

THINKING OUT LOUD



ALISON SAAR

Written by **ERIN CLARK**

Photographed by **PRAKASH SHROFF**

If you want to know what's on Alison Saar's mind, take a look at her latest work. Her art has always been personal, or at least it starts that way. From race to gender to poverty to feminism, she takes on weighty societal issues, but the work is born out of personal rather than collective experiences. Wielding a chainsaw, or hammer and chisel, she admits to working out a lot of anxiety in her studio. "The gritty stuff ends up in my work most of the time," she says. "To be able to vocalize my anxieties or issues through my art helps me stay sane." It's not that these issues personally weigh her down; it is more a question of voice. Saar has always had something to say.

Her parents encouraged creativity. The family lived in L.A.'s Laurel Canyon in the aftermath of the 1958 Bel Air Fire. There wasn't much left – a lot of burned out shells of homes and scorched hillsides. But it was the 1960's, and the canyon offered refuge for creative free spirits – a lot of artists and especially musicians. Mama Cass lived over the hill, and Alison and her two sisters used to play Ding Dong Ditch at Frank Zappa's place just down the street. For kids it was paradise. "We didn't ride bikes or play street games like you would in an urban environment. We built tree houses, and made stuff out of things we found. Painting rocks with flowers was one of our favorite things to do. There were a lot of musicians' kids in the neighborhood, but they were transient. They'd be there for a while and then move on, so basically it was me and my sisters," Alison remembers.

Her parents were "hippie" artists – a mixed race couple who gave their daughters two unique perspectives, both culturally and artistically. Betye Saar, Alison's mom, is an accomplished artist who, using "found materials," often made provocative assemblage pieces that reflected the cul-



tures of her own mixed heritage. Alison's father, Richard Saar, on the other hand, was a classically trained art conservator. By the time she was in junior high, Alison was working in his studio as an apprentice. "My mom's work is very spiritual. Her main contribution to my artistic persona was her interest in nonwestern art history: Indigenous art, Native American art, South American art. She was interested in all of it," Alison explains. "My Dad had a very different technical approach than my mother. He was trained at the Cleveland School of Art. He had us reading books on Michelangelo, and looking at early methodologies like encaustic and frescoes. With mom and dad together, we (Alison and her sisters) had a very well-rounded education – better than any education I got in school."

Culturally it was a mixed bag as well. Alison would spend her summers with her mother's family in Pasadena. "It was a classic African American experience," she says, "right down to dancing to Motown in the street. My father's side was also very Bohemian, although early on we didn't have as much contact with my grandmother. She remarried a man who was pretty intolerant. The first son married a catholic, and that was outrageous. The second son married a Puerto Rican catholic, and that was even more outrageous, and then my father married an African American – that was over the top! When he passed away, we got to see my grandmother a little more."

Alison clearly identified more with her African American heritage, but as a young woman who looked white and felt black, the teenage years were frustrating. Following the devastating Sylmar Earthquake that left L.A. High School red tagged, Alison and her classmates were bussed to Fairfax High, and for the first time Alison experienced real racial tension. It would have been easy for her to "pass" as white, but she would have had to deny an important part of her heritage and she wasn't prepared to do that. "I felt I was in the mongrel group," Alison says without anger. "I had my little enclave of misfits – a young gay man, a Native American kid, and an African American woman who was adopted by whites. We clung together." And made it through together, and along the way Alison collected material for the artistic autobiography she was just beginning to write.

Alison's art has always been narrative. In fact, when she was a young teenager she made rag dolls to sell at the local Renaissance Fair. They were simple sewn dolls dressed in traditional Renaissance clothing,

which she sold for about \$15, but they were also multi-racial, and long before Cabbage Patch dolls made pedigree popular, Alison's dolls came with a written history. She would create the story of the doll's life, write it down and include it as part of the final package. In many ways she has been doing the same thing ever since.

