

[WOMEN BY WOMEN \(HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/WOMEN-BY-WOMEN/\)](https://bombmagazine.org/series/women-by-women/)

Alison Saar by Melissa Joseph

Finding the stories in materials.

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Alison Saar, *Feral Son*, ca. 1980, mixed media, 27 x 37 x 4 inches. © Alison Saar.

Speaking to Alison Saar is soothing. We are living in the same world, but she does so with a steadiness inaccessible to me. She feels moored to something greater than herself, which gives her the freedom to float through uncertainty knowing she will not be lost. There are many words for this “something”: *purpose, spirituality, vocation, wisdom, ancestors, salvation*. I am not too concerned with which one it might be as much as I am with the connection it fosters between Saar and everything/everyone else. Her works often incorporate fibers, hair, rope—literal tethers. But even without them, we would feel connected to her figures and their stories. It is her gift: to be a transmitter. As Christina Sharpe beautifully stated in her catalogue essay for Saar’s show at the Benton Museum in 2021, “Saar salvages the uncanny presence of something marvelous that is in the wrong place.” Luckily for us, she is able to restore them to their right places, and in doing so throws us a buoy while we seek our own anchors.

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Melissa Joseph

Congratulations on recently being awarded the Driskell Prize!

Alison Saar

It’s an honor, especially because I knew David Driskell and admired him for his work as an artist, as a historian, and for his generosity to so many other artists. So it’s personally very meaningful to be receiving this. Having lost him a couple years back, it’s pretty special.

MJ

I am so happy for you. Are there pivotal moments or people that led you here?

AS

Outside of my parents, I would have to say Dr. Samella Lewis. She was a peer of David Driskell’s, and she was doing what he was doing—promoting Black artists and art of Africa—but on the West Coast. She was instrumental in getting my mother’s work out there early on. My father did conservation for her and suggested I go to Scripps College and study with her. It really opened doors for me. She exposed me to Black, self-taught artists and instruction in African art that helped formulate what my art became. Similar to David, she was an astounding artist, scholar, and historian, and she was out there tirelessly fighting for artists and museums.

MJ

You mentioned your father was a conservator; I read that you used to work with him.

AS

Yeah, my father had a conservation business, and we worked for him after school. “We”

being myself and my two sisters. Initially I was just sweeping the floor and cleaning brushes until he gradually trusted us with more stuff. I wouldn't say I have full-on chops, but I'm pretty good at retouching and pretty good at cleaning paintings.



Installation view of *Alison Saar: Sweet Life*, 2025. Galerie Lelong, Paris. Photo © Galerie Lelong.

MJ

What was it like growing up in a family of artists?

AS

You're constantly exposed to art. My father was classically trained in Western art, and my mother was interested in non-Western art and alternative art from cultures around the world. It was like she filled in all the spaces that Western art educations leave out. My sister Leslie is also an artist, and my sister Tracy is an artist, but mainly works with my mother's affairs.

MJ

Did you feel you had a different upbringing than your friends?

AS

It was just what we did. We went to openings and hung around artists all our lives. You

don't always appreciate it at the time, just like my children didn't appreciate it when they were young and being dragged to openings. But they're both artists now, so there you go.

MJ

Sounds like a strong genetic line. You work in many different mediums. What is your relationship to the different disciplines?

AS

I started out as a sculptor because I'm very physical with my work and love making things with my hands. When I was ten or eleven, I made dolls to sell at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire. It was kind of like *Bridgerton* because they were Black kings and queens in Renaissance garb. They all had a story, and I think that got me into having narratives behind all my pieces.

MJ

I love that.

AS

Even though I have a master's in art, I didn't take sculpture classes as an undergrad, so I taught myself how to do a lot of things. I had to rely on technologies that were easily accessible. With printmaking, woodcuts were easy because all you needed was a board and a couple of chisels, which my father gave me early on. You can hand-rub it, so you don't need to press. Much of my material came off the streets. When I was working at the Studio Museum in Harlem, I would find all this great ceiling tin on the street from the Harlem Renaissance. I used to think about all the things this material had witnessed. It had a little juju thing embedded in the material along with the layers of grime, and dirt, and maybe fish-fry grease; there was an essence of what it had experienced. I was interested in materials being part of the content and the story.

