

# BETYE SAAR

## What Might Be Over to You Is Far From Over to Me

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Photographed by Guy Lowndes

*You're wandering through the brush, looking for sustenance, the sun beating down on your concave chest. Suddenly an object falls from the empyrean heaven. You cautiously pick up this small vessel, clear as water—but hard—and emblazoned with the characters C O C A C O L A. You come to admire its aesthetics and functionality, and that's a problem because there's only one, and the rest of your tribe has come to admire it too. Swept up in idolatry, you're unaware of the fact that the object of your affection is merely a mortal afterthought.*

This scene, from the Australian film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), was the inspiration for what 87-year-old Los Angeles born artist Betye Saar calls mojo-tech, and the foundation for her views on technology. “It’s an object of magic...they throw away all this ‘over’ stuff and invent something else and it keeps going and going. That’s what the mojo is: the magic technology, mojo-tech.” [Incidentally, following this interview, I was surprised to learn that *The Gods Must Be Crazy* is widely pegged as a slapstick comedy.]

We sit in her studio, inset in the hills of Laurel Canyon, as her pug—not so coincidentally named Miss Mojo—keeps a watchful eye out for an unoccupied hand to perform an obligatory belly rub. Lining the shelves around us are groupings: mini twig furniture, paint-chipped birdcages, and wood figurines. Saar, a recent recipient of MOCA’s Distinguished Women in the Arts award, pulls out a piece, her own *objet magique*: a circuit board stripped bare, reconfigured in an assemblage. “The only thing that I like about technology is some of the components that are used—like the circuit boards—because they just seem too beautiful. They use real gold and real silver because that traps the electricity. That’s how I relate to technology; the components of it and how beautiful they are and what I can visualize with them.”

This leads us to her decision to maintain this lo-fi aesthetic, which is two-pronged: Her own connection to folk and indigenous art has always been ardent. “It has that element...it has that purity to it. Whether you like it or not, there’s a kind of purity to it and that’s what I would like to have my art say. Not every piece says that, but at least from this point on that’s what I would like for it to say. I want to be authentic, and I want my art to be authentic.” Additionally, for Saar, the appeal of art has been to simply forge ahead, popular aesthetics be damned. “I think it was in the ‘80s that it was like, if art is a current, go in the current of what’s new. New stuff keeps coming on and they drop the old stuff. I was never a part of that current; it went against my particular flow. I’m a little river going on the other side and doing what I really love to do.” She says this easily, and yet, in practice, that decision might not be so untroubled.

The dispersal of chemical weapons and a few malignantly placed bullets into similarly tanned adolescents scratches the newly in vogue itch to constantly, relentlessly, sound off. But in Saar’s own work, a divergent pattern has begun to emerge. From this romanticizing of the aboriginal: a muting

of the political. Her work began this rearrangement in the late ‘80s, drifting away from smaller collages: tightly packed with social significance, studies of civil rights, and, more prosaically, everyday aspects of black culture, eventually evolving into physically expansive site-specific work. (Much of which was featured in a significant amount of exhibitions at the Getty initiated Pacific Standard Time in 2011.)

Her latest exhibition, *The Alpha & Omega* (presently housed in a blue-tinted room at Roberts & Tilton in Culver City from September 14<sup>th</sup> through December 14<sup>th</sup>) is larger in scale, though looser in meaning, than her early offerings. The titles of various components in the exhibit (including: “The Challenges of Fate,” “Mystic Window of Sea and Sky”) seem to wrestle with transcendental forces. The room’s centerpiece—an undersized table for two—makes use of an idiosyncratic placement for two of her characteristic assemblages: The clocks sit on opposing chairs, facing each other across a table setting of lit candles. In that positioning their dialogue exists between them, never fully confronting the viewer. “It’s not that [the exhibition] is metaphysical; it still is about inequality, it’s still political, in a way—but it’s kind of mellowed out.” Saar’s tempered take on inequality, though, has only manifested itself aesthetically. “It’s still intense when I look at television. I get really upset with what’s happening in South Africa. I get really upset with what’s happening in some of the Arab countries because there always has to be an underdog who has to be mistreated and then when they finally get their weapons they’re accused of being barbarians. And it’s like, ‘Well wait a minute, they just got tired of being stepped on.’”

Fair enough. So how *does* Saar communicate these feelings? “In my work I just want to say what I feel like saying and then use a certain symbol; I use a little black bird to symbolize Jim Crow and Jim Crow stands for racism. That’s how I do it, it’s kind of in a code. Or maybe I’d use a washboard and that symbolizes labor intensity like the Mammy, or the Aunt Jemima, and chains would symbolize slavery and captivity. So [the meaning] is more in a code now with other kinds of information.” It’s a bold move, this restraint, in a year when racial tensions have again been pulled to the forefront of our smart phones and their empirical tickers.

Fellow artist Miyako Ishiuchi once noted an interest in “the way that time records itself into things and people,” and the near-nonagenarian Saar’s current time-stamped dossier seems telling: *Alpha & Omega* investigates race relations with a light touch. In taking cues from the indigenous art she prefers, Saar invites a sense of spontaneity and ease. It’s a break from heavy analysis, exploring creation for creation’s sake. And this shift, in turn, seems ripe to breed the authenticity she reveres. It becomes clear that maybe Betye Saar is still mad as hell, but she can take it.

As Betye walks me to the door I notice a neon sign above a shelf housing color-coordinated empty bottles, clay figures, and other obscure relics in a range of sizes. The unlit metal and glass feminine script sits in glaring contrast to the analog framework of the artist’s domicile, and I’m tempted to inquire about the meaning of the inscribed adage, the origins of its creation, and how it ended up in its current location. Then it occurs to me that this could be our own-shared Coke bottle, a mundane artifact dropped into the center of my philosophic pondering. I let the moment pass. What the word was I could not tell you because I’ve forgotten, and that’s perhaps for the best.

PHOTOGRAPHER: GUY LOWNDES AT GUYLOWNDES.COM; HAIR: NEEKO FOR TRACEYWATTING.COM; MAKEUP: SAMUEL PAUL FOR JEDROOT.COM.



HAIR: NEEKO  
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"THE GAME OF TIME," (2013). TABLEAU: CHILD'S CHAIR WITH ORANGE FACE CLOCK, METAL TABLE WITH CANDLES, RECTANGULAR CLOCK FACE IN SAND, AND CHILD'S CHAIR WITH GREEN CLOCK. 68 X 30 X 20 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS & TILTON, CULVER CITY. PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER.



"THE ALPHA AND OMEGA," (2013). INSTALLATION VIEW. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS & TILTON, CULVER CITY. PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER.



"OBJECTS, OBSESSIONS, OBLIGATIONS," (2013). SHELF WITH ASSORTED OBJECTS. 49 X 12 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS & TILTON, CULVER CITY. PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER.