

A tall, ornate wooden shrine or altar structure. The base is a large, dark wooden trunk. The middle section is a blue-painted wooden box containing a seated figure with a black face and a white mask above it. The top section is a smaller wooden box containing three standing figures and a large eye symbol. The structure is decorated with red candles, colorful beads, and a star-shaped ornament. The base is surrounded by various offerings, including a watch, a glass, and a pile of sticks.



BETYE SAAR RITUAL



ROBERTS & TILTON



"Betye Saar: Selected Works 1964-1973" Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles, CA, September 29 - October 2, 1973

Conceived as an experiential space, *Betye Saar: Ritual* presents a selection of Betye Saar's works spanning three decades organized under the unifying idea of ritual. The installation brings together collages and wall assemblages chosen for their reoccurring themes exploring the transformation of rituals and cultural symbols. The aforementioned wall works are ordered around a major historical work – *Mti*, 1973 – which takes its form as a freestanding altarpiece fusing together gypsy, Native American, and voodoo cultural symbols. Visitors are invited to participate in the work by placing a personal offering at the base of the work. The resulting exhibit aims to renegotiate the aestheticization of ritualized action, concepts of power and display, the transferal of installation as sculpture, and how agency simultaneously resides in the objecthood of art and its transmitted communicative qualities.

The ritual process of Saar's work evolved tremendously since the late 1960s, and took its most concrete form in 1973 when she added the altar format as a receptacle or platform for other objects. "*Mti*, the first of these, later became a participatory event, not only providing a new type of object but also suggesting a new, expanded approach to experiencing that object".* This transformation of a work into a cumulative participatory event by 1977 was a key development in Saar's practice, informing her use of space as the backdrop for larger and more immersive site specific installations.

First exhibited in 1973, *Mti* has had subsequent installations in both commercial and institutional spaces; as current conditions remain contingent on viewing the work, no two iterations are alike. Saar has long used her work as an

*Mary Schmidt Campbell. pg 3. Introduction *Rituals: The Art of Betye Saar*



Mti, 1973, mixed media floor assemblage, 42.5 x 23.5 x 17.5 in (107.95 x 59.69 x 44.45 cm)







organizing force for rites of passage, rendering visible and tangible the experiential. Aesthetic consideration for form underlines the placement of power in Saar's works - which in turn underlines how viewers intervene and act upon the present. Through extending the invitation of accumulation to the viewer, the installation becomes a cumulative participatory event. This action puts the audience in the position of collaboration – not as passive viewers, but as active participants – which engages a deeper relevance of the shared repast and the creation of community.

As a progression of format, the altar-as-concept was the starting point to the implementation and exhibition of Saar's personal and private interpretations of an African American experience, weighted with political and autobiographical implications. The profound intimacy of the altar form, reminiscent to her earlier boxes, speaks to the sublimation of the personal narrative into a shared experience.

Saar's radical departure from conventional attitudes - where a work of art is attributed to one mind, and its evolution ceases upon leaving the studio – lends *Mti* its affective power and complex multiple meanings. Through each manifestation, the link between the work and site is redefined. As well as producing a performative effect, the temporary nature of the installation work changes its relation to both institutional platforms and traditional forms of artist practice. The intimacy of the composition and invitation fixes the piece simultaneously in a nostalgic past and aggregated present. In effect, the works on view are transfers of information, mapping the interplay between performance and memory.

There is a continuity between art and ritual. They are essentially connected, with art playing a similar role today to which ritual played in the past. Saar's assemblage works begun in the 1970s utilize the accumulative process inspired by the tradition of African sculpture incorporating a variety of both decorative and power elements from its surrounding community. As a result, Saar's orchestration of materials and techniques transcend the formal qualities of iconographical or symbolic signifiers, and transform the environments in which they reside in—and the people whom they engage with—into parts of the work itself. The end result outlines the importance of how Saar's historical assemblages, as precursors of her present work, investigate concepts of the ritual and community, inherited traditions, and how objects retain the memories and histories of their owners.

