



Kara Walker, *A Subtlety*, 2014.
Installation view. Photo: Jason Wyche.
Courtesy of Creative Time.

A SUBTLETY, KARA WALKER

Domino Sugar Factory – New York
She Is All Things All At Once

By Keren Moscovitch

Kara Walker's public art installation *A Subtlety* was the spectacle of the summer in New York City—one that produced crowds that snaked through the streets of industrial Brooklyn and had the bandwidths of social media buzzing. Commissioned and presented by Creative Time and housed in the old Domino Sugar Factory, *A Subtlety* smacked visitors with a visceral experience of the problematic legacy of sugar production in the Americas, a legacy rife with human casualties.

Like the equally mysterious Egyptian sphinxes, the Walker installation represents an uneasy marriage of reverence and commerce, ruin and industrialization, understanding and ignorance. Visitors were greeted at the entrance by a youth announcing mechanically, “Exit behind the sphinx,” with the anticipation building as if one is approaching a massive tourist attraction. A sign instructs visitors to not touch the artworks, but instead to post photographs to social media, and provides a hashtag, a neatly packaged publicity tool making each participant a walking advertisement for the project.

Lining the space like sentinels at attention, sugar sculptures of black boys carry bananas and baskets of molasses dripped from the ceiling. In my viewing, half had already suffered the toll of heat and time created to facilitate their gradual disintegration into decaying candy corpses. At the far end, a giant white sugar sphinx lorded over the space, a proud and melancholy mammy with fists curled and nipples erect, staring into space with a seemingly blank expression that is as weighty as the 35 tons of sugar that went into the installation.

The sickeningly sweet smell of sugar melting in the summer heat could have been mouthwatering, but there was a thickness

in the air reminiscent of those scenes in crime dramas in which the detective enters a house containing dead and decaying bodies and covers his face with a handkerchief before proceeding. The tremendous stench and summer heat ushered crowds into the grand expanse of the factory, molasses oozing from the walls and candy boys crumpling to the ground, with delicate sugar armor crackling and melting into a broken glass menagerie in sticky puddles of sludge. The atmosphere was light and hot, dark and foreboding, a mess of molasses mummies.

One of the most striking qualities of *A Subtlety* was the public interaction with the work. Visitors were happy to oblige and whip their smartphones out to celebrate the adolescent-like behavior of those who posed with their lips hovering in the air as if suckling the sphinx's nipple and fingers in flight as if penetrating her genitalia, and the thousands of proudly naughty expressions were destined to litter social media. The black female body continued to be ogled, violated and diminished by the bashful public seeking to make sense of such a regal figure, with her brazen sexuality and threatening, ambivalent gaze. Walker refers to the effects of the work as “intentional but unpredictable.” Did she anticipate this rush of tabloid energy from the masses? This spectacle appeared as a well-designed and well-executed mockery of the public's relationship to race, class and sexuality—a dance that someone as deliberate and calculating as Walker must surely have choreographed. ■

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Keren Moscovitch is a lens-based artist exploring the intersection of the sexual and spiritual. She is based in New York City, where she teaches at the School of Visual Arts. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad and reviewed in publications such as The Huffington Post, Playboy, Policy Mic and New York Magazine.