

Betye Saar Your Particular Jellybean

This episode focuses on Betye Saar (b. 1926). Joining host Helen Molesworth are artist Linda Goode Bryant and art historian Marci Kwon. Saar is the only California artist in this series, and her work has been deeply influenced by the region's cultural landscape. In a 1975 interview, she discusses the diverse sources for her art and how she prevailed in the face of racism and gender discrimination.

Additional Resources

- ◆ Betye Saar, Roberts Projects (<https://www.robertsprojectsla.com/artists/betye-saar>)
- ◆ Cindy Nemser Papers Finding Aid (<http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/2013.M.21/2013.M.21.xml>)

Transcript

Episode transcripts are provided to make this podcast accessible to a wider audience. Please note that interviews featured in this episode have been edited for concision and clarity.

Original interviews: Cindy Nemser interview with Betye Saar, April 25, 1975, box 26, R45, Cindy Nemser papers, 2013.M.21, Getty Research Institute.

BETYE SAAR: It took a long time, even for me to say, "I am an artist." You know, I'd always be a designer or artisan or a craftsperson. Like, to say I was an artist, it took a long time.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: This is Recording Artists, a podcast from the Getty dedicated to exploring art and artists through the archives of the Getty Research Institute. I'm your host Helen Molesworth.

In this season we focus on audio interviews with six women artists whose lives span the twentieth century. These recordings were made by the New York-based art critic Cindy Nemser and art historian Barbara Rose. Most of these interviews come from the 1960s and '70s, in the midst of the civil rights movement and the feminist

revolution. Hearing these artists in their own words talk about their work and about their experiences as women making art is a revelation.

This episode focuses on Betye Saar. Cindy Nemser interviewed her in April, 1975. Saar was forty-eight years old. I asked activist and former gallery owner Linda Goode Bryant and Stanford University art historian Marci Kwon to listen to these tapes with me. Linda championed African American artists in her gallery Just Above Midtown and Marci writes on collage and assemblage in post-war American art.

Betye Saar was born in Los Angeles in 1926, which means this past July 2019 she celebrated her ninety-third birthday. Hers is a consummate California story. Her grandparents were part of the Great Migration, moving from Louisiana to Los Angeles around 1910. And her grandmother settled in the Watts neighborhood.

Saar was born in Watts and lived there until she was four, when the family moved to Pasadena. Her father died when she was just five years old. And in the wake of his passing, her mother moved the family in with Saar's great aunt, Hattie Parson Keys.

Even after moving away, Saar spent summers at her grandmother's house in Watts. This placed the young Saar in the shadow of the Watts Towers. The towers, made by the Italian immigrant Simon Rodia, are a set of fantastical architectural creations that look like baroque church spires emerging directly from the ground. Saar remembers watching Rodia build his towers, which incorporated found elements, namely pottery shards and pieces of broken glass, as decoration.

Saar is also a product of the University of California system, one of the most progressive and impressive public education systems ever created. She attended UCLA as an undergraduate and Cal State Long Beach for her graduate studies, where she focused on print making.

Art Historian Marci Kwon has a sense of Saar's story as being shaped by the specificity of California.

MARCI KWON: She grew up in Pasadena. She moved there when she was young. And Pasadena is also where Charles White, the great African American artist and teacher, moves in '56, when he's diagnosed with tuberculosis. And he begins to get very interested in mysticism there. And so Saar's kind of initial artistic formation, she recalls going to see Charles White and interacting with many people in that community.

Saar, in many ways, is emblematic of the history of African Americans in Los Angeles. Her grandparents, move in 1910 to '11 from Louisiana. By 1920, Los Angeles has the largest African American population on the West Coast. I believe her uncle is a member of the AME, African Methodist Episcopal Church. And so she grows up going to various church services. And so there's certainly the kind of persistence of that kind of spirituality.

