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SAAR



Alison Saar's Defiant Black Warrior Queens and Afro-Deities are Agents of Change

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Published on: December, 2021



Alison Saar, Hankerin' Hearts: Gimpy, Hincty, Mosey, 2012. Cast Bronze. Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver. Installation Photo from Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe at Armory Center for the Arts (2021). Photos by Ian Byers-Gamber. Courtesy of Armory Center for the Arts.

Alison Saar: of Aether and Earthe

[Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena](#) and the [Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, Claremont](#)

Through December 12, 2021 (@ Armory) and
December 18, 2021 (@Benton)

By LITA BARRIE, November 2021

Alison Saar's inimitable sculptures of defiant Black warrior queens and Afro-Deities embody universal feminine power which cannot be suppressed in a man-made world once women learn to seize it - and own it. Her female characters have a commanding presence because their body language exudes self-confidence, and they return the viewer's gaze - even watching our backs. Their presence also mysteriously electrifies the atmospheric space - much like a wild jungle cat we may not see but we can sense. Saar's sculptures have an aura that recalls ancient tribal art, religious art and Greek art because they are painstakingly handcrafted in an almost devotional way, and with a purpose: as totems and talismans with open-ended meanings that move with the times, especially in our current era of racial and gender upheaval.

Saar understands the importance of the human touch for creating meaning in handmade art. As she says, "I have to experience everything through my hands," because, "the hand is in the making of textures." Saar carves her female figures from salvaged wood, using a chisel and mallet given to her by her ceramicist father, Richard Saar, who restored ancient art and allowed her to hold these artifacts in her hands. She covers these

nudes with tougher armor made from old ceiling tin and wire, then hammers scores of nails like studs, and even uses nails for a crown of hair. The salvaged tin has a beautiful patina created from a natural aging process, and Saar creates further patterns from aggressively hammering to show that her female characters wear their hard forged histories as a protective covering. As the daughter of Betye Saar, she developed a deep understanding of assemblage techniques and a commitment to fusing recycled materials and storytelling.



Alison Saar, Bitter Crop, 2018. Wood, steel, bronze, acrylic, tar, 18 x 28 x 8 in. (45.7 x 71.1 x 20.3 cm). Collection of Gary and Kathi Cypres.

Her two-part survey *Alison Saar: Of Aether and Earthe* shared by the Armory Center for the Arts and the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College is concurrent with a group exhibition Saar curated for L.A. Louver. Although Saar has been making art to upturn racial and gender hierarchies for thirty years, her work strikes a much stronger chord today in the era of the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements. As Christopher Knight wrote in his Los Angeles Times review: “Given the extraordinary agency of Black women in American life, it’s hard to think of any recent art more salient right now.”

The survey is divided into work that emphasizes the spiritual and non-material air qualities of sculptures and installations, along with five graphics and a large painting, to play on the dichotomy of body and spirit and the sense of being suspended between two realms. The impressive accompanying 164-page catalogue includes Black poetry about Saar’s work, in addition to scholarly essays and biographic information.

At the Armory, the life-size female sculptures are seen determinedly standing their ground, enthroned, elevated on piles of chairs or carrying burdens on their heads. In *Inheritance* (2003) the female figure recalls

Atlas, the Titan condemned to hold up the heavens for eternity by balancing an oversized ball on her head - much like a celestial sphere - made from twisted white sheets. The clean laundry is a reference to female domestic labor but the sheets are also a reminder of Ku Klux Klan horrors. In *Pearly* (2013), an acrobatic figure suspended from the ceiling by cloth can be interpreted as a further reference to KKK lynchings.

In *Rouse* (2012), the bronze female figure with hooves for feet carries a child cocooned in protective antlers that extend from her head. Deer antler sheds are a recurrent symbol in Saar's oeuvre because they are a symbol of regeneration, and are seen elevating a female figure and extending from a lactating breast in *Via Lactea* (2013). In *Brood* (2008), a woman is elevated on children's chairs and stares down through the space between her hands at red stains from pomegranates on the floor, a reference to menstruation. In Saar's most recent installation *Hygieia* (2020), a domestic servant is transformed into the Greek goddess of Hygieia. The dimly-lit cleaning chamber filled with buckets is reimagined as a magical refuge with glistening hanging bottles to symbolize hope.



*Alison Saar, High Cotton, 2017. Acrylic on indigo-dyed seed sacks, vintage linens, and denim, 84 x 102 in. (213.4 x 259.1 cm).
Courtesy of L.A. Louver.*

The second part of the survey in Pomona is also the inaugural exhibition of the newly constructed Benton Gallery building, celebrated with the commission of Saar's cyan colored outdoor sculpture *Imbue* (2020). Saar draws on the protective power of Yemoja, the West African water deity, carrying water vessels on her head, and pouring water indefinitely in a symbolic act of purification. These terrestrial works have many references to water, especially the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The latter event is addressed in *Breach* (2016), in which a

towering female figure holding a pole on a wooden raft is overburdened by trunks, suitcases and kitchen utensils she carries on her head. Like Atlas, this resilient character carries the load with dignity and a determination to survive the catastrophe.

A highpoint at Benton is a large celestial painting, *High Cotton* (2017), on indigo-dyed seed sacks, vintage linens and denim, from Saar's acclaimed Topsy Turvy series. Unlike the "wicked" contrarian slave girl in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who was pacified by the gift of a single lock of golden hair, Saar's heroine reinvents her identity as a fierce warrior-queen who seizes a scalp of golden hair as a war trophy - recalling the myth of Jason and the Argonauts. Saar reimagines Topsy as a Medea-like heroine with an army of smaller Topsys who revolt against their subordination. This monumental painting is a study for the sculptures of the five female rebels who invert their plantation tool into tools of war. Saar is known for using hair as a leitmotif for female emancipation, so in this painting she transforms the cotton branches worn in the hair of slaves for camouflage into regal crowns that resemble beautiful stars against an indigo sky. Nearby in *Bitter*

Cup (2018), this bronze sculpture of a graceful reclining nude wears cotton branches as a symbol of fecundity like a proud African queen.

Few artists can pour such voluminous feelings into labor-intensive handmade techniques or use historically loaded materials to create such distinctive signature motifs. Fewer still can use materials to weave mythological references together in storytelling with such sophisticated cultural subtexts. It is rare to see art with soul in today's all too often soulless art world of brand art. Saar is the Nina Simone of sculpture because like the High Priestess of Soul, Saar delivers her message as an urgent cry for change. **WM**

<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/afro-deities-are-agents-change/5224>