

## Material/Memory #1

My memory of being nine years old consists of blips on the vision plane: edible stems; pinhole cameras made of boxes; Carol King and Patti Smith; sweet-peas on strings; dance class and Campfire Girls; dominoes and backgammon; chess and metal-wheel roller skates down steep driveways...the purple sparkles of the banana seat helped make going the distance full of possibilities. I wanted to have a theater and create a shadow puppet play – invite the kids in the neighborhood. I remember wanting to make a tricycle-drawn wagon with a ladder attached so that we could ride it around and pick pomegranates or tangerines from the trees that hung in the alley.

The alley was a shared space by me and my friends. It connected us like a shadow cast behind the private places that faced away from it. One day, when Mom and I pulled up the driveway in her little Honda Civic, someone in the neighborhood had written something mean about me on the porch with the charcoal briquettes that were in a bag next to the Hibachi in the garage. I threw the charcoal briquettes at the perpetrators who jumped out of the bushes and road away on their bikes...

Charcoal is the shadow of past actions. It is created by burning wood or other organic materials at extremely high temperatures without oxygen (pyrolysis). Charcoal is the residue of pyrolysis which is comprised of carbon and ash. It is the fourth most abundant element in the universe, after hydrogen, helium and oxygen. It is combustible, volatile, poison, and it is also inert, harmless and stunningly beautiful in other forms. Carbon comes in several object forms, from black granite, to clear diamond, as well as vapor forms such as carbon monoxide. It is completely opaque as granite and totally transparent as a diamond. For all of these above mentioned morphic juxtapositions, carbon carries with it identities that can be drawn from its inherent uses and the associations people make with those objects. Most profoundly carbon is the chemical basis for all known life.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot help but notice the binary nature of charcoal as an agent for sustaining life or for also taking it away. It is living matter that is then killed, literally, to be used for other purposes in its new blackened, repurposed and highly charged state. By charged I mean the metaphorical sense, in that it carries the history of its making with it, while at the same time, its new polymorphic potential can be used for a number of mans' necessities – from water filtration to combustion in the form of gunpowder. In my work, I see charcoal as a material that is no different than a memory of pain (barring special circumstances) while at the same time, laying bare its potential as an agent of renewal. Charcoal has become a symbolic shadow – a silhouette – of human presence in my work and the spaces people occupy.

Anne Wagner states in her essay, "The Black White Relation":

*Of course, silhouettes were always meant to be illustrative: the issue is what – how much or how little – they are devised to convey...Such and image trusts its viewers (their desires, their fantasies) to bring its blank blackness (back) to life.*

To continue:

*Only under these conditions can silhouettes do the work of portraits, answering desire and absence, but at a double remove. For such skiagrams derive their descriptions not from concrete and material beings, but from an ephemeral bodily substitute or byproduct, shadow...What is shown is not a body, but how a body blocks the light. That the schema is reductive – that it conflates presence and absence – is overshadowed by the sheer drama of the forms, which result: time and touch and transitory yield to what Edmund Burke<sup>2</sup> called the "power of black".<sup>3</sup>*

According to Victor Stoichita in an interview for Cabinet Magazine, at approximately the age of nine, a child realizes that the shadow is not a substance behind the object, but rather the shadow is an object that is pulled away from the object by light. Therefore, the shadow is synonymous with the absence of, or rather more acutely, the body falling away from the light. Piaget<sup>4</sup> refers to this young identification and understanding of the shadow as a form of otherness, of alterity. Stoichita goes on to reference Lavater's<sup>5</sup> *Essays of Physiognomy* as attempts to capture a person's soul through the depiction of the line of their profile, in their silhouette.<sup>6</sup> Wagner's essay is a testimony to the power of Kara Walker's elaborately detailed

silhouette vignettes. The ability of the silhouette to negate bodily presence is the argument that Wagner proposes as a vital comparison to the politically charged underpinnings of Walker's work that portrays conflicting assumptions about African American history. From the history that the silhouettes play on the American consciousness, to sexualized racial stereotypes, her work casts "blackness" not only as a skin color, but as an ethos. Walker portrays the specific narratives while at the same time negates specific identities of the people she portrays. In a sense, they are only memories of occurrences and perpetuated myths.

For me, the blackness of the charcoal is a stand-in for negation of specifics, and a reiteration of the sublime. Referring back to my childhood as a point of departure, I can distinctly say that I do not use charcoal *because* of that fateful day where I realized that the people I picked pomegranates with were no longer my friends. Wagner asks, "But if recovering the past demarks feeling a way into its bodily and psychic dimensions, might not the silhouette, with its built-in requirement for desire and projection, risk unleashing (or flattening) both?" Rather, charcoal and all its deep, black, non-reflective qualities as an art material and its various functions in the every-day makes it wide open for interpretation – from which many histories can be drawn, including mine. It is unlike a silhouette, but very much like a shadow<sup>7</sup> creating shared spaces.

### **Brief Bibliography**

environmentalchemistry.com

Turner, Christopher and Victor I. Stoichita. "A short history of the shadow: an interview with Victor I. Stoichita." *Cabinet Magazine* Winter 2006/07: Issue 24. pdf.

Walker, Anne. *Kara Walker: The Black-White Relation*

### **Informal Notes**

1. environmentalchemistry.com
2. Edmund Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, 1909 – 1914
3. Wagner
4. Jean Piaget, developmental psychologist (b. 1896, d. 1980)

5. Johann Kasper Lavater, author of *Essays on Physiognomy*, which were popularized in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but are now considered a pseudoscience.
6. Stoichita
7. Carl Jung, archetypal psychologist