"My narratives now include issues of gender, race, the economy," Alison explains, "but my experience is one thing. When they go out into the world, people will have a different idea." Take, for instance, a piece called *Tippy Toes*; a female form seemingly suspended in mid-air and surrounded by a skirt of intertwining thorns. Alison sees it as a statement on women who torture themselves with a certain idea of beauty and how that obsession can become something of a corset akin to an iron maiden. The sculpture was sold to a museum in North Carolina

where some of the patrons identified with it on a more personal level. In the South, women used to wear hoop skirts to debutante balls. "So there is a whole generation of now gray-haired southern bells who relate to this piece. They would say to me 'we looked beautiful, but we were very uncomfortable.'" Alison laughs. It wasn't quite her narrative, but she says, "People bring their own personal experience to it and understand it through a slightly different lens. Sometimes I feel that their experience is more powerful than my ideas for it."

Like many artists eager to establish themselves, Alison spent some time in New York City. She admits there was an element of "trying to prove herself," but mainly it was about a boy. Right after getting her masters from Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, she followed her boyfriend to the Big Apple. Personally and professionally it worked out well – she and Tom got married and had two kids, and artistically she opened a new chapter. Her studio was in Harlem, and she admits to having a romantic vision of the place before she got there. Black culture did thrive in the city, but there was a dark side as well. "We moved in the winter of 1992," she remembers. "Unemployment was very high; a lot of people were homeless. It was the first time in my life I was stepping over people to get through my front door. I really felt the poverty 24/7, so I did these pieces dealing with homelessness."



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Most of her sculptures are carved from wood and covered with copper or ceiling tin. A veteran dumpster diver, she finds materials wherever she can. Initially she did it because it was all she could afford; now she




does it for the environment and for the history it brings to a sculpture. "One piece (of wood) I really adored came out of a phone booth from the old Madison Square Garden. There were layers and layers of paint, and where some had chipped off you could see phone numbers – really cryptic because they didn't look like contemporary phone numbers. I loved to think about the conversations that were had in that phone booth."

After more than a decade in New York City, Alison moved back to Southern California, mainly to be near family, but also because she believed Los Angeles was coming into its own as an art center. She and her husband bought a house in, where else, Laurel Canyon. The narrow tree-lined lanes snaking up the hills still seem a world away from downtown L.A., but it is a much more upscale neighborhood than the one Alison grew up in. Although her home is traditional on the outside, it is typically artistic inside. Art is everywhere. A "curiosity cabinet" is tucked into a corner next to the fireplace. It's filled with collectables from around the world and works of art created by her young children. The kids are older now. Her daughter is a teenager, and a great writer. Her son is an artist and puppeteer – some of his handcrafted puppets hang from the ceiling in Alison's cluttered studio just off the kitchen.

A poster of Barack Obama has a place of honor in the living room. "It's frightening for us because in the past when we have felt reason for hope, it has ended in disaster. I'm frightened to say that or even think that way, but I do. My kids think the civil rights struggle is over and it's not," Alison says. Although she is as engaged as anyone in the big issues of our times, and she is passionate about her politics, she skipped the inevitable election night parties, opting instead for a quiet night at home watching the returns with her family. "I didn't want to bawl in public," she laughs. Overwhelmed by the results of the election, she says the emotion may find its way into her work, but for the most part she relies on the personal stuff for inspiration.

IMAGE: At left, *Sea of Nectar*, 2008, wood, ceiling tin, bronze & tar, 69 x 36 x 31 inches. At right, detail of *Lunarseas: Sea of Fecundity*, 2008, bronze, edition of 5 unique variations, 27 x 20 x 8 inches. Courtesy of LA Louver, Venice, CA.



Her last exhibit, *Hither*, was prompted by the inevitable passing of the fertility torch. Just as she was moving into pre-menopause, her daughter was entering her fertile years. That was the seed, but Greek mythology provided the fertilizer for the idea to take root. Alison has always looked to mythology – African, Greek or otherwise – for the symbolism that might help tell her story of the moment. In this instance she found it in the story of Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus.

