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Deep Wisdom and



Collective Fortitude

A Conversation with

**Sonya
Clark**

No Passing, 2017. Fine-toothed
plastic combs and thread, 48 x 48
x 1 in.

TAYLOR DABNEY



Left (L to R): *Unraveling*, 2015–ongoing, cotton Confederate battle flag, 70 x 36 x 7 in.; and *Unraveled*, 2015, unraveled cotton Confederate battle flag, 14 x 30 x 7 in. Below: Detail of interactive performance.

Amanda Dalla Villa Adams: You've performed *Unraveling* (2015–ongoing) six times now: at the Mixed Greens Gallery in New York; twice at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; at the Speed Museum of Art in Louisville, Kentucky; and at the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts. How have the different performances changed from 2015 to 2017?

Sonya Clark: It's challenging to keep one's equilibrium in this country, especially now. That's reflected in the conversations I have with *Unraveling* participants. When I first performed *Unraveling*, we had a president who tried to bring our very troubled nation together. Yet, even with Obama, the world witnessed blacks getting killed in the streets. This news was not new but rather age-old oppression recorded and distributed with recent technology. Brutalization of black people is a sickness that permeates this nation. I was an art student in 1991 when the video of Rodney King being bludgeoned by police hit the news. Lynching postcards were common not so long ago. The 2015 performance of *Unraveling* happened a week before Dylann Roof joined the legacy of white terrorism by committing mass murder in Charleston. My performance was regarded as "timely." I long for a time when it won't be.

So, what has changed since that first performance? With a mentally unstable president who incites violence, xenophobia, sexism, and racism, there is a heightened urgency to attend to this nation's maladies. I'm working side-by-side with people when we unravel. It's a confessional stance, like that James Baldwin quotation about art being a kind of confession. Art forces us to tell the whole story and "vomit up the anguish." I hear about folks struggling to talk with Trump-supporting relatives and family members who were or are active in the KKK. I hear about struggles of just being in America as a person of

TAYLOR DABNEY

BY AMANDA DALLA VILLA ADAMS

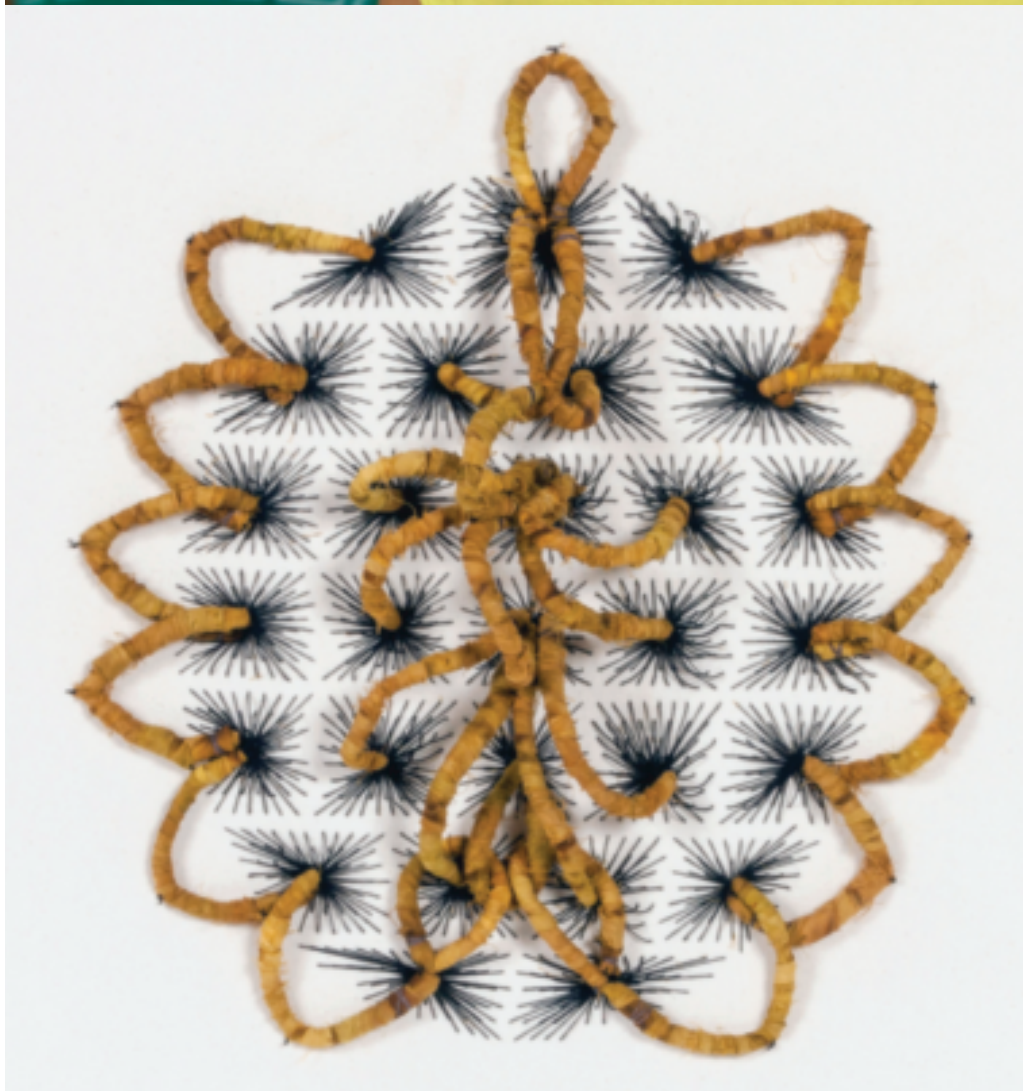
Sonya Clark uses everyday materials to address "identity politics, collective fortitude, and social justice." Returning repeatedly to the same basic materials, including copper pennies, hair, combs, and sugar, she brings value to quotidian objects through her investigations while asking viewers to consider the embedded histories surrounding an object and its reception. Her most recent work, *Unraveling*, is an art object and performance that she began conducting with the help of the public in 2015. In the performance, Clark invites participants to help her unravel a Confederate flag. While some have regarded *Unraveling* as timely, Clark believes that with this work, as throughout her career, she continues an ongoing political struggle to, as she describes it, assert an "identity outside the established hegemony."

