

COMB

comb series | sonya clark



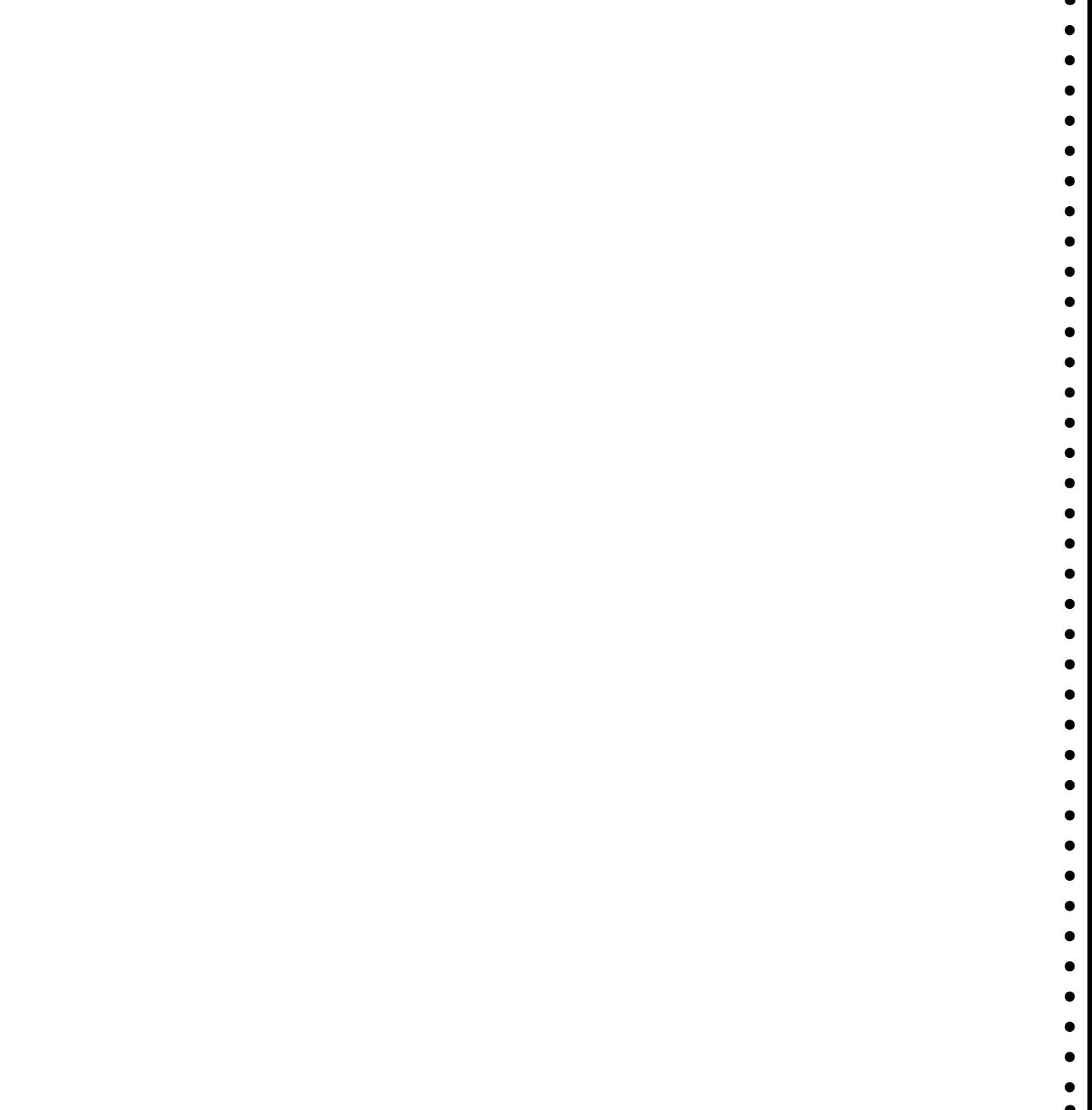
GOOD HAIR

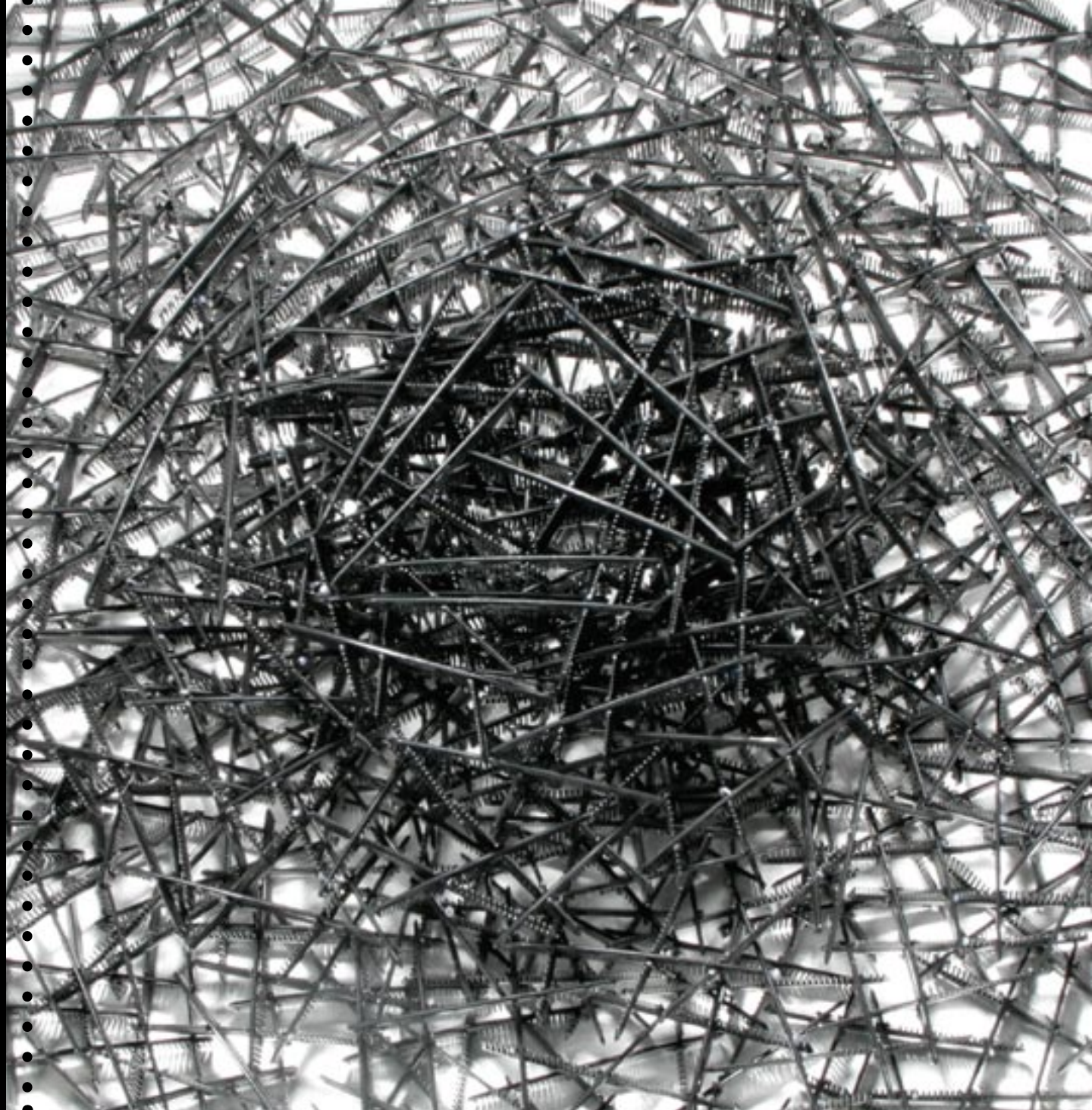


BAD HAIR

**The Comb Series** uses a strategy informed by a material culture perspective. It is concerned with the meaning in the materials. The black plastic combs evoke a **legacy of hair culture, hair and race politics, and antiquated notions of good hair and bad hair.** What type of hair would be able to pass easily through these fine-toothed combs? What does it mean that the combs themselves are arranged into tangles like felted dreadlocks, neat curls, and wavy strands? Combs imply order in as much as they are tools that organize the fibers we grow. They suggest thorough investigation as in "to go through something with a fine-toothed comb." When a comb has broken or missing teeth there is evidence of struggle. The missing teeth provide a new rhythm, the music of a new order.

