



# **ALISON SAAR: THISTLE AND TWITCH**

**Feb. 20 – Apr. 20**

**DOCENT GUIDE**

Alison Saar was born in Los Angeles. She received her Bachelor of Art in studio art and art history in 1978 from Scripps College, Claremont, California and her Master of Fine Art from Otis Parsons Institute, now known as Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in 1981. Saar has held a number of distinguished artist residencies including Studio Museum, New York, 1983; Roswell Museum of Art, New Mexico, 1985; Washington Project for the Arts, Washington D.C., 1986; Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, 2003. Saar has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984 and 1988. She was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1989 and the Flintridge Foundation Award for Visual Artists in 2000.

We selected her work because of her interest in exploring personal and cultural identity. Sensual and buoyant with story, her carved figures and installations also address humanity in the broadest sense by delving into universal themes of family, fertility, life cycles, politics, human vulnerability and hope.

Saar's work calls on a wide variety of sources— mythologies, Greek, African, and Native American are re-imagined and twined together, to create new legends. Her titles, including "Thistle & Twitch" often draw upon poetry including Ovid's Metamorphosis. The wood, tin, copper, wire, and other objects that she builds into her sculpture are often reclaimed or recycled material, revealing Saar's fondness for her supplies having, as she states, "former lives" and carrying "the histories of what they've witnessed." The humor and wordplay that she injects into the titles of her work speak to Saar's willingness to engage viewers' personal interpretations and imbue levity into otherwise serious subject matter.

The daughter of art world cognoscenti (mixed-media artist Betye Saar and art conservator Richard Saar), Saar's work is included in numerous public collections, including the High Museum, Atlanta, Georgia; Walker Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Museum of Fine Arts, Huston; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California; Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, Virginia; Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; and in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art where she was included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. She has done numerous public commissions including: "York" for Lewis and Clark College; a Harriet Tubman memorial "Swing Low" for the city of New York; "Conjure" for the California Endowment in Los Angeles; "Califia" for the Capital East End Complex in Sacramento; "Nocturne Navigator" for the Columbus Ohio Museum of Art; "Monument to the Great Northern Migration" in Bronxville, New York, MTA 125<sup>th</sup> St Station. She lives and works in Los Angeles and is represented by LA Louver in Venice, California.

This exhibition is supported by Gertrud Parker and the County of Sonoma through the Advertising Grant program.



## ***Thistle and Twitch (Mombie), 2013***

**paper, glue, acrylics, copper, and found brambles**

An eight-foot-tall figure appears monstrous in scale, but fragile in material, as she is constructed from thin layers of paper. The viewer is encouraged to peer inside her navel to see she is empty, save for a few brambles. The shell of the figure has been overcome with barren briars. The title is derived from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in the telling of Demeter's grief in her search for Persephone.

*The stars and the winds assailed them; hungry birds gobbled the scattered seeds; thistles and twitch, unconquerable twitch, wore down the wheat.*

*-Ovid's Metamorphosis*

### **The Story of Demeter and Persephone:**

Demeter, goddess of the corn and harvest, has one daughter, Persephone, the maiden of spring. Hades, god of the Underworld, kidnaps Persephone and brings her down to be his wife in the Underworld. Grief-stricken and confused, Demeter withholds her gifts from the world, which becomes "a frozen desert." The earth becomes barren, and nothing will grow. She comes down to human beings in the form of an elderly woman and is taken in by a woman named Metaneira. At night, Demeter attempts to grant Metaneira's son immortal youth by secretly anointing the boy with ambrosia and placing him in a hot fire. When Metaneira discovers Demeter putting her son in the fire, she becomes angry. Demeter then sheds her disguise and demands that the people of the town build her a temple.

In this temple, far removed from the other gods in Olympus, Demeter sits in longing for her daughter. The earth, meanwhile, freezes to a bitter cold that threatens mankind's extinction. Finally, Zeus intervenes by telling Hermes to go down to the underworld and bring Persephone back. Hades knows he must agree to Zeus's terms, but he gives Persephone a pomegranate seed, knowing that if she eats it she will have to return to him. With her daughter back, Demeter leaves her temple and joins the other gods on Mount Olympus. But because Persephone does eat the pomegranate seed, she must return to the Underworld for four months a year. In these months, Demeter grieves and the earth goes through winter.



## ***Bramblin' Blues, 2013***

**glass, brambles**

*Bramblin' Blues* is part of a series of blown glass heads filled with a variety of objects. Blues is filled with brambles and thorny branches alluding to the pain of a devastating loss, resulting in eternal sorrow, and apathy.

