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# Piecing Together

## A SHARED PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

IN HER MOST RECENT WORKS OF COLLAGE AND ASSEMBLAGE, RENOWNED ARTIST **BETYE SAAR** TRANSFORMS FOUND OBJECTS AND IMAGES TO ARTICULATE HER FEELINGS ON THE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND RACIAL LEGACY OF BLACK AMERICA.

by **Courtney Jordan**



**N**o matter the kind of art object—sculpture, collage, drawing, or painting—the most powerful and enduring works always have a story to tell, communicating something that catches our interest and keeps it. Over the past seven decades, Betye Saar has earned a reputation for creating significant and faceted works that speak to her personal history and black heritage. The resulting assemblages and collages weave together complex narratives that charm, startle, and sometimes sting. But most of all they entice—each artwork, as Saar describes it, “has to have something, so that when you walk into the museum or gallery and you look around, the piece says, ‘Come over here and look at me.’”

Born in Los Angeles a few years before the onset of the Great Depression, thrift was an obvious necessity for Saar. As the daughter of a seamstress and granddaughter of a quilter, she learned early on the benefits of bringing disparate parts together and combining and reusing items to give them a new relevance.

As a child, Saar witnessed the construction of the Watts Towers, one of the most extensive examples of vernacular architecture in America. Walking by the site on her way to the market near her grandmother’s house, Saar saw how creator Simon Rodia brought all sorts of objects—bed frames and porcelain dishes, corn cobs, seashells, and rusty tools—together to decorate



**ABOVE**  
**The Liberation of Aunt Jemima**

1972, mixed media assemblage, 11¾ x 8 x 2¾. Collection the University of California Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, California.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Rhythm & Blues**

2010, mixed media assemblage, 16 x 14¼ x 9½. All artwork this article courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York.

the structures and spires. For Saar, this transformation of discarded objects and unwanted materials was akin to magic, and highly influential in her own artistic development.

Since the mid-1960s, Saar has been creating assemblages and collages from personal mementos, possessions passed down from friends and loved ones, and found objects that resonate with her in broader ways. She uses assemblage to tell her own stories and give voice to the narratives she feels need to be told—the hidden or forgotten histories of black Americans; explorations of spirituality and metaphysics; the intersections of race, politics, and gender; and, most recently, the ideas and effects of psychological as well as physical imprisonment.

Saar’s most recent exhibition, “Cage,” which was on view at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, in New York City, explored the myriad ways a person can be caged—literally confined, culturally stereotyped, and emotionally stunted.



To reinforce the show's theme—inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy"—Saar placed all the assemblages within the confines of delicate, antique birdcages.

One of the linchpins of Saar's work has been the appropriation of derogatory images and caricatures of black Americans, reclaiming such racist symbols as Sambo, Aunt Jemima (who is the focus of Saar's most famous work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*), Uncle Tom, the mammy, and others, and giving them new meanings and messages. In the assemblages in "Cage," such figures are given nuanced roles to play as Saar combines them with objects that can bring to mind the confines of the politics and culture of America's not-so-distant past.

In *The Weight of Color*, a stuffed black crow has been squeezed into a too-small cage. Its legs splay unnaturally to either side of its body and its beak pushes between the cage wires in a futile search for more head room. The cage itself sits atop a scale, ostensibly where the burden of the Jim Crow laws are forever being weighed.

The cage door, which is slightly ajar but secured with an oversized lock, is likely a reference to the false promise of the "separate but equal" laws that offered blacks the semblance of equality but in reality provided nothing of the kind. The mammy figure that sits atop the cage is much like the metaphorical straw that broke the camel's back. Not only did black Americans at one time have to exist under the yoke of the Jim Crow laws, they also lived in a society where racist images and caricatures of blacks, like the mammy, had to be shouldered every day.

Throughout her career Saar has also explored the history and enduring legacy of slavery, incorporating shackles, locks, chains, and reproductions of blueprints of slave ships in her assemblages. In her recent series, she assesses the history of slavery and its repercussions in a quiet, reflective manner.

BELOW

**Record for Hattie**

1975, mixed media assemblage,  
13½ x 14 x 2.

