

No more “poisonous, disrespectful and skewed images of Black people”

Barbara Walker’s *Louder than Words* (2006-9) and a Call to Arms

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“I have developed a practice which is concerned with social, political and cultural issues, with particular relation to history and contemporary practice,” so Black British artist, Barbara Walker declares, summarizing, “My work touches on class, racial identity, power and belonging.”<sup>1</sup> Engaged in a prolific outpouring of paintings and drawings over her decades’ long career to date, Birmingham based artist, Barbara Walker, works across multiple narrative series to create hard-hitting dramatic tableaux in which she does powerful justice to the psychological, physical, emotional, cultural, social, and imaginative realities of lives as lived by Black women, men, and children not only within twentieth and twenty-first century Britain but across the African diaspora more generally. Answering her own question, “where is the black presence?” she works within the series format to create self-reflexively experimental and politically radical bodies of work in which she dramatizes the repeatedly invisibilized and misrepresented lives of Black subjects. As an artist committed to visual storytelling, she lays bare the importance of working with narratives by explaining, “I tend to work two or three years in a series... and then I edit them” as she admits to the role played by her own authorial presence. As emerging over a twenty-year period, Walker’s vast bodies of work include *Private Face* (1989-2005), *Louder than Words* (2006-9), *Show and Tell* (date), and *Here and Now* (2012-present).<sup>2</sup> Working with the formal and thematic possibilities presented by painting and drawing as well as mixed-media works in which she traces shifting relationships between text and image, Walker has developed a powerful aesthetic practice by which she actively intervenes into debates related to the following: black absences within the domain of white western art histories; black objectification and stereotyping within a national body politic and white

mainstream popular culture and media; and black physical and psychological annihilation and violation as per legal systems of white racist discrimination and historical erasure, among much more.

Writing candidly regarding the fundamental role played by her exposure to positive images of Black subjects as created by white artists and authors at the same time as refusing to flinch from their perpetuation of assumptions and biases, Walker concedes, “I must also admit to strong feelings of pride, empathy and a little curiosity whenever I read stories that touched on Africa and its peoples. Seeing people who were Black like me, presented in ways that, whilst not unproblematic, were in so many ways better than the poisonous, disrespectful and skewed images of Black people so readily available in today’s society.”<sup>3</sup> Creating hard-hitting, multi-layered, and multi-referential bodies of work in which she not only questions problematic representations of “Africa and its peoples” but rejects the centuries’ long stranglehold of “poisonous, disrespectful and skewed images of Black people,” Walker fuses personal autobiography, family testimony, and scholarly research to bear witness to her status as a contemporary history painter. Coming to grips with the imaginative, political, and aesthetic force of only one of her series, I examine *Louder than Words* to trace Walker’s visual and textual resistances to the intersecting relationships between black masculinity and white mainstream stereotyping, criminalization, racial profiling, physical persecution, and psychological wounding. At the same that she refuses to sanitize or clean up white atrocities enacted against Black subjects – and, more specifically in this series, as confronts Black men - Walker works with charcoal, pencil, and paint to create emotively charged portraits and landscape scenes in which she visualizes black rather than white centered histories, narratives, and memories in a contemporary era.

A vast series executed on an epic scale, Walker’s *Louder than Words* consists of over thirty works in which she dramatizes the stark realities confronting the daily life of her son, Solomon, and the dominant role played by the racist actions of a twenty-first century British police force. “*Louder than Words* came about during a period I wasn’t working for about three years,” she explains, noting the intellectual and philosophical as well as political origins of the series: “It was a time to reflect and out of

