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ART EXHIBITION “TRACING SLAVERY: MOSES WILLIAMS / KARA WALKER”

OPENS AT THE TROUT GALLERY, DICKINSON COLLEGE

Exhibition of Silhouette imagery from the Colonial Era and the Present

Examines the Power Dynamics of Race in America

CARLISLE, Pennsylvania—October 22, 2021—The Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, opens art exhibition *Tracing Slavery: Moses Williams / Kara Walker*. The two-part exhibition considers issues of racism and the African American experience through the simple, yet direct medium of cut-paper profiles, better known as silhouettes. It brings together cut silhouettes by the early nineteenth-century artist, Moses Williams, and a series of silhouette prints by contemporary artist, Kara Walker, to trace a profile of racism in the United States that continues to shape the present. The exhibition runs from October 22, 2021 to January 22, 2022. It is free and open to the public, Monday through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Thursdays until 8 p.m. The museum will be closed from December 19 through January 3.

Phillip Earenfight, director of The Trout Gallery, notes, “Bringing together the silhouette images of Williams and Walker concentrates attention on race and power in the United States. As the nation grapples with centuries of systemic racism, this exhibition provides ways to consider a wide range of issues related to this matter. This sharply focused exhibition builds on the pioneering work of Asma Naeem at the National Portrait Gallery.”

Moses Williams (Philadelphia, c. 1775–c. 1825) was born enslaved into the household of Charles Willson Peale (Chester, PA, 1741 – Philadelphia, 1827) the early-American portraitist, naturalist, and museum founder. Williams worked in Peale’s home and fledgling museum in Philadelphia, where he cut portrait silhouettes of visitors to the museum. The majority of his portraits represent members of the White elite, some of whom were slave owners and industrialists who profited from them. Peale owned at least three slaves (Moses and his parents, Lucy and Scarborough Williams), yet campaigned for a gradual end to slavery in Pennsylvania. In many ways Peale’s conflicted beliefs around slavery were mirrored by those of his friend and colleague Dr. Benjamin Rush (Philadelphia, 1746–1813), who founded Dickinson College. After freeing Williams’s parents and then training the young man to use a physiognotrace, a

special mechanical device designed to copy profiles for cut silhouettes that was housed in his Philadelphia museum, Peale also manumitted Moses Williams at age twenty-seven. Between around 1804 and 1820, Williams traced and cut tens of thousands of silhouettes for museum visitors and for Peale family members and friends.

The silhouettes by Moses Williams are on loan to The Trout Gallery as part of an American Art collections sharing initiative created through a multiyear, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of the Art Bridges Initiative.

Earenfight notes: "It is striking to host Williams's silhouettes at Dickinson College. There is little doubt that Williams met Benjamin Rush during Rush's many visits to Peale's home and Williams may well have made a silhouette of Rush. Bringing these cut silhouettes from a point in time when slavery was widely practiced into view with the contemporary prints by Kara Walker focuses critical attention on the issue of systemic racism in the United States. On behalf of Dickinson College and the Carlisle community, I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Art Bridges Foundation, for making possible the loan of such important works at this time."

Unlike Williams, Kara Walker (Stockton, CA, b. 1969), does not create portrait likenesses through silhouettes; rather, she employs the medium as a way to interrogate history and expose racism. In her series of fifteen lithographs entitled *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* (2005), Walker "corrects" the Reconstruction-era publication by overlaying its images with silhouettes of African Americans, whose presence the editors diminished so as to make the volumes more appealing to Southern readers. According to Walker, "I'm interested in . . . the fact of slavery's influence on the American system, and the power of its influence over the American imagination." This series features the artist's signature silhouetted figures engaged in provocative and oblique dramas that have come to characterize Walker's style and her interest in engaging with the continuing impact that racism and perceptions of racial difference have had upon American visual culture. The artist's work draws a direct line between the historical demonization and degradation of Black bodies that flourished during the century between the Civil War in the 1860s to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the contemporary era of protest against race-based police violence and the prison-industrial complex. Walker's prints serve as a profound remediation of the act of exclusion performed by the original volumes' purposeful elision of the Black presence in the Civil War. It is also representative of Walker's provocative insertion of Black bodies, both real and imagined, into the historical image worlds that were created in the immediate aftermath of the devastating national reckoning over slavery and political union that was the US Civil War.

