

SONYA CLARK MATRIX 184



FEBRUARY 6 - MAY 3, 2020
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

HAIR IS POWER

*I was born in Washington, DC to a psychiatrist from Trinidad and a nurse from Jamaica. I gained an appreciation for craft and the value of the handmade primarily from my maternal grandmother who was a professional tailor. Many of my family members taught me the value of a well-told story and so it is that I value the stories held in objects.*¹

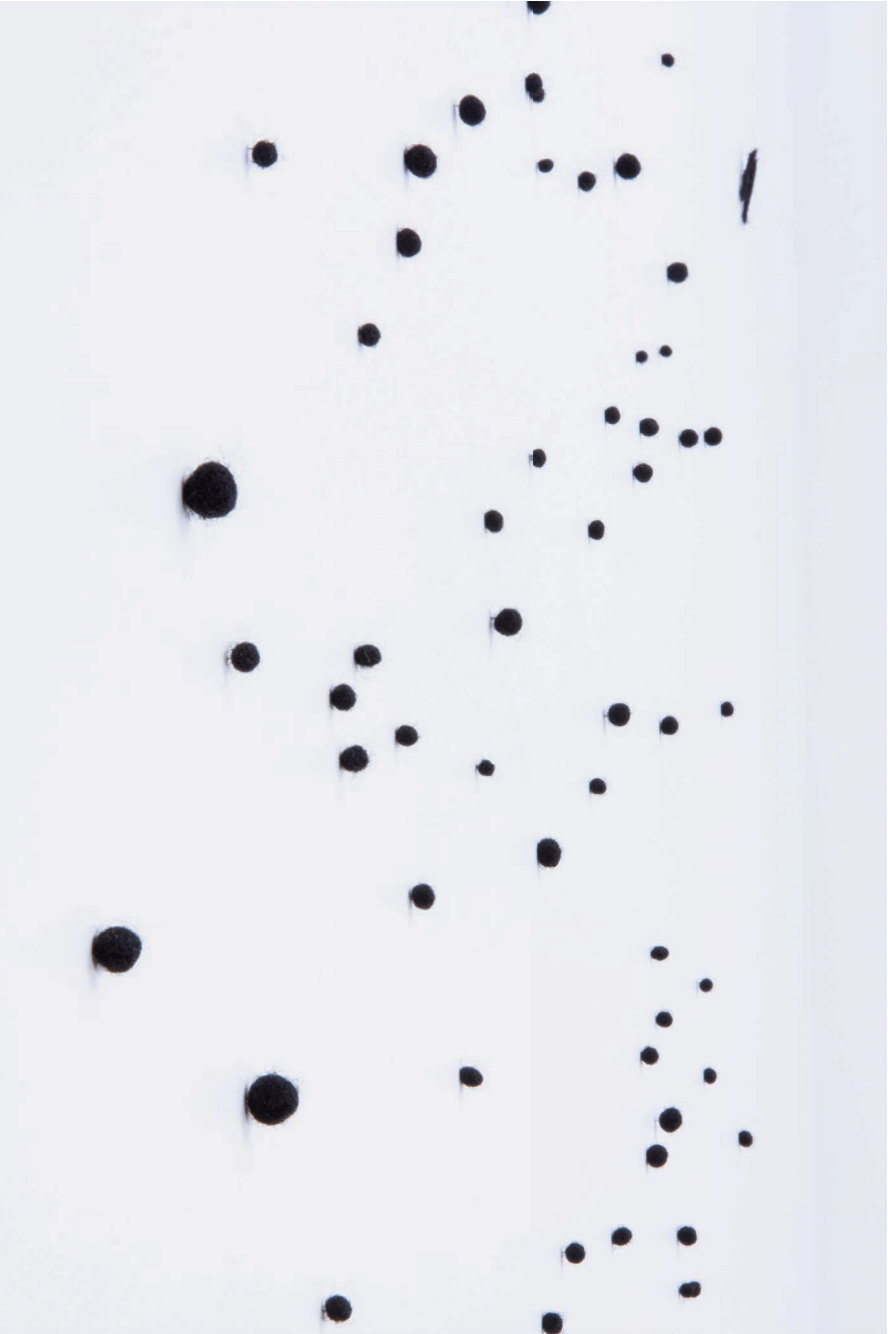
—Sonya Clark

Sonya Clark creates sculpture that explores how our understanding of historical events and identity reveals our personal and collective attitudes towards race, gender, inequality, and social justice. Focused on the Black experience in the United States, Clark integrates a wide range of media into her work to understand how cultural symbols change. For Clark, familiar things—plastic combs, human hair, cloth, bricks, furniture, and glass beads—become materials that “absorb our stories and reflect our humanity back to us.”² Clark has used hair as her primary artistic medium throughout her career. In writing about Clark’s work, curator Ashley Kistler noted that, “hair and hairstyling [are] complex signifiers of African American identity and experience.”³ In Clark’s own words, “I use [hair] to celebrate ancestry, race, class, and culture, I think of hair as a synecdoche for people of African descent specifically but also as a placeholder for our common ancestry given that Africa is the cradle of humanity.”⁴

Sonya Clark’s *MATRIX* installation brings together several of her exemplary works. *Constellation*, an ongoing work that Clark began in 2012, traces significant markers used to define the Underground Railroad, the expansive network of individuals who aided enslaved people in their escape to the North. According to some accounts, the Underground Railroad helped to liberate 100,000 enslaved African Americans from the South.⁵ The “stars” of *Constellation* are balls made of the artist’s own hair, attached to the wall in the configuration of a reverse constellation—here, the spheres of hair represent black stars against a white sky. *Constellation* includes the Big Dipper—also known as the Drinking Gourd—which points to the North Star, a beacon in the sky that directed those seeking freedom from oppression to true north in their arduous journey on the Underground Railroad. Clark depicts the North Star as a section of train tracks, representing the Underground Railroad itself.

