

Betye Saar  
*Call and Response*

SEPTEMBER 12, 2020—JANUARY 31, 2021

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**Betye Saar in her studio in Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles,  
1975. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects,  
Los Angeles. Photo by Richard W. Saar.**

***A Loss of Innocence, 1998***

**Dress with printed labels, wood hanger, chair, and framed photo on block**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

The labels sewn onto the dress in this tableau list various racial epithets for Black children, and the wooden hanger branded with the work's title alludes to the marking of enslaved people with branding irons. This evocative installation suggests the fragile innocence that is lost—not only historically but also to this day—as Black children grow into adults facing racism in its many guises.

**Sketchbook pages for *A Loss of Innocence*:**

**19 April 1996**

**Ballpoint pen on paper pasted into sketchbook**

**12 December 1997 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen on paper**

**1 March 1998 (facsimile)**

**Marker on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and**

**Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

**Sketchbook pages for *Memory Window for Anastacia*  
and *Eyes of the Beholder*, 3 May and 6 November 1994**

**Watercolor and ballpoint pen on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

***Eyes of the Beholder, 1994***

**Paint on metal and wood serving tray, with painted metal baking pan and metal ornaments**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

Saar titled this work *Tantric Tray* in her related sketchbook drawing on view nearby, evoking the Tantric practice of eye gazing, a tool for opening oneself to a higher plane of consciousness. At the same time, the lozenges in the baking pan at center can be read as a dozen martinis with stuffed olives seen from above—a witty play on Saar's use of a cocktail tray for this assemblage.

***Memory Window for Anastacia, 1994***

**Paint on copper circuit boards in wood window frame, with metal ornaments and copper wire-covered nails**

**Private collection, Los Angeles**

Since the late 1960s, Saar has used discarded window frames like this one in her art. Here, she pays homage to a figure of legend venerated in Brazil: the blue-eyed, black-skinned Anastacia. Though expunged in the 1980s by the Brazilian Catholic Church, Anastacia was embraced by the local Umbanda religion, which combines aspects of Catholicism, Spiritism, and African and indigenous Brazilian belief systems. Copper coils on nails emerge from the window frame, suggesting psychic power or energy. The copper circuit boards used as a support evoke another form of energy generation and circulation.

**PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH**

***Serving Time, 2010***

**Metal cage with stand, figures, keys, and locks**

**Collection of Neil Lane, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

The cultural historian George Lipsitz has commented on this piece: “The descendants of yesterday’s slaves and servants are not free; millions of them are serving time in jails and prisons while others are locked into low-wage jobs and locked out of upward mobility. By associating contemporary incarceration with historical slavery and Jim Crow segregation, Saar renders the cage as evidence of the oppressor’s cruelty rather than as a representation of the deserved fate of the oppressed.”



## **Dolls sketchbook, ca. 1968–70**

**Marker and watercolor in accordion-folded sketchbook**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

In this early sketchbook, Saar recorded a range of dolls, from those that give comfort to those—like the two “pickaninny” dolls holding watermelon wedges—that cause pain. In the nineteenth century, manufacturers advertised such dolls, which were made of durable materials, as suitable for rough treatment, presumably by the white children for whom they were purchased. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court case that outlawed segregation in public schools in 1954, social scientists Kenneth and Mamie Clark submitted evidence from tests performed with dolls that demonstrated segregation’s demeaning impact on Black children. The perpetuation of stereotypical images reinforced those negative feelings.

**Spread from *Black Dolls* sketchbook, San Diego, Mingei International Museum, 24 May 2015**

**Photocopy, ink, watercolor, marker, and paper collage on board**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

Saar made these drawings while visiting an exhibition of handmade Black dolls. Produced between 1850 and 1940, the dolls were likely created by African Americans for children they knew. Until recently, positive, nonstereotyped Black dolls were rarely produced by commercial manufacturers.

***Blend, 2002***

**Collage of dress, gloves, fabric, fan, printed papers, and  
paint on paper**

**Collection of Neil Lane, courtesy of the artist and Roberts  
Projects, Los Angeles**

***Cream*, 2001**

**Collage of dress, buttons, photos, printed papers, lock of hair, metal ornament, handprints, and paint on paper**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

*Cream* is a “family portrait” featuring a child’s dress surrounded by photographs of Saar’s relatives. The young girl in the photo at bottom is Saar’s mother and the adults flanking the dress sleeves are Saar’s maternal grandparents. The generational story continues with Saar’s own handprint at bottom center and those of her youngest granddaughter, made when she was a year old. The butterflies that float among them suggest that while appearance is mutable, the essence of a creature remains the same.

