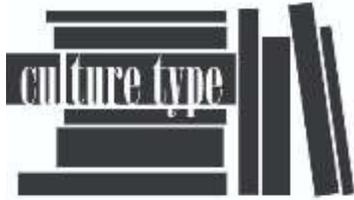


Alison Saar



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## ‘Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe,’ a Survey Spread Across Two Institutions, Presents Female Forms That ‘Activate Legacies of Bodily and Spiritual Survival’

By: Victoria L. Valentine

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DUALITY IS A CONSISTENT THEME in the work of **Alison Saar**. The multidisciplinary artist has long centered the female body and the wonder of nature in her practice, using figurative forms to explore cultural narratives and contemporary events. In her latest exhibition, she considers the binaries of body and spirit, earth and air and the intersections of gender and race, space and time.

The [Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena](#) and the [Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College](#) are partnering to present “Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe,” in the greater Los Angeles area. On view at both museums, the exhibition features paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations, dating from the early 1980s to 2020.

“Within these works, Saar measures social memory and cultural norms, using sophisticated visual language to bring attention to the gaps where narratives have been forgotten or ignored. Using rough-hewn forms and humble found materials, she creates resilient female bodies that activate legacies of bodily and spiritual survival,” co-curator Rebecca McGrew wrote in “Alison Saar’s Radical Art of Sustenance,” her opening essay in the exhibition catalog.

*“Saar measures social memory and cultural norms, using sophisticated visual language to bring attention to the gaps where narratives have been forgotten or ignored. Using rough-hewn forms and humble found materials, she creates resilient female bodies that activate legacies of bodily and spiritual survival.” — Co-Curator Rebecca McGrew*

Saar’s works respond to Hurricane Katrina and the isolation of the current pandemic. Symbols of strength, fragility, and invisibility are readily apparent. The title of the show, “Of Aether and Earthe,” may be harder to decipher. The term aether is not in common use and it is odd to see an “e” on the end of “earth.”

The exhibition summary explains the meaning and origins of the title: “In ancient and medieval science, aether represented the fifth element—a cosmic essence that exists in and around the other elements of earth, water, air, and fire. For Saar, this title suggests transformations of elemental properties: with aether representing the spiritual and non-material, and earthe—with the archaic spelling—suggesting a rootedness to physical materials.” **CT**

*TOP IMAGE: ALISON SAAR, “Bitter Crop, 2018 (wood, steel, bronze, acrylic, tar, 18 x 28 x 8 inches / 45.7 x 71.1 x 20.3 cm). | Collection of Gary and Kathi Cypres*

“Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe,” is on view at the **Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena and Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College**, from Sept. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021. The exhibition is co-curated by Irene Georgia Tsatsos, director of exhibition programs and chief curator at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena and Rebecca McGrew, senior curator at Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College

**Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College**

*Works on view evoke grounded, earthly, and water qualities*



*Installation view of “Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe” Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021. The exhibition is co-organized with the Armory Center for the Arts. Shown, at right, “Breach” (2016). | Photo courtesy Fredrik Nilsen Studio*

From the “Of Aether and Earthe” catalog essay, “Alison Saar’s Radical Art of Sustenance” by Rebecca McGrew (pages 14-15): Saar’s direct observation of the horrific repercussions of Katrina ultimately resulted in a series of works included in the exhibition **“Breach.”** Scholar Kitty McManus Zurko notes that Saar brings back into focus the “bitter lessons of the traumatic Great Flood [that] have receded with time like the waters themselves.” Saar researched flood-related disasters, looking at the effects of flooding on Black living in flood prone areas, in particular how they influenced music, art, and literature.

"Breach" (2016) is an over-twelve-foot-tall sculpture composed of a life-size female figure. Covered in rusted tin ceiling tiles, she stands on a raft-like platform, holding a pole to guide her journey. On her head, she balances a massive load of trunks, suitcases, kitchen utensils, lanterns, and pots and pans. In her discussion of "Breach," Zurko characterizes Saar's sculpture as a homage to strength, drawing connections between "Atlas, Greek god of endurance, and the Senegalese women and children [Saar] encountered in Senegal in 2006... [balancing] gravity-defying loads of calabashes and other market goods on their heads."