Unlike *Constellation*, which addresses slavery and freedom, Clark’s *Hair Craft Project* (2014) explores hairstyling. “Hairdressing is the primordial fiber art,”⁶ wrote artist and cultural critic Bill Gaskins in an early review of Clark’s work. For the project, the artist

CONSTELLATION, 2012–PRESENT. BALLS OF HUMAN HAIR.
COURTESY THE ARTIST



KAMALA BHAGAT, SONYA CLARK: *THE HAIR CRAFT PROJECT*, 2014.
PIGMENT PRINT ON ARCHIVAL PAPER.
COURTESY GOYA CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, BALTIMORE.
PHOTO: NAKO WOWSUGI



reached out to eleven hairstylists in the Black salon community of Richmond, Virginia, to style her hair. Clark stated, “For the yearlong span of the project, I became a walking art gallery donning glorious hairstyles. The photographs document the temporary hairstyles created specifically for the project.... As to the premise that these talented hairdressers are also talented fiber artists: that is made evident in the work.”⁷

The Hair Craft Project photographs depict the singular creations of the hairstylists on the back of Clark’s head in sharp focus in the right foreground. The different artists-stylists are depicted face forward in soft focus in the left background. For the community-based art project, the photographs document the ephemeral artworks that adorned Clark’s head one at a time. *The Hair Craft Project* equated art galleries with hair salons as sites for artistic excellence, acknowledged hairstylists as artists, and challenged the boundaries between the art world and the hairstyling world.⁸

DIONNE JAMES EGGLESTON, *SONYA CLARK: THE HAIR CRAFT PROJECT*, 2014.
PIGMENT PRINT ON ARCHIVAL PAPER.
COURTESY GOYA CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, BALTIMORE.
PHOTO: NAAKO WOWSUGI



Clark's *Hair Craft Project* was enacted as an international performance art intervention in the summer of 2013 at the *The Encyclopedic Palace*, the 55th Venice Biennale. An installation of the Nigerian artist J. D. 'Okhai Ojeidere's *Hairstyles* photographs featured prominently at the entrance of the Biennale. The series, begun in the 1960s and created over decades, comprised black-and-white images of the backs and sides of women's heads focusing exclusively on elaborate and sculptural Nigerian hair designs. Presented in a curved-wall gallery space, the several dozen, nearly life-size heads proved a perfect setting for Clark's live-action "walking art gallery" performance. Curator Brooke Davis Anderson noted:

