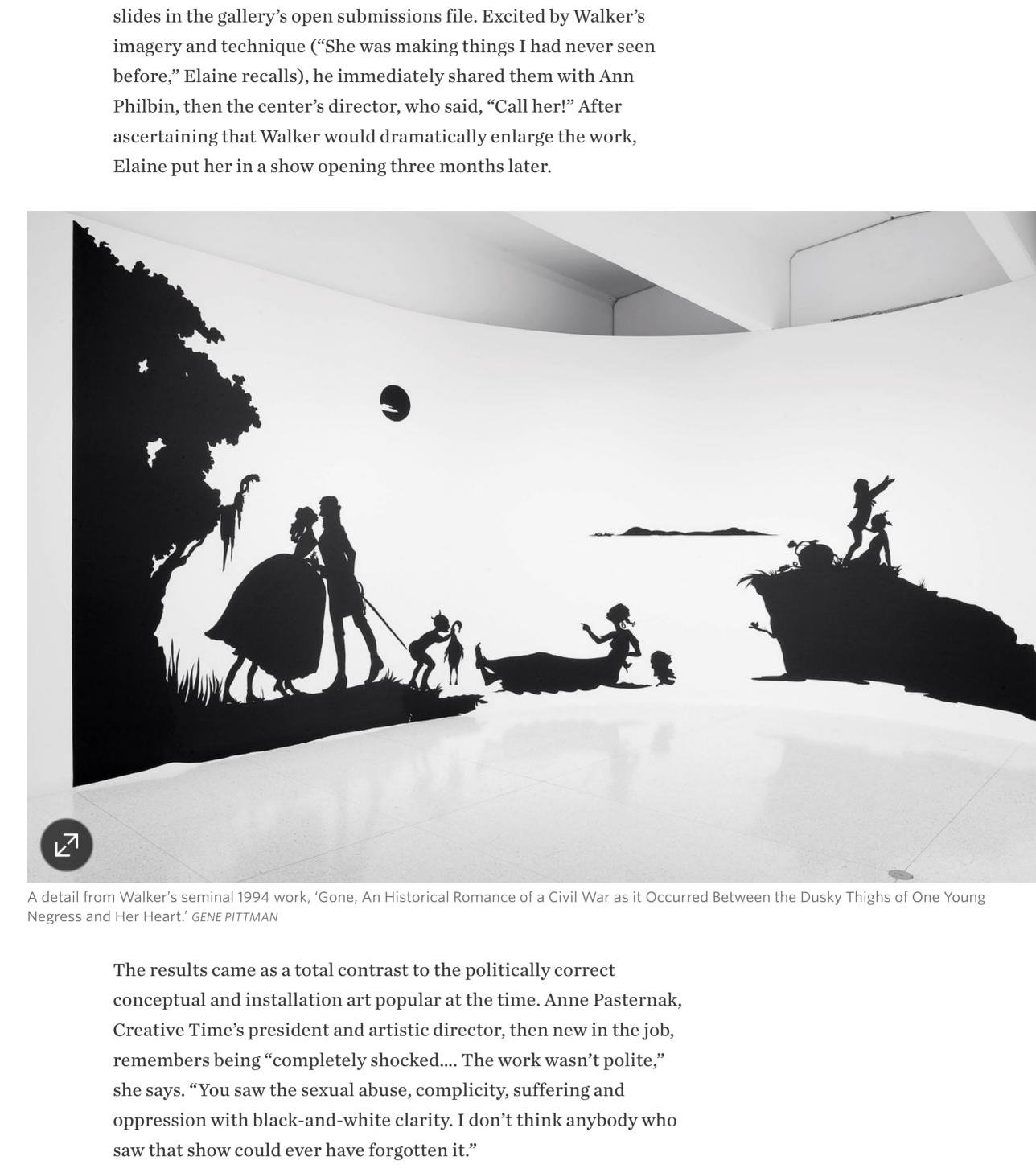
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MAGAZINE 2014 INNOVATOR AWARDS - ART 125 125 125 126 127 128 Kara Walker's Thought-Provoking Art On the heels of her wildly successful installation at the Domino Sugar Factory in New York, the artist Kara Walker prepares for a new exhibition and opens up about what drives her fearless exploration of race and sexuality Following her massive installation at New York's Domino Sugar Factory, artist Kara Walker continues to fearlessly confront attitudes towards race, women and sexuality. 1 COMMENTS By CAROL KINO Nov. 5, 2014 8:43 p.m. ET EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO, the artist Kara Walker found herself at the stove, boiling up pots of sugar and water. It was not for an elaborate dessert but rather an experiment for a piece at the former Domino Sugar refinery in Williamsburg, one of New York City's most picturesquely decaying industrial landmarks. The public art group Creative Time had suggested the location, and despite her reservations—"Public art has so many pitfalls"—she was taken by the cavernous, sweet-smelling space, soon to be razed for a condo development. "Something resonated with me there," Walker says. "It was a challenge." Walker, 44, who initially PHOTOS: KARA WALKER'S ART » envisioned a performance piece, quickly began playing with ideas making sketches with molasses, creating drawings and collages that showed women sweeping up chicken feathers or dancing on giant stripper poles. But it was only while perusing Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History, Sidney W. Mintz's 1985 tome on sugar's fraught legacy, that **Most Popular Videos** her direction crystallized. Reading about "subtleties," the elaborate How to Hack a medieval sugar sculptures displayed as symbols of kingly power at Smartphone With a royal feasts, she realized she had to make a subtlety herself—albeit **Fake Fingerprint** one that was decidedly unsubtle. "This was not for a small segment of How to Love, Wow, the art world," Walker says. "It had to be bigger." Angry, Sad and Haha on Facebook When she realized that meant making a huge sculpture—something Trump: We're she'd never done before, and the most traditional sort of public Winning the **Country** artwork besides-Walker hesitated. "But then I said, 'Stick with it. Be in the moment!' So I did. And then I thought, 'Oh, yeah!'" **Eero Review: Bad Home Wi-Fi Meets** Its Match When the piece finally went up in May, it was so massive that it seemed to loom over the city itself. For two months, it dominated **Clinton Laments** 'One Standard' for conversations and Instagram feeds: a 35-foot-tall and 75-foot-long Her on Paid sphinx, built with 30 tons of white sugar. Called A Subtlety, or the **Speeches** Marvelous Sugar Baby, its leonine body was, like much of Walker's work, built for controversy, with pendulous breasts, an Aunt **Most Popular Articles** Jemima-esque face and kerchief, a Kim Kardashian rump and a A San Diego Ranch vulva so enormous one critic likened it to a temple entrance. Some Seeks a Record \$92 130,000 visitors—including Beyoncé, Jay-Z and their daughter, Blue Million Ivy—came to view it, with lines that sometimes extended for eight Review: The End of Bad Home Wi-Fi blocks. "The scale was such that one couldn't tell if it was art or a tourist **Fort Lauderdale** attraction," says Nato Thompson, Creative Time's chief curator. (The **Gets Its Priciest** Home: \$40 Million sculpture was demolished after the exhibit ended on July 6.) Opinion: The Trumpkins' Lament Advertisement **Nevada Republicans** Line Up to Cast Surrounded by 14 statues of small boy attendants, some of their **Votes for Presidential** disintegrating brown