MOLESWORTH: Saar's earliest artistic explorations were in printmaking and design, and she also made enameled jewelry under the moniker Brown & Tann. Like many artists working in California at that time, she played in the spaces between art and craft, not making too much distinction between the two. However, like many women artists and many African American artists, she felt that the category "artist" was not exactly open to her. Family responsibilities, particularly caring for children, was a challenge faced by many women artists. By the time Saar was in grad school, she was married with two young children. And she often brought one of her daughters to

class with her.

Saar needed validation that what she was doing had merit. Here she recounts the story of a teacher who gave her the push she required.

SAAR: So we were, like, rapping, I told him that I was having some problems with my husband, as far as his ego and so forth, in taking this class. And he said like, “What the important thing is, that once you know that you’re an artist and you’ve found[?] onto it and that’s, like, your particular jelly bean,” which was his word, “then you just hold onto that and nothing can really change that.” But up until that time, no one had ever talked to me that way, and so like, I didn’t even know that I had it in me, and it took, like, an outsider to say, “Well, that’s what that is in you, you know, and you should, like, hold onto it.”

MOLESWORTH: In addition to the encouragement of her teachers, Saar, like many Los Angeles-based artists of the post-war period, was deeply influenced by the exhibition program at the Pasadena Art Museum, led by legendary curator Walter Hopps. In 1967 she visited an exhibition of the East Coast assemblage artist Joseph Cornell. The exhibition had a profound effect on her as an artist. Cornell made small diorama-like constructions of found objects and images in modest wooden boxes. Hopps installed them embedded in walls and on pedestals, each one spot lit. Individually illuminated, the boxes took on an otherworldly aura, becoming magical dreamscapes, mini-universes designed for the viewer to get lost in. The dramatic display hit Saar with great force, and after seeing the exhibition, she began to use found objects in her work.

Marci Kwon’s recent book on Cornell ends with a chapter on Saar’s work. I asked her to tell me more about this fateful encounter.

KWON: She says she was actually struck by Hopps’s quote— She uses the term “jewel-like installation.” And I think she also was quite struck by the fact that he was using found objects. And so what I would say that she’s getting from him are, you know, one, the use of found objects and the ideas that objects are more than just their material appearances, but have histories and lives and energies and resonances. Two, a sense that objects can connect histories. That a photograph from the nineteenth century carries with it the lives of the people who are posing, the photographer, the time in which it was shot, and then the life it lives subsequently, which is something that’s really important to Cornell, as well. And then three, I just think the idea that the world is not just what we’ve been given, but you can actually use the material leavings of the world to remake it somehow.

MOLESWORTH: Kwon places Saar firmly within the post-war American legacy of assemblage, or assemblage [changes pronunciation], a form of art making that uses found objects and images and assembles them into new configurations. If pop artists used the images of shiny new commodities, then assemblage artists tended to dumpster dive, using the leftovers of commodity culture. Exemplified by artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Cornell on the East Coast and Bruce Conner, John Outterbridge, and Noah Purifoy on the West Coast, assemblage became so important that by 1961, New York’s Museum of Modern Art dedicated a major exhibition to the form.

Assemblage coincided with the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements, and the confluence of these two events—one aesthetic and the other world historical—created new opportunities for African American artists. I asked Linda Goode Bryant, the founder of a gallery dedicated to showcasing the work of black artists, what she

thought about the predominance of assemblage in Black art circles. She began by recalling acts of assemblage from her childhood.

LINDA GOODE BRYANT: You know, at least during the time that I was growing up, in the Black community that I lived in in Columbus Ohio, we really did use whatever resources we had to create what we needed. In fact, probably the most influential people in my life was a family friend. And his name was Tom Dillard. And Tom Dillard had a magical, magical room that he created in the garage behind his house. And in that room there were all sorts of things, from dolls to chairs to broken tables to pots to whatever. And he would make things with them.

