

Betye Saar

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Betye Saar, *The Edge of Ethics*, 2010. Metal cage, figures, chain, glass bottle, and fan coral, 64 x 17.25 x 9.75 in. Photo: © Betye Saar, Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California

New York

[The Morgan Library & Museum](#)

“Call and Response,” Betye Saar’s current traveling exhibition (on view at the [Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson](#), April 10–July 11, 2021, and the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) in Dallas later this year), offers a compelling, behind-the-scenes look at her powerful, and personal, approach to assemblage. She begins her sculptures and installations with a single item—a cot, a figure of Aunt Jemima, a bird cage, a washboard, or an ironing board—then searches her extensive collection of objects to find resonant combinations. Finally, she responds with a sketch of how the piece should look when she puts it back together. Each finished work in the exhibition is accompanied by pages from Saar’s working sketchbooks—these pairings open a fascinating window onto Saar’s process, illuminating what she calls “the mysterious transformation of object into art.”

Early in her career, Saar, like James Baldwin (who was born two years earlier than the artist, in 1924), found subversive ways to use art as a tool to reveal and attack the deep issues underlying racism in America. But while Baldwin pointed to Aunt Jemima and to cages as metaphors for the Black experience, Saar looked into them deeply and reshaped them. In *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin painted Aunt Jemima with a few words, writing, “There was no one more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger or more pious or more loyal or more wise; there was, at the same time, no one weaker or more faithless or more vicious and certainly no one more immoral.” Writing in Paris just after World War II, Baldwin saw Black Americans as “anonymous and caged,” with a depthless alienation from oneself and one’s people.”

Over the years, Saar has exposed and reappropriated the stereotype of Aunt Jemima in innovative, bold, and timely ways. (Her call to “liberate” Aunt Jemima was prescient; the brandname and logo were [finally retired](#) in February 2021.) In Saar’s quasi-altar *A Call to Arms* (1997), the figure of Aunt Jemima stands on a clock, with bullets forming her raised arms, framed by two Black Power fists; below, lines from Langston Hughes on a washboard cabinet target “National Racism.” In *Maid-Rite—I’s in Town Honey* (1997), Jemima’s bold blue eyes see in all directions; Saar remixes images on this washboard—the top is loaded with a row of mini mammy heads; Jemima’s headwrap advertises the pancake mix tagline (“I’s in town, honey”), while a quotation from Henry Dumas, “They carved Europe on our masks & made us puppets,” tells the real story. Jemima totes two guns in *Supreme Quality* (1998), her eyes looking toward heaven; she stands on a two-sided washboard set inside a washtub. On the front, the text includes “extreme times call for extreme heroines”; on the back, “liberate Aunt Jemima” appears on her yellow scarf as she faces an American flag on a clock with no hands. As the exhibition catalogue points out, *Supreme Quality* was called *Time to Come Clean* in Saar’s original sketch.

Saar's countless cages—they come in all sizes and shapes—mainly contain Black bodies and serve as a metaphor for racism. But they also symbolize the human dilemma—every human lives in the cage of her/his body, as well as in external cages, whether a jail cell, a palace, or anywhere in between. In *The Edge of Ethics* (2010), a hybrid figure (part human, part bird), stands on an alligator, stuck in thorny branches, chained to a glass bottle, and confined within a too-small cage.

With humor and erudition, Saar, now 94, has spent seven decades not only unpacking and challenging racial stereotypes, but also exploring gender and spirituality. Her elaborate travel sketchbooks from Brazil, Mexico, Aix-en-Provence, and Haiti are filled with watercolors and collages responding to and combining various belief systems. A group of collages (1977–78) commissioned by the poet Ishmael Reed to illustrate *A Secretary to the Spirits* shows Saar's range, as does *Sanctuary Awaits* (1996), in which Kongo-derived bottle trees ward off evil spirits.

Her touch can be delicate, as in *A Loss of Innocence* (1998), the tableau that opened the exhibition at the Morgan Library. A child's old-fashioned white cotton dress hangs gracefully from a hanger, haunted by its own dark shadow. Close inspection reveals that the hanger is branded with the work's title, while the dress is decorated with sewn labels enumerating various racial epithets for Black children. A similar deftness can be seen in *Woke Up This Morning, the Blues was in My Bed* (2019), which recasts the infamous 1787 Brookes slave ship diagram as a spirit bottle bed infused with a remarkable blue neon light. In her first sketch for this work, from February 2001, the metal cot at the center of the work is shown sitting on a bed of coal—a material evoking energy and change. *Still Ticking* (2005), made shortly before Saar's 78th birthday, may be self-referential with its notations marking important dates in her life, but its plethora of stopped clocks also make that point that now is past time for America to wake up.
