

A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication
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Saar Explores Interior Space

By Susan Pettit

"I like to break the rules about what is precious and not precious," artist Betye Saar says of the eclectic materials which populate both her small boxed assemblages and her room-sized installations. Her assemblages are currently on exhibit at The Temporary Contemporary through Oct. 6; *Oasis*, an environmental installation, will commence a three-month run Oct. 19.

Aged family photographs, heirlooms, souvenirs, found objects, spiritual/cultural artifacts and discards that have outlived their intended usefulness are ordered into compositions that explore and express the artist's perceptions of herself and her world.

"Recycling junk is a way of showing that you can make art out of anything," Saar said during a recent interview in her Laurel Canyon home. "There's power in the changing uses of a material, another kind of energy that is released. I am attracted to things because they have multiple meanings. Dreams are like that, full of puns, double meanings."

Intuition Important

Saar lets her compositions evolve spontaneously. "Intuition is the most important level of consciousness. The intellect can come later. You do it, and *then* you find a vocabulary for it."

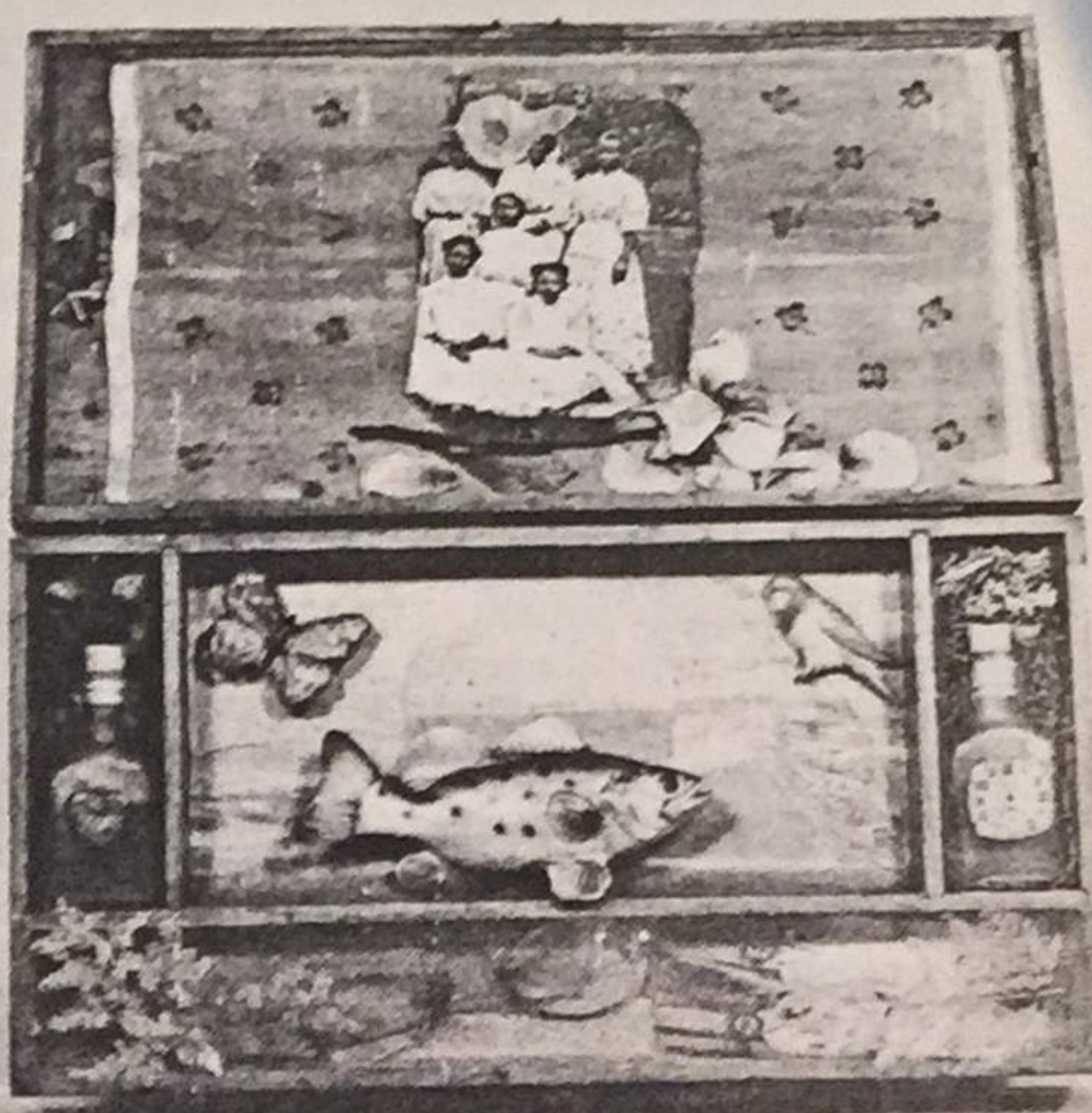


'Recycling junk is a way of showing that you can make art out of anything . . . There's power in the changing uses of a material, another kind of energy that is released.'

—Betye Saar

As an art and design teacher at UCLA and the Otis Art Institute, Saar tells her students, "Let the painting tell *you* a story as you work. Judgments about it can come later. You can always go back and make corrections or changes.

"My rule of thumb is this: the logical side will lie to you. But the intuitive side, your heart, your feelings, will be honest and true."



Found objects—a pair of old spectacles, dried rose petals, a ceramic fish, a Xeroxed copy of an old photo—are reassembled by In Context artist Betye Saar to evoke *Lost Summer* (1976), on view until Oct. 6 in the small brick building at 165 N. Central across from the T.C. ticket booth. Lezley Saar

Relief from Boredom

Saar calls her installation for MOCA's *In Context* series *Oasis*. The title refers "to the second definition in the dictionary. The first definition says 'a fertile or green area in a desert region, usually having a spring or well.' The second says 'something providing relief from a boring routine.' That's the meaning I want."