# ***Lunarseas: Sea of Serenity, 2008***

**cast bronze, edition of five unique variations**

# ***Lunarseas: Sea of Nectar, 2008***

**bronze, edition of 5 unique variations**

***Lunarseas* is a series of cast bronze partial figures whose titles are taken from the poetic names by astronomer Galileo for what he perceived to be bodies of water on the moon.**



*Sea of Nectar* features a woman's breast lactating abundant branchlike rivers of milk. This piece references the myth of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest and mother of Persephone, who was abducted by Hades and forced to live in the underworld. Demeter's mourning over her daughter's loss allowed the fields to go fallow. Here in her sorrow and yearning for her child, Demeter wrests the milk from her breast which soaks into the ground to her daughter in the underworld.

# ***Sea of Nectar Study, 2010***

**mixed media**



# ***Lunarseas: Sea of Serenity, 2007***

**wood, copper, ceiling tin**

*Sea of Serenity* depicts a female figure who becomes a specimen for study as she stands still and calm, much like the moth specimens covering her face and body.

*Moths have two lives, in the caterpillar stage and in the moth stage. They represent the juxtaposition of two worlds, as Saar, being biracial, often feels that she has a foot in two different worlds. The moths also fly at night, often in the moonlight. This piece also represents lunacy from the moon, as the moths like the darkness but will*

fly into a bright light like a fire. There's a stillness about this piece, just as a person would have to be still to attract the moths to alight, but an opposite feeling could just as well be the feeling of repulsion from crawling insects.



## **Sea of Serenity Study, 2009**

**mixed media**

## **Rouse, 2012**

**wood, bronze, paper, and antler sheds**



In *Rouse*, a stoic female figure sports a massive set of antlers upon which rest a frail translucent figure, bound by her own umbilical cord. The antlers serve as branches of a nest that cradle the delicate figure. They stand amongst hundreds of graphite covered antler sheds which denotes the time invested in nurturing and protecting the fragile figure.

*Saar finds herself, as a mature artist and mother of young adults, in a metamorphic state, still undefined but "approaching completion." She beautifully captures this notion in Rouse, a life-*

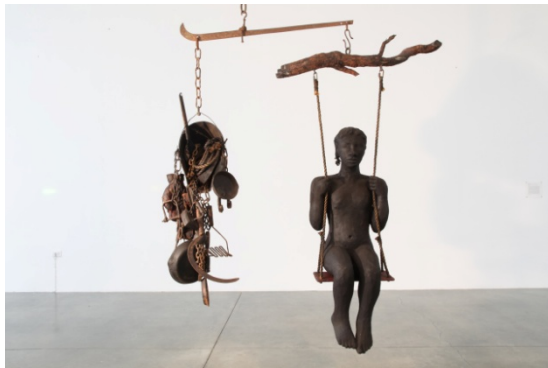
*sized sculpture of a light-skinned woman, attached like an embryo to a massive nest of antlers growing from the head of a sturdy graphite-colored figure. The reclining and hollow figure is molded from rice paper and glue, thus reinforcing her fragile nature. Despite her visceral and incomplete form, like Saar, she is coming out of a state of hibernation, arousing from the "the incubation of ideas to a new self, the pupa state of insects, or the shedding of old skin and the formation of the new." Saar explains that Rouse is about her daughter Maddy leaving for college and the fragile nature of her emergence into the adult world. Saar adds that while she started thinking that the fetal figure was about Maddy, she now thinks that it was more about herself emerging into a new period of her life after raising her children.*

*In stark contrast to the fetal figure, the standing figure—representing Saar's own primal animal-self, the fierce mother trying to protect her offspring—is made from a patchwork of unrefined blocks of carve wood. Her spent antlers litter the ground as symbols of protection, maturity, and the passage of time. Not yet derelict, she is nonetheless beginning to show "the fissures of a body in decline . . . preparing for and holding it together long enough for the next one to take over . . . to come to term." Speaking from a stream of consciousness, Saar expounds that Rouse, like the other works in this exhibition, is "about me being menopausal, being interested in moving into new territory in my work, having new ideas, new materials, and that I don't know what any of it is, and that I'm doing things on precipices, ready to cut away the old self but trying to find the stillness to let the other part of me mature and come out and be realized."*

Cross-reference to Sea of Serenity series: references again to a mother who has to separate from her daughter and the moths that are reborn from the pupae stage.