Right: *Hair Craft Project: Jamilah Williams, 2014.* Archival digital print, 28 x 28 in. Below: *Hair Craft Project: Kamala Bhagat, 2014.* Canvas and thread, 28 x 28 in.

color. People call me brave. But we are doing this together, so aren't "we" brave? Does unraveling this contentious piece of cloth, reawakened with the rise of the KKK and erection of Confederate statues, require bravery? If this is so, many standing by my side know this is not a new bravery. Freedom is, as Angela Davis said, a constant struggle.

ADVA: *In 2014, you were awarded the 1858 Prize for Contemporary Southern Art, and your work was recently included in the exhibition "Southern Accent," organized by the Nasher Museum of Art. How do you feel about being included under the category of "Southern," and what does "Southern" mean to you?*

SC: "Southern Accent" was inspirational in its scope and nuance. I was honored to be included. As for the "Southern" nomenclature, I've called Richmond home longer than anywhere else I've lived as an adult, but most folks agree that it takes more than a dozen years to gain true status as a Southerner. As an African American woman, I have a vantage point. I connect with the impact of slavery in the South and beyond. Richmond's story, as the second largest slave port and a city in the American colonies, is an American story. In fact, it's a global story. I was born in Washington, DC, and my folks are from the Caribbean. So, in a sense, my family is from the deep, deep south. A friend whose people have been in the American South for many generations said to me, "Your folks just got off the boat sooner." There's the connection—African individuals forcibly migrated to the Western hemisphere for the economic gain of Europeans. Of course, there are cultural distinctions, but there's still something shared. When I first started working with Confederate battle flags, some people took umbrage at my being a first-generation American. What could I possibly know about the South or America? That kind of nativism attempts to strip away my Americanness, erase my voice, and discredit my agency. Sound familiar? The same tactics were used on Obama.



TOP: NAOKO WOSUGI, COURTESY THE ARTIST / BOTTOM: TAYLOR DABNEY, COURTESY THE ARTIST



Beaded Prayers Project, 1998–ongoing. Beads, cloth, and written messages, dimensions variable.