Installation view of "Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe" Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021. The exhibition is co-organized with the Armory Center for the Arts. Shown, at right, "Breach" (2016). | Photo courtesy Fredrik Nilsen Studio

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ALISON SAAR, *Equinox*, 2012 (hand-sewn lithograph with collage on paper, 48 x 16 inches / 121.9 x 40.6 cm). |  
Pomona College Collection. Museum purchase with funds from the Carlton Seaver Fund



Installation view of "Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe" Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College (Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021). The exhibition is co-organized with the Armory Center for the Arts. | Photo courtesy Fredrik Nilsen Studio



ALISON SAAR, "High Cotton," 2017 (acrylic on indigo-dyed seed sacks, vintage linens, and denim 84 x 102 inches / 213.4 x 259.1 cm). | Courtesy of L.A. Louver

**Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena**

*Works on view reference elements of fire, air, and aether*



*Installation view of "Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe," Armory Center for the Arts (Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021). The exhibition is co-organized with Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College. | Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber, Courtesy Armory Center for the Arts*



ALISON SAAR, "Hankerin' Hearts: Gimpy, Hincty, Mosey," 2012 (cast bronze). | Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver.  
Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber, Courtesy of Armory Center for the Arts



*Installation view of "Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe," Armory Center for the Arts (Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021). The exhibition is co-organized with Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College. | Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber, Courtesy Armory Center for the Arts*



ALISON SAAR, Detail of "Brood," 2008 (found children's chairs, fiberglass, bronze, 98 x 20 x 20 inches / 248.9 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm). | Collection of Gary and Kathi Cypres



*Installation view of "Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe," Armory Center for the Arts (Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021). The exhibition is co-organized with Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College. | Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber, Courtesy Armory Center for the Arts*



*Installation view of "Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe," Armory Center for the Arts (Sep. 1, 2020-Dec. 19, 2021). The exhibition is co-organized with Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College. | Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber, Courtesy Armory Center for the Arts*



Installation view of ALISON SAAR, "Hygiea," 2020 (mixed-media installation, Dimensions variable). | Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver, Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber

From the exhibition label: "Hygiea," a new artwork being premiered at the Armory, connects us to the global Covid pandemic. The ancient Greek goddess of health, cleanliness, and sanitation is represented as a generically modern charwoman, bringing to light the invisible efforts of domestic workers, who are most often women of color.

From a dark, narrow room we hear the sound of a broom sweeping as water drips into buckets, and we see Hygiea under the warm glow of lighting elements cast in glass, a material that starts as sand and converts to liquid under extreme heat. She confronts us with a direct gaze and fierce blue lips that portray her fury, her

fairness, and her ferocious magic. She holds a double-headed broom with power to sweep away not just dirt but sickness as well, while cradling a snake, a creature that sheds its skin to renew itself. Using tools at hand and her mystical powers, Hygieia expands her humble workspace into one of transformation and healing.



ALISON SAAR, Detail of "Hygieia," 2020 (mixed-media installation, Dimensions variable). | Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver, Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber

#### BOOKSHELF

The exhibition catalog "[Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe](#)" is edited by co-curators Irene Georgia Tsatsos and Rebecca McGrew, with a preface by Judith Tuch, foreword by Leslie Ito and Victoria Sancho Lobis, and contributions from Evie Shockley, Christina Sharpe, Camille T. Dungy, and Harryette Mullen. The first major monograph on Alison Saar, the volume documents the exhibition and explores four decades of the artist's work. An interview with Saar, never-before-published family photos from her childhood, and a timeline authored by the artist are also included. Also consider, "[Mirror, Mirror: The Prints of Alison Saar: From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation](#)" and "[Family Legacies: The Art of Betye, Lezley, and Alison Saar.](#)"

<https://www.culturetype.com/2021/09/03/alison-saar-of-aether-and-earthe-a-major-survey-spread-across-two-institutions-presents-female-forms-that-activate-legacies-of-bodily-and-spiritual-survival/>

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