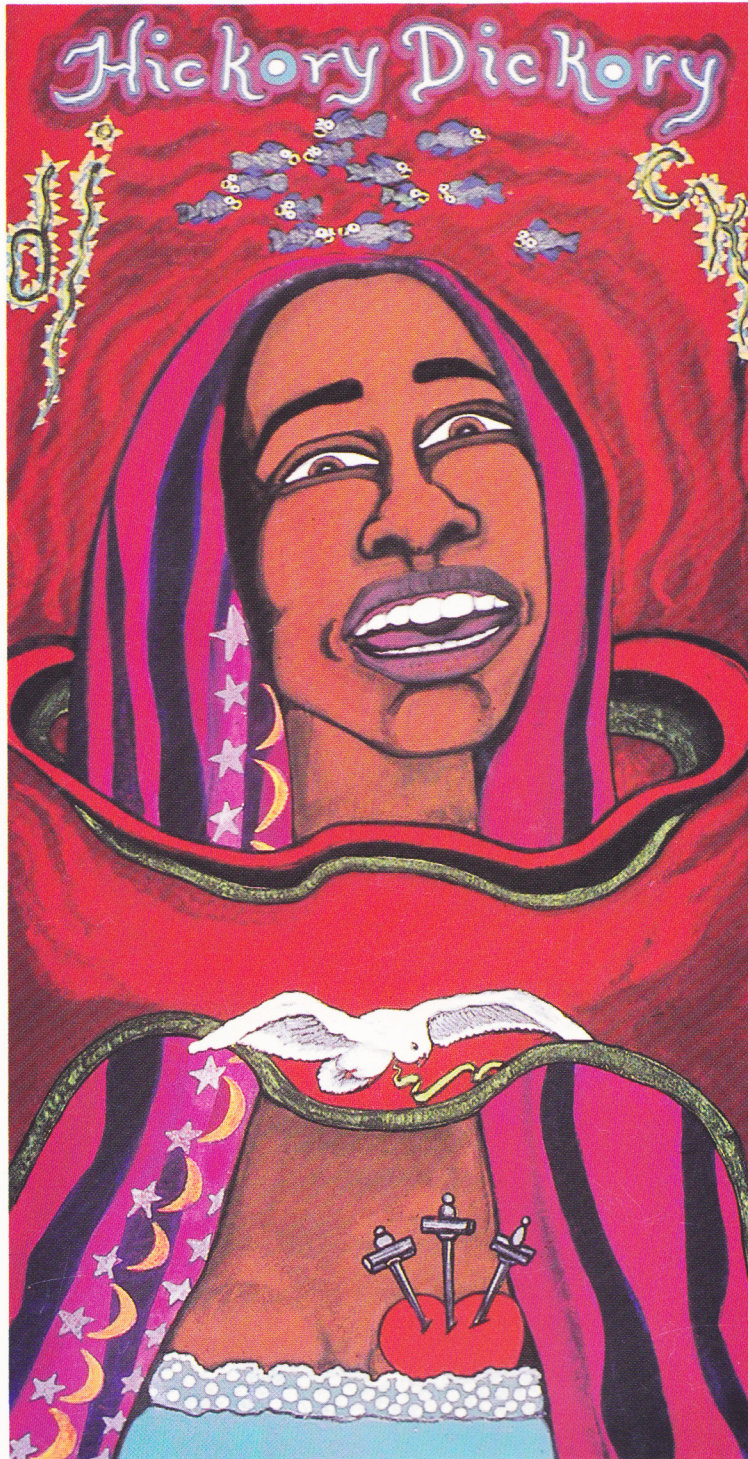


THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN ART



GRIEF RECYCLED

VOLUME 15 NUMBER 2 \$10.00

ART ABOUT HAIR

By Jacqueline Francis

Sonya Y. S. Clark's *Parted, Plaited, and Piled*. Solo exhibition, Leedy Voulkos Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri, March 6 - April 18, 1998.

Sonya Clark is among the many contemporary artists of color inspired by hair and the force of beauty culture. Her recent solo exhibition, *Parted, Plaited and Piled*, at the Leedy Voulkos Gallery featured the latest chapter in her meditations on black hair. Like Eve Sandler, Joyce Scott, David Hammons and other acclaimed artists, Clark has taken our imaginative coiffures as the evidence of a broad, cultural aesthetic grounded in spiritual respect for the head.

