

ARTS

Sculptures and other works by Alison Saar, on show in Los Angeles County, convey an indomitable spirit, writes Annabel Osberg

The black female protagonists of Alison Saar's sculptures, paintings and installations confront myriad encumbrances – some balance burdens on their heads; others are suspended on chairs, fabrics, or ropes – yet they never seem to lose their courage or agency. Each figure's expression conveys an indomitable spirit.

Often, the women's workaday tools and even their bodies take on magical powers, such as in the painting "High Cotton" (2017), where plantation implements double as weapons for a platoon of enslaved girls. Their deep blue hair mystically sprouts cotton-topped branches as camouflage in a nocturnal field.

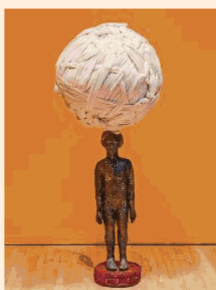
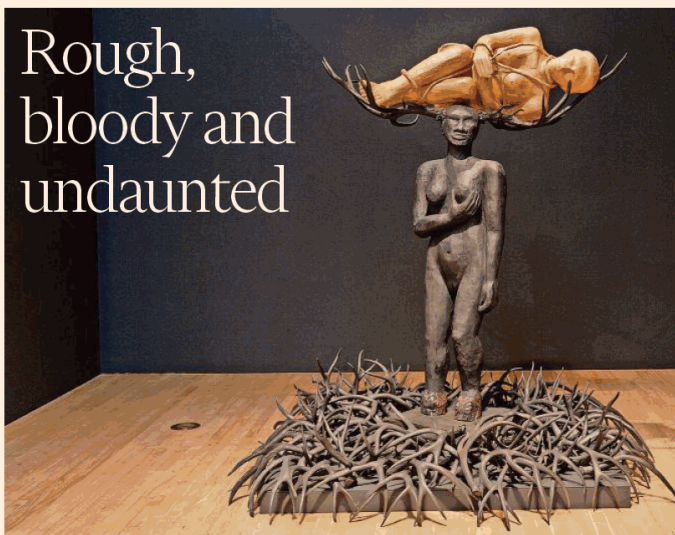
This piece is one of nearly 30 comprising *Of Aether and Earth*, an exhibition offering a bird's-eye view of the intersection of blackness and femininity in Saar's work over the past four decades. Her largest museum survey to date, it spans two Los Angeles County venues, the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College in Claremont and the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena.

Curators Rebecca McGrew and Irene Tsatsos have adroitly employed the bifurcated format to play on dualities. Intermingling myths of ancient Greece with folklore and traditions from Africa and beyond, Saar's work frequently conveys the feeling of straddling two realms. Highlighting the dichotomy between body and soul that runs through her oeuvre, the show's title refers to the five classical elements of ancient Greece: earth, air, fire, water and aether.

It also bears alchemical connotations, suggesting the transmutative nature of her practice of imbuing found objects and historic icons with fresh meanings.

Saar's wide-ranging academic background in art history is evident in her lone figures' stiff poses and simplified forms, which appear as indebted to Greek male *kouros* statues as to stone-carved sculptures by self-taught Southern folk artist William Edmondson – as in "Sea of Serenity" (2007). Her stylised

Rough, bloody and undaunted



Clockwise, from main: Alison Saar's 'Rouse' (2012); 'Sapphire' (1985); 'Inheritance' (2005) (art by Elys-Gambel)

subjects often bring to mind those of Gauguin, but they subvert traditions of the female nude as a passive object of desire: hers represent mettlesome forces of transformation.

In rugged contrast to the smooth, supple flesh fetishised throughout western art history, these women are made of tougher stuff: wood, nails, salvaged metal hammered into *repoussé* low-relief patterns. Scarified, they wear their histories on their bodies, as in "Scar Song" (1989). Contributing to the sober mood, Saar's palette consists mostly of earth tones punctuated by fiery reds and oceanic blues.