*Sonya Clark*





COMB DRAWING  
2005 – pencil on paper, 28" x 22"

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TWIST  
2005 – combs, 8" x 15" x 15"

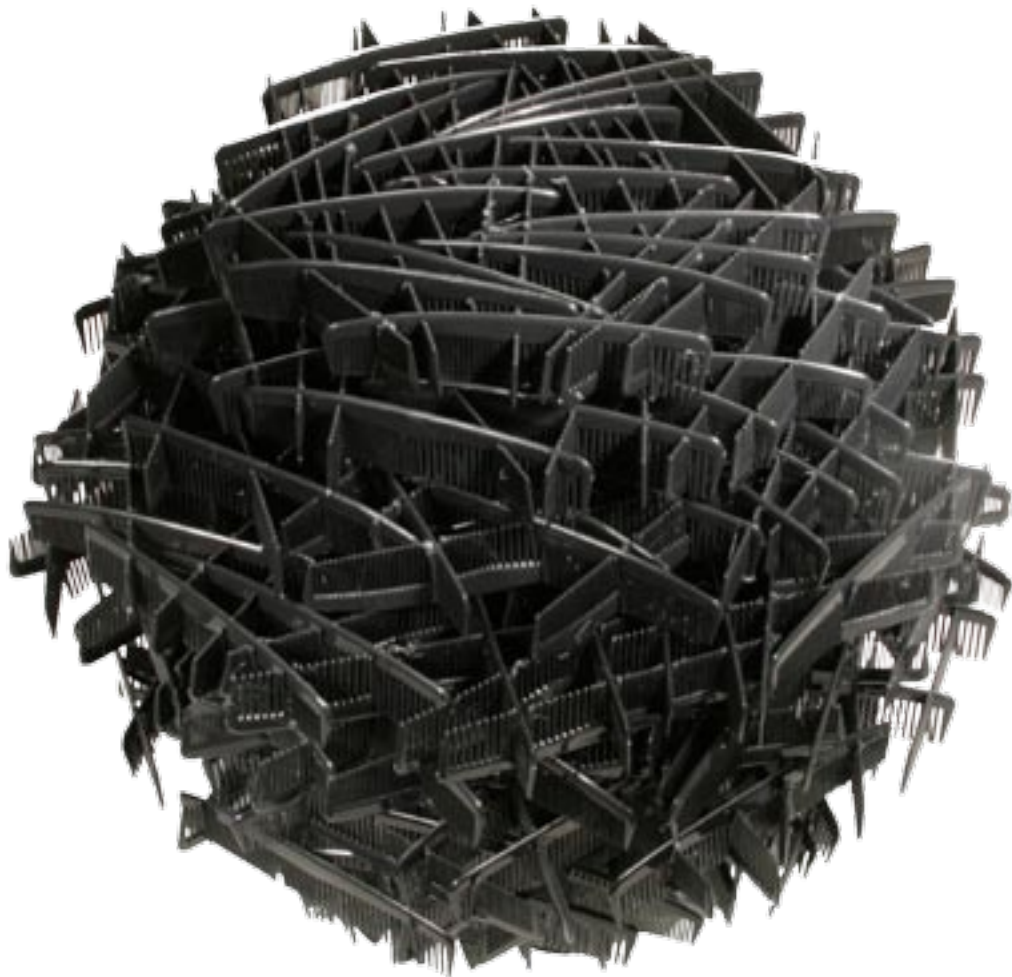
SPIRAL BRUSH  
2005 – combs, 6" x 15" x 15"





WAVY STRAND  
*2005 – combs, 5" x 10" x 20"*

COMB BALL  
2005 – combs, 15" x 15" x 15"





COMPOSITION #1

2005 – combs on board, 20" x 20"

COMPOSITION #2

2005 – combs on board, 20" x 20"

