

Identity in the Balance | The Iconic Works of:

Alison Saar

Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara City College



BY REBEKAH ALTMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL WERTS

A female figure is perched atop a precariously tall stack of children's chairs. Leaning forward, she holds the husk of a pomegranate in her hands, its red juice running down her legs. On the ground far below lie scattered pomegranate remnants.

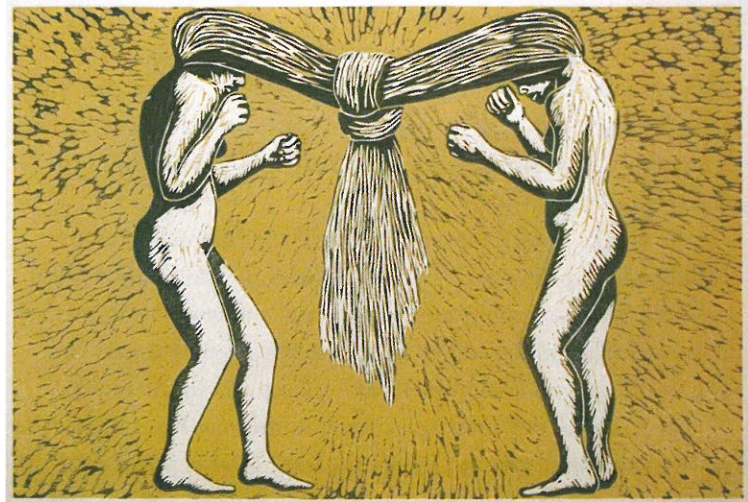
A woman sits in a chair. Her long braid stretches behind her to merge with rope loosely bound over a heap of antique luggage. In her hands she holds a pair of scissors.

THE ARTWORK OF ALISON SAAR is full of such vivid scenes, surging with imagery that encompasses cultural, mythical, political and personal realms. The scenarios portrayed in her sculptures and prints are almost cringe-causing intimate, while the figures depicted maintain a sense of anonymity that enables the work to address broader cultural and historical concerns. These elements, along with the appealing physical nature of the work, draw the viewer into Saar's world for a deeper look and a piece of the action.

Saar works out of her home studio with a focused vision and refreshing lack of braggadocio. This lack of posturing balanced by respectful consideration for her materials and process could be a result of her upbringing. Born in 1956 to an African-American mother and white father,



Saar's work is both personal and political in her handling of race, gender and identity. This page clockwise from top: *Bat Boyz*, 2001, carved from baseball bats and pitch. *Tango*, a woodblock print from 2005. Saar creates limited edition prints revisiting imagery from her sculptural work following the completion of a sculpture. In the *Spade* series, Saar plays with language and material in groupings of anonymous portraits painted on shovels.





Above: In collaboration with SBCC, Saar created a small bronze cast of her 2003 bronze-and-cloth sculpture *Inheritance*. Made in an edition of 10, five of the sculptures are being sold by Atkinson Gallery as a fundraiser for gallery programming. Here, Alison Saar discusses the casting process with, from left: gallery director Dane Goodman, sculpture program head Ed Inks and Nevin Littlehale, who teaches bronze casting at SBCC Adult Ed and helped with the pour. Right: *Coup*, 2006, wood, wire, tin and found objects.

Saar grew up in the fabled Los Angeles enclave of Laurel Canyon—Joni Mitchell, David Crosby and Frank Zappa all lived nearby. Saar’s mother Betye is a well-known assemblage artist who won her first national endowment while Saar was in high school. Saar’s father Richard was an art conservator and ceramicist with whom she began a conservation apprenticeship in junior high school.

She speaks fondly, but with a lack of sentimentality, of a childhood steeped in art. “Part of growing up was being around art being made or going to the museums and being in those dark halls with the dioramas. My mom was always making art, and she would give us something to do to keep us out of trouble.”

