FROM SARAH BAARTMAN TO L’IL KIM

Over the past two decades, Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman has been the subject of numerous historical, anthropological, literary and visual arts projects including Deborah Willis’ Tribute to the Hottentot Venus quilt. An installation by furniture maker/conceptual artist Fo Wilson advances the discussion of the Baartman history by linking it to the exploits of 20th- and 21st-century African American women.

“Hottentot not! Indeed! What shall I call you George Cuvier, lusting to explore the secrets of my own dark continent, you pull me off my throne and use my brain, endowed back side, and secret jewels to build a throne of your own in glass jars.”

EXCERPT BAARTMAN DIARIES INSTALLATION TEXT

A 2005 MFA graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design’s furniture design program, Fo Wilson uses the language of her furniture to investigate issues of identity, culture and the human experience. Wilson’s Baartman Diaries exhibition at the Richard and Dolly Maas Gallery, Purchase College/SUNY, May 22–June 13, 2008 focused on the life of Sarah Baartman, a Khoi Khoi woman taken from Cape Town to Britain in 1810. In London, Baartman was exhibited as a carnival freak. Her image and the idea of “the Hottentot Venus” swept through British popular culture. In 1814 she was taken to France and became the object of medical and scientific research. In the mixed media Baartman Diaries installation, Wilson explores the voice of Sarah Baartman and explicates the curiosity of famed French naturalist George Cuvier. Upon Baartman’s death, Cuvier, unceremoniously dissected her body, put her brain and genitals in bell jars and used them to support his theory of “Hottentots” as the missing evolutionary link between animals and human beings. Sarah Baartman’s remains were kept on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1985.

Hottentot Not is a physical metaphor and a contemporary shrine. One piece is composed of an exquisitely crafted piece of furniture made from cherry wood (dressed in a horsetail hair apron) with a bell jar on top and fictional diary entries suspended above. This text is written in the voice of Baartman and does not question her host/captor. Through the artist, Baartman becomes this assertive voice (character), one who is aware and more able to address the concerns of contemporary women in society.

“Darwin, Gelton, Bertillon and Murray sit with you looking down on the world of the darker ones while you ask us to masquerade in your evolutionary fairy tale. Hear me I am no missing link I am not missing at all. Your glass jars present false premises. In the end you will see. My people are good. We will lead great nations to salvation rescuing them from their own demise and ruination. In the end we will see who will call who civilized.”

EXCERPT FROM BAARTMAN DIARIES INSTALLATION TEXT

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Fo Wilson
Sara’s Lament, 2008
Collaboration with Dayo Harewood
LCD monitors, bell jars, video (30 sec.), fictional diary entries.

The diary entries comment on the “curious moving cages” where “video girls” willingly give away their “secrets.” In contemporary Nama language, South African women have a collection of secret words, the meaning of which, only they know and share. These words speak of private, intimate things shared between the women about their romantic world with their husbands and lovers.

Hottentot Not was the curiosity of famed French naturalist Georges Cuvier, who upon her death unceremoniously dissected her body, put her brain and genitals in bell jars and used them to support his theories of “Hottentots” as the missing evolutionary link between animals and humans. This piece includes a representation of Cuvier’s famous 1817 treatise: Extrait d’observations faites sur le cadavre d’une femme connue a Paris et a Landres sous le nom de Venus Hottentote. According to some accounts, Baartman was said to have been made to perform on a stage in a cage.
Baartman’s celebrity inspired the 19th-century Victorian bustle dress that evolved stylistically through the entire century. She was one of three South African women displayed as an anthropological curiosity in Europe during that time with steatopygia, a so-called condition where proteins are stored as fatty tissue in the posterior and thighs and is common in women who live in arid parts of Southern Africa.

Other works in this exhibition point to later figures such as Josephine Baker and L’il Kim. Are these women following in the Sara Baartman legacy? Josephine Baker, like Baartman, found fame through her sexuality and the European fascination with her exotic appearance. Wilson’s art challenges ideas around black female sexuality and examines the role that we play in our own victimization. To what extent was Sara Baartman a willing participant in the display of her body? As we look further across time, Baartman again appears to us in the form of L’il Kim. At each of her visits, she spans time to make us question our complicity.

Part of the African tradition is a belief that the spirit of the ancestors can be embodied in inanimate objects. Wilson’s work establishes a portal connecting us to this belief. In revisiting it, we have conversation with the present. The works enable us to more clearly address current dilemmas and project possibilities for the future. Through reenactment and re-visititation we become more fluent at interpreting the rationale behind issues of colonialism, racism, enslavement, scientific racism and standards of beauty.

R. Shabaka is co-director of The Scene Gallery, Brooklyn, New York.