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Alison Saar gives her sculptures an inner life

The artist creates openings in her figures that she fills with objects that convey history and tradition, as well as her personal experiences.

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Reporting from Encinitas, Calif. — On opening night of Alison Saar's exhibition and residency at the Lux Art Institute in Encinitas, sculptures stood on the floor and on pedestals, hung from the ceiling and were mounted on the wall, much like any of her gallery installations. But in one corner lay a dozen planks of Douglas fir, laminated into a solid block and held together by furniture clamps.

By the end of Saar's monthlong working retreat, which concluded last week, that lumber had come to life, and in place of the artist's materials and a cartful of tools stood a figure of compelling presence: a woman, slightly larger than life-size, carved in wood and clad in patches of copper. Her hands pull back flaps of metallic skin from over her abdomen, revealing a dark blue cavity — rib cage, womb — filled with cotton bolls on slender stems and a fluttering of moths, all cast in bronze.

"Foison," titled after an archaic term meaning plenty or abundance, emerged out of a combination of the artist's longstanding and newer interests.

"The works I'm doing now hark back to my really early work, from right out of grad school," Saar explained, "full-size figures, with doors that would open up or breasts that would open. They were more following African traditions, like the Nkisi, having cavities with objects embedded in them, as opposed to these being very Western-based, using anatomical drawings as a springboard."

Reproductions of several such anatomical images were taped to the wall of the gallery-workspace at Lux. Beautifully rendered engravings from the 17th and 18th centuries, they depicted men and women of vivid sensuality peeling away portions of their skin to expose the muscles, ligaments and organs beneath. Nearby hung the collaged paintings that Saar used as starting points for "Foison" and its companion piece, "Fallow," a sculpture-in-progress at her home studio in Laurel Canyon. Both of the works on paper were shown last fall at Saar's gallery, L.A. Louver. In "Fallow," the female figure opens her chest to reveal a deer nestled among thorny stems. Both of the women are muses of a sort, "figures embodying emotional states, figures that become verbs."

Saar earned her bachelor's from Scripps College and her MFA at Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) and has been named a distinguished alumna at both institutions. In addition to a steady slate of shows over the last 20 years, she has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and numerous public art commissions. In the fall of 2012, the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis will host an extensive exhibition of her work.

Saar draws upon history, myth and spiritual traditions in her work, often as they resonate with her personal experience. She twines the metaphorical and literal tightly around each other. The cotton in "Foison," for instance, refers to production, flowering and fertility, she said, but it's also a striking reminder of African American history and the crops that relied upon institutionalized slavery. The image of cultivation contrasts with the thistles and thorns, the "raw, more savage state" of "Fallow."

"That goes back to the duality in myself," said Saar, gracious and understated, her silver-streaked waves pulled back into short pigtails, "seeing myself as the civilized self and the uncivilized self, the wild self and the controlled, contained, well-behaved self. It plays into those two polar worlds."

Dualities invigorate Saar's work: strength and vulnerability, freedom and oppression, sanity and madness, humor and despair. The opposing forces don't reconcile harmoniously as much as they coexist in a state of vibrant friction. Many of her sculpted figures are bound, carry impossible loads on their heads or trail an inordinate amount of baggage. Some hang by their feet — "inverted lynchings," she calls them — symbolic of restraint and victimization, imposed from without as well as from within. The burdens of history and expectation are made palpable; the personal and political converge.

"I think being biracial definitely has a big play in my interest in that or my experience with that — never belonging in either world, always being considered some sort of other."

Saar's mother, artist Betye Saar, is African American. Her late father, Richard Saar, an art conservator, was white. She grew up in Laurel Canyon, not far from where she now lives. She claims multiple artistic heritages, basing works on European odalisques, Greek statuary, African tribal sculpture and spiritually charged ritual objects. Deeply informed and emotionally dense, tough as well as lyrical, poignant and often punning, her work is also accessible. Attendance during the public hours of Saar's residency was triple the normal numbers, said Lux director Reese Shaw, in large part because of the work's broad and deep appeal.

Visitors and numerous school and community groups watched Saar, 55, wielding a chainsaw, mallet and an array of chisels to free her figure from the block of wood. Gradually, the angular planks began to resemble a human form, the form took on the shape of a woman, and the woman assumed the characteristics of an individual. Saar continuously circled the work, hacking off large chunks here, smoothing rough edges there. After the carving was complete, she scooped out the figure's belly and began to sheathe the form in small

patches of copper that she cut to conform to the body's shape, nailing them down along their edges to create a continuous, quilted skin.

During the '80s and early '90s, when Saar lived in New York, she scavenged for old, stamped ceiling tin to cover her sculptures. She was intrigued by the history embedded in the material, in its former life sheltering a household.

"I liked that it was really hard and that it had a resistance to me trying to make it do what I wanted it to do. I liked that it had this patterning that related to keloiding and scarification, and that it was decorative on one hand, but it was also dirty and rusty and kind of raw. Also that it was this kind of armor."

Ceiling tin has become less available, so is using copper for that cladding, which, in "Foison," is not entirely protective. "I'm actually tearing this sort of skin, this thing that keeps the outside from coming in. And by pulling it open, it's allowing the inside to come out. It's opening the door between those two worlds."

Saar assembled the diorama in the figure's abdomen and sprayed the form's slightly wrinkled skin with a jade green patina. The warm tones of the copper gleamed through, and the newly animate figure suddenly appeared weathered, experienced. Even in the modest selection of her works at Lux, Saar's impressive range and resourcefulness with materials came through. In addition to pieces cast in bronze, there was a fiberglass figure coated in coal dust, a carved wood form dimpled with chisel marks and rubbed with graphite, faces carved in old baseball bats and a head carved in wood with a shimmering skin of gold leaf.

"All of the surfaces want to be touched," she said. "They want to be understood physically." At the same time, "they create a barrier."

That push-pull duality of immediacy and distance plays out in the figures' eyes as well, which, like those in "Foison," tend to be blank.

"You can observe them but they're not going to return your gaze. They're not going to engage you in any way." They stand like sideshow figures or slaves, people on display to be observed or sold. Some do directly address the viewer, "but for the most part they're creating this veil between them and you. They're in this whole other place spiritually or psychologically, but they're not present. Only their body is present."

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