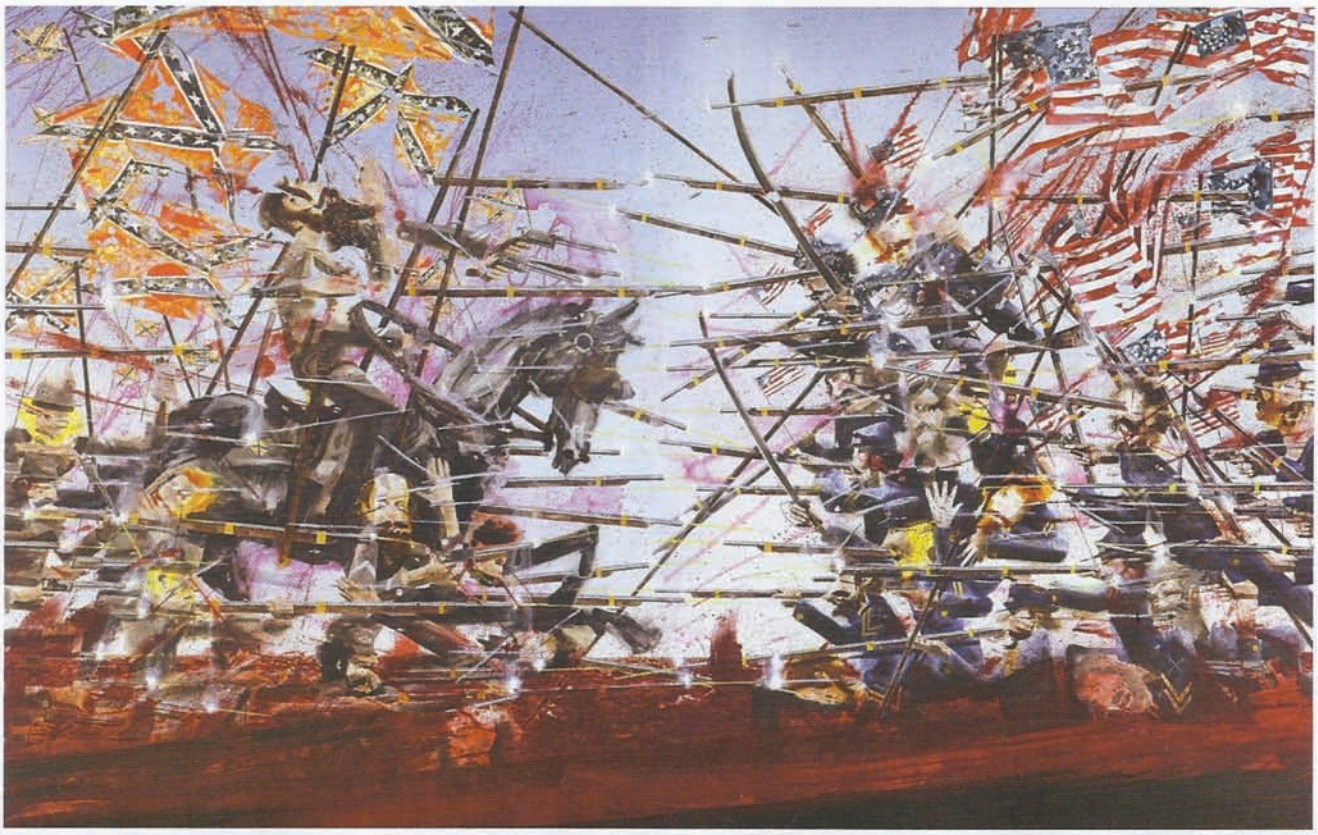
The Civil War in Art, Then & Now

As several museums showcase works made at the time of the conflict, contemporary artists continue to reflect on its legacy

BY BARBARA POLLACK



OPPOSITE Frederic Edwin Church's *Our Banner in the Sky*, 1861, sets a wide celestial stage for the conflict, while Barnaby Furnas's *Untitled (Antietam) II*, 2008, above, captures the conflict down on earth.

One hundred and fifty years after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War still figure prominently in the American imagination. Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* and Quentin Tarantino's more controversial film, *Django Unchained*, were both nominated for Academy Awards and have been box-office blockbusters. Museums throughout the United States have been planning exhibitions to celebrate the sesquicentennial. Many artists have commemorated, appropriated, deconstructed, and reenvisioned Civil War legacies, which, with much of the rhetoric surrounding last year's presidential election, seem more relevant than ever.

