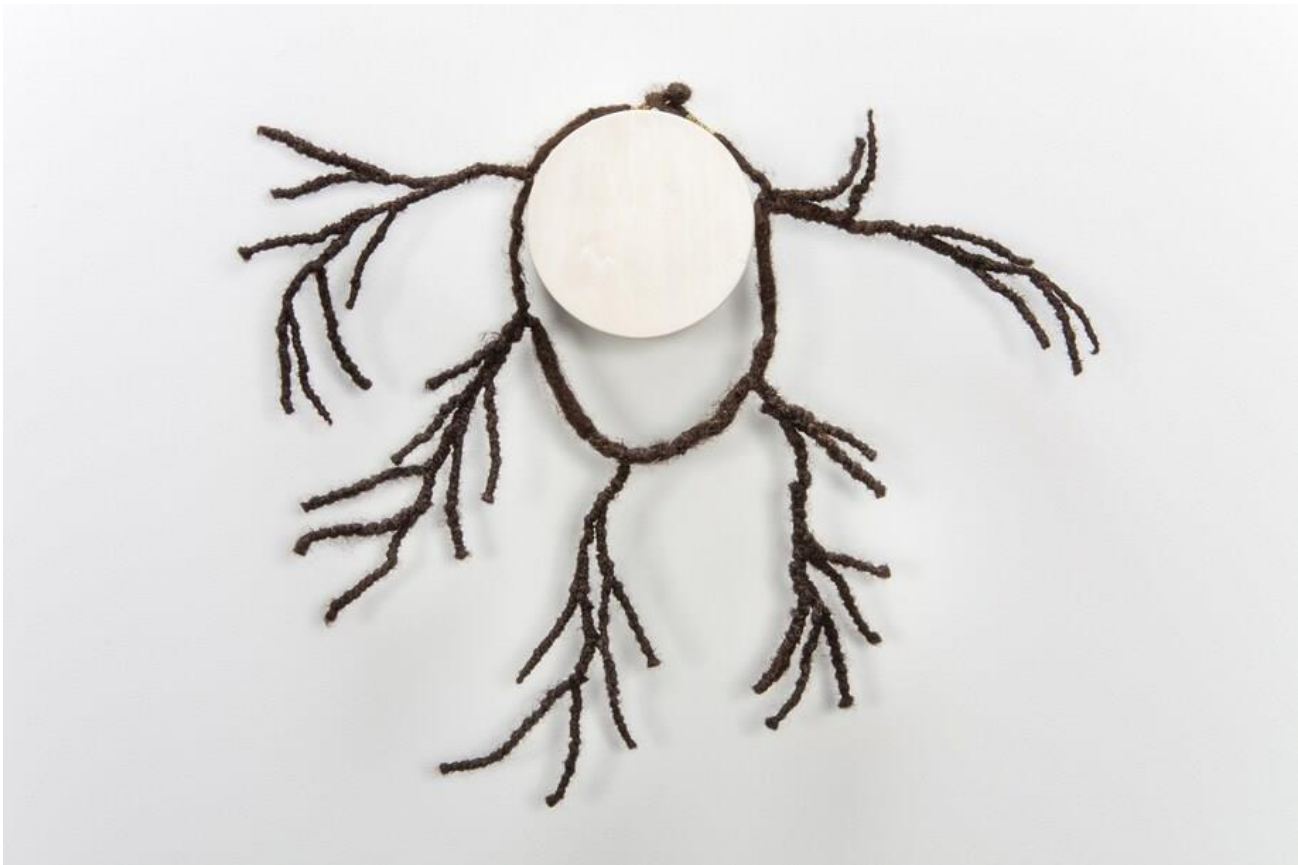


# The Washington Post

## At the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Sonya Clark's art is both political and deeply personal

By Mark Jenkins | March 9, 2021



"Hair Necklace 5 (Branches)" by Sonya Clark. Photo by Taylor Dabney

The political is personal — intimate, even — in Sonya Clark's art. The D.C. native weaves visual narratives of African American culture, history and genetics using such materials as beads, plastic combs, and her own hair. Clark's ability to transform such everyday things into pungent critiques is central to the National Museum of Women in the Arts exhibition "Tatter, Bristle and Mend," the artist's first major career survey.