Truth be told, I moved to the South because of the vibrant reputation of the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. Much of my work addresses identity politics, collective fortitude, and social justice. The presence of Confederate flags in Richmond is historically tied to “that mean old white backlash.” Cue Nina Simone. As slavery was abolished, concessions were made to support white supremacy and white privilege. Carol Anderson’s brilliant book, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (2016), and Ava DuVernay’s film *13th* attest to this history. This country has not gotten over conceding. Hate groups are all over this country and beyond. I was in Rome this summer doing research on ancient slavery, connections between Lincoln and Garibaldi, and contemporary uses of the Confederate battle flag in Italy. We have exported an ugly part of Americanness, and this global problem continues.

ADVA: *In your work, which began in the 1990s, you see a continuation that stretches into the present. I, instead, read your trajectory as a shift from an interest in African art to an interest in current American politics.*

SC: Being an African American woman artist is definitely a political act. I studied African cultures and Caribbean cultures to root myself, to tap into the cultural complexity and fortitude of people in the African diaspora, and to unpack the legacy of subjugation at the heart of American politics. The art world itself continues to be outrageously homogenous in its maleness and Eurocentrism. It also operates on a system of dominance and subjugation. Asserting any identity outside the established hegemony is a political act and always has been. Museums, biennials,

and the art market in general remain woefully behind the curve. I am grateful to the women artists, artists of color, and all the folks who have continued to push the door open and who champion the mission. I try to do the same. For instance, in *Hair Craft Project* (2014), I highlight an art form that crossed the ocean in the hands, hearts, and minds of women of African descent. I point to the craft and the supreme talent of these women who then worked their magic on my physical body.

ADVA: *With works like Hair Craft Project (2014), Beaded Prayers Project (1998–ongoing), and Unraveling (2015–ongoing), why is it important to include the names of your participants?*

SC: It’s an act of agency, bearing witness, and disruption of the notion of the singular artist. I used my identity and reputation as an artist in *Hair Craft Project* to reframe the work of 12 Richmond-based, black hairstylists as an art practice that connects hair to textiles. I wanted to disrupt tiresome art hierarchies by shining light on what is so often devalued—craft, women’s work, work by people of color, textiles, and hairstyling. Naming these amazingly talented women, compensating them for their time, paying them when the project was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston—all of that is about agency. Our work and all of our names are included in the museum records.

Beaded Prayers Project has had about 5,000 contributions from around the world. I keep a record of all the contributors. Their names are included each time *Beaded Prayers Project* is exhibited. As more people participate, more names are added. Previous participants try to find the package they made. Folks look through the names to see if they know anyone. It is a strategy



Above: *Afro*, 1996. Curlers, thread, cloth, and ceramic, 16 x 16 x 16 in. Below: *Twenty-One*, 1998. Cloth and thread, 10 x 10 x 10 in. From the “Wig” series.