"The Civil War continues to attract remarkably rich imaginative engagement in many different venues of American culture and society," writes Thomas J. Brown in his introduction to *Remixing the Civil War: Meditations on the Sesquicentennial* (John Hopkins University Press, 2011). "The war . . . is our most frequently rehearsed, solemnly enshrined, most commercially exploited, and therefore most readily appropriated history."

Over the past year, museums across the country have been or will be staging shows to commemorate the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, starting with "A Strange and Fearful Interest: Death, Mourning, and Memory in the American Civil War," at the Huntington Library last October, followed in November by the landmark show "The Civil War and American Art" at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art this month, coinciding with the Met's own exhibition "Photography and the American Civil War." This past February, the National Portrait Gallery opened "Bound for Freedom's Light: African Americans and the Civil War," and the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco is celebrating the sesquicentennial with "The Kinsey Collection: Shared Treasures of Bernard and Shirley Kinsey, Where Art and History Intersect," on view through this month.

None of these exhibitions follows a strict chronology of the war—as from Antietam, to Gettysburg, to Cold Harbor. Instead, they offer new ways of considering depictions of it, both as art and as documentary material. "The Civil War and American Art" revisits the history of American painting and asks why art historians have often overlooked the impact of the Civil War on American artists. "There's an interesting story of erasure here. Art history starts off with the presumption that the war mattered to some artists but not to others, and I couldn't believe that was the right answer," says Eleanor Jones Harvey, the curator of the exhibition. After ten years of research, she concluded that all American artists have been impacted by the Civil War, but many expressed their views through

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landscape painting, such as Martin Johnson Heade in his 1859 *Approaching the Thunder Storm* and Frederic Edwin Church in his *Meteor of 1860* (1860). "Landscape painting picks up on changes in barometric pressure, if you will—where comets are omens and the aurora borealis is a sign of displeasure from God; lurid sunsets are like a landscape on fire; and a storm presaged the war. Landscape is not an escape. Landscape is the emotional rollercoaster we are on as we navigate the war."

One reason there are so few paintings of battle scenes by American artists is that photography from the period, most notably the images produced by the Mathew Brady Studio, makes it abundantly clear that battlefields were riddled with corpses; they were not the picturesque or romantic views associated with chivalry. Photographs, however, held a "terrible fascination" for Americans, as described by a *New York Times* reporter at the time. "Photography tapped into the grief that was occurring," says Huntington Library curator Jennifer A. Watts, who notes that this was the first time battlefield dead were depicted. "It was also a tether between the home front and the battle front," she says, "with soldiers taking pictures of loved ones into battle or bringing back home photographs of themselves in uniform so their families could remember them. People are using photographs as a way of thinking about what they are experiencing."

These exhibitions, fascinating as they are, tell only one side of the story, leaving out the rich source material produced by people of African heritage in America, both freed and enslaved, during the period. The Museum of the African Diaspora bridges this gap through its audio installation "Slave Narratives," which features nine profoundly moving first-person accounts of slaves dating from the 1700s to the 2000s. "The historical documents, art objects, and artifacts in the exhibition 'The Kinsey Collection' provide an opportunity to move beyond one-dimensional stories about slavery, or more appropriately enslavement, to stories about the brutality of the institution and the struggle for survival," explains MoAD executive director Grace C. Stanislaus. "And it offers more complex and layered stories that celebrate the indomitable spirit of Africans, many of whom endured the Middle Passage and, though forced, were able to establish lives in the New World." She points to *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley, published in 1773. Born in West Africa in 1753 and sold into slavery, Wheatley became the first published African American poet and is considered a founding figure of black literature. Her portrait printed in the book is the only surviving work by the African American slave artist Scipio Moorhead.

Kara Walker, in her drawing *The moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon as not curves back around toward barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos*, 2010, hoped "to conjure horrors of reconstruction and 20th-century Jim Crow-ism and the Tea party."

A rendering of Fred Wilson's statue *E Pluribus Unum*, 2012, combining an appropriated image of a freed slave from a monument in Indianapolis with the Iwo Jima Memorial in Washington, D.C. The statue was never installed.

Artists' interest in the Civil War did not fade in 1865, and contemporary artists continue to mine this rich legacy. African American Kara Walker has, since the 1990s, plumbed the depth of stereotypes, both black and white, from the time of the war and Reconstruction. Her figures are presented as black silhouettes that stand out sharply against a white background. Drawing from *Gone with the Wind*, minstrel shows, romance novels, and pornography, Walker's collages, paintings, and silhouettes "accentuate the absurdity and incongruity of the mythic images of slavery and the Civil War," writes W. Fitzhugh Brundage in *Remixing the Civil War*. He observes that Walker, rather than looking at the history of the Civil War as an objective set of facts, "seems to dismiss any suggestion that there is an authentic historical memory of slavery or the Civil War uncontaminated by racism and stereotype."

