



## Kiki Smith's Installation 'Chorus' Brings Josephine Baker To Times Square Lot

The Huffington Post | By Priscilla Frank

Posted: 05/30/2012



These days Times Square is possibly avoided more often than sought out, defined by swarms of tourists, overpriced trinkets and all-consuming advertisements. However, the artist Kiki Smith is working against this mentality with her new installation, titled "Chorus." Smith arranged multicolored stained-glass stars clusters around Art Production Fund's Last Lot project space on 46th Street and 8th Avenue. Made of hand blown cathedral glass, the luminescent stars recall the razzle-dazzle of Broadway's heyday, and certainly contrast with today's empty lot. Evoking an almost religious sense of awe, the stained glass stars guide us to revisit an era that has been mythologized over the past century.

We asked Smith some questions on her fascination with the 1920s and how "Chorus" came to be.

### HP: How does nostalgia fit into this project?

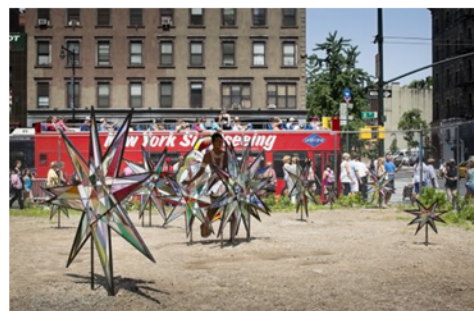
KS: One of my worst personal problems is nostalgia, a sentimentalism for a past that doesn't really exist, or an attachment to a non-existent past. Josephine Baker's past amplifies many of the social political problems of the United States. I am interested in th 1920s, but more in the visualization of spectacle pageantry and how that relates to medieval art... the exuberant festiveness of public experience. I don't know if I feel nostalgia for her particularly. I just think she is someone who exemplifies that time period. She was one of the first African-American stars of cinema. In a way she is a cultural ambassador, definitely a cultural icon.



HP: It seems you've been using a lot of stained glass in your projects lately. Is this a conscious decision -- a way to explore a new medium?

KS: I have been working with stained glass for about 25 years. I have rarely had the opportunity to make it in an architectural context simply because nobody had asked me. I nonetheless had the necessity to work with painting on glass. It was attractive to me because it is a non-porous material, and it has a transparent luminosity. I was excited to be working with color, endless color. Also, Josephine Baker adopted 12 children from all over the world from different nationalities. She called them her "Rainbow Tribe." So that made me think of using all different kinds of glass.





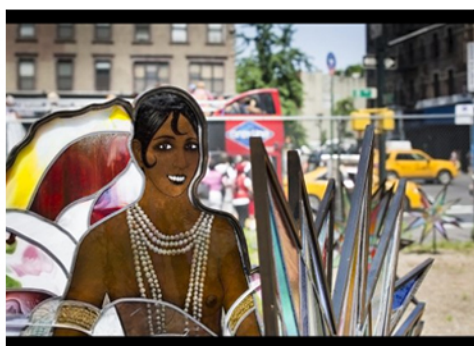
**HP: How does the glamor of Josephine Baker fit into the unglamorous location on 8th Avenue?**

KS: Josephine Baker was someone who lived a long time and had a multifaceted life. She exemplifies the glamor, sexuality and comedic qualities of both the vaudeville and the burlesque. But I don't think [8th Avenue] is unglamorous. I think that whole area certainly historically has been associated with glamor and then with social destitution... destitution and poverty, the sensationalism of sex. For me it's the attraction of using glass, to pick the material, the mattiness of the rubble in contrast to the shiny luminescence of the glass.

**HP: In an interview with The New York Times you said, "The history of Times Square has been erased and made boring." Would you elaborate on this idea?**

KS: Under Giuliani's administration, he wanted to change the architecture and the constituency of the people who went to Times Square. I imagine for tax purposes as well as a more conservative social agenda. Who owns Times Square now is radically different from who owned it 20 or 30 years ago. You used to have burlesque shows and peep shows and an enormous intersection of people. You had tourists visiting the city, you have young people going to visit the all night movie houses, poor people, rich people every walk of life. I think that has changed to some extent. But you still have all the spectacle of the lights and the history of the lights. And you have the advertisements; there are very few places in the world that have that visual impact of light... that pleasurable assault of light.

**"Chorus" is a public installation on view until September 4 at The Last Lot project space on 46th Street and 8th Avenue. The piece is presented by Art Production Fund.**



All images:

Kiki Smith

Chorus, 2012

Blackened Steel, Hand Blown Stained Glass, Lead

Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy of Art Production Fund