

SAAR

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Seeing the artist Alison Saar on both sides of the San Gabriel Valley

By: Larry Wilson

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Alison Saar, "Bitter Crop," 2018, Wood, steel, bronze, acrylic, tar, 18 x 28 x 8 in.. Collection of Gary and Kathi Cypres, now on view at the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College in Claremont.

By [LARRY WILSON](#) | lwilson@scng.com | Pasadena Star News

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Local art of international renown is back, big time, and so is museum-ing and gallery-going.

Not that it's not a little different. You might have to make an appointment to see your art; you will have to show your vax passport; you will be wearing a mask.

But we are beggars, and we will choose to go, those of us who have missed looking at good stuff in public places, not on screens, so very much these past 18 months.

And our world-class local institutions are definitely pulling out all the stops to get us back in.

Hey, the Norton Simon this week took out a full-page ad in *The New Yorker* to tout its new show of three of Manet's "Philosophers" paintings, opening this week, trying to entice not only Southern Californians but people around the country to the museum.

Locals and quite likely people from all around the nation and world have certainly been jonesing for LACMA's opening this week of the traveling exhibit of the National Portrait Gallery's official portraits of Michelle and Barack Obama.

And Southern California art institutions are increasingly smart about creating tie-ins at different venues when big works come to town, as the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens is doing with its commissioned painting by Kehinde Wiley, who famously painted the former president. "A Portrait of a Young Gentleman" hangs directly across from "The Blue Boy." Wiley studied at the Huntington while young, and now says: "Later, I started thinking about issues of desire, objectification, and fantasy in portraiture and, of course, colonialism." His young gentleman is decidedly not an aristocratic Englishman.

But the best gallery-going I had last week was right here in the San Gabriel Valley, at the far east and west edges of which are on view one

exhibit in two concurrent, complementary venues: “Alison Saar: of Aether and Earthe.”

Saar, the Los Angeles sculptor, has very deep local roots. Daughter of the great artist Betye Saar and art conservator Richard Saar, she has degrees from Scripps College in art history and studio art and an MFA from Otis.

If you are of that ilk that decries a supposed lack of old-fashioned talent, of hand and eye, among contemporary artists, you will be disabused of that notion when you walk into the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College in Claremont and see Saar’s sculpture, a photo of which is above, “Bitter Crop,” which she began with a simple block of wood — and a chain saw — before chiseling it down, as Michelangelo would, into the human form.

It is a choice example of what a Saar scholar calls her “amazing command of figuration ... figures that are full of life, sumptuously done.” In a lifesize sculpture at the Benton, I love her use of pressed tin, perhaps pulled down from the ceilings of old abandoned restaurants, nailed back into place to form the copper-colored skin of a human figure.

Saar finds material in everything under the sun — wire, bottles, bronze, tar, sugar sacks and denim, leather, tacks, trunks and washtubs.

She has a fascination and a way with the hair of women of the African diaspora, and often uses long strands of wire, growing out of a head and sometimes pulled back through a mouth and out again through a neck — “Conked,” referring to the way of processing hair straight that involves the innocence of egg whites and the poison of lye.

The exhibit continues at the Armory Center for the Arts in Old Pasadena, one piece of which, the wonderful “Catfish Dreamin,” you can view outside on Raymond Avenue without scoring a reservation, which are required for both shows and can be acquired at both museums’ websites.

Inside are more figurative wonders, including one of the great purpose-built installations I've seen in the Armory's old munitions vault in the back, the dreamy "Hygiea," which I'm told is being acquired by a major American institution. "The ancient Greek goddess of health, cleanliness, and sanitation is represented as a generically modern charwoman," the wall card informs us, and she holds her double-strawed broom like a kayak paddle — or like a weapon. On an audio track we hear the sound of sweeping as water drips into buckets. Her stare is so directly at us. An Egyptian asp is clutched unflinchingly to her breast. Her job may be to clean — but she lives her life as a goddess.

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