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Crowning Craftsmanship

Sonya Clark weaves metaphorically and literally with hair and textiles

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Artist Sonya Clark uses hair and textiles in her pieces, exploring how identity, race, culture and time work together in her exhibit “Material Reflex,” which closes in early September at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles. “Hairstyle is how we speak about culture and identity,” says Clark, the chair of the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. “Most of the work I’ve made through these twenty-some years has had to do with hairstyling in one way or another.” Clark is currently working on “The Hair Craft Project” in collaboration with Richmond hairdressers and artists for an exhibit that will open in February at 1708 Gallery. We checked in with her to hear about her projects.



Artist Sonya Clark Naoko Wousugi photo

R·Home: Does your work in “Material Reflex” take any inspiration from Richmond?

Clark: Richmond’s history has fed into those pieces and is part of the inspiration for the work in the show. 3/5 is coming from the three-fifths of a man rule. Black people were counted not as a whole person, but three-fifths of a person. That piece is a man’s white dress business shirt ... stitched with thread in cornrows. And the cornrows, there are three, but room for two more. ... So by taking a business shirt from [a] man, which ... has economic status implied, and by stitching in cornrows, the African-American body is implied and creates racial dialogue. Other pieces in the show are specific to Richmond history in the span of 150 years, the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation.



Afro Abe II, bill and thread, appearing in “Material Reflex” history. ...

R·Home: And what are those pieces?

Clark: Afro Abe. And that makes reference to economics. But the idea of giving the Great Emancipator an African-American hairstyle crowns him with the glory of an afro like a saint for freeing black people from slavery. That refers to Richmond’s

The last piece that refers to that time period of the Emancipation Proclamation is a piece called Abacus 1863. It’s a small piece — 5 by 5 inches, wooden — and it’s an actual functioning abacus. The abacus has beads made out of my hair. The abacus is used to count, so this one was used to make a stop-motion video that counts from when ... the Emancipation Proclamation was signed until 2013. But the object, not the video, is what is in the exhibition in L.A.

R·Home: Why do you incorporate hair in your pieces?

Clark: I’m going to give you the quick story. I use hair-braiding techniques to talk about race and culture. And I sometimes use actual hair for the same reason. The hair I use most often is my own, but the very first hairpiece I did is a friend who is biracial. She identifies as black. She had

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dreadlocks and cut them off and asked me, “Do you want these?” She knew my work was engaged in hair, so she gave them to me, and I made the very first piece out of human hair, and that was about 13 years ago.

R•Home: Will you use anyone’s hair in your artwork?

Clark: I’m very specific about whose hair I use. I don’t get hair from random people. I often have a conversation with people whose hair I use, because selling part of a human, being an African-American, turning other people into commodities, is worthy of discussion. I’m very careful about whose hair I’m using. ... I’ve used my mother’s hair, very good friends, people who are like family to me.

R•Home: What other hair projects are you working on?

Clark: I have a big project in Richmond with hairdressers — The Hair Craft Project — which I’m doing now. I wanted to connect the skills and craftsmanship of the black hairdressing community with the art community in Richmond. Those two communities reside [beside] and overlap one another. There are lots of black hairdressers who braid hair on Broad Street downtown. It’s also where First Fridays are held.



Abacus 1863, wood, human hair and metal

R•Home: What is the premise behind the project?

Clark: I belong to both of these worlds as an artist and black woman, so I’m ... getting my hair done by these incredibly talented hair braiders, photographing the hairstyles and then asking them to take the skills they use to do the hair braiding ... and [create] braided canvases stretched on stretchers.

R•Home: Who is involved in this collaborative art project with you?

Clark: Ten hairdressers and a variety of people across VCU’s art department.

R•Home: What’s your hair like now?

Clark: It’s cornrowed and elaborate, but I can sleep on it. I make sure it’s something I can sleep on, or else it’s a waste of time and artistry.

R•Home: When can we look forward to the unveiling of the pieces?

Clark: That show will open in February 2014 at 1708 Gallery, during Black History Month. ... I will have a solo show at [Reynolds Gallery] that will open in February, too. That’ll be a show of my work and ... a piece or two from the [“Material Reflex”] show in L.A. will be there, too.

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