Previous page: Betye Saar at the opening of "Betye Saar: Selected Works 1964-1973" California State University, Los Angeles, September 29, 1973

Above: Film still, *Spirit Catcher: The Art of Betye Saar*, 1977

Right: *Mti*, 1973, mixed media floor assemblage, 42.5 x 23.5 x 17.5 in (107.95 x 59.69 x 44.45 cm) side view





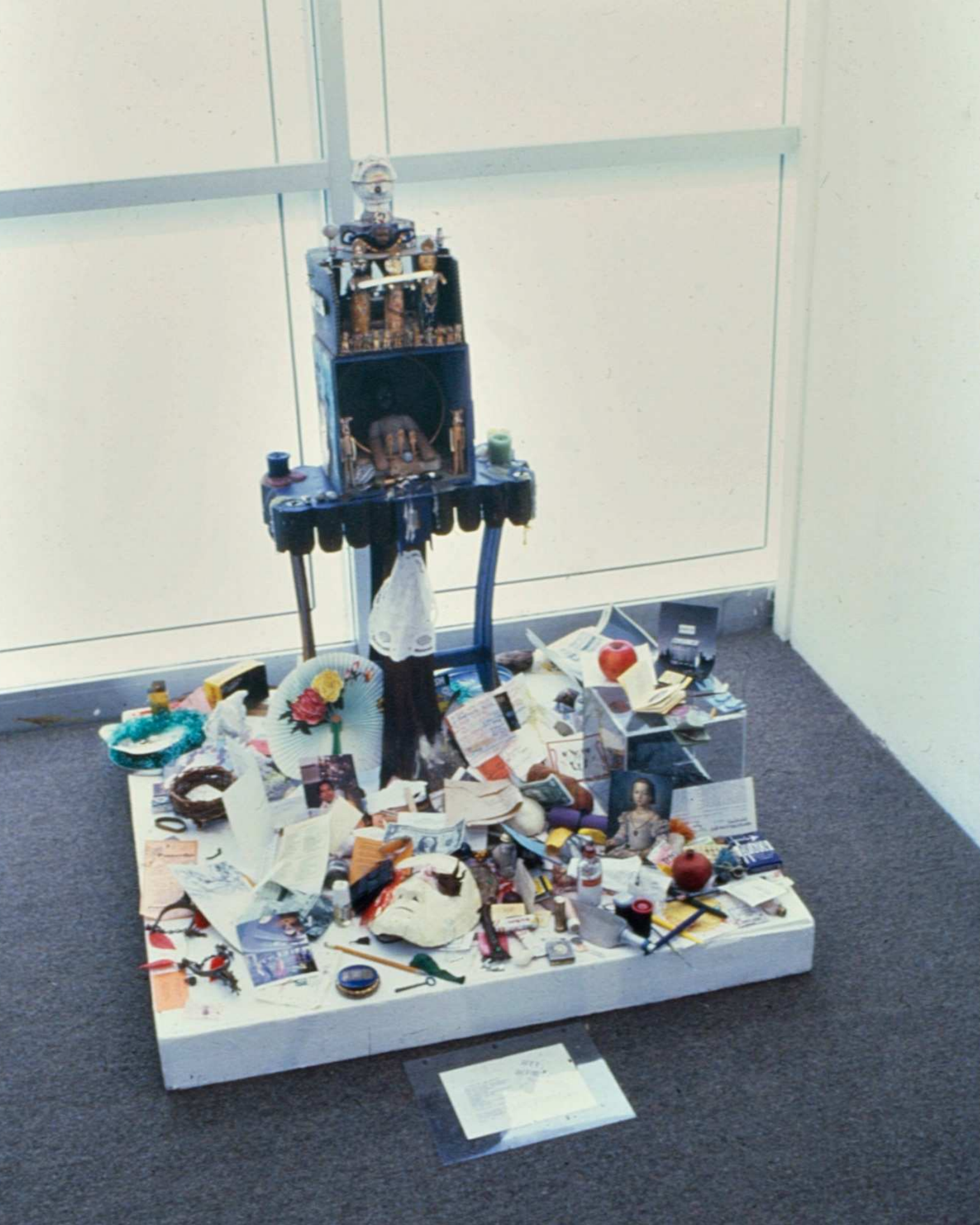
RITUAL

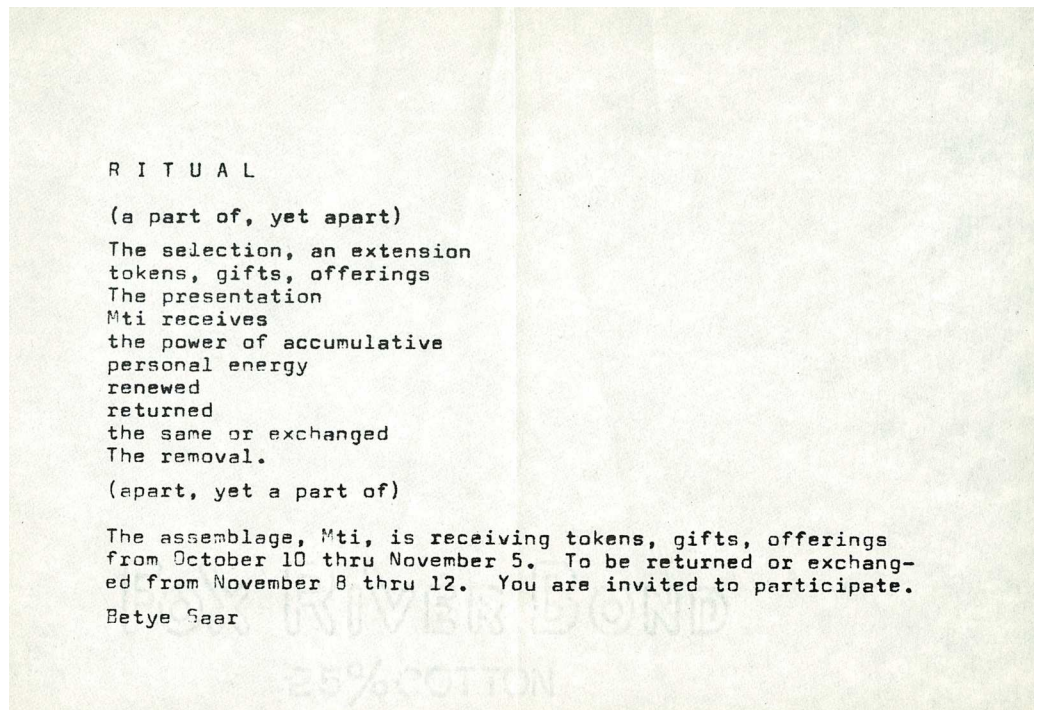
*(I never had the stroke for 'mainstream'
it went against my flow)*

From the past
the essence
of accumulative
consciousness
the remanents of
lost ceremonies
the loosening and
unwrapping of
mystery
the emergence
from shaddows
to face the
unknown.
Purification.

(These works are what I leave behind)

BETYE SAAR
1977





Top: Betye Saar at the opening of "Ritual" Baum-Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles, October 11, 1977
 Bottom: Card presented to visitors at Betye Saar's "Ritual" exhibition, Baum-Silverman Gallery
 Left: "Ritual" Baum-Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles, October 11 - November 12, 1977

*Ritual, "a prescribed series or set of ceremonies, rites, acts, words, gestures, etc. determined by considerations of tradition and symbolism."

The act of making art, for me, is a ritual. The "prescribed series or set of acts" include the following procedure:

The imprint—ideas, thoughts, memories, dreams, from the past, present and future.

The search—the selective eye and intuition.

