

DIRECTIONS

ALISON SAAR

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Rose Tattoo, 1991. Wood, tar, tin, copper; 28 x 26 x 10 in. Joe Austin, Los Angeles.

Sometimes the outside is a denial of what's inside.¹

—Alison Saar

She has no compunction about dredging the soul with home-made tools.²

—Judith Wilson

THE WORKS IN THIS EXHIBITION CELEBRATE the rich spiritual lives of ordinary people. The figures we encounter, made from such everyday materials as wood, tin, and linoleum, have faces and personas that ring true in our culture permeated with African ancestries. Eloquently down to earth, these figures also function as objects of veneration and awe. Expressions are impassive, poses are frontal, bodies float ethereally or stand in stillness. With skin cut, scarred, or exposed, they recall ritual objects or deities from lost or far-off civilizations. Fusing the everyday with the otherworldly, effusive and yet solemn in tone, these sculptures and wall pieces operate on two levels. "I've always been fascinated by dualities," Alison Saar says, "and I make use of all of it in my work."³

Alison Saar, whose mother is the well-known African-American artist Betye Saar, is no stranger to duality. Born of a mixed marriage, she remembers herself "floating between two worlds" as a fair-skinned child taken for white.⁴ Saar's self-identity is African American. She was raised a spirit-conscious Unitarian in a neighborhood of offbeat, creative people in Laurel Canyon above Los Angeles. Both parents steered their middle daughter toward art. As Alison watched and sometimes helped, her mother scavenged charms, bones, clock faces, and other found objects to create boxes and assemblages steeped in mysticism. Betye Saar, who is represented in the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and other museums, also took her daughter to Watts many times to see the fantastic shard-and shell-decorated towers made by her own childhood idol, Italian immigrant Simon Rodia. Richard Saar, a conservator, encouraged his daughter to draw and frequently took her to museums. From secondary through graduate school, she worked as his studio assistant, learning to mix pigments, apply gold leaf, and pursue other traditional painting techniques in intimate communion with such evocative, physically compelling objects as Chinese frescoes, Egyptian mummies, and Pre-Columbian and African sculptures.

An art history major at Scripps, Saar studied African, Haitian, Afro-Cuban, and other black visual traditions under Samella Lewis and wrote her senior thesis on art

by self-taught African Americans. Shifting to studio art for graduate school at Otis-Parsons, Saar began making "abstract, ephemeral" paintings influenced by Mark Rothko and Josef Albers.⁵ Just before her M.F.A. show, however, she destroyed those works and abruptly changed direction to create archetypal African-American figures in wood, cut-tin, and fresco imbedded or framed with pottery shards, palm fronds, plastic charms, and other found materials.

The growth of Saar's work, as with most artists, has been spurred by self-challenge and changes in locale. Enjoying early success in Southern California—where her unashamedly exuberant, narrative work still remains most widely appreciated—she left Los Angeles permanently in 1983 for New York, initially to take an artist-residency at the Studio Museum at Harlem. Already grounded in the nuances of black culture, including inspiration from songs, historical figures, and Afro-Caribbean religions, her work soon incorporated the raw urban types she saw in the streets and subways. Dumpsters provided new materials such as pressed ceiling tin and scraps of linoleum flooring. During 1985–86, Saar lived as an artist in residence in Roswell, New Mexico. There she made her earliest life-size works and carved logs with a chain saw for the first time. The distinct environment of the region enriched her palette and aroused a strong interest to Southwest Indian and Mexican cultures. Since that sojourn, her figures have become increasingly simple—unclothed or semi-clad, for instance, with eyes indicated by indentations rather than imbedded materials. Saar has also begun pursuing themes that are less recognizably contemporary, often by placing figures in room-size ensembles that evoke ancient rituals of non-Western cultures.⁶

Paralleling in some ways the recent surge of figurative expressionism, Saar's work has come into its own in a period increasingly attuned to the visions of African-American artists. Misinterpreted early on in New York as appropriation of black folk art, Saar's work is better understood as a recasting of the vernacular to explore its expressive potential. The artist, who readily admits to never having had a life-drawing class, balances this exploration with conventions from African, classical, and religious art and the found-object tradition in modernism. Like Joyce S. Scott's beaded figures, David Hammons's installations of reconstituted trash, her mother's and Renée Stout's fetishistic assemblages, Martin Puryear's poetic objects, and Houston Conwill's monastic floor installations, Saar's work is syncretic, open-ended, and not easily categorized. A nonlinear ap-

proach, if anything, might be said to characterize her work, as it does for a number of her African-American peers.