sugar bodies dripping with molasses, the **Nominee** installation was a monument to the slave labor that enabled sugar to become an everyday commodity. Yet the reactions it provoked were wide ranging, from despair over slavery and sadness about the city's gentrification, to lectures about obesity and joy at the sheer spectacle. It prompted much discussion, too, primarily regarding Walker's embrace of racial and sexual caricatures, which were seen as alternately degrading or empowering. Walker seems to be the only person who wasn't appalled when viewers took titillating selfies with the piece. "Part of me understands that half of the world has never seen a woman's bottom before," she says, laughing. The hullabaloo was nothing new for Walker, who two decades ago went from art student to art star overnight with a 1994 group show featuring cut-paper tableaux of plantation slaves entwined in devilish congress with their masters, work that seemed to simultaneously attack and celebrate racist caricatures. Three years later, at 28, she became one of the youngest people to win a prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. Since then, she's had work exhibited at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, London's Tate Modern, the Venice Biennale and other venues around the world. But this time, the magnitude of the response took even Walker by surprise. "I figured people would come because it was free," she says. "But I don't think you can anticipate tens of thousands, or all the celebrities." And when it was up, "I didn't quite know what to do with myself." PEOPLE WHO KNOW Walker well often describe her as shy and reserved. But during our lengthy interview in her airy studio high above New York's Garment District, I'm more impressed by her intense drive to express herself. After kicking off her shoes, Walker tucks herself into a chair and immediately launches into conversation. "No segues—just on-off," she comments, laughing. Tall and lithe, with a newly cut, blonde-streaked Afro-one of hundreds of styles she's had over the years, she jokes—she seems to have a hard time sitting still. Walker channels a similar sort of energy into her art making. "I've always been a bit restless in the work," she says. "I have to look this way and that way, just to see what my limitations are, or if they are limitations. Maybe they're assets." It was the height of identity politics and the culture wars when, at 24, Walker presented her first major piece, as part of a group exhibition at New York's Drawing Center in September 1994: a 50-foot-long mural, showing creatures who were clearly masters consorting with others who were clearly slaves, intertwined in shapes that gave new meaning to the phrase "the beast with two backs." Cut from black paper with precise, cartoonish strokes, and hot-glued to a white wall, the scene featured adults thrusting their heads up each other's clothes, a woman popping out pickaninnies while dancing a jig and a pigtailed slave girl fellating a white boy in a suit. Walker might have drawn inspiration from the antebellum South, but she was also driving straight into the heart of contemporary racial tensions. Before the show, Walker was working on a much smaller scale, closer to that of 19th-century silhouettes. She had been included when the curator James Elaine, then with the Drawing Center, discovered her slides in the gallery's open submissions file. Excited by Walker's imagery and technique ("She was making things I had never seen before," Elaine recalls), he immediately shared them with Ann Philbin, then the center's director, who said, "Call her!" After ascertaining that Walker would dramatically enlarge the work, Elaine put her in a show opening three months later.



