



**WADSWORTH ATHENEUM**  
MUSEUM OF ART

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Image files to accompany publicity of this exhibition will be available for download at <http://press.thewadsworth.org>. Email to request login credentials.



**Sonya Clark / MATRIX 184 at the Wadsworth**

Hartford, Conn. (January 27, 2020)—Using common materials such as combs, glass beads, cloth, and hair, Sonya Clark creates sculptures that explore how our understanding of objects reveals our personal and collective attitudes about race, gender, inequality, and social justice. *Sonya Clark / MATRIX 184*, opens February 6, the first week of Black Heritage Month, and will continue through May 3, 2020, featuring a variety of works that incorporate or reference hair. Clark’s “hair” projects, dated 2011 to present, focus on the Black experience in the United States. “As carrier of DNA, hair holds the essence of identity,” explains Clark. “Deep within each strand, the vestiges of our roots resound. In this work hair is formed into markers of chronology, wisdom, and adornment.”

“Clark uses a variety of familiar materials in her work, which instills them with humanity,” says Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth. “In her MATRIX show she uses hair to address important historical events and phenomena including the Underground Railroad, Black labor, the artistry of African American hairstyling, and the traumatic resonance of history. The essence of truth instilled in these objects is tangible.”

Shown as a group for the first time in *MATRIX 184*, the series *For Colored Girls...a rainbow* (2019) lines one wall of the gallery. Each work is made of stacked plastic hair combs bound in varying patterns of colored thread, recalling the woven, geometric designs of Ghanaian kente cloth, embedded in the center of Afro wigs, employing symbols that reference African heritage and generate associations with African American culture. The title of the series refers to Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1974), a modern classic of African American literature and an Obie-award winning play. The narrative centers on Black female empowerment through stories of struggle, love, and loss as embodied by seven female characters named for colors: lady in brown, lady in yellow, lady in purple, etc. Clark's series evokes Shange's community of powerful African American women acknowledging the continuing relevance of the late author's stories.

Two works of freestanding sculpture punctuate the *MATRIX* installation, incorporating found chairs that Clark has reupholstered and embellished. *Throne* (2016), Clark's ornamented barbershop chair, acknowledges the barber shop and hair salon as vital meeting places within the African American community. This elaborate perch, beaded in patterns influenced by Yoruba and Zulu cultures, emphasizes the place where artful hairstyles, such as those depicted in the photographs from Clark's *Hair Craft Project* (2014), on view in the exhibition, are created. The photographs depict singular hairstyles created on the back of Clark's head alongside the artists-stylists who created them.

The artist's hair is not only the subject of photographs on view in *MATRIX 184* but is also employed as the medium for *Constellation* (2012–present). The “stars” of the installation are made up of balls of the artist's hair that are attached to the wall creating the effect of black stars on a white sky. *Constellation* includes the Big Dipper and the North Star, which Clark depicts as train tracks referencing the Underground Railroad and an enslaved American's journey north to freedom. This ongoing installation, as in all of the works in *MATRIX 184*, uses hair to celebrate ancestry, race, class, and culture.

### **Artist Biography**

Sonya Clark is Professor of Art at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her work has been exhibited in over 350 museum and galleries in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe and Australia. Clark's work is in numerous public collections including the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin, TX; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN; the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI; the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, Montreal, Quebec, Canada; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX.

### **Related Programs**

Thursday, February 13; noon

Gallery Talk: Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art leads a tour of *MATRIX 184*. Free with admission.

Sunday, March 8; 2pm

The Emily Hall Tremaine Lecture in Contemporary Art: Sonya Clark discusses her process and work on view in *MATRIX 184*. Free with admission.

Saturday, March 14; 2pm

Film: *Good Hair*, a controversial documentary narrated by Chris Rock, explores the complicated and fascinating subject of Black hair. Preceded by a 1:15pm gallery talk in *Sonya Clark / MATRIX 184*. Gallery talk included with film admission: \$10; \$9 seniors (62+) and students w/ID; \$8 members; Free for Film Stars.

Saturday, March 14; 4pm

Textured Hair Demonstration: Stylist Carmen Veal leads a discussion and demonstration of textured hair styling techniques in Avery Court. Free with admission.

### **About MATRIX**

Inaugurated in 1975, MATRIX is the Wadsworth's groundbreaking contemporary art exhibition series featuring works by artists from around the world. From its inception, MATRIX has been a forum for art that is challenging, current, and sometimes controversial. Through clear explanation and thoughtful engagement with the viewer, MATRIX exhibitions call into question preconceptions about art and increase understanding of its possibilities. Many MATRIX artists, such as Christo, Sol LeWitt, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, and Carrie Mae Weems are now considered seminal figures in contemporary art.

### **Exhibition and Program Support**

The MATRIX program is supported by the Wadsworth Atheneum's Contemporary Coalition. Sustaining support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided by Newman's Own Foundation and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign. The Tremaine Lecture in Contemporary Art is generously supported by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation.

### **About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**

Founded in 1842 with a vision for infusing art into the American experience, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is home to a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years and encompassing European art from antiquity through contemporary as well as American art from the 1600s to today. The Wadsworth Atheneum's five connected buildings—representing architectural styles including Gothic Revival, modern International Style, and 1960s Brutalism—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Hours: Wednesday–Friday: 11am–5pm;

Saturday and Sunday: 10am–5pm Admission: \$5–15; discounts for members, students and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free “happy hour” admission 4–5pm. Public phone: (860) 278-2670; website: [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org).

Images: Sonya Clark, *For Colored Girls...a rainbow (purple)*, 2019. Afro wig, combs, thread. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Stephen Petegorsky; Jamilah Williams, *Jah Braids*, for Sonya Clark’s *Hair Craft Project*, 2014. Pigment print on archival paper. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore. Photo by Naoko Wowsugi; *Throne*, 2016. Found salon chair, cloth, beads. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

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