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Artist Alison Saar On the Making of Her Olympic Sculpture in Paris

Observer caught up with the Los Angeles-based artist in the quiet garden where her work for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, 'Salon,' is installed.

By [Sarah Moroz](#) • 07/03/24 9:43am



Alison Saar's latest work, now installed in Paris, champions inclusivity, optimism and community practices. Henri Garat - City of Paris

Alison Saar comes from a family of artists: her mother is the iconic Betye Saar; her father Richard Saar was a conservator and ceramist. She has referenced Elizabeth Catlett and Kiki Smith as influences, in addition to her parents. Saar knows her way around a public sculpture: Swing Low, her 13-foot-tall Harriet Tubman tribute, lives on a granite pedestal stationed at a traffic island in Harlem. Her latest work likewise champions inclusivity, optimism and community practices: it is the Olympic Sculpture for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, a stark and graceful seated figure installed now in the eighth arrondissement just off the Champs-Élysées. Despite her California roots, the sculpture's materials were all French-sourced and produced under the artist's supervision. Seated on a shaded bench in view of Salon, Observer spoke with Saar about studio practices, family ties and the spark of pride when women run things.

To start: walk me through how you got from conception to this present installation of “Salon”?

The initial proposal was just a singular drawing and some ideas. I developed that further and finally got a go-ahead in September 2023. It's a really short turnaround time for casting stuff because it's a lot of process. Then I came here [to France], made a maquette and met the IOC [International Olympic Committee] and the city of Paris people; they shared concerns about certain things. We looked at the site—at that point [where the statue is] was a planter.

I came back to France from November to December to actually work on the maquette, then we built the models to scale. I brought my daughter with me and we worked together at the foundry for a month. We signed off on everything to be cast; I came back in April to oversee the patina and talk about the shape of the stonework with the stonemason. Then I came back four days ago and it was installed!



Alison Saar working on *Salon*. IOC - Storm Studio 4

What is your relationship to the Olympics? Is it something that you've watched or followed?

No... I mean, I used to do gymnastics, so I would follow gymnastics, but I'm not *sportif* or anything. What I was really interested in was the ideal of promoting humanity and bringing people in from all over the world. There are some really interesting ideas about how these games can function, beyond just the competitions. I was very interested in that.

That's why I made this meeting space—so that all these chairs communicate. We're hoping poets will come and host a poetry slam. I've done other pieces where it's less about the monument than it is about the space it creates. The first one I did was Harriet Tubman in New York City, and it's now become a space where the Women's March would meet, and they do an anniversary for Harriet Tubman there. I wanted this to be a space where people came together.

When talking with the committee, were there any parameters that you had to follow?

The original parameters were ‘let’s not make this so Olympic-centric.’ Like, don’t put rings in it, don’t put the torch in it. But I’d done another piece that had this torch in the hand—not an Olympic torch—with the idea of illumination and a beacon of hope. I did apprehensively think, well, they might not want this flame in her hand, but they seemed to go with it. That was part of my iconography; they didn’t see it as being problematic. And they ended up deciding they wanted the rings after all, so there are rings in the center—which is nice because it marks it as the gift from the Olympics to the city.

In terms of the lines in her skin, I love that chiseled mark. We created her out of wax, and I had someone build the rough structure of it. Then we were able to carve the clay like that. She looks a lot like early Benin bronzes. Of course—it being public sculpture—it had to be made from materials that are durable.

The other thing required was that it had to be made in France: not only to promote French artisans but also to make a minimal green footprint. Initially, that was challenging for me, but I’m very thankful we did it that way. Making this and shipping it here... The time constriction would have been a *nightmare*. So it was great that it only had a four-hour truck ride to come up to the city. We found a really lovely foundry, Fonderie Fusions. It was founded by David de Gourcuff—he then handed it over to his daughter, so his daughter now runs it. I love that it is a woman-run foundry. I’d say 90 percent of the employees are male, but she’s just showing them how it’s done.

I love that!

We stayed in this little farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, which is great, because we got a lot of work done. We looked at other foundries, near Versailles, but it would have meant commuting to and from Paris. It was great to be able to get up, go to the foundry, work and then go home and go to sleep.

Can you talk about how you determined this scale? She feels very accessible. It is a “she,” right?

It is a “she.” She’s very androgynous!

Did you name her?

No, no, she's unnamed.

She feels like someone to sit with—there isn't this overwhelming monumentality.

I've been working with this scale: it's 1.5 human scale. She still has a presence that's bigger but not this kind of insane monument that you need to kowtow to. You can clasp her hand in yours, and it's larger than yours, but it still feels very human-like. Brittney Griner, the basketball player who had been imprisoned—I just love the way she looks, just beautiful and tall and sensuous and really *powerful*. It's not modeled after her face, but it's modeled after her stature. I think she's seven foot something? [ed. Note: She's 6'7"]



Salon is the Olympic Sculpture for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Fred Mauviel - City of Paris

Can you discuss the racial component of the sculpture?

The reason I wanted it to be a person of African descent was that there's a massive population of African descent in France. I feel there aren't very many monuments to them, and France owes a great debt to its many colonized countries, as well as enslavement overseas. I wanted to pay homage to their contribution and this existence in France, in terms of how much money was made off their backs.

