

## ALISON SAAR

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OTIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

by Leah Ollman



**LOS ANGELES** Alison Saar has recently added cast and blown glass to her already broad repertory of historically charged, richly tactile materials—coal, tar, wood, rope, antlers, ceiling tin, old tools. In four of 12 works at Otis's Ben Maltz Gallery (one 2010, one 2011 and the rest 2012), glass is fashioned as bodily vessel or distillery equipment—or both, as in *Still Run Dry*. The three components of this wall-mounted sculpture suggest the abandoned remains of a rustic laboratory, its obsolescence and nonproductivity a metaphor for the female body's midlife decline. On one shelf, thorny twigs fill a clear glass uterus whose tubes are sealed to resemble gnarly, stunted fingers. A canister beside the object, connected to it by tubing, holds a glass pomegranate split open to expose not juicy red seeds but desiccated bits of black coal. This is alchemy in reverse, potential gone extinct.

References to the function and symbolism of the still run through this show of potent sculptures and tableaux (most 2012). In one piece, inky liquid rises through a tube into a clear glass heart and head; a hand pump sends droplets trickling out from the eyes into the washbasin below. In another, *Mammy Machine*, a cluster of bulbous brown glass breasts receives and pumps out fluid. Saar's devices embody racially inflected ideals of purity and viability, while shifting states of emptiness and fullness signify transformation and change keyed to phases of fecundity within a woman's life. "STILL . . .," the exhibition's title, refers as well to a kind of stubborn endurance. Three damaged hearts, in bronze, teeter defiantly on legs like those of a Louise Bourgeois spider.

Saar has long focused on certain persistent, corrosive notions (*still* around) having to do with the positioning of African-Americans and women. Her figures are strong and self-possessed, sturdy descendants of African deities and the wood carvings of Expressionists like Hermann Scherer and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. She pits the formidable physical dignity of her sculptures, their internally anchored identity, against objects and details that threaten a diminishment of the figures' status. In *Weight*, for instance, a young girl sits on a swing attached to a scale for weighing cotton. On one side is this taut little soul, pigtailed, carved in wood and sheathed only in a gleaming skin of coal dust; on the other, a cornucopia of cast iron tools of domestic and field labor (skillet, scythe, shears, chains), the implements that will determine her functional worth.

Saar's work is personal, but so deeply informed by myth and history that its narratives become universal and inclusive. The eyes of her figures are generalized or turned inward, so the sculptures don't meet our gaze, yet their presence registers viscerally. In all their power and vulnerability, these women embody essential conditions of being-social, political, biological. They represent humanity, distilled.

*Photo: View of Alison Saar's exhibition "STILL . . .," 2012; at Otis College of Art and Design.*

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