

## YOUTH SPEAKS<sup>[1]</sup>

### The Art of Barbara Walker

*“I use drawing as a communication tool to respond to the world around me and the world is a big place.”* – Barbara Walker

The trajectory of Barbara Walker’s artistic career is testament to an artist making and following her own path. Over the past two decades, Walker’s art has quietly but steadfastly refused to entertain art fads or the fleeting fixations of the art world. Walker’s resolve and unwavering belief in her abilities has meant that her practice has continued to evolve, becoming an invaluable and vital form of social commentary about often unseen or little explored aspects of life in contemporary Britain.

While initially centred on painting, in recent years, drawing has begun to figure more prominently in Walker’s exhibited work. Over the past four years or so, Walker has supplemented her substantial body of drawings on paper with a blossoming range of site-specific temporary wall drawings. This relatively new approach has brought yet another dimension to Walker’s practice. Produced in a range of galleries, these large-scale works have also often been undertaken in full view of the public.

Prior to this, the introduction of drawing into Walker’s artistic repertoire of exhibited work was first notably revealed in the series *Louder Than Words* from 2006. It is also probably true to say that this series also marked a key moment in the evolution of Walker’s practice inasmuch as social and political commentary, which had a latent presence in earlier paintings, became more prominent. The paintings and drawings in *Louder Than Words* examined the significance and impact of police ‘stop and search’ as experienced by Walker’s son, Solomon, in Birmingham. This compelling series of paintings and drawings was imbued with a particular sense of personal anguish and exasperation. More generally it urged us to consider what Eddie Chambers described as “the consequences and implications of living in a world in which an individual such as Solomon is often judged by others (particularly those with power and in power) by the way they *look*, rather than by what or who they actually are.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Following *Louder Than Words*, Walker continued to explore what Karen Roswell described as “critical conversations about perceptions of male identity.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Walker’s painted portraits depict unnamed individuals, in a range of poses, side on, facing or with their back to the viewer. Fixating on certain details, such as hairstyles (*B44*, 2007) or particular clothes (*Construct 2*, 2009), such works often germinate from, or carry with them, the spectre of photography’s classificatory powers. This is not incidental. Walker’s compositions can be seen in response to, and in dialogue with, the historical and systematic framing of the Black body, via bogus anthropology and photography’s historical pseudo-scientific aspects. Used to portray an emasculated or a fear-inducing subject that was in need of control, perhaps it is the legacy of such visual imagery coupled with the construct of the ‘suspicious’ Black male, which enables invasive powers such as racial profiling (aka ‘stop and search’), or worse still extrajudicial punishment to persist.

Many other practitioners have, over the years, felt duty bound to explore Black male representation vis-à-vis the state, particularly the enduring image of the Black male as a delinquent. Tam Joseph’s painting *UK School Report* (1983) and Donald Rodney’s, mixed media work, *Black Man, Public Enemy* (1990), are just two examples of work that spring to mind. In this regard, Walker’s studies can also be understood as serving an ongoing necessity, as well as being part of a wider (art) historical narrative.

It was with all this in mind that the Cultural Programme at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) Farnham invited Barbara Walker to undertake a Residency/Exhibition to create a new series of temporary site-specific wall drawings for the James Hockey Gallery. Rather than have

an exhibition already set up for the start of the academic term, it seemed more appropriate and more in keeping with an environment in which creativity is allowed to evolve over time, to have an artist quite literally practicing on campus. Working in the gallery over the course of August and September 2015, Walker's Residency/Exhibition afforded her time to experiment with scale within a cavernous gallery space. This was a challenge that Walker undertook not without some level of apprehension, having never worked at the scale offered by the James Hockey Gallery. The influx of a new and returning student cohort further accentuated the extent to which Walker's residency would be relatively public. However, she applied herself to the project with a quite remarkable level of intensity and focus matched only by her desire to talk and discuss the evolving project with students, staff and public alike.

*Sub Urban* continues Walker's interest in using portraiture, 'traditional' drawing materials (charcoal and chalk) and large-scale compositions to consider representation of young people. This project also represents another evolution in Walker's practice, in terms of these subjects being young Black women. The title of this exhibition, *Sub Urban*, is intentionally loaded with meaning, in order to highlight the ways in which the spoken word can itself be encrypted with meaning. *Sub Urban* not only evokes a dynamic between the 'suburban' and the 'urban' but also the ways in which in Britain, terms such as 'urban' or 'inner city' or even 'rural' are often used to denote certain cultural demographics. For Walker, dress and fashion are similarly loaded with social and cultural significance.