assemblage artist Betye Saar mounted a letter-writing campaign in which she called Walker's work "revolting," urged curators to prevent her work from being shown and suggested that the younger artist's use of racist stereotypes was betraying African-Americans "under the guise of art." "It must have been hideous," says Kathy Halbreich, then director of

Despite the mural's outrageousness—or perhaps because of it—

Island School of Design, had a career overnight. Three years and

seven solo shows later, she won the MacArthur. But her success

prompted a nasty backlash, led by older African-American artists

who'd forged careers during the civil rights era. Most notably, the

the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, who included the artist's work

in a show there the same year and subsequently hosted her first

retrospective in 2007. "Kara was considered a self-hating black

Philippe Vergne, who organized that retrospective (which later

traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Musée

d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, among others), came away hugely

impressed. "What I really admire is Kara's capacity to face her fear

As for Walker, she survived the furor as she always does, by working.

way, through my art. My hope is that somebody will respond in kind

BORN IN STOCKTON, California, the youngest child of a secretary

Walker loved cartooning as a child and always knew she would be an

artist. "It was just something I liked to do," she says. "It was a way of

'I always felt that my goal in life was to make

meaning in a visual way, through my art. My

and an art professor (her father, Larry Walker, is also a painter),

"I always felt that my goal in life was to make meaning in a visual

person," says Halbreich, now associate director of New York's

Museum of Modern Art. "But if we do get angry, if we do get

emotional, if we are confused, then she's successful."

-something beyond that naysaying, 'No.'"

She stumbled upon her subject

matter in 1983, when her father

University's art department and the

became chair of Georgia State

for text-based projects.

and to go forward."

focusing."

Walker, who'd just received her master's of fine arts from the Rhode

hope is that somebody will respond in kind.' family relocated to Atlanta. They settled in Stone Mountain, once a -Kara Walker stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan, and Walker has often suggested that her work's jarring nature reflects her own reaction upon landing in the South less than 20 years after desegregation. "I think moving into that situation was shocking," says Walker's high school art teacher, Julie Shaffer, who remains in touch with her onetime student. "Kara probably had not given her blackness much thought till then."

By the time Walker arrived at RISD, having studied painting and

printmaking at the Atlanta College of Art, she was experimenting

with a huge range of media. A photograph of her studio there reveals

the early cut-paper work, but it also shows paintings on black paper

and glass, drawings made with chocolate and the typewriter she used

"Even when I was in school," Walker says, "I knew my work grew out

of this cumulative kind of process. Then it was all about cutting away

Her range has never really diminished. Over the years, she's made

graphite and coffee. Her 1997 book, Freedom: A Fable, uses pop-up

illustrations to tell the tale of a freed slave—perhaps a stand-in for

projections, text pieces, animations, stage sets and shadow-puppet

Burning African Village Play Set with Big House and Lynching (2006),

is frankly theatrical: It's composed of painted steel pieces—burning

huts and a black man with an erection carrying a whip-that can be

Besides speaking to race, women's issues, sexuality and themes like

Although writers tend to rely on "catchphrases, like Gone With the

diaspora and migration, Walker's work can be raunchily funny.

Wind," to describe its aesthetic, says the New York dealer Brent

Sikkema, who has represented Walker for 20 years, he believes a

more apt comparison is the obscene, bitingly irreverent comedy of

Richard Pryor. As with Pryor, Walker's "cynical sense of humor can

really kick your butt," Sikkema says. He also recalls that years ago,

herself-who "concluded it her duty to become a god." Much of

shows, both live and filmed. Her one previous sculptural work,

Walker's work is performative, too, including magic-lantern

paintings and drawings with everything from watercolors and oils to

the excess and finding some form that works."

recombined into different narratives.

