

ARTFORUM

February 2011

Betye Saar

MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY

On certain antebellum plantations in the American South, behind the magnolias and the majestic colonnaded verandas, is a covered walkway connecting the kitchen (kept far from other buildings for fear of fire) and the Big House. It is called the “whistle walk,” not for any leisurely strolls or romantic serenades that took place there, but for the prosaic reason that slaves were required to whistle as they carried platters of food to the tables of their masters, to assure they were not eating anything along the way.

This and other perversities of human bondage may explain why the metaphor of the caged bird singing is a fraught one in the context of Betye Saar’s oeuvre, which has for the past forty years deployed eclectic objects to return viewers to racially charged events in its appraisal of African-American history. In the twenty-one recent assemblages and some half dozen collages in “Cage,” an exhibition of new work, Saar focuses intently on birdcages and avian imagery, and on old-fashioned cooking implements, to speak again to the lives of African Americans during and after that “peculiar institution” of slavery.

Saar’s exhibition intertwines these sources differently depending on the medium. On the one hand, her sculptures combine elaborately wrought cages she rummaged for in junk shops and yard sales with the sort of stereotyping mammy, Sambo, pickaninny, blackface, and black porter collectibles that have been a mainstay of Saar’s iconography since the early 1970s and that one can, disturbingly, still find for purchase today. Sometimes hanging and sometimes placed on antique furniture, the birdcages make uncannily appropriate homes for the figurines due to their current and former tenants’ diminutive scales, and owing also to the symbolic connotation of domestic labor as captivity that these cages as dioramas convey when Saar commingles them with old washboards, sieves, and frying pans. Her collages, on the other hand, frequently juxtapose photographic portraits of

nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African-American women with detailed period renderings of birds and plant specimens. In these delicate two-dimensional works, the figures, often facing the camera in dignified poses and formal attire, are embellished with delicate filigrees of patterned flora and fauna moving in and around their hair and bodies.

The impact of Saar’s work is heightened by her titles’ painfully raw puns, which often refer to the continuing effects of the incarceration of blacks in the United States and elsewhere, from the journey of the Middle Passage, which brought captured Africans to enslavement in the colonies, to the criminal justice system of today, which sees an alarming percentage of the young black population of the US housed in correctional facilities. In the sculpture *Globe Trotter*, 2007, Saar rests a modest square cage on a simple rough-hewn bamboo side table, under which a large classroom globe is wedged.

Inside the cage stands a plaintive-looking black toy soldier whose facial features have been worn down to an eerily blank mask. Rimming the tabletop is a length of measuring tape, evoking the rise in the nineteenth century of statistical metrics justifying racial privilege, the vastness of the distance between Africa and the New World, and the smallness of the quarters in which the childlike doll is confined. In the collage *Nevermore*, 2010, a woman’s diaphanous ankle-length gown is outfitted with a pair of birds perched on the shoulders like ears. Superimposed on the dress is a diagram of hellishly crowded billeting on a slave ship, demonstrating how to most efficiently transport chattel on a transatlantic voyage. Of course the title references Poe’s poem “The Raven,” whose ebony bird repeatedly intoned the word to memorable and frightening effect. Here, the implied repetition acts like a quickening pulse, revivifying the ghostly, avenging giantess whose torso is filled with an armature of hundreds of suffering human bodies stacked like pins on a cribbage board.

—Eva Díaz



Betye Saar,
Globe Trotter, 2007,
 mixed media, 32 1/2 x
 18 1/4 x 14 1/2".