In 1997 the MacArthur Foundation awarded then twenty-eight-year-old Kara Walker its coveted "genius grant" fellowship, catapulting the young artist onto the national stage and into a heated (and ongoing) debate around the use of racial stereotypes, graphic violence, and strong sexual content in contemporary art. Despite the controversy that Walker's often life-size and profoundly surreal silhouette installations of interracial violence and sexual depravity generated in the late 1990s, or perhaps because of it, the artist's career has flourished. In the last two and a half decades, she has had numerous major solo exhibitions and has completed important commissioned projects in the United States and throughout Europe.

Kara Walker: Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The C. F. Foundation in Atlanta supports the museum's traveling exhibition program, *Treasure to Go*.

Tracing Slavery: Moses Williams / Kara Walker will be explored by members of the Carlisle and Dickinson College community extensively through free panels, lectures, and programs offered by the museum's education program. A number of these offerings will center on the experiences, perspectives, and voices of members of Carlisle's African American community. According to Heather Flaherty, the museum's curator of education: "We are collaborating with partners across the community, including Hope Station, the YWCA, the Cumberland County Historical Society and Carlisle Arts Learning Center (CALC) to learn about African American experience in Carlisle, past and present, and to create collaborative works of art that powerfully showcase the stories and experiences we learn about in order to raise awareness of Carlisle's Black history and encourage community dialogue about race. The generous grants provided by the Art Bridges foundation for these exhibitions have allowed us to expand our programming into the community in ways we never have before."

Exhibition Credits:

Tracing Slavery. Moses Williams: Silhouettes is one in a series of American art exhibitions created through a multi-year, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of the Art Bridges Initiative.

Publications:

Exhibition brochure with text by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Associate Professor of American Art, University of Pennsylvania: <http://www.troutgallery.org/exhibitions/detail/69>

Public Events (more to follow—see events listed on museum's website):

- Public lecture on Zoom: Asma Naeem, author/editor of *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*, and Chief Curator, Baltimore Museum of Art: December 9, 7–8 p.m.

Museum Information:

The Trout Gallery is the art museum of Dickinson College. It is always free and open to the public. It is located in the Emil R. Weiss Center for the Arts at 240 West High Street, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 17013.

The mission of The Trout Gallery is to inspire creativity and to support the study and experience of the visual arts through direct contact with works in the its collections and exhibitions. It serves the students, faculty and staff, and alumni of Dickinson College; the residents of the Carlisle-Central Pennsylvania area and their visitors; and the broader academic and artistic communities. It meets its objective through its collections, exhibitions, programs, publications, and professional resources.

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Press Kit

<http://www.troutgallery.org/exhibitions/detail/69>

General inquiries: email trout@dickinson.edu / 717-245-1344

THE TROUT GALLERY / The Art Museum of Dickinson College

COVID-19 protocol updates and information, visit: <http://www.troutgallery.org/about/2/>

Updates from The Trout Gallery see: <http://www.troutgallery.org>.

Social media: @TroutGallery

EXHIBITION IMAGES



Moses Williams, *Dr. James Hunter Fayssoux* (1785–unknown), ca. 1803. Hollow-cut profile on wove paper. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of McNeill Americana Collection, 2009. 2009–18–42(99).



Kara Walker, *Exodus of Confederates from Atlanta*, from the portfolio *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, 2005. Offset lithograph and screenprint on paper. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum. Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment. 2008.19.1.9.



Kara Walker, *Confederate Prisoners Being Conducted from Jonesborough to Atlanta*, from the portfolio *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, 2005, from the portfolio *Confederate Prisoners Being Conducted from Jonesborough to Atlanta*, from the portfolio *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, 2005. Offset lithograph and screenprint on paper. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum. Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment. 2008.19.1.5.