Most of the pieces in this wide-ranging yet thematically cohesive show do not incorporate actual hair. But Clark, a professor at Amherst College, deftly uses black fiber to suggest her own tresses, and those of her African (by way of Jamaica and Trinidad) ancestors. Clustered black threads take the form of X-shaped chromosomes and a map of the African diaspora, and are sewn defiantly into fabric decorated with nostalgic images of what might be called the good old days (if you were wealthy and White). Two

sets of braids, one tightly anchored and the other free-hanging, contrast the artist's known European heritage and her largely unknowable African one.

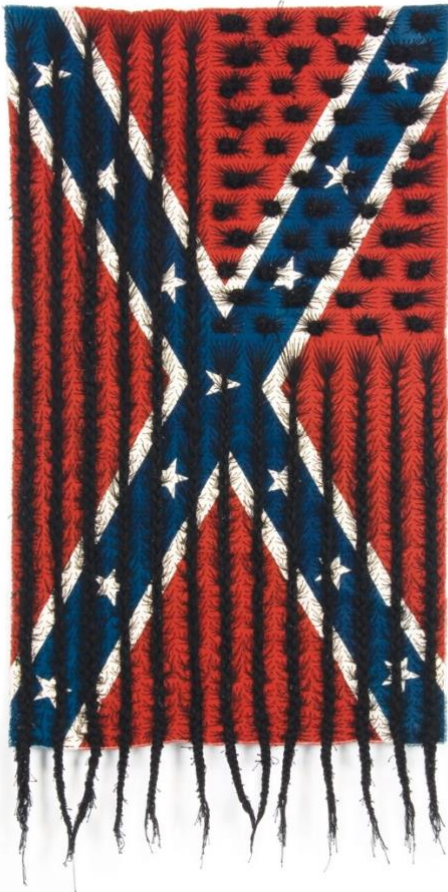
When working with actual hair, Clark knits it to make necklaces and wreaths that sometimes include beads. Using beads alone, she makes a model of the genetic code for melanin, which produces skin pigmentation. The beads are red, blue, and yellow, but the implied hue is Black.



(left) "Hair Wreath" by Sonya Clark. Photo by Lee Stalsworth (right) "Straight Ways" (detail) by Sonya Clark.

Before taking her current position, Clark spent a decade at Virginia Commonwealth University, located in the erstwhile capital of the Confederacy. One legacy of her Richmond period is a series of portraits of 11 of the city's hairdressers, all Black and female, drawn on the tops of dozens of combs fitted together into unconventional canvases. The beauticians are also depicted in colorful, large-format photos in which the artist's body becomes the canvas: Each woman poses next to an elaborate braiding job they did on the back of Clark's head.

Textile art meets performance art in a room filled with works that may well have been inspired by Clark's time in Richmond. The artist deconstructs the Confederate flag in multiple ways: by bleaching it, blackening it, fraying it, grafting it with black braids and even reducing it to three balls of cotton in red, white and blue. When unraveling the flag in performance, according to a written description, Clark encourages audience members to stand beside her and help symbolically undo the Confederacy — and all that the South's "Lost Cause" has come to signify since 1865.



(left) "Black Hair Flag" by Sonya Clark. (right) "Monumental Fragment" by Sonya Clark. Photos by Taylor Dabney

The same gallery features copies of a different Confederate banner: the handmade dish towel that served as the rebels' surrender flag at the end of the war. These ragged scraps of off-white fabric signify that the Lost Cause really is lost — and a long time ago, too — and are reminders of the labor of domestic weavers and other unsung women. Yet the towels themselves are as ordinary as the cheap plastic combs that are the basis for dozens of the show's artworks. Clark finds value in meaning, not material.

Cotton can be made into flags, or used to imitate human hair. It's also one of the two most labor-intensive agricultural products — the other is sugar — that were harvested by enslaved people in the Americas and the Caribbean. Clark evokes these two substances in myriad ways, notably by nestling spun-sugar flowers amid cotton pods. The most tender treatment is a photograph of her mother's white hair cradled in the artist's hands and titled "[Mom's Wisdom or Cotton Candy](#)." Even when pondering the things closest to her own life, Clark is always exquisitely attuned to the ways they can be used as metaphors for the larger Black experience.

*Sonya Clark: Tatter, Bristle and Mend*

National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW. [nmwa.org](http://nmwa.org).