**Sketchbook pages for *Blend* and *Cream*, 1 April 2001**

**Marker on paper; ballpoint pen on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

The sketch for *Blend*, a collage incorporating a vintage dress, is labeled “Blend (-Slipping-Passing),” suggesting that the pale figure wearing the dress in the final work is a Black woman passing as white. She holds in her gloved hands a framed photo of Saar’s late great-aunt Hattie, who has been something of a muse for the artist. The elegiac tone of *Blend* reflects the experience of racial passing as one of loss or exile.

The sketch for *Cream* indicates Saar knew early in the creative process that she would use a particular dress and a variety of buttons in the final collage. The buttons progress from white at the top to black at the bottom, reflecting different shades of skin color. Saar’s grandfather was Native American and Black, while her grandmother was Irish.

**Sketchbook page for *Maid-Rite—I'se in Town Honey*,  
17 July 1997 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

Saar's sketches are a repository of sources and ideas for her completed works. Here, she wrote, "A.J. [Aunt Jemima] white invention." She also attributed the words inscribed on the bottom of the washboard to Henry Dumas (1934–1968), an African American writer and activist who was killed at age thirty-three by a New York City transit police officer.

***Maid-Rite—I'se in Town Honey, 1997***

**Washboard with paint, stenciled lettering, artificial eyes,  
and painted heads**

**Greenville County Museum of Art, museum purchase with  
funds donated by the Greenville News / Gannett Foundation**

Saar began collecting washboards in the mid-1990s, inspired by memories of the one her grandmother used on her back porch. The artist has said she is interested in the “dichotomy between an object that was used to keep something clean and the person [using it], who was a slave and considered a dirty person because of the color of her skin.”

The work's title references Aunt Jemima and her famous pancake mix, which in the 1910s and '20s featured the advertising tagline “I'se in town, honey.” The figure of Aunt Jemima, which is based on the stereotype of a mammy, has appeared frequently in Saar's work—inaugurated in her iconic *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972). In response to the recent news that the Aunt Jemima brand and image will finally be retired, Saar has said, “I transformed the derogatory image of Aunt Jemima into a female warrior figure, fighting for Black liberation and women's rights. Fifty years later she has finally been liberated herself. And yet, more work still needs to be done.”

## ***Supreme Quality, 1998***

**Dashboard with stenciled lettering, soap bar with printed paper label, metal figurine with toy guns, tin washtub, fabric, clock, and wood stand**

**The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Mortimer and Sara Hays Acquisition Fund**

In *Supreme Quality*, Saar shows Aunt Jemima as a gun-toting figure. At the same time, she is surrounded by accoutrements of feminine labor. A clock whose hands have been replaced by an American flag can be found on the back of the work, suggesting the unending nature of the mammy's tasks. The inscription, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines," which appears on a number of Saar's assemblages, may refer to a controversial essay published in 1997 in *The International Review of African American Art*. Titled "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," the text, in which Saar is quoted, addresses the incorporation of racist imagery into works by contemporary Black artists.



## ***A Call to Arms, 1997***

**Dashboard with stenciled lettering, toy guns, compass, clock, wood picture frame, printed photo, crumb brush, twine, bullets, wood and metal spools, and Black Power fists**

**Collection of David Packard and M. Bernadette Castor**

Lettered on the corrugated surface of this vintage dashboard are lines from the poem “Proem” (1922) by Langston Hughes. The names of two American cities appear above: Chicago, the site of a bloody race riot in 1919; and Memphis, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. A crumb brush affixed to a mammy figurine with a noose around her neck stands before a photo of a lynching. Her outstretched arms are bullets and she is flanked by Black Power fists. For decades, Saar has transformed such derogatory images into potent symbols. She has said, “When Martin Luther King was assassinated, I reacted by creating a woman who’s my warrior: Aunt Jemima.”

Saar borrowed both the Hughes excerpt and the photo from a page in *The Black Book*, on view at right. She regards this influential volume as a sourcebook.

**Middleton A. Harris (1908–1977)**

***The Black Book***

**First edition**

**New York: Random House, 1974**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the**

**Gordon N. Ray Fund, 2019**

*The Black Book* is an anthology of photographs, newspaper clippings, quotations, sheet music, patent applications, advertisements, and other ephemera, which together form a picture of Black life in America. The volume, assembled by Middleton A. Harris under the editorial eye of Toni Morrison—whose uncredited poem appears on the back jacket—is unflinching in its documentation of slavery, racially motivated violence, and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Saar was in the midst of her own reclamation of racist imagery when the book was published, having produced *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* two years earlier. In *A Call to Arms*, displayed at left, Saar stenciled the Langston Hughes excerpt seen here onto a vintage washboard, where it joins other imagery to create a narrative of Black liberation.