Executed on seed sacks and denim, even her paintings are torn, wounded and patched together. Worn but resilient, they recall African American quilts and the male-dominated, utilitarian Ghanaian tradition of painting movie posters on discarded fabrics.

Saar has recalled, how, while growing up in Laurel Canyon, LA, she scavenged cast-off items and made dolls with ornate backstories for her parents to

sell in their booth at the local renaissance pleasure fair (a festival which recreates a historical setting), an activity to which she attributes her work's narrative content.

Doll-like in scale, the earliest work in the exhibition, "Volutions Mummy" (1982), is a centrepiece of the Benton show. The third sculpture she produced shortly after earning her MFA, it represents what the artist, who had previously favoured abstraction, describes as an "epiphany moment" when she adopted figurative as the "most direct way to talk about abstract ideas of the spirit and the unseen".

Presaging the female figures and classical references that have come to define her work, this piece portrays a curvaceous body swaddled in linen scraps that she salvaged from trimmings of 19th-century paintings while working in the restoration studio of her father, ceramicist and conservator Richard Saar. His face, a tiny mosaic, reflects the influence of her mother, assemblage artist Betye Saar.

There is a similarly compelling female figure in "Breath", part of her body of work made between 2015-17 which was inspired by the great Mississippi flood of 1927, Hurricane Katrina of 2005 and the bureaucratic mishandling and malfeasance that exacerbated the plights of black communities in their aftermath. The life-size woman stands alone with a pole on a wooden raft, as though the

gallery floor were inundated with water. A formidable stack of trunks and wash-basins towers atop her head, nearly reaching the ceiling. Undaunted by the deluge and her Atlas-like load, she stands erect and dignified, conveying the sense that she will survive and reach a better destination. She seems just as relevant to more recent scenes from Hurricane Ida and floods in Haiti.

Whereas the Benton's presentation centres on terrestrial and aquatic themes, the work at the Armory is airier and more spiritual, with sculptures featuring dangling figures, balancing acts and feats of propulsion. The subject of "Blonde Dreams" (1997) is suspended from her ankles, bound by Eurocentric beauty ideals that devalue black



women's natural hair. Her long straight mane shimmers with gold leaf, but her body is covered in tar.

Cultures across the globe glamorise superficial signifiers of female fertility even as they compel women to hide more functional reproductive attributes. Challenging this, Saar spotlights the wonder of menstruation and lactation, suggesting that such phenomena might be mystical powers. A creepy lyricism permeates "Undone" (2012), where a girl sits in a levitating chair, clutching the folds of her flowing white gown, whose translucence barely conceals a blood-red branch extending downward, tied with ribbons and bottles.

Nearby, the protagonist of "Brood"

(2008) perches precariously on a stack of wooden children's chairs, staring through her fingers at a fallen pomegranate. A pile of the fruits rots on the floor below; none remain within reach. Enhancing the uneasy atmosphere, her complexion is mottled, and trickles of bloody juice drip down her legs. The artist has said that this sculpture stemmed partly from her own experience with menopause shortly after the birth of her daughter.

Though rooted in highly personal episodes, the situations and themes of Saar's work are timeless and universal. In drawing on myths from a wide range of cultures and eras, the artist succeeds in creating open-ended totems whose social commentaries can evolve to fit new conditions.

This exhibition was conceived before Covid-19 and last year's racial justice protests, but its two newest pieces, both of which focus on cleansing, seem uncannily appropriate for a society seeking to clear its air of infection and injustice alike. In "Hygieia" (2020), a humble charwoman is reimagined as the Greek goddess of hygiene, wielding a silver double-headed broom as a wand. Suffused with a soothing soundtrack of sweeping and dripping, the dimly lit chamber she inhabits evokes a janitor's closet converted into a secret refuge adorned with mysterious bottles and pans.

In addition to her studio practice, Saar is a prolific public sculptor. The Benton has christened its newly constructed building by commissioning a site-specific sculpture, "Imbue" (2020), included in this show. Bathed in an aquamarine patina, it portrays a modern washerwoman as Yemoja, the west African water deity, in the dry landscape of a courtyard. There she will stand indefinitely, perpetually pouring bronze water in symbolic purification of whatever ills may come.

