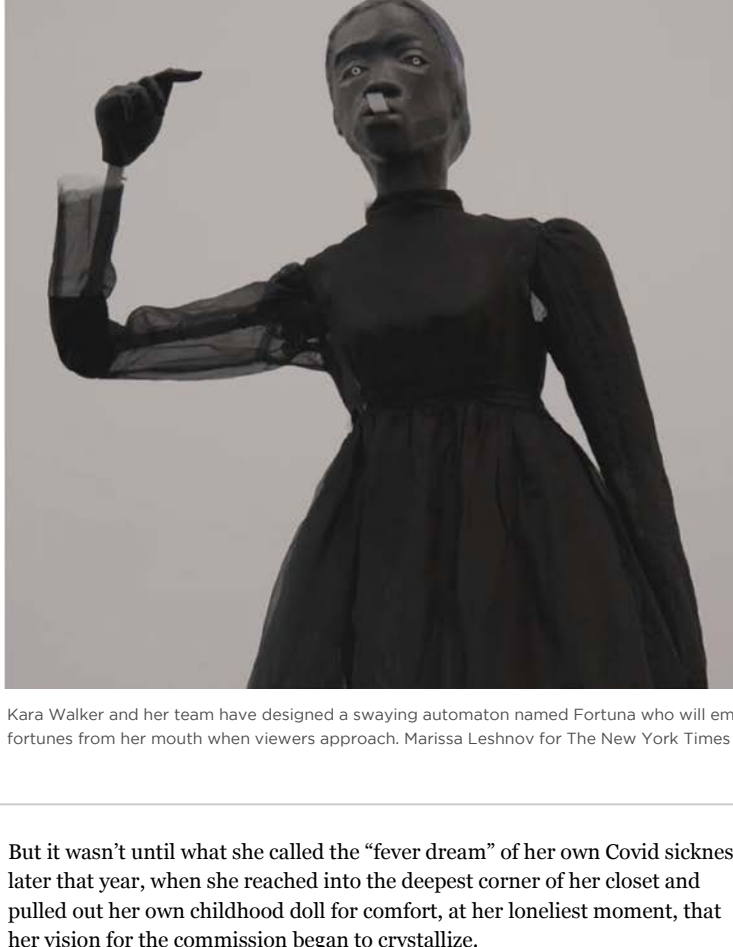


Obsidian Wine Co. is proud to provide the obsidian stones in this exhibit.

The New York Times

Kara Walker Is No One's Robot

At SFMOMA, the artist enacts a parable about trauma and healing in Black life — and makes her first foray into robotics. “I went down a little sci-fi rabbit hole the last couple years working on this piece.”



Kara Walker and her team have designed a swaying automaton named Fortuna who will emit fortunes from her mouth when viewers approach. Marissa Leshnov for The New York Times

By **Hilarie M. Sheets**
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The raised right arm of a 7-foot-tall Black automaton in a somber Victorian dress came swinging down toward an approaching visitor, who had unknowingly triggered a motion sensor.

“Oh, watch your head!” the artist Kara Walker called out. She was standing just outside the wingspan of her creation, called Fortuna, as it sputtered to life in a cavernous hangar at the Brooklyn Navy Yard this spring. The robot, named for a prophetic, began to spit out printed fortunes from its mouth; they fluttered to the floor for the audience to contemplate.

“The paradox of Being Black is the condition of Not-being,” one read.

“Your last shred of dignity is often your best.”

“Loss is a heady thing our hearts cannot comprehend.”

Fortuna is one of eight robots Walker produced in a groundbreaking collaboration merging art and technology for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The kinetic ensemble begins its marathon performance on July 1 in the museum's free, first-floor gallery and runs for almost two years.

At the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Walker and her team of engineers, fabricators and designers were in the throes of staging and testing the weathered-looking figures. The artist's commission bears one of her poetically complex titles: “Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine) / A Respite for the Weary Time-Traveler. / Featuring a Rite of Ancient Intelligence Carried out by The Gardeners / Toward the Continued Improvement of the Human Species / by Kara E-Walker.”