So that's one way I come at it. The other way is, is that if you want to be creative and you can't afford things from art supply stores, what better material to use than the material around you? And I wasn't surprised when I first talked to David Hammons about when he decided to stop doing the body prints and was using brown paper bags and barbecue bones and hair, and what he said to me was, "You know, why is my art restricted to art supply stores?"

MOLESWORTH: Saar also decided not to be limited by the offerings of the art supply shop. She was a collector at heart, and her regular trips to the Pasadena flea market meant that she had been collecting old and discarded objects for quite some time. They ranged from wooden window frames, found photographs, old fabric, and, most notably, old racist memorabilia, such as cookie jars, postcards, and commercial products that used racist marketing imagery.

After her exposure to Cornell's work, Saar began to combine her found items into diorama-like boxes. And through her use of found materials and assemblage she, along with a handful of other black artists living and working in Los Angeles, began to develop a specifically African American aesthetic. The foundation of this aesthetic was two-fold: cast-off materials, on the one hand, and images that depicted African Americans, on the other.

Here's Saar breaking down the various concerns in her work:

SAAR: For me, the work is divided into like, groups. The first group, which I kind of go in and out of, is the kind of mystical or occult. And when I was a graphic artist, by that dealing with drawing and painting, my imagery was primarily that, using tarot cards and zodiac signs and things like that. And then after the black movement started, I found my work changing for several reasons. First because of strong feelings that happened with that movement. And sometime after that, I started collecting, like, derogatory black images. By that I mean, like, Aunt Jemimas and pickaninnies and black Sambos. And so I thought, like, well, I could just keep these things or I could, like, transfer some kind of message, how I relate to them or so forth.

MOLESWORTH: The first of Saar's works to receive notice and acclaim were her box constructions that dealt with the racist stereotype of the mammy, notably her 1972 work titled *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. This box centers a notepad holder, in the shape of a mammy figure, a caricature of a black domestic laborer, imaged with exaggerated features. The background of the box is papered over with the repeating smiling image of Aunt Jemima, a mammy figure used to sell fake maple syrup to an affluent American public. Saar's work transforms the racist stereotype of the black mammy into a revolutionary figure. Through her exploitation of pop imagery, specifically the trademarked Aunt Jemima, Saar utterly upends the perpetually happy and smiling mammy by giving her a rifle in one hand and a broom and grenade in the other. The shotgun was reminiscent of the iconography of the Black Panther

movement, and the work oozed a kind of “take no prisoners” vibe. Simultaneously caustic, critical, and hilarious, the smile on Aunt Jemima’s face no longer reads as subservient, but rather it glimmers with the possibility of insurrection.

The Liberation of Aunt Jemima also refuses to privilege any one aspect of her identity—either Saar’s or the mammy’s—insisting as much on women’s liberty from drudgery as it does on African American’s emancipation from second class citizenship. In 1975, when Cindy Nemser asked Saar about her use of the Aunt Jemima imagery, it sounds like Nemser is not fully considering the racial implications of the work.

SAAR: Taking this kind of figure that classifies all black women as an Aunt Jemima and making her like one of the leaders of the revolution, you know, by dealing in violence. Although she’s a pretty strong character anyway, the Aunt Jemima character.

CINDY NEMSER: Yes. I think she’s sort of always been very well [Saar: Yeah] loved, in a way.

SAAR: Yeah, but see, like, there was a time, even during the revolution, blacks put down other blacks, like Uncle Toms and Aunt Jemimas. And it’s only recent that we’ve realized that the reason that we’re here is because of their particular role that they played. You know, subservient role, [Nemser: Mm-hm] to like protect the youth so they could grow up and get an education and become something different.

NEMSER: [over Saar] Was there really an Aunt Jemima?

SAAR: No. Well, first of all, the black women that were portly played like a mammy role or a nanny or a house servant. And they covered their hair and they wore that kind of apron. But they’re an Aunt Jemima character. And because of that product they actually selected a black woman to play Aunt Jemima, who went around. And she was their symbol, you know.

NEMSER: Right. Well, it just meant good things, actually.