When viewers complimented Sonya on her braided sculpture, she would give them a business card announcing it as "a mobile exhibition of the craft of hairdressing." Upon finding out that Sonya was an artist, they would ask her if she was in the Biennale and she would reply... "Yes, I am in the Biennale, and so are you!"⁹

CORNROW CHAIR, 2011.
UPHOLSTERED CHAIR, THREAD, EMBROIDERY, BRAIDING.
COURTESY GOYA CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, BALTIMORE.



Clark uses hair as a vehicle to discuss race and class in *Cornrow Chair* (2011). She reupholstered a found chair with a red velvet seat cushion and red-and-white ticking on the back rest. The odd combination of sumptuous velvet and utilitarian cotton ticking—traditionally used as a durable covering for mattresses and pillows—is an intentionally discordant pairing that points to the unseen and unspoken labor that serves the wealthy consumer industry. With the addition of lengths of black cotton thread along the lines of the chair back’s ticking stripes, Clark embroidered loose threads and manipulated them into cornrows and braids that reach to the floor. Braids also hang from underneath the seat, creating the effect of tassels that were a key element of Victorian-era furniture design. For the artist “these braids [are] all those standing in the shadows, that their mass somehow also serves to support the awkward chair.”¹⁰ The clumsy mishmash of armrests and leg styles—both curved and straight—reflect a trickle-down design of European and American styles. Ultimately, *Cornrow Chair* addresses ideas about the history of power and privilege, race and class.

THRONE, 2016. FOUND SALON CHAIR, CLOTH, BEADS.
COURTESY GOYA CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, BALTIMORE.



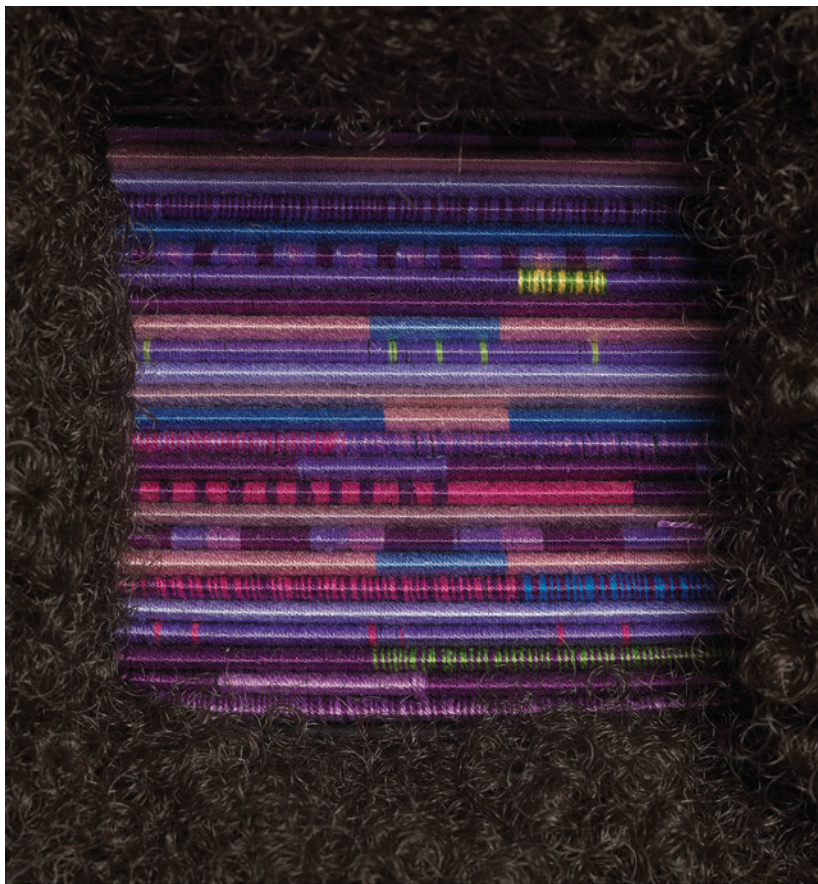
From *Cornrow Chair* to *Throne* (2016), Clark moves from the private sitting room to the public hair salon. The barbershop and the hair salon are vital meeting places for the African American community. So critical is this space that numerous Black and Brown artists—including Faisal Abdhu'allah, Pepón Osorio, and Fahamu Pecou—have engaged the barbershop chair as subject matter.¹¹ In *Throne*, a title that suggests royalty, Clark found and embellished a barbershop chair with beading influenced by Yoruba and Zulu cultures to provide an ornate perch where artful hair designs would be made. (In fact, *Throne* has been used in several performances by Clark.) The base and cylinder employ netting-stitch beadwork. The foot rest and hydraulic chair pump are covered with diagonally-striped beadwork sleeves. The chair was selected for its seat's fiberglass shell that approximates a Brown skin tone. The cushion has the texture of African hair. *Throne* is customized for an African American body.