Kara Walker's “Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine)” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, with an ensemble of seven automatons enacting a mix of chance and choreographed movements. Marissa Leshnov for The New York Times

In San Francisco, Fortuna will be elevated on a pedestal so her mechanical arm doesn't clobber fortune-seeking visitors. She could be considered a stand-in for Walker, 54, who is celebrated for her unsparing and haunting site-specific installations that explore collective racial trauma and systems of power. The best-known, “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,” at the Domino Sugar Plant on the edge of the East River, in Williamsburg — a massive sugarcoated female sphinx for Creative Time — was in 2014; the current show brings a new level of showmanship, and, like “Sugar Baby,” it is open to myriad interpretations.

The automatons nod to the displaced and dispossessed Black population in America across time, its presence now felt acutely in San Francisco's city center. Seven figures will be rooted on two platforms in a field of black obsidian rocks, which are long associated with healing properties. The figures enact a ritualized dance, their motions centered on a figure called Levitator, a flailing girl who rises and falls on her back in an endless, cycle.

“There's something operatic about their interaction and the suggestion of an allegorical tale,” said Engie Joo, curator of contemporary art at SFMOMA, who first approached Walker in 2018 to consider a project. It ultimately had a long gestation period: Covid struck, and the work became informed by Walker's thoughts of death and dying, the pandemic's disproportionate effect on Black lives, and the loss of her father, who passed away on Christmas.

“Kara wanted to address the trauma of experiencing Covid as a society, where so many everyday lives lost their meaning and so many people were anonymously taken,” Joo said. At the same time, she added, Walker also wanted “to think about how art could offer wonderment and transformation.”



A robot girl rises up on her own (through a mechanism hidden by the dress) as though ascending to heaven. At left is the character Water Bearer. At right is the hand of the Magician. Walker's installation “Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine)” at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art explores trauma and healing, and nods to religious pageantry. Credit: Marissa Leshnov for The New York Times

Walker's foray into robotics is new but perhaps not surprising. The automatons are instantly recognizable as a product of her hand and imagination, reminiscent of her signature silhouettes — a technique that had roots in the Victorian art of shadow puppets. It's as though they've now materialized in three dimensions, with motors and electronics and a few extra bells and whistles.

Her early interest in puppets emerged some 30 years back, when Walker made her huge splash in the art world right out of the Rhode Island School of Design's M.F.A. program, in her 1994 show at the Drawing Center in New York. There, she constructed her first panorama using black paper cutout silhouettes skewering both Black and white racist stereotypes in an epic antebellum plantation scene. It was at once lyrical and lewd, playful and horrific.

Invitations and accolades quickly followed, including the MacArthur “genius” award in 1997. (Walker was one of the youngest recipients.) That same year came hundreds of publicized letters of protest from older members of Walker's own Black community, objecting to her use and the exhibition of degrading imagery of African Americans in museums where they had had little representation to begin with.

Ann Philbin, then the director of the Drawing Center, gave Walker her early break and remembers the very personal and brutal subsequent public takedown. “Kara suffered through it — but she was also undeterred,” said Philbin, who went on to become director of the Hammer Museum for 25 years. “She didn't back down and the work became even stronger and more nuanced but just as unsettling.”



The sphinx-like centerpiece of Kara Walker's exhibit at the Domino Sugar Factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2014, titled “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby.” Damon Winter/The New York Times



Kara Walker's 2007-'08 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art included her early cut paper silhouettes, a daring reinvention of the genteel Victorian medium into her art. She drew inspiration from sources as varied as the antebellum South, testimonial slave narratives, historical novels and minstrel shows. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Christopher Bedford, SFMOMA's director, described Walker as “this country's most important artist — for her relentless drive to force us as a nation to reckon with our past.”