In *Sub Urban*, six large drawings of young women dressed in contemporary fashion and sporting different hairdos dominate the space. Four drawings have been produced using Walker's customary choice material, charcoal, on white painted walls, and two drawings are in chalk on sections of walls painted black. These individuals are her friends' children, or students she met on UCA's Farnham campus. Walker's detailing, composition and subtle use of light and shade give these figures an extraordinary power. Each figure is depicted larger than life and arranged in a variety of poses, straight on, side on and with their back to the viewer.

Walker's stylistic approach to representation exudes an air of accessibility. On one level, accessibility emerges from the range of mark making as much as it does from composition, together these qualities draw the viewer closer. On another level, her erudite portraiture offers a contemplative form of representation.

It is also the sheer scale of these works which give them such presence and makes them so captivating. Their monumentality is analogous to that of imagery found on billboard advertising. This is more than just a happy coincidence. On the one hand, so much of the consumer world is today aimed at the young. On the other hand, Walker's unabashed use of scale functions as a bold statement, an intervention or counterpoint to the ways in which the Black subject is routinely rendered (in)visible in contemporary Britain.

Through their dress, the young women in *Sub Urban* are located in contemporary society. For Walker, the wearing of dress, labels and styles evident in these drawings, represent the mutability of identity and as such are rites of passage. Walker's interest in fashion is not an incidental detail, nor is it intended as a celebration of consumer culture or style. Her interests are concerned with analysing how these young women see themselves and are seen, rather than addressing or examining the 'promises' offered by consumer culture.

The subjects in *Sub Urban* are individuals in their own right, with their own ambitions and prospects; although they are together in one room they are not a homogenous group. The physical space between each drawing functions as a means of further emphasising their individuality. This is reinforced by Walker's decision in this project to title each drawing with the actual name of her 'model': Chenika, Montana, Annie, Berchadette and Martha.

Catch-all phrases such as 'Black Britain' or the 'Black community', are often used as forms of descriptive shorthand. Walker's art, not unlike the films of Menelik Shabazz, offer a thoughtful

and expansive form of representation, that goes beyond the myopic interests of mainstream media.<sup>[4]</sup>

Walker's analytical eye re-presents imagery and constructs, insisting on the value of portraying and thinking about what it might mean to be young and Black in Britain today.

At the end of a site-specific drawing project, it has become customary for Walker to wash away her endeavour. This action entails another form of effort. While not necessitating the sort of intensity required for producing her drawings, this physical act, undertaken by the artist denotes a powerful, if somewhat melancholic denouement to the project. This has been captured in a poignant and beautifully composed 16mm film made by UCA's BA (Hons) Film Production students. In the film's brief accompanying voiceover, Walker candidly explains how her wiping away is intended to signify what happens to "certain races". We can, of course, interpret this in any number of ways. Using water to wash away her drawings leaves only a dramatic visual trace, an agglomeration of swirling abstract marks. This abrupt, but decisive intervention could be construed as an allegory for the transitory state of adolescence. Equally, it also speaks of the precarious nature of social visibility. It is as if, despite Walker's own monumental efforts, this final act of washing away knowingly functions as a sobering reminder of the 'real' world that exists beyond the sanctity of the gallery walls. □

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[1] This is a play on the essay title *Negro Youth Speaks* by distinguished writer and philosopher Alain Locke. This essay was originally published in his influential anthology the *New Negro* published 1925, which identified and championed the emergence of a notable period in African American artistic practice in the early twentieth century, known as the Harlem Renaissance.

[2] For an in-depth analysis of this work see Eddie Chambers, *It's a Bit Much*, exhibition brochure for *Louder Than Words*, Unit 2 Gallery, London Metropolitan University, 18 November – 16 December 2006.

[3] Karen Roswell, *Barbara Walker: As Seen*, exhibition catalogue, Tiwani Contemporary, London, 2013-14.

[4] Menelik Shabazz is a British filmmaker who has for over thirty years produced some of the most important documentaries, which explore the lives and identity of Black people in Britain. His films include: *Blood Ah Go Run*, 1981, *Burning an Illusion*, 1982, *The Story of Lovers Rock*, 2012 and *Looking for Love*, 2015.

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