**Sketchbook page for *Supreme Quality*, 22 January 1998  
(facsimile)**

**Marker on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

**Sketchbook page for *A Call to Arms*, 1997**

**Ballpoint pen on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts  
Projects, Los Angeles**

**Sketchbook pages for *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*,  
3 January (*right*) and 29 January (*left*) 1998**

**Ballpoint pen on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

**Sketchbook page for *Still Ticking*, 23 March 2004**

**Marker on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

**Sketches for *Sanctuary Awaits*:**

**4 May 1996**

**Ballpoint pen on paper**

**19 June 1996 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen on sketchbook page**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

***Still Ticking, 2005***

**Clocks, wood, paint, and white chalk**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

Made shortly before Saar's seventy-eighth birthday, this assemblage includes years and astrological glyphs on the inner left side that correlate to important dates in her life. The work's title wittily refers to the timepieces in the sculpture—which, of course, are not ticking; indeed, they are either frozen in time or missing their hands. It also alludes to the artist herself, who is still making art well into her nineties.

***I'll Bend But I Will Not Break, 1998***

**Ironing board with printed images and text, flat iron, chain, bedsheet with appliqués, wood clothespins, and rope  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Lynda and Stewart Resnick through the 2018 Collectors Committee**

This tableau directly addresses issues of race and women's work. The image on the ironing board—itsself a traditional symbol of female labor—is borrowed from a well-known eighteenth-century print showing scores of Africans packed into a slave ship to cross the Atlantic. Saar's construction also refers to the marking of enslaved people with branding irons, and to their enchainment in transit or as punishment. The "KKK" appliquéd to the sheet denotes the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, still active today in the United States. According to Saar, this work communicates "the political message that you can treat me as a slave and I'll bend down—I'll bend down to pick cotton, I'll bend to do this, to be a laborer—but I *will not break.*"

**PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH**

# *A Secretary to the Spirits*



***A Secretary to the Spirits, 1975–78***

**Collage of cut printed papers and fabric, with matte and metallic paint and ink stamps, on laminated paperboard**

***Pocadonia, 1975–78***

**Collage of cut and torn printed papers and Letraset border tape, with porous point pen, ink wash, watercolor, and ink stamps, on laminated paperboard**

***Sky Diving, 1975–78***

**Collage of cut printed papers, with porous point pen,  
watercolor, and ink stamps, on laminated paperboard**

**Ishmael Reed (b. 1938)**

***A Secretary to the Spirits***

**Illustrated by Betye Saar**

**First edition**

**New York; London; Lagos: NOK Publishers, 1978**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Modern and  
Contemporary Collectors Committee, 2017**

***Tea Dancer Turns Thirty-Nine, 1977–78***

**Collage of cut and torn printed papers, with porous point pen, watercolor, acrylic paint, and ink stamps, on laminated paperboard**

***Memo to Stevie Wonder, 1975–78***

**Collage of cut printed papers, with watercolor, ink stamps, and artist's thumbprint in ink, on laminated paperboard**

***The Return of Julian the Apostate to Rome, 1975–78***

**Collage of cut and torn printed papers and fabric, with porous point pen, watercolor, and acrylic matte medium, on laminated paperboard**

**Sketchbook page for *The Edge of Ethics*, 14 January 2010  
(facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen, marker, and colored pencil on paper pasted into sketchbook**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

**Sketchbook page for *Serving Time*, 24 February 2009  
(facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

Saar identifies the bird atop the cage in this drawing as “(Jim) Crow.” Jim Crow laws were used to enforce racial segregation in the American South from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. The name supposedly derives from a nineteenth-century minstrel routine called “Jump Jim Crow,” which was performed by a white man in blackface; it eventually became a derogatory name for Black Americans.

***Sanctuary Awaits, 1996***

**Wood, glass bottles, metal wire, palm fronds, compass,  
sheet tin, screws, and nails**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

*Sanctuary Awaits* is informed by the African Kongo tradition of bottle trees, which are garlanded with bottles, vessels, and other objects to protect a household. Black people in the Caribbean took up this tradition as early as the 1790s; it continues today in the southern United States, where many still believe that bottle trees ward off evil. Saar made this sculpture as one of a three-part piece exhibited in conjunction with the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

***The Edge of Ethics, 2010***

**Metal cage, figures, chain, glass bottle, and fan coral  
Collection of Iris and Adam Singer**

In 2006, Saar began collecting cages like this one, which she purchased at a swap meet in Long Beach, California. She has said, “The cage, an object of containment, for me became a metaphor for many concepts: ideas of limitations, of emotions, of racism, of feminism, of death, of beauty, of mystery, of legends and superstition.”