The project costs for the commission were nearly \$2 million, supported through grants and private philanthropy. It is the museum's first commission specifically for the Roberts Family Gallery, which has Roman amphitheater steps that provide ample seating and is visible from the street.

Bedford noted the very long shadow that Covid has cast on San Francisco's hard-hit downtown, where the museum is situated, and also the efforts to build back attendance, now hovering around 65 percent of prepandemic levels.

Walker said she initially struggled with doing another commission, having come off a string of major public projects, most recently her 2019 monumental fountain at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London. “The Tate seemed like it was the culmination,” Walker said.

She was at first resistant to the Roberts Family Gallery site in the 2016 addition designed by Snohetta. “I didn't want to be a lobby decorator,” she said. “Sometimes it feels like it's providing a service for the museum, bringing in customers, as opposed to making an artwork.” Then the pandemic happened. “It felt like a good time to rethink and reset,” Walker said.

She found a direction to explore at the New-York Historical Society's 2022 exhibition, “Black Dolls,” many handmade by enslaved women using scraps of cloth; after seeing the show the artist experimented with sewing humble little figures.

But it wasn't until what she called the “fever dream” of her own Covid sickness later that year, when she reached into the deepest corner of her closet and pulled out her own childhood doll for comfort, at her loneliest moment, that her vision for the commission began to crystallize.



Clockwise from top left, Fortuna, the namesake of Kara Walker's “Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine)” is programmed to occasionally look around the room while idle; a robotic “gardener” known as Bell Toller announces the next cycle of the healing ritual; printed fortunes collect at the base of Fortuna; a veiled “gardener” known as Harpy plays dissonant chords from a gaping hole in its chest, with animal hands. Marissa Leshnov for The New York Times

“I thought about dolls as therapy machines, providing a service,” she recalled in the Brooklyn hangar, “and as some kind of magic object.” Walker decided to embrace the museum's desire for audience engagement, and the architecture of a gallery frequented by families, by constructing her larger-than-life-size avatars of men, women and children that would deliver an experience that she described as part church, part Disneyland and part natural history museum display.

“Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine)” could be seen as a diorama of tomorrow, looking back at Black life in America “from the institution of slavery through the eviction of Black populations from inner cities like San Francisco,” she suggested.

The setting itself is deeply personal: Until age 13 Walker lived in nearby Stockton, Calif., and frequented San Francisco with her family. In conceptualizing her new project, she thought about the displays she saw at the California Academy of Sciences, which she called, “my favorite place on earth as a kid.” She has drawn on other spots from her youth, like the Musée Mécanique on Fisherman's Wharf, which has an entertaining collection of coin-operated fortune tellers, mechanical puppets and animated dioramas.

She dove into Donna Haraway's essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” which contemplates the hybrid of human and machine as a metaphor for women of color. She read Jessica Riskin's essay “Machines in the Garden,” illuminating the popularity of automatons in Renaissance Europe on noblemen's estates as amusements, and in church re-enactments of the divine. And she revisited Octavia E. Butler's 1993 novel, “Parable of the Sower,” set in a postapocalyptic future of 2024.

“I went down a little sci-fi rabbit hole the last couple years working on this piece,” said Walker, who enlisted Noah Feehan as the technical lead to design the software programming; the engineering studio Hypersonic in Brooklyn, led by Bill Washbaugh, to build the robots' bodies; and the couturier Gary Graham to outfit them.



The artist Kara Walker preparing a robot at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Ari Marcopoulos

While Walker outsourced the technology, she remained hands-on, modeling each figure's face and hands in clay, which were then 3-D scanned and printed. She drew silhouettes of the body shapes on cardboard, which were translated into aluminum skeletons, wired for motion and covered by exquisitely tailored clothing.

