

Betye Saar: the artist who helped spark the black women's movement

Heralded by the activist Angela Davis, the work of the 92-year-old remains prescient with its focus on how racism is entrenched in American culture

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In 1972, a black cultural center in Berkeley, California, put out a call for artists to help create an exhibit themed around black heroes. One African American artist, Betye Saar, answered. She created an artwork from a “mammy” doll and armed it with a rifle.

According to Angela Davis, a Black Panther activist, the piece by Saar, titled *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, sparked the black women’s movement. Now, the artist’s legacy is going on view in New York with *Betye Saar: Keepin’ It Clean*, an exhibit opening on 2 November at the New York Historical Society, featuring 24 artworks made between 1997 and 2017 from her continuing series incorporating washboards.

“Saar says that it’s about keeping everything clean, keeping politics clean, keeping your life clean, your actions clean,” said Wendy NE Ikemoto, the society’s associate curator of American art. “She wants America to clean up its act and a lot of her art has to do with this idea that we haven’t cleaned up our act.”

Saar, 92, was born in Los Angeles and turned to making political art after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. “After his assassination in 1968, her work became explicitly political,” said Ikemoto. “That’s when she started collecting these racist, Jim Crow figurines and incorporated them in her assemblages.”

Saar was part of the black arts movement, the cultural - often literary - arm of the black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s; she was also among so-called second wave feminists. But she still found herself at a crossroads. “The black arts movement was male-dominated and the feminist movement was white-dominated,” Ikemoto said. “Being at the intersection of both movements, she became one of the most prominent black female artists for presenting strong, recognized women who are fighting off the legacy of slavery. I think it did open doors for other artists to follow.”

This traveling exhibit, from the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, shows Saar’s consistent message through her washboard series. “Many of her works tackle the broad issue of revisioning derogatory stereotypes to agents of change, historical change and power,” said Ikemoto. “Many artworks feature descendants of Aunt Jemima and mammy figures armed to face the racist histories of our nation.”

Betye Saar's Supreme Quality. Photograph: Kris Walters/Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA

The exhibit includes *Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines*, a washboard piece Saar made in 2017 that features a mammy doll holding a pair of guns. The washboards are used in lieu of canvases and are loaded with symbolism.

“The washboard becomes her frame for the art, it’s the star,” said Ikemoto. “It’s the structure of black labor and she is moving it from a space of invisibility to highlight it. She is also using this humble object of hard labor to subvert notions of fine art.”

Each washboard is like a puzzle to be decoded, filled with small details that reference American history. There are Black Panther fists, references to police brutality and phrases from the Harlem renaissance poet Langston Hughes.

There are also references to Memphis, the city where King was assassinated, and to the Congolese slaves who were killed under the Congo Free State. Some washboards include phrases such as “national racism”.

“It’s as if Saar is suggesting how racism is so entrenched in our nation that it has become a national brand,” said Ikemoto. “She takes something that is a sign of oppression and violence, something pejorative and derogatory, and transforms it into something revolutionary.”

Not all of the artworks are on washboards, however. One piece from 1997, *We Was Mostly 'Bout Survival*, is on an ironing board, emblazoned with an image of a British slave ship.

“I think this exhibition is essential right now,” said Ikemoto. “I hope it encourages dialogue about history and our nation today, the racial relations and problems we still need to confront in the 21st century.”

All of Saar’s artworks are made with recycled materials, often found in secondhand shops. “Assemblage is about using recycled materials, found objects from the past,” said Ikemoto. “Just by recycling objects, her work is suggesting we haven’t gotten over these histories. The legacy of Jim Crow still holds currency today. The idea is that with each cycle of history, the world gets a little bit cleaner.”

Betye Saar: *Keepin’ It Clean* will be on show at the New York Historical Society from 2 November to 27 May

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