Also, I wanted to give people an excuse to come to this neighborhood, which feels very exclusive and very, you know, *riche*. Like, come down here and feel comfortable—feel like you're invited to the table. You have all these chairs. [At the site's inauguration ceremony] Haitian poet Jean d'Amérique read a poem, which I only understood maybe five out of twenty-five words. But it was really beautiful to have someone from a French colony set the tone that this is a space where art and creativity can happen.

Indeed, France is a tricky place in terms of acknowledging its ugly history. Have you had any local conversations about that?

No! I'm just trying to put it out there, to let her exist as such, and those who are aware of it understand that, and maybe it brings awareness to those who aren't aware of it. I know there's a lot of resistance. And in light of the elections, I'm like, Oh my God. I see what we're going through in America reflected here now—and we know how really bad it has gotten in the States. Last week, we did an opening of the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park with the Equal Justice Initiative. I had a piece there; it was the first time I'd gone through the museum. To see the parallels of that history and this history... I think the United States is visibly grappling with it. I don't know if that's happening here so much.

I think the Olympic committee, as the Olympics itself, wants to keep politics out of the games, so I didn't push that or say that, but I think that it can be a space that can function as such.

Is this the first time you've had a sculpture outside the U.S.?

Yes, the first public commission. I've shown in some museums in the Netherlands, but this is the first time I've done anything here in France. Well, I had a print show at a gallery. It was daunting to come and be here for a month and work and not be in my own studio because you don't have the same tools. Now I know it's possible.

What's your studio like?

It's pretty small. I live in Laurel Canyon in Los Angeles, and my studio is about 30 minutes away in the valley. It's maybe 800 square feet, but I like it. I work with two assistants; they come and go depending on the project. The space is 14 feet tall, so 13.5 feet is the tallest I can build. If it's larger than that, usually I can ask the foundry.

Do you have a daily practice, or are you more project-based?

More project-based. At home, I have a two-dimensional drawing/painting studio with a printing press. The sculpting studio gets very dirty with sawdust, so I do 3D stuff in the valley. Sometimes it's seasonal, whichever studio I'm working at. But I get up in the morning, kick around, and I keep a 10-to-5 workday sort of thing.

You come from a legacy artistic family. How do they influence you? Do you have conversations?

When we were just starting out as artists, we'd laugh that it was like the passing of the baton. It still kind of feels like that. Now my daughter's an artist in her own right. She works in clay; she was great at helping with this piece. My father was a ceramicist, so she has picked up his baton. [My sister] Lezley works a lot in assemblage, which is similar to my mother [Betty Saar]'s work. I work in found materials. When we go to flea markets, we're looking out for materials for each other: someone's looking for spoons, for example, or rusty locks. We help each other out in that respect. It's really loving. But it's not so much that we have studio visits with each other or anything. We just show up for each other when we have events and share materials.

I used to help my mother a lot before I became so busy—I used to be her apprentice. And I used to work for my father because he was an art conservator. That’s where I learned a lot of my methods. The nephews and nieces worked for my mother, on and off, depending on what jobs were available to them. [My daughter] Maddy has in turn worked with her grandmother—they all have a hand in supporting her practice.

Are there particular exhibitions you’re excited to see, or have seen, while in Paris?

We went to the [Brancusi](#) show yesterday. I love his work. It was really incredible to see the images at the studio. I understand there are a couple of museums in Paris that have studios.

Institut Giacometti does.

I’ve seen images of it, where it’s jammed full of stuff.

What are your hopes for the sculpture more widely?

I want this to be a space where people convene and interact with the work and an opportunity for poets to share. In September, they’re bringing poets from Los Angeles here. I’m thinking it’d be great to come back and convene with them. Again, having Jean D’Amerique open it initiated the ‘interaction’ aspect of it.

Are there particular poets or figures you would like to invite?

I don’t know *any* French poets. I collaborate a lot with [Evie Shockley](#). I like [Desiree C. Bailey](#)—she’s from Trinidad [and wrote] “What Noise Against the Cane.” We’ve collaborated. The first poet I started working with was [Erica Hunt](#), when I was living in New York, and then I was introduced to [Harriet Mullins](#) by [bell hooks](#) when I first moved to Los Angeles; we’ve been working together on a couple of projects. I really love collaborating with poets.

Is this idea of the “salon” inspired by French history, or do you yourself host things with friends?

We used to do this *massive* Christmas party that ended up being a bit of a salon because we would invite musicians and writers to perform at the party. It was salon-like but ended up being a lot of eating, to be honest. But I love that tradition and the avant-garde coming together to share art. When I wanted to name the piece *Salon*, I wondered: Does that feel too corny or too common? Because the salon is also just a living room. But I love that. It was a space that could be comfortable and familiar, that wasn't pretentious. But the history of the term salon, with Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein... hopefully this will function as such. Although, I don't know if you tried to sit here, in the very hot sun.

I didn't try!

We had to take photos with the president of the Olympics: he and I were sitting next to each other in the sun, and we're kind of like, *Oh, yeah, this is getting a little uncomfortable*. I imagine they'd be quite cold in the winter, too. But actually, a lot of kids have been sitting in her lap. So she's welcoming everyone.

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