

Heather Davis

Seffronia, 2005

Cans, African fabric, silk, felt, beads, paper, photo transfer, phone wire

8" x 8" x 2"

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Artist's Statement

Recently, I have been researching more about my genealogy. My maternal lineage is far different than my paternal ancestry. My maternal lineage which is represented by Auntie Sarah in my work, a dark girl with woolly hair, is at times a figure from the Jim Crow era and at others a slave. My paternal side, represented by Seffronia, a blonde girl with Caucasoid features, is more like W.E.B. DuBois' Philadelphia Negro, many of them fair-skinned and affluent. Those two characters are representative of multiple people in my family and myself. Through these personas the work explores stereotypes of women from African descent- the mammy and the tragic mulatto.

What I want to question in my work is the legitimacy of these stereotypes. I am not questioning their existence but the role they play in individuals. Are people of African descent eternalizing these images and believing them as truth?

The work has elements of stereotypes, which I believe at the beginning stages of their creation were subconscious. Auntie Sarah, who makes her first appearance in singer Nina Simone's *Four Women*, as does Seffronia, is part of Aunt Jemima. In Seffronia's story, Auntie Sarah is Seffronia's mother demonstrating Auntie Sarah's mammy-hood. As early as 1836, plantation fiction such as that of Beverley Tucker drew a parallel between blacks and women. Tucker presented a list of the qualities held by both women and Blacks, "their humility, their grateful affection, their self-renouncing loyalty, their subordination of the heart." In my pieces Auntie Sarah is often docile and a child demonstrating those characteristics.

The tragic mulatto character was introduced in two short stories: "The Quadroons" in 1842 and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" in 1843. The mulatto portrayed a light skinned woman as the offspring of a White slaveholder and his Black female slave. Seffronia shares the same beginning in my work and in the *Four Women* song.

These two parts of my history are evident in my work but are also at war with each other. I often utilize images of myself and of my family members to explore these women. Though I physically

resemble Seffronia, I feel both of them. The tales, such as the story about Anansi, also demonstrate these elements. The tales are part of the Auntie Sarah character as they are mostly from the South and relate back to Africa or slavery.