This cultural and artistic immersion has resulted in Saar’s ability to neither take art for granted nor treat it too preciously. She is reluctant to theorize about her own work and has never been drawn to the art banter that is common parlance in art

schools and galleries. When asked during an interview for a teaching position how people were supposed to understand her art, she responded simply, “They should look at it.”

The viewer’s participation is important to Saar. Guests at Santa Barbara City College’s Atkinson Gallery in November and December for a solo exhibition of Saar’s work can interact with *Cake Walk*, a larger-than-life wooden marionette maneuvered by ropes attached to the ceiling. Ideally, all of Saar’s works would be interacted with physically. “The hardest rule for me is not to touch the art,” she laughs. “As an artist, such a crucial part of the work is that sense of touch, and the surfaces I put on are really tactile.”

But even considering the pervasive hands-off policy, the sculptures emanate a powerful physical presence. Most are larger than life and rendered out of wood that Saar sources from salvage yards and other treasure troves, sawing, hacking

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and chiseling raw material into form in her studio or terraced backyard. She also incorporates bronze, copper, fiberglass and a host of found and reclaimed objects. Totemic in scale and attitude but also imminently human, the works invoke, variously, family, womanhood and life cycles; slavery, the African-American experience and American folk art; identity, myth and spirituality. Saar's own heritage and experience is a frequent source of inspiration, as is her desire to recast the history of our country's disenfranchised citizens in their own words.

The exhibit at Atkinson is not Saar's first appearance in

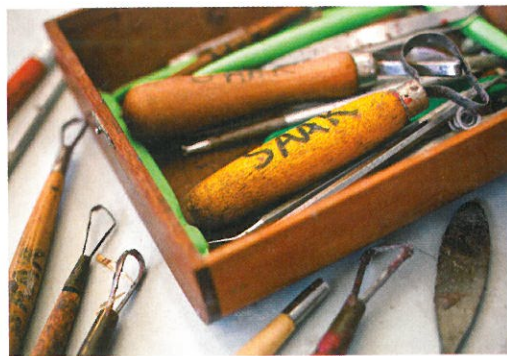
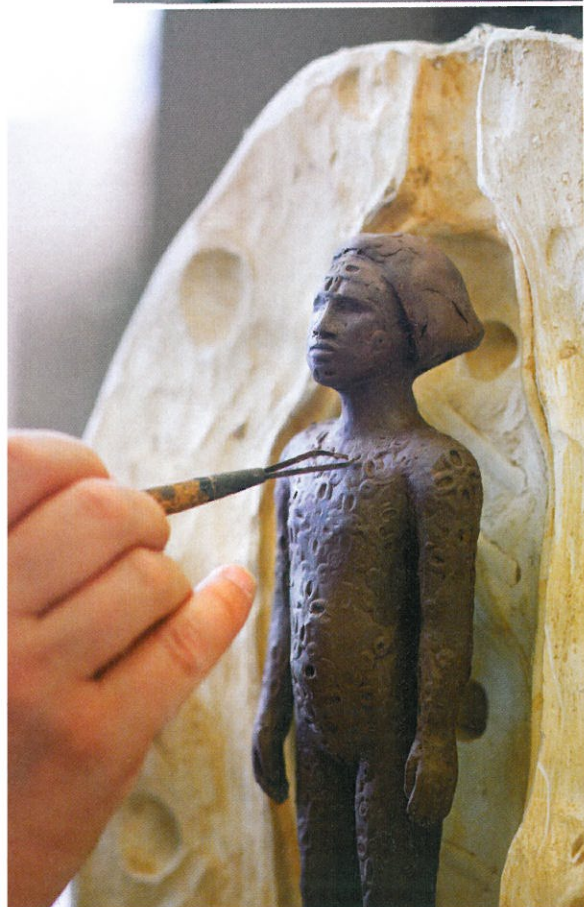
Santa Barbara. *Terra Firma* (1991), a tin, tar and found-object sculpture of a reclining figure, is in Santa Barbara Museum of Art's permanent collection and was included in the 2007–08 exhibit *Identities*. University Art Museum at UCSB owns two of Saar's works from the 1980s and Saar was part of a fundraiser at Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum in 1995, as was Atkinson Gallery director and artist Dane Goodman. After meeting a few times, Goodman asked Saar to jury the 2007 *Small Images* exhibit, a popular annual event for regional artists, before approaching her about a solo show.

