

KARA WALKER

American, born Stockton, CA, 1969

The Bush, Skinny, De-Boning, 2002

Stainless steel painted black, 7 x 6 x 1 inches (overall)

Gift of Peter Norton, 2016.4.58

Kara Walker's works have often focused on the harms white enslavers inflicted on Black enslaved people in the antebellum United States. In this three-part sculpture she uses the visual language of cut-paper shadow puppets to tell a story of the impact of those harms—the ways in which abuse within Black communities can be rooted in interracial abuse. On the left, *The Bush*, a woman wields a hoe against herself. The hoe that usually clears out the bush or breaks up fertile ground to make it ready for planting, here deepens the damage caused by the enslaver's apprehension of the woman's fertility. In the middle, *Skinny*, a woman—the same one?—forces a child—hers?—to eat (from) a penis-shaped object, which does not promise nutrition for him anymore than it had for her. Her clothing—particularly her headdress—echoes that of a Klansman, the children's nursery rhyme character Mother Goose, and an old-fashioned nun's habit, connecting intergenerational violence from (before) antebellum slavery through postbellum emancipation (and beyond). On the right, *De-Boning* shows the futility of attempts to separate from racial trauma: if some escaped their chains, others remain fettered via family ties. The head might belong to her white male enslaver, or it might be the adult head of their child together.

The Bush, Skinny, De-Boning was commissioned by Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, which brings to bear the context of global histories of colonialism. Germany's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century occupation of Namibia and genocidal violence against the Herero and Nama people there paralleled racial violence in the United States. In this context, it is difficult not to see the title *The Bush* as a reference to Africa. As with US enslavers, German colonists also raped African women and created children with them, even as they claimed Africans were racially beneath them, a separate species.

—Leslie M. Harris
Professor of History