Art in America
"Betye Saar: In the Studio"
Leah Ollman
June/July 2019

BETYE SAAR

COMING SOON
"Betye Saar: Call and Response," at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Sept. 22, 2019–Apr. 5, 2020. The show will then appear at the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, May 23–Sept. 13, 2020, and the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Feb. 13–May 9, 2021.

"Betye Saar: The Legends of *Black Girl's Window*," Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct. 21, 2019–January 2020.

Interview by Leah Ollman
Studio photography by Evan Strang

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IN THE STUDIO

BETYE SAAR, WHO turns 93 in July, remains both an evolving and an emerging artist. She professes to want to work less hard, "to sit and look at the sky, or watch my garden grow, but still I have ideas." Though her prints, assemblages, and installations have been exhibited steadily since the '60s, attention to her work has burgeoned in the past decade, among artists of younger generations and curators internationally. In September, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opens "Betye Saar: Call and Response," her first career-spanning show in her home state of California. In October, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, launches its newly expanded and reconfigured space with "Betye Saar: The Legends of *Black Girl's Window*." The MoMA exhibition, centered on a 1969 self-portrait that compartmentalizes prints, collages, and found objects in the panes of an old wooden window frame, will be the artist's first art museum solo in New York since an appearance at the Whitney in 1975.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Saar studied design at UCLA. After starting a family (two of her three daughters, Lezley and Alison, became artists), she did graduate work in printmaking at several Southern California schools. In the early phase of her career, Saar gravitated toward signs and symbols from diverse systems of belief, including palmistry, the tarot, and astrology. She kept to a lexicon of spiritual and psychological emblems, even as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the upsurge of feminist activism spurred her to infuse her work with references to racial politics and historical injustice.

Betye Saar: *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, mixed mediums, 11¾ by 8 by 2¾ inches. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

All artworks this article courtesy Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, a 1972 assemblage featuring a mammy figurine and postcard set against a backdrop of multiple Aunt Jemima logo "portraits" from boxes of pancake mix, marked the beginning of Saar's ongoing commitment to inverting derogatory images of black people, to recasting stereotypes into icons of strength—heroes even—for their perseverance and resilience. Saar put racist distortions and exaggerations to work. She gave the servant's trademark solicitous smile a subversive edge, by adding a rifle to her identifying attributes of straw broom and white baby, and fronting the entire ensemble with a raised black fist.

Saar's bricolage practice was inspired early, by watching Simon Rodia's Watts Towers rise, and nourished further by an introduction in the late '60s to the work of Joseph Cornell. Her use of scavenged materials developed in fertile ground and rich company in LA, among the kindred efforts of Edward Kienholz, Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, and others. Saar's constructions range from the intimate architecture of altars to immersive installations. She favors materials worn on the body, such as handkerchiefs and gloves, or activated by it, especially tools of domestic labor like washboards and irons. She has incorporated birdcages, photographs and fabrics, clocks and ladders, globes and scales into works steeped in remembrance, grief, rage, humor, and tenderness.

Saar lives in the same house in Laurel Canyon, in the Hollywood Hills, where she moved with her family in 1962. Her adjacent studio feels utterly continuous with her work, a space defined by accretion, layering, conjunction, and disjunction, an organized ingathering of handled objects, worn surfaces, and burnished meanings. A specific temporality adheres to each shelved and piled item, but a broader, more expansive notion of time unifies them all.

On the chilly afternoon of our conversation, Saar gave me a tour of the studio, identifying categories of accumulations: "Here's metal. There's wood. And there is rust. I want to do an installation about rust called 'Insomniac,' because rust never sleeps." She opened crates filled with the sort of sketchbooks that form the organizational basis of the LACMA show. We paged through them, leapfrogging across decades of words and images. Epic summing-up seems to interest her far less than simply getting on with the next project. An installation planned for the LACMA show will rest on a bed of crushed coal, and one of Saar's granddaughters, who helps in the studio, was busy tracking down a source for it, a challenge in eco-conscious Southern California. With obvious urgency, Saar regularly interrupted both questions and answers to monitor progress of the search.

LEAH OLLMAN Your sketchbooks, which have not been shown before, are the focus of the exhibition curated by Carol Eliel for LACMA. You work out a lot of ideas in them, in ballpoint pen, and develop titles for works. Do you do other types of writing in them as well?

BETYE SAAR The sketchbooks are real seducers. The tiny sketchbooks are for ideas. I would use the larger ones when I


HOPE

Right, sketchbook, 2013, ink on paper, 5⅝ by 3½ inches.

Far right, *The Weight of Buddha (Contemplating Mother Wit and Street Smarts)*, 2014, mixed mediums, 19½ by 7 by 7 inches.