that reflection *Louder than Words* came.” As she summarizes, “Solomon came home one day frustrated and upset and said, ‘I’ve been stopped again,’ and I looked at him... and said, ‘What do you mean stopped?’ He explained what had happened. He was just walking about his business and he had been stopped again and so I said, ‘what do you mean, ‘again?’”<sup>4</sup> Turning to art-making to expose the social, political, and legal restrictions specifically circumscribing the rights of Black men living in Britain today, Walker’s series takes inspiration from her son’s exposure to discriminatory police practices concerning targeted incidents of surveillance popularly designated as “stop and search.” Tracing a long history of police practices aimed at racial profiling and the singling out of Black men which came to a head in the 1980s by resulting in acts of radical resistance undertaken by black grassroots protest groups, Eddie Chambers writes, “In the period leading up to the disturbances of September 1985, hundreds of Black youth were subject to summary stop and search, whilst going about their legitimate business.” As he notes, and as Walker’s body of work reveals, very little progress has been made in a contemporary era: “Two decades later, the intrusive and corrosive effects of stop and search are still being felt, in Birmingham and elsewhere in the country.” “In 2006, Black youth, many of whom were born in the 1980s and 1990s find themselves, in effect, harassed by a similarly new generation of police officers,” Chambers further explains, incensed at the fact that, “Behind each stop and search statistic there lies an individual human being who has, for whatever reason, been targeted as *someone of interest* to whichever police officers of patrol car that happens to be passing.” For Chambers, as for Walker, the white racist motivations of these abuses and violations visited upon black manhood are clear-cut: “Stop and search is in effect racial profiling by another name. These stopped individuals, these luckless pedestrians, tend to be of a certain ethnic background (African Caribbean), tend to be of a certain gender (male) and tend to be of a certain age group (young).”<sup>5</sup> As Walker explains, a motivation for the series was her determination to condemn ongoing cycles of oppression as she “makes links to the ‘sus’ law of the 80s” only to critique the fact that “I’ve gone through that in that generation” and now it has “come back again.”<sup>6</sup>

Adding insult to injury regarding the traumatizing violations enacted by police authority against the individual rights of Black men, Walker declares that Solomon “produced... four crumpled slips and I was immediately kind of perplexed by them and upset.” The sight of these yellowed A5 sized carbon copies which functioned as the “proof” of her son’s “stop and search” as given to him while the police officers kept the “original” provides the material catalyst to Walker’s *Louder than Words*. Starting to collect them in 2002 while “he was still being stopped and searched,” she declares that a few years later in 2006, “I decided I wanted to respond to them.”<sup>7</sup> For Walker, *Louder than Words* assumes heightened dramatic force by doing justice to her outrage: “How can and why should such pathetic pieces of police detritus impact so much on the life of one of my family members?”<sup>8</sup> As an artist typically undertaking six months to a year of research for each of her series, Walker learned that the West Midlands Police kept the “original dockets” on official record, a stark reality that stimulated her art production yet further given that, “it was quite disturbing to know that each time he was stopped but he was just searched that documentation is on file. It’s almost kind of sinister for me to know that this activity existed. It’s almost like, ‘just in case.’ It’s almost building a profile on someone” given that the record “stays in the system for five years.”<sup>9</sup> As Chambers notes, Walker’s decision to work with Solomon’s actual dockets physically, materially, and imaginatively inscribes “the curiously modern and thoroughly bizarre act of being issued with a *record* of the stop and search,” as he concludes, “It’s difficult to know what those stopped and searched are supposed to do with these *souvenirs*.”<sup>10</sup> Refusing to shy away from these objects as macabre “souvenirs” commemorating home-grown injustices rather than national tourist attractions, Walker’s epic-sized, digitally scanned reworkings of these police dockets for which she explains “None of these are tampered, they’re in their authentic state” and onto which she not only collages portraits of Solomon but urban views representing the locations of these incidents assume new found status both as memorials and as works of art.<sup>11</sup> As talismans to traumatizing experiences, on the one hand, Walker’s works testify to white racist persecution and black suffering while, on the other, they emerge as monumental declarations to formal and thematic developments within her practice as she endorses the

power of artistry in transforming Black men from their status as criminalized specimens into psychologically and physically complex individuals.

“Like the great African American artist Charles White, Barbara’s pictures are ‘images of dignity,’” Chambers states, declaring that, “because her work is highly figurative, we all have an uncommon access to its multiple and pronounced social narratives.”<sup>12</sup> Regardless of their vast and important differences of national context, historical framework, and time period, Chambers’ comparison between Walker and White reveals their shared determination to create “images of dignity” as constructed from monumental portraits and executed in black and white and/or sepia and which is further enhanced by another parallel technique. In the same way that Charles White used seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century runaway slave advertisements as the basis for his individualized portraits of Black women, men, and children as he testified to black activism in a 1960s United States Civil Rights era regardless of a history of slavery, Barbara Walker collages similarly hyper real portraits of Black subjects onto twenty-first century police dockets and newspaper accounts in a powerful denunciation of the fact that black bodies and souls may no longer be bought and sold on the auction block but nevertheless remain imprisoned in the social, political, cultural and class-based inequalities generated by its contemporary legacies. Across *Louder than Words*, Walker’s portraits of Solomon as well as her landscape scenes documenting the locations of his police encounters come to life not only on the digitally scanned enlargements of police dockets but on collaged newspaper fragments containing powerful accounts related to white atrocity and black martyrdom and on the symbolically white backdrop of drawing paper. Issuing a call to arms as did White decades previously, Walker adopts experimental artistic practices to defy white racist forces of annihilation and subjugation and ensure that her Black protagonists circulate as subjects rather than objects and individuals rather than types as she works with physiognomic expression, bodily gesture, and self-expression through clothing to provide radical declarations of individual agency and artistry.

