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Betye Saar At MOMA

By EDITOR • DEC 28, 2019



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LEILA FADEL, HOST:

Betye Saar is one of the best-known African American artists of our time. She's now in her '90s and has been part of the black arts and feminist art movement since the 1960s. In the last few years, Saar has really hit it big, winning international awards and having solo shows at venues, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York's Museum of Modern Art. That's where Karen Michel caught up with her.

KAREN MICHEL, BYLINE: So much for objectivity - when it comes to Betye Saar, I'm a fangirl. My late parents had one of her etchings in their Los Angeles apartment. And, as I told the artist, I was emotional, verklempt even, to see an edition of it at MoMA.

BETYE SAAR: So you've seen that piece before.

MICHEL: I've seen it a lot.

SAAR: OK (laughter).

MICHEL: So it's emotional for me to see it again, especially with you.

SAAR: Yeah. My birth sign, or my sun sign, is Leo, so I have a lot - not a lot, but several Leo things in there.

MICHEL: There's a red and black sun at the top of the small etching. One lion enters top left while another exits bottom right. There are discs of blue and yellow - the former an impression of a dime - and the imprinted words, he who. In that mix of draftsmanship and using what was around her, you see evidence of the work that first inspired her, Simon Rodia's Watts Towers.

SAAR: And I thought he was building something magical there.

MICHEL: She'd see it as a child when visiting her grandmother.

SAAR: And little did I know that that was really the first art I saw, and the first recycled art. And I like that kind of playfulness. I like that kind of freedom of working with materials, that everything doesn't have to be so precious.

MICHEL: For Betye Saar, it's memories that are precious. Her father died when she was 5, and she still talks about it. She studied art in college in LA, became part of influential groups of black and feminist artists in the 1960s and '70s and became the mother of three girls. Still, she made art, often, like Watts Towers, from objects she collected, as she continues to do - ironing boards, washboards, old advertisements from flea markets and trash.

SAAR: My formula is to search and always find something that from the corner of my eye says, come over here and look at me.

MICHEL: In the MoMA exhibition, along with a number of her early prints, there are several windows from the mid-'60s onward, among them, her most famous, "Black Girl's Window." It hangs by itself on an aubergine wall. It's about 3 feet high and a foot-and-a-half wide and bisected

by the six small panes at the top and a single large one underneath depicting the black girl of the title.

SAAR: That is like a self-portrait with my hands pressed against the glass. My palms telling my fortune are my signs and the mystical part of life. My eyes that are kind of google eyes in the thing - that's our way of seeing. And the window, for me, was like a way of looking through and a way of looking in because you're on both sides. It has a duality to it.

MICHEL: We walked closer, the eyes following us, a "Mona Lisa" of another time and place. The panes at the top are filled with advertising images, occult references, old photographs, bits of detritus and of memory.

SAAR: The panes, for me, became like chapters of the book of my life. I have a pane for family. This is - I think a valentine that I found probably of the '20s or the '30s of a family with the husband and the wife or the mother and the father dancing, and then Leo the lion, which is my sun sign, and then a photograph of an unknown woman, who is a white woman, because I come from mixed heritage. So that would be, like, that part of my life I don't know about. And then an eagle, which is love of country or, like, emotionally, love can fly away. But in the center is death. So I sometimes - I'm concerned about why is death in the center? I'm not a morbid person. I'm a happy person.

MICHEL: There's often a wry humor at play in her work. Take another of Saar's iconic pieces. "The Liberation Of Aunt Jemima" shows a black mammy caricature holding a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other. To the artist, the 1972 image is another example of recycling, transforming a derogatory image into a positive one.

SAAR: She becomes a warrior. And that's my way of being involved in politics, of being a warrior through my art by making a piece of art that you would either hate or love. But it's my expression of using something that's negative and turning it around to be something positive as - just by being a piece of art.

MICHEL: Betye Saar said she's working on new pieces, continuing her exploration of the mystical and of memory.

For NPR News, I'm Karen Michel in New York. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.



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