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ARTS & THEATER

ARTS

What is Old Can Be Made Anew

By Michael Elias

10-25-02

I first encountered the work of Betye Saar when visiting Los Angeles in the mid-seventies. What caught my eye was the remarkable love of African-American family life. The print I purchased at that time depicted a series of three cut-up photographs of African-American families dressed in their Sunday fineries.

Alongside the image of these people is a lace doily upon which sits a stuffed bird, a slice of toast and a flower. Above the cloth lies a piece of calico material, besides that is a feather and a coin with the Islamic star and crescent symbol.

In this one small lithograph we can see delineated several telling characteristics of black life. The family is not my own, the race depicted not mine, and the religious symbol not one that I use in my religious ceremony.

Nevertheless, the way of life it presents, the values of family and community, and the sense of a continuation with the past, are all elements I can relate to and appreciate.

Yes, Betye Saar is an African- American artist but to characterize her as such is to do her an injustice and to assert the distances between people. She speaks for her community to be sure and I do not mean to diminish her cultural contribution but this is an American artist who should be embraced by all. Her new exhibition, *Colored: Consider The Rainbow* at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery on 57th Street is one that can be enjoyed by everyone. It brings the past alive. It makes the future something we are prepared for with an understanding of the past.

Betye goes about picking up the detritus of life. She brings home cloth, glass, paper, wood and old photographs. These pieces and fragments that have been discarded are given life as symbols and memories of a life not forgotten. She re-enlivens this forsaken waste by putting them together with other elements until the life they held virtually shouts out to the viewer.

The resulting assemblage makes new the hidden and the forgotten. This is the third one-person exhibition the Rosenfeld Gallery has given Ms. Saar since they became her exclusive representatives in 1997.

The gallery has produced an extensive fully illustrated exhibition catalogue. It contains a quite erudite essay by Dr. Leslie King Hammond, the Dean of Graduate Studies at the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore. In her essay, Dr. Hammond develops a specific discussion of nearly every work in the show.

She provides insight into Ms. Saar's methodology and some analysis of the work, and of her career. The hardcover exhibition catalogue costs \$25 (\$28 with shipping) and is available from the gallery or directly from their website, which also provides a link to Betye Saar's own website.

Gallery owner Michael Rosenfeld has had the good sense to mount the Betye Saar exhibition along with an exhibition of photographs taken by James Van Der Zee of Harlem in the 1930s. The exhibition is entitled, Harlem Guaranteed. These photographs of ordinary working folks in Harlem will give the viewer insight into the dignity with which these people struggle.

The photographs of children coyly flirting with the camera will charm even the most hard-hearted. It becomes apparent in these photographs that we are all alike in our search for a warm and welcoming community from which we can work to achieve the prosperity we all seek. In the work of Van Der Zee, Harlem of the thirties becomes a palace of the ordinary pleasures of life and family.

Together, these two artists, Betye Saar and James Van Der Zee, have the uncanny ability to present a particular group, African-Americans, in their own milieu, with sensitivity and insight while also asserting the universality of their experiences. It is an education and a joy to behold.

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Betye Saar & James Van Der Zee
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
24 West 57th St. -- 7th floor
Tues - Sat 10 am - 6 PM
Through November 2
212-247-0082

www.michaelrosenfeldart.com
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