Writing of one of Walker's earlier series, *Private Face*, in which she visualizes Black women, men, and children at work and at play as she dramatizes their everyday lives in full color and sepia paintings similarly executed on a monumental scale, Chambers emphasizes the extent to which she "has to work hard to win the trust and confidence of her subjects before she can begin to sketch or otherwise document these people and their everyday or regular activities." "For everyone involved, not least Walker herself, the right to paint familiar subject matter has to be earned," he continues, in no doubt that, "Having earned that right it has to be nurtured, protected and never abused."<sup>13</sup> As a series inspired by the personal memories and private experiences not only of community members but of Walker's own son, these issues surrounding the "right to paint" remain of even more fundamental moral, ethical, and political importance in *Louder than Words*. Admitting to Solomon's initial reluctance regarding her decision to take his "upsetting" experiences as her subject-matter on the grounds that "he was very wary of being recognised and being up for public scrutiny," she explains the moral and emotional importance of adapting her practice to ensure a respectful engagement with his personal experiences. In a bold departure from her favored method of working in her studio, she explains, "I started the charcoal drawings of him... at home so he could see and he could be part of it," emphasizing, "It was important that he could see what I was doing, understood it, be part of it, absorb it and be part of it." "As an intervention and introduction, I always start a project within drawing. I began by created several laboured charcoal studies of Solomon at home, as a catalyst to develop a critical dialogue with him. To begin I often work and think quite literally, with an expectation that the metaphor and the critical analysis will flow in later," she emphasizes, noting that "these first series drawings were the genesis and were pivotal to *Louder than words*. It was very important that Solomon (he usually never see me working) was present to bear witness, to see the process, to absorb and be part of what seemed at the time a mother and son collaboration."<sup>14</sup> Walker's decision not only had powerful aesthetic results in powerful bodies of work but profound emotional consequences. "Whilst I was working he could see and then he came in and we talked," she declares, in no doubt that, "I managed to unlock certain things through that whole process of what he was feeling because he held a lot

in. And through that work - and I'm not saying that the work was therapy - it gave a place to discuss these critical and very personal experiences." Far from creating *Louder in Words* in isolation, Walker's admission that, "It's a collaboration between us," provides a powerful lens through which to examine her tendency toward interweaving autobiography, familial testimony, oral history, and scholarly research as integral to her visual lexicon. Self-reflexively interrogating the relationship not only between image and image but text and image, she repeatedly reinforces "the tension between the text and the drawing" to open up a space for audience engagement.<sup>15</sup> An anti-explicatory and anti-didactic artist, Walker works with understatement, fragmentation and a multiplicity of narratives across her portraits and landscapes in order to introduce ambiguity and actively inscribe the viewer's interpretative process into her series. Deliberately fusing her radical political consciousness with an experimental aesthetic practice, Walker's *Louder than Words* heightens social and political awareness among her audiences regarding racist discrimination in general and the excessive practices of the British police force more specifically "because a lot of people aren't aware of it," which is why, as she explains, "it's so important to me because I'm still dealing with history and documentation in recording the particular policing of today."<sup>16</sup>

