

ROBERTS PROJECTS

Sculpture Magazine

"Ritual, Politics, and Transformation: Betye Saar"

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April 2018



April 2018
Vol. 37 No. 3

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org



Above: *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972. Mixed-media assemblage, 11.75 x 8 x 2.75 in. Below: *Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail*, 1973. 2 views of mixed-media assemblage, 12 x 18 in.



BY STEVEN NELSON

For nearly 70 years, Betye Saar has created prints, collages, and assemblages that transform the cast-off and forgotten into powerful explorations of African American history and identity, the politics of race and gender, spirituality, and the occult. To visit her Los Angeles studio is to enter the world of a brilliant collector. Carefully categorized and filed, everything has its place. Black memorabilia, African sculptures, washboards, cages, scales, buttons, and myriad knick-knacks await assemblages in progress. This is a home to things cast off and forgotten, things waiting to be activated.

Saar was born in Los Angeles in 1926 and raised in Pasadena. Even as a child, she created art objects. She recalls making nearly everything in the book *Our Wonder World, a Library of Knowledge: Amateur Handicrafts*. She is a child of the Great Depression, and her family, like many others, had little money at the time. They used dishes until they broke. They did not waste food. They made things for each other. She became an avid observer of the world: "I would spend time with my grandmother in Watts, and we would pass Simon Rodia creating the Watts Towers (1921–55). I was fascinated with that." Putting together his work with the things that she and her family did on a daily basis, she learned the following: "Use it up, make it do, go without."

Saar attended Pasadena City College, where she majored in art. She then received a scholarship to UCLA, where she focused on interior design. She also pursued graduate studies at California State University, Long Beach; California State University, Northridge; and the University of Southern California. In 1952, she married Richard Saar, a ceramicist. The couple had three daughters. Two of them, Alison and Lezley, are artists. Betye and Richard would later divorce.

The family moved to the Laurel Canyon section of Los Angeles in 1962. Saar has been there ever since. By this time, she was involved with printmaking and had begun showing her work locally. A 1965 Los Angeles *Times* review of a one-day exhibition at the First Unitarian Church notes the high quality of her work. Printmaking served as Saar's segue from design into the fine arts.

In the late 1960s, she began to create assemblages such as *Black Girl's Window* (1969), which is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. With astrological signs across the top, a self-portrait at the bottom, a skeleton in the middle, and a daguerreotype of the artist's maternal grandmother, this work combines Saar's personal biography, heritage, and her interest in the metaphysical. *Black Girl's Window* is also an exegesis on the connection of life and death as well as a meditation on loss. All of these issues are leitmotifs in her work.

Saar's assemblages are the result of her own experimentation and intense looking at the work of other artists. She stresses that Joseph Cornell, George Herms, and Edward Kienholz opened creative doors for her. In 1967, she saw the Pasadena Art Museum's Joseph Cornell retrospective. His small, intimate boxes were among the first assemblages Saar had ever seen. In her mind, all of Kienholz's work "tells a story, sometimes just from a certain article he read in the paper." She continues, "There was one about Kathy Fiscus, a child who was three who fell down a well. They couldn't rescue her in time. He did a beautiful piece about her" (*Ode to Kathy Fiscus and A Box for Kathy*, 1962). Saar also saw Kienholz's controversial installation *Back Seat Dodge '38* (1964) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1966. Works such as this showed her the political possibilities of assemblage.

In 1972, the Rainbow Sign Cultural Center in Berkeley put out an open invitation for an exhibition of works depicting black heroes. Saar, who decided that she wanted a heroine, produced *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*,

TOP: BENJAMIN BLACKWELL, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES; BOTTOM: JONATHAN DONADO, BROOKLYN MUSEUM, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES



Left: *We Was Mostly 'Bout Survival*, 2017. Mixed-media assemblage, 37 x 8.5 x 2.75 in. Right and details: *Spirit Catcher*, 1977. Mixed-media assemblage, 45 x 18 x 18 in.

her best-known work. Connected to her earlier work yet explicitly political, *Aunt Jemima* was Saar's response to the rage and helplessness she experienced after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The work also responded to the politics of civil rights and black nationalism. Aunt Jemima was the symbol of black nurturing and black servitude. She was the caregiver for the master's children, as well as her own. She was also the go-between for the house and the field. In Saar's hands, Aunt Jemima, with her broom and her rifle, is transformed into a freedom fighter.

At the same time, Saar created *Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail*. Consisting of a

wine bottle with a scarf coming out of its neck, labeled with a hand-produced image of Aunt Jemima and the word "Aunty" on one side and the black power fist on the other, this Molotov cocktail demands political change, insisting that full racial and gender equality must be achieved, to borrow the words of slain civil rights leader Malcolm X, "by any means necessary."

Both of these works turn derogatory images of blacks on their heads, a move that African American poet Ishmael Reed lauded in a 1973 *New York Times* essay (Saar illustrated his 1978 book *A Secretary to the Spirits*). Other observers also recognized the radical nature of *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. Activist and academic Angela

Davis, in a 2007 lecture at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, suggested that the black women's revolution began with *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. "I was on cloud nine with that," Saar recalls.