Oasis will be located in The Temporary Contemporary's small brick building at 165 N. Central. *Oasis* is "only the fourth or fifth installation (large-scale versions of smaller pieces) that I've done," she says. "The expanded scale is part of the fun. In the installations, the viewer becomes part of the assemblage."

The materials she will use in *Oasis* "may change because my ideas change, but I want to use something from nature—sand, perhaps, or peanuts, lots of peanuts covering the floor if that won't be too messy—and something I've made, a piece of furniture like my altar pieces, perhaps." In addition, she may employ a glass blower to create water-filled glass balls for the composition.

Work Is Intimate

"And there will be things on the walls, found objects," she notes, her hands smoothing the walls of a room that only she can see. "My work is small and intimate. Installations are interesting because they are also small and intimate.

"The more autobiographical my work becomes, the more cryptic the images. I do want to put in something autobiographical, a hand print or perhaps a shadow—something about me, so I'm there but not there."

Since the late 1960s, Saar's work has moved from social and political statements to exploration of her personal heritage and beliefs and currently to an examination of her own interior spaces. "It helps to think

of my work in terms of a spiral instead of a straight line," she says. "My work is still political, but more subtle. The subversive is powerful."

Family Supportive

A native of Los Angeles, Saar is the oldest of five children. She describes her family as "close and supportive." Her mother was a seamstress who encouraged her children to engage in creative activities. "We were always making things," Saar recalls.

She studied design at UCLA in the late 1960s, then married and raised three daughters. After her divorce in 1969, she returned to work as a costume designer. She also began to devote more time to her art and received a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1974.

"I never took myself seriously as an artist," Saar says. "Blacks and other minorities were not encouraged in the arts. I'm not a joiner. But during the women's movement in the early '70s, I was asked to be part of *Womanspace* (the first West Coast center for women's art), to be on the board. I got a lot of support from that, met a lot of other women in the arts. It changed my viewpoint about being an artist. It all came together then—women, the black movement, artists.

"I think it's much easier now for women and minorities," she observes. "I'm not affected by what goes on in the established art world. I'm very busy in the exhibition world, in alternative spaces where attitudes are totally different. It's not elitist, it's supportive and more on a feeling level than a commercial level!"