Across *Louder than Words*, Walker's drawings etched onto official police dockets constitute by far the larger proportion of works in the series and can be divided between works consisting solely of portraits of Solomon – such as *My Song* (2006), *Untitled* (2006) (Figure 1), and *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin* (2006) – and compositions from which she entirely absents the figure in favor of creating idealized renderings of the locations at which he was stopped and searched, including: *Polite Violence I* (2006), *Polite Violence II* (2006) (Figure 2), and *Polite Violence III* (2006). Defying the diminutive size of the original police dockets, Walker inserts her charcoal and pencil drawings onto digitally enlarged scans of the original documents on the grounds that, "They're meant to be monumental, they're meant to engulf you, they're meant to be powerful. It's a symbolic thing." As self-confessed "monoliths," these works assume spiritual and allegorical function as part memorial, part monument, and part testimonial as she actively intervenes into the official records to create artworks out of archives. As

per White's decades' earlier monochrome works executed on a similarly aggrandized scale, Walker not only insists that, "the reason why they're large is... so the audience can engage with them," but also emphasizes the necessity of creating larger-than-life black figures as "a political statement" as she declares: "It's almost to say, 'here we are,' 'here I am.'" <sup>17</sup> Deliberately rejecting "poisonous, disrespectful and skewed images of Black people," she emphasizes that she works "within the art world and art practice" to "interrogate the perception of images and perception of ideas" ultimately to "change or interrogate a perception or stereotype" regarding black humanity within white mainstream society. <sup>18</sup> As Gen Doy emphasizes, Walker's "aim [is] to produce artistic documents in a difficult and traditionally prestigious visual language, in order to offset the media images which still persist of black people as violent, threatening, or potential criminals." <sup>19</sup>

Anti-sensationalist and anti-voyeuristic, Walker's mixed-media works, *My Song, Untitled* (Figure 1), and *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin*, variously consist of a close up of a full frontal or rear view of Solomon's face or the back of his head as she foregrounds the role played by portraiture within her revisionist and experimental aesthetic. Far from statically engaging with the genre of portraiture, Walker's admission that, "I'm still in the conversation of portraiture" as she remains committed to debates surrounding "how you define a portrait" is dramatically played out in her delicately rendered line drawings of Solomon. Shoring up thematic and formal relationships across works in this series, Walker's decision to provide a full frontal view of Solomon's physiognomy in *Untitled* functions in conjunction with her representation solely of the back of his head in *My Song* and *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin* to lay claim to the impossibility of doing justice to Black subjects within a single work. Betraying her critique of the ways in which black manhood is fragmented and distorted across official documentation, Walker creates a series of likenesses dramatizing different parts of Solomon's face and body to attest to portraiture as fraught terrain for Black subjects. In stark contrast to the government docket in which the police officer attempts to categorize or itemize black male identity in socially determinist ways, Walker collages delicately rendered and only partially complete full frontal and rear



views of Solomon onto the textual surfaces and lined grids to ensure that his physiognomy is simultaneously both revealed and concealed: she reimagines black masculinity not as a criminalized spectacle but as an absent-presence and present-absence in these works. More particularly, in *My Song* and *Untitled*, Walker introduces further ambiguity by inserting her pencil portraits not directly onto the original docket but on swathes of white paint through which the text of the police document bleeds through but is ultimately rendered illegible in the artist's physical act of erasure. An anti-didactic artist self-confessedly working with "a lot of code," for Walker the white paint has the potential not only to symbolize the whiteness of art production as referenced in blank paper and canvases but even correction fluid as its uneven layerings confirm her active role in editorializing official information concerning black subjects. In more hard-hitting terms, as she explains, her preferred technique testifies to her conviction that, "I'm using the white to wipe away that pain because it was really painful for me to know what my son was going through because it's almost like it's happening to me," as she admits that his exposure to these traumatizing experiences are far from over: "since that day in 2002... even now when Solomon goes out there's a fear and I always say be careful just be careful. It's still ongoing."<sup>20</sup> Opting not to whiten the whole area of the docket as per *My Song*, however, in *Untitled*, Walker leaves more of the police document visible at the same time that she inserts a frame as delicately rendered in pencil. Simultaneously providing a barrier separating Solomon's portrait from the physical and psychological violations enacted against black manhood by the dehumanizing process of "stop and search," her inclusion of a frame explicitly references western art history to defy widespread racist associations of the genre of portraiture as for whites only.

