

Exhibition: *Betye Saar: Call and Response*

On View: September 22, 2019—April 5, 2020

Location: Resnick Pavilion



IMAGE CAPTIONS PAGE 5

(Los Angeles, CA—July 16, 2019) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents the first exhibition to examine the relationship between Betye Saar's sketchbooks—which she has kept since the late 1960s—and her finished works. Featuring approximately 40 objects, *Betye Saar: Call and Response* covers the span of the artist's career, including work from her early years (1971) through the present day. Addressing spirituality, gender, and race in her art, Saar ruminates and plays with objects and ideas, making sketches inspired by specific found objects in her possession. In her sketchbooks Saar lays out quick visuals for works, jotting down ideas about materials and potential titles for finished pieces. She has also kept more elaborate travel sketchbooks containing exquisitely beautiful watercolors and collages, many with motifs that recur throughout her work, including hearts, eyes, hands, lions, and celestial bodies.

"Saar is one of the most significant assemblage artists working today and a key figure in the Southern California tradition of artists who work with found objects," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "*Betye Saar: Call and Response* is a rare opportunity to present a very special and previously unseen aspect of a great Los Angeles-based artist's work and process."

Saar combines items typically discovered at flea markets and second-hand stores into conceptually and physically elaborate creations. Her creative process starts with a particular found object—a piece of leather, a cot, a tray, a birdcage, an ironing board—since she believes that objects have stories to tell. After identifying a primary object, Saar surveys her stockpile of other found materials to see what feels appropriate to combine with it. Only once she has arrived at a vision of the final work in her mind's eye does she make a sketch.

“Saar’s creative process is brought to the forefront in this long-overdue exhibition,” said Carol S. Eliel, LACMA’s Senior Curator of Modern Art. “Her sketches, which Saar has never before shown publicly, form an essential part of what she considers the mysterious transformation of object into art.”

*Betye Saar: Call and Response* is organized by Carol S. Eliel. Following LACMA’s presentation, the exhibition will travel to the Morgan Library & Museum, New York (May 27–September 13, 2020) and the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (February 13–May 9, 2021). A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition. On November 2, 2019, Saar will be honored alongside filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón at LACMA’s 2019 Art+Film Gala, which is generously sponsored by Gucci.

### **Exhibition Highlights**

*Betye Saar: Call and Response* is grouped loosely by theme and materials. In the exhibition, the sketchbooks will be shown in vitrines in the center of the room, so that the visitor can see simultaneously any given sketch and the related finished work.

#### *The Divine Face (1971)*

Based on an Ethiopian symbol that Saar describes as a sun looking both up to heaven and down to earth, *The Divine Face* includes a self-portrait and, according to Saar, is one of her first works informed by “a Black or African American consciousness, recycling it into art form.” Saar’s sketch for this assemblage represents a face with bilocating eyes and radiating rays, along with images above depicting phases of the moon. The support for this assemblage is a cowhide given to Saar by Alonzo Davis, co-founder of the Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles (1967–89), which showed Black artists. The work also incorporates macramé, used in the 1970s by women artists to inspire conversations about the value of “women’s work” and to critique the modernist hierarchy of art over craft.

#### *A Call to Arms (1997)*

The sketch for *A Call to Arms* identifies many found object components, including a brush doll at the top as well as a central compass, an allusion to both geography and the notion of a “moral compass.” In the final work, the washboard evokes female and slave labor, though it is framed by guns, customarily associated with men. The mammy head and bullet arms of the brush doll similarly combine traditional concepts of female and male. Lettered on the corrugated washboard surface are words from Langston Hughes’s poem “The Negro,” originally published in 1922. Saar began collecting washboards in the mid-1990s, inspired by memories of one her grandmother used on her back porch.

### *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break (1998)*

*I'll Bend But I Will Not Break* addresses issues of race and women's labor. Saar made two sketches for the piece within several weeks of each other in January 1998. The image on the ironing board—itsself a traditional symbol of female labor—is borrowed from the Brookes diagram, a well-known 18th-century print showing how scores of Africans were packed into slave ships to cross the Atlantic. As indicated in both sketches, Saar enlarged and then transferred the diagram to the top of the ironing board, subsequently superimposing on it an image of a Black woman ironing, dressed in stereotypical mammy attire, underscoring the connection between the Brookes diagram and the impact slavery had on American society.

The work also refers to the marking of enslaved people with branding irons and their chaining in transit or as punishment. “KKK” applied to the sheet denotes the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, still active today in the United States. According to Saar, this work “implies the political message that you can treat me as a slave and I'll bend down—I'll bend down to pick cotton, to be a laborer—but I will not break.”