IMAGES OF ARTWORK COURTESY OF LA LOUVER





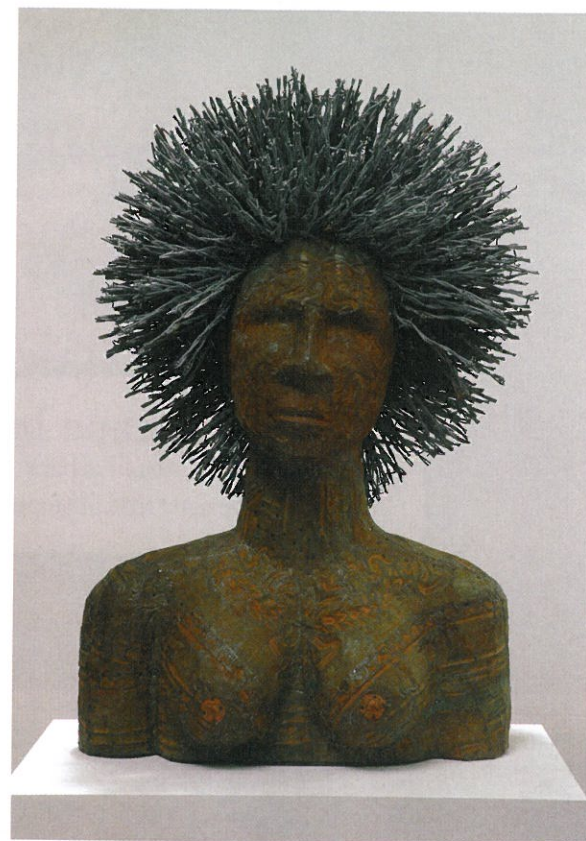
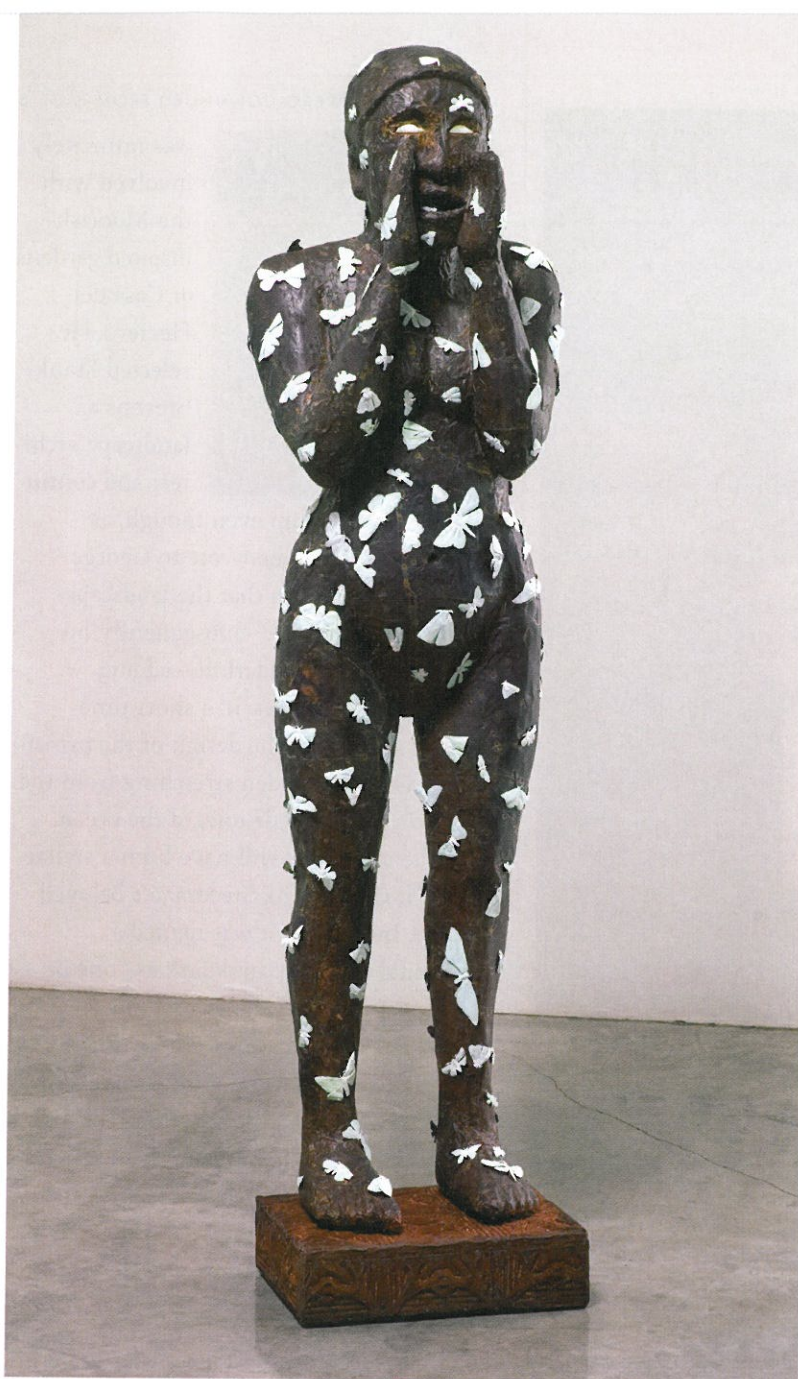
Above: Goodman and Saar discuss her solo exhibit in the Atkinson Gallery, with a mockup of *Inheritance* visible in front of a preparatory drawing for *Coup*. Left: A detail of the clay original and plaster "mother" mold that were used to cast wax copies and eventually, the final bronze sculpture.