SAAR: Well, she— A woman who could cook, who was, like, full of love and kind of a family person, you know. The only negative thing about it is that was the *only* way that black women were portrayed, you know.

MOLESWORTH: I hear Saar very gently schooling Nemser, as she smuggles a history lesson about slavery and its complex effects into a casual interview between artist and critic. And a few minutes later Nemser wanted to talk about the humor in the work.

NEMSER: I thought the Aunt Jemima— What I liked about it is it had a lot of humor to it, as well as a significance. It was like taking something bad, making it something good, in a way.

SAAR: Well, that was the intent.

NEMSER: And one felt that. I don’t know, it’s like a certain Jewish humor [inaudible], you know.

SAAR: [over Nemser] Yeah. Well, it’s— it does have that same similarity. It’s like you have to laugh to keep from crying.

NEMSER: Exactly.

MOLESWORTH: Linda Goode Bryant brought a critical lens to this exchange:

BRYANT: I have to wonder what would have been the follow-up questions and comments if Cindy had been black. Because there's so many other ways to have responded to that. And one would have been to have allowed Betye to talk more about the work, so that she could reveal if there was humor in it, and what was the nature of that humor. What I think is interesting about Betye is that she's just so wonderfully considerate and respectful and patient.

MOLESWORTH: While Saar was respectful in this interview, she exhibited a kind of fearlessness in her work. In the 1960s and '70s there were very few models of black women artists that Saar could emulate. On top of that, in the wake of the dissolution of her marriage, she was raising three daughters singlehandedly. Being a mother, combined with sexism, racism, and the New York art world's suspicion of West Coast artists, all led to a delay in Saar's reception. She was in her late forties by the time she had her first museum exhibition at the Whitney in 1975. Nemser remarks on her unusual trajectory.

NEMSER: I find it fascinating that it was really in the middle of your life that you really found where your real interest was, your real commitment was.

SAAR: Yeah, and it took a long time, even for me to say, "I am an artist." You know, I'd always be a designer or artisan or a craftsperson. Like, to say I was an artist, it took a long time.

NEMSER: Why, do you suppose? Do you have any idea why that was?

SAAR: Because I was really insecure about that, you know? About being that. Also, at that time, blacks were not particularly encouraged in the arts.

MOLESWORTH: One of the hallmarks of Saar's work is that she had a sense of herself as both unique—she was an individual artist pursuing her own aims and ideas—and as part of a grand continuum of African American history. To that end, her works drew a great deal of sustenance from the nearly 400-year long history of black people in America. As her use of cast-off objects continued to grow, she started to populate her works with images of African Americans from found photos. She also began referencing numerous diasporic spiritual traditions.

I asked Marci Kwon about mysticism in Saar's work:

KWON: There's this very intense interest in astrological symbols, esoterica, the occult, mysticism, which are often talked about in her work in imprecise terms. But I see her using those symbols and those images and these emblems of alternative spiritualities as really searching for something that's quite different from Cornell. They lived very different lives, had very different experiences. But fundamentally, are searching for something, or a way to understand the kind of world in which you live, as just one instantiation out of many possible pasts and futures.

MOLESWORTH: Saar describes her interest in the occult and spirits as building upon her exploration of historical images of African Americans.

SAAR: From the black thing, it developed also into, like, a historical black thing, which means like going back to Africa or other darker civilizations, like Egypt or Oceanic, non-European kinds of cultures. And the kind of mystical things that belonged to them, part of their religion and their culture. And the mojo is a kind of a charm that brings you a positive feeling. You know, like a rabbit's foot or a four-leaf clover. Only

it would be like a mojo, which is like a little— A fetish maybe has a negative connotation, but sometimes it's something that's worn or kept next to you to bring you good luck. And so it's called a mojo.

MOLESWORTH: I wanted to know what Marci Kwon heard in Saar's account of the mojo in her work.

Do the boxes tame the mojo? Do they produce mojo? Do they stage mojo? Like, what's going on there?

