

Wadsworth Atheneum
Early July through August 1976

Betye Saar
MATRIX 22

Miz Ann's Charm 1974



MATRIX is supported in part
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Endowment for the Arts, a
federal agency.

Through the vehicle of boxed assemblages and framed collages Betye Saar shares with the viewer her response as a Black woman artist to the world around her. Intimate in scale, each piece is an intricate patchwork of intentional devices. Contemplation and close scrutiny reveal compelling implications beyond what meets the eye. Like small votive objects, an aura of intensity and mystery lingers about these works.

Although the focus of her work is on the Black experience, her interests transcend solely racial considerations. Consistently recurrent are a wide variety of the symbols of the occult. Stars, crescents, beads, Tarot cards, fragments of hair and bone remind us of the ancient rites of early civilizations. Drawing inspiration from the political headlines of the last decade, Saar transforms present day derogatory images of Black America such as Aunt Jemima, Little Black Sambo and Jim Crow into urgent justifications for resistance to the dominant social order. Elsewhere Saar arranges items of nostalgia - faded photographs, pieces of lace, engraved lockets on chains, dried flowers and old dance cards - into purposefully sentimental allegories.

The strength of Saar's work is to be found in the breadth and sensitivity of her vision. For the viewer, her curious and enigmatic amalgam of themes resolves into a heightened awareness of a collective consciousness.

In Miz Ann's Charm, Miz Ann is a white porcelain figure. Tied to her hands is a tiny black head whose skeletal body has dropped into the box. The beautifully crafted wooden box suggests a coffin heady with secrets of hidden lust, miscegenation, camouflage, defiance, shame and guilt. In

Dark Erotic Dream, a lascivious tongue extends beneath a tractor painted as a rainbow. The piece exudes an ominous sensuality. Juxtaposing the photograph of an actual child, sweet and vulnerable, with a Sambo-like figurine, Black Boy/Black Bird simply and directly arouses compassion for the generations of children damaged and hurt by cruel stereotypes. In Imitation of Life (Liberation of Aunt Jemima) the text pasted behind the small statue is a poignant reminder of the inhumane treatment such nurturing figures were forced to endure (see opposite page). The artist transforms the statue into a time bomb and the message is clear. In marked contrast is Rainbow Garden's pastel romanticism. This lyrical landscape suggests concord and tranquility.

Born in Pasadena, California in 1926, Betye Saar was a graphic designer before starting to make collages at the beginning of the 'sixties. She first saw the boxed assemblages of Joseph Cornell in an exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of Art. An inveterate collector of small bits and pieces of the past, she immediately recognized in Cornell's format a vehicle that opened possibilities in her own work. A graduate of the University of California at Los Angeles, Saar later studied print making at California State University at Long Beach. In 1974, she was the recipient of a Visual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Saar presently lives in Los Angeles and is represented by the Monique Knowlton Gallery of New York City.

AMK

A valuable Negro woman accustomed to all kinds of housework. Is a good plain cook and excellent dairymaid, washes and irons. She has four children, one a girl about 13 years of age, another 7, a boy about 5, and an infant 11 months old. Two of the children will be sold with mother, the others separately, if it best suits the purchaser.

From a newspaper clipping used in Betye Saar's Imitation of Life (Liberation of Aunt Jemima)

...Sometimes I feel like a medium, like the connection between the material and the message. My current work is involved with nostalgic journeys, with secrets, and with mystical powers.

Betye Saar, 1975

Works in MATRIX:

Black Boy/Black Bird, 1972, 6 1/2" x 6" x 1".

Miz Ann's Charm, 1974, 11 1/4" x 7 3/4" x 11".

Rainbow Garden, 1974, 17" x 13".

Friends and Lovers, 1974, 13 1/4" x 11 1/4" x 2".

Imitation of Life (Liberation of Aunt Jemima), 1975, 8 1/2" x 7" x 4".

Last Dance, 1975, 12" x 14 1/4" x 2".

Dark Erotic Dream, 1976, 9" x 5" x 2 1/2".

Lost Summer, 1976, 12 1/2" x 12" x 1 3/4".

All works in this exhibition are mixed media assemblage and all are lent by Monique Knowlton Gallery, Inc. of New York City.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:
Multi-Cul Gallery, Los Angeles '72 (first); Berkeley Art Center, California '72; University of California, Santa Cruz '73; California State University, Los Angeles '73; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '75; Mabel Smith Douglass Library (Women Artists Series), New Brunswick, New Jersey '76; Monique Knowlton Gallery, NYC '76.

Selected group exhibitions:
Lytton Center of Visual Arts, Los Angeles, 25 California Women Artists '68; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 30 Contemporary Black Artists '68; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Dimensions of Black '70; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Sculpture Annual '70; California State University, Fifth California Small Images Exhibition '72; New York Cultural Center, NYC Blacks USA: 1973 '73; Barnsdall Art Gallery, Los Angeles, West Coast Image: The Black Image '75; Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, L.A. Collage and Assemblage '75; Clark Museum, Scripps College, Claremont, California Female Imagery in Art '75.

Selected bibliography about Saar:

Lewis, Samella S. and Ruth G. Waddy. Black Artists on Art, Contemporary Crafts Publishers (Los Angeles) '69, vol. 1, p. 35+.

Andrews, Benny. "Jemimas, Mysticism, and Mojo: The Art of Betye Saar," Encore, March '75, p. 30.

Bourdon, David. "Betye Saar: A Los Angeles Artist," The Village Voice, April 7, '75, p. 89.

Frankenstein, Alfred. San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, April 20, '75, p. 30.

Schwartz, Barbara. "New York/ Sculpture and Craft," Craft Horizons, vol. 35, no. 4 (August '75), p. 43+.

Nemser, Cindy. "Conversation with Betye Saar," Feminist Art Journal, Winter, '75-'76, pp. 19+.

Bourdon, David. The Village Voice, May 17, '76, p. 111.

Rosing, Larry. "Betye Saar," Artsmagazine, vol. 50, no. 10 (June '76), p. 7+.

Hazlitt, Gordon J. "An incredibly beautiful quandry," Art News, vol. 75, no. 5 (May '76), p. 36+.

Selected bibliography about Saar:

Bourdon, David. "Betye Saar: A Los Angeles Artist," The Village Voice, April 7, '75, p. 89.

Andrews, Benny. "Jemimas, Mysticism, and Mojo: The Art of Betye Saar," Encore, March '75, p. 30.

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