

A life in art

BETYE SAAR

Through her evocative prints and talismanic assemblages, Saar subverts negative racial stereotypes into a powerful body of work

By CATRIONA GRAY Photographs by TIERNEY GEARON



*This page: Betye Saar
photographed at her Laurel
Canyon studio. Opposite:
her 'Anticipation' (1961)*



Collected dolls in Saar's studio. Above: Saar in 1970. Left: 'Black Girl's Window' (1969)

When Betye Saar first showed *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, in a Berkeley gallery in 1972, it caused an instant sensation. The mixed-media piece featured a 'mammy' doll – a popular toy that was a caricature of a female slave – placed centre-stage and armed with a miniature rifle. Saar had created it in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr while she was at home looking after her three children, unable to march in protest but eager to express her anger. 'I wanted to make images that turned black people from victims into warriors,' says the African-American artist. She certainly succeeded – credited as the trigger of the black women's movement, that artwork made Saar, now 93, one of the most important voices of her generation.

Saar grew up in California, and her earliest introduction to art was accidental. She spent summer holidays with her grandmother in Los Angeles, and would often walk past the home of the outsider artist Simon Rodia, who was in the midst of his 34-year project to create the Watts Towers – a vast site of 17 interconnected structures that he constructed single-handedly from steel and concrete. 'Today, it's a famous LA landmark, but at the time I didn't know what he was doing,' she says. 'He was building these wonderful spires out

of steel and burying shards of glass and crockery in them – although he was in an ordinary neighbourhood, it seemed as if he was living in a fairy tale. Looking back, he was one of my earliest influences.'

Saar studied design at university, before getting married and starting a family. It was only later, following her divorce in 1968, that she began a master's degree and became fascinated by printmaking. 'Before then, my background had been in design, but that was my first experience of fine art,' she says. 'I loved the smell of the ink and the physical process of creating the prints.'

From there, she made her initial foray into assemblages – the medium for which she is now best known. Her intricate pieces often take on the quality of talismans, fusing mysticism and feminism. In the 1969 work *Black Girl's Window*, a woman's dark silhouette peers out of an old window frame, her hands decorated with moons, stars and alchemical marks. Above her is a series of nine symbols, including a skeleton, a lion and an eagle; some are found illustrations, tinted and



Saar's studio. Clockwise from bottom right: 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima' (1972). A work from Saar's 'Collages Book 2' sketchbook (1971–1972). 'Sock It To 'Em' (2011). 'Phrenologist's Window II' (1966)



found items that are waiting to be turned into new pieces. Some, such as an old canoe, have been there for more than a decade, while others, including an assortment of antlers, are new arrivals that she plans to use in her next series. 'I've got them all laid out on my studio table, and I'm wondering how it's going to take shape,' she says. 'I'm looking forward to things quietening down, so I can get back to my next project.' It may take some time, as Saar is currently the subject of two major exhibitions in the US: an in-depth solo show at New York's MoMA, and a retrospective at LACMA in California that examines the relationship between her preliminary drawings and finished works by displaying a series of her sketchbooks. Through these, you can see the embryonic versions of some of her best-known pieces; shown en masse, they are testament to Saar's lifelong fascination with her craft. Now in her 10th decade, she remains remarkably productive, transforming ordinary objects into exquisite works of art, and imbuing even the most mundane items with a touch of magic. □

embellished, while others are meticulously drawn by Saar herself. It's beautiful and intricate, the sort of creation that can never be fully unravelled, no matter how long you gaze at it.

Throughout her career, Saar has been an avid collector of objects, which she incorporates into her work. 'Thrift stores, antiques shops, fleamarkets, on the sidewalk, in my own house, in other people's houses... I find things everywhere,' she says. 'I know intuitively if I've come across something that I can use – it's almost as if it speaks to me.' For decades, she has turned old wooden washboards into canvases for her assemblages, drawn to their long history: they were taken on journeys by pioneer women as they travelled across America, and were also used by slaves, toiling over their masters' laundry. 'There were so many connotations tied up in this one object,' says Saar. 'It was a symbol of labour and hard work.' The humble washboard held a personal significance for her, too – Saar remembers seeing one propped up on her grandmother's back porch, during those summers when she watched the Watts Towers slowly taking form.

Her Los Angeles studio is still full of

'Betye Saar: Call and Response' is at MoMA (www.moma.org) from 21 October to 4 January 2020, and at LACMA (www.lacma.org) until 5 April 2020.

