

IN THE MID-1990S, WHEN KARA WALKER REVIVED THE QUIANT MEDIUM OF CUT-PAPER SILHOUETTES, the no-holds-barred contemporary-art world was preoccupied with the dynamics of racial, sexual, and political power.<sup>1</sup> She employed deftly scissored figures as characters in room-scale narrative tableaux, as shadow puppets in stop-action films, and as subversive commentaries upon historic illustrations of the Civil War – all offering wildly absurd, alternate histories of African Americans. Filled with caricatured images of slaves, masters, lynching, rape, and bestiality, Walker's work played fast and loose with stereotypes and violence, leaving few feathers unruffled. It offended an older generation of black artists for seeming to reaffirm white racism, and it offended a post–civil rights-movement generation for offering no escape from self-loathing. Walker is aware of these criticisms but views as fraught the very act of depicting African Americans. “Every image of ‘us’ is mediated,” she writes on an illustrated diary page, “filtered through the grounds of years of misrepresentation, bitterness, and suspicion.”<sup>2</sup>

In the lithograph *I'll Be a Monkey's Uncle*, Walker opens the Pandora's box of American racist iconography with typical fearlessness. Depicting on the left an archetypal pickaninny – a young black girl with unkempt hair, ragged clothes, and bare feet – and a long-tailed monkey in male clothing standing on a stump on the right, the work is rife with charged allusions. The monkey's tail loops forward to become a phallus pointing at the girl, and the dripping do-rag, hair braid, or disembodied tail held aloft by the girl suggests amputation, castration, or possibly even the scalping of a white woman for her desirable, straight “good hair.” The work's title also conjures up false associations of people of African descent with apes and a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder.

Walker discovered that the very flatness and emptiness of the silhouette medium provided a powerful vehicle for traversing the minefield of racial representation:

*I had a catharsis looking at early American varieties of silhouette cuttings. . . . What I recognized, besides narrative and historicity and racism, was this very physical displacement: the paradox of removing a form from a blank surface that in turn creates a black hole. I was struck by the irony of so many of my concerns being addressed: blank/black, hole/whole, shadow/substance, etc.<sup>3</sup>*

*I'll Be a Monkey's Uncle* may be open-ended, offering little resolution for age-old problems. But the work's black humor and black imagery, along with its title – a common expression of consternation – provocatively remind us of the urgent need to evolve beyond our exasperating and poisonous fixations on race.

Toby Kamps

### 53 *I'll Be a Monkey's Uncle*

1996

Lithograph on paper, 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 35 in.

Museum Purchase, 2001.0017



1. The present entry builds on ideas and research the author developed in *The Old, Weird America*, exh. cat. (Houston: Museum of Contemporary Arts Houston, 2008), which surveys the resurgence of folk themes in contemporary American art.

2. Walker diary page quoted in Ariella Budick, “Review: Kara Walker at the Whitney Museum,” *Newsday*, October 13, 2007. Available online at [www.newsday.com/entertainment/fanfare/rage-black-and-bleak-1.644776](http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/fanfare/rage-black-and-bleak-1.644776). Accessed October 9, 2009.

3. Walker quoted in Hilton Als, “The Shadow Act,” *New Yorker* 83, no. 30 (October 8, 2007): 75.

# Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE | ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART  
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

*Patricia McDonnell* AND *Emily Stamey*

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

*Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,*

*Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,*

AND *Robert Silberman*

PHOTO-ESSAY BY *Larry Schwarm*

Ulrich Museum of Art | Wichita State University  
in association with the University of Washington Press

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition  
*Art of Our Time: Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art,*  
*Wichita State University*

April 24–August 8, 2010.

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Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art  
Wichita State University  
1845 Fairmount Street  
Wichita, KS 67260-0046  
www.ulrich.wichita.edu

University of Washington Press  
P. O. Box 50096  
Seattle, WA 98145-5096  
www.washington.edu/uwpress

Book design: Patrick Dooley, Lawrence, Kansas

Assistant manuscript editor: Susan C. Jones, Minneapolis

Photographers: Larry Schwarm and Jim Meyer for the Ulrich  
Museum of Art, except work by Zhang Huan (courtesy of the  
artist)

Printing and binding: Greystone Graphics, Kansas City, Kansas

This book was typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro, designed by  
Robert Slimbach (based on the roman typefaces of Claude  
Garamond and italic typefaces of Robert Granjon), and Gill Sans,  
designed by Eric Gill.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art.

Art of our time: selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art,  
Wichita State University / Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey;  
with Toby Kamps . . . [et al.]; photographic essay by Larry  
Schwarm. – 1st ed.

p. cm.

Published on the occasion of an exhibition held at the Ulrich  
Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Apr. 24–Aug. 8, 2010.

ISBN 978-0-295-99024-8 (cloth) – ISBN 978-0-295-99025-5 (paper)

1. Art, Modern – 20th century – Exhibitions. 2. Art, Modern – 21st  
century – Exhibitions. 3. Art – Kansas – Wichita – Exhibitions.  
4. Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art – Exhibitions. I. McDonnell,  
Patricia, 1956 – II. Stamey, Emily. III. Kamps, Toby. IV. Schwarm,  
Larry, 1944– V. Title. VI. Title: Selections from the Ulrich  
Museum of Art, Wichita State University.

N6490.E36 2010

709.04'007478186 – dc22

2009051477

Front cover: Joan Miró, *Personnages Oiseaux* (Bird People), 1977–78  
(cat. no. 16)

Back cover: Tom Otterness, *Millipede*, 2008 (cat. no. 45)



This exhibition and book have been made possible through the  
generous support of Emprise Bank and the National Endowment  
for the Arts. Additional sponsors include the Joan S. Beren  
Foundation, Edward and Helen Healy, Harry Pollak, and  
Richard S. Smith and Sondra M. Langel. Support has also been  
provided by Jon and Kelly Callen, Mike and Dee Michaelis, Jayne  
S. Milburn, Christine F. Paulsen-Polk, and the Wichita State  
University Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic  
Affairs and Research.

## About the Contributors

**Toby Kamps** is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (2000), *Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s* (2002), and *The Old, Weird America* (2008).

**Patricia McDonnell** is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include *Marsden Hartley: American Modern* (1997), *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002), and *Painting Berlin Stories* (2003).

**Laura Moriarty** is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

**Antonya Nelson** has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, *Living to Tell* (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, *Bound*, is set there as well.

**Timothy R. Rodgers** is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

**Robert Silberman** is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former *New York Times* photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series *American Photography: A Century of Images*.

**Larry Schwarm** is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, *On Fire: Larry Schwarm*, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.

**Emily Stamey**, the Ulrich Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of *Jolan Gross-Bettelheim: The American Prints* (2001) and *The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968–2005* (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.

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