# **Weight, 2012**

**wood, rope, cotton scale and miscellaneous objects**



*Weight* features a young black girl on a swing dangling from a cotton scale. She is counterbalanced by a coal scuttle, its contents spilling out toward the ground: an iron ladle, horseshoe, sickle, lock and key, shackle, pair of scissors, potato masher, shovel, hot comb for the hair, rope, boxing gloves, skillets, flat irons, and chains. The scuttle is her cornucopia, which instead of symbolizing her wealth, harvest, and good fortune, depicts the struggles and limited opportunities she may face in her future as a young black woman. The boxing gloves are for her to fight her way out of poverty and limited opportunities.

Theoretically, a cornucopia symbolizes wealth, harvest, and good fortune. But Saar's version relates to cotton wealth, made possible by the exploitation and dehumanization of slaves. And although the image of a young black girl on a swing commonly alludes to youth, innocence, and hope, this child is precariously balanced by a "cornucopia of troubles and turmoil." The removal of a single object from the coalscuttle will send her crashing to the ground. More importantly, the young girl is covered in coal dust, naked, and swinging on ropes made sticky with smears of tar. The swing hangs from a tree root jarringly reminiscent of the lynching of African Americans and the weighing of slaves sold at market by the pound.

Saar says that she was moved by her volunteer work with teenagers in East L.A. The piece came from her frustration with seeing bright young women unable to go to college because of poverty and the lack of scholarships.



# **Cotton Eater, 2013**

**wood, cotton, acrylic, and tar**

A small carved wooden figure stands with a protruding belly eating cotton bolls. Slung over her shoulder is an over-stuffed, elongated cotton-picking sack draping to the floor. The protruding belly is ambiguous, either from a pregnancy or from malnutrition.

*The Cotton Eater* is a title taken from the Greek mythology of the Lotus Eaters, a race of people on an island off the coast of North Africa who consumed the narcotic lotus fruit rendering them into a state of apathy.

*They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches*

*-Homer's Odyssey, IX*



Saar says that the Cotton Eater works were inspired by her time spent in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. She was appalled that there were so many houses and buildings that had not been rebuilt—promises made by the government that proved to be empty promises, just like the cotton balls providing empty nutrition. Saar compared post-Katrina New Orleans to France during the French Revolution, when Marie Antoinette purportedly uttered, “Let them eat cake!”



## ***Cotton Eater (head), 2013*** **ceramic, acrylic, graphite, and cotton balls**

A blue and graphite colored bisque-ware head lies prone with cotton balls spilling from the mouth and severed neck.



## ***The Cotton Eater study (sugar sack shroud series), 2013*** **found sugar sacks, gesso, charcoal and graphite**

The drawing depicts a female nude standing in a field of cotton consuming the cotton balls, her stomach distended from malnutrition from eating massive amounts of the cotton. The piece relates to the history of government appeasing the poor with insidious gifts. It is also a common practice for models to eat cotton to feel full without ingesting any calories. The fabric is from old cotton sugar sacks, a reminder of the preponderance of slaves used in the sugar industry.



## ***En Pointe, 2010*** **mixed media**

An antlered female figure hangs from a rope binding her ankles. Half wild and half domesticated she is trapped between two worlds.

The figure is bound but is very calm about being trapped. The figure is inverted, so instead of her toes being “en pointe,” the antlers are en pointe.



## ***Pearly, 2013***

**paper, foam, glue, acrylic, graphite, and polyester cloth; signed and dated, right foot**

Pearly, a dark pearlescent figure, hangs from her teeth in a death-defying act. The image originated from posters of Mademoiselle La La, also known as the La Mulatresse-Canon or the Black Venus, where in a high wire act she would suspend herself, and others, hanging from her teeth. Saar was also inspired by Degas's painting of Mme. La La.

*I became fascinated with her strength and her vulnerability. I was also interested in one hanging on by the skin of their teeth suspended in a sort of desperate limbo.*

*-Alison Saar*



Degas's painting, *La La at the Cirque*



## ***Pearly study (Sugar Sack Shroud series), 2013***

**found sugar sacks, gesso, charcoal, polyester cloth**

The Sugar Sack Shroud series is a collection of drawings on found sugar sacks. The cotton panels, complete with stains, foxing, and holes, are worn to a veil-like thinness through years of reuse as cleaning rags. Some still show faint evidence of their original printed labels, one being "Sea Island Sugar."





## ***Pallor Trick, 2013*** **cast bronze, stone, and silk**

A small cast bronze female figure stands, stoic, covered with a sheer silk cloth, in an attempt to conceal her dark skin. Or is it a woman who appears to be light-skinned, but who feels that she is black inside? A trait of Saar's work is her use of word play.