



Betye Saar, *Something Blue*, installation view

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects

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Betye Saar Makes the Blues Sing

SHANA NYS DAMBROT | DECEMBER 6, 2018 | 12:26PM

17 Betye Saar is a true living legend, one of the most influential American artists of her generation and an early star in the firmament of modern Los Angeles art history. Beginning in the 1960s, her pioneering work helped put both L.A. and the assemblage movement on the international cultural map. Now at age 92, with half a dozen institutional exhibitions open or imminent and the acquisition of her archive by the Getty Research Institute, Saar also is celebrating an exhibition featuring several of her complex, beautifully finessed new works at her Culver City gallery, [Roberts Projects](#).

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"Something Blue" is a symphony of aquatic and azure hues, in a group of works for wall, floor, pedestal and ceiling suspension. Mixing a salient selection of pieces made as early as 1983 and as recently as 2018, across elements of imagery and materials, the entirety is closely linked by the prominently featured colors in the spectrum of blue. The works are arranged in an installation of Saar's specific design. She's known for envisioning the presentational context of her works in an almost theatrical way, going beyond curatorial choices to provide a more liminal, environmental set of emotional cues. And the project room at Roberts Projects, being perfect for such a gesture, has been transformed this way by Saar before.



Betye Saar, L.A. *Sky With Spinning Hearts* (1987)

Robert Wedemeyer/Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles

With Betye Saar, there are always more layers to the story than first meet the eye. "It was always about layering," Saar recently told Wendy Ikemoto, Ph.D., associate curator of American art at the New-York Historical Society. "One idea, one feeling, one material on top of the other – because basically that's what life is. It's layering – memories from childhood, to current experiences, to people involved." As soothing, evocative and almost chapel-like as the blue room feels, with the silhouette of a woman reading on a wall-hanging signaling the contemplative, studious attention desired, Saar's interests in the color are both more personal and culturally symbolic.



For Saar, the choice of a blue palette is connected to the world of occult and folk magic, topics she's explored throughout her career, specifically through the lens of historically African-American



Betye Saar, *Blue Window of the Mystic Palms* (2018)

Courtesy Roberts Projects

experiences and traditions, identity and spirituality. So beyond setting a mood, in her new sculptural works Saar augments and explores the expansive potential of that indigo realm in the dense accumulations of cosmic details in her assemblages – themselves composed with and containing troves of found objects, from curio cases and bell jars to ceremonial and souvenir charms, glass beads, domestic artifacts, gemstones, trinkets, feathers and more.

Her imagery further amplifies this narrative, both in the found source materials and the images she paints and renders herself – in the Buddhas, bird cages and skeletons, snakes and other spirit animals, books, bells, candles, hearts, suns, stars and moons, and especially drawings of the hand – her own hand, as the artist, the maker, the spellcaster and even the hand of destiny.

These elements – like the well-used blue watering can in the corner, borrowed from her own garden – are lovingly, attentively collected over long periods. "The past always has had its hook on me," Saar told Ikemoto. "Each object has its own story. When I collect, it's about finding something that says it wants to be art. It's like it says, 'Come over here, lady. Buy me! I want to be a piece of art! I want to be used in it.'



Betye Saar, *Indigo Illusions* (1991)

Shana Nys Dambrot

"When I teach school," Saar continued, "we do exercises to help students remember events or places or things that happened in their past, maybe in their childhood, that maybe could be integrated into their current life,

because we're all the product of who we were from childhood and so forth. So that's an exercise I do, and I'm constantly finding things from my own life to say, 'Oh, that's why I use that material! Oh, that's why I'm attracted to that color!' It's very interesting. It's what I call the holistic approach – of totally involving your past and your present to make a presentation."

Speaking of mining her past and informing her present, in September the Getty Research Institute announced that it had established and endowed a \$5 million initiative dedicated to building a more robust collection of the history of African-American art. Its first official acquisition was Saar's lifetime archive. "The Betye Saar Papers," as the Getty has dubbed them, cover the years from 1926, when Saar was born, right through to the present day, across her entire life and career. This includes her many sketchbooks and travel diaries, prints and drawings, graphic design and illustration work, as well as exhibition installations and studio documentation.



Betye Saar in her studio, 2015

Ashley Walker/Courtesy Roberts Projects

"The Getty is making a strong, long-term commitment of unprecedented breadth to the field of African-American art history," states James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust. "The study of African-American art history is fundamental to a comprehensive understanding of American art history." Getty Museum director Timothy Potts echoes this sentiment, stating, "We are committed to building a collection of photographs by African-American photographers as part of this important initiative."

Besides the impressive installation at Roberts Projects, 2018 sees multiple other exhibitions on Saar's calendar. "Keepin' It Clean," her magnificent exhibition pairing her seminal washboard works with her personal collection of vintage washboards, has gone from L.A.'s Craft and Folk Art Museum, where it originated in 2017, to the [New-York Historical Society Museum & Library](#). (Excerpts of the interview for the show's catalog appear in this story.) "NOW: Monster Chetwynd, Henry Coombes, Moyna Flannigan, Betye Saar, Wael Shawky" is on view at the [Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art](#) in Edinburgh through April 28. And Saar is featured at LACMA in the excellent "[Outliers and American Vanguard](#)" show, on view through March 17.



With a [Morgan Library](#) group exhibition opening in



Betye Saar, *Evening in Paris* (2010)

Tim Lanferman/Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles

New York in January, Saar also will be featured in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, 1963-83" at the [Broad Museum](#) (on view from March 23 through Sept. 1). And to coincide, opening in March, Roberts Projects presents a bulletin board-inspired installation of Betye Saar's influences from the 1960s to the 1980s. The gallery describes its intention to have it feel "as if she's working from her studio." The installation will include papers, images, quotes and objects from the civil rights era,

feminism and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which Saar has said was a pivotal moment in her consciousness as a citizen and an artist.

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Tired yet? Too bad, because Betye's not. Even more grand plans are still being made. "Betye Saar: Call and Response," will be at LACMA Sept. 22, 2019, through Feb. 23, 2020, and

then will travel to the Morgan Library in New York and one other venue. Saar will have an installation on view at a major museum in London early in 2019.



Betye Saar, *Shrine of Forgotten Memories* (2018)

Robert Wedemeyer/Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles

In true Betye Saar style, she will almost certainly play a large part in conceptualizing the look, feel, contents and thematics of all these shows whenever possible – but that doesn't stop her curiosity about what other people will find for themselves and take away in their hearts. "You know, sometimes I do things, and it has another meaning," she told Ikemoto. "Somebody will ask, and I'll say, 'Oh yeah, well, that fits.' I'm open to that because everybody has their own story."

"Something Blue" is on view through Dec. 15 at Roberts Projects, 5801 Washington Blvd.,

Culver City; (323) 549-0223; robertsprojectsla.com.
