

Ashleigh Brady
Mar. 02, 2020
Sculpture I

FINAL PROJECT — CONSUMPTION

The artists that were assigned to me were Elanor Antin and Kara Walker, both of whom's work I used to come up with an overall idea behind my final project. Elanor Antin's piece *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and *Carving: 45 Years Later* (2017) inspired me the most because of the meaning behind the pieces. Antin photographed her naked body while she partook in a crash diet, essentially showing her body's response to societal pressures of having that 'ideal' body. I decided that I wanted to focus on some aspect of black women and how we try to change based off of societal standards based off of these two pieces from Antin. I liked the idea of showing what is considered intimate—black hair—to black women and putting it on display. Kara Walker was my next suggested artist, best known for her black paper silhouettes that document different aspects of the American black experience. Her ability to make the race and gender of her silhouettes clear without verging on stereotypical—except for when she is actively trying to create a black caricature—helped me to figure out how to form abstracted black female faces that were abstracted yet didn't devolve into caricatures of black female features. Finally, I found inspiration from Lebohang Lang Motaung, who uses yarn to recreate intricate black hair patterns and styles. Lebohang's work helped me realize that black hair *is* the art, through the history of the designs that we utilize to style and protect our hair and through our ability to love and care for it despite years of society attempting to ingrain a self hatred of our hair within us and throughout everybody else.

While my piece employs inspiration from all three of these artists, my overarching message comes from me. I wanted to create a piece that recognized and dealt with this new phenomena in society of black hair being halfway accepted and halfway appropriated. While we have come a long way in the sense of black women being able to love all of the styles their hair can take on, we have also come into a time of a new type of 'blackface.' Society has decided that black culture is a commodity that can be bought and sold, with hair being at the forefront of the societal market for black culture. The braids we employ to protect our hair from natural elements has been turned into a style used 'just for fun' by non-black people, and the curls that we dutifully take care of to make sure they don't lose their shape are being turned into wigs that anyone can don to try and look more 'ethnic' or 'exotic.' While cultural appreciation is one of the good parts of our world and one of the benefits of globalization (whether one thinks globalization is overall good or bad), the consumption of black hair fails to be cultural appreciation. At the moment, it is appropriation, solely because the history and the current treatment of black women and our hair has failed to progress enough. Black women *still* are called 'ghetto' 'ratchet' and 'ugly' based off of our hair. Braids are seen as unprofessional, women are made to cut their dreads, twists, or box braids for work interviews and events. Curls are seen as unruly and unkept, and the word 'nappy' has been employed as an insult despite the words accurate description of some black women's hair. However, when our features—mainly our hair—are seen on non-black women, they become beautiful, exotic, something *new*, whereas black women have been donning hairstyles for centuries and have yet to get any kind of credit from a larger society.

My use of wire is also meaningful, as I put these displays of black hair up for the public to see, but I used a material that feels nothing like it. Wire is hard, sharp, and up close it doesn't look too much like black hair. This is to show that even though I created these hairstyles for public consumption, the public can never *really* come into contact with the true intimacy of

viewing or touching black hair. Black women are strict (and rightfully so) when it comes to allowing people to touch our hair, and this piece is to bring back some of that exclusivity to black hair. Black women and our hair have been viewed as something that can be commodified and consumed by popular culture while also being demonized by society. This piece aims to show that without letting *everyone* into the world of black women's hair. The wire as the material acts as a sort of barrier, so those that viewing are not totally able to consume all there is about black hair. The only ones who are able to really know what its like are those with it coming out of their head. And—it will stay like that until society can learn to accept and love our hair on *us* in all of its forms without needing to appropriate or invade our space or our culture.