Saar's immersion into assemblage led to a new understanding of Rodia's work. She notes that "I really didn't see the Watts Towers until I was an adult. I saw how he made it from every broken dish that he could find, and if he had some wet cement and didn't have anything he'd take a corn cob and put it in there or embed his tool and make a print." Along with the lessons of the Depression, Watts Towers reminded Saar that "nothing is broken. You can always recycle it and make art out of anything."



Cage (In The Beginning), 2006. Mixed-media assemblage, 42 x 15 x 12 in.

of collecting objects from flea markets and garage sales. Her daughter Tracye Saar-Cavanaugh recalls going on monthly pilgrimages to the sprawling Pasadena Swap Meet, where “Betye sorted through a box of old buttons or haggled over the price of a seat-less chair.”

Next, Saar sorts through the objects, shifting them around to see which pieces go together. She believes that all things have stories within them, and combining them registers as a formal act that opens other narratives. *We Was Mostly 'Bout Survival* (2017), for example, features the infamous diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*, an icon of black suffering and diasporic loss, painted onto an ironing board, which itself is combined with a wooden ship, a washboard imprinted with a photograph of a black woman doing laundry, and a bar of soap. Taken as a whole, the assemblage brings together the Middle Passage and black female domestic labor, characterizing both as foundational elements of African American history and experience. Like many of Saar’s works, *We Was Mostly 'Bout Survival* beautifully illustrates her proposition that the combining of objects leads to the uncovering of sublimated stories and the invention of new ones.

The third part of Saar’s process consists of transformation and fabrication. When her daughters were young, they assisted in this process. Now Saar hires people to help her put things together. Finally, in the last phase of the ritual, the work is released into the world, where it is subject to the infinite stories and interpretations of those who interact with it. Saar recalls how the washboard works that populated “Betye Saar: Keepin’ It Clean” (Craft & Folk Art Museum, 2017) elicited questions about African American history and contemporary race relation, in addition to personal recollections.

Whether washboards, buttons, masks, or cages, Saar chooses things based on their formal possibilities as well as on their alchemical, metaphysical, and transformative potential. Her travels and the experience of being an African American woman in Los Angeles have had an important influ-

ence on the kinds of objects that attract her and the kinds of art historical research she has done. When Saar and fellow artist David Hammons visited Chicago’s Field Museum in 1970, she was attracted to the African and Oceanic works on display. She also traveled to Africa, visiting Marrakesh and attending the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria. She read art historian Arnold Rubin’s 1975 *Artforum* essay “Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture,” which explored the relationship between objects, display, and power. All of these experiences led to an interest in using raffia, rattan, bamboo, leather earrings, skulls, and other organic materials in her work.

Spirit Catcher (1977) incorporates some of these materials, which become a means to visualize and connect with a spiritually and metaphysically based black identity. Understood by many as a folk altar, this assemblage ignited the imagination of many Los Angeles-based artists of color, who saw its straw and beads as a way to explore an earthy, organic, even mysterious blackness. Saar and the assemblage were also the subjects of a 30-minute television documentary, “Spirit Catcher—The Art of Betye Saar,” which aired on public television in 1978.

Saar’s works of the 1960s and 1970s—her mummies, forays into the occult, washboards, and collages—form the basis from which she still creates her works. Be it clocks that illustrate equality as an unfinished project, scales that bear witness to what she calls “the weight of racism,” or the return of Aunt Jemima, who combats our current racial amnesia, her works offer an unflinching look at African American history, as well as a deep, feminist exegesis on the social, psychological, and emotional construction of black identity. Along such lines, *Cage (In the Beginning)* (2006) presents African sculpture in captivity, alluding not only to the Middle Passage and the containment of black bodies, but also to the unconscious containment of our feelings and emotions. Saar adds that such works attend to the ways that “we build cages in our lives without even knowing it.” *Cage* and assemblages such as *Migration: Africa*

Responding to a burgeoning body of work that was becoming known for its exploration of personal history and spirituality, Los Angeles *Times* art critic William Wilson, in a review of the 1973 exhibition “Betye Saar: Selected Works 1964–1973” at California State University, Los Angeles, commented that the artist’s work combines “charm with occult magic, passionate idealism, and venomous racial sarcasm.” Given the mummies, washboards, slave ships, skulls, African art, feathers, and charms that populate her work, such a description is still apt.

Saar understands her art-making process as a four-part ritual. The first, which she calls “Hunting and Gathering,” consists



to *America I* (2006), which merge African art, mummies, and daguerreotypes, continue Saar's penchant for combining the personal and the political in unexpected ways. Her goal is the transformation not only of the objects under scrutiny but also of those who interact with them.

The past couple of years have been very busy for Saar, and with several upcoming exhibitions, she shows no signs of slowing down. She is still collecting, still combining, and still transforming objects in her quest to mine African American histories and to invent new ways of understanding the world. She is also converting her garage into additional studio space to accommodate larger works. Saar is still inventing stories through the combination of myriad cast-off and forgotten objects, with many more ideas to pursue. As far as she's concerned, "Artists don't retire."

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Left: *The Weight of Persistent Racism (Manufactured in the U.S.A.)*, 2014. Mixed-media assemblage, 25 x 9 x 7 in. Above: 2 views of *Migration: Africa to America I*, 2006. Mixed-media assemblage, 14 x 12 x 6.5 in.

LEFT: PHILIP WEISBERG, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS PRODUCTIONS, LOS ANGELES / RIGHT: JAM LANTIERANG, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS PRODUCTIONS, LOS ANGELES