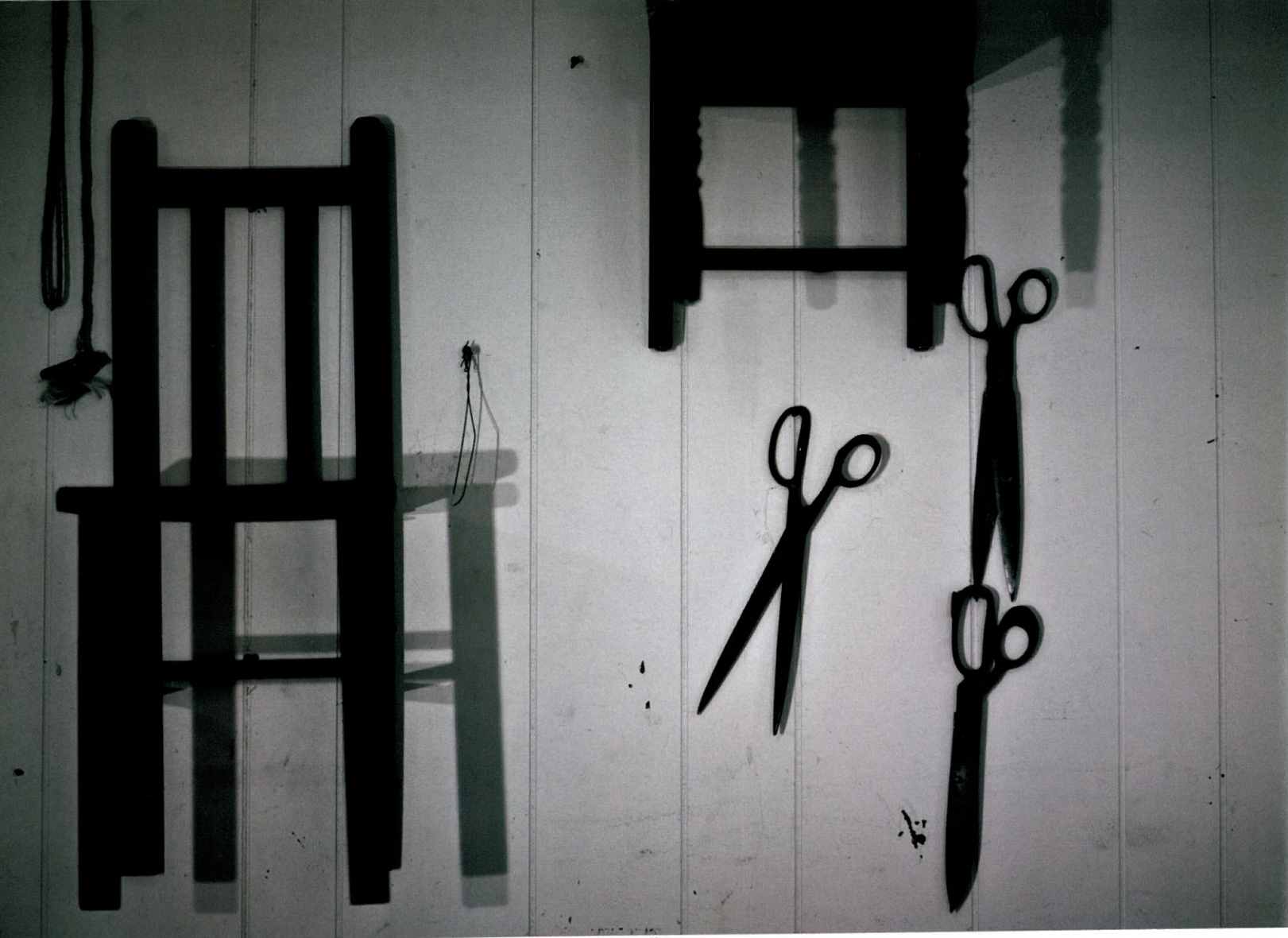
As the story goes, Persephone was abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld. Life came to a standstill as the devastated Demeter, goddess of the Earth, searched for her daughter. Zeus finally forced Hades to return Persephone, but not before she was tricked into eating pomegranate seeds, which forced her to return to the underworld for one season a year. Upon her return, the vegetation flourished only to die away when she paid penance in the underworld for one season every year. The myth of Demeter and Persephone was used to explain the seasons. As an artist, Alison uses the symbolism to create remarkably powerful and contemporary pieces that metaphorically speak to the female change of seasons. *Brood* shows a fiberglass female figure perched atop a tower of children's chairs, holding a split pomegranate, the blood-red juice dripping on her knees while a cluster of abandoned fruit lay at the foot of the tower. Knowing the mythology and Alison's personal perspective, make the sculpture all the more powerful and meaningful. It is every woman's journey.