Recently, Walker found herself the subject of controversy when a work of hers on permanent loan to a library in Newark had been covered with cloth for four months before finally being displayed. The 72-by-114-inch surrealistic drawing—titled *The moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon as not curves back around toward barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos* (2010)—depicts aspects of the African American experience, including a view of a slave owner forcing a black woman to perform a sex act on him.

Walker's work was met with ambivalence among African American librarians, some of whom objected to the abject nature of her depiction of blacks. Likewise, Fred Wilson was also embroiled in a public controversy over his statue *E Pluribus Unum* when the 2012 scheduled installation of the work in Indianapolis was canceled. For the ten-foot-tall limestone statue, Wilson appropriated an image of a freed slave from the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in downtown Indianapolis and replaced the man's broken shackles with a flag held up proudly above his head as in the Iwo Jima Memorial in Washington, D.C. Wilson was acutely aware that this would be the only monument in Indianapolis devoted solely to an African American, and his gesture became a lightning rod for the divided communities' outrage.

"I like to make work about things that have been hidden or erased," says Wilson, who has created museum installations uncovering hidden vestiges of the black

experience in institutions throughout the world, including the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. "Something about race is not being spoken about in the monuments of Indianapolis, but it is really about a point of view that's missing," he explains. "By revealing my point of view, the work in turn reveals that something that seems completely benign and objective has its own really strong point of view in the existing culture, in either monuments or museums."

Walker and Wilson first emerged as artists in the 1990s, when identity politics, relating to the social and political roots of gender, race, and sexual orientation, played a prominent role in art. Today, in response to Walker and Wilson's work, many artists, both black and white, have chosen the Civil War as a way of exploring issues of commemoration and division. "Kara Walker was a huge influence at the beginning. And I thought, 'How do you respond to that?,'" says Philadelphia-born artist Barnaby Furnas. "I thought the Civil War would be a way that I could get closer to issues like racial violence, racism, and reverse racism." Furnas, who often depicts huge battle scenes, treats the Civil War as one big conflagration with grand-scale paintings of clashing U.S. and Confederate flags, or the image of a bloody Lincoln with his head exploding. "I was also asking what would history paintings look like at the end of history?" he says. He adds that war movies, like *Saving Private Ryan*, also influenced him. "War is certainly good box office, and there was a lot of talk about how pop culture was going to eclipse fine arts, and this all got mixed together and I began to think about what a blockbuster painting would look like."

Virginia-raised Allison Smith's reenactment *The Muster (Encampment at Fort Jay) May the 14th, 2005* expresses the artist's conflicting feelings about her heritage.

Allison Smith, born in Virginia, at one time the home of the capital of the Confederacy, views the Civil War as key to her identity. She grew up being taken to numerous Civil War reenactments and to historic homes and monuments in her state and wanted to find a way to express her conflicting feelings about her heritage. She took on the issue of reenactments directly, ultimately producing large participatory installations, like *The Muster*, a re-creation (sponsored by the Public Art Fund) of a Civil War encampment involving hundreds of people, which took place on Governors Island in May 2005. "When I first started to study Civil War reenactments," she says, "I was sure that it was motivated by racism, because the vast majority of reenacters are from the South, and it seems like people not wanting to let go of the past," Smith continues. "But the more I looked at it, it seemed to be about an unresolved trauma that has to be replayed, like in therapy, going back and experiencing the trauma in order to move through it."