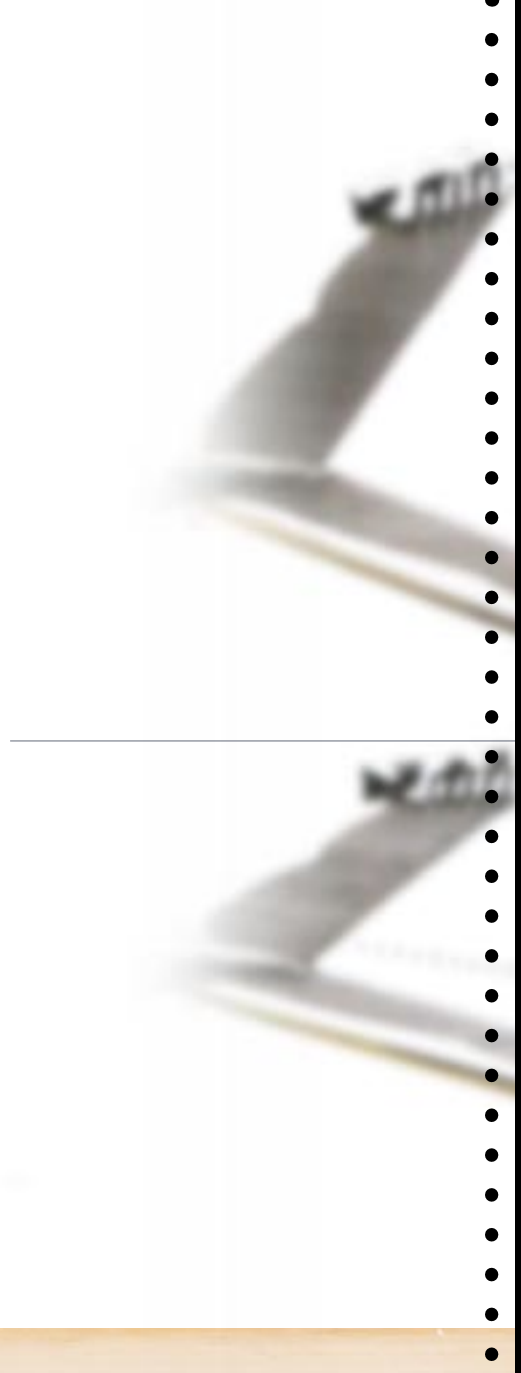
COMPOSITION #3

2005 – combs on board, 20" x 20"

COMPOSITION #4

2005 – combs on board, 20" x 20"







CURLS

2005 – combs and clips, 12' x 4' x 4'



TANGLE CURLED  
2005 - combs, 8' x 8' x 1"



WAVES  
2005 – combs, 35" x 45" x .5"  
as pictured



STACKED  
2005 – combs, 1' x 2' x 2'



UNDULATE  
2005 – combs, 30" x 40" x 1"



PILE  
2005 – combs, 5' x 5' x 3"  
DETAIL AT LEFT







PARTED SERIES  
2005 – photograph, 24" x 24" each



7 LAYER TANGLE  
2005 – combs, 10" x 30" x 30"



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PHOTOGRAPHY: TOM MCINVILLE, STUDIO M  
DESIGN: DISTILLERY DESIGN STUDIO

Hair, that tuft of bodily fiber, comes layered with all kinds of social and cultural narratives. The meanings and preconceptions shift depending on one's racial identification, age, class, and geography. What is seen as beautiful in the eyes of one individual is considered ferociously offensive to another. Such extreme perspectives are especially prevalent when considering the innumerable variations that have come to typify the place of hair in black experience. In her most recent body of work, entitled, *Comb Series*, Sonya Clark is evoking the legacy of Black hair in America by using the comb, an icon of assimilation, to symbolize "blackness" and the contribution of Black people to the enrichment of American culture. bell hooks consciously describes this notion of enrichment:

**"Before we reach the appropriate age we wear braids, plaits that are symbols of our innocence, our youth, our childhood. Then, we are comforted by the parting hands**

**that comb and braid, comforted by the intimacy and bliss. There is a deeper intimacy in the kitchen on Saturdays when hair is pressed, when fish is fried, when sodas are passed around, when soul music drifts over the talk.** <sup>2</sup>

That sense of intimacy is found in the fine tuned work of Sonya Clark.