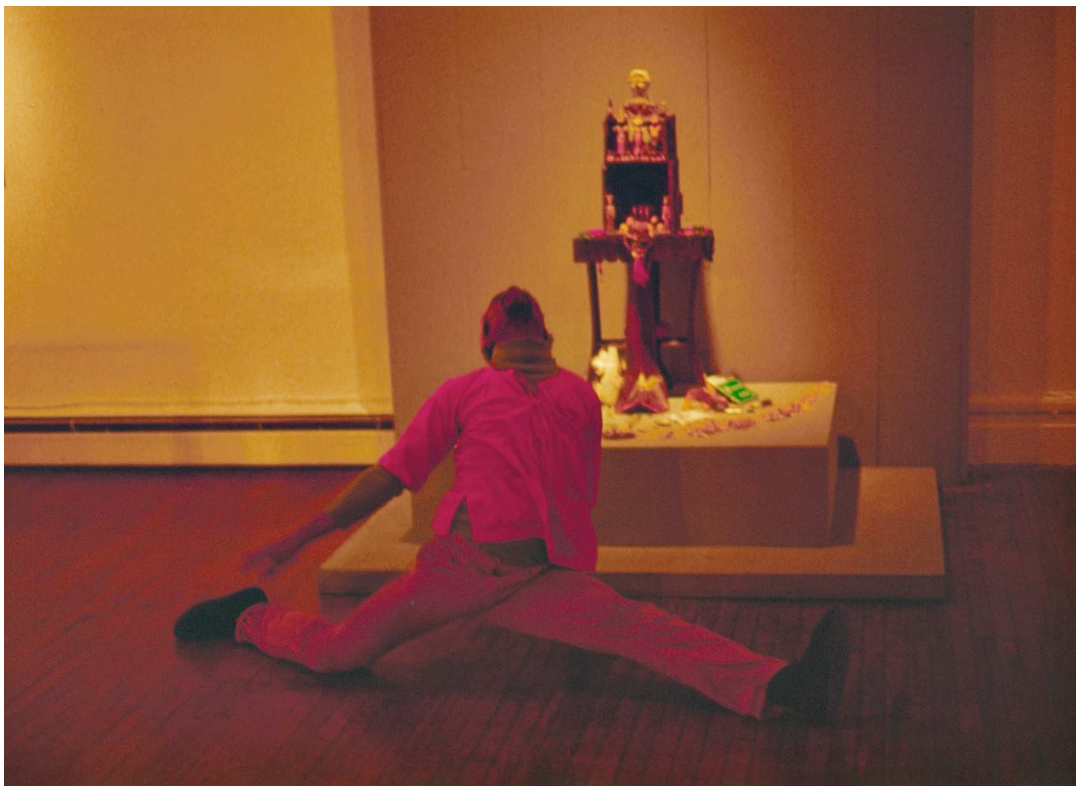
The collecting, gathering, and accumulating of objects and materials, each bringing a presence, an energy (old, new, ethnic, organic).

The recycling and transformation—the materials and objects are manipulated and combined with various media (paint, chalk, glue).
The energy is integrated and expanded.

The release—the work is shared, (exhibited), experienced, and relinquished. The 'ritual' completed.

Betye Saar, 1980

* The Dictionary of Mysticism, Frank Gaynor, editor, 1973.



Performance at "Rituals: The Art of Betye Saar" The Studio Museum of Harlem, New York, 1980
Right: "Rituals: The Art of Betye Saar" The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, April 13 - June 29, 1980







"Betye Saar: Selected Assemblages" Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, July 21 - September 11, 1984





"Betye Saar: Resurrection: Site Installations 1977 to 1987"
Main Art Gallery, Visual Arts Center, California State University, Fullerton, CA, February 6 - March 6, 1988



Wizard, 1972
Mixed media assemblage
13.25 x 11 x 1 in (33.66 x 27.94 x 2.54 cm)





Nubian Shadows, 1977
Mixed media collage
19.5 x 23.25 in (49.5 x 59.1 cm)



Secrets, 1977
Mixed media collage
16.25 x 19 in (41.3 x 48.3 cm)







Umbia, 1977
Mixed media collage
15.50 x 16 in (39.4 x 40.6 cm)



Shadow of Reason, 1979
Mixed media assemblage
13.25 x 10.75 in (33.7 x 27.3 cm)



Dispeller of Darkness, 1980
Mixed media collage
22.25 x 20 in (56.5 x 50.8 cm)



Tarigat, 1980
Mixed media collage
20 x 26 in (50.8 x 66.0 cm)



