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Alison Saar

EXALTING AMBIGUITY

BY JOHN O'BRIEN

Alison Saar's sculpture not only functions as art, it also speaks to issues that go beyond the purely sculptural. Often described, even by herself, as being caught between different worlds, racially, artistically, and poetically, Saar has crafted from her multiplicity of origins a figural and narrative art form that exalts ambiguity as a significant component of how images and objects come to mean more than one thing to the viewer.

From a distance, *Proclamation* (2006) looks a lot like a free-standing Barnett Newman zip cast in bronze. Rising over six feet in height from a loosely coiled spiral on the floor, the thin vertical strip appears to be little more than a wavering piece of patinaed metal. On closer examination, however, it reveals itself to be fashioned after a long braid of hair. At the top and slightly out of view, an oversized nail pins it to the wall. Thus, in the space of a few steps, this work goes from a singular, formal, and abstract composition to a figurative fragment embedded in a larger historical and narrative cycle. *Proclamation* forces the viewer to dwell on experiential details at length. As an abstract zip, the shape proclaims its adherence to a history of forms in which identity is subjugated to an essentialized distillation process. But as a cut length of hair emancipated from the conditions of "pure" abstraction, this proclamation lays claim to territory ranging from the personal to the art historical to the imaginary. This kind of double take is a typical experience with Saar's work. The perceptual and cognitive

coordinates start in one place with one set of expectations and quickly move elsewhere.

"Coup" was the title of Saar's recent exhibition of large- and small-scale sculpture at L.A. Louver in Venice, California. It is also the title of a specific sculpture. This type of free-floating index is symptomatic of the fruitful ambiguity that Saar has investigated in both three-dimensional works and drawings over the years. The French word *coup* is derived from *couper*, which literally means "to cut" and refers to an aggressive blow or even the sound of a weapon firing. A coup is also a sudden and decisive change of government, as in a coup d'état. It can mean a brilliant and notable success, even a crowning achievement, unless it is meant as the coup de grace or deathblow (final stroke). As an introduction to this particular sculpture, the word "coup" forces viewers to consider the work from oscillating points of view. Multiple interpretations co-exist for the viewer to weigh.

Coup consists of several interconnected elements. There is a life-size carving of a seated female figure, who appears to be staring intently ahead. Made of tin-covered wood, she is seated on a small, unadorned chair facing away from a large pile of assorted luggage. The strands of wire that form her hair are tenuously drawn out behind her, stretching over several feet toward the accumulated pile and then entangling with the suitcases like netting. In the figure's folded hands, held straight up from her lap, is a large and dangerous-looking knife. So which coup are we to entertain? Is the seated woman about to whirl around in her seat and cut herself away from the pile of baggage? Or is this stern-looking figure a guardian sentinel tenaciously keeping the tangle

Clockwise from opposite bottom: *Cache*, 2006. Wood, ceiling tin, and wire, 28 x 26 x 90 in. *Coup*, 2006. Wood, wire, tin, and found objects, 62 x 168 x 52 in. *Proclamation*, 2006. Cast bronze, 69 x 31 x 18 in.





Left: *4N'20*, 2006. Wood, tin, and tar, 30 x 10 x 16 in. Above: *Inheritance*, 2003. Wood, ceiling tin, and cotton, 72 x 29 x 29 in.

free from outside tampering? Is this a wealth of experience relentlessly accumulated into monumental proportions, an ambivalent crown of sorts? Or is it simply piled-up junk from the past that needs to be jettisoned? We can certainly entertain all of these possibilities, and ultimately they can all be construed as valid. It is precisely from within this interpretative ambiguity that Saar has successfully merged the history and traditions of sculpture with the theories and exigencies of contemporary art practice.

One aspect of Saar's sculpture that has most enticed me over the years has been her unabashed embrace of figuration. As post-war sculptural styles evolved, particularly during the periods dominated by Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, there was a distinct move away from the figure. Aside from the work of George Segal and to a certain extent the hyper-realistic casts of Duane Hanson, criticism relegated figuration to the distant past with little relevance for a contemporary viewer. Industrial and material-based work in three dimensions caused the viewer to be interjected as the otherwise absent figurative element. Viewers, with their perceptual participation and quasi-theatrical enactment of the installed work, seemed to preclude the possibility of other figuration. After all, if sculpture had become primarily an object occupying a place and the viewer a living participant activating that site, how could the symbolic and imaginary projection onto a figure be meaningful? Aren't these two orders of meaning at odds, or even in opposition? Yet as we move further into the contemporary paradigm, the formalism of these historically codified approaches seems less compelling. There has been a resurgence of interest in figuration and the ways that viewers can use their imagination. The realm of the symbolic is being critically recouped

as an imaginary space for viewers to dwell on, in projected reverie. Figuration and enigma require an empathic viewer, willing to suspend belief about the purely physical nature of tangible entities and willing to imagine a relationship with an inanimate carving or casting. Throughout her career, Saar has helped to bridge that empathic gap by re-tracing her steps. Her themes and storytelling modes are reiterated and interlaced over the course of many works. She allows for her storytelling to add up to different kinds of truth than those embodied by stable abstract forms and pure materials. She calls for imaginative flights of fantasy, where more than one answer can surface.

