



## ART REVIEW

# 'Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now' Review: Tracing the Shadows of Past and Present

From slave portraits to contemporary reflections on racial violence, silhouettes are loaded with aesthetic and political power.



'Maibaum' (2009), by Kristi Malakoff PHOTO: KRISTI MALAKOFF

By Edward Rothstein

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2 COMMENTS

## Washington

Sometimes we see something more clearly by seeing less of it, as extraneous detail is filtered away. Something like that can happen at "Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now," a remarkable exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Portraits here have no fleshy presence or elaborate surroundings. Their effect is severe, almost abstract. It is line that we focus on, not space; profile, not face. Almost all of the 50 or so images here are made of cut black paper or a cut white foreground. These figures don't breathe with life—no human outline is so scissor-smooth—but they starkly insist on their own significance in an otherwise vague visual world.

### Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now

National Portrait Gallery  
Through March 10, 2019

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The oldest of these silhouettes is from 1796, the newest from this year; the smallest is some 3 inches high, the largest almost 40 feet. The first portion of the exhibition, "Then," provides a potent survey of the genre's American past; the second, "Now," devotes a gallery to each of four contemporary female artists, their work echoing earlier themes.

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Gathered with intelligence, insight—and some political pointedness—by Asma Naeem, the National Portrait Gallery's curator of prints, drawings and media arts, these silhouettes also take on a significance greater than their style might suggest. For while itinerant American painters once regularly traveled from town to town offering upper-middle-class

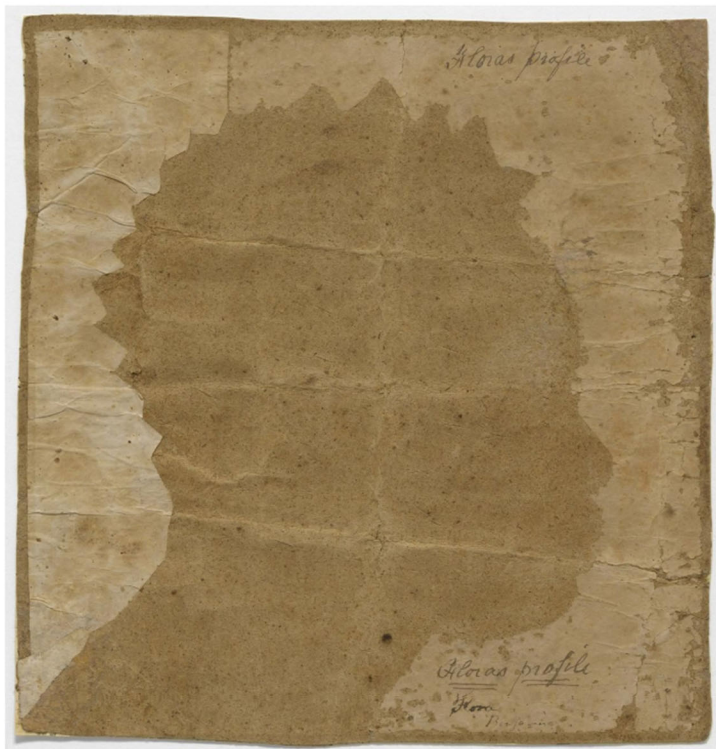
patrons a simulacrum of upper-class portraiture, the silhouette offered that possibility to a mass public, requiring less subtlety, expense and time than any other form of portraiture.



Ledger book of William Bache (c. 1803-12) PHOTO: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

William Bache, a profiler who traveled between Maine and Louisiana at the beginning of the 19th century, charged sitters 25 cents for four silhouettes. One ledger here contains 1,846 images of doctors, slaves, priests, soldiers, merchants, politicians and others, of seemingly all ethnic backgrounds. Auguste Edouart (1789-1861), a French-born silhouettist, made more than 3,800 during his decade-long American sojourn. We see his profile of John Quincy Adams, but he also created silhouettes of other presidents, Supreme Court justices, governors—and anybody else who interested him.

The form was so popular that in his pioneering Philadelphia Museum in 1802 Charles Willson Peale installed a “physiognotrace”—a machine that would mechanically trace a customer’s profile on paper, ready for cutting: the world’s first selfies, at a cost of pennies. A portable physiognotrace here was used by Raphaëlle, one of Peale’s sons, who cut so many thousands that he earned \$1,250 in April 1804 alone.



'Flora and Bill of Sale' (1796), by an unidentified artist PHOTO: STRATFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, STRATFORD, CT

It is clear from the offerings here too that some households had every member profiled, including slaves, which makes silhouettes one of the few sources for authentic portraits of the enslaved. One of Charles Wilson Peale's own slaves, Moses Williams —later manumitted—earned his living from running the museum's physiognotrace; he also became its subject—as we see—for Raphaele.

The most powerful historical image we see was found in Connecticut: a life-size 1796 silhouette of an enslaved African girl, Flora, with spiked hair. It was probably created by tracing her image cast by candlelight. It is powerful, partly for having preserved such a fleeting and forgotten shadow. It is also palpably human because of its size—more vital than most silhouettes, which miniaturize facial distinctions.



'Auntie Walker's Wall Sampler for Civilians' (2013), by Kara Walker PHOTO: KARA WALKER/SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO, NEW YORK



In the catalog Ms. Naeem gives this form's democratic range a place in the progressive pantheon; the political status of various figures even seems to have determined their presence here. Thus, aside from the enslaved, we have profiles of the disabled (including Oliver Caswell, who was blind and deaf and is shown, in Edouart's 1843 silhouette, sounding the tines on a fork) and a double silhouette that is "arguably the earliest known representation of an American same-sex couple," created c. 1805-15.



'Chair' (2015), by Kumi Yamashita PHOTO: HIROSHI NOGUCHI

But while aspects of silhouette history can resonate with contemporary American progressive thought, too many scissor cuts are needed for a perfect fit. Silhouettes have a more diverse reach. Also, despite implications that the form has an intrinsic connection to American ideals, it was not mainly an American phenomenon: it began in Europe; the physiognotrace was invented in France.

The exhibition, though, is so fascinating that its political subtheme can recede a bit without impairing perspective. Even contemporary artists are best seen in their own lights. Kara Walker's 2013 "Auntie Walker's Wall Sampler for Civilians" uses mounted black paper cutouts along with the iconography of cartoon culture to

create a surreal pastiche of racial violence. "Maibaum" (2009), a gallery-sized installation by Kristi Malakoff, is exhilarating with its life-size silhouette-images of Victorian children spinning ribbons around a maypole as black birds quiver, a bit ominously, above.



'Precarious' (2018), by Camille Utterback PHOTO: CAMILLE UTTERBACK

Another installation, by Camille Utterback, "Precarious" (2018) is a descendant of the physiognotrace, as sensors and software map the movements of visitors, creating shifting patterns on a screen. But the best sense of the magic that shadows and silhouettes once had comes from works by Kumi Yamashita; in "Chair" (2015) a shadow vividly shows us a seated woman. But the object that casts the shadow is unremarkable, a shape less real than the immaterial image.

No silhouettes can claim a similarly uncanny accomplishment; these shadows never eclipse the real. But this exhibition demonstrates that they should not be underestimated; they too cast shadows, and in this show we start to see their long political and aesthetic reach.

—Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.