

2015
MEDAL
DAY

Betye Saar: M

Assemblage and Installation Artist Honored with 55th Edward MacDowell Medal

Nearly 1,400 visitors watched assemblage and installation artist Betye Saar accept the 55th Edward MacDowell Medal from Chairman and novelist **Michael Chabon** at a public ceremony August 10. In kicking off the festivities, Chabon described the three stages of the making of a work of art: The Hunt, the Transformation, and the Release. The following is the transcript of his opening remarks:

Good afternoon!

Forgive me if I seem to have a bit more swagger in my walk than usual, if I seem a bit more, shall we say, swingin'. But I've been working on a project related to Frank Sinatra for the past month, immersing myself in the man and his music--and, well, you know, they also call *me* "The Chairman of the Board."

And what's more, I actually *am* a Chairman of a Board.

This is my fourth Medal Day as Chairman: Edward Albee, Nan Goldin, Stephen Sondheim, and now Betye Saar. I'm not sure it would be possible to condense a greater sense of the range, intelligence, cunning, and fierceness of American art into a smaller span than that. Or maybe it is: Within the confines of these 450 acres, as you will see today when you tour the studios, 30-odd geniuses (and when I say 30-odd, believe me, I know what I'm talking about.) from all over the country and all around the world have been busy striking just as deep, just as far, just as fiercely, and just as hard at the boundaries and foundations of art, as those four great pioneers.

I'm proud to have been a part of that incredible intensity, that smoldering focus, as a Fellow and as Chairman, for the past 18 year now.

I'm also proud to be the guy who in a few moments from now gets to hand one of those medals to Betye Saar. The word "pioneer" does not seem quite strong enough to describe the startling courage she has shown, from the beginning, in making her presence known to the world, and it's neither a knock on the way in which medals get awarded nor, God forbid, a comment on Ms. Saar's age--it's simply the truth--to say this one is probably overdue.

While I was preparing for today's ceremony I came across an interview with Ms. Saar in which she told the interviewer that, in her view, there are three stages to the making of a work of art: the Hunt, the Transformation, and the Release.

I thought this was a fascinating model not just of her process, or of the process of artists generally who work in assemblage and collage, but of my own and perhaps that of most artists, in any discipline. I hope that Ms. Saar will forgive me if I take hold of her framework and run with it a little ways, the way my dog Mabel does when she gets hold of somebody's swim goggles.

Let us consider the three stages in reverse order.

The final stage, "The Release," is the briefest, and the weirdest, part of the whole business. It comes when the work--assemblage, poem, canvas, short story--is surrendered to the tender mercies of the world: put up for sale, given away, submitted for publication, abandoned in a drawer. Consigned, at times after years of labor, doubt and confusion, to its fate. This is the weird part because, first of all, it often involves money or questions of compensation, and money makes everything weird. It's weird because having your work exposed, at last, is kind of like what I imagine it would feel like to be trepanned, that moment when the tap of a very sharp chisel lets the light and air of the outside world flood in, revealing what had until now lain pulsing secretly in the dark. That has to feel pretty weird, right? "The



(Clockwise from top left) Medalist Betye Saar and Chairman Michael Chabon present the 55th Edward MacDowell Medal; Brenda Garand, Daniel Kojo Schrade, and MacDowell Fellow Betsey Garand after the ceremony; Lila, Caroline, and Laura Trowbridge head off to lunch before touring Medal Day open studios; Michael Chabon addresses the gathered crowd.

“ I have been a believer that one can best bring about change in the world by cultivating one's own garden and trusting that others will do the same. Betye Saar, by cultivating her own garden through the art that she has created has played an important role in showing the world the beauty of African American culture. What a gift to the American cultural experience!”

—PRESIDENT SUSAN DAVENPORT AUSTIN

Release” is also weird because it brings about situations like that of a painter friend of mine, a former MacDowell Fellow himself, who misses his paintings, once they're sold and gone from his studio, who kind of *pines* for them, and has even contrived, on rare occasions when it gets really bad, to track them down and go and visit them for as long as decency or their current owners will permit. I guess he hasn't quite yet grasped the whole “release” concept.

The middle stage of the process, the Transformation, is probably what most people think of when they think of an artist making art: the part where the artist turns tubes of pigment into haystacks at sunset, the remembered details of a tour of duty in Vietnam into a magic-realist epic, the notes of the diatonic scale into a sonata that leaves hard men in tears, or--in the case of Betye Saar--an antique washboard, an image clipped from an old magazine ad, a doll and a pair of vintage ladies gloves into an assemblage that is both a stinging indictment of, and a witty riposte to, a century and a half of pernicious pop-cultural racism.

