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Jessica Dallow and Barbara Matilsky

Family Legacies: The Art of Betye, Lezley and Alison Saar

Chapel Hill: [Ackland Art Museum](#) in association with [University of Washington Press](#), 2004. 144 pp.; 51 color ills.; 2 b/w ills. Paper \$24.95 (9780295985640)

[Ackland Art Museum](#), Chapel Hill, NC, December 18–March 26, 2006; [Pasadena Museum of California Art](#), Pasadena, CA, April 30–September 2006; [San Jose Museum of Art](#), San Jose, CA, October 21, 2006–January 7, 2007; [Palmer Museum of Art](#) at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, January 30–April 22, 2007



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Alison Saar. *Inheritance*. 2003. Wood, ceiling tin, and cotton. 72 x 29 x 29 inches. H. Allen Evans © 2003 Alison Saar.

Family Legacies: The Art of Betye, Lezley and Alison Saar is the first major exhibition to feature together the artwork of this mother and two daughters. The fifty mixed-media pieces span over forty years of work (1964–2005) and embody multiple legacies: personal, familial, cultural, and artistic. Overall, the exhibition presents visually provocative and historically significant work, and succeeds in drawing informative connections between the pieces without minimizing each artist's individuality. The show is co-curated by Jessica Dallow, art history professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and the Ackland's Barbara Matilsky, in collaboration with the artists. Instructional materials explore the multiple connotations of each piece and include artists' quotes. Wall labels offer comparative images drawn from art history and popular culture, and articulate major organizational themes of the show: "art, family, and identity"; "interpreting stereotypes and offering alternative histories"; "reconsidering slavery"; "interpreting mixed-race ancestry"; and "revealing the spirit through art." These themes overlap and materialize differently in each work, articulated best in the artists' production of and relationship with domestic, ritual, personal, industrial, and organic objects. History, memory, and spirituality

animate the materials of these mixed-media assemblages, forms that are conducive to their multi-referential themes.

The exhibit underscored the artists' distinctive crafts and identities within an artistic family and an increasingly globalized art world. Each artist chooses different means to explore her interracial ethnicities (parts African American, with Afro-Caribbean roots, and white, of mixed European heritage), and uses these explorations to confront issues ranging from internal conflicts to social discrimination. Gender is also a prominent theme, as mummies, matriarchs, martyrs, mystics, and women of mixed-race heritage and mythical proportions populate the works. While some of these images memorialize, others critique and reclaim images linked with often violent histories of exploitation. All the works, to varying degrees, address the perpetuation of stereotypes in advertising; relatedly, inclusions of "popular culture"—from the nineteenth century to the present—span many forms and translate uniquely in each piece. The artists display how racism and sexism are culturally inextricable and have brought about inheritances of oppression, along with deep cultural, artistic, and spiritual influences.

Poignantly ushering viewers into the museum, Alison Saar's *Inheritance* (2003) displays ancestry as formidable weight. This female child made of a wood armature covered in dimpled, subtly glistening, pounded ceiling tin, which resembles African carving and body scarification practices, holds on her head an overwhelming sphere of knotted white fabric that recalls the burden of Atlas, African traditions of women carrying laundry on their heads, and African American women's specific histories of domestic servitude. Such combinations of Western and non-Western sculptural forms and themes are seen throughout Alison's work, as in *Strange Fruit* (1995), a Venus-like female hanging upside-down from the ceiling, and *Briar Patch* (1998), a work referencing Kongo nail figurines with spiritual powers and resembling also a creepy odalisque bounded with wire—works that invoke bitter references to racial and sexual victimization. *Inheritance* displays Alison's characteristic creolized formal qualities, references, and use of domestic objects, as do the combined works *Cool Maman* and *Smokin' Papa Chaud* (both 2001). Yet, it most specifically portrays Alison's mother, Betye, as a child, shouldering responsibilities for her siblings, as well as Alison's own struggles in the shadows of her commanding, successful mother. Thematising the exhibit, the figure bears the burdens, baggage, and blessings of multiple legacies.

Nearby is Lezley's *Me, Myself, and Identity Crisis* (1998), a painted image inset into a carved-out book cover of two young girls, one white and one black and with facial features similar to the artist, joined at the hip and floating over a landscape collaged from fragments of found paintings, which appear in many of Lezley's works. The piece indicates Lezley's influence by the self-portraits of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, also of mixed ethnicity, as well as by Latin-American votive images. Lezley was primarily a writer before she became a visual artist, and she uses books—objects with literary and personal significance—in many of her works. The identity crisis depicted here is more explicitly autobiographical than in many of Lezley's works, which tend to focus on under-recognized historical figures, specifically social outcasts and victims of violent oppression (such as *Anastácia—Escrava e Martir Negra* (1999) and *Saartjie Baartman, Hottentot Venus* (1999)). This series includes images of her socially excluded yet profoundly gifted autistic daughter (*Geneva Saar Agustsson—Labeled Autistic* (1998)). More recent works by Lezley explore, with biting wit, popular images of interracial celebrities (for example, the installation *Mulatto Nation* (2003)), pieces that stem from her own grappling with identity in a divisive world.

Across the room are a series of female ancestor portraits by Betye, who is most famous for two-dimensional collages and a quite tangible use of family history. The works layer stitched handkerchiefs, letters, and gloves, some printed with hand-colored family photographs—all materials inherited from her late caregiver, who is featured in *Aunt Hattie* (1977). The collages memorialize Betye's mixed-race and female ancestry in the vein of a larger 1970s feminist revival of women's history and traditionally feminine crafts. Yet, Betye's works often diverge from these largely white feminist movements. Her manipulations of popular portrayals (most famously, Aunt Jemima) subversively critique racist images and African American women's forced servitude (*De 'Ol Folks at Home* (1972) and *Supreme Quality* (1998)), while including black power symbols. Influenced by Joseph Cornell, Betye produces multicultural collections, for example in *Black Girl's Window* (1969), which includes symbols of the occult and astrology as well as of her part-Irish ancestry. Objects and images, across Betye's many constructions, have conjuring and votive powers.

Brought together, the works embody generations and regenerations, most profoundly in a collaborative installation commissioned by the museum, *Transitions in Black and White*. The piece memorializes Betye's former husband, art conservator Richard Saar (1924–2004), with whom his daughters, Alison and Lezley, apprenticed and learned world art history and techniques. It epitomizes his looming influence throughout the exhibit. Composed of Betye's assemblages of Polaroid photographs and clocks, Alison's sculptural crows, and Lezley's assemblage of travel photographs surrounded by cocoon illustrations, it displays each artist's current work with objects that once again incarnate memory and the passage of time. This collaborative project, like the exhibit, honors family.

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