Saar creates a figurative art based on characters to which she feels a strong emotional response. She does not make portraits or work from live models but neither are her characters total fabrications. "Some of them are historical. . . . Some of them are personal, people I meet. Sometimes it's people I see from the windows and just make up stories about. And some are combinations."⁷

Saar has been pondering, processing, and re-forming "characters" since her earliest days as an artist, from an African-styled seductress suggested by a visit to the trendy Los Angeles restaurant Trump's (*Heathen Tea at Trump's*, 1982) to a down-and-out homeless person in New York perhaps dreaming of a Southern homeland (*Terra Firma*, 1991). What she calls the "urban shaman" has been a prominent member of this cast. One of Saar's earlier explorations of the "Spanish-black crossover," *Tinto en Tando y Suta*, 1985, floats ethereally along a wall, a combination altarpiece and barrio survivor ("Tinto" means "inky," a derogatory term used in the 1940s for a dark-skinned Mexican American). Her first full-size figure, this "street savvy guy" from a past generation in Los Angeles wears a yellow pressed-tin zoot suit, with eyes covered by a hat and hands poised to display attributes of power—dice and a ruby ring. In a similar gravityless pose on a Japanese-like hanging scroll, *JuJu Eugene*, 1985 (a JuJu is an African charm) [fig. 1], appears as a genie in a cloud above a snarling female dog (symbolizing communication with spirits), with martini glass and hat hovering nearby. This shaman presents his bag of tricks in a mosaic of collaged images—feathers, hearts, locks of hair, Chinese characters—that Saar made from torn encyclopedias, playing cards, and patterned wallpaper. A genie on a wood-carved puff of smoke spewed from a Coca-Cola bottle, *Medicine Men*, 1986, is a "psychological doctor to chase the blues away." Modeled after the Spanish-speaking world's *curandero* (healer), this suitcase-wielding salesman has dubious medical credentials, but the potions, medicines, and various other aids revealed inside his chest bespeak profound restorative powers.

In this and other works, Saar has adapted the sculpture-as-medicine motif from African art, specifically Minkisi figures from Bakongo sculpture of Zaire in which medicine-containing cavities, often sealed by a mirror, become the locus for symbolic healing. Frequently for Saar, healing translates into self-realization which in turn becomes a metaphor for pain, or, as



Fig. 1. *JuJu Eugene*, 1985. Mixed-media drawing, collage: 98 x 50 in. Courtesy Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles.

Judith Wilson has put it, "an utterly vitiated, vulnerable state, the shattered soul of the individual who has internalized racism."⁸ A delicate plastic parakeet trapped behind smoky glass is the heart of *Divu*, 1987, an archetypal, larger-than-life singer in the intense indi-

go often seen on Haitian altars, Yoruba sculpture, and Aztec mosaic heads. Soprano Kathleen Battle's voice was the inspiration for this piece, which appears both battered and beautiful, its mother-of-pearl eyes and mouth expressing both strength and vulnerability. Perhaps more pointedly, Saar evinces "a gut connection with a past that is completely downtrodden" in the Michelangelo-inspired *Dying Slave*, 1990, whose glassed-in belly reveals a torrent of rusty nails of Kongo inspiration. This tin-sheathed figure is in shackles, muscles straining, the skin on his back cut open with lashes. Saar's work forces recognition of human cruelty.

But Saar's messages, like the face of black America, are seldom monolithic. Just as *Dying Slave* fuses African and Western ideas, other works by Saar straddle cultures and genres. *Snake Charmer*, 1985, is a male bust with a wood serpent in his mouth. Sometimes mistaken for a portrait of rock star Grace Jones, the figure has a chopped-log flat-top, Navajo pot-shard earring, and turquoise and mother-of-pearl eyes. The work's potency comes from its formal austerity, evoking ancient Minoan sculpture, as well as from its resonance as a reminder of the multiracial heritage of the Americas. Afro-Caribbean religions are quoted in *Mamba Mamba*, 1985 (Mamba is a Haitian priestess, mambo is the dance), which depicts the love goddess Frieda Ezurli, whom Saar identifies as "a distributor of wealth, luxury, love, and sex . . . a favorite spirit of Haiti." The sequin version of *La Rosa Negra*,

1986, a rumination on beauty at once Latina and ancient Egyptian in feel, was created by Saar in collaboration with Haitian Vodun (Voodoo) banner makers. *Palma y Palmera*, 1984 [fig. 2], punning in Spanish on palm tree versus palm of the hand, fuses the ritualizing characteristic to Vodun and Santería, an Afro-Cuban religion, with typical subjects for *milagros* (Mexican votive offerings). Moving the disembodied hand makes the jaw move, as if this quasi-deity can speak and thus connect us with the spiritual world. The mystical underpinnings and precious scale of this early work by Saar show the strong influence of her mother, whose own syncretic vision has been informed by an African-American self-identity blending African, Native American, and European heritages.