Exposing the ideological forces at work within the seemingly detached neutrality of the police docket, Walker inserts Solomon's face and body onto the police document's surface in *My Song*, *Untitled* and *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin* to critique the profoundly entrenched tendencies within national institutions toward a wholesale whitewashing of black psychological and physical realities. Creating hand-drawn portraits that appear in ambiguous relation to the official text within the docket and

which name and shame the official institution - “WEST MIDLANDS POLICE” – the dehumanizing practice - “Search Record of Person/Vehicle/Stop Form” – and the authoritative act of choosing what stays on record - “\*Delete as Appropriate” - in the case of *My Song* and *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin*, Walker’s decision to include a detailed rendering solely of the back of Solomon’s head guarantees that he retains his individualism in the face of white mainstream attempts to objectify and quantify black bodies. Similarly, while she provides a full frontal view of his physiognomy in *Untitled*, she defies audience tendencies toward voyeuristic consumption by ensuring his eyes are closed at the same time that she meticulously delineates his hooded jacket in a powerful interrogation of white racist stereotypes surrounding black masculinity and items of clothing, a concern rendered more clear-cut in her detailed representation of his jacket and baseball cap in *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin*. Despite the fact that, as Karen Roswell states, the title of *My Song* in particular is an allegorical and spiritual “meditation on the Old Testament’s *Song of Solomon*,” Walker sets out across these works to obliterate his name as it appears in the original docket not only symbolically to reenact the ways in which white racist practices annihilate black identities but also to attest to his representative importance: while this experience has happened to her son, “stop and search” remains a lived reality for the vast majority of Black men exposed to ongoing practices of racial profiling and police surveillance.<sup>21</sup> “While I was doing my research,” Walker explains, “to begin with it didn’t start off just with Solomon and myself. It was a bigger approach. I started to collect dockets from other young men that had been subjected to it.” Accumulating a “bag of dockets from various men” which were ultimately unusable due to data protection issues, Walker’s decision to focus solely upon her son’s physiognomy has powerful implications regarding her ongoing engagement with “how you define a portrait:” his likeness testifies not only to the individual but collective experiences confronting Black men and thereby shores up her protest against widespread systems of official discrimination and persecution.<sup>22</sup> Opting for no clear-cut vision of spiritual redemption, Walker’s monochrome renderings of Solomon in *My Song*, *Untitled*, and *Series... I can paint a picture with a pin* testify not only to black survival in the face of white strategies of

subjugation but also to black sacrifice in potential martyrdom on the grounds that the suspended placelessness of the portraits work in conjunction with the monumental scale of the work symbolically to resonate with tombstones and memorials more generally. At the same time, however, Walker's drawings attest to black male self-expression as she carefully details Solomon's personal style via clothing to testify to black resistance over and above white discrimination as he retains his individualism regardless of white racist forces of annihilation and erasure. Revealingly, Solomon's personal strategies of resistance are inscribed into the very texture of these works given that, as Chambers observes, these portraits are etched onto police dockets that, far from surviving as pristine documents, exist solely as "crumpled yellow bits of paper" which "reflect and represent Solomon's own frustration, displeasure and above all fear."<sup>23</sup> Ultimately relying on the language of portraiture to carve out a space for black representation and black agency while interrogating white racist strategies of discrimination, as Gen Doy declares, "Walker sees herself not as a portrait painter, but rather as a commemorator of the histories and experiences of people she knows and the Birmingham community in which they live."<sup>24</sup>

On the surface, Walker's series of idealized townscapes including *Polite Violence I*, *Polite Violence II*, and *Polite Violence III* which come to life not in the monochrome starkness of charcoaled lines but the softened sepia hues of oil on paper could not be further from her highly politicized and aestheticized portraits of Solomon. Probe deeper, however, and her seemingly idyllic content soon loses its sentimental and nostalgic sheen if examined in relation to her emotive use of titling; she provides explicit references to "polite violence" to reveal her politicized subject-matter as she visualizes the "locations where he was stopped" in a direct condemnation of police rituals of public intimidation. Taking the local geographical terrain rather than Solomon's physiognomy or torso as her starting point, Walker emphasizes that, "the reason why I put these landscapes in [is] because I'm moving away from the figure," noting, however, that, "they're still portraits of Solomon" but that she is engaged in "abstracting the idea."<sup>25</sup> Deliberately extending her political critique of the violations enacted upon Solomon's body to interrogate the "abstract" and philosophical questions related to the body politic of the nation, Walker