Walker once confessed she'd have loved to have been the diva rapper Lil' Kim. (Walker, for her part, characterizes her work as "pretty broad humored.") Walker's personal life has been conducted mostly out of the limelight. Yet she seems to have entered a freer, more confident phase. After a long separation, she ended her marriage to a former RISD faculty member, the German jeweler Klaus Bürgel, and is now involved with someone new. ("I'm only three-quarters of a loner," she says, but won't divulge more.) Her daughter with Bürgel, Octavia, 17, is almost grown: Now a senior at New York's High School of Art and Design, she intends to be an artist herself. "It's like nobody can stop her, you know?" says Walker, sounding mock exasperated. Last year Walker, who as a Columbia University faculty member lived in faculty housing for years, moved into her first house in NYC, in Wallabout, a neighborhood near the Brooklyn Navy Yard filled with pre-Civil War frame buildings. "Having a place that was really my own really cradled me in a way that I did not anticipate," she says.

Walker is now working toward a gallery show, opening November 21

attendants (most of whom were cast in caramel-colored resin), it will

include her studies and two videos, one made from footage of the

piece being destroyed and another from footage Walker shot during

the show's run. "The real drama was 130,000 people with different

Walker will also present the single souvenir she kept from her A

Subtlety: the sphinx's left hand, thumb clenched in the sign of the fig,

an ancient gesture that appears in many different cultures. Just as

the sphinx is "a symbol of both wonder and despair," the fig "is both

phallic and vaginal," Walker says. "It can be a fertility symbol, or a f-

responses," Walker says. "That took on a life of its own."

at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in Chelsea, that will elaborate on A

Subtlety's creation and aftermath. Besides a group of the boy

you, depending on which way you want to look at it." It's likely that she intends the message to encompass both those possibilities, and many more.

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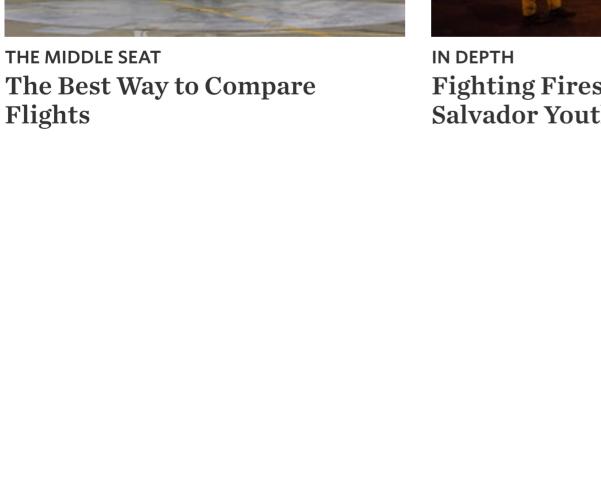
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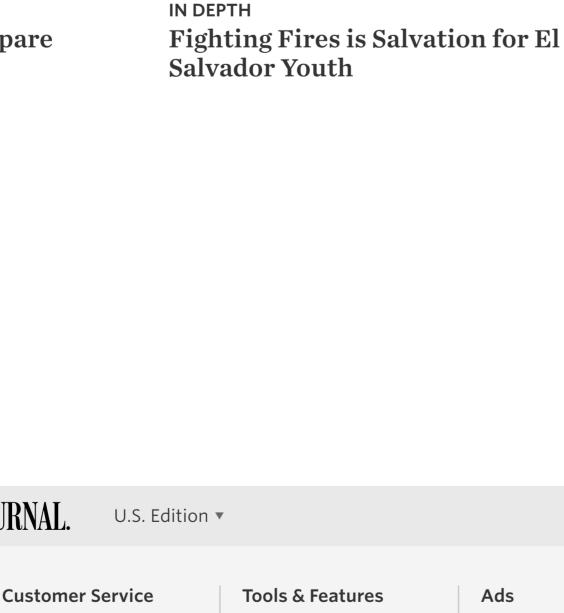
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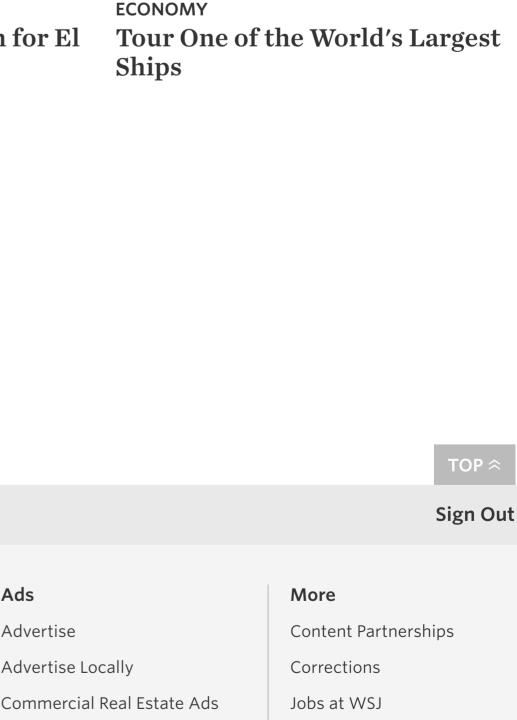
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