FOR COLORED GIRLS... A RAINBOW (PURPLE), 2019.
AFRO WIG, COMBS, THREAD. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Clark creates a community of African American women in *For Colored Girls... a rainbow* (2019), a new series shown as a group for the first time in MATRIX 184. Afro wigs line a wall of the gallery. At the center of each Afro, Clark has embedded a bound stack of plastic combs wrapped with brightly-colored thread, which call to mind the woven, geometric designs of Ghanaian kente cloth and American military ribbon racks. Seven of the wall sculptures are dominated by a single color—brown, yellow, purple, red, green, blue, and orange—while others refer to the rainbow in their multi-color compositions. Titled *For Colored Girls... a rainbow*, the series pays homage to late author Ntozake Shange (American, 1948–2018) whose fierce choreopoem¹² *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975), is a modern literary classic and an Obie-award winning play. Tyler Perry adapted the piece into a film in 2010, and the play returned to Broadway in fall 2019. The narrative centers on Black female empowerment through struggle, love, and loss as embodied

FOR COLORED GIRLS... A RAINBOW (PURPLE), 2019. DETAIL.
AFRO WIG, COMBS, THREAD. COURTESY THE ARTIST



by the seven female characters named for colors: lady in brown, lady in yellow, lady in purple, etc. In 2010, Shange wrote, “I never realized what *for colored girls* would become. I look back now with awe as gray slate clouds, ominous and dense, give way to a pastel prism of color dancing across the sky. And I look forward to discovering even more colors to add to the rainbow that is this colored girl’s wonderful journey.”¹³ Clark honors the artist’s legacy almost fifty years after she wrote the play with additional rainbow-adorned Afro wig compositions to acknowledge the universality and continuing relevance of Shange’s stories.

In Clark’s hands, hair is life, material, and metaphor. In the artist’s words: “hair is power.”¹⁴

PATRICIA HICKSON

The Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

SONYA CLARK

Sonya Clark is Professor of Art at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Previously, she was a Distinguished Research Fellow in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University where from 2006 until 2017 she served as chair for the Craft / Material Studies Department. In 2016, she was awarded a university-wide VCU Distinguished Scholars Award. She earned an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art and was honored with their Distinguished Alumni Award in 2011. She has a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her first college degree is a BA from Amherst College where she also received an honorary doctorate in 2015.

Her work has been exhibited in over 350 museums and galleries in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Australia. Most recently, she has had solo exhibitions at the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, PA; Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA (2019); the African American Museum, Philadelphia, PA (2019); and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC (2017).

She is the recipient of a United States Artist Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, an 1858 Prize, Art Prize Grand Jurors Award, and an Anonymous Was a Woman Award, a Red Gate Residency in China, a BAU Carmago Residency in France, a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency in Italy, a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, a Knight Foundation Residency at the McColl, a Civitella Ranieri Residency in Italy, a Yaddo Residency, and a VCUarts Affiliate Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. Clark is an inaugural recipient of a Black Rock Senegal Fellowship.

Clark's work is in numerous public collections including the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin, TX; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN; the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI; the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, Montreal, Quebec, Canada; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX.

