

ALISON SAAR TOPSY LARV

28 March – 12 May 2018

Opening reception:
Wednesday, 28 March, 6-8pm
Valet parking



Venice, CA -- L.A. Louver is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Los Angeles-based artist Alison Saar. Taking inspiration from the character of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic Civil War-era novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Saar re-contextualizes the sprightly uncouth slave girl as a symbol of defiance, through paintings on dyed vintage linens and sculptures carved from wood.

"She was one of the blackest of her race," writes Stowe of Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "Her woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails which stuck out in every direction... there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance." In over a dozen works, Saar utilizes this literal characterization to figuratively transform the chastised and ill-mannered Topsy into a fearless girl-at-arms.

Topsy, abused and mistreated by her former owners, was purchased by Augustine St. Clare and presented to his cousin Miss Ophelia as a gift with the challenge to make her "good." Despite Ophelia's attempts, Topsy steals and neglects her servant duties, and when reprimanded describes herself: "I's wicked, - I is. I's mighty wicked." By contrast, Eva, Topsy's child mistress and playmate, is portrayed with purity and light -- her flaxen hair likened to a glowing halo. Upon her untimely death, Eva gifts each of the family's slaves a lock of her hair. It is this final act of Eva's love that ultimately tames Topsy's wicked, wild-child ways.

However, Saar imagines a different fate for Topsy. In the sculpture *Topsy and the Golden Fleece* (2017), the slave girl refuses to be pacified, and is emboldened to take matters into her own hands. Saar braids tales, and weaves into Topsy's story the Greek myth of *Jason and the Argonauts*, drawing upon their seafaring journey to retrieve the Fleece of the Golden Ram to fulfill Jason's claim to the throne. The artist recasts Topsy as a nude female figure, carved from wood, firmly postured like a self-possessed conqueror. Having deployed the sickle clenched tightly to her chest, Topsy rejects Eva's docile offering of a single curl of hair, and instead commandeers her entire golden scalp, seizing Eva's power to carve out her own destiny.



Topsy is the leitmotif that runs throughout the exhibition. We see her again in *The Wrath of Topsy* (2018) as a gorgoneion Medusa-like head -- her “sundry little tails” radiate outwards, and her dark skin made even darker by the empty white gleam of her eyes. And in *Jubilee* (2018), a small wooden nude figure, the relaxed soft curves of her body are tranquilly expressed as she cuts away her hair in a cathartic and symbolic act of liberation. The title references Juneteenth, a celebration commemorating the abolition of slavery.

The spirit of Topsy is present in a series of sculptures depicting five life-size young girls carved from wood and plated with reclaimed ceiling tin. Ranging in heights from 3-5 feet (1-1.5 m), each is armed with tools used to cultivate southern plantation crops: *Sugarcane (Machete)*, *Tobacco (Tobacco Knife)*, *Indigo*

(Hoe), *Rice (Sickle)* and *Cotton (Bale Hook)*. Poised to wage an attack on the masters by employing the implements of their labor, these fierce little warriors have disguised themselves with cotton branches held aloft by their plaited hair, allowing them to move camouflaged through the fields. *High Cotton* (2017), the largest of five painted wall hangings on dyed vintage linens, Saar assembles the girls into a small army. They emerge from the dark indigo of night, weaponized, and on the precipice of war.

For Saar, these works summon the collected rage and frustration for our current times, poignantly phrased in the writings of poet and activist Audre Lorde: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time... I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”

Alison Saar was born and raised in Laurel Canyon, California. Saar received her B.A. in studio art and art history in 1978 from Scripps College, Claremont, California. She went on to earn her MFA from Otis-Parsons Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design). She has received three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1984, 1985 and 1988), and was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1989, the Flintridge Foundation Award for Visual Artists in 2000, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 1998 and the Joan Mitchell Artist in Residence in 2013. In 2012, the United States Artists Program named Saar one of 50 USA fellows. Select public works include: *Monument to the Great Northern Migration* (Chicago, Illinois), *Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial* (Harlem, New York) and *Embodied* (Los Angeles, California).

Concurrently on view (28 March – 12 May 2018):

SECOND FLOOR – David Hockney: *iPhone and iPad Drawings, 2009-12*

SKYROOM – Matt Wedel: *New Sculptures*

images:

(this page) Alison Saar, *High Cotton (study)*, 2017, acrylics on indigo dyed seed sacks, vintage linens and denim) 84 x 102 in. (213.4 x 259.1 cm)
 (previous) Alison Saar, *Topsy and the Golden Fleece*, 2017 wood, tar, steel, ceiling tin, wire, acrylic paint and gold leaf, 35 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. (90.2 x 29.2 x 21.6 cm). Collection of The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.

For more information and visuals, please contact Christina Carlos tel: 310-822-4955 e-mail: Christina@lalouver.com
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