### *Colored (2002)*

*Colored* foregrounds the problematics of race and skin tone. According to Saar, this assemblage “is like a scale chart from light to black, about all different skin colors.” The first sketch for this work proposes a mirror as the center panel, while the second sketch includes the wood-frame mirror hanging on the wall next to the collage. Saar used the latter concept in the final work, though either would have allowed the viewer to compare her own skin tone to the images and threads in the collage. Saar's starting point for this collage was a crown-shaped found frame, into which she inserted photocopies of four found photographs of Black women with skin tones varying from light to dark. The earlier of the two sketches includes Saar's variation on the lyrics to blues singer Big Bill Broonzy's 1930s song, “Black, Brown, and White,” which refers to skin colors.

### *Woke Up This Morning, the Blues was in My Bed (2019)*

*Woke Up This Morning, the Blues was in My Bed* is a new sculptural installation based on sketches the artist created in 2001, 2010, and 2013. The cot in this tableau can be seen as a spirit bottle bed, akin to the traditional bottle tree used by the Kongo civilization in Africa to ward off evil spirits. The August 2001 sketch for this work connects the work to an old blues song with the words, “woke up this mornin', the blues was on my mind.” Saar used the cot—bought at a second hand store on Western Avenue in Los Angeles—in at least two earlier (1990 and 1994) installations, later dismantled, evidence that she

loves not only using recycled objects but also recycling them herself.

### **About the Artist**

One of the most important artists of her generation, Betye Saar (b.1926) has played a seminal role in the development of Assemblage art. Since the 1960s, her work has reflected on African-American identity, spirituality, gender, and the connectedness between different cultures. Saar received her BA from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1949, with graduate studies at California State University, Long Beach; the University of Southern California; and California State University, Northridge. She has been awarded honorary doctoral degrees by California College of Arts and Crafts, California Institute of the Arts, Cornish College of the Arts, Massachusetts College of Art, Otis College of Art and Design, and San Francisco Art Institute. Saar's work is included in the permanent collections of more than 80 museums, including—in addition to LACMA—Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Forthcoming exhibitions include *Betye Saar: The Legends of Black Girl's Window*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (October 21, 2019–January 4, 2020).

### **Exhibition Catalogue**

*Betye Saar: Call and Response*

Co-published by LACMA and Delmonico Books · Prestel

Essay by Carol S. Eliel, Senior Curator of Modern Art, LACMA

Hardcover, 96 pages, 70 color illustrations

Price \$35

### **Credit**

*Betye Saar: Call and Response* was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

This exhibition is made possible in part by The Claire Falkenstein Foundation, the Pasadena Art Alliance, Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte, and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

All exhibitions at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by Mr. and Mrs. Anthony and Lee Shaw, Kitzia and Richard Goodman, Jerry and Kathleen Grundhofer, Meredith and David Kaplan, and Jeffrey Saikhon, with generous annual funding from Terry and Lionel Bell, the Judy and Bernard Briskin Family Foundation, Kevin J. Chen, Louise and Brad Edgerton, Edgerton Foundation, Emily and Teddy Greenspan, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross, Mary and Daniel James, David Lloyd and Kimberly Steward, Kelsey Lee Offield, David Schwartz Foundation, Inc., Andy Song, Lenore and Richard Wayne, and The Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

### **Image credits**

(left): Betye Saar, *The Divine Face*, 1971, mixed media assemblage, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, © Betye Saar, photo credit: Robert Wedemeyer

(left center): Betye Saar, page from 1970–1972 sketchbook, collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, © Betye Saar, photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA

(center): Betye Saar, *Supreme Quality*, 1998, mixed media on vintage washboard and tub, The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Mortimer and Sara Hays Acquisition Fund, © Betye Saar, photo courtesy Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, by Tim Lanterman

(center): Betye Saar, page from 1998 sketchbook, January 22, 1998, collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, © Betye Saar, photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA

(right center): Betye Saar, *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*, 1998, vintage ironing board, flat iron, chain, white bedsheet, wood clothespins, and rope, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Lynda and Stewart Resnick through the 2018 Collectors Committee © Betye Saar, photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA

(right): Betye Saar, page from 1998 sketchbook, January 29, 1998, collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, © Betye Saar, photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA

### **About LACMA**

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 140,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. [Lacma.org](http://Lacma.org)

LACMA press contact: [press@lacma.org](mailto:press@lacma.org), 323 857-6522

Connect with LACMA

[@lacma](https://www.instagram.com/lacma)