

Kara Walker

Cast aside were a variety of potential leads, including, but not limited to: the Redcoats and Rebels of the American Revolution; Crispus Attucks; Captain Paul Cuffee; the Black Loyalists; the Book of Negroes; the Royal African Company; an Afro-American colonial exploit in Sierra Leone; the presence of race thought in scientific inquiry, ethnography and ethnographic portraiture; the cranial work of Samuel George Morton; and the English blood coursing through my African-American veins thanks to James Thorpe, the grandson of Abraham Thorpe, who himself emigrated from Derbyshire to New York in 1829. James, a second-generation 'white' American, fathered a 'Negro' son in Reconstruction-era South Carolina and bequeathed him his Name, which, you may not realise, saved my eventual great-grandfather from ever being *entirely* Black, and to some extent allowed him to move up a station in life, despite the curse of the 'one drop' rule, which posited that the mere trace of African heritage denotes underclass.

I looked at a grand panorama of a whaling voyage and considered the Black Atlantic as it has been represented in art by Turner, Homer, Copley and sailors themselves in scrimshaw and song. I listened to '24 Negro Melodies' by composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, himself a black biracial Englishman connected to Sierra Leone by a lost Afro-American father, and whose sense of yearning for America shines in his famous works. I considered his music a reversal of the Triangle trade with Africa and the Americas. I wondered how to return the *gift* of having come to be – through the mechanics of finance, exploitation, murder, rape, death, ecological destruction, co-optation, coercion, love, seafaring feats, bravery, slavery, loss, injustice, excess, cruelty, tenacity, submission and progress – conceived here in the United States, to live in this time and place, with this opportunity, this ability. My work has always been a time machine catapulting me backwards across decades and centuries to arrive at some understanding of my 'place' in the contemporary moment.

It is my supposition that the Turbine Hall Commission functions as a one-person version of the nineteenth-century World's Exposition. The World's Fair – trade show, art exhibition, commodities market and zoological garden – was a public entertainment exploiting the wealth and bounty of rich nations often literally carried on the backs of its colonised subjects, who might also be on display alongside the coffee, cotton or tea they produced. As a one-woman World's Fair, I can shine a light on my ill-gotten cultural inheritance, and create a wonderful display, from across a great watery divide that binds me to and separates me from any single point of origin.

The Turbine Hall Commission is an opportunity to give a Gift from one cultural subject to the heart of an Empire that redirected the fates of the world. With this in mind, and the attendant bloodshed that conquest implies, I intend instead to create a space for reflection, *joy*, even, amid the miasma of conflicts, racial, economic and cultural, which still lodge themselves in our collective gullet thanks to the rise of white nationalism, xenophobia, fundamentalist violence, and poisonous populism which has everyone mouthing off, thought-lessly, at once.

The *Fons Americanus* is a working fountain loosely based on the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace. It is inspired by late Victorian neo-classical and beaux arts monuments, primitivism, and such romantic Continental icons as the Trevi Fountain and the Fountain of the Four Rivers at Piazza Navona in Rome. The *Fons Americanus*, encompassing four tiers, standing at approximately thirteen metres, features an allegory of the Black Atlantic, and really all global waters which disastrously connect Africa to America, Europe, and the hope (or threat) of economic prosperity. Drawing from and inverting the meanings and titles of famous (and not so famous) artworks and poetry from the colonial era to the present, my Fountain yokes together racist representation and violent expressions of power, issues which tend to become romanticised and often depicted in pastoral settings.

This is a piece about oceans and seas, traversed fatally. Water, literally connecting the wonder that is our persistence of mind, memory and dreams. Water, representing our capacity for survival against all odds, and our outsized human desires. Water, with devastating indifference to nation or tribe unifying the spectator with the spectacle, the past with our present and gently coercing a viewer into some kind of reflection, even if only the Narcissus kind.

Notes on the Figures

SHELL GROTTA

A tourism site for embattled Sierra Leone promises lush white sand beaches along the outer edges of Bunce Island, the colonial ruins of a former slave-trading fortress. Amid the salient features of the disaster site is a hole. 'Hole of the Brave', the narrator monotonously intones over the redundant strains of a New Age spa soundscape, where 'Captured

natives, who refused boarding, were tortured and dropped to extermination.’ He segues nonchalantly to remind the viewer that ‘Today Banana Island is Peaceful, with five low-key “chillout” beaches and restaurant. [sic.]’

