

# The Currency of Craft

by Lowery Stokes Sims



Sonya Clark's recent work in hair and combs challenges our expectations of contemporary fiber art with witty insight and improvisational materiality.



Since 2000, Sonya Clark has created startling new art featuring hair and combs. This work is a logical extension of her much-acclaimed beaded headdress assemblages and braided wig series of the late 1990s, which evoked African accoutrements while advancing those basic forms to new arenas of expression.

For Clark, the headdresses and wigs literally “crown” the head as the seat of personal power and a site of communication where, according to Clark, “cultural influences are absorbed, siphoned and retained.” She describes her new hairpieces as expressions of “hair culture . . . and race politics in the United States” enacted on the head. She also notes that the combs signify their “functionality . . . as tools to order our appearance,” and relate to “cultural notions of hygiene, civilized

*ABOVE: Afro Abe II (with detail, LEFT), 2008; five-dollar bill, thread; embroidered; 3" x 6". Series of forty-four. All photos by Taylor Dabney, unless otherwise noted.*



behavior, and aesthetics." Clark alerts us to the complexities of tonsorial politics—in the global black world as well as the United States—where straightened hair, "natural" hair, Afros, and dreads in different eras have expressed how blacks situate themselves in society and navigate strategies of assimilation, entitlement, and enfranchisement.

While African art and Clark's Caribbean heritage are the main inspirations for her work, it is useful to discuss the assemblage and accumulation tendencies seen in the work of artists such as David Hammons, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and Betye Saar, who worked in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. These artists were attuned to the accumulated memories of objects, how they conveyed social and economic conditions (imposed and assumed), and served as conduits for acts of healing and personal testament. This artistic strategy reflected the intense dialogue about modes of culturally based expression that arose from the mood of black cultural empowerment at the time.

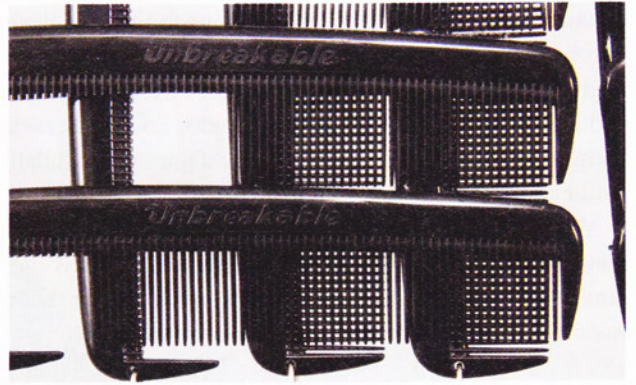
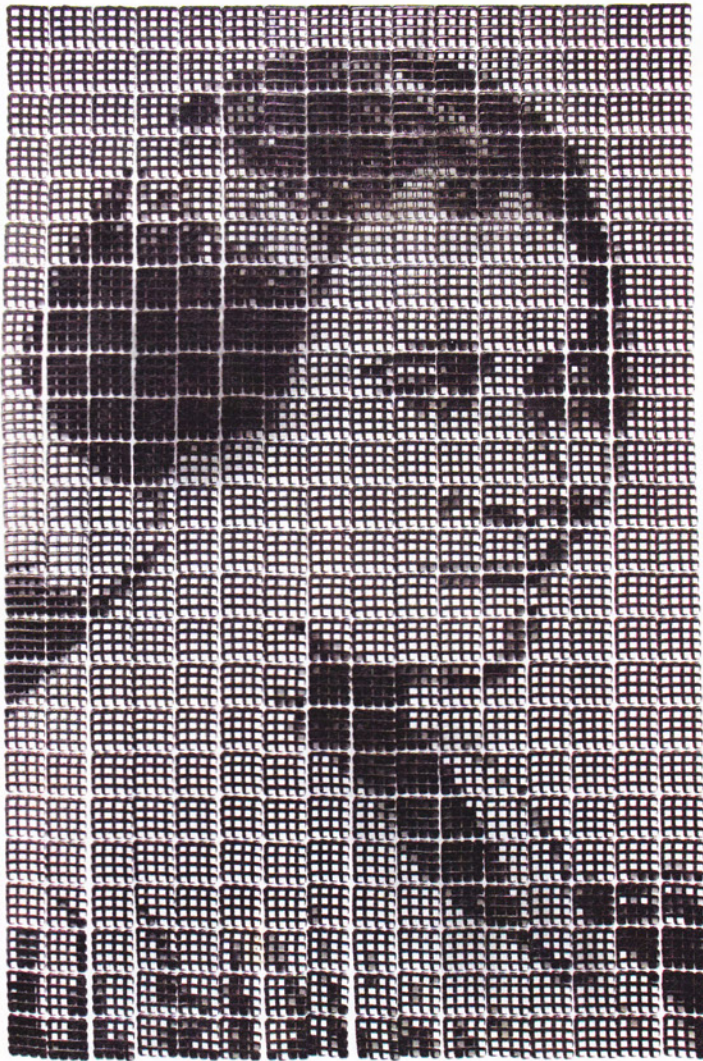
Clark affirms her affinity for this aesthetic, which I would describe as *improvisational materiality*, when she notes that her "creative process starts with a question about the function or use of an object of material culture." She allows what is close at hand to lead her into the work rather than conform it to a preconceived notion. Pieces made from hair, such as *Pearl of Mother* (2006), which features a "pearl" fashioned from her mother's white hair situated in the palm of a hand created out of the artist's own black hair, share the talismanic power of David Hammons's work of the mid 1970s, in which greasy brown paper bags, gnawed barbecue bones, and shavings of black, kinky hair combine to celebrate aspects of black life and living. Clark's thirty-foot-long digital print *Long Hair* (2005) measures the improbable growth of a lock of dreaded hair over time and serves as "a reference to the measuring of one's lifetime and destiny in a spun thread as Lachesis of the Fates." We see intimations of this in Joe Lewis's 1984 performance, *Viva la revolución* for the *Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America* held at El Taller Latino Americano (The Latin American Workshop) in New York City, where he cut off his longtime growth of dreads. Lewis then fashioned his shorn locks into earrings in anticipation of Clark's hair necklace *Pearls of Wisdom* (2007). The versatility and sturdiness of dreaded hair invites a comparison to a felting process that gives such pieces their special aura.