KWON: Well, there's a lot to say in that question. First of all, I think that one thing that's been overlooked in her practice is how syncretic her use of these symbols are.

MOLESWORTH: And what do you mean by syncretic?

KWON: Syncretic meaning they're drawn from all sorts of sources. So for example, in many of the boxes, probably most notably in a box like *Omen*, which was among her first box constructions, she Xeroxes her own hand onto the box. And it's just beautiful. It's like this kind of ink stain that's floating across its surface. And she says that that iconography comes from seeing Romas in Southern California and remembering the palms that they advertised for their palm readings and tarot cards.

So that is to say that I don't think that her work resolves or is just simply trying to illustrate one particular spiritual system. I think that what she's instead doing is piling up all of these emblems of meaning and almost creating her own personal iconography.

MOLESWORTH: If Marci sees Saar's use of different traditions as syncretic, then Linda Goode Bryant heard something transhistorical in Saar's description of her interest in the occult.

BRYANT: So I have this big smile on my face, because— I'm going to do a paraphrasing of a statement I heard Chaka Khan use.

MOLESWORTH: I was wondering when Chaka Khan would finally hit the table in these podcasts.

BRYANT: We're going to bring in Chaka Khan to the table now. I saw her at the Beacon Theater in New York. We all were jumping up and down and screaming, "Chaka Khan, Chaka Khan." But what she did was she said, "You know, this doesn't come from me. This voice doesn't come from me. I'm just a vessel. And my job is to keep the vessel open so that the spirit can move through me and make the sounds it wants you to hear." And so maybe when she's making these works, she is a vessel for those very spirits to talk through her.

MOLESWORTH: What I find so compelling in Marci's and Linda's slightly differing accounts of Saar's work is the way they complement one another. In Marci's art historical account, Saar's limberness with her multivalent interests produces a body of work that has a dense and complex field of allusions, references, and narratives. In Linda's account we get a profound suggestion that Saar's boxes are pointing to how time might not be linear, and that the dead might be with us in powerful ways. For Linda this is both a general truth and has something specific to do with the African American experience.

Here's Linda again:

BRYANT: It is that force that, you know, during really difficult times, you hold onto it,

you know? You call to the ancestors and say, "Okay, I really need your spirit and energy right now to get through this."

MOLESWORTH: Linda's sense that the ancestors can be called upon to help in difficult straits suggests the complexity and historical reach of Saar's overall project.

Marci Kwon also emphasizes this.

KWON: That period really marks the emergence of this kind of African consciousness, this consciousness of a diasporic African experience. That also has to do with politics, with the Civil Rights movement, with the assassination of Martin Luther King in '68. And so what I hear in her speaking about fetishes, speaking about mojos, these objects that have a kind of power, is that this interest in mysticism and occultism is almost meeting these political commitments that she's better known for. And she's showing how those things can coexist with each other. When she talks about how fetishes have a negative connotation but she's trying to reclaim that, that seems to be one of the operative principles of her practice, is thinking about things with negative connotations in American culture and Western culture, but reframing them, so to speak, resituating them, in order to help us see them differently.

MOLESWORTH: Of course, reframing has different valences for different folks. Linda Goode Bryant talked about her first encounters with the work when she was an undergraduate student at Spelman College in the 1970s. For her, Saar's reclaiming of Aunt Jemima was as personal as it was art historical.

BRYANT: In terms of Aunt Jemima, Buckwheat, you know, all of the stereotypical representations of blacks at a certain time that are meant to be derogatory, for the most part, I started collecting that memorabilia maybe right before I left Atlanta. And I thought about that when I listened to the tape. Like, why did I feel a need to do that?

MOLESWORTH: Why did you feel the need to collect that material? Because I imagine it must've been very hurtful.

BRYANT: You know, given the hurtful things that so many of us go through living in this society, that didn't seem hurtful. It was hurtful to me as a child when my grandmother Zula Goode, took me shopping downtown and we went into Woolworth's in Columbus, Ohio, and had to sit at the other end of the counter. That was hurtful.