"Her pieces work on so many levels, it's just like, 'Bingo,'" Goodman says about his attraction to her artistic style.

Saar specialized in art history as an undergraduate at Scripps College, focusing on art of non-western cultures, especially African, African Diaspora and African-American art. But ultimately, she found "there were too many rules in art history. You have to tell someone else's story, and I like making my own story." So Saar made the switch to full-time art student and earned her MFA from Otis in 1981. Amazingly, she never took a sculpture class but credits the time she spent in her dad's workshop with implanting her early sculpting techniques.

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Left-right: *Hither*, 2008, made of wood, copper, tar and paint, and *Mo'fro*, a 2006 piece made from wire, tin, and tar on wood, demonstrate varying approaches to similar themes visible throughout Saar's career.

"A lot of the pieces are very dark, and I like to give them a little levity with the titles, which have more playfulness." She relates this tactic to her interest in the blues. "They're playing these heart-wrenching songs, but there's also some humorousness to them, some sort of escape." Rather than cement the meaning of a work, the titles provide extra fodder for open interpretation, and that is Saar's intention. "I look back at art I made before I had kids and I have a completely different understanding of it now that I've had new experiences. If the artist can change her mind about a piece, then it's definitely open for other people to interpret as well."

With representation at Art Basel this June through LA Louver and an increasing tally of exhibits, awards and public commissions, Saar's star continues to rise. Both intellectually and viscerally satisfying, her work tells stories that feel like they were waiting to be told. Saar is the maven of her own narrative now. ✨

IMAGES OF ARTWORKS COURTESY OF LA LOUVER

Alison Saar: Solo Work opens on November 13 and runs through December 11. Saar gives an artist talk on December 2 at 4:30 p.m. Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara City College, East Campus, Humanities, 2nd floor, 721 Cliff Dr. Monday–Thursday 10 a.m.–7 p.m., Friday–Saturday 10 a.m.–4 p.m. For information, call 805/965-0581 ext. 3484.