IMAGE: Opposite page clockwise top, *Blood/Sweat/Tears*, 2005, wood, copper, bronze, paint and tar, 72 x 24 x 20 inches. *Coup*, 2006, wood, wire, tin & found objects, 52, 168 x 52 inches. This page left (and opposite left detail), *Brood*, 2008, found children's chairs, fiberglass and bronze, 115 x 20 x 20 inches. All sculpture images, courtesy of LA Louver, Venice, CA. At right, Alison working in her studio.





On a chilly, rainy day in November, Alison stood at the juncture of St. Nicholas Avenue, West 122nd Street, and Frederick Douglas Boulevard in Harlem. She was there for the dedication of her sculpture of Harriet Tubman. As a hero to most African Americans, the city thought it was high time the famous abolitionist was honored. So The New York Cultural Affairs Commission asked 10 artists to submit designs for a Harriet Tubman memorial. Alison was honored to be one of those artists and even more humbled when she was chosen. "I was a little hesitant at first," she says, "because they wanted a representational figure and I don't do that, but I thought it was important." The larger than life bronze monument has transformed what used to be an ugly traffic triangle into a lasting memorial to a woman who spent her life fighting slavery. Alison used what few pictures were available to create a realistic depiction of the woman and then used heavy symbolism in designing Tubman's trailing skirt. She included portraits of "anonymous passengers" on the Underground Railroad, some of which were inspired by African "passport masks." Around the granite base, she placed bronze tiles representing significant events in Tubman's life. Alison is happy with the final results, "I wanted to say something about the woman, and so I made her fairly fierce. I wanted to show her strength."

Large public commissions are a departure for Alison. She isn't crazy about the process; she prefers to be in her studio alone letting her ideas form

organically. These days, she is collecting scissors. "I'm a little crazy right now," she says. "I'm on eBay, bidding on scissors day and night." The growing collection of clippers is mounted on one wall in the studio, waiting for Alison to make her move. The process is vintage Alison Saar – somewhere in her psyche scissors have surfaced. As a metaphor for what? She honestly doesn't know, but is toying with several ideas, and of course, doing her research. She likes the idea of mythology's three muses – one draws out the cord of life, one measures it and one cuts it, which would bring in the scissors, but she isn't sure. "I've been thinking about these figures being bound by their hair, being held hostage by their hair, so I tried something. I carved a figure that is bald and put her on a mound of hair. I don't know where I'll go from here, but it's a start," says Alison, perhaps giving a glimpse into what her next series might be.

Alison Saar's art is not easy – it requires the viewer to engage and perhaps consider some things that are uncomfortable. But Saar believes that we can be better, that we can find answers to divisions and inequities. If her art makes us think, maybe it's a first step to a better understanding. "My work is dark, but there is always an element of hopefulness," she says. "I want to make sure that we can push beyond boundaries. It's the only way to survive."

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IMAGE: A collection of found objects displayed on Saar's studio wall for inspiration and perhaps for inclusion in future work.