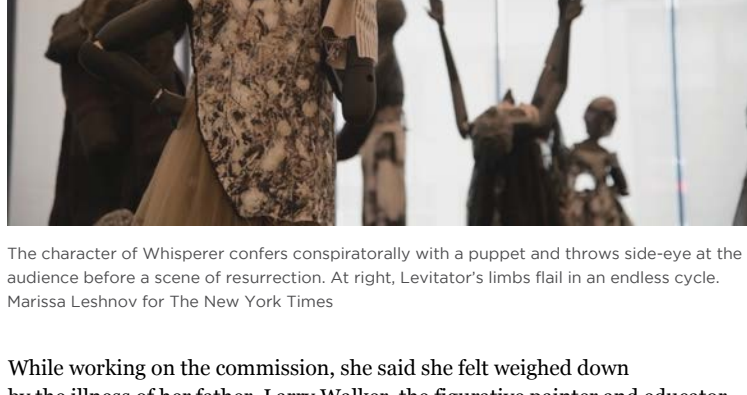
A big challenge was giving the automatons old-fashioned herky-jerky movement while not having them appear to be malfunctioning. “Motors and robotics generally privilege really smooth actions,” Feehan said, “exactly the opposite of what Kara wanted.”

She showed the team Herbie Hancock's video “Rockit,” with spasmodically moving Chuck E. Cheese-style animatronics. She also taped herself pantomiming movements for each character. Her video for Whisperer, another child figure holding her own puppet, with which she appears to gossip, was “10 minutes of haunting conspiratorial eye-acting from Kara,” Feehan said. The automatons' moves “will be a mix of chance and choreographed routines,” he added.

Harpy, a doll who plucks the strings in the gaping hole in her abdomen, often dances a duet with Water Bearer, who wears a long, elegant skirt printed with a black-and-white image of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, smoke billowing from the fires. At periodic intervals, the Bell Toller stiffly chimes, signaling the main event: the rise and fall of Levitator at the bidding of Magician, a kneeling male figure with outstretched arms. This play of resurrection and dissolution, stuck in a futile loop, evokes religious pageantry.

The tolling bell also summons a stooped figure on its own pedestal, who slowly unbends and comes to attention. His detached arms wriggle on the platform amid the obsidian rocks.

“I was thinking a lot about people I actually witnessed walking on the streets around the museum,” Walker said. “It felt very desperate to me — the unhoused population, the drugs, the emptiness.”



The character of Whisperer confers conspiratorally with a puppet and throws side-eye at the audience before a scene of resurrection. At right, Levitator's limbs flail in an endless cycle. Marissa Leshnov for The New York Times

While working on the commission, she said she felt weighed down by the illness of her father, Larry Walker, the figurative painter and educator, and questions of mortality and memorials.

“Last year he asked me for a new body,” Walker said. She was keeping her project a secret and didn't get the chance to share it with him.

“My dad would be wondering why I would do something this far away from two-dimensional work,” she said, adding, “I like to think I was his best student, but I also had a mind of my own.”

Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, has not yet seen the new piece. But looking back across the trajectory of Walker's work, she said, “What I marvel at is the way in which Kara is such a profoundly powerful monument and memorial maker.

“The work exists as a way for us to understand collective memory and moves us through many emotions — beauty, a dystopian sense of the world, a view of the real and the imagined.”

David A.M. Goldberg, a lead product designer for Disney, who contributed an essay to the exhibition catalog, said that Walker's automatons “really hark back to harsh truths about plantation relationships that we first understood from her, through the silhouettes.” Now, through her work with robotics, he added, “She challenges what makes that so uncomfortable. Is it their Blackness? Is it because they're not fluid, animated figures?”

Walker faced her own fear of technology by enlisting ChatGPT for the first time to write the aphorisms dispensed by Fortuna. She used AI prompts such as “Afro-pessimism” and “liberation struggles.” Yet the results sounded trite. “I was like, ‘No, it has to have fire! It has to have soul!’” She wound up writing 100-plus fortunes herself, proving that a human sensibility was not yet replaceable.

At the Brooklyn Navy Yard, standing alone, Fortuna straightened up, arms by its sides. In the snowfall of fortunes on the floor, one message stood out: “Artists cannot be expected to follow instructions.”

The New York Times