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Rochester Contemporary Art Center features exhibit of Alison Saar art

Artist Alison Saar's work reflects her richly diverse background

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Los Angeles artist Alison Saar is obsessed with finding her roots — sometimes in very unexpected places.

Roots, tendrils and even pomegranates sprout from her fiercely individual sculptures and prints at Rochester Contemporary Art Center.

Dangling from a female torso, they might symbolize fertility. Trailing behind a statue of Harriet Tubman, they represent uprooted slaves. In other pieces, they suggest Saar's own richly diverse background.

Her mother, artist Betye Saar, has Irish, African and American-Indian ancestry. Her father, the late conservator Richard Saar, was German American. Ethnic identity remains a highly charged issue for Alison Saar and infuses much of her work.

"Growing up in Laurel Canyon (Calif.), I was living two lives," she recalls. "In grade school, I was always considered white. At home, I was drawn strongly to African-American culinary traditions and music.

"In my teens, I spent a lot of time finding out where I belonged, hanging out with other 'mongrels' in my high school. Now those ethnic boundaries are less rigid for me and also, I think, for a lot of other Americans."

She soaked up both Western and Chinese art in her father's Los Angeles studio, where she washed paintbrushes and swept floors while learning his restoration techniques. By 18, she was moonlighting as a conservator in the prestigious Jan Baum Gallery, where she came to appreciate African and contemporary sculpture.

She stayed in California to earn art degrees from Scripps College and Otis College of Art and Design, then moved to Harlem in 1983 as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum. Since then she has shown her work at leading museums nationwide.

For her first local exhibit, Rochester Contemporary has chosen nine of her sculptures and 16 works on paper.

"It was very important to have a cross-media show showing her different strengths," says curator Deborah Ronnen, a local fine art dealer.

Although several strong woodcut prints are on view, Saar's dramatic sculptures literally stop you in your tracks. Don't trip over the floor-mounted female figure with roots growing from her feet. Nearby statues are covered with sculpted moths, teardrops or miniature faces. Many pack a surreal punch with their highly personal meanings.

The woman with roots, for instance, is curled into a fetal position.

"She's in limbo and waiting for rebirth," says Saar, 52, who was visiting the exhibit last weekend. "You can see from her broken roots that she's been yanked out of the earth."

Her art often shows powerful female forms with masklike faces recalling African art. Moody colors help pull in the viewer. The prints glow with bruised reds, burnt orange and overcast grays and blues.

But Saar's most striking innovation is the way she constructs her sculptures. She carves them from wood, which she covers with tin ceiling panels. Nailheads show through the metal patchwork, resembling skin grafts applied by an artsy plastic surgeon.

Since her student days, she has enjoyed using found or recycled materials for these creations. A veteran Dumpster diver, she salvaged wood beams and metal from urban renovations.

"But there aren't as many Dumpsters available now in Los Angeles," she says. "And I'm not as handy using chain saws as I used to be. So I'm exploring new material — doing more casting in bronze and tinkering with Fiberglas."

She also relies more heavily on assistants, including her 18-year-old son, Kyle.

"My small studio is somewhere between a quilting bee and a chain gang," she says.

Her most important recent project is a 13-foot-tall statue of Harriet Tubman, installed last fall on a Harlem traffic island. Its powerful symbolism is evident in the bronze model displayed at Rochester Contemporary.

"She was a formidable force no one could stop," says Saar, who portrays Tubman as the defiant soul of the Underground Railroad.

The Auburn abolitionist strides forward, her petticoats poking out like a steam locomotive's cowcatcher. Images of broken shackles and the faces of black fugitives adorn her dress. And long roots trail behind her, representing slaves torn from their heritage.

"This is a very important piece for our exhibit," says Bleu Cease, executive director of Rochester Contemporary. "Rochester has such strong connections to abolitionism with Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony."

After next month's formal unveiling of the Tubman statue, Saar hopes to fly to Ireland to explore that branch of her family tree. But it doesn't mean she'll be sculpting leprechauns next year instead of ultra-fertile Earth mothers.

"I always come back to what I understand, really," she says. "That's what it has to be for me."

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