The first stage of the artistic process that Ms. Saar talked about in that interview, the Hunt, is the most important, I think, and the one that tends to be misunderstood or completely neglected by non-artists and even by artists themselves. It's the part that people at bookstore readings are unwittingly referring to when they raise their hands during Q&A and ask an author--often an author who has not slept particularly

ore Than a Pioneer

well for several nights in a row—that dreaded question “Where do you get your ideas?” The fact that writers dread and despise this question so thoroughly may be proof that the Hunt is the least understood, and most important stage in an artist’s process. And one of the many, many wondrous things about Betye Saar’s work is that it exposes the importance of the Hunt to making art in a way that is readily grasped.

At its simplest, the Hunt might be defined as the period during which the artist assembles, accumulates, organizes, and prepares the raw materials that will, during the next phase, be transformed. For Betye Saar the Hunt is often, in part, quite literal: she haunts garage sales, secondhand stores, junk yards. I can actually report that she sent out some emissaries this morning to a local swap meet. She trains her gaze on curbsides and trash bins, rescuing what has been discarded or neglected to obtain material for her pieces.

But I would argue, and I hope Ms. Saar would agree, that the Hunt, properly understood, begins long before the first trip to the Salvation Army or the hardware store, before the first research is undertaken or the first interview conducted, before the canvas is bought and stretched and the paints mixed—long before the commission is ever received. The Hunt for the raw materials out of which art can be made begins before we even know we might want to spend our lives making it. The Hunt begins before we are born, with the experiences and memories, the skills and the scars accumulated by our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, and it carries on, in earnest, from the day we are born, through all the years of our education (both in school and out), through the streets and houses of our hometown, through the pages of the books we read and the flicker of the movies we see and the endless hours of music we listen to. All of that provides us with raw material for the Transformation; they are all the spoils, and the quarry, of the Hunt.

When the time comes for the Transformation, if you’re, say, Betye Saar, you are holding not just bits of glass and pottery, old furniture to reconfigure and old books and magazines to repurpose, but particular memories: of seeing Simon Rodia’s magical towers rise from the alleyways of Watts, of your relatives’ conversations and tribulations. You hold the expertise you gained by making enamel jewelry to sell at fairs when you were young, and that you gained by raising three bi-racial daughters in a racially fraught city. You hold your history of pain and love and sorrow, of slavery and emancipation, hope and disappointment, exclusion and marginalization, your history as a woman, your history as a reader of magazines and fairytales. *All of that*, taken together, is where you get your ideas. And now the Hunt is over, and it’s time to get to work—no time to consider the mysterious possibility that all along it was not you who was doing the hunting, that in fact you are just the container, the basket in which some unknown hand has gathered all that raw material, that it is not the bits of flotsam or cans of paint or skeins of words but yourself that must now be transformed. And as for the Release...? Let’s burn that bridge when we come to it. Thank you.

“In all the various disciplines, artists tell us stories. Some of those stories are difficult and some of them are beautiful. But all artists have a genius for combining rational and emotional intelligence into something that makes the hair on my arms stand on end. That kind of response means Art is working its way into us, helping us to understand our deepest selves. For young and old, being opened up to ideas through art, to think and form an opinion about what we believe, is the best exercise we can get and we are better for it.”

—EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHERYL YOUNG

Of the 1,931 applications in 2014, more than 75 percent were from those who’ve not yet come to MacDowell. Applications came from 48 states and 62 countries. From that, 288 residencies were awarded.

Museum of Arts and Design Curator Lowery Stokes Sims introduces 55th Medalist Betye Saar

Joining Sims on the selection committee were visual artists Nene Humphrey and Richard Haas, Leslie King-Hammond, art historian and founder of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and the late Susan Sollins-Brown, executive producer and curator of PBS’s *Art in the Twenty-First Century*.

I’m entitling this A Praise Song for Betye Saar.

One of the things that Betye Saar and I have done together in the past, and have not done enough of in the present, is to shop. I recalled that fact a few years ago when at the behest of the Michael Rosenfeld and Halley Harrisburg I wrote a brief personal reminiscence about Betye. I rely on that reminiscence here with some recent embellishments.

I suppose I was shopping with Betye Saar even before I met her. When I first encountered her work in the late 1970s—in the notorious exhibition of black American artists organized by Robert Doty at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, and later in the basement gallery in SoHo of Monique Knowlton—I had just embarked on what turned out to be an occasional hobby of collecting black memorabilia. I sought out dolls, figurines, photographs, salt shakers, twine holders, fly swatters and whisk brooms in expected and unexpected places. I would later realize that I was shopping along with Betye in spirit.

