

reviews: national

Alison Saar

3 September - 5 October 2013

L.A. Louver
Venice, California

Alison Saar's archetypal female figures are instantly recognizable. Monumental in impact, regardless of their dimensions, and seething with raw power, her black women seem to transcend their troubled history, rising above racial injustice with spiritual force. But if Saar's sculptures and drawings are easy to read at first glance, they often have double meanings that emerge slowly and painfully.

That was certainly the case in this show of 12 sculptures and three wall pieces made by the Los Angeles artist in 2013. "Slough," the exhibition's title, could be interpreted as a state of either degradation or renewal, an ambiguity that set the stage for a quagmire of conflicting implications. In a strange twist on the horrors of slavery in the American South and partly inspired by the lotus eaters in Homer's *Odyssey*, three works titled *Cotton Eater* depict women consuming or regurgitating balls of cotton. In one, a beautifully carved wooden figure on a tall white pedestal has stuffed her belly, as well as a long bag cascading behind her, with so much cotton that she looks pregnant. A related study, drawn in charcoal on found sugar sacks, depicts a nude woman standing among cotton plants, calmly eating the flowering buds instead of picking them. On another pedestal nearby, a severed head in dark ceramic lay on its side spewing cotton from its mouth, suggesting a slave who consumed her master's profits and suffered the consequences.

As the show continued, so did the double takes. In *Cat's Cradle*, a dark wooden figure wraps a network of red string between her hands, evoking the familiar childhood game. But any thoughts of innocent play disappear with the realization that the "string" is actually a trail of red blood, oozing from her vagina. Ultimately, the collective effect of these visceral works would have been devastating, were they not so visually and conceptually compelling.

Alison Saar, *Cotton Eater*, 2013
 wood, cotton, acrylic, and tar

64 x 20 1/2 x 17 1/2 in. (162.6 x 52.1 x 44.5 cm)



– *Suzanne Muchnic*