The exhibition "Coup" included a life-size reclining female figure with her hair stretched out above her. The shock of hair flows in the same direction as the supine figure, and where it ends it appears to become a kind of pedestal for a large wire sphere. The carved figure is almost curled into a fetal position, and it is hard to tell if the eyes are open or closed. One arm is folded under the head, while the other drapes across her torso, the palm placed on the floor as though ready to push off and stand up. Characteristically, it is hard to decide whether the underlying relationship set up in this sculpture is to be understood as antagonistic, parasitic, or idyllic. The title, *Cache*, only complicates the interpretation since a cache is generally a hiding place used to safeguard provisions and valuables. If one goes to the root, however, the word comes from the French, *acher*, to hide, which in turn draws from the Latin, *coctice*, to store, to pack together, as well as to constrain

Betye, Lezley, and Alison Saar, *Transitions in Black and White*, 2005. Mixed media, 100 sq. ft.

and/or force. Thus the undecidability is increased. An earlier sculpture from 2003, which uses many of the same elements, illuminates how Saar works both poetically and thematically. *Inheritance* is a medium-sized figure standing on a round cushion-like pedestal and balancing a large, swaddled cotton sphere on top of its head. The figure's physical attributes clearly connect it with youth. The association of youth with inheritance introduces an ambiguity to the load. Is it wash being brought home by the young woman? Or is it like a hobo sack, a spirited display of one's specially preserved secret possessions?

Although the interpretation of Saar's works may not be unequivocally determined, their physicality is extremely tangible. Saar uses wood and cast metals to fashion figures, covering them with the tin of kitchen ceilings. She takes everyday objects and modifies them through elaboration and re-casting, and she pairs found objects with fabricated forms and bundles them together with bonds that range from ephemeral to structural. Saar's work with wood can be characterized as rough-hewn. By that I mean she is clearly engaged in carving the physical material, but by stopping short of polishing and smoothing the surfaces, she allows the viewer to go beyond the appreciation of her modeling skill and get to the meaning of the carved figure itself. Her mode of working allows for the viewer to understand the hand-wrought qualities of the sculptural work (which the artist is clearly interested in engaging) without ever conceding to the overwrought qualities to which the craft of woodworking is occasionally subject. Other artists such as Judith Shea and Katsura Funakoshi also create figurative work with wood, but they have adopted an understated woodworking style and engage in an economy of means as a way out of the craft conundrum. Shea uses cast elements and Funakoshi employs disconcertingly realistic marble eyeballs to increase the viewer's projection into the figure. Saar has a greater affinity for an artist such as Stephan Balkenhol, whose wooden sculptures eschew classical ideals of beauty and work from a more generalized and prosaic notion of man/woman. Both Saar and Balkenhol draw on medieval woodcarving traditions and "naive" folk art. While Balkenhol de-monumentalizes the figurative statue, Saar leaps into myth and fable to make the monumental figure less of a monolith and more of a dream fragment.

Saar is more interested in telling stories than in recording history. When her stories are rooted in her own personal and family history, the connections are visible; at other times, she dreams herself somewhere else, something else. Even amid a variety of histories, myths, fables, and folktales, she carves out her own stake, returning to chosen motifs regularly and modulating what they



have to say to the viewer. In *4N'20* (four and 20 blackbirds?) she conjures up three wire birds settled on a branch. This grafted limb sprouts from the chest of a petite wood, tin, and tar figure of a woman with slightly outstretched hands. The delicacy of this topological reversal, of a figure unraveling into arboreal flight, elicits a very different sentiment in *Treetop* (2005), a wood, ceiling tin, lead, and wire sculpture. Lying on its side, this androgynous head with sealed eyes and green-cast lips has its wiry hair caught up in three clumps and pulled by what could be birds or bats—an image that elicits a singularly unpleasant and uncomfortable experience for the viewer. In the wood and wire *Blue Bird* (2002), a small child is seated with her braided hair turning into a very long branch that cantilevers far off her body. A single bird sits at the end. Melancholy and wistful, *Blue Bird* takes the same elements of the previous two works and applies them to a very different poetic end. The differences between these three figures give some measure of the broad bandwidth covered by Saar's symbols and emblems.

The Pasadena Museum of California Art recently presented the first exhibition to bring Alison Saar's work together with that of her mother, Betye Saar, and her sister, Lezley Saar. The exhibition highlighted how the three artists interpret family, identity, race, and gender. Curator Barbara Matilsky writes, "Although the Saars' works reflect their individual stories and cultural histories, they also illuminate the viewer's own sense of identity and self-understanding." Of special interest was a site-specific, collaborative installation created by the three Saars, *Transitions in Black and White*. This new work was dedicated to the memory of Betye Saar's late husband and Lezley and Alison's father, Richard Saar (1924–2004). Alison Saar cast the 85 bronze tears that cascaded down one wall in the installation.

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