Clark has made her career as a textile artist, and is Chair of the Craft / Materials Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. She is no stranger to the topic of hair and matters relating the head. In the past Clark has created bead - embroidered hats, headdresses based on wig

making, and artwork that employs the fibrous quality of actual human hair. With the Comb Series, Clark is expanding the notion of "craft," as her practice has been described, by exploring the hinterlands of abstraction. Black artists have often used the comb as a surrogate for

## COMBING THROUGH

*Confidence comes with the creative ability to make one's culture "abstract." It is a gift that can be seen in the outer appearance if the work. In other words, it is an aura.*

– Manthia Diawara <sup>1</sup>

the political struggles and solidarity of Black existence in America. Kori Newkirk's massive installation of six-foot tall afro-picks, entitled *Legacy* (1999), is arranged in an impenetrable ring. Newkirk's ring of afro-picks is an imposing enclosure - demarcating a possession of that which it surrounds, and mounting an undeniable force against infiltration. The afro-pick, as Newkirk has depicted, is an overwhelming emblem of the particular set of inclusions and exclusions that characterize Black pride and unity. In a less austere manner, Clark celebrates the versatility and improvisation of Black American style by exploring the metaphorical relationship between hair and the comb that grooms it.

*Wavy Strand* (2005), is an assemblage of vertically placed combs, set up sequentially like dominos, to mimic the undulated meandering of a wavy line. *Seven Layer Tangle* (2005) is comprised of seven geometric layers of tangled combs that culminate into the shape of a step pyramid. Through the titles, Clark offers the audience

*In a sense, combs become allegorical objects. They take on a fetishized quality that conjures the spiritual presence of black ancestral lineage.*

very formal descriptions of the work, yet, for a particular audience, her titles signify the cultural associations that distinguish hair type. Using small, black, fine-toothed combs as her media, Clark constructs a cluster of architectural forms that spiral up from the base and plateau at the pinnacle. *Twist* (2005), named for its coil, is figuratively indicative of a hairstyle that is achieved

with the skillful use of a comb.

Similarly, *Wavy Strand* alludes to a hair texture that is considered compatible with the comb, and *Seven Layer Tangle* insinuates a power struggle between kinks and the comb, especially the kitchen against which the comb is no match. The kitchen,

according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., has double meaning:

**"The kitchen was the room... where Mama did hair and washed clothes, and where each of us bathed in a galvanized tub. But... the 'kitchen' I'm speaking of now is the very kinky bit of hair at the back of the head, where the neck meets the shirt collar. If there was ever a one part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen!"** <sup>3</sup>

In a sense, combs become allegorical objects. They take on a fetishized quality that conjures the spiritual presence of black ancestral lineage. The comb, and its many mutations, is a mark of subjugation and resistance. Kobena Mercer expresses this idea when he wrote, "as part of our modes of appearance in the everyday world, the ways we shape and style hair may be seen as both individual expressions of the self and as embodiments of society's norms, conventions, and expectations".<sup>4</sup> As a shaping and styling implement, the comb is an implicated accomplice. Having these characteristics, it offers the simplified polarities that encapsulate the position of the Black body in American society. The artist is narrating a multivocal story, much like her contemporaries who are working with hair and its referential materials. However, Clark is able to transform meaning so that her work becomes relevant within the dimensions of shape, motion, and sound. This sets her apart from the pack, and places her on a trajectory all her own.

#### REFERENCES/ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Diawara, Manthia. "Make It Funky." ArtForum. May 1998. pg. 120 - 126
- <sup>2</sup> hooks, bell. "Straightening Our Hair." Tenderheaded. Edited by Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson. New York, NY. Pocket Books, 2001. pg. 112.
- <sup>3</sup> Gates Jr., Henry Louis. "It All Comes Down to the Kitchen." Tenderheaded. Edited by Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson. New York, NY. Pocket Books, 2001. pg. 23-26.
- <sup>4</sup> Mercer, Kobena. "Black Hair / Style Politics." *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*. New Museum of Contemporary Art. MIT Press, 1998. pg 34.

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