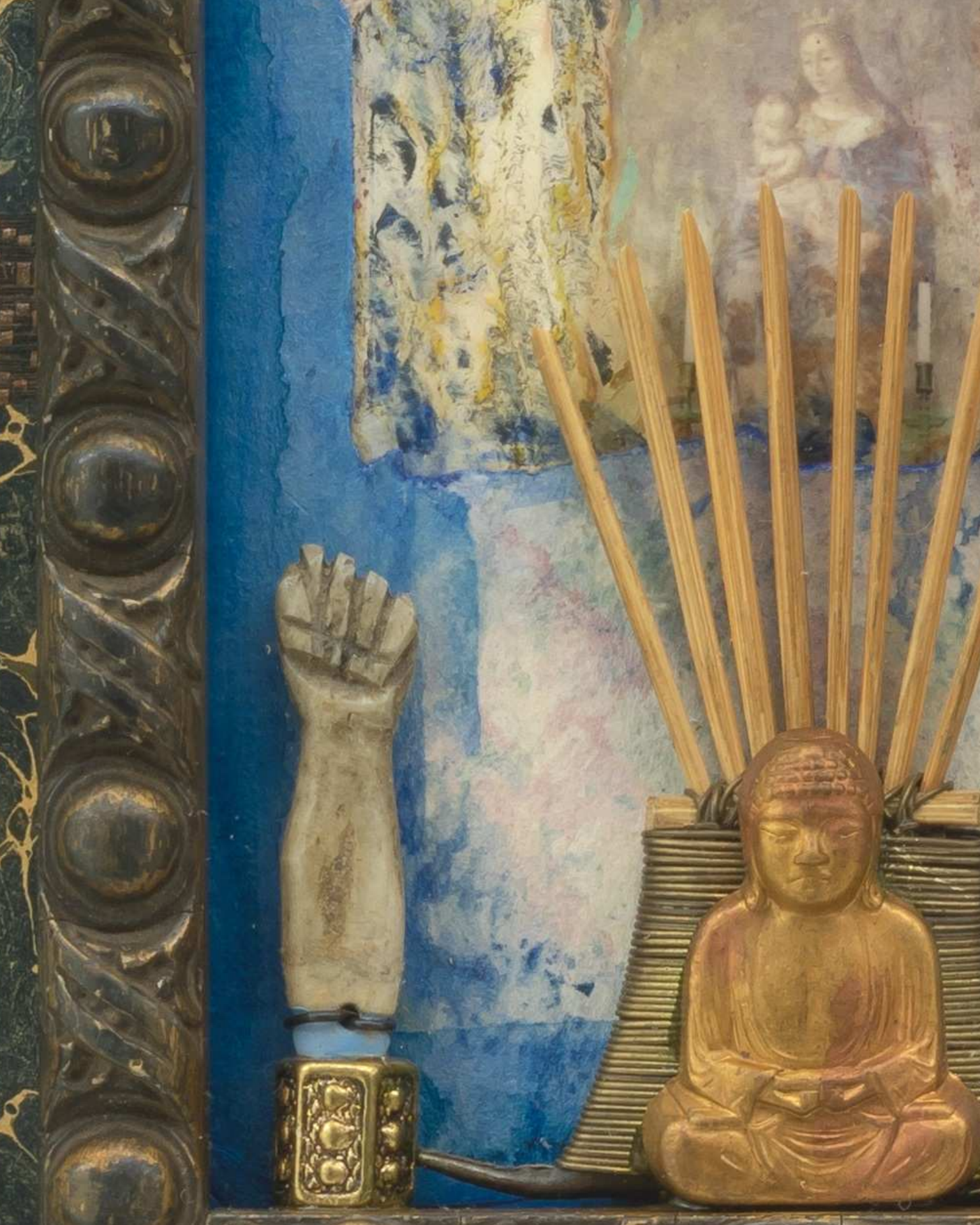


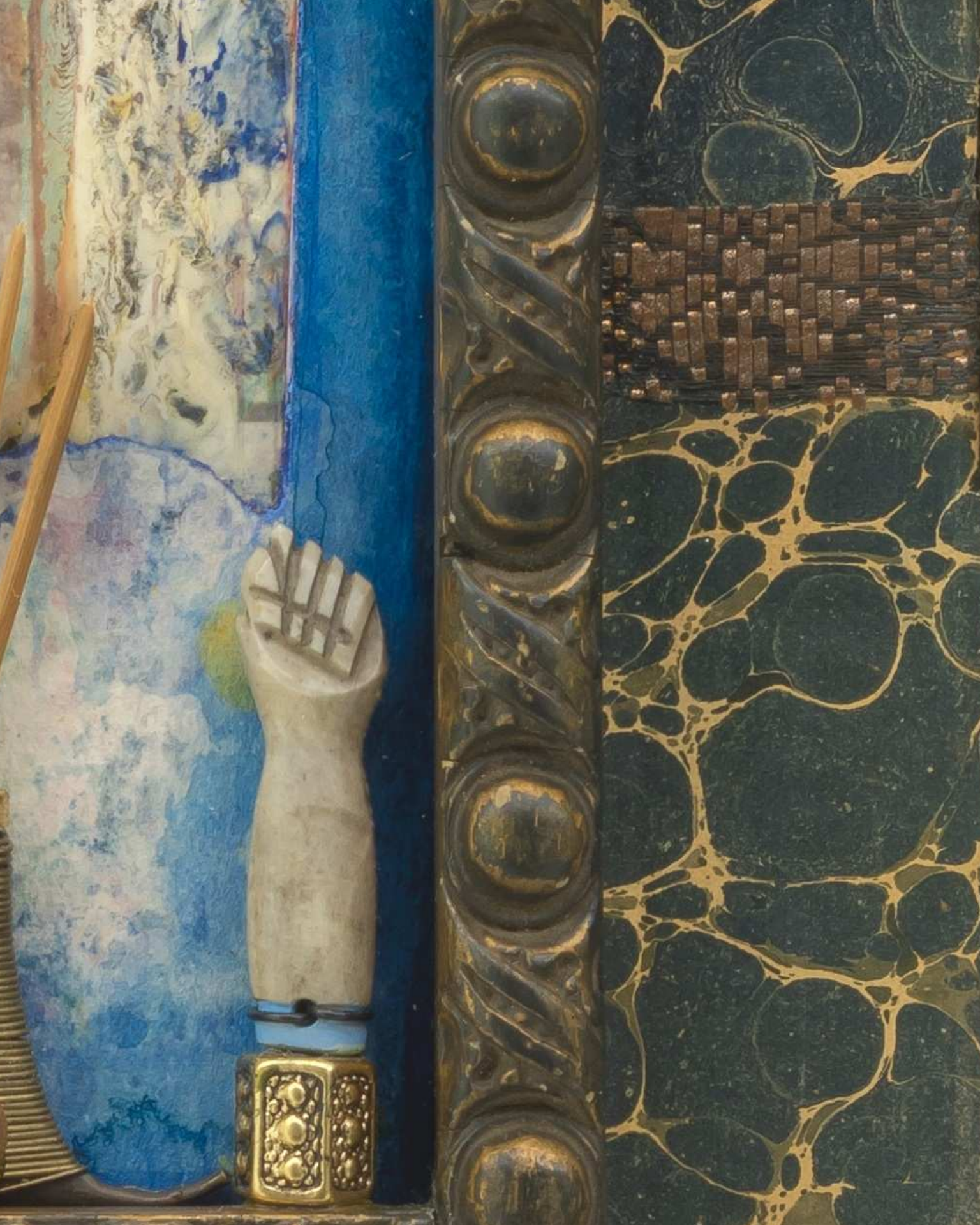


Floating Buddha with Coiled Snake, 1993
Mixed media assemblage
10.25 x 7.75 x 1 in (26.0 x 19.7 x 2.5 cm)