So I collected it more out of defiance. Like saying, "Even if you present me, if this society and world presents me in a negative light, I still love me and I love the people who I'm from."

MOLESWORTH: And so when you saw Betye's Aunt Jemima work, what was your response to it?

BRYANT: Probably the first thought was like, "Oh, shit. Look at what Miss Saar has created." It was like, "Where does she get that from?"

MOLESWORTH: If Saar's use of derogatory images embodied her fierceness, then her use of found photographs of African Americans might be seen as the polite counterbalance. After the death of her great aunt Hattie Parson Keys, a woman who had helped raise her, Saar inherited numerous family photo albums and mementos. True to her interest in spirits and the historical persistence of black people in

America, she began steadily to incorporate these family photos alongside found photos into her assemblages. It was not lost on her that women are typically the transmitters of family memory and knowledge. But Saar was never one to work exclusively within the logic of the familial or the personal. Rather she toggled between derogatory images made by whites to advance their own racist aims and familial portraits that signaled dignity and perseverance. Her interest in the myriad representations of blackness became a hallmark of her extraordinary career.

Earlier in this episode Marci Kwon talked about Saar's box constructions as offering the implicit truth that "the world is not just what we've been given" but that one can "use the material leavings of the world to remake it." There's a passage in Saar's interview with Nemser where it seems clear that Saar doesn't think that the remaking of the world is exclusively the province of artists. She implies that creativity is alive in the quotidian gestures of everyday people as well.

SAAR: My grandmother lived in Watts. And there's something, like, even driving down the street, I could see, that's a grandma's garden. Because there's something about the way the flowers grow. It's like they just out and throw the seeds out, [she laughs] you know? And they just grow up, you know, and it's no formal beds or little rows or things like that.

NEMSER: Because why? Because Grandma really can't tend it anymore, perhaps.

SAAR: Or maybe that kind of thing isn't important. They just like the color and the flowers to go out and come up—

MOLESWORTH: I really wanted to know what Linda Good Bryant thought about Saar's idea of the grandmother's garden.

BRYANT: I love it. I love it.

MOLESWORTH: I love it, too. What do you love about it?

BRYANT: You know, in the world that we live in, the world that I know, it is this fallacy, this belief that we humans can control everything. So if you can't control it, what do you do? And one of the things that I think many of us do is to appreciate the non-structured, the uncontrolled, the wonder of nature.

And so, when Betye says what she says, I am like, I'm thinking of everyone who ever was improvisational? So when, you know, the image of women, you know, black women throwing seeds out into the yard, it's like whatever nature gives me will be amazing. I don't have to control that.

MOLESWORTH: Saar begins that clip talking about her grandmother and this acknowledgement that there's a kind of garden that she sees that she knows is a grandmother's garden. You said women and then you said black women throwing seeds. And then started to talk about improvisation. And do you see that as a kind of central pillar of what we might call an African American aesthetic, this improvisational, haphazard, what nature gives me is what I'm going to take and it's going to be beautiful?

BRYANT: I wish I had words that expressed more what I feel, but definitely. Because it's more than improvisational. There's faith in that. There's a belief in that. There's a trust in oneself to be able to be in the moment, no matter what else is happening in that moment, know that your feet are solid on the ground, they're solid on this earth, and that you'll be okay.

MOLESWORTH: I find Bryant's insight profound. She offers us an understanding of Saar's interest in an aesthetic as more than improvisational, she sees it as an aesthetic that emanates from ideas as large as trust and faith, ideas germane to survival itself. This quality of Saar's work is part of the groundwater of the African American aesthetic as it developed alongside the civil rights movement—an aesthetic that contained seeds carried from Africa, seeds carried from the South along the roads of the Great Migration, and seeds that ultimately landed in Los Angeles and helped to create one of America's greatest cities.