*The Destiny of Latitude & Longitude* features two miniature slave ships caught in a maelstrom. One is entangled in a sea of artificial hair weave, and the other has lost its bearings completely, suspended in the middle of the cage. The horror and suffering that took place on such ships and voyages would be well known to most viewers, but the overarching feeling of the piece is somewhat calm and tranquil. A crescent moon at the top of the cage offers a measure of hope, or at least a constant shining presence in the sky to chart one's course by. The wire outlines in the shape of hands that hang around the cage could be protective or warning, but either way speak to a more transcendent presence. The silver mirror in the bottom of the cage could be taken as a literal "looking glass," but in reality the glass has been removed and the mirror lies face down. The temporal here and now, which is all a mirror can reflect, is set aside for a distant, forward-thinking view or perhaps a mindset that is more mystical, focused on other worlds and higher planes. The title of the piece reinforces this in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek way: The literal destiny or destination of latitude and longitude is physical, a mere point on a map. But a person's true fate isn't determined by where he or she lands. It is the wisdom and insight we gain along the way that makes us who we are.

In *Valley of Bones*, the bleached bones in the cage call to mind the deaths of thousands of slaves, and the globe at the bottom of the cage attests to the distances crossed by enslaved Africans. But the assemblage is also a sepulchre of sorts, honoring the dead and speaking to the lineage that connects black Americans to their African ancestry, linking past to present. The bird that sits on top of the cage indicates a path to freedom and the potential to transmigrate from this world to another. In accordance with this idea of transcendence, the title of the piece



**The Weight  
of Color**

2007, mixed media  
assemblage,  
22 x 8½ x 9.





ABOVE AND ABOVE  
RIGHT  
**The Destiny of  
Latitude and  
Longitude  
(and detail)**  
2010,  
mixed media  
assemblage,  
54 x 43 x 20½.

LEFT  
**Valley  
of Bones**  
2010, mixed  
media  
assemblage,  
12½ x 7 x 7.

OPPOSITE PAGE,  
BELOW  
**Woman  
With Bird  
in Her Hair**  
2010, mixed  
media collage  
on paperboard,  
13½ x 12.



calls to mind a Bible verse from the Book of Ezekiel, in which Ezekiel is given a vision from the Lord: a valley littered with bones. The Lord asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” In the Bible, the answer to that question is yes—through the word of God. Saar may be referencing this on some level, but this faith-based answer is supplemented by self-actualization in this particular work. The cage is a catalyst. Once a person is aware of a cage’s presence, he or she is no longer bound by ignorance or fear—knowledge becomes a source of power. From there, one can take steps toward change and

empowerment and wisdom. Saar makes us aware of the cages—real and imagined, metaphorical and societal—that can imprison us so that we can begin to break free.

“It’s a way of delving into the past and reaching into the future simultaneously,” the artist says of how she brings objects and images together in her works. Her art says complex things eloquently, but above all they are carefully constructed so that you want to engage with them. Saar’s works stay powerfully and meaningfully relevant because they create conversations that contextualize our past and engage with us in the present. But Saar is always thinking toward the future, always ready and waiting for the next object to provoke a new idea or perhaps act as the last piece of the puzzle falling into place on a work she’s had simmering for some time. Just as a painter can view a scene or composition repeatedly before it captures her interest; or a draftsman interacts with a person several times over before deciding to use him or her as a model—Saar waits for her muse to speak, and when it does, she listens, creating art pieces that are as incisively crafted as they are artistically fine. ■

*Courtney Jordan is the online editor for American Artist.*

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

For more than 70 years **Betye Saar** has created groundbreaking works in printmaking, assemblage, collage, and installation art that address a gamut of psychological and cultural concerns. She has won numerous grants and awards, including two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a fellowship from the J. Paul Getty Fund for the Visual Arts. Saar’s work has been the subject of more than 60 solo shows, and in 2005, the University of Michigan Museum of Art, in Ann Arbor, organized “Betye Saar: Extending the Frozen Moment,” a traveling exhibition of her work. Her pieces are included in museum collections throughout the country, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York City; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, DC; the High Museum of Art, in Atlanta; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis. Saar is represented by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. For more information, visit [www.michaelrosenfeldart.com](http://www.michaelrosenfeldart.com).

