

FONDAZIONE PRADA PRESENTS THE EXHIBITION "BETYE SAAR: UNEASY DANCER" IN MILAN FROM 15 SEPTEMBER 2016 TO 8 JANUARY 2017

Milan, 14 September 2016 – Fondazione Prada presents the exhibition "Uneasy Dancer", a comprehensive survey of work by Betye Saar (Los Angeles, 1926). This exhibition, hosted at the Nord Gallery, opens to the public from 15 September 2016 through 8 January 2017. Curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose, "Betye Saar: Uneasy Dancer" is the first exhibition of the American artist in Italy, and brings together over 80 works including installations, assemblages, collages and sculptures produced between 1966 and 2016.

"Uneasy Dancer" is an expression Betye Saar has used to define both herself and her artistic practice. In her own words, "my work moves in a creative spiral with the concepts of passage, crossroads, death and rebirth, along with the underlying elements of race and gender." This process implies "a stream of consciousness" that explores the ritualized mysticism present in recovering personal stories and iconographies from everyday objects and images. Several key elements lie at the center of her artistic practice: an interest in the metaphysical, the representation of feminine memory, and African-American identity which, in her work, takes on evocative and unusual forms. As Saar has said about her work, "It was really about evolution rather than revolution, about evolving the consciousness in another way and seeing black people as human beings instead of the caricatures or the derogatory images."

Betye Saar's earliest artistic memory was stimulated by the Towers of Simon Rodia in Watts, a suburb of Los Angeles she frequented with her Grandmother in the 1930's. The construction of the Watts Towers, built over a period of 33 years, was decisive in introducing ideas of how found materials embody both the spiritual and technological. After graduating from UCLA with a degree in design, Saar initially worked as a graphic artist before dedicating herself to printmaking, drawing and collage. In the late 1960s, inspired by American Joseph Cornell, Saar's work in mixed media became increasingly three-dimensional, ultimately taking form as assemblages by the end of the decade.

Through her confident usage of found objects, personal memorabilia and derogatory images that evoke denied or distorted narratives, Saar developed a powerful social critique that challenges racial and sexist stereotypes deeply rooted in American culture. In the 1970s, her assemblages began to grow in scale,

ultimately becoming substantial installations and immersive environments that speak to an approach uniting spiritual beliefs and faiths of all kind – from the intimate and the mysterious to the universal - alongside politicized convictions.

Curator Elvira Dyangani Ose notes, “Saar’s works blur boundaries between art and life, between physical and metaphysical. Spirituality in her work, does not only resides in the works with which she addresses her concerns and her knowledge on a myriad of traditions. On the contrary, it is to be found in the artistic exercise of transforming common material in a sort of evocative new imagery, involving the viewer in reminiscent fabulations of the real.”

“Uneasy Dancer” expands holistically on fundamental tenants of Saar’s practice including memory, mysticism and the construction of socio-political identifiers. This is none so much apparent than in the seminal work *The Alpha and the Omega* (2013–2016), a circular environment alluding to the initiatory journey and the experience of human life. This installation was specifically conceived for “Uneasy Dancer”, and will include a number of newly created elements denoting the idea of representing the whole of anything, from beginning to end.

Earlier assemblages involving objects inserted within boxes or suitcases, like *Record for Hattie* (1975) and *Calling Card* (1976), take on a performative dimension even when rendered in an intimate scale. Sculptural floor works utilizing cages, such as *Domestic Life* (2007) and *Rhythm and Blues* (2010), simultaneously represent the physical and metaphorical condition of segregation, and the increased need for resistance and survival. These works specifically reference African-American folklore, combining a political dimension with a spiritual vision that draws on a multiplicity of traditions stemming from Africa, Asia, America and Europe.

The exhibition additionally highlights a series utilizing work tools and elements of domestic life, such as washboards and scales, alongside either found or inherited photographs, as in the works *Mystic Window for Leo* (1966), *The Phrenologer’s Window II* (1966) and *A Call to Arms* (1997). Spanning the length of several decades, these aforementioned works reveal, on one hand, an intimate and autobiographical condition, whilst on the other, allude to an imaginative, fantastical dimension. Saar’s use of photography, treated here as a found object rather than a singular flatness, in works such as *Migration: Africa to America I* (2006) becomes a way to celebrate both the beauty and artifices of femininity.

Throughout her career Saar has engaged with a practice which, in addition to opposing male chauvinist and Euro-centric thinking, supports a humanistic perspective that reconsiders notions of the individual, family, community and society.

The exhibition “Betye Saar: Uneasy Dancer” will be accompanied by an illustrated publication, edited by Fondazione Prada, with essays by the curator Elvira Dyangani Ose and scholars Kellie Jones (Columbia University), Richard J. Powell (Duke University), and Deborah Willis (New York University).

Betye Saar – Biographical notes

Betye Saar received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1949, with graduate studies at California State University at Long Beach, the University of Southern California and California State University at Northridge. She has been awarded honorary doctorate degrees by California College of Arts and Crafts, California Institute of the Arts, Massachusetts College of Art, Otis College of Art and Design, and San Francisco Art Institute. Saar has been the recipient of awards, including but not limited to the the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles Distinguished Women in the Arts Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award Visual Art, California African American Museum, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and two National Endowment for the Arts.

Saar’s work can be found in the permanent collections of more than 60 museums, including Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, to name a few. Saar’s work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; De Domijnen, Sittard, the Netherlands; and Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona. Saar was featured in eight Pacific Standard Time exhibitions, including “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980” at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

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