

Betye Saar

Serious Moonlight

09.09.22 —
22.01.23

49 Nord 6 Est-Frac Lorraine presents the work of the American artist Betye Saar for the first time in France. Born in Los Angeles in 1926, throughout her career Saar has addressed the issues of race and gender both as an artist and activist. Since the 1960s, she has been a pioneer of assemblage

art on the American West Coast, as well as of Black feminist art in the United States. *Serious Moonlight* constitutes a selection of rarely exhibited immersive installations that reveal the evocative power of found objects.

Invoking Black identity and intersectional feminism within a broader West Coast context, these installations offer visitors radical new worlds inspired by ritual and myth. While Saar's intimately scaled assemblages of the 1960s and 1970s are considered today as icons of Black feminist art, the same cannot be said of her monumental installations. These are only now being rediscovered and exhibited for the first time in decades; *Serious Moonlight* was initially presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami before travelling to 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine in autumn 2022 and the Kunstmuseum Luzern (Switzerland) in 2023.

Rich with narrative, Saar's installations are informed by the artist's travels to Haiti, Mexico, and Nigeria during the 1970s. The exhibition highlights works that invoke spirituality, such as the installation *House of Fortune* (1988), which presents an enigmatic scene composed of a gambling table and voodoo flags. *Mojotech* (1987) is a vast altar that brings together a number of symbolic objects in a reflection on the links between magic and technology. *Oasis* (1984) — presented for the first time in three decades — can be interpreted as a shrine that evokes the passage of time and the stages of life. In *Wings of Morning* (1987-92), the viewer is invited to pay tribute to loved ones who have passed away. Taking the



Betye Saar, *Snake in the Heart*, 1987 Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California ; photo Alan Shaffer

↳ Curated by
Stephanie Seidel,
Curator, ICA Miami

↳ Press visit
Wednesday 07.09.22, 10h30
49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine

In the presence
of the curator

form of an altar, the work tells of maternal mourning, while *Gliding into Midnight* (2019) evokes the Middle Passage. The history of the African diaspora has inspired Saar to create these dense and vibrant forms, which have inspired many younger artists. Several solo exhibitions have been devoted to this pioneer of assemblage art, including at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne (2021), the MOMA — Museum of Modern Art in New York (2020) and the LACMA — Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2020).

With *Serious Moonlight*, 49 Nord 6 Est continues its exploration of diasporic visual languages, and the artistic canons and narratives that carry them. Through her accumulations of objects — and the narratives they carry — Betye Saar's practice offers a reflection on the ways in which a collection is assembled and deployed.



Installation view: *Betye Saar: Serious Moonlight* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, Oct 28, 2021 – Apr 17, 2022. Photo: Zachary Balber.

↳ The exhibition is organised by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, in collaboration with 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine, Metz and the Kunstmuseum Luzern.

↳ A monographic catalogue is published for the occasion, with contributions by Sampada Aranke, Edwidge Danticat, Leah Ollman, and Stephanie Seidel.

↳ This exhibition is supported by Étant donnés, a program of the Villa Albertine, FACE Foundation and the Ford Foundation, in partnership with the French Embassy of the United States, the French Ministry of Culture, the French Institute, the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Chanel and ADAGP.

You can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you.

—Claudia Rankine, *Citizen : An American Lyric*

In the 1970s, the idea of art making as ritual took on central prominence in Betye Saar's practice. She started incorporating the form of the altar in her work in 1973, which subsequently expanded into room-size installations. While Saar's assemblages and altar pieces had already incorporated found objects sourced from flea markets and swap meets, those were much smaller in scale and maintained an intimate format. Saar points out that her installations in particular "evolve as ritual" in a process that is as much about her expression and exploration as it is about summoning the audience: "A formula develops, the procedure of gathering the materials/objects, the offering of the materials (art making), the placing (installation) of the materials, and the presentation of the viewer... I am interested in the interplay of concealing and revealing, the layers of reality, and involving the viewer beyond the physical domain."



Installation view: *Betye Saar: Serious Moonlight* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, Oct 28, 2021 – Apr 17, 2022. Photo: Zachary Balber.

For Saar, ritual is an activity that creates and releases energy, with the work as the amalgamation of this energy. Through the repetition of forms and the utilization of symbols, the artist aims to create a connection to something outside or beyond what is tangible or rationally quantifiable, and, more specifically, she does so with the audience in mind.

At the time, Saar was among a number of artists in Los Angeles who were connecting their art making to a practice of ritual, including Houston Conwill, David Hammons, and Senga Nengudi. In Barbara McCullough's filmic essay *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* (1981), which was filmed in 1978 and 1979, these artists reflect and share their personal perspectives on ritual as a symbolic action. In one scene, Hammons slowly

puts together a structure from found rubble and debris on the side of a busy Los Angeles street while describing his interest in rituals: "In order to make an altar you have to perform a ritual." Hammons points out that the most important thing about whatever form he is working on—whether a sculpture or "a doodle or something else"—is the ability of the activity itself to "create energy," as well as "balance and restore energy" through (or to) the objects. He defines this activity as "ritual," describing the latter as "an action word." The film also features Nengudi and her 1978 performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*

that took place under an interstate overpass near the Los Angeles Convention Center. Nengudi remembers the performance served as “an opening ritual to celebrate and christen the area it was in.” Finally, in one of the last scenes, McCullough interviews Saar, who points out that, for her, a ritual or a rite is related to “what feels right” and is something that “comes from your center.” Like Hammons, Saar defines ritual as “the act of making art.”

Extract from *Ritual and Reimagining: The Installations of Betye Saar*, Stephanie Seidel in *Betye Saar, Serious Moonlight*, 2022, published by the ICA, Miami and DelMonico Books, New-York (30 €, available at 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine)



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Horaires
Ma. - Ve. : 14h - 18h
Sa. - Di. : 11h - 19h

Gratuit !

Le Frac est soutenu par
la Région Grand Est et la
Direction Régionale des
Affaires Culturelles Grand Est

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