***The Weight of Buddha (Contemplating Mother Wit and Street Smarts), 2014***

**Painted figures, chain, and postal scale**

**The Eileen Harris Norton Collection**

In *The Weight of Buddha*, Saar retains her focus on race while simultaneously returning to her early interest in spirituality. The assemblage is an amalgam of Buddha, Aunt Jemima, Black Sambo—a children’s book character drawn as a racist “pickaninny” caricature—and a postal scale, which for Saar symbolizes justice. The meditative, esoteric figure of Buddha, who is literally being weighed on the scale, contrasts with the commonsense values ascribed to Aunt Jemima (Mother Wit) and Black Sambo (Street Smarts).



**Sketchbook page for *The Weight of Buddha (Contemplating Mother Wit and Street Smarts)*, February 2013**

**Ballpoint pen, colored pencil, and wash on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

# *Travel Sketchbooks*

**Page from U.S.A. sketchbook, Santa Fe, Museum of  
International Folk Art, 1988–91  
Watercolor and ballpoint pen on paper**

**Page from California sketchbook, 1975  
Acrylic and collage on paper**

**Page from Brazil/Los Angeles sketchbook, 1983/88**  
**Collage and gouache on paper**

**Page from Oaxaca sketchbook, April 1985**  
**Acrylic, gouache, and collage on paper**

**Spread from Mexico sketchbook, June 1975**  
**Gouache, watercolor, and pencil on paper**

**Page from Aix-en-Provence, France/Los Angeles  
sketchbook, 8 September 2004**  
**Collage and watercolor on paper**

This sketchbook page refers to the *hamsa*, an amulet in the form of the palm of a hand that is popular throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Often containing the image of an eye, the *hamsa* is considered a defense against the evil eye. The palm of the hand—here a silhouette of the artist's own—symbolizes fortune for Saar.

**Spread from Taiwan sketchbook, 1988**

**Watercolor and collage on paper**

**Spread from Haiti sketchbook, 26 July 1978**

**Watercolor, marker, and colored pencil on paper**

## **Page from Haiti sketchbook, 24 July 1974**

### **Watercolor, ballpoint pen, and ink on paper**

This sketchbook page incorporates black-and-white lozenge motifs from a grave monument Saar saw in a cemetery in Jacmel, Haiti. They are combined with imagery seen throughout her work: celestial bodies, a heart, and a burning cross.

## **Page from Brazil sketchbook, 1994**

### **Watercolor and collage on paper**

In the fall of 1994, Saar traveled to Brazil for the twenty-second International Biennial in São Paulo. Her work was featured in an exhibition alongside that of John Outterbridge (b. 1933), a fellow assemblage artist from California. The following year, Saar visited South Africa when the exhibition traveled to Johannesburg.

**Sketchbook pages for *Woke Up This Morning,  
the Blues was in My Bed*:**

**24 February 2001 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen and colored pencil on paper**

**14 August 2001 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen and colored pencil on paper**

**8 March 2010**

**Marker, colored pencil, and wash on paper**

**22 May 2013 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen on paper pasted into sketchbook**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist  
and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**



**Sketchbook page for *Blow Top Blues: The Fire Next Time*,  
14 January 1998 (facsimile)**

**Ballpoint pen and collage on paper**

**Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and  
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

***Blow Top Blues: The Fire Next Time, 1998***

**Lithograph and hand-painted collage on paper**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

Aunt Jemima's fixed stare and rigid grin in this work refer to the song "Blow Top Blues" by jazz musician Leonard Feather (1914–1994). Popularized in the 1940s, it tells the story of a woman who is going mad. Saar's subtitle, *The Fire Next Time*, is taken from James Baldwin's 1963 book of that title, which addresses the role of race in American history and the connections between race and religion. Baldwin in turn took his title from the antebellum Negro spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep."

***Woke Up This Morning, the Blues was in My Bed, 2019***

**Metal cot, glass bottles, neon, and coal**

**Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**

The title of this tableau references “Empty Bed Blues,” a song recorded by Bessie Smith in 1928. The cot can be seen as a spirit bottle bed, akin to the traditional bottle tree used by the Kongo civilization in west-central Africa to ward off evil spirits. Saar used the cot, which she bought at a secondhand store on Western Avenue in Los Angeles, in at least two earlier installations (in 1990 and 1994); she loves not only using recycled objects but also recycling them herself. In a February 2001 sketch—the first of four she made for this work—Saar introduced the idea that the cot would sit on a bed of coal, a material that evokes energy and change.

**PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH**