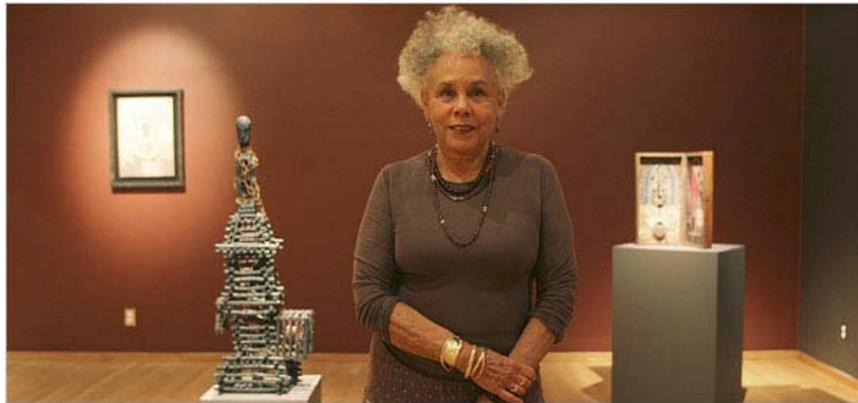


The New York Times

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, September 12, 2006
ART & DESIGN

E3

The Artist Who Made a Tougher Aunt Jemima Hasn't Softened With Age



Betye Saar, whose show of her latest work, "Migrations/Transformations," is at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery through Oct. 28. Photo by Hiroko Masuike

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Published: September 12, 2006

You wouldn't expect the woman who put a gun in Aunt Jemima's hands to be a shrinking violet. And Betye Saar, who for 40 years has constructed searing narratives about race and gender — including "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima" (1972), in which she armed the pancake lady with broom, pistol and rifle — doesn't disappoint.

When she arrived at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery on West 57th Street in Manhattan on a recent afternoon, Ms. Saar seemed far younger than her 80 years. To her crowd she is sometimes Grandma Betye, but the signal she emits is clear: Ms. Saar and her work can still muster the mojo.

The hoopla this summer around her 80th birthday attests to her staying power. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia is presenting "Betye Saar: Extending the Frozen Moment" (through Dec. 10), a traveling retrospective focusing on the use of photography in her assemblage art.

The Rosenfeld gallery is showing "Migrations/Transformations," an exhibition of her new work, through Oct. 28. And tomorrow night at the New-York Historical Society, Ms. Saar will talk about her life and career with the scholars Leslie King-Hammond and Deborah Willis in connection with "Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery," a group show there through Jan. 7.

"In July 2006, I completed 80 revolutions around the sun," is how Ms. Saar, a Leo whose art often refers to the mysticism of the universe and voodoo, put it in an essay about aging that she wrote for the gallery. "As the world turns, my thoughts turn inward in remembrance."

In her latest art pieces Ms. Saar continues the trajectory of her ancestral narratives to bring them, like their creator, full circle.

“My work before was mostly in the United States — the Aunt Jemima thing, the derogatory images,” she said. Her latest artwork traverses black history from “what happened in Africa, the transition through the diaspora, to slavery, to freedom,” she added. “This new work is about the integration of it all.”

The 17 assemblages at the Rosenfeld gallery, some of which she will discuss tomorrow night, tell of journeys literal and spiritual. In “*Ragtime*,” a photograph of a minstrel strumming a banjo shares space with a scrap of a Confederate flag, an African mask, the layout of a slave ship, a clockface, a lock and a chain. At the bottom, block letters spell out R-A-G-T-I-M-E.

“It’s about the African-American who gets to be a minstrel or a fool or gets lynched,” Ms. Saar said. “The R is backwards, and the G is backwards, but so is slavery.”

In “*Vessels*,” cutouts of the moon frame a portrait of a woman in a lace blouse, surrounded by amber-glass bottles.

“Her face is so beautiful and peaceful, but there’s something about the eyes that shows sadness and sorrow, like somehow in her DNA she remembers the slave ship,” Ms. Saar said. The bottles “are the poison of the idea of using rum to buy more slaves, and then the slaves would produce the sugar that would make more rum.”

“*Cage (In the Beginning)*” resembles a tower of cells in which African tourist sculptures, in shackled or hanging positions, have been strung. The work refers to the transition from tribal member to slave, Ms. Saar said, and was inspired by a trip she made to the holding dungeons on an island off Nigeria.

“I’m a sensitive person to places and situations, and I walked into a room, and it was really oppressive,” she said. “It didn’t feel comfortable, and I tried to capture that.”

Ms. Saar, who is of African, Irish and American Indian ancestry, deals with discomfort by focusing on stereotypical images and language and not allowing her audience to turn away. Not all of her visual lectures point outward: “*Colored: Consider the Rainbow*” (2002), for example, consists of 29 works that explore the issues of skin color within the black culture.

Born in Los Angeles in 1926, Betye Brown graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, and was a social worker before marrying the conservator and painter Richard



Betye Saar (b.1926), *Vessels*, 2005, mixed media assemblage on vintage window, 30" x 30" x 1 1/2", signed and dated

Saar, who was white. Their daughters Lezley and Alison are also artists; a third, Tracye, is a writer.

After divorcing, Ms. Saar worked as a costume designer. It was then that she began concocting assemblages of found materials, inspired by Joseph Cornell’s boxes.

Her art evokes a sense of memory, ancestry and journeys common across cultures and gender, and tries to speak of the unspeakable in ways words cannot.

Ms. Saar is an artist “who gets a lot of materials sent to her, and she does use them,” said Halley K. Harrisburg, a director of the Rosenfeld gallery. “She’ll use memories from other people. She takes it in, and when it’s time to create a work, she has embraced it in a way that it no longer has that specific association and now just has a deeper, richer meaning in another context.”

Deborah Willis, a professor of photography at New York University, said: “I see her work as reflective of the rites of passages that many of us have gone through — courtships, growing up with grandmothers and aunts. She portrays women as warriors, and I think that is essential in her relationship to younger artists, who have turned to Betye in their attempt to understand that history of struggle and survival and resilience.”

Ms. Saar, too, speaks of broken chains. “There are more years behind me than in front of me, but there’s a sense of freedom,” she said. “I’m shifting into cruise control and I’m coasting along, and it’s just wonderful.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/12/arts/design/12saar.html?pagewanted=all>

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