And just as Saar found these aesthetic impulses in ordinary folk, she also imagined an audience for her work that differed from the audience typically imagined by the museum. Describing her exhibition at the Whitney, she did not discuss the response of her fellow artists or of the critics. Rather she focused on the guards at the museum who were primarily African American.

SAAR: Oh, because the opening, like most openings, was really hectic. But I've gotten, like, fan notes. I was really, really touched, because the guards at the Whitney were just so proud. [she chuckles] They were really so proud. And that really touched me, you know, because they see a lot of things that come in and out there, you know. And they told me that, that they really liked it and how proud they were. And I get strange little notes from people who say, "Oh, I saw your show and I called the registrar and she gave me your address, and I wanted to let you know how much I liked it." Or, "I saw it; it made me think of my grandmother's house."

MOLESWORTH: Marci Kwon:

KWON: It strikes me that she's operating on a completely different system of values than what I associate with the quote/unquote, "official New York art world." It's not about press clippings, good reviews, or even attendance figures. It's about the way that the work affected other people, and kind of questions of direct communication with her.

And I hear in that clip a kind of sense that I always get from her that personal experience matters. And that emotional responses are just as important as intellectual responses, and that there's actually power in that, kind of radical power, when it comes particularly with black women.

She's someone who is able to understand that valorizing, especially black women's history, is itself a political act.

MOLESWORTH: Linda Goode Bryant:

BRYANT: Wow. There is so much I could unpack from that. There is so, so, so, so much. How fortunate she was that the guards spoke to her and told her how much they appreciate her work. It's fantastic that people figured out how to get a way to send her a note. Because as I understood and experienced the Whitney in the '70s, the guards, the housekeepers, the cooks who made the food that you could buy there and et cetera, were all African American. Or Black; they could've been Caribbean American and African, but they were all Black.

And invisible. Absolutely invisible to the people who came into that museum. And it is difficult—and I find it still difficult today—to be in a space where people can't be seen and you're right there. Somebody staring straight at you, and not be seen.

And how enriching that experience was to be acknowledged and recognized from work on the wall. To be seen. So that exhibition of Betye's at the Whitney was a

declaration that they existed, and do exist.

MOLESWORTH: Saar’s acknowledgement that creativity and the appreciation of creativity is the province of the museum guards as much as it is that of the museum visitor was an early indication, polite as it may have appeared, that the women’s movement and the civil rights movement were to have profound effects on the spheres of art and culture.

Saar’s work is committed to the realities of everyday people, to creating a parallel playing field between different cultures and times, and to pulling into the present the stories of the past. Through her work we can examine the history and legacy of the African diaspora and its structuring effect on this enormous idea called America. That she continues to make work, and that she raised three daughters, two of whom are also artists—Alison and Lesly Saar—makes her nothing short of a national treasure. And in the “better late than never” category she is the subject of two exhibitions opening in the fall of 2019, one at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the other at MoMA, in New York.

Some might wonder if Saar’s late-in-life success made her feel bitter or passed over, but true to her sanguine nature and her long view of time, in an interview for the 1977 documentary *Spirit Catcher*, she said the following:

SAAR: The burdens that my mother had, my aunt had, my grandmother, my great grandmother, all the way back to like people that I don’t even know. Things that happen in their lifetime that they pass on to their children. But all of those things that become part of us that we transmit to our children. And as my daughters became women, I could see my hang-ups, my mother’s hang-ups, my grandmother’s hang-ups. And I said, ‘Wait a minute, I can do something about that. Because if I change and I am their model, then they change too.’ It’s like, at one point, taking the responsibility of your life. There is the hope of being able to control my destiny. To move it from previous points where it was, where I was locked into that, getting rid of all that programming, into becoming a true, free, creative person.

MOLESWORTH: For episode transcripts, images, and additional resources, visit our website at getty.edu/recordingartists.

This season was produced by Zoe Goldman with audio production by Gideon Brower.

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