Betye’s engagement of and challenge to commercial black imagery, which had been an irksome presence since the Reconstruction era, was a never-ending source of fascination for me. As a young black person I had grown up with the expected unease with and disgust for black stereotypes such as Stepin Fetchit, Uncle Tom, Sapphire, Amos and Andy, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Mose, and Uncle Ben, and a whole other panoply of characters. These were certainly not the types of images in which one expected to find a new and positive black assertiveness. What Betye’s art work did was to let me and others in on another reading, another consideration of those images, their historical reality, and their social impact, and to begin to recognize that they could be mechanisms for survival, and a means to coopt the distortions of racist ignorance.

Because of the fact of her work, therefore, my avocational passion—which some of my family and friends viewed as a transgressive pleasure—was given context and meaning, and the objects in my collection shed their controversial pasts as symbols of shame and ridicule. They were resurrected as instruments of liberation for me as I strove to define myself in the world.

At times I also realized that the dialogue I could have with Betye’s work could take on the character of an inside joke, or a nod and a wink of those in the know. This was the case when I engineered the acquisition of one of Betye’s boxes, *Whitey’s Way* (1970-1996) for the Metropolitan Museum of Art when I was on their staff. This piece shows a series of identical white figurines of alligators aligned on a mirrored surface. I realized that my colleagues at the Metropolitan initially saw this as an expression of ethnic serial imagery. At the time it was brought into the Museum, a postcard that Betye had put into the lid of the box had gotten loose and it was only when it was recovered that the true meaning of the work was evident. The post card showed a popular image of a young black boy half in the mouth of an alligator referring to the actual, though thankfully not widespread, use of black babies as alligator bait.

So in light of my affinity for mementoes from the past, and Betye’s need to replenish her stock of images to make her art when we got together we would shop whether in a flea market or swap meet or places like



(Standing, from left) Resident Director David Macy, Executive Director Cheryl Young, Chairman of the Board Michael Chabon. (Seated, from left) President Susan Davenport Austin, Medalist Betye Saar, and Presentation Speaker Lowery Stokes Sims.

the Terminal Market in Philadelphia, a trendy boutique on the upper west side of Manhattan, or in a new mall she insisted that I see in Los Angeles. We hunted for presents for ourselves and friends, ate in the hottest restaurants and where possible took in the drop-dead gorgeous views.

I hope that I've indicated how Betye Saar and I have long had a multi-layered relationship: artist/curator, teacher/ student, black women across generations.

As a curator I've had to privilege of writing about her work, and being able to do so from a highly personal point of view. I have observed how she creates a visual dialogue between real and manufactured images, particularly of black women. How she exploits the racially charged metaphorical meanings of colors such as white and black. How she affirms our spiritual essence as African peoples as well as our empirical challenges in the world. After all she emerged as an artist in the 1960s and 70s as black Americans were involved in a movement to assert their right to economic, social, and political equality in this country. One of the crucial strategies in this effort was the recasting of the self-image of the black American.

In this context, as Susan Scott indicated yesterday, Betye's legendary work *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* of 1972 burst onto the landscape of American art like a molotov cocktail. This boxed assemblage of modest proportions gathered "found" objects into a "mojo" (i.e. an amulet or charm that works with the strength and conviction of the user) that transmuted the mythical stereotype of Aunt Jemima from some fantasy of the good-natured black servant to a dedicated terrorist outfitted with a grenade and rifle, ready to reclaim her power and her dignity.

As a student I learn from her every time she exhibits her work. I see how artifacts from vernacular life and personal histories can be brought together and result in works of great visual acuity and political acumen. At times the effects are breathtaking even in their simplicity. I think specifically of a small sculpture of a kneeling African woman set in a gilded cage that was part of her exhibition *Cage* at the Rosenfeld Gallery a few years ago. It was a heart-stopper, metaphorically capturing the experience of women caught in a cage—albeit gilded—but caught in a cage nonetheless.

As a student I also learn how she brings to her work certain qualities that are key elements of her vision: improvisation, emotional engagement, nature, and her own personal presence and energy.

A primary encounter with Betye's work is on an intimate scale where one can meditate quietly and privately on her transformative gestures. But even as the assemblages and collages gave way to larger altar-type works and eventually installations, the context for the object in Saar's work grew richer and more profound in nuance. While this enlargement of scale and space would seem to deprive the viewer of the experience of the quintessential intimacy and concentrated energy of the early works, Saar has never lost her primary connection to the innate and accumulated aura of the individual object. Through the artful evocation of nostalgia, shamanism, autobiography, and reconstruction in these works Betye has been able to consistently and directly engage her audience.

