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Sugar? Sure, but Salted With Meaning

‘A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby’ at the Domino Plant

By ROBERTA SMITH MAY 11, 2014

With her stinging, site-specific installation at the former Domino Sugar compound on the edge of the East River in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Kara Walker expands her imposing achievement to include three dimensions and monumental scale. In the process, she raises the bar on an overused art-spectacle formula as well as her own work. And she subjects a grand, decaying structure fraught with the conflicted history of the sugar trade and its physical residue to a kind of predemolition purification ritual.

Titled “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,” the piece runs the gamut in its effects. Dominated by an enormous sugarcoated woman-sphinx with undeniably black features and wearing only an Aunt Jemima kerchief and earrings, it is beautiful, brazen and disturbing, and above all a densely layered statement that both indicts and pays tribute. It all but throws possible interpretations and inescapable meanings at you.

This is par for the course with Ms. Walker, who is best known for wall installations in which cavorting black paper silhouettes depict the often sexualized, variously depraved yet comedic interactions of discernibly white slaveholders and black slaves in the antebellum South. Combining reality and metaphor with a great gift for caricature, these works demonstrate unequivocally that America’s “peculiar institution” was degrading for all concerned.

A looming 35 feet tall, Sugar Baby is ensconced toward the back of an

enormous warehouse, built in the late 19th century, that Domino once used for storing raw sugar cane as it arrived by boat from the Caribbean for refinement and packaging. Once a luxury — subtleties were sugar sculptures made for the rich as edible table-decorations — sugar became more widely available due in large part to slave labor. No wonder its journey north may bring to mind the Middle Passage endured by Africans forced across the Atlantic.

Sugar Baby fills the space between two rows of steel columns. Evoking an Egyptian temple, the columns also cage her: the scene of King Kong arriving in New York in the hold of a ship comes to mind. And yet, this creature is a power image, a colossal goddess of the future awaiting veneration. With blank eyes, she might also be a blind diviner who knows that the American future is much less white, racially, than its past.

Adding to her scale, the blocks of polystyrene from which she was built show through the sugar coating like seams of quarried stone. The long approach to her is dotted by 13 molasses-colored boys — underage blackamoors — made of cast resin or cast sugar, who introduced further dichotomies of light and dark, raw and cooked. Carrying either big baskets or bunches of bananas, they are enlarged from small cheap ceramic figurines still made in China. They could be pilgrims bringing offerings or workers returning from the cane fields.

As you approach, Sugar Baby's extra-large hands create a foreshortening that makes her seem to loom all the more powerfully. Her left hand is clenched in the ancient "fig" fist, of thumb through first two fingers. It is variously an obscene gesture, a protection against the evil eye and, furthest back in time, a fertility symbol. Like I said, multiple meanings.

"A Subtlety" uses a familiar festivalist-art recipe: to wit, take a historically freighted figure or motif and remake it, enlarged if possible, in a historically freighted material. The resulting application of one ready-made to another is usually a simplistic one-liner.

But slavery, the sphinx and sugar are too overt and too embedded in

this rough, sugarcoated place. Its walls are dark and rusted. When it rains, the ceiling drips molasses as evidenced by the dark spots forming on Sugar Baby, part of a larger deterioration that will continue until the piece closes on July 6. (A very small justice, considering: the land occupied by the warehouse will become a public park, not a condo, according to Creative Time, the nonprofit art organization that commissioned the project).

In addition, unlike most festival-art frivolities, Sugar Baby is an actively sculpted form in which Ms. Walker goes beyond both caricature and realism, making exaggerations and taking liberties that have their own psycho-formal effects. (And possibly some roots in African and pre-Columbian sculpture.) In addition to the Sugar Baby's enlarged hands, pendulous breasts and her narrow, lioness shoulders, there is her magnificent rear, swooping up almost like a dome from a shortened spine, above shortened thighs and calves. From the back this dome turns into a perfect heart shape, buttocks whose cheeks protect a vulva that might almost be the entrance to a temple or cave, especially factoring in her boulder-size toes as steps. A powerful personification of the most beleaguered demographic in this country — the black woman — shows us where we all come from, innocent and unrefined.

Which brings us to our own self-destructing present, where sugar is something of a scourge, its excessive consumption linked to diseases like obesity and diabetes that disproportionately affect the poor. The circle of exploitation and degradation is in many ways unbroken. No longer a luxury, sugar has become a birthright and the opiate of the masses. We look on it like money, with greed. Heavily promoted, it keeps millions of Americans of all races from fulfilling their potential — an inestimable loss in terms of talent, health and happiness.

A final part of the web of meaning that Ms. Walker has woven around this resonant work can't help including a black first lady trying to get people to avoid sugar, and a black president whose skin color alone has brought this country's not-so-buried racism roaring back to furious, mindless life.

Correction: May 13, 2014

An art review on Monday about “A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby,” an installation at the former Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn by the artist Kara Walker, who is best known for work caricaturing slavery in the antebellum South, misstated a phrase applied to slavery when it was legal in the United States. It is “peculiar institution,” not “curious institution.”

“A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby” runs through July 6 at the former Domino Sugar factory, 317 Kent Avenue at South 1st Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn; it is open to the public Friday evenings, Saturdays and Sundays; creativetime.org.

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