exposes the rhetoric surrounding Britain as a “green and pleasant land” as nothing less than a propagandistic fantasy and delusional mythology based upon systems of exclusion that cut across race, class, and gender divides. Seemingly relying on identical formal techniques, in the same way that Walker ensures that the police officer’s handwriting is all but obliterated in *My Song*, *Untitled*, and *Series -... I can paint a picture with a pin*, she repeats her preferred practice not of overwriting but of overimaging across *Polite Violence I* and *III* in order to eradicate Solomon’s exposure to ritualistic dehumanization. Ultimately favoring an entirely different practice in *Polite Violence II*, however, Walker provides the viewer with unmediated access to the police officer’s handwritten data as entered onto the form and following Solomon’s subjection to one “stop and search” incident in particular. With the exception of one act of censorship – she inserts a white sticker to conceal the specificities of the family’s home address – Walker provides full access to the information provided by “PC 7152 EGAN DIGBETH” as written on “24/01/03.” According to Digbeth’s record, Solomon – who is listed as “short black,” “slim,” “5 ‘0’ – was stopped on “Corporation St” at “2341” hundred hours at which point the police undertook a “search for weapons” on the grounds that he was “Seen acting suspiciously pointing at bar staff through window of closed PH [Public House].” Refusing to provide a direct reimaging of the exchange between Solomon and the police officer, however, Walker’s decision to represent a street scene in which she foregrounds architectural landmarks over and above any figurative representations of humanity in *Polite Violence II* offers a powerful condemnation of the ways in which the daily persecution of Black men is not only written but imaged out of British history: writ large here are the damages done by a “polite” for which read concealed form of physical and psychological violence as enacted by national authorities against Black subjects. Admitting that she found this police docket which “talks about suspicious pointing” not only a “laughing point” but “really disturbing,” Walker’s decision to include the police officer’s text maintains a stark formal and thematic “tension” between “the personal handwriting of the police officer” and the artist’s “personal marking” as she artfully juxtaposes dominant systems of record-keeping with subversive strategies of aesthetic practice. At the same time that the official docket operates to effect

black eviction and exclusion, Walker performs a powerful act of inclusion by relying on a “vignette style” rather than a social and political documentary framework to represent the scenes at which Solomon was stopped and searched in *Polite Violence I, II and III* “through rose-tinted spectacles.” In so doing, she testifies to the entitlement of Black subjects to the rights of British citizenship and belonging in recognition of the fact that despite “all the complexities of the situations that happen” this “working class neighbourhood” is “home.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, as Chambers emphasizes, Walker refuses to shy away from an underlying sense of threat as “through the device of depicting decidedly pleasant street scenes, she reveals her home neighbourhood not to be an environment of comfort, safety and domesticity, but an environment in which there lurks a terror that might, quite literally, descend at any given moment.”<sup>27</sup> As Walker herself summarizes, here and elsewhere across *Louder than Words* she repeatedly raises the question, “Are you safe?”<sup>28</sup>

Any in-depth examination of Walker’s *Louder than Words* soon reveals her engagement with police dockets is far from the whole story as her delicately rendered portraits of Solomon also come to life against the politically charged backdrops of collaged newspaper texts. An especially hard-hitting example is Walker’s diptych, *Brighter Future* created in 2006 and consisting of two portraits executed in charcoal and conte crayon. A close up of a full frontal portrait of Solomon assumes center-stage in the first work as Walker’s meticulous rendering of his physiognomy appears alongside an article published in *The Independent* newspaper and accompanied with the headline, “IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME” as the journalist narrates the tragic murder of Brazilian born, Jean Charles de Menezes, by the London Metropolitan Police in 2005. As Walker explains, she substituted a photograph of de Menezes with “a charcoal drawing of Solomon” in order to condemn the senseless injustice of arbitrary police killings while also raising her personal fears regarding the safety of her son and as instilled by his repeated subjection to “stop and search” interrogations: as she asks, what if “that was my son[?]”<sup>29</sup> Generating yet further dramatic tension, the second image consists of another charcoal and conte rendering of Solomon but this time he is represented in profile view - in a direct evocation of

