



Trained in textiles as a client in a hair salon chair, and at Michigan's Cranbrook Academy of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sonya Clark has been braiding and weaving threads since childhood. As she has put it, hairdressing is "a way of knowing." Tacit and rhythmic in its styling, and sensual and sensitive as a part of the body, hair knowledge provides proprioception of our environment and orients us culturally. For Clark, hairdressing is the primordial fibre art.

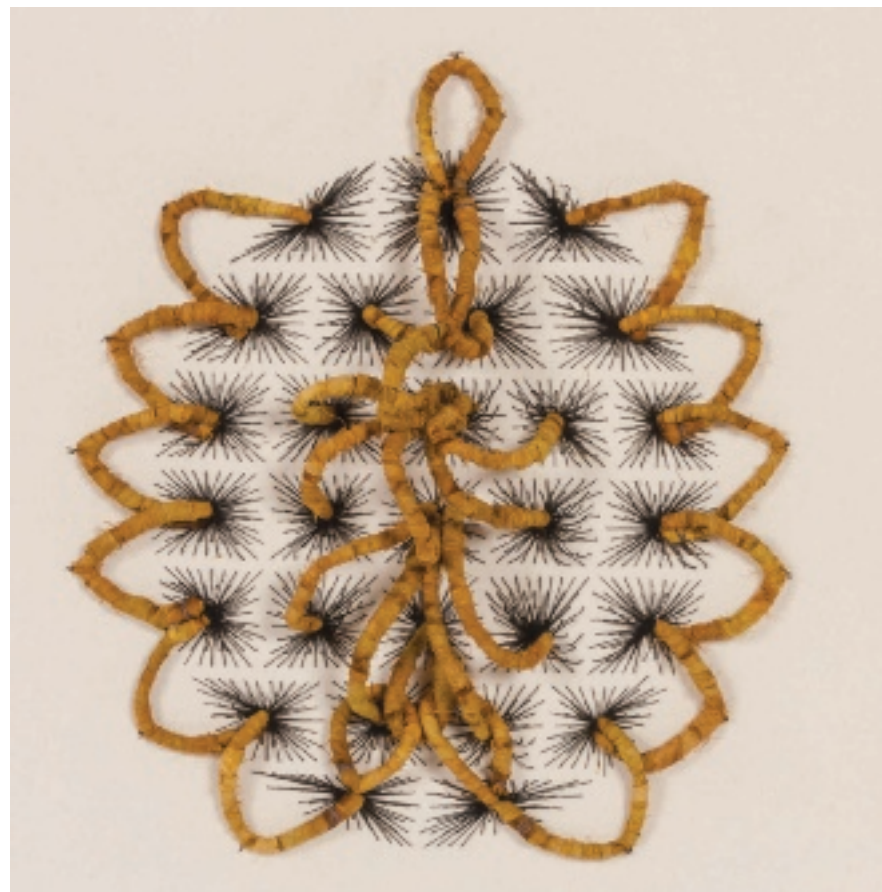
The daughter of a psychiatrist from Trinidad and a nurse from Jamaica, Clark has woven together familial and community traditions, local and social, national and political, for over 30 years. Born in Washington, DC, Clark examines the American Black experience and its roots in the wider African Diaspora; as such, she has drawn inspiration from the daily practices of high street hair salons and the spiritual significance of ceremonial headdresses from West Africa. In the late 1990s, Clark constructed wig-like crown sculptures from a hair-like thread, grandly piled and geometrically parted in homage to the soulful position of hair in Yoruba cosmology. A decade later, she embroidered Afro hairstyles on Abraham Lincoln's head on five-dollar bills, *Afro Abe*, 2007-09. She made 44 of these banknotes in honour of Barack Obama as he became the 44th US President, symbolically marking the long journey from the Great Emancipator to the first Black man in the White House.

Image above: Hair Craft Project, jurors' and peoples' choice winners, Jamilah Williams (left), Kamala Bhagat (right).

Image top right: *Unraveling* 2015- present, Confederate Battle flags, cotton.

Image top far right; *Unraveled*, 2015, Confederate Battle flags, cotton.

Image right bottom: Performance of *Unraveling* by Sonya Clark, Mead Art Museum, 21 February 2018



As the travelling exhibition *Hair: Untold Stories* reminds us, hair is a powerful expression of youth, desirability, and their opposite. It can be simultaneously a highly valued commodity in the global beauty industry and a waste material that prompts disgust when clogged around a drain, for example. Black hair is intensely politicised, as Emma Dabiri eloquently explains in her 2020 book, *Don't Touch My Hair*. How it is worn is a potent matter for contestation: racist school uniform policies on both sides of the Atlantic police and punish Black pupils for hairstyles considered deviant. Black hair, too, can be a matter of fierce pride and cultural identity.

Clark has not only engaged with hair as a medium, using her own and that of her friends and family, but she also makes art from its tools, for example, in her portrait of the Black hairstyling heroine and first female self-made American millionaire *Madam CJ Walker*, 2008, constructed from over 3000 black plastic combs whose teeth Clark overlaid and removed to create gridded textures to suggest pixels and to convey light and shade. In her award-winning 2014 *Hair Craft Project*, Clark invited hair stylists to use her head as a temporary plinth for their creations. She recorded their designs and portraits in photographs, and then they transposed their highly technical, beautiful designs onto canvas using thread, yarn, beads, and shells. In these works, Clark thinks through hair; with mathematical precision and skill, she makes multiple works with it and about it. ▶