The last resting place of the rebellious unbreakable African, a dry well into which uncooperative non-slaves were thrown away to die is the first image/encounter I’d like you to have. ‘Well Well... What have we here?’ And I ask, What *bravery*? What lies at the bottom is terror of the worst kind, the abyss, the bottomless pit, buried alive, dark, alone in a womb in the earth.

We are stillborn, yet this Amniotic fluid courses through us, still.

Q: What Waters?

The Well, overfloweth its banks, and changes course, away away from this island fort, toward a new world, taking with her gods and dreams and men and women.

We crossed the Atlantic in many ways. We Swam or we Sunk. The Voyage of the Sable Venus, submerged within her misshapen shell.

A: Caribbean Seas, Amazon tributary, Mississippi (colloquially known as ‘the Father of Waters’). We are the Tallahatchie River, the Bay of Fundy that catches the Gulf Stream and returns returns returns us to the Atlantic Gates of Empire.

THE FONS AMERICANUS

Right: *The Ship* (of course, but it’s understated because we KNOW all this, right?) – the slave ship gets nowhere without *The Sea* to carry it. Left: *A Maroon* rebel, dreadlocked and rejecting you. Is s/he washing something, doing laundry? Removing your layers of entrapment, purifying those *Waters*.

Rear: *The Pietà of Emmett Till*, or any thousands pulled from the depths. Bullet holed. Lynched. Tortured. Drowned. The flesh flayed. Christian Iconography celebrates martyrdom – the greater the torture the closer to God. They are the symbiosis of the dead and not dead. This pair, the Father and the Son, are fused. The ghostly countenance of the *never dead enough* coupled with the bereaved expression of the *still, but barely living*.

The Physical Impossibility of Blackness in the Mind of Someone White. Riffing on Hirst’s sharks (not to mention my own work *Grub for Sharks*) The Swimmer, sharks and Drowner play the role of sea nymphs and serpents in the usual parlance of fountains. Sharks’ bellies hold the remains of our catastrophic sea crossings. Would they remember us, our flavour, if they could? Has their DNA Changed by our ingestion? Do they think of their attack as an enactment of tradition, as a corrective against Hope?

The Captain. François-Dominique Toussaint L’Ouverture or Marcus Garvey or Captain Paul Cuffee or The Emperor Jones (Played by Paul Robeson in the film). An ongoing quest to dismantle European Colonialism throughout the African Diaspora and the cyclical nature of ideological *usurpation and co-optation* by power-hungry leaders.

To the right kneels *the Kneeling Man*. Perhaps the West Indies Governor Sir William Young in caricature. He begs, scarred and contrite – a Slave owner on bended knee is a cunning negotiator when Rebellion threatens his economic goals. He’s an amalgam of *European Colonial Interests*, full of Capital and Promises and Religion and (quite possibly) Lies, deceit and corruption.

To the Left of the Captain stands *the Angel*. Resembling a tree with hangman’s noose. Trees are innocent, wordlessly submitting to the weight of injustice, witness bearing.

At the rear of the pedestal laughs *Queen Vicky*. With her voluptuous nonchalance and commitment to survival she holds at her breast a coconut, symbol of life, ego, sustenance, commerce, and death if it falls on your head. Under her skirts crouches a figure of melancholy and despair, which is perhaps her own, masked by all that simple abundance and good cheer.

The crowning figure aloft, Venus, is emblematic of the Yoruba religious traditions which are housed in the bodies and sprits of New World Africans. *Water baptises and bathes old gods in new gowns*. Entranced, the Candomblé/Macumba/Santeria priestess transmits the wishes, blessings and curses of deities from an ancient pantheon, fusing the colonial missionary position with a potent combination of refusal and submission.

The amniotic fluid at the beginning of this journey is now transformed into mother’s milk and lifeblood. Mother, wetnurse, whore, saint, Host, lover – she is the daughter of waters.