The strong-woman type is a cliché of African-American culture that Saar deals with head-on. *Divra* is a case in point. Another is *Sweet Thing*, 1983, which Saar calls a "tough lady in a house dress," whose story is told in bloodied feet with all the force and moral punch of a Latin American santo. In *Salome*, 1988 [fig. 3], Saar explores the "big wet kiss" between Herod's daughter and the severed, dead-blue head of John the Baptist. For Saar, this biblical story of obsession, unrequited love, and revenge tells of an "essential woman, not an evil vixen, who had an overwhelming infatuation." The image might also be interpreted in a broad, metaphorical sense as the resilience of women in their acceptance, support, and continuing belief in the disempowered male.

The powerful black man is another stereotype in which Saar finds considerable complexity. In size and expression, the Buddha-like *Rose Tattoo*, 1991 [cover], depicts a tough, larger-than-life, dark-skinned African American who would definitely dominate any situation. Yet his tattoos—delicately imprinted tin flowers—show his "soft and feminine" side. In *Five Guys Named Moe*, 1989, Saar used the title of Louis Jordan's song as a starting point to explore "the idea of powers of the world," which can be also interpreted as a look into black malehood. This "power totem," as she calls it, has five archetypes: "Mo-Hair" (intelligence), "Mo-Gul" (money), "Mo-Town" (creativity and art), "Mo-Jo" (magic), and "Mo-Fo" (violence). The figures gaze out in all directions, as if claiming their places in society.

In its examination of stereotypes, Saar's work finds certain parallels in the thought-provoking, didactic installations about Western history's blind spots by Fred Wilson and the insidiousness of racism by Adrian Piper. But while these African-American conceptual artists scramble situations to overturn cultural clichés, Saar's



Fig. 2 *Palma y Palmera*, 1984. Wood, tin, paint, palm fronds; 10 1/4 x 11 x 1 in. Virgil Young, Los Angeles.

strategy is to hone in on the clichés to demystify them and thus reveal universal truths.

As if to drive home the point, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, 1992, invites us on a journey of death. An empty winged harness made of shoe-sole feathers and a suitcase "bursting with spiritual light" seem to await our use. Lyrics to the song inspiring the piece's title provide a cogent guide to eternity. "Pack up all my cares and woe, here I go, singing low."

The multivalent, centuries-old legacy of the African diaspora in the Americas is Saar's external focus, but her internal subject is the human condition; her work teaches us to read souls, not appearances.

Sidney Lawrence
Exhibition Curator

1. Alison Saar, in Dinah Berland, "Artist Finds Magic in the Everyday Object, Individual," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 21 February 1987, B1. Unattributed quotes that follow are from telephone conversations with the artist, 10 and 11 December 1992.
2. Judith Wilson, "Down to the Crossroads: The Art of Alison Saar," *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture* 10 (Spring 1990): 38. This comprehensive analysis of Saar's work was reprinted in *Callaloo* 14 (Winter 1991): 105-23.
3. Quoted in Chiori Santiago, "Private Dialogues, Shared Visions," *Museum of California* 15 (Summer 1991): 10.
4. Quoted in Judith Wilson, "Hexes, Totems and Necessary Saints: A Conversation with Alison Saar," *Real Life* 19 (Winter 1989): 39. This interview also appears as part of Wilson's essay in Elizabeth Shepherd, ed., *Secrets, Dialogs, Revelations*, cited in the bibliography.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
6. Saar sometimes separates and exhibits single works from installations. *Vulcanized (Tony)*, 1986, and *Bye Bye Blackbird*, 1992, from this exhibition were made for installations at the Washington (D.C.) Project for the Arts and the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.
7. Quoted in Wilson, "Hexes, Totems and Necessary Saints," p. 39.
8. Wilson, "Down to the Crossroads," p. 26. Identifying the motif as a "power box," Wilson cites Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 117-18.
9. Quoted in Zan Dubin, "An Artist with a Stroke of Magic," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 October 1986, sec. 6, p. 4.