Born 1967, Washington, DC
Lives and works in Amherst, MA

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Cornrow Chair, 2011
Upholstered chair, thread, embroidery, braiding
36 x 20 x 20 in.
Courtesy Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (orange), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

Constellation, 2012–present
Balls of human hair
Dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (yellow), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

Hair Craft Project, 2014
11 pigment prints on archival paper
29 x 29 in. each
Courtesy Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (green), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

Throne, 2016
Found salon chair, cloth, beads
50 x 30 x 30 in.
Courtesy Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (blue), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

For Colored Girls... a rainbow, 1–8, 2019
Afro wigs, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in. each
Collection of the artist

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (purple), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (red), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

For Colored Girls... a rainbow (brown), 2019
Afro wig, combs, thread
12 x 12 x 3 in.
Collection of the artist

¹ Sonya Clark, quoted in the biography section of her website: www.sonya.clark.com. Accessed January 13, 2020.

² Sonya Clark, quoted in *Artist Profiles: Sonya Clark* on the National Museum for Women in the Arts website at www.nmwa.org. Accessed January 13, 2020.

³ Ashley Kistler, "Paying Tribute," *The Hair Craft Project: Sonya Clark*, exhibition catalogue, Richmond, VA: Sonya Clark, 2014, 92.

⁴ Sonya Clark, email correspondence with the author, January 18, 2020.

⁵ See *The Underground Railroad, c. 1780–1862*, in *Africans in America* on www.pbs.org. Accessed January 13, 2020.

⁶ Bill Gaskins, quoted in Sonya Clark, "Foreword," *The Hair Craft Project*, ix.

⁷ Sonya Clark, "Foreword," *The Hair Craft Project*, ix.

⁸ Elissa Auther, "Creative Collision and Overlap Between Art Worlds," *The Hair Craft Project*, 107.

⁹ Brooke Davis Anderson, "In Venice with Sonya and The Hair Craft Project," *The Hair Craft Project*, 109–10.

¹⁰ Sonya Clark, email correspondence with the author, January 18, 2020.

¹¹ Pepón Osorio's *En la barbería no se llora (No Crying in the Barbershop)* (1994) is a barbershop chair sculpture with video in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum. The subject was a boy's first haircut as a rite of passage to manhood, so he must not cry. This was traumatic for Osorio who cried because the barber did not know how to handle his kind of hair and hurt him. The work was part of a site-specific installation in a barbershop on Park Street in Hartford that was a Real Art Ways project in 1994.

¹² Shange coined this term in 1975 in reference to the work *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. The multidisciplinary work of a choreopoem includes poetry, dance, music, and song.

¹³ Ntozake Shange, "Beginnings, Middles and New Beginnings—A Mandala for Colored Girls: Musings and Meditations on the Occasion of the Second Publication," *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010, 16.

¹⁴ Sonya Clark, quoted in Bill Gaskins, "The Hairdresser Knows What the Looking Glass Doesn't," *The Hair Craft Project*, 79.

ARTIST PROGRAM

Sunday, March 8, 2020; 2pm

The Emily Hall Tremaine Lecture in Contemporary Art: Sonya Clark

The artist Sonya Clark weaves the rich material and visual culture of African American history into insightful narratives about the lasting legacy of slavery and oppression. Clark will discuss her work in the Tremaine Lecture in Contemporary Art.

CURATOR GALLERY TALK

Thursday, February 13, 2020; Noon

Gallery Talk: MATRIX 184

Artist Sonya Clark uses hair as a conduit into history, biography, and identity in MATRIX 184. Take a tour of the installation with curator Patricia Hickson, the Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art.



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

600 Main Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06103
(860) 278-2670

thewadsworth.org

MATRIX 184 is generously supported by the Wadsworth Atheneum's Contemporary Coalition.

The Emily Hall Tremaine Lecture in Contemporary Art is generously funded by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation and the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Fund.

Sustaining support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided by Newman's Own Foundation and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.



Tremaine Foundation

NEWMAN'S OWN
FOUNDATION



GREATER HARTFORD
ARTS COUNCIL

