

Alison Saar: *Coup*

by Rebecca Epstein

Alison Saar's deeply personal sculptures in her first solo show at L.A. Louver deserve tremendous applause - for their emotional honesty, sure, but more for the balance of strength and tenderness, in form and idea, through which she conveys it.

The daughter of celebrated African American artist Betye Saar and painter-conservator Richard Saar, she demonstrates deft skill with seemingly unforgiving materials (bronze, lead, tar, wood). Here, Saar juggles themes of personal and cultural identity as she fashions various sizes of female bodies (often her own) that are buoyant with story while solid in stance. Hair, similarly, she constructs with dense wire (sometimes even barbed), only to have it attract more than repel - thick, smooth strands you long to run your fingers through. See for example, "Mo'fro," a life-size bust that radiates an alluringly sensual afro, and "Tango," a smaller work comprising two tussling women, locked by a massive, shared hair knot. In the upstairs gallery, "Proclamation" carries the challenge further - a sinuous, cast bronze braid slithering up (or is it down?) the wall from a haphazard coil on the floor.

Also marrying soft with severe is the installation "Suckle": 15 hanging cast bronze skillets of varying size, with an ample female breast emerging out of each pan bottom. Engaging the material via cooking, nurturing and sex, the piece is literal but also ironic and iconic, its inherent grace stopping it miles short of cliché.

To this viewer, however, it's all about the skin: Saar covers her figures with pieces of decorative ceiling tin, affixed with hundreds of nails. The show's overarching narrative is the artist's shifting sense of self as her children prepare to leave home. Not surprisingly then, this "armor" is in fact vulnerable, made from a thin, malleable material that in its patterning - like wrinkles, birthmarks, and stretch marks - bears the imprints of life.



Tango