The majority of the pieces in this spring exhibition were made in early 1998; the exception is *Afro Puff*, completed in December 1997. It is a mounted form (positioned on a hat stand) that playfully resembles the 70s-era (and recently revived) 'do. The "puffs" are two, black donuts of furry fabric, plastic eyes filling their middles; symmetrically positioned on either side of the head, the puffs are sewn on a red fabric skull-cap, which, itself is adorned with striped, yellow beads. With its varied surfaces, textures, and patterns, *Afro Puff* is an assemblage that resists categorization: it is hat, hair, and monument.

After *Afro Puff*, Clark organized seven more mounted sculptures into a series that follows a mathematical progression. Like *Afro Puff*, these are intimate and small-scale (their heights ranged from eight to fourteen inches). Yet, in Clark's own words, the series is "more minimal" than the work that preceded it. Each of the series' pieces is made with brown fabric and black thread — either cotton or crochet — to suggest black skin tones and strands of hair, respectively. Clark stiffened the cloth into a scalp-like form and manipulated the thread into silky twists and branching braids. Titles reflect the number of tresses (and in some cases, the parted sections) each coiffure boasts. Hence, one curving coil defines *Unum*; two knots make up *Semi*; three braided twists in *Triad*; four main branches (and numerous, tiny limbs) in *Dryad*; five reaching

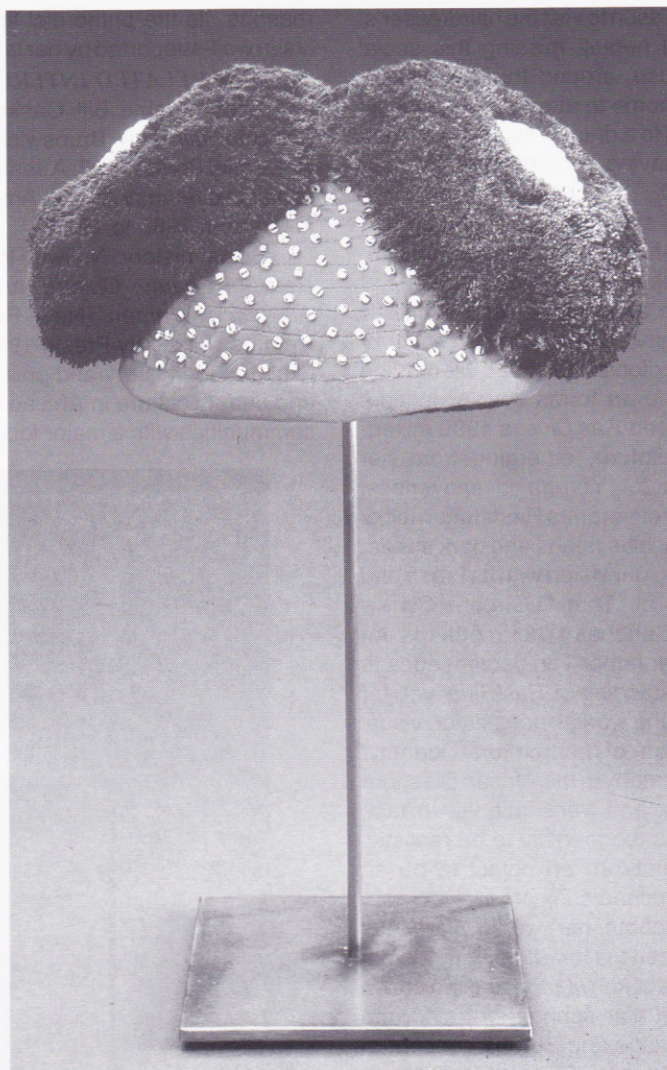
coils in *Fingers*; eight droopy twists in *Spider*; and coils again (thirteen) in *Onigi*.

Clark's intention was not to make wigs, but instead, to pay homage to the gendered head. While contemporary men (like the L.A. rapper Coolio) and women sport these 'dos, Clark continues to be fascinated with hairstyles as a manner of female assertiveness. Her work, she told me in an interview, is "about woman power," and she readily drew connections between women and life's energies, from the miracle of birth to magnificent hairstyles.

