

# Essay on black history from a modern art pov

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



## **Betye Saar, Michael Ray Charles, Kerry James Marshal and Kara Walker**

### Art and History

The history of African-American people and slavery in the United States can be difficult to face and therefore it is often easy to ignore. The four artists Betye Saar, Michael Ray Charles, Kerry James Marshal and Kara Walker have each used their artistic talents and vision to remind people that Black History is still important, still impacts our lives today and still must be faced even when painful.

There are many differences in the way they present their art. Betye Saar uses mostly soft colors and a variety of small memorabilia and images to create some spiritual and some political pieces. She explains on her website that her art is a bridge between the past and into the future using “remnants of memories, fragments of relics and . . . components of technology” (Saar). Her “Midnight Madonnas” icon includes a religious referenced Madonna and Christ child paired with a modern mother and child in the composition. The “Midnight Madonnas” is also a collage which is lovely and comforting; not disturbing as the other artists’ creations.

Michael Ray Charles’ pieces are quite different from Saars’ work. His pieces have a punch that can make the viewer very uncomfortable. For example he uses old stereotypes of black people such as the Aunt Jemima image from a pancake mix box or black-face minstrels with sayings such as “Alternative Fears Alternative Tears.” His pieces look old fashioned but the colors are modern. The words on his work convey rebellion and sadness. Art21 (2001) explains,

“ Charles draws comparisons between Sambo, Mammy, and minstrel images of an earlier era and contemporary mass-media portrayals of black youths, celebrities, and athletes—images he sees as a constant in the American subconscious. “ Stereotypes have evolved,” he notes. “ I’m trying to deal with present and past stereotypes in the context of today’s society”” (Art in the 21st Cent.)

Kerry James Marshall creates huge newspaper comics. For his exhibit RHTHM MASTR, “ Marshall takes his cue from inner city environments where old newspapers are recycled as makeshift window curtains to hide the view into empty buildings” (Sultan). His pieces for the exhibit covered the whole sides of the cases. The look was like newspaper comics using a large comic book format. The words “ Boom” and Crash” have colors behind them like yellow and red with star shapes behind them for emphasis. The stories told in his art with works and images also address the urban culture.

Kara Walker is very different from the other three both due to the medium she uses and the way she presents the main themes of her work. Art21 describes her work this way: “ The artist is best known for exploring the raw intersection of race, gender, and sexuality through her iconic, silhouetted figures” (Art in 21st Cent.). Her images are very shocking and controversial. She is outspoken with her work in displaying the violence of rape and racism using large black cut outs most commonly known as being used as face silhouettes which became popular in the late 1700s. Art21 described her exhibit ‘ Darkytown Rebellion’ as having “ one foot in the historical realism of slavery and the other in the fantastical space of the romance novel” and “ Walker’s nightmarish fictions simultaneously seduce and implicate the

audience" (Art in 21st Cent.). Her images can be very disturbing.

Each of the four artists confront themes that can make people uncomfortable, that is because the history of slavery is clearly part of their art and still makes people uncomfortable. I think this kind of art is good because viewers stop, look and feel something. Once people stop to look at the art they have to think; their art is hard to ignore. The history before the Civil War is not discussed much and their art reminds us that we still have a lot to talk about and a lot of differences to resolve in our culture.

I don't think I could be so brave as to make such strong art as that of Walker or Charles. If I tried to approach the subject I would probably use charcoals which I would use in a range of darkness and shades to emphasize portions of the work I want people to view. If I chose to use colors I would use one color in each piece and again use different tones and shades to draw the eye of the viewer over the subject matter to the center of the subject matter. The problem I have is that I'm not sure what the subject matter would be, but I might draw images of the old Southern plantations juxtaposed with the urban landscape

I could not use the images that Kara Walker uses about gender and violence. I would feel more comfortable use an image like that of Betye Saar when she used a triplicate of an Aunt Jemima stereotype in her piece "Equality" which also includes the words "We wants today? We needs? Oh, I needs?" all answered with the one word "Equality."

Also Betye Saar's use of small objects in "Midnight Madonnas" would be something I would like to explore. If I did draw images of the old Southern plantations contrasted with the urban landscape, I could use trinkets of

stereotypes from historical types and from modern times to balance out my piece of artwork and give it texture.

## **Works Cited**

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