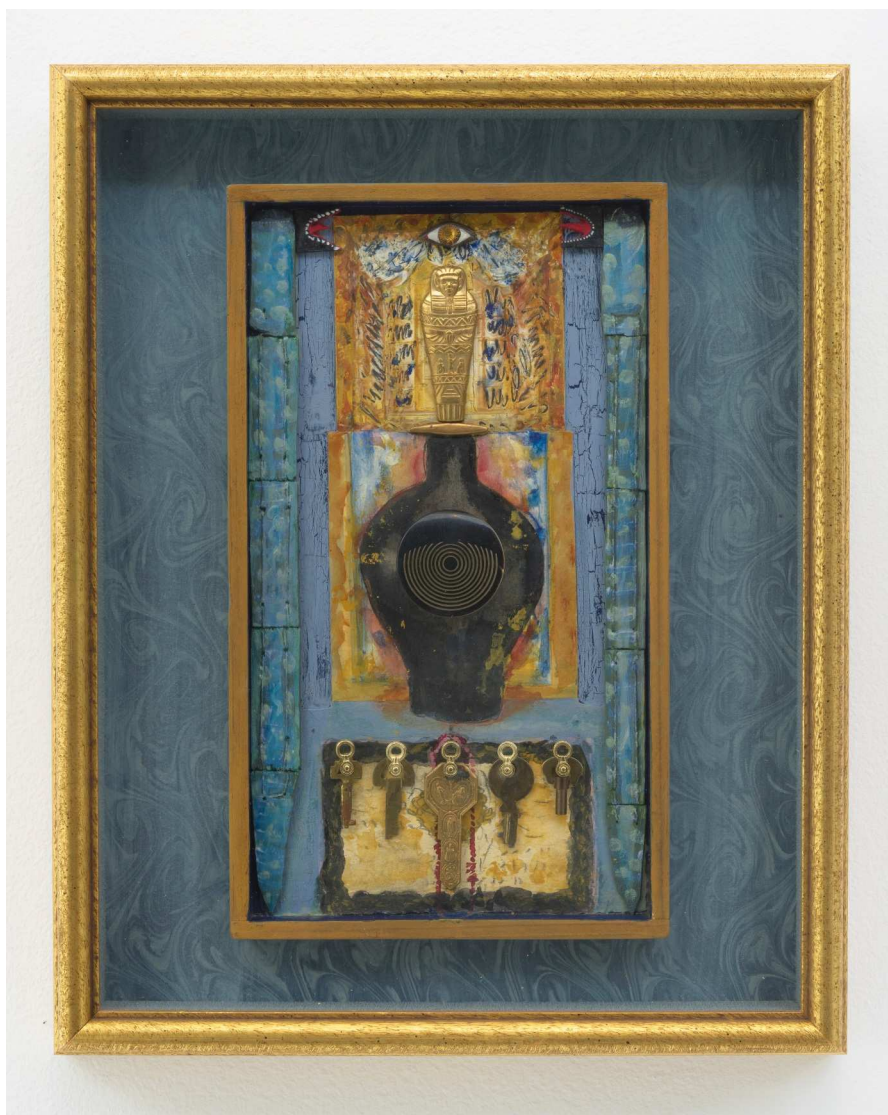
The Tantric Hand, 1993
Mixed media assemblage
20.62 x 13.62 x 1.5 in (52.4 x 34.6 x 3.8 cm)