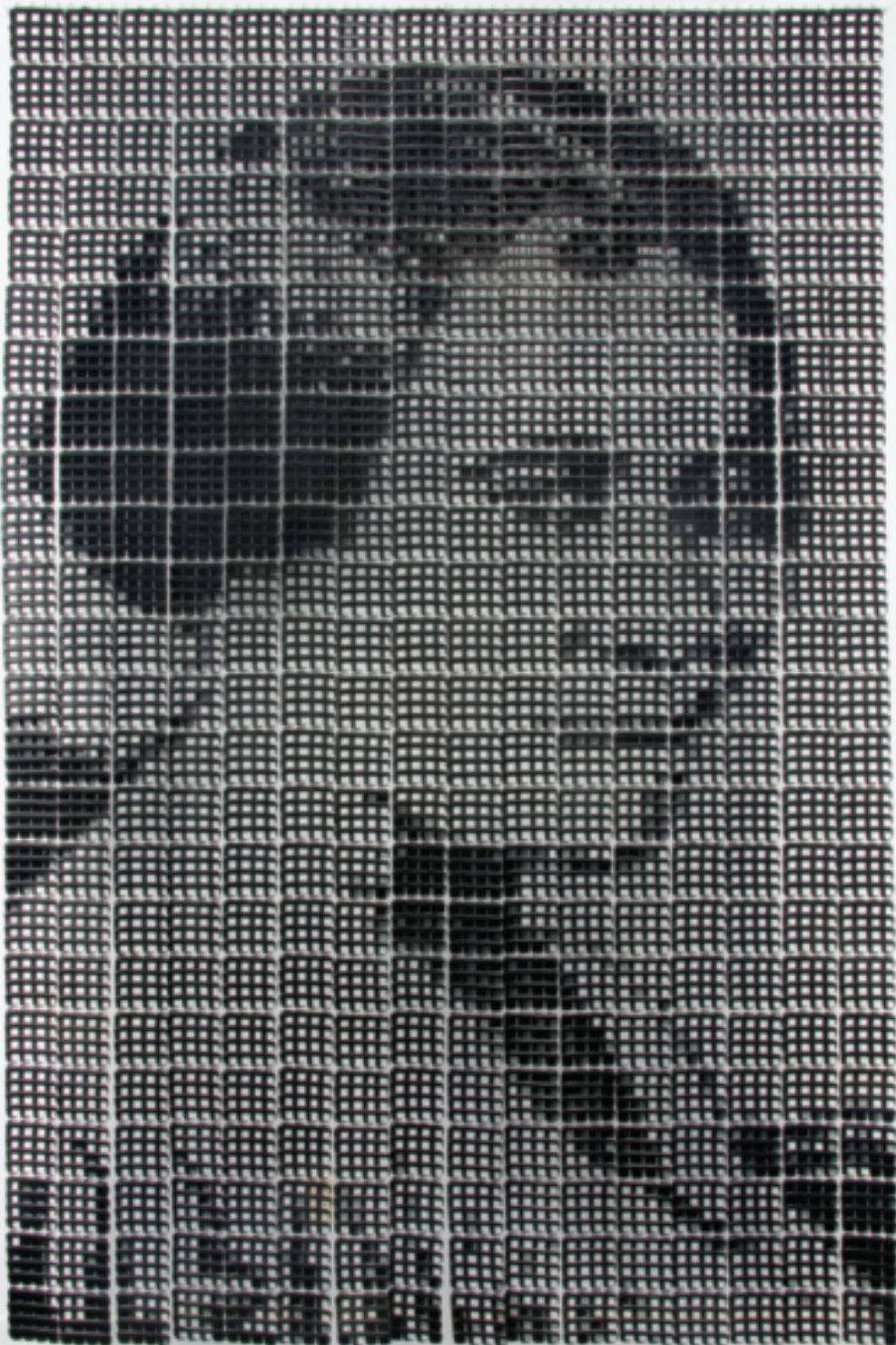
TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST / BOTTOM: TOM MCINVILLE

that Maya Lin used in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982). There's something satisfying about finding yourself or someone you know in the midst of a community. As for *Unraveling*, we are creating a kind of palimpsest through the action of unraveling. Participants give their names to be recorded along with the particular Confederate battle flag they have helped to unravel. Only a handful of the 150 participants to date chose to remain anonymous. Some people will pull a thread and ask to keep it. They want a relic to say, “I did this thing, I was there, I was witness to the action, I was part of the action.”

ADVA: *Can you explain your interest in hair, the head, and combs? Earlier in your career, you made hats and head coverings, and then you moved to combs and hair itself as a material.*

SC: It does seem as if I excavated from head covering to scalp, but really it happened simultaneously. Those early headdresses were influenced by Yoruba concepts of the inner head as the site of the soul. They were both altars and homages to ancestry. One could say hairdressing is similar. I made my first headdress and my first hair piece while studying with Nick Cave, Anne Wilson, and Joan Livingstone. Nick was teaching me to print on cloth and making his first *Soundsuits*, Anne was stitching with hair and teaching me to weave, and Joan was teaching me to build dimensional structures with fiber materials, as was her practice. My first hair piece was about British colonialism. There was a teacup, teapot, and straightened and natural hair.

Hair is a way of understanding individuality and racial constructions. It separates us and also brings us together. It's a repository for our genetic ancestry. Pluck a hair from my head and one from a European-American's head; our DNA would be essentially the same. But if we grow very different textures of hair, those same strands also racially divide us. Hairstyling addresses issues of normativity and beauty standards. The combs came into my work later. To order fibers, you need a comb. On the loom, that could be a beater or a reed. On our bodies, it's a comb. The ubiquitous fine-toothed black comb is a hygienic tool intended for straight-haired people. There are ancient fine-toothed combs in cultures with straight-haired people because those people are susceptible to lice and nits. People who grow hair like mine are not. That's just one example of how race gets tied to a fine-toothed comb. I used these combs in *Madam C. J. Walker* (2008). An African American woman, Walker was born in 1867 and died 52 years later. She started in the cotton fields of the South and became one of the first self-made female millionaires in this nation of any race. Hers was a beauty and hair care business for African Americans. She died before women could vote and well before blacks could vote, yet she possessed economic power. In a capitalist country that counts. She was also political and worked on anti-lynching campaigns. The activism happening in black churches was also happening in black salons. She also popularized hair-straightening techniques because of the hegemony of European-American aesthetics. The combs used to make the piece are stamped with the word “unbreakable” in the American factory that produces them. Yet to make her portrait the teeth are broken.



