

Black Enterprise
Betye Saar: Eminently Collectible
 Pamela Hollie
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As a child growing up in the Watts section of Los Angeles during the 1930s, Betye Saar collected bits of glass and stones from her backyard. "I saved shells from the beach," the petite 52-year-old artist recalls. Now these items plus beads, old photographs, antique memorabilia, religious artifacts, and other "found" materials compose some of the most collectible artwork of the decade.

Saar's ritualistic altars, collages, and assemblages are at once startling and soothing. They seem strange but as familiar as rummaging through the attic of one's childhood home. Such qualities have

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earned her a national reputation and prestige for what one critic called "brilliant connections between primitive ritual and urban consciousness."

As an investment, some of Saar's work, especially the ritual altars constructed from one-of-a-kind objects, have appreciated along with her growing reputation. These altarpieces, which express Saar's fascination with mysticism and the occult, now sell for more than \$2,000-\$7,000 each and are climbing at a rate of more than \$500 a year. Smaller pieces, in the \$100 range, have appreciated more slowly but may later prove to be better investments because many of them are autobiographical and contain some of Saar's personal effects. Some of her most engaging works are those in which she reproduces old family photographs on handkerchiefs, some that belonged to her great aunt Hattie, who died in 1975.

Miss Saar, who was trained as a designer and teaches fine art at Parsons/Otis Institute in Los Angeles, is also known for her political art, including an angry series called "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima." It makes a powerful statement about derogatory black images. Some of this art, produced in the early 1970s in response to Saar's anger after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., was a good investment for those who bought it five years ago. Now, these pieces are hard to find and cost more than four times their original price.

In 1978, Saar was the subject of a half-hour television documentary called "Spirit Catcher—the Art of Betye Saar." Now,

amidst the dazzling clutter of her Laurel Canyon home, which is filled with Indonesian puppets, Japanese pillows, African figures, and family photos, Saar says she is concerned that it will be many years before black art is recognized as a good investment. In her best year, she made only \$13,000 from her art.

"Black people must make a commitment to their artists. There are too few of us who survive," she says. "I always hope that people buy my work because they like it. I create art for those with feeling," she says. "If you like the art you buy, it will be worth something."



"Shinta," 1977