

ART

## Betye Saar Washes the Congenial Veneer Off a Sordid History

Saar's work is a poignant depiction of this nation's fraught history of race relations and gender politics, and this exhibition demonstrates the need for more major retrospectives of her.

Zachary Small November 28, 2018



Betye Saar, "Supreme Quality" (1998), mixed media on vintage washboard, metal washtub, wood stand (all photos by author for Hyperallergic)

The washboard assemblages of [Betye Saar](#) are threatening reminders of how seemingly innocuous domestic tasks can become poignant symbols of suppression. Saar has collected these washing machine precursors for almost 60 years, incorporating them into bric-a-brac compositions of salvaged historical memories that recall a similar aesthetic championed by assemblage sculptor [Joseph Cornell](#). An African-American artist with a concern for feminism and social justice, Saar reimagines the washboard as a site of insurrection — a call to arms for the disabused women of color whose hard housework buoyed the lives of their wealthy mistresses.

[Betye Saar: Keepin' It Clean](#), organized by the Craft & Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, is currently presented at the [New York Historical Society \(NHYS\)](#) in tandem with the museum's other exhibition examining the history of racial

discrimination in America: [Black Citizenship in the Age of Jim Crow](#). Focused on the last 30 years of the artist's washboard preoccupation, [Keepin' It Clean](#) presents 22 works that violently rebel against damaging historical constructions of race and gender intent on disenfranchising black women.

Historical trauma has a way of transforming everyday objects into symbols of latent terror. A domestic icon of cleanliness, the washboard's popularization in the 19th-century binds it to two synchronous developments in American history: [Westward expansion under the mantle of manifest destiny](#) and the waning of the [slaveholding South](#). The washboard of the pioneer woman was a symbol of strength, of rugged



"Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines" (2017), mixed media and wood figure on vintage washboard, clock

perseverance in unincorporated territory and fealty to family survival. In contrast, the washboard of the Black woman was a ball and chain that conferred subjugation, a circumstance of housebound slavery. Saar investigates this latter notion while holding the former idea within her peripheral vision.



Installation view of undecorated washboards in *Betye Saar: Keepin' It Clean*

The exhibition begins with a wall of undecorated metal and wooden washboards. Lacking the artistic interventions of Saar, these items look innocent and utilitarian. But the remainder

of *Keepin' It Clean* reinterprets the washboard as the site of simultaneous subjugation and insurrection. These two opposing themes often overlap in Saar's work. She arms mammies with machine guns and stamps her washboards with images of slave ships and lynchings. She carves niches into her readymade sculptures for little bars of soap, a symbol both of domestic work and the desire to wash from history its congenial veneer.

The stamped boat resembles the infamous blueprints of the British slave ship called the Brookes, which carted people from Africa through the middle passage to the American colonies in the 18th century. "A Call to Arms" (1997) takes the international scope of the slave trade into account, referencing Belgium's brutal colonization of the Congo with the greens and reds of the African flag. On the washboard, a message reads: "I've been a victim. The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo. They lynched me in Texas."

Because these words are written directly onto the washboard's undulating surface, reading them is difficult under the museum's harsh lighting. The visual displacement of Saar's message feels intentional — like peering through venetian blinds. There's a sense that the artist wants to prevent us from fully envisaging the brutality she depicts, as if images of lynched bodies hanging from trees and packed slave ships may be so disturbing that full depiction would prevent the viewer's comprehension of the scene.

The system of chattel slavery that took hold in the United States was founded in a similar destruction of human bodies for profit. The mammy caricatures and slave ship imprints are painful reminders that this nation's history of trading Black lives for economic gain extends long after the abolition of slavery. Historians estimate that 40 Africans died for every 100 that successfully reached the New World; that's about 29 percent of the total population traded across the middle passage. And according to



"A Call to Arms" (1997), mixed media on vintage w ashboard

Yale University historian [David Blight](#), the four million slaves held in America by 1860 accounted for some \$3.5 billion, making them the largest single financial asset in the entire US economy, worth more than all manufacturing and railroads combined.



"I'll Bend But I Will Not Break" (1988), mixed media including vintage ironing board, flat iron, chain, w hite bedsheet, w ood clothespins, and rope

If slavery is a dirty business, then who gets things clean? Saar answers that question with a silent shudder. "I'll Bend But I Will Not Break" (1998) and "[A Loss of Innocence](#)" (1998) are two such subdued responses. Created in the same year, both works include pristine white fabric conveying an upsetting message.

"I'll Bend" is a sculptural tableau that overlays the slave ship blueprint onto a similarly shaped ironing board. The backdrop here is a large, rectangular white sheet with the letters "KKK" appliquéd. This piece collapses many of the artist's themes into one image: traditional female labor, the history of slavery, and working-class chores. Of the work, Saar has [previously observed](#) that, "In order [for a Klan member] to wear a clean sheet to a Ku Klux Klan [rally], a black woman had to wash it." The absence of a laundress provides a hint of narrative to the work. The iron looks to have burnt the wooden laundry board, indicating the maid's sudden departure from the scene. Has she abandoned her post in protest, or was she taken away?

By comparison, "A Loss of Innocence" feels more personal. The work depicts a ghostly white christening gown that hangs above a toddler's chair where a small photograph of a baby sits. The chair looks decrepit, faded, and deteriorated. The gown includes a list of derogatory names stitched into its fabric, like "tar baby" and "coon baby." The message here seems obvious: growing up Black requires a person to rapidly mature.

Contemplating this work, I cannot help but envisage Saar's visual art as literature. She joins Eugenia Collier, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison in articulating how the loss of innocence earmarks one's transition from childhood to adulthood. Saar seems deeply engaged with Morrison's writing in particular: Her "Maid-Rite" replaces the mammy's pupils with blue beads — a possible reference to the titular theme of the novel, [The Bluest Eye](#). Through her work, Saar responds to Morrison's protagonist whose quest for

blue eyes — symbols of whiteness — denote the character’s desire to be valued by a society that often discounts Black beauty. “They carved Europe upon our African masks and made us puppets,” Saar writes on her washboard.



“Maid-Rite (Mask Eyes)” (1998), mixed media on vintage washboard

Saar’s success relies on her exceptional ability to reconsider master narratives through revised visualizations of history. She is an artist whose work is political but not overwrought, small but not insignificant, gentle but not pliant. She’s also someone who, despite international recognition, lacks the acclaim she deserves. Although her work is present in virtually every museum collection from LACMA to MoMA, Saar’s last major institutional survey show in the US occurred almost 40 years ago in 1980 at the Studio Museum Harlem. Fortunately, LACMA has announced that it will mount another big exhibition in 2019, called *Betye Saar: Call and Response*. Hopefully that show will expand upon the foundations of *Keepin’ It Clean*, championing Saar as a clear-eyed historian of one of America’s cruelest chapters.

*Betye Saar: Keepin’ It Clean continues through May 27, 2019 at the [New York Historical Society](#) (170 Central Park West, Upper West Side, Manhattan).*

*The exhibition is presented in the Joyce B. Cowin Women’s History Gallery, part of the recently inaugurated Center for Women’s History, the exhibition is organized by the Craft & Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles and coordinated at New-York Historical by Wendy N. E. Ikemoto.*

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