

Alison Saar at LA Louver

By ironic coincidence or thoughtful curatorial planning, the Alison Saar exhibition, *Hither*, coincided with Kara Walker's retrospective at the Hammer Museum.

Despite the fact that these two African-American women artists both deal with issues of race and gender, an unfortunate dichotomy exists between their bodies (pun intended) of work. Saar's own mother Betye, a talented and accomplished artist in her own right, has publicly criticized the work of notorious Walker, arguing that her images of black women create amusing characters out of negative stereotypes. For better or worse, Alison Saar's sculpture separates itself from such images of mammies and pickaninnies, opting to model her subjects after African deities. Where Walker uses African history to shock, scare and embarrass its viewers, Saar uses mythology to glorify and celebrate the black, female body. And this recent show is no exception.



Alison Saar, *Sea of Nectar*, 2008, wood, ceiling tin, bronze, tar, 69" x 36" x 31", at LA Louver, Venice.

A reaction to her previous series, *Coup*, which dealt with Saar's desire to break loose from certain aspects of her life, and *Whither*, a group of work concerned with finality, *Hither* follows the physical cycle of a woman, including childbearing and menopause. Here were three life-sized figures, mixed-media-on-paper works and several wall-mounted sculptures. For the sculptural pieces, Saar uses her familiar materials of copper, wood, bronze, tar and ceiling tin whose limited palette of rusty red-brown and pale green-blue (think oxidized copper) maintain an overwhelming organic sensibility.

While Saar may stray from Walkeresque gruesomely sexual aesthetics, she is far from shy. Like her contemporary Kiki Smith, Saar revels in corporeal forms and functions. In *Sea of Nectar*, a life-sized bronze and wood figure squeezes from her breasts milk that transforms into tree branches. In *Lunaseas: Sea of Moisture*, a bronze back sweats glorious raindrops and in the accompanying *Lunaseas: Sea of Fecundity*, a pelvic area sprouts pomegranates.

Saar has done her homework. A former art history student, she models her figures after Persephone and Demeter. At once earthy and ethereal, *Hither* reconsidered issues of the body normally deemed unpleasant as lovely and magical. The outstanding *Brood*, features a fiberglass figure atop a ladder of children's chairs, her mouth and limbs dripping with red liquid. Beneath her perch, crushed overripe pomegranates litter the gallery floor. In a smaller room was the exhibition's eponymous sculpture. Here, a figure with her hands to her mouth (as if calling out) is decorated with delicate, pale moths. Also strewn throughout the room, the moths unite the series, as well as draw you to its centerpiece.

Hither is sensual in the most organic way. Saar's figures are voluptuous, native-looking women who delight in their transformation. Her subjects' bodies echo the fertility (or lack thereof, as the case may be) of the bruised fruits, the withering of the gnarled roots and

branches that now take the place of lactation. But in Saar's vision, the aging process is not something to fear. Rather, it is as natural as the soil from which *Bareroot* has been pulled. Through the artist's eyes, we are able to view these physical changes in a higher realm: The stages of a woman's life are in the context of their equally natural counterparts. Saar's women are as solid as the earth on which they stand, as strong as the roots of her trees, yet as fragile and beautiful as the moths adorning the gallery walls.

—Ashley Tibbitts