

ART



Alison Saar's "Pallor Trick."
(Jeff McLane / L.A. Louver)

With raw elegance, Alison Saar conveys bitter truths

BY LEAH OLLMAN

Alison Saar's work makes a tremendous visceral impression on contact. Its own physical potency, the concise urgency of its forms, acts on the body. Though it needs no verbal scaffolding for support or rationale, titles often help actualize its metaphorical potential.

Consider one small, tabletop sculpture in Saar's engrossing show at L.A. Louver. The standing female figure is 14 inches tall, cast in bronze and loosely covered by a square of sheer white silk, like a handkerchief to be lifted for the big reveal.

Saar named the piece "Pallor Trick," playing on the art of illusion, sleight-of-hand and also conjuring another, more historically freighted aspect of disguise having to do with racial identity: the second (false) white skin attempting to mask the authentic dark body beneath, a variant, perhaps, on passing. Like so many works by Saar, this compact piece has a simple, raw elegance informed by bitter truths.

"Pearly" strikes hard in a different way, inducing a reflexive gasp of unease. The life-size female nude, a strong athletic body with a graphite sheen (a rare black pearl?), hangs overhead by a white cloth knotted to the ceiling and seemingly clenched between her teeth. Her head tilts back and the palm of one hand faces out, the pose a disarming clash of opposites -- the ecstasy of spiritual ascension (toward the pearly gates?) and the torment of lynching.

Saar's inspiration for the sculpture was a black acrobat who performed in Victorian circuses. Degas paid tribute to Mademoiselle LaLa as well in a striking painting highlighting her strength and grace. Saar's homage manages to be both weightless and packed. Suspension -- whether from the ceiling or upon a high perch -- is a device she has used before to equally powerful effect, stripping her characters of solid ground beneath their feet to echo the lack of fixity they endure internally or socially.

Saar, based in L.A., is one of the most significant artists working today. Her sculptures, especially (the show also includes a few drawings), reverberate inward and outward, from the particular and individual to the social and historical, back and forth, with a dynamism belied by their typically stable poses. She folds myth into modern life, and in her work, identity politics become highly personal.

Recently, Saar has been addressing how a woman's sense of self shifts with age, with the phasing out of fertility and the recession of the maternal role. "Slough," the show's title, refers in part to this shedding of old skin, a loss that also carries the promise of growth and renewal. One piece featuring a paper figure enwombed in an old suitcase illustrates this idea with uncharacteristic triteness, a rare off-note.

"Slough" also refers to a swampy mire or a situation that fails to progress. Saar might be pointing to that condition in works that deal with varieties of subjugation, but she appears well able to resist it.

She continues to push into new territory in terms of materials and technique and to build upon foundational themes of passage, fullness and emptiness, sustenance, freedom and restraint. Her work in "Slough" is, as ever, deeply resonant.

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through Oct. 5. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.lalouver.com