Fig. 3 *Selome*, 1988. Wood, copper, tin, alabaster; 72 x 26 x 26 in. Greenville County Museum of Art, South Carolina, museum purchase with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

BIOGRAPHY

Alison Saar, born in Los Angeles on 1 February 1956, received her art history degree in 1978 from Scripps College and her M.F.A. in 1981 from the Otis Art Institute of the Parsons School of Design. The recipient of numerous grants and artist residencies, Saar has been represented by the Jan Baum Gallery in Los Angeles since 1982. She has also had three New York gallery shows and solo exhibitions at the New Gallery in Calgary, Alberta (an installation, 1988), the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art (1992), and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass. (1993), among other venues. The Wight Art Gallery of the University of California at Los Angeles organized and toured *Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations*, a retrospective shared with her mother, Betye Saar, in 1990-91. Alison Saar's work has been included in more than 15 significant group shows, most recently the 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. A permanent commission by Saar can be seen at the 125th Street commuter station in Manhattan. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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Hewitt, Mary Jane. "Alison Saar: The Persistence of the Figurative." *International Review of African American Art* 9 (October 1990): 4-11.

Shepherd, Elizabeth, ed. *Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar*. Exhibition catalog. Essays by Lucy R. Lippard, Ishmael Reed, and Judith Wilson. Interviews with the artists. Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1990.

CHECKLIST

Heathen Tea at Trumps, 1982. Tin, copper, palm fronds, paint, wire; 18 x 14 x 1 1/2 in. Richard and Jan Baum.

Street Smart (Be Wise Beware), 1983. Tin, wood, brass, wire, gesso; 12 x 10 in. Joshua P. Smith.

Street Thang, 1983. Wood, tin, glass, paint; 19 x 17 x 5 in. Jack Lawrence, Los Angeles.

Travelin' Light, 1983. Wood, lead, paint, rope, abalone shell; 29 x 6 x 4 in. Merry Norris, Los Angeles.

The Invisible Man, 1984. Tin, plaster, palm fronds; 12 1/2 x 10 x 1 in. Daniel Jacobs and Derek Mason Collection, New York.

Palma y Palmera, 1984. Wood, tin, paint, palm fronds; 10 1/4 x 11 x 1 in. Virgil Young, Los Angeles.

JuJu Eugene, 1985. Mixed-media drawing, collage; 98 x 50 in. Courtesy Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles.

La Rosa Negra, 1985. Tin, found objects on wood; 14 1/2 x 10 x 1/2 in. Daniel Jacobs and Derek Mason Collection, New York.

Mamba Mamba, 1985. Wood, tin, paint, canvas, found objects; 64 x 34 x 14 in. Susan Bush and Warren Saks.

Snake Charmer, 1985. Wood, tin, paint, found objects; 21 x 26 x 14 in. Merry Norris, Los Angeles.

Tinto en Tinto y Suda, 1985. Painted tin and plaster, wood, found objects; 76 x 21 1/2 x 8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Clarence Y. Palitz, Jr., gift.

Litlenage, 1985. Tin, glass, wood, paint; 24 x 14 x 8 in. Susan Bush and Warren Saks.

Black Snake in My Bed, 1986. Mixed media, fresco; 20 x 24 x 6 in. Alan and Wendy Hart, Santa Monica.

Blue Boy, 1986. Tin, linoleum, paint, found objects; 34 x 18 in. Richard and Jan Baum.

La Rosa Negra, 1986. Beads, sequins, fabric; 17 x 17 in. Peter and Eileen Norton.

Medicine Men, 1986. Wood, tin, copper, miscellaneous objects; 35 x 13 x 13 in. Susan Bush and Warren Saks.

Vulcanized (Tony), 1986. Wood, rubber, paint, found objects; 73 x 22 1/2 x 16 in. Merry Norris, Los Angeles.

Dive, 1988. Mixed media; 32 x 30 x 10 in. Private collection, courtesy Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles.

Saleme, 1988. Wood, copper, tin, alabaster; 72 x 26 x 26 in. Greenville County Museum of Art, South Carolina, museum purchase with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Dying Slave, 1989. Wood, tin, mixed media; 81 x 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. Private collection, courtesy Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles.

Five Guys Named Moe, 1989. Mixed media on wood; 79 x 23 x 18 in. Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Malibu, Calif., gift of the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation.

Rose Tattoo, 1991. Wood, tar, tin, copper; 28 x 26 x 10 in. Joe Austin, Los Angeles.

Terra Firma, 1991. Wood, tin, tar, found objects; 24 x 74 x 22 in. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the Friends of Contemporary Art and partial purchase with 20th-century deaccessioning funds in celebration of the museum's 50th anniversary.

Bye Bye Blackbird, 1992. Mixed media with neon; 2 elements, 44 x 51 3/4 x 10 1/4 in. and 19 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 9 3/4 in. Collection of the artist.

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.