criminalized mug shot iconography - while collaged over a headline within the same newspaper which reads, “Met chief defends ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy for his officers.” Refusing to shy away from the life and death consequences of police atrocities, Solomon’s portrait appears immediately beneath the prostrate and traumatized figures of Menezes’ family in a powerful exposure of parental grief on an unimaginable – and even “unimagable” scale - as Walker relies on a mixed-media visual language simultaneously to reference suffering with her own personal history and as confronting millions of Black women, men and children living across the diaspora. As yet another work in which she relies upon collaged newspaper text, Walker created *Time* a few years later in 2009. Appearing against the whited out backdrop of the *Financial Times*, her full frontal portrait of Solomon emerges in hard-hitting contrast not only to her reproduction of a handwritten police docket but to her inclusion of a diminutive photograph of Jean Charles de Menezes as accompanied by an article headlined, “Pressure grows over anti-terror police.” In a radical departure from her other works in her series, however, Walker’s composition is dominated by her poignant decision to include the rear view of a delicately rendered and unidentified black female figure whose head is bowed as if to render her exposure to emotional suffering clear-cut. Introducing the possibility that this figure may well be a surrogate for the artist herself, she summarizes that there is a “woman coming through” who “symbolises metaphorically how I felt about how this work.” “It was really a weight just dealing with this work and dealing with Solomon,” Walker admits, testifying to her sense of art-making as a catalyst to consciousness-raising on the grounds that, “It’s still ongoing” but “people don’t realise.”<sup>30</sup>

“I always go back to history,” so Barbara Walker summarizes, further explaining that her interest in history is “in the sense of documenting” and “leaving traces” as she emphasizes her determination to do justice to the repeatedly elided political, physical, social, cultural, and imaginative realities of black lives as lived not only in a historical but a contemporary era. Recognizing and resisting the ideological stranglehold maintained by dominant forces of political power, social control, and historical revisionism, Walker exposes mainstream biases, prejudices, and blindspots as she declares, “I look at history to learn and to work with and work against so there’s a lot of loaded information.”

Acknowledging the fundamental role played by audience engagement with her bodies of work, her multiple narrative series - including *Louder than Words* - foreground her commitment not only to critiquing but to rendering white racist caricatures of black humanity obsolete. Shedding powerful light upon her artistic practice, Walker categorically states, “I want to challenge the stereotyping and misunderstanding that abounds, and offer a sophisticated and positive alternative in a mainstream setting, as a number of other Black artists have tried to do.”<sup>31</sup> Working not in isolation but in full awareness of a vastly under-researched tradition of Black British and African diasporic painting, film-making, sculpture, photography, prints, and mixed-media installation and performance art, Walker’s narrative series can be examined only in their own right but in powerful relation to the creative outpourings of artists as diverse as Lubaina Himid, Donald Rodney, Maud Sulter, Marlene Smith, Ingrid Pollard, Keith Piper, Claudette Johnson, Gavin Jantjes, Mona Hatoum, Roshini Kempadoo, and Mary Evans, to name but a few. Committed to creating images that are “louder than words” as her Black subjects come to life despite their ongoing subjection to dominant forces of physical, social, cultural, existential and even art historical incarceration, Walker adopts an array of experimental practices in a heartfelt determination to give “voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless.”<sup>32</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Artist statement. Available online at: <http://june96.wordpress.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Interview of Barbara Walker with the author, September 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Artist statement, *Here and Now*. Available online at: <http://june96.wordpress.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Eddie Chambers, "It's a Bit Much" in *Barbara Walker Louder Than Words* (London Metropolitan University, Unit 2, 2006): n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in Chambers, "It's a Bit Much," n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Chambers, "It's a Bit Much," n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>12</sup> Chambers, "It's a Bit Much," n.p. For an examination of Charles White's use of runaway slave advertisements as a catalyst to his aesthetic practice, see Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008): 135-38.

<sup>13</sup> Eddie Chambers, "Barbara Walker" in *Private Face Paintings by Barbara Walker* (Birmingham: West Midlands Art, mac and Birmingham City Council, 2002): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Email conversation with the author, June 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.



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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Gen Doy, "The Subject of Painting: works by Barbara Walker and Eugene Palmer." *Visual Communication* 1.1 (February 2002): 47.

<sup>20</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Roswell, "Barbara Walker: Essay," in *Barbara Walker As Seen* (London: Tiwani Contemporary, 2013): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>23</sup> Chambers, "It's a Bit Much," n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Doy, "The Subject," 46.

<sup>25</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Chambers, "It's a Bit Much," n.p.

<sup>28</sup> Interview of Walker by the author.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Qtd. in Chambers, "Barbara Walker" in *Private Face Paintings by Barbara Walker*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Qtd. Maria Varnava, "Foreword," in *Barbara Walker As Seen* (London: Tiwani Contemporary, 2013):

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