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Alison Saar
of Aether and Earthe: Celebrating and Empowering Women

Armory Center for the Arts
July 16 – December 12, 2021

Benton Museum of Art
September 1 – December 19, 2021

by Jody Zellen



The figures in Alison Saar's two-venue exhibition, *of Aether and Earthe* are stoic and empowered. Throughout her long career, Saar has focused on the representation of Black women while exploring issues of identity, gender and race. She often incorporates found objects into her sculptures which connects them to specific times and places. On view at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena and the Benton Museum of Art in Claremont are a carefully curated selection of works created between 1985 and 2020. While the distance between the two cities might be daunting, it is worth it to make the trek to both spaces and experience the show in full.

At the Armory, the earliest work is *Sapphire* (1985) an illuminated mixed media sculpture of a woman from the waist up. Glowing light fills the cavity of her chest behind her breasts which are hinged so they may open and close like a pair of doors. With elbows raised and hands behind her head, this brown-skinned, blue-eyed woman carved from wood stares forward as if unwilling to succumb to any external forces. *Sapphire* being the oldest, it is bookended by *Hygieia* (2020), a mixed-media installation installed in a small narrow room. Centered within the space is a woman who holds a double-headed broom in one hand and clutches a snake against her stomach that inches up her body. She is surrounded by empty bottles and jars that hang from ropes tied to the ceiling. On the floor is an array of buckets and bowls ready to collect water which can be heard dripping. While most definitely a goddess of health, cleanliness and sanitation, Saar's *Hygieia* is simultaneously that iconic image of a Black servant who must attend to her chores no matter the circumstances.

While some sculptures are placed in front of bright yellow walls, others are set within deep gray spaces creating visual as well as metaphoric relationships between dark and light and object and space. In *Brood* (2008), positioned in front of a bright yellow wall, a woman is seated at the top of a tall and rickety stack of found children's chairs looking down through her hands toward the floor where a bunch of pomegranates has fallen. The provocative sculpture, *Rouse* (2012) is surrounded by dark gray walls. Here, the dark-skinned nude woman stands on a bed of cropped

antlers. A smaller shimmering yellow/gold figure tied with rope rests in the fetal position nested in a crown of longer antlers that emerge from the standing figures head. While each sculpture celebrates the integrity of its subject, Saar also acknowledges pain and suffering. Her works draw from myth and history while also being very much rooted in the present. Sparsely installed to give each piece ample breathing space, the exhibit serves as a worthwhile introduction to Saar's work.

Although only sculptures are on view at the Armory, viewers can see some of Saar's works on paper at the Benton. *Equinox* (2012) is a hand sewn lithograph depicting a standing nude Black woman who is connected by long red and white veins emanating from her breasts to a mirror image of herself below. *High Cotton* (2017) is a mixed-media wall work picturing a group of female cotton-pickers holding tools and posed to defend or attack like warriors. While many smaller intimate works are installed throughout the exhibition, it is hard to take one's eyes off of *Breach* (2016). This gigantic work pays homage to the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, yet also references hurricane Katrina and other recent storms that have made clear some of this country's racial inequities. In this powerful work, Saar piles found trunks, wash tubs and cookware on the head of a blue-lipped, tin-covered statue of a nude woman. She stands on a wooden pallet that could be a fragment of a raft while holding a long pole as if navigating through water. Her possessions are the weight of the world on her head. *Sea of Nectar* (2008) and *Bitter Crop* (2018) are bronze sculptures in which Saar explores ideas relating to nurture and nature. The sea of nectar that spurts from the breasts of a life-size standing nude become a tree of life, whereas the reclining woman in *Bitter Crop* seems indifferent to the white cotton puffs that sprout from her braided hair.

While there are a lot of pieces to contemplate in *of Aether and Earthe*, it is not an overwhelming experience. The dual shows trace a clear trajectory through many of the themes in Saar's work. One comes away with an understanding and appreciation of her commitment to challenging negative and stereotypical representations of Black women. She presents these female figures with dignity and humanity while celebrating and empowering women.

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