MJ

I feel that way too. I believe the stories of those who engaged with the objects are part of them.

AS

When you're finding stuff on the streets, do you sometimes turn a corner and go a different way home, knowing that you're going to find something?

MJ

Great question! Does that happen to you?

AS

I feel like I'm guided in some weird way. I remember needing a door for some piece, and I was walking home from my studio in Brooklyn, and I said, Oh, I think I need to go down this street, and there was a door just sitting on the curb.

MJ

Are you kidding?

AS

I think stuff calls, and you have to just listen.



Installation view of *Alison Saar: Sweet Life*, 2025. Galerie Lelong, Paris. Photo © Galerie Lelong.

MJ

You have an exciting project coming up at the Obama Center in Chicago.

AS

Yes, that's been in the works for eight years or so.

MJ

Oh, my gosh, eight years?!

AS

Well, I haven't physically been working on it for that long, but it's gone through many iterations. These things take a long time. It's going to be an amazing space and collection to be part of.

MJ

I've seen the lineup, and it truly is. Did they give you a specific theme, or were you given free creative rein?

AS

I made a few proposals; they chose one out of three, and then we refined it.

MJ

Do you have a personal connection to Chicago?

AS

This will be my fourth piece of public art in Chicago, and I had an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art with my mother, but I haven't spent a lot of time in Chicago.

MJ

I would call four public artworks a pretty serious relationship. You had a show in Paris last year too.

AS

Yeah, my first solo exhibition at Galerie Lelong in Paris. It felt a little daunting being a newcomer, like I was starting all over again; but it was fun, and we got to go and take the family and have a great time in Paris.

MJ

Tell me about the show.

AS

The title of the show was *Sweet Life*, and it was about sugar production and how France was built on the money coming from sugar plantations—and the idea of something being sweet and delectable, and then the horrible, dark, bloody history behind the production. My grandfather's family comes from New Orleans, and I wanted to connect my work through France's history with the enslavement of Africans. Because that work becomes too heavy, I needed to come up for air every once in a while, especially now when you can't open a newspaper without major bad news hitting you on the head. So I did a small group of pieces about the joy of being at home with my family and watching them play dominoes. It was all about being sassy and slapping the tiles down. The language and the rapport between people playing was incredible, and powerful, and full of love, even though people were cussing at each other.



Installation view of Alison Saar, *Fall*, 2011, bronze. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. Photo by Kimberly Davis. Courtesy of L. A. Louver, Venice, California. © Alison Saar.

MJ

I'm glad you mentioned heaviness. How are you coping with current events?

AS

What's really excruciating is to see all the work that my grandmother's and mother's generations, all the protests for equal rights, all these gains we've made in the last fifty years, day by day, being dismantled. I find it hard to fathom the backwardness and the hate behind it.

MJ

And the short-sightedness. I always thought art was important as a vehicle for social change, or to be in touch with spirituality or a greater purpose. But in this moment, I don't feel particularly inspired.

AS

I think as artists we are fortunate that we can do our work regardless. We've always felt insulated and that we can work on our own, but you see now that institutions are now being forced to—

MJ

—censor, like with Amy Sherald.

AS

Yes, and curators are being fired. We should be talking about the real history of this country. How it is being completely whitewashed is scary. It's going to be an interesting time. If you look at the art coming out of Europe during World War II, there was a freedom; people weren't making work to conform to anything. They're not being supported or embraced, so they just make whatever the hell they want. My hope is that in all this darkness, artists will be freed of feeling like we have to make art for the market, even though none of us want to admit that we do that. I'm hoping that this will just give us time and space to talk about things we feel are important.

"We should be talking about the real history of this country. How it is being completely whitewashed is scary."

— Alison Saar

MJ

I hope so too, and maybe a chance to rebuild in a more authentic way. I think a lot of what had been happening regarding diversity in institutions was largely optics.

AS

Something's got to give. We'll see if things have to get really dark before the dawn comes. I hope we start seeing the light.

Alison Saar's work can be seen in the exhibition Shifting Landscapes (<https://whitney.org/exhibitions/shifting-landscapes>) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City until January 25.