

## Making Black Feminist Art Histories

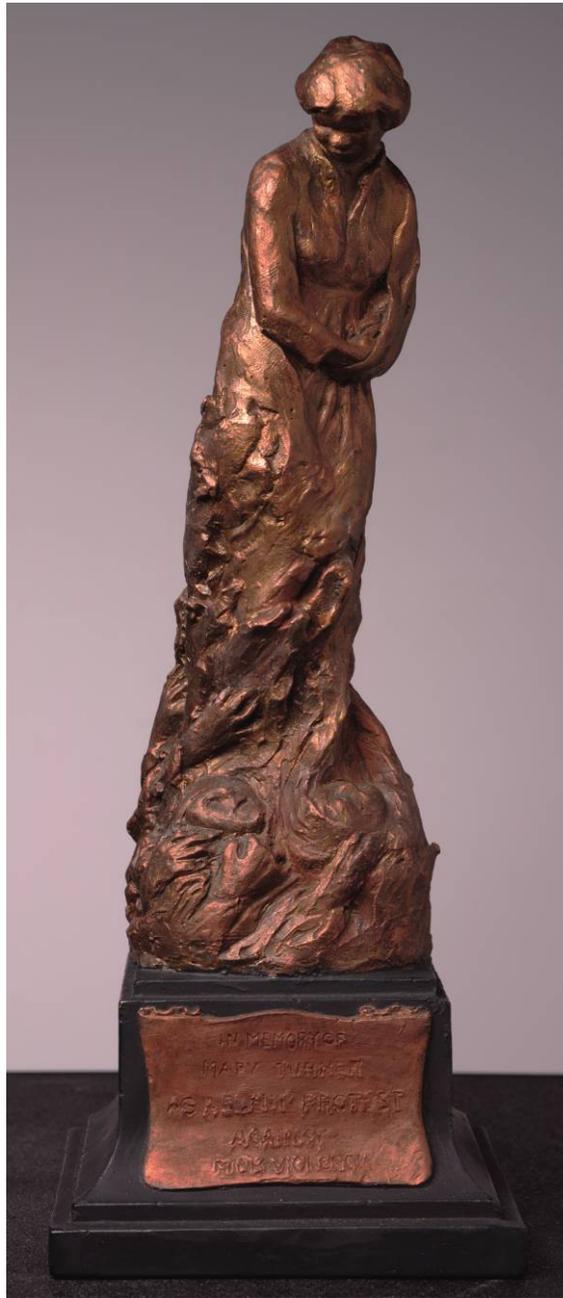
Over the last decade, I have had the pleasure of teaching Renée Ater's 2003 article "Making History" on Meta Warrick Fuller's *Ethiopia* in classes focused on twentieth-century sculpture, histories of modernism, and African American cultural politics.<sup>1</sup> Such range underlines the expansive address of the artist's work as well as the scholar's vital framing of it: in homing in on *Ethiopia*, the signature sculpture of a long-neglected black female artist, Ater's text subtly challenges art-historical discourse while holding out a productive model of it, one that confronts rather than suppresses the importance of race and gender in the making of modern American culture.

Fuller's *Ethiopia* is a painted plaster depicting a standing woman in Egyptian-inspired attire—complete with mummy wrappings—who appears to be emerging from a deep sleep. The significance of this iconography has not been lost on other scholars of African American art who have recognized the work, even if glancingly, as a signal achievement of the Harlem Renaissance that offers an innovative instantiation of black international consciousness (29n3).<sup>2</sup> Ater's article builds on, deepens, and corrects these earlier readings by nuancing our understanding of Fuller's particular brand of cultural nationalism, providing a robust sense of the historical context that informed it, and detailing, arguably for the first time, how the sculpture was activated in a number of pageants and performances as a model and surrogate for the black female body (25–28).

As such, "Making History" deftly combines close attention to the formal dynamics of the sculpture with meticulous archival research (13, 18). Just as important, Fuller's work, as narrated by Ater—in her essay, subsequent book, and the dissertation from which both texts emerged—opens onto much-needed conversations about black feminist aesthetics and the centrality of African diasporic female bodies to avant-garde innovation. For, as I have argued elsewhere—licensed, in part, by Ater's research—Western modernism has time and again taken up black female bodies as avatars of radical difference, enabling artists on all sides of the color line to push against the limits of representation, whether Édouard Manet in *Olympia* (1863, Musée d'Orsay) or Cindy Sherman in her *Bus Riders* series (1976).<sup>3</sup> Fuller's practice can be understood both to sit within and to contest this tradition, especially if we follow Ater's lead across her writing as she unravels the sculpture's relationship to other sights and scenarios.