Images this spread courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"In a way, it's like, slavery was over, but they will keep you a slave by making you a salt shaker."

travel, to make sketches on-site, then make finished paintings out of them when I came home. I like the idea that, in the show, first you see the sketchbook and then you see the work of art. That says a lot right there, that exchange; it's a learning experience.

Here's a statement I wrote in 1986: "It may not be possible to convey to someone else the mysterious transforming gifts by which dreams, memory, and experience become art. But I like to think that I can try." A lot of the writings are just titles, or sometimes a line from a song: "Now is the Time," that's from Martin Luther King Jr. "Romantic Refuge." "Illusion of Passion." When I need a title, I go through some of these books and find a really good one.

OLLMAN There are some great lines in here: "Facts are sometimes hard on dreams."

SAAR Is it true? Yeah. I was surprised to find out that some people never dream. How sad. "Vague Indiscretions." "Love Without Mercy." Here's one from *The Bridge Across Forever* by Richard Bach: "You're never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true."

OLLMAN Here you diagram the dance steps for the fox-trot. There are little bits of things tucked into and collaged on the pages too—tickets and other scraps you've picked up on the street. What a treasure trove. The notebooks are an archive of your mind and experience. Do you still use them?

SAAR Oh, yes. I just bought five more. I don't think I could ever travel without one. These are like art, but a very different kind of art from my assemblages. When I'm making them, I think, when I get old, I'm just going to sit on my bed or sit at my table and finish these books, paint the pictures in them. But now I just keep making them. And I do like to go back and look at them. The magical thing is that right away I'm back at that place where I was traveling. A lot of them are just, my God, look how much paper I wasted! I grew up in the Depression, and we didn't waste anything, you know?

OLLMAN The installation you're planning, with the coal, shows up at different times in sketches that all trace the same idea.

SAAR I did a small installation like this in Italy, and they didn't have any trouble finding coal. They just went to the store and got it. Here, someone brought me charcoal briquettes! It's not the same. The idea for the installation keeps appearing, in 2001, 2006, 2010: "Blue metal cot with blue bottles tied to springs. Blue neon wire under the bed surrounded by coal." I added a bed with a heart. Another sketch has a wave. Things are added each time.

OLLMAN Your work engages with so many fundamental issues—race, gender, injustice, the spirit. Those subjects seem to get talked about far more than the processes you use to address them. The how tends to get overshadowed by the what.

SAAR Many writers don't feel that comfortable with what's under the materials, what's under the market, what the artist is

doing. That's my favorite part to talk about—that creative energy, what makes an artist create.

OLLMAN Do you still hunt around for things to use in your work?

SAAR Yes. I fell in love with going to flea markets and thrift stores a long time ago. I don't go so often now, because I have plenty of stuff here. But sometimes you see something and you just can't refuse it. It may take twenty-five years to use it. It will just sit here until I'm ready.

OLLMAN Where are some of your favorite places to hunt?

SAAR Pasadena City College, they have a nice flea market. The Rose Bowl is really commercial. I don't go there anymore. Sometimes neighborhood garage sales. My daughters were raised to be junkies.

OLLMAN Do they collect things for you?

SAAR Sometimes. Mainly, they're collecting things for their own art. If they find anything that's black memorabilia, if it's not too expensive, they'll buy it. Now those things are really collectibles.

OLLMAN "Contemptible collectibles," as Patricia Turner has called them. Another writer refers to them as "racist kitsch." Why did you want to collect such things at first?

SAAR That was in the '60s. I had a friend who was collecting [derogatory] postcards, and I thought that was interesting. So I started collecting these things. I thought, this is really nasty, this is mean. This is like the word "nigger," you know? Many of these things were made in Japan, during the '40s. I think in some countries, they probably still make them. In a way, it's like, slavery was over, but they will keep you a slave by making you a salt shaker. I said to myself, if black people only see things like this reproduced, how can they aspire to anything else? If this is how the world sees them, maybe they see themselves like this. Many slaves did, and many people still do now. They don't have any self-esteem.