Madam C. J. Walker large, 2008. Fine-toothed plastic combs, 121 x 96 x 8 in.

ADVA: *Your work also involves things that are worn or used. How do you use function?*

SC: I refer to function, but most of the objects I make aren't intended for use. Functional objects speak to craft and design language across multiple generations. Consider a comb or a spool; the conversation with the human body is ancient. What engages me is that these simple objects, often of humble materials, hold complex stories. I leach them out, bring them forward, and use collective knowledge about the materiality of objects to divine meaning. Our bodies know cloth. It touches us every day. We discern the precise temperature of coffee conducted through a ceramic mug on our lips. Our hands know sanded wood and splinters. Our ears perceive the difference between a shattered window and the clink of a glass for a toast. That is why craft is such a powerful language. Makers know in an even deeper way. A former student told me his father said, "First we'll fly a kite, then we'll make one so we can be the kite." Ways of knowing through making, this is what Richard Sennett meant when he wrote, "Making is thinking." The material and the crafted object appeal to our embodied knowledge.

ADVA: *What is your relationship to the discipline of craft?*

SC: My grandmother was a tailor. My grandfather and uncle were furniture makers. Their kind of intelligence is one that I hold dear. It's also tethered to a legacy of forced migration. People of African descent weren't valued as human beings, yet when they had the deep wisdom we call craft, they were literally more valuable on the auction block—a simultaneous dehumanization and increased valuation. The technology of the day was the ability to make baskets, weave, or do ironwork. When people try to get me to relinquish using craft language around my work, it's like asking me to deny my own grandmother or grandfather. It's not going to happen. I eschew those antiquated notions of mind/body split. I push against how craftwork gets marginalized, rebranded, and co-opted. I'm grateful for the strides that queer theory and feminist theory have made in challenging the system. When it comes down to it, I am the artist I am because of my grandmother—an acknowledgment of a histori-



cal legacy — craft people I learned from throughout the globe, and some stellar teachers at some blue chip educational institutions. All of it, yes, but first and foremost my grandmother, Chummy.

ADVA: *What are you reading, and what are you most influenced by right now?*

SC: Right now, on my nightstand are *The Fire This Time* edited by Jesmyn Ward, Carol Anderson’s *White Rage*, and Tim Wise’s *White Like Me*. I travel light; I like the physicality but not the weight of books, so I usually bring two or three thin books with me. I like to reread and am fond of traveling with *James Baldwin: The Last Interview, Burn This Book* edited by Toni Morrison, bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress*, Angela Davis’s *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, or Rebecca Solnit’s *Hope in the Dark*.

I’m not the kind of artist who is directly influenced by any specific artist, though I like to think there is a shared dialogue between my work and the work of artists who are using similar references, strategies, and materials. I had the opportunity to meet Nari Ward recently — we are both Jamaican, we both believe in a craft aesthetic. It was like meeting a long-lost brother. I also had the opportunity to connect with composer Jason Moran, and he re-mastered an audio recording of Regina Carter playing “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” on a violin played with a bow that I re-haired with a dreadlock made from my hair. I’m looking for connectivity and strategies everywhere. There’s a poem by poet laureate Rita Dove, “Found Sonnet: The Wig.” It caught my eye in the *New Yorker* because she uses words from wigs and hair products and repurposes them into a formal rhyme scheme. Her strategy parallels my own with quotidian objects. I was so taken by the poem that I translated it into a hair font I created with the help of graphic designer, Bo Peng. Rita, in turn named the hair font, *Twist*. I find a generative quality in these kinships, conversations, and connections.

Amanda Dalla Villa Adams is a visual arts writer based in Richmond and a PhD candidate in Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University.



Top and above: *Hairbow for Sounding the Ancestors*, 2013. Found violin bow and human hair, 27 x 1 x .5 in.; performance by Regina Carter. Below: *Engagement Rings*, 2016. White and brown sugar crystals set in gold rings, approx. 1 x 1 x .25 in. each.

