

Nasher Sculpture Center Announces *Betye Saar: Call and Response*

Exhibition of sketchbooks and sculpture gives insight into the working process of the renowned Los Angeles artist

DALLAS, Texas (July 1, 2020)—The Nasher Sculpture Center announces *Betye Saar: Call and Response*, the first exhibition to examine the relationship between Betye Saar’s sketchbooks—which she has kept since the late 1960s—and her finished works. Originated by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and curated by Carol Eliel, LACMA’s Senior Curator of Modern Art, the exhibition features approximately 40 objects and covers the span of the artist’s career, including work from her early years through the present day, and will be on view from September 25, 2021 - January 2, 2022.

Addressing spirituality, gender, and race in her art, Saar ruminates and plays with objects and ideas, making sketches inspired by specific found objects in her possession. In her sketchbooks, Saar lays out quick visuals for works, jotting down ideas about materials and potential titles for finished pieces. She has also kept more elaborate travel sketchbooks containing exquisitely beautiful watercolors and collages, many with motifs that recur throughout her work, including hearts, eyes, hands, lions, and celestial bodies.

“It is a tremendous honor for the Nasher Sculpture Center to present this exhibition of Betye Saar’s sketchbooks and sculpture,” says Nasher Director Jeremy Strick. “Saar’s efforts to skewer the racist underpinnings of American material culture has produced a body of work that radically challenges systems of oppression of Black Americans, while also highlighting their spiritual perseverance. It is so gratifying to be able to shine a light on how Saar’s private drawings led to these important works of sculpture, which grapple with themes so fundamental to our nation’s history.”

Saar combines items typically discovered at flea markets and second-hand stores into conceptually and physically elaborate creations. Her creative process starts with a particular found object—a piece of leather, a cot, a tray, a birdcage, an ironing board— since she believes that objects have stories to tell. After identifying a primary object, Saar surveys her stockpile of other found materials to see what feels appropriate to combine with it. Only once she has arrived at a vision of the final work in her mind’s eye does she make a sketch.

“Saar’s creative process is brought to the forefront in this long-overdue exhibition,” said curator Carol S. Eliel. “Her sketches form an essential part of what she considers the mysterious transformation of object into art.”

Exhibition Highlights

Betye Saar: Call and Response is grouped loosely by theme and materials. In the exhibition, the sketchbooks will be shown in proximity to the sculptures, so that the visitor can see simultaneously any given sketch and the related finished work.

The Divine Face (1971)

Based on an Ethiopian symbol that Saar describes as a sun looking both up to heaven and down to earth, *The Divine Face* includes a self-portrait and, according to Saar, is one of her first works informed by “a Black or African American consciousness, recycling it into art form.” Saar’s sketch for this assemblage represents a face with bilocating eyes and radiating rays, along with images above depicting phases of the moon. The support for this assemblage is a cowhide given

to Saar by Alonzo Davis, co-founder of the Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles (1967–89), which showed Black artists. The work also incorporates macramé, used in the 1970s by women artists to inspire conversations about the value of “women’s work” and to critique the modernist hierarchy of art over craft.

A Call to Arms (1997)

The sketch for *A Call to Arms* identifies many found object components, including a brush doll at the top as well as a central compass, an allusion to both geography and the notion of a “moral compass.” In the final work, the washboard evokes female and slave labor, though it is framed by guns, customarily associated with men. The mammy head and bullet arms of the brush doll similarly combine traditional concepts of female and male. Lettered on the corrugated washboard surface are words from Langston Hughes’s poem “The Negro,” originally published in 1922. Saar began collecting washboards in the mid-1990s, inspired by memories of one her grandmother used on her back porch.

I’ll Bend But I Will Not Break (1998)

I’ll Bend But I Will Not Break addresses issues of race and women’s labor. Saar made two sketches for the piece within several weeks of each other in January 1998. The image on the ironing board—itsself a traditional symbol of female labor—is borrowed from the Brookes diagram, a well-known 18th-century print showing how scores of Africans were packed into slave ships to cross the Atlantic. As indicated in both sketches, Saar enlarged and then transferred the diagram to the top of the ironing board, subsequently superimposing on it an image of a Black woman ironing, dressed in stereotypical mammy attire, underscoring the connection between the Brookes diagram and the impact slavery had on American society.

The work also refers to the marking of enslaved people with branding irons and their chaining in transit or as punishment. “KKK” appliqued to the sheet denotes the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, still active today in the United States. According to Saar, this work “implies the political message that you can treat me as a slave and I’ll bend down—I’ll bend down to pick cotton, to be a laborer—but I will not break.”

Woke Up This Morning, the Blues was in My Bed (2019)

Woke Up This Morning, the Blues was in My Bed is a recent sculptural installation based on sketches the artist created in 2001, 2010, and 2013. The cot in this tableau can be seen as a spirit bottle bed, akin to the traditional bottle tree used by the Kongo civilization in Africa to ward off evil spirits. The August 2001 sketch for this work connects the work to an old blues song with the words, “woke up this mornin’, the blues was on my mind.” Saar used the cot—bought at a secondhand store on Western Avenue in Los Angeles—in at least two earlier (1990 and 1994) installations, later dismantled, evidence that she loves not only using recycled objects but also recycling them herself.

About Betye Saar | One of the most important artists of her generation, Betye Saar (b. 1926) has played a seminal role in the development of Assemblage art. Since the 1960s, her work has reflected on African American identity, spirituality, gender, and the connectedness between different cultures. Saar received her BA from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1949, with graduate studies at California State University, Long Beach; the University of Southern California; and California State University, Northridge. She has been awarded honorary doctoral degrees by California College of Arts and Crafts, California Institute of the Arts, Cornish College of the Arts, Massachusetts College of Art, Otis College of Art and Design, and San Francisco Art Institute. Saar’s work is included in the permanent collections of more than 80 museums, including—in addition to LACMA—Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; The Metropolitan

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Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In 2019, *Betye Saar: The Legends of Black Girl's Window* opened in the redesigned Museum of Modern Art, New York.

For high resolution images, please follow [this link](#).

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About the Nasher Sculpture Center:

Located in the heart of the Dallas Arts District, the Nasher Sculpture Center is home to the Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, one of the finest collections of modern and contemporary sculpture in the world, featuring more than 300 masterpieces by Calder, de Kooning, di Suvero, Giacometti, Gormley, Hepworth, Kelly, Matisse, Miró, Moore, Picasso, Rodin, Serra, and Shapiro, among others. The Nasher Sculpture Center is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11 am to 5 pm, and from 10 am to 5 pm on the first Saturday of each month. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$5 for students, and free for children 12 and under and members, and includes access to special exhibitions.

For more information, visit www.NasherSculptureCenter.org.

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