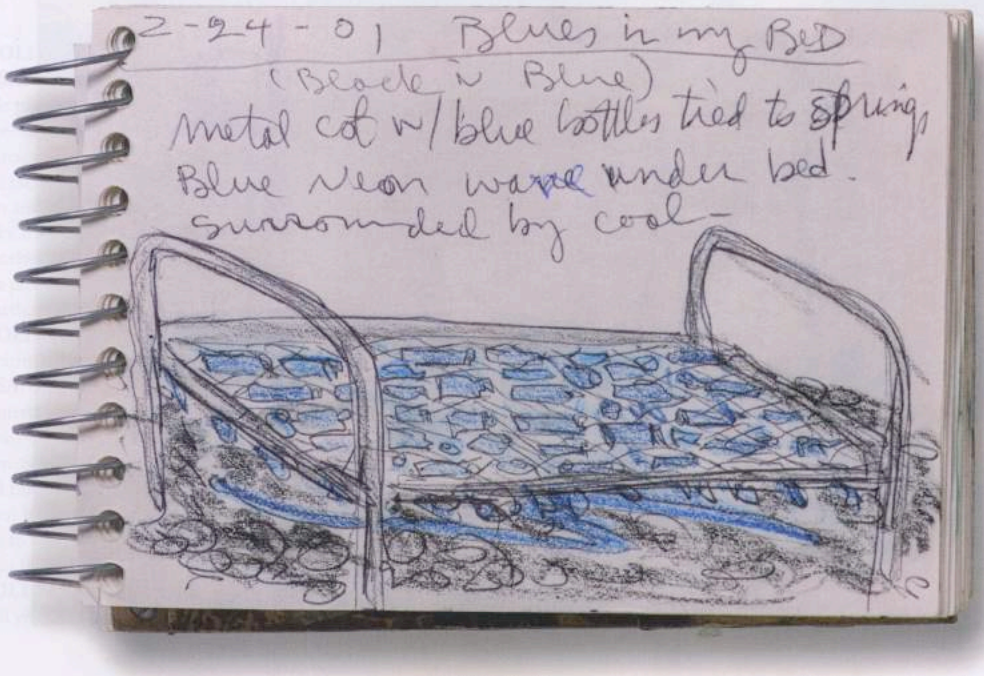
OLLMAN Seeing mammy and Uncle Tom figures not just as denigrating, culturally imposed models of servitude, but as survivors, as catalysts to self-determination, requires a shift in consciousness for an African American audience. What kind of new awareness do you want non-black viewers to have when seeing those objects?

SAAR To say they're not cute, they're not funny, they're not cartoons, and it's a sad thing that black people were depicted this way. Because behind them is an image that's deeply insulting to black people. I have had a lot of people say, I like your work, but I hate those black things. They're so turned off by a mammy that they don't understand my interpretation of it.

Once, I was in a show in New Zealand where a lot of my works used metaphysical images, from palmistry and astrology. People there said, you're Satan's child, you're a witch. That made me realize that I couldn't just use that material any old way. I had to connect it so it feels comfortable enough for people to look at it and try to figure out what I'm saying. Any kind of art is a constant education.

OLLMAN Is there any kind of material that you feel is off limits?

SAAR Well, I don't want to use these derogatory images anymore, but a lady I didn't even know brought over all these salt and pepper shakers and I got a new idea.



Sketchbook, 200
ink on paper, 3½
5⅝ inches.


GLASS
SHARDS

View of the exhibition "Betye Saar: Uneasy Dancer," 2016–17, at the Prada Foundation, Milan. Photo Roberto Marossi.

"I'm trying to convert material that's not used for art into art. You just put it out there and see where it takes you."

OLLMAN Why don't you want to work with them anymore?

SAAR Because I have lots of other things to do. This whole place is something to do. I'm still inventing my language—like using a mask to symbolize Africa or Indigenous cultures, using a bird to symbolize Jim Crow, which would mean racism or prejudice. I use a heart for love, or a star and a moon and the sun for astrology, for things that are unknown. I had a friend who gave me three little beads that were from a meteorite. He said, when you're wearing this, you're wearing a star, a piece of a star. That's so cool to think about. But if you're on earth, you're part of a star, right?

OLLMAN There's a lot of continuity in your work between the spiritual, the metaphysical, and a politics of being in the world.

SAAR It's all the same stuff. The work always refers back to something historical or metaphysical, the racial thing or the feminist thing, but when I'm making it, it's just about the visual information. I just put it together, and then when I look back at it, I think, oh, wow, I was making feminist things back then. But not intentionally. None of it is intentional, except that I'm trying to convert material that's not used for art into art. You just put it out there and see where it takes you.

OLLMAN The interpretations might come later, but first you fill your studio with all these raw ingredients that carry a charge, like cages, ship models, and keys. Tell me more about how you gather your materials and build with them.

SAAR Well, I'm walking through a flea market, and something says, "Come here and look in this box." It's intuition. When I was a child, I was clairvoyant in a way. I've tried to figure out how I lost that. It's a pretty neat gift. But like many things that children have or anybody has, if you don't understand it, it's scary and you just let it go, or life gets in the way. I can look at materials and they tell me, "You should have me in your studio, so I can make something for you, I can be something for you." I have that kind of intuition, also about people. It's a thing that society has kind of put down, to make you feel you're weird. It's a lost art that many children have just naturally, until they're taught to draw a tree that really looks like a tree instead of something else.

My major at UCLA was design, so I have a really strong sense of what should go together and how it should look, whether it's color or size or shape. Alison works in a little bit riskier way, I think, and she also fabricates her things. I just work with the objects that I find.