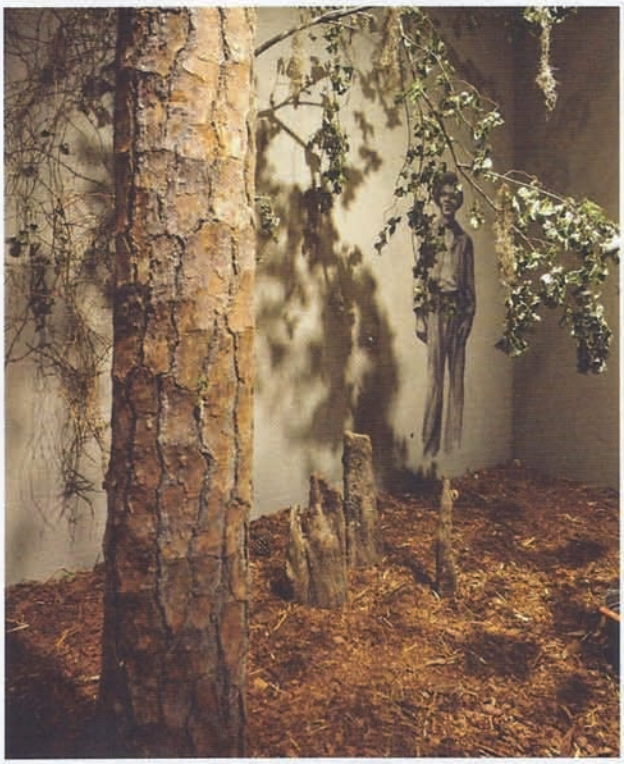
Many other photographers have documented Civil War reenactments. Their popularity is growing, and they can involve tens of thousands of participants, including photographers like Willie Anne Wright, whose pinhole-camera pictures look almost identical to Mathew Brady's images, and Greta Pratt, whose portraits of Lincoln reenacters are downright hilarious.

In 1862, Thomas Moran painted *Slave Hunt, Dismal Swamp, Virginia*, a compelling and claustrophobic landscape depicting a slave family, knee deep in water, fleeing two vicious dogs, with white hunters standing in the shadows. In 2002, Whitfield Lovell revisited this subject in his installation *Sanctuary: The Great Dismal Swamp*, shown at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia in Virginia Beach. Instead of picturing runaway slaves as half-clothed victims, as they were in Moran's painting, Lovell portrayed the dignified woodcutters and homesteaders they became on the fringes of the wide expanse

of land, now a nature preserve, that once hid fugitive slaves.

"I work with old photographs, and I like to work with people who are presenting themselves the way they want to be seen," says Lovell, referring to the fact that even the most humble people went to photo studios at the time he draws from in his installations. He is currently working on another project based on Camp Contraband, which was located in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Contraband was the term for slaves who had successfully escaped from their masters, and this site was a place where they were considered safe from recapture. Lovell, who is Wilson's long-term partner, will be showing this work at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga this month. When asked why he most often portrays emancipated slaves rather than those in

ABOVE Willie Anne Wright used a pinhole camera to capture images of reenactments on film negatives. Her series "Civil War Redux" includes *Antietam: Union Troops at Ease*, 1988. RIGHT Greta Pratt's photographs focus on the Lincoln reenacters themselves, as in *Lincoln Number Three*, 2005.



TOP Whitfield Lovell prefers to portray emancipated slaves rather than those in bondage in installations like *Sanctuary: The Great Dismal Swamp* (detail), 2002. BOTTOM In contrast to Lovell's work, *Slave Hunt, Dismal Swamp, Virginia*, 1862, by Thomas Moran, is poignant and frightening.

bondage, he answers, "Slavery is so much a part of my consciousness, I don't dwell on the painful part of it. For example, a doctor dealing with people dying all the time can't really think about death or he might get really upset and not be able to handle it. I think this is my mission to make a statement, so I can't afford to get too wrapped up in the pain of it."

Combining Buddhist imagery, slave iconography, and surrealism, Sanford Biggers demonstrates how to confront the pain and transcend it. For example, his iconic work *Lotus* (2007) takes a key symbol of Buddhism, the lotus flower, but imprints on each petal a diagram of a slave ship. Etched in glass, the work is shimmering and beautiful but also disturbing. "It's a way of transcending the past, the trials and tribulations of the Middle Passage, by transforming the slave ship into this mandala," says Biggers, who emphasizes that the esthetic experience should not

Sanford Biggers references the way quilts conveyed coded messages to fugitive slaves during the Underground Railroad. Biggers adds his own set of icons, as in *Quilt #9 Cheshire*, 2012.

be overshadowed by the historic content. "I am interested in the slow reveal—for the viewer to be brought in and then find out about the hidden content, and maybe find out more of the story," he says. Recently, Biggers has been working on transforming 19th-century quilts into multilayered paintings, referencing the role that they played in the Underground Railroad delivering secret messages to fugitive slaves making their way north. "There was coded language within these quilts, and by me repurposing them with my own set of icons, I'm adding another layer of language," Biggers says.

"For contemporary artists, the material of history often operates in the realm of allegory, pointing a finger toward contemporary issues," says Creative Time chief curator Nato Thompson, who organized the 2007 exhibition "Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History" at MASS MoCA. "History, and particularly the Civil War, is a language that a lot of Americans understand because history is not about art, it is about life," he says. "So, hopefully, by connecting with history, artists could connect with a broader swathe of people." ■