To wit: whereas in *Ethiopia* the remarkable bound-ness of the work seems intended to protect the figure from the violence of an objectifying gaze, in an earlier piece, Fuller confronted and thematized the actual violence to which black women have historically been subjected. The sculpture in question is *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest against Mob Violence* (fig. 1), and any attempt to come to grips with it must turn to Ater's earlier scholarship. As she explains in her 2000 dissertation, the subtitle of the sculpture refers to the New York "Negro Silent Protest Parade," organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in July 1917 in recognition of the spate of murders that had taken tens of black lives in Waco, Memphis, and St. Louis in the previous year. Collapsing time and space, Fuller took the parade as a guide for her homage to the work's eponymous martyr, a tenant farmer who dared to speak out after her husband was lynched by a mob in Georgia on May 19, 1918. In retribution, Turner, then eight months pregnant, was hung from a tree, burned, and disemboweled before her body was riddled with bullets. In her sculptural response—likely the earliest American artwork to depict a

- 1 Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest against Mob Violence*, 1919. Painted plaster, 15 × 5¼ × 4½ in. Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket, Mass. Courtesy of John L. Fuller Sr. Image courtesy the Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket, Mass.



lynched black woman—Fuller at once refuses and registers this horrendous violence, rendering a female figure who holds her absent child in her arms, her dress giving way to the tortured hands and faces that rise like flames around the sculpture’s base.<sup>4</sup>

Fuller never exhibited the sculpture but kept it above her desk. The small plaster sketch served, then, as a memento and a memorial but was also, I think, imagined as a monument: the work’s patina of bronze paint suggests as much and its downturned face would have offered a fitting shelter and destination for those marchers in the NAACP parade. In her 2011 book, *Remaking Race and History*, Ater argues that the artist “transformed” this work “into a positive pan-Africanist statement” with *Ethiopia*.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, the pair of sculptures—one miniature, private, and engulfed in flames; the other life-size, public, and swathed in bandages—outline a black feminist method that aims to both engage and disrupt the violence enacted against black women in life and in representation.

Like Fuller’s work on the black female figure, Ater’s approach has unfolded in time, leading to the ambitious agenda for black and women’s art

histories spelled out in *Remaking Race*.<sup>6</sup> Throughout her scholarship, she emphasizes the performative interventions that activated and inspired Fuller’s art: the pageants and protests come alive on the page, allowing us to consider them as aesthetic interventions in their own right. “Making History” can thus be seen as one moment in an art-historical trajectory that asks us not only to take black women’s art seriously but also to pay heed to what Hannah Feldman calls “image tactics,” those means employed by marginalized subjects to make themselves visible within the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> What Ater’s work suggests is that in time and with effort, “American art” itself can be transformed if the fullness of black women’s lives and cultural practices are placed at the fore.

## Notes

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My article, which appears just as Renée Ater retires from her position at the University of Maryland, College Park, to embark on new ventures, is meant not only to honor her 2003 *American Art* essay, but also her distinguished art-historical career and the lasting interventions of her work.

- 1 Renée Ater, "Making History: Meta Warrick Fuller's *Ethiopia*," *American Art* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 12–31 (subsequent citations appear in the text in parentheses).
- 2 Ater cites the following precedents to her study: David Driskell, "The Flowering of the Harlem Renaissance: The Art of Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer Hayden, and William H. Johnson," in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), 108; Judith Wilson, "Hagar's Daughters: Social History, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-U.S. Women's Art," in *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists* (New York: Spelman College and Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1996), 106; and Richard J. Powell, "Re/Birth of Nation," in *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (London: Hayward Gallery and Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997), 18.
- 3 Huey Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 480–97. For a related argument, see Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 4 Ater devotes a chapter to the work in her "Race, Gender, and Nation: Rethinking the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Maryland, 2000), 125–55. For a recent engagement that extends Ater's research and resonates with my own here, see Caitlin Beach, "Meta Warrick Fuller's *Mary Turner* and the Memory of Mob Violence," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 36 (May 2015): 16–27.
- 5 Renée Ater, *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011), 33.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 1–7.
- 7 I borrow the notion of image tactics from Hannah Feldman, "'The Eye of History': Photojournalism, Protest, and the *Manifestation* of 17 October 1961," in *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2014), 159–99.

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## John Wollaston and Passion in Eighteenth-Century Charleston

In the spring of 2016 I taught the seminar *Art of the American South* at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where I was then an associate professor of art history. In preparing my syllabus, one of the challenges was to assign scholarship—especially studies dealing with early portraiture—that upheld a tone of probing inquiry and that sought an interpretive richness befitting the images under discussion. Jennifer Van Horn's article "The Mask of Civility: Portraits of Colonial Women and the Transatlantic Masquerade," published in *American Art* in 2009, was very helpful in this regard. It lays the groundwork for new approaches to art produced in the decades leading up to the American Revolution and, not surprisingly, was a hit with my seminar students.<sup>1</sup>

I have long benefited from scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art published in the journal (my present project on Edward Hopper's hotel imagery builds on Erika Doss's recent article on the artist's visualization of modernist psychological suppression).<sup>2</sup> Eighteenth-century scholarship, however, has not appeared as frequently in *American Art*, although the situation has begun