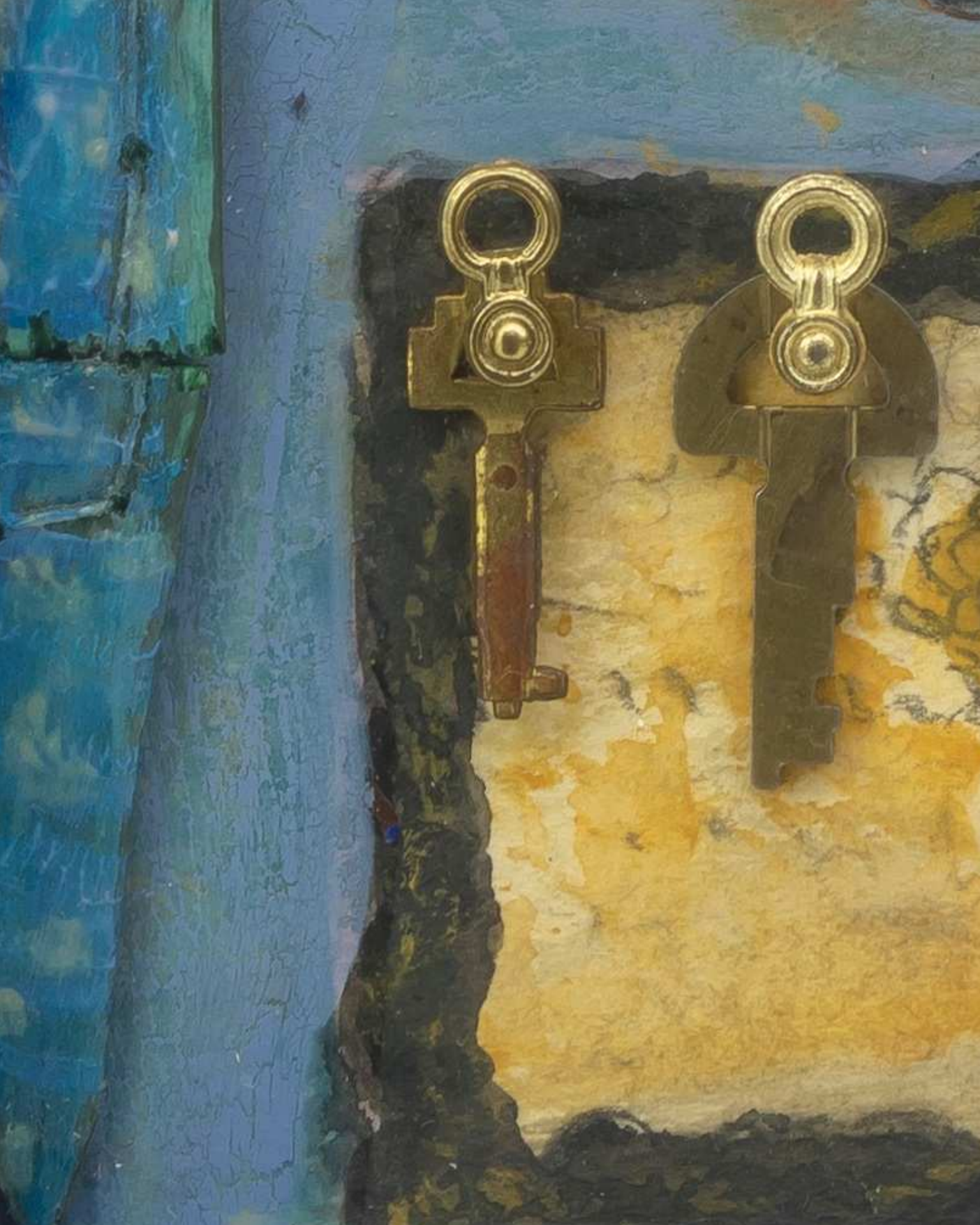




Visionary, 1994
Mixed media assemblage
15.25 x 12.75 x 2.38 in (38.7 x 32.4 x 6.0 cm)



Chronicles, 1995
Mixed media assemblage
15 x 12.12 x 1.62 in (38.1 x 30.8 x 4.1 cm)







The Messiah, 1993
Mixed media assemblage
15 x 8.75 x 1.25 in (38.1 x 22.2 x 3.2 cm)



Survival of the Spirit, 1993
Mixed media assemblage
14 x 11 x 1.5 in (35.6 x 27.9 x 3.8 cm)





Betye Saar

Mti, 1973

Mixed media floor assemblage

42.5 x 23.5 x 17.5 in (107.95 x 59.69 x 44.45 cm)

Exhibited

“Betye Saar: Selected Works 1964-1973” Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles, CA, September 29 - October 2, 1973 (catalogue)

“Ritual” Baum-Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, October 11 - November 12, 1977

“Betye Saar: Collages/Assemblages” Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego, CA, April 5 - May 13, 1979

“Rituals: The Art of Betye Saar” The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, April 13 - June 29, 1980 (catalogue)

“Icons and Images for Children of All Ages” Clark Humanities Museum, Scripps College, Claremont, CA, March 12 - May 15, 1983

“Betye Saar: Selected Assemblages” Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, July 21 - September 11, 1984 (catalogue)

“Between the Worlds: The Art of Women’s Altars” Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Ana, CA January 30 - February 22, 1985 (catalogue)

“Betye Saar: Resurrection: Site Installations 1977 to 1987” Visual Arts Center, California State University Fullerton, Fullerton, CA, February 6 - March 6, 1988 (catalogue)

“L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945 - 1980” Pasadena Museum of California Art, Pasadena, CA, January 22 - May 20, 2012 (catalogue)

“Betye Saar: Still Tickin’” Museum De Domijnen, Sittard, Netherlands, June 28 - November 15, 2015 (catalogue)

“Betye Saar: Still Tickin’” Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ, January 30 - May 1, 2016 (catalogue)

“Soul of A Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” Tate Modern, London, July 12 - October 22, 2017 (catalogue)

Left: Betye Saar with *Mti*, Los Angeles, 1978

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Betye Saar: Ritual* at Art Basel Miami Beach, Roberts & Tilton Stand S06, December 1 – 4, 2016.

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