

Art

The Incredible Synergy of Toni Morrison and Alison Saar

At Princeton University, *Cycle of Creativity* sets the writer's archive in dialogue with the artist's paintings, prints, and sculptures.



Elaine Velie April 13, 2023



Alison Saar, "Torch Song" (2020), wood, copper, ceiling tin, enamel paint, leather belts, and vintage piano keys, 72 inches x 22 inches x 26 inches (image courtesy Tia Collection)

PRINCETON — At Princeton University, two exhibitions delve into the life and work of Toni Morrison, a professor from 1989 until she stepped into an emeritus role in 2006. When Morrison died in 2019, the school acquired her vast trove of archival materials: typewritten drafts, maps, letters, notes, and research fragments that speak to Morrison's process as a writer and the relationships she cultivated throughout her career. Now, Princeton's Firestone Library is exhibiting around 100 of those documents.

Across the street at a small exhibition space of the Princeton University Art Museum called Art@Bainbridge, curator Mitra Abbaspour takes a different approach to Morrison's archive, setting them in dialogue with Alison Saar's paintings, prints, and sculptures. *Cycle of Creativity: Alison Saar and the Toni Morrison Papers* is on view through July 9.

Morrison and Saar both center the experiences of Black women throughout their bodies of work, but Abbaspour has parsed through Morrison's papers to create more specific thematic connections — exhibiting Morrison's thoughts on music alongside Saar's depictions of musicians, for example, and pairing the author's research on slavery with the artist's depictions of enslaved people.



Saar's "Swing Low (maquette for Harriet Tubman Memorial)" (2007) accompanies Morrison's musings on the meaning of storytelling. (photo Elaine Velie/Hyperallergic)

As Morrison and Saar reflect on the same topic simultaneously, the show uses one form of art to develop the other. This idea highlights a vital piece of Morrison's work — the interrogation of storytelling itself. In the exhibition's first room, a draft of Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech questions the meaning of language and what it means to be a writer.

"The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers," Morrison writes. "Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie." The text accompanies a maquette of Saar's Harlem sculpture of Harriet Tubman, the first public

monument to a Black American woman in New York City. “Swing Low” (2007) interrogates what it means to tell Tubman’s story. How have centuries of lore changed Tubman as a historical figure, and how have tales passed down across generations spoken to something larger than the singular life of Harriet Tubman?

Abbaspour told *Hyperallergic* that she hopes visitors will walk away from the show with an understanding of Morrison’s archive “not as a study as a past” but as a source for new creative expressions, a concept she says carries through to how Saar and Morrison engage with historical subjects.



Saatchi and Saatchi's prints depict people playing and listening to music. From left to right, top to bottom: "Queen of the 88's" (2021); Jitterbug (2019); "Hooch 'n' Haint" (2019); "Hepcat" (2019); "Syncopatin'" (2019); and "Table for Two" (2019), all multi-block linocuts, 19 1/2 inches x 17 13/16 inches (photo Elaine Velie/*Hyperallergic*)

Even though Saar largely depicts figures from the past, she created most of the show's sculptures, prints, and paintings in the last five years. Morrison's work also feels strikingly contemporary. Her 40-year-old reflections do not come across as dated and the ideas she pens are still relevant.

Morrison's manuscripts and drafts are displayed in raised glass cases. Near the front of the exhibition, Saar's "Torch Song" (2020) stands in the center of a small room near an old-fashioned fireplace. The sculpted depiction of a jazz singer is wrapped in decorated tin, creating the appearance of fabric. Saar found the metal, which used to line the ceilings of Harlem homes, in the 1980s when apartments in the neighborhood were being renovated and the old material was brought out onto the streets. In addition to reflecting on the process of gentrification, the tin evokes the lives — and stories — that played out underneath it.



Alison Saar, "White Guise" (2019), color woodcut, relief printing, and shellac-stained paper, hand-tinted iron on mulberry kozo paper, 55 1/2 inches x 27 inches; "Cotton" (2018) from the series *Topsy Turvy*, wood, copper, ceiling tin, bronze, tar, and vintage found tools, 60 inches x inches 148 x 40 inches (© Alison Saar; image courtesy LA Louver Gallery)

The Art@Bainbridge building, an old colonial home built in 1766, is a small outpost of Princeton's general art museum that has seen multiple iterations over the last three centuries. Enslaved individuals once worked in the house and lived on its property. The building is carefully renovated but retains slanting pinewood floors, fireplaces, old trim, and a colonial exterior, constant reminders of its past. The work exhibited inside does not shy away from this history.

In the back, a gallery space showcases the research material Morrison used to develop *Beloved* (1987), her most famous novel and one which directly addresses the legacy of slavery. In this room, three Saar works all feature Black women and girls with cotton tied into their hair. In “White Guise” (2019), the artist has crafted a thin backing for her print. Its floral decals, which are actually cotton plants, make the material look like wallpaper. The life-size depiction of the enslaved woman working in a domestic space, holding a clothing iron, is jarring in the colonial room, which was perhaps once lined with wallpaper, too.

In another space, Saar has curated a soundtrack of Black women singers that plays over the gallery’s speakers, joined by works featuring musicians and dancers. Morrison’s accompanying papers explore the power of music and include lyrics of her own. The display case includes a 1993 letter to composer André Previn and poems that Morrison wrote for her musical collaboration with Previn, *Honey and Rue* (1992).

“First I’ll try love,” Morrison writes in one poem, “Although I’ve never heard the word referred to even whispered to me.”



Alison Saar, "Jitterbug" (2019), multiblock linocut, 19 1/2 x 18 inches; "Syncopatin'" (2019), multiblock linocut, 19 1/2 inches x 18 inches (image courtesy Princeton Museum of Art)

A copy of Morrison's 1974 *New York Times Magazine* story "Rediscovering Black History: It's Like Growing Up Black One More Time" is displayed above the poems. Morrison questions how Black history is discussed and ponders the ways it can be remembered.

"Finally, in this long trek through 300 years of black life, there was joy, which is what I mostly remember," she writes, going on to comment on the importance of music — dancing, togetherness, tunes, and lyrics — in this history. On the gallery's walls, Saar's collection of vibrant prints portrays community spaces in Harlem, all involving music in some form and speaking to Morrison's written ideas about remembering. Just like in the room featuring depictions of enslaved women, it seems that the work of Morrison and Saar was made for each other, filling in the gaps between writing and visual art.



Saar's prints speak to the importance of music. (photo Elaine Velie/Hyperallergic)

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