker was born in 1928 in the United States. She graduated from Vassar College in 1949 and then went on to study at the High School of Music and Art in New York City. She spent several years as a writer and journalist before becoming a professor at Barnard College in 1966. In 1970, she published her first book of poetry, “The Women’s Room,” which became a bestseller. Since then, she has published several other books, including novels, poetry, and essays.

Walker’s work has been widely lauded for its wit, intelligence, and dedication to social justice. She has been a vocal advocate for women’s rights and has been a prominent figure in the civil rights movement. Walker was awarded the National Book Award in 1977 for her collection of poetry, “The Women’s Room.” She was also a recipient of the National Medal of Arts in 1989 and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 2000.

Walker has faced criticism for her views on race and gender. Some have accused her of being too radical and others of being too moderate. But Walker has always maintained her commitment to social justice and her dedication to the struggles of marginalized groups.

In the final analysis, Walker’s work is a testament to the power of the written word and the importance of speaking out against injustice. Her legacy will continue to inspire generations to come.