Her installation work, which has been a part of her oeuvre since the 1970s, has given her a vehicle by which she could "travel" her art and engage a larger number of people—particularly art students. She revels in the improvisational mode in which she has had to create these works in the past. Often it was not feasible to transport a cache of objects from her studio, so she would find herself creating the work on site in conjunction with others. On occasion even visitors to the exhibition might be invited to leave their own contribution on a work, accumulatively altering the form and substance of the work during the exhibition. In this way Betye brings her work squarely into the realm of communal expression that characterizes the work of the tribe—i.e. the familial group—and the magical and occult aspects of the objects are refocused again.

But the roots of that expression are multi-variant. Betye thinks of herself not only as a woman artist, but as a California artist. As she has noted the first consideration has given her access to an intuitive gift that was nurtured and sustained through the multi-ethnic gene pool into which she was born. The second consideration has led her to feel a particular cultural affinity to Asia and to appreciate the West Coast environment where light and water are omni-present, reinforcing her particular connection with nature.

As women bridging generations, Betye and I have shared perspectives on our experiences as black women, meditating on the conditions of exploitation and servitude that for many of us are but one or two generations behind us. As our late great mutual friend Arlene Raven, the noted feminist critic and writer, observed about Betye's work dealing with



(Top) Baxter and Bonnie Harris enjoy a picnic lunch with their daughter Molly Herron. (Lower left) Visual artist Emily Noelle Lambert demonstrates print making for a young visitor in Graphics-Putnam Studio after lunch.



Sometimes from the outside MacDowell can be mistaken for an isolation chamber for creative work, a place where artists are trained on deadlines with bleary eyes, endlessly grinding out work in the studios. But the reality is that MacDowell is an incredibly social place, a rich community filled with opportunities to trade ideas and make fast friends. Its open admissions process brings together a cast of characters that could never be assembled here or anywhere else without the striving of all those who are seeking the time to make their work...and to discover what it's like to make it on an organic time schedule."

—RESIDENT DIRECTOR DAVID MACY

black female labor: She is able to "[intensify] the irony inherent in her materials, exaggerating beyond satire to black humor," while demonstrating "the involuted and unfinished nature of American apartheid."

I cannot conclude my remarks without acknowledging the influence that Saar has had in the art world on generations of younger artists. Her gift as a manipulator of texture, color, image, shape and contour informs the work of a host of artists for whom she paved the way for their positive reception in the art world. A few who readily come to mind:

Joyce Scott, master beader and glass artist, who is a comparable creator of commentary within the context of a highly aestheticized sensibility and technical virtuosity.

Kara Walker, with whom Betye has disagreed, but who would never have been able to pursue her artistic ambition without Betye Saar.

Performance and installation artists from Kaylynn Two Trees, to Sengue Nengudi and Maren Hassinger and Simone Leigh would never have been able to see how their own existences could be potent and viable subjects for art without Betye Saar.

And I can't fail to mention the wonderful work created by her daughters Alison and Lezley who have found their own voices within the language she has created. And Tracye, whose engagement with language complements those of her siblings and of her mother.

Betye Saar is an artist for all ages. At a time in human history where individual responsibility on all planes, especially the spiritual, is increasingly abrogated, she reaffirms the validity and power of the individual and shows us the way to tap the best qualities in ourselves and reach our highest good. She is a guru, a griot and a masterful materialist. She is also feisty, feminist, mystical, and race affirming.

Therefore this year's MacDowell medal committee, which also included Richard Haas, Leslie King Hammond, Nene Humphrey and Susan Sollins (under the stewardship of Cheryl Young and Michael Chabon), is honored to present the 2014 MacDowell Medal to Betye Saar for her outstanding achievement and continuing effervescence in the arts of the United States and the world.

Betye Saar Delights Crowd as She Accepts Edward MacDowell Medal

Thank you.

Eighty-eight revolutions around the sun. Eighty-eight revolutions around the sun, and what do I have to show for it?

All the hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades. All of those behind me and yet here I am hunting and gathering, collecting, finding objects, images, materials, imprints, impressions, ideas, memories to recycle. To recycle, to reinterpret, to mix, to match. To recycle all the trash and treasure that I have with the obligation to reinterpret, to connect, to transform by cutting, tearing, nailing, painting, gluing, with fabric, paper, and paint.

My creative process, which is my art: collages, assemblages, installations. I guess that's what I'm leaving behind. But anyway, I feel that I'm creating herstory, my story.

The MacDowell Colony encourages and supports creativity, just as all of us right here in this space are doing our part to encourage and support creativity.

And here I am a few weeks into my Eighty-ninth revolution around the sun. Here I am receiving this medal as my reward, and I feel that this medal says for me, 'You go, girl!'

(applause and laughter)

And my reply is, 'Thank You.'

(applause)

2015

The MacDowell Medal is rotated among the artistic disciplines practiced at the artist colony established in Peterborough in 1907. Next year's medal will be awarded to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the realm of music composition.