To no small extent, treasured childhood memories have informed Clark's art. In a recent written statement, she explained:

The stories I was told and lessons I learned as I sat between the knees of a female relative as a child, and the sense of aesthetics expressed in the chair at the black beauty salon have molded my identity. Coming to know oneself and others through the rituals of hair-dressing and hairstyling is a unique way of knowing.

Transition and transformation in her life further prompted Clark's thinking. In 1986, she cut her shoulder-length, processed hair and began wearing a short, natural style. Practical and personally satisfying, her decision, nonetheless, created a void in her life: no longer



SONYA Y. S. CLARK, *Afro Puff*

1997, Velvet, glass beads, fringe, plastic, 5" x 8" x 8"

having a reason to visit the hairdresser's, she found herself missing this social sphere. Also, around the same time, Clark left home to attend college which put an end to a ritual of fixing her sister's hair and having her sibling do her hair for her.

Clark subsequently took up the study of African headdresses, assiduously researching Yoruba traditions of regal caps and crowns, and syncretic designs inspired by the African encounter with colonial Europe. Meditating about these art forms over a decade, she produced *Ras Blue*, a 1996 mixed-media sculpture, emerging from her admiration for Yoruba inventiveness. The piece reinterprets Rastafarian locks in textured, blue beads and dark suede, challenging our vision with its brash and original form. That D.C.-born Clark's roots are Caribbean (her mother is Jamaican, her father Trinidadian) adds to our understanding of *Ras Blue*; yet, for this artist, the work is not a strict, visual transcription of her cultural identity, which, like many in the African Diaspora is complex and transnational. In fact, *Ras Blue* is too magical to be realistic, too insistently an art object to be an over-determined subject.

Throughout her work, Clark has memorialized the head. For her, it is not just the site of knowledge and the crown from which hair springs, but also, the source of *ashe*, the Yoruba concept of divine life force. She created headdresses to honor, adorn, and protect the head: caps of rich fabric, embroidered with sequins and beads, and studded with coins. Lustrous and textured, these headdresses mimic the look of theatrical hairstyles. They are also invested with symbolism as well. Notably, the dominant material of *Freed Seed* (1996) are its pennies: made of copper, a plentiful African metal, plundered and traded; stamped with the profile of Lincoln, the reluctant Emancipator of enslaved sons and daughters of Africa.

Sonya Clark has taken her cues both from both everyday and historical practices of beautifying the body. As a result, her work demonstrates how artificial boundaries separating realms of visual culture — for example, craft as opposed to “fine arts”— can be tested and transcended. Hairdressing, Clark

reasons, “is the primordial fiber art,” a claim well-supported by her latest effort.

OF RELATED INTEREST:

Photography: Bill Gaskins, *Good and Bad Hair* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press) 1997. A series of shots of hair in everyday African American life taken from 1986 to 1994.

Social history: Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press) 1996. Rooks explores the history and politics of hair and beauty culture in African American communities with a major focus on little

known aspects of the life and influence of Madame C.J. Walker.

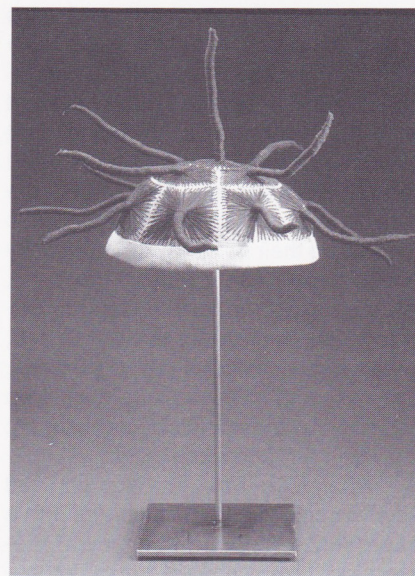
16 mm, black and white documentary: Lydia Douglas, “Nappy,” 28 minutes, 1997. The story of 14 black women and girls who decided to stop straightening their hair and “go natural.” VHS copies available from the filmmaker: Peazey Head Productions, 238 Park Avenue, #2; Takoma Park, MD 20912; (301) 891-3490. ■

— Jacqueline Francis is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at Emory University and the Wyeth Fellow in American Art at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Washington, D.C.



SONYA Y. S. CLARK
Unum

1998, cloth and crochet thread
8" x 8" x 8"



SONYA Y. S. CLARK
Onigi 13 Sticks

1997, cloth, cotton thread
10" x 10" x 10"



SONYA Y. S. CLARK
Onigi (detail)