At the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena to December 12, armoryarts.org, and Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College in Claremont to December 19, pomona.edu/museum



"Sea of Serenity" (2007) (art by Elys-Gambel)

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Moved by the experience of moving on

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ought to be used to moving house, having lived in six homes over the past decade. Yet somehow each time I move, I find myself ambushed by what an emotional experience it is to parcel my life into boxes and say goodbye to a place I called home. *Unpacking* is a new game that explores the intimate relationships we develop with the objects in our lives and the melancholy of moving on; this thoughtful puzzle game has proved a surprise hit in recent weeks.

There are no dramatic setpieces in *Unpacking*, no characters, barely even any words. But there is *stuff* in abundance – boxes and boxes of it – and it's your job to take out each object one by one and find a place where it belongs. It's not about ruthlessly pruning possessions, Marie Kondo-style, but rather about caring for them and contemplating their meaning. The game arrives among a series of recent titles that turn activities which many consider unwelcome chores into satisfying puzzle games, but it stands apart when it blossoms into a sensitive meditation on life's transitions.

Each level of *Unpacking* is a new house filled with boxes waiting to be unpacked. These are not simply disconnected scenarios; they tell the story of a single woman's life through the places where she lives over 20 years. We begin in a child's bedroom, and the first objects drawn from the boxes are unsurprising: board games, colouring pencils, football trophies, cuddly toys. Though we never see the owner of these objects, we learn about her through the things she carries with her – art supplies show that she is creatively inclined, a dreidel that she's Jewish, souvenirs from France and Italy indicate a love of travel.

After every object has been unpacked in the child's bedroom, we jump forward in time to the protagonist's next home, a narrow bedroom in a

university dormitory, then later to a shared house where her possessions must jostle for space with the knick-knacks of her flatmates.

You can't help but start to construct a mental picture of this woman and her friends as each character is delicately articulated via their possessions, from the vibrant wigs and mannequins of a costume-making flatmate to the cold, joyless decor of the bad-news-boyfriend the protagonist moves in with next.

All this subtle environmental storytelling would count for little if the game wasn't fun to play, but *Unpacking* provides compelling gameplay over its brief four-hour runtime. The game allows you

'Unpacking' blossoms into a sensitive meditation on life's transitions

a degree of creativity in defining your character by how you place each object – does she keep her pyjamas in the drawer or tucked under the pillow? Is the cuddly toy stationed proudly on the bed or shoved in a cupboard? Yet as the houses get bigger, you must strategically find space for everything using whatever domestic *Tetris* logic is at your disposal. Put an object in an obviously wrong place, like a shoe in the shower, and you won't be able to progress to the next level. Story beats are cleverly woven into

this system: in the boyfriend's bachelor pad, there is no place for our heroine's diploma on the wall so it must be hidden, poignantly, under the bed.

Unpacking understands that there is something inherently satisfying about organising and tidying, especially when there is no manual labour involved. It sits alongside other surprise successes such as *PowerWash Simulator*, with its myriad jet nozzles and types of grime, renovation simulator *House Flipper* and its historical companion *WW2 Rebuilder*, and the smart *Viscera Cleanup Detail*, which asks players to mop up the gore following the kinds of alien battles that are routine in countless action games. These games respond to a rising desire for games which are low-impact and relaxing, a mould *Unpacking* fits snugly with its gorgeous pixel art and soothing synth soundtrack. A player review on gaming platform Steam expresses this colourfully: "*Unpacking* is like sinking into a memory foam mattress after spending a lifetime on a bed of iron."

There is a degree of serendipity to *Unpacking's* success, as Covid-related delays to some of the season's big hitters have opened space for its rise to prominence. This attention is fully deserved, for it is a game of great warmth, intricacy and originality; it's impossible to play it and not reflect on your own passage through various homes and the possessions which together make up a life. It asks us to look at the things we hold dear; those we carry with us, and those we leave behind.



'Unpacking' has proved a surprise hit in recent weeks