

Jemima Unchained: Alison Saar at MoAD

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Her feet dangling in the air, a young black girl sits on a swing, holding onto the ropes that give her the ability to fly joyously through the air. But where is the joy? Why is she nude? And why are a rusted frying pan, a spatula, old boxing gloves, and other detritus balancing the swing?

Alison Saar's sculpture is a torrent of questions and an opera of inference that narrates the history and legacy of race in America. Saar made *Weight* in 2012, a year before the "Black Lives

Matter" movement mobilized street protests over the killings of black Americans, and although her new exhibit at the Museum of the African Diaspora touches on some of that movement's themes, Saar's art is much more reflection than rage.

The rage is there — implicitly. But at MoAD, we get a chance to step back and connect the dots, pivoting from the early 17th century, when African slaves were first brought in chains to American shores, to the early 21st century, when black integration into American life remains as complicated as ever.

Saar began *Weight* in the aftermath of Barack Obama's election. While many Americans debated whether the country had entered a "post-racial" epoch, hate oozed out in the open like never before, even as Obama's political triumph galvanized the hopes of idealists and liberals. The girl in *Weight* is sitting on a cotton scale, and the artwork's other implements were also used in slavery times.

"*Weight* converged with the news and my own personal experience," Saar says in a phone interview from her home in Los Angeles. "I'd done a show called 'Still...' that was a response to all of the hatred, especially now that all of that is so easily accessible on the internet and social media. It got me angry and discouraged and frightened. So I had started creating pieces that were a response to that. Obama's election opened up this whole flood [of racism]. *Weight* was really a response to working at this art [in a] high school, and these students were really phenomenal. Many of them got scholarships, but they couldn't do it because they didn't have the money, or they had to help support their family. This was a high school that works with lower-income families in downtown Los Angeles. It broke my heart that

they're still expected to be housekeepers like their mothers or laborers like their fathers. We think we've moved beyond that, and we haven't."

Women are an especially strong focus of "Alison Saar: Bearing," including the woodcut called *Shorn*, which has a naked black woman — bathed in blood-red skin — holding the tresses that once adorned her head, and the sculpture *Mammy Machine*, where a collection of rubber breasts (activated by a pump that museum-goers can squeeze) sprays water into a bucket below.

Saar's artwork is full of double meanings that evoke the past and present. *Mammy Machine* is a commentary on how difficult it has been for African-American women to find jobs. It's also a commentary on the "mammy" role that black women played as nurturers for white plantation families in the Antebellum South. Sold for more than a century, the packaging of Aunt Jemima pancake mix originally featured a large, happy-go-lucky black woman, a legacy of the Jim Crow era. Saar's mother, the celebrated African-American artist Betye Saar, critiqued the imagery of Aunt Jemima with her 1972 work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, which features one Jemima figure holding both a broom and a shotgun, and another wearing a black skirt in the form of a black fist.

Betye Saar's genre was more obviously protest art, and *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* was (and still is) an important work that embodies the Black Power movement of the early 1970s. Alison Saar, who was then a teenager, is now almost 60, with two grown children of her own (both artists). Her legacy of success includes a Guggenheim grant, National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and past exhibitions of her work in the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art (including the 1993 Whitney Biennial). Alison Saar's most visible public commission is her Harriet Tubman Memorial — a colossal sculpture in Harlem that has the abolitionist heading south, to where she rescued scores of slaves in the mid-1800s.

Nature has a pull for Saar and her art subjects, and she frequently depicts women enmeshed in or emerging from vines and the earth. As the arts of Africa influenced 1920s German Expressionism, so are they a strong influence on Saar. Many of the women in her art are stripped of their clothing, but there's a "so what?" defiance to their poses, and an implicit reference to the 19th-century colonial practice of displaying African women nakedly in public. Saartjie Baartman, the South African exploited as "Hottentot Venus" for customers in 1800s London, could not even find dignity in death, as Paris' Museum of Man (Musée de l'Homme) openly displayed her genitalia.

"I'm trying to remove them from this realm of being observed," Saar says. "I think of those really beautiful, but disturbing, photographs of slaves with scars on their back. They are these clinical observations, where the slaves are being scrutinized in this pseudoscience, where they're being looked at as 'others' and 'oddities.' In Victorian times, it was a freak show if you look at Saartjie Baartman and how she was put on display, and her private parts were put on display in a jar at Musée de l'Homme until the 1970s. My idea is to make the viewer self-conscious, and for the viewer to see beyond the naked body — that there's a strength there, or that there's a determination, or a powerful story behind this image. It's tricky not to fall into the cage that it's trying to bust out of."

Image: "Alison Saar: Bearing" Through April 3 at the Museum of the African Diaspora, 685 Mission St., S.F.; \$5-\$10; 415-358-7200 or moadsf.org.

One of the works in "Alison Saar: Bearing" is *Black Lightening*. It features a bucket and mop that evoke Gordon Parks' iconic 1942 photograph *American Gothic*, which shows janitor Ella Watson posing with a mop and broom before a giant American flag. Parks' photo was a searing portrait of America's treatment of its black citizens, and the limited opportunities for good work. *Black Lightening* also has boxing gloves that are a part of *Weight*, and the gloves hint at the narrow work options that society has for many black men.

"There's this mindset that black males are suitable for two lines of work — that they can play sports and be entertainers or make music, or they can be janitors or do hard labor," Saar says. "Being president isn't in that spectrum. This comes out of people's unwillingness to accept an African-American as president, even though Obama was elected. There was this idea that he was incapable of doing the job, and people still feel that way. It often comes down to, sadly enough, a racial bias."

Still, for African-American artists like Alison Saar, there seems to be more opportunity than ever. Last month, *The New York Times* wrote about how American museums like MOMA and the Metropolitan are acquiring and exhibiting more work by 20th-century black American artists. The article quoted Betye Saar, and both Alison and her mother were featured in an accompanying online video. "The art world," Alison Saar tells *SF Weekly*, "has a tendency to play these games as to what's cool and not cool. It will be really cool to show black artists now, but at some point, it may be not so cool. At the 1993 Whitney Biennial, there was all this backlash about, 'Well, this is just the PC version of the Biennial, and none of these artists really merit to be seen,' and 'White artists are being excluded.' I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop instead of assuming that this is going to be business as usual. I hate to sound like such a pessimist."

<http://www.sfweekly.com/sanfrancisco/alison-saar-art-gallery-museum-of-the-african-diaspora-blacklivesmatter-alison-saar-bearing-mammy-machine-the-liberation-of-aunt-jemi/Content?oid=4345923>