OLLMAN When you went to Chicago with David Hammons to attend the National Conference of Artists in 1970, you visited the Field Museum. How did the work you

View of Saar's installation *The Alpha and the Omega*, 2013–16, at the Prada Foundation, Milan. Photo Roberto Marossi.

saw there, using hair and bones and shells, affect your approach to materials?

SAAR It first opened my eyes to Indigenous art, the purity of it. All the main exhibits were upstairs, and down below were the Africa and Oceania sections, with all the things that were not in vogue then and not considered as art—all the tribal stuff. Of course, I had learned about Africa at school, but I had never thought of how people there used twigs or leather, unrefined materials, natural materials. That's when I started the series of hanging paintings on cowhides. Back in the '70s when Josine Ianco-Starrels was gallery director at Cal State LA, she had a show of the hangings. It was weird stuff, but now, many decades later, that show is kind of the foundation of my work.

OLLMAN What is it about those materials that speaks to you?

SAAR How the materials are combined, I think. Things in African art that might seem casual to us are really important to the creator. For example, in a rug, there's a border and there's fringe. That's not just part of the design. The fringe is to ward off evil spirits. The evil spirits would get tangled in the fringe. When rugs are used for prayer, and the inside of the rug is the sacred part of it, there's a border to protect that part. That idea really affected me, and I thought, what if you made art like that? Art that calls attention to the design or the pattern or the color, that's beautiful and there to entertain you, but the real intention of it, the real magical part, the power that has the message, is disguised in the interior. Like the inside of the rug where the person kneels down to pray. Or like a box—there's the outside of the box, there's the pattern of the box, but inside it there might be a little Buddha or something like that.

OLLMAN You use a lot of framing elements like window panes, and compartments, like drawers. Why that kind of organization of space?

SAAR That's the protection for what's inside. I can't verbalize it, because most of it is a feeling and most of it is something I do automatically, because I've trained myself to look for the point of power. It's an interesting way to think about things that you look at.

OLLMAN I know that Arnold Rubin's 1975 article for *Artforum*, "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture," made a big impression on you, and that you also heard him speak. He wrote about the compositional principle of profusion, and the way certain materials are used for enhancement and others embody power.

SAAR Yes, he was the one who gave me that example. When David Hammons and I went to the Field Museum, we saw it in actuality.

OLLMAN I want to hear your thoughts about time. Almost every material you use has already had a prior life. You're giving it a new purpose and a new place. You're bringing elements of the past into the present.

SAAR Every object has a story. I don't know what that story is. I'll find something, like a bracelet—it was on somebody's arm, I don't know who that person was, or if they bought the bracelet in a shop or it was a gift. The objects that I use, because they're old (or used, at least), bring their own story; they bring their past with them. I have no idea what that history is. If the object is from my home or my family, I can guess. But I like that idea of not knowing, even though the story's still there.

OLLMAN How does that relate to your work with circuit boards or things that are newer?

SAAR A circuit board has its own destiny. And they're just so beautiful. I called the installation of my [1987] residency project at MIT "Mojotech," because it was about magic and technology. Everything is magic if you put it in the right context.

OLLMAN John Outterbridge described assemblage as more than a sculptural practice, more than the manipulation of objects, but "a way of life, in that you assemble your own directives. . . . It has a great deal to do with the piecing together of possibilities."[1]

SAAR That's right. The piecing together of possibilities—and of actualities, too. We're all limited to our bodies and what strength we have, and you just make the best of it. But you could maybe make a piece of art that's profound.

OLLMAN Much of your work is about affirming the value of women's lives and African American lives, against the forces of dehumanization that have coursed through our culture. Clearly, #blacklivesmatter applied to your work decades before hashtags were invented.

SAAR All lives matter. The current political thing is so much about separating—the Democrats from the Republicans and on and on. Even during the feminist movement, many men thought it was about separating them from women, when it's really all about the human thing. It's about humanizing everything.

OLLMAN When the Getty Research Institute acquired your archive last fall, to launch its new African American Art History Initiative, the director of the Institute called you "the conscience of the art world for over fifty years." Labels tend to be restricting, but how do you feel about that one?

SAAR I accept that label. It seems overblown—I mean, the whole art world? But the key word is conscience. ○

1. Quoted in Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 91. The statement appeared originally in Jorge Daniel Veneciano, "A Conversation with John Outterbridge," *Artweek* 24, no. 21, Nov. 4, 1993, p. 20.

Far left, *Black Girl's Window*, 1969, wooden window frame with paint, cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers, daguerreotype, lenticular print, and plastic figurine, 35¾ by 18 by 1½ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Left, *Lost Dimensions of Time*, 1988, mixed mediums, 14¼ by 7½ by 1 inches.