The comb works can mimic the flow and density of hair, as seen in *Wavy Strand* (2005), and in *Tendrils*, *Split Ends*, and *Comb Curls* (all 2007). They address the idea that dreaded hair is un-comb-able, and therefore might be said to symbolically



RIGHT, TOP: *Pearl of Mother*, 2006, hair of artist and hair of artist's mother, 4" x 4" x 1". RIGHT, BOTTOM: *Pearls of Wisdom* (displayed double-stranded), 2007, human hair, silver; 10" x 8" x 8".





disentangle Clark from what artist and writer Tosha Grantham described in the exhibition catalog *Sonya Clark: Tangles, Teeth and Touch* (Raleigh: North Carolina State University Gallery of Art & Design, 2006), as the “psychological implications of Black American hair culture as a site of struggle.” Clark notes that “combs are tools in as much as they order the fibers we grow.” This notion undoubtedly inspired her portraits in combs of *Madam CJ Walker*, the legendary black hair-care millionaire. Clark pixilated the original image of Walker in Photoshop and translated the light and dark values in the photograph by removing or retaining teeth in the combs. This textile-technology link is comparable to that of Jacquard looms and modern computers.

For Clark, the comb has a connection with the “creation of looms and textiles,” providing continuity between the new work and her seminal work in textiles. In the 2008 version of *Madam CJ Walker*, she uses the teeth of the combs as “warp and weft to visually weave her image.” The arrangement of the combs, wrapped and bound with colored and irides-

*LEFT: Madam CJ Walker (with detail RIGHT, TOP), 2008; plastic combs, jump rings, rivets; 132" x 96". RIGHT, BOTTOM: Sonya Clark installing a 2007 version of Madam CJ Walker.*

cent threads, in *Threadwrapped* and *Plain Weave* (both 2008), approximates the geometric interplay of warp and weft, while the textural effects of woven carpets are evoked literally and figuratively in *Pile* (2005) and *Velvet Carpet* (2008). These works remind us of Clark’s mathematical preoccupations, seen in the exploration of Fibonacci number sequencing in her *Wig Series* (1997–1998) and are also evident in the formations of *Honeycomb* (2008) and the fractal geometry in *Iterations* (2008). In the comb works, Clark disrupts the usual craft associations of weaving by using the combs as readymade surrogates for the strands of the warp and weft and subverts the utility of combs by literally de-toothing their function.

Clark’s involvement in handwork reflects trends in the art world that are currently investigating the relevance and merit of contemporary craft. Her participation in New York’s Museum of Arts and Design (MAD)’s 2008–2009 exhibition *Second*



Lives: Remixing the Ordinary (with a Walker portrait) placed her among other practitioners who construct works of art from readymade objects in multiples. The curatorial parameters of this exhibition required that the identity of the original components be preserved in the realization of the final artwork and that the objects be included in such a way as to enhance the viewer's experience of the readymade elements.

This engagement with found objects allows Clark to expand beyond the parameters of craft and, in the words of Grantham, to engage with "materiality instead of . . . function." Clark continues to exercise that versatility with her contribution to the traveling exhibition *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, guest-curated by art historian Henry John Drewal at UCLA's Fowler Museum in 2008. *Aqua Allure* (2005), with its "surface" of plastic combs, woven together in an MW pattern (referring to Madam CJ Walker's initials) and set against a background of holographic paper, is more an evocation than an object.

An early version of Clark's witty and pertinent *Afro Abe* series (2007–ongoing) of embroidered interventions on five-dollar bills was included in MAD's exhibition *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* (2007–2008), curated by MAD's Chief Curator David Revere McFadden. Clark then produced forty-four images in 2008 (*Afro Abe II*) to honor President Barack Obama's place in the ranks of American history. In *Afro Abe Progression* (2009), featured in the *ÜberPortrait* exhibition at the Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington (through October 18), Clark exponentially grows the embroidered Afro hairdo in seven interventions. It is impossible to ignore Clark's sly repositing of just who can lay claim to being the nation's "first black president"—Abraham Lincoln, William Jefferson Clinton, or Barack Obama?

Clearly, the head and hands are equal partners in Clark's creative enterprise, allowing ideations to achieve actuation in the physical world. In myriad critical and theoretical contexts, Clark continues to provide us with unprecedented opportunities to discern the breadth of her artistic achievement. ■

The artist's website is [www.sonyaclark.com](http://www.sonyaclark.com). Sonya Clark's work is included in the following exhibitions this fall: *Tasting Culture*, at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, South Carolina, through September 7 ([www.cofc.edu/avery](http://www.cofc.edu/avery)); *Dress Codes*, at the Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York, through October 4 ([www.katonahmuseum.org](http://www.katonahmuseum.org)); and *ÜberPortrait*, at the Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington, through October 18 ([www.bellevuearts.org](http://www.bellevuearts.org)). The next scheduled presentation of *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* will take place at The Mariner's Museum, Newport News, Virginia, January 29–August 16, 2010 ([www.mariner.org](http://www.mariner.org)).

RIGHT: *Afro Abe Progression*, 2009; five-dollar bills, thread; embroidered; 36" x 12" (framed). Photo: Abigail Volkmann.

