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ART

ART REVIEW: Alison Saar

By Rebecca Rafferty On May. 7th, 2008

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When artists create visual examinations of universal experiences in human life, they are still operating from an individual perspective. The precarious task of communicating something that is common, but experienced differently from person to person - and culture to culture - leaves the artist in a vulnerable place. Will the personal aspect make any sense to others? Is it interesting to them? With her strong philosophical capacity, Alison Saar has developed a symbolic vocabulary that explores her personal reflection on these universals in a profoundly accessible and complete way. Saar spoke about her work at the Memorial Art Gallery this past weekend, and Rochester Contemporary Art Center is hosting a showing of her work this month.

Saar's show at Rochester Contemporary consists of sculptures and prints that explore themes of gender and racial identity, the fear of madness, and the struggle with aging. She calls her prints "post-studies" - they were created after the sculptures and allow her to further examine the possible meanings of the concepts explored in the 3D pieces. Saar has constructed a visual language that is informed by both historic and personal symbolism, the depth of which is ever-expanding. While some artists fear the loss of control over interpretation of their work, Saar acknowledges that the complicated nature of the symbols she chooses is still revealing itself to her in ever shifting connotations.

Favorite imagery includes moths (madness), pomegranates (fertility), and hair, which signifies a person's dreams and aspirations, and also the struggle of developing identity. As a biracial woman, Saar has felt the strain of both personal and cultural identity wars, and her art draws from a wealth of personal experience. The child of famous artist Betye Saar and art conservationist Richard Saar, she is well versed in both technique and art history. Her work marries artistic skill with multicultural references and reveals sympathy for the harshness of reality and passion for the enigmatic draw of the mythic.

As visitors enter the gallery, they are confronted with a larger-than-life head, resting on its side atop a pedestal. "J'attends," a mixed-media sculpture of painted copper and tin nailed to a carved wooden head, examines outer composure and inner turbulence. By cutting holes where the eyes would be, Saar challenges viewers to peer inside the woman's head, where they find a swarm of moths, frozen in a fluttering stance around a light bulb. To Saar, the moths indicate insanity and self-destruction; as they are inexplicably drawn to the flame, they create a "frantic, kinetic movement within her mind" (according to her talk at the Memorial Art Gallery), which contradicts the exterior calm.

The moths are repeated in "Lunaseas: Sea of Serenity," one of the sculptures and drawings in the "Lunaseas" series. The sly wordplay is intentional, and the works are named for the spaces on the moon that Galileo thought to be seas. This discrepancy between individual interpretation and reality influenced Saar's work. In "Lunaseas: Sea of Fecundity," a bronze female abdomen sprouts fallopian branches ending in erupted pomegranate fruit. In her talk at the MAG, Saar spoke about the mix of anxiety and pride as she moves out of the reproductive stage of life, while her teenaged daughter enters hers.

"Blood/Sweat/Tears" is a life-sized figure of a seemingly defeated woman caving into herself. She stands covering her face with her hands, her shrinking shoulders turned inward to cradle a sunken chest, and sculpted drops of liquid cover her body. Though Saar's renderings of the human form and features often nod to the art of ancient cultures, her attention to the emotional nuance in gesture is extremely well developed. Made of wood, copper, ceiling tin, tar, and paint, Saar uses the patterns on the tin to give the skin a sort of scarified appearance, and comment on the wear that both age and experience have on a body. The source of the materials is also conceptually critical - she obtains much of the wood and ceiling tin used from domestic sites, and at the MAG she revealed that she likes the idea of the supplies having "former lives" and carrying the "histories of what they've witnessed".

Many of Saar's pieces deal with complexities of experience, often manifesting in duality. In "Tango," a large-scale print, two women struggle in a tug-of-war using their hair, which is tied together between them. The simple image indicates the "combating two aspects of the self" in which there is "no escaping each other."

Toward the back of the gallery, viewers follow a curve in the wall to arrive in a small circular room where a television plays a brief but hugely informative video on Saar's piece "Swing Low." The 13' bronze sculpture, which was installed in Harlem, presents Harriet Tubman as an "unstoppable train," doing things that were "unfathomable for a female at that time, and expressly a female of color." Sculpted into Tubman's "cattle-catcher" skirt are faces representing slaves she helped achieve freedom, broken chains, and other objects carried or shed by her "passengers." The back of her skirt pulls a trail of roots, indicating her "uprooting of slavery," as well as the family and friends lost by individuals seeking an entirely new life. Outside of the circle room is a small bronze maquette of the sculpture.

Whether based on tensions in personal experience or historical events, Alison Saar's art meditates on human vulnerability and celebrates human resilience. She seeks to create a "preservation of conscience" in examining and sharing these complicated topics and cultural rifts. Showing this nature of work is an act of trust that the audience will, if not relate directly, at least learn something about how these universal themes are experienced by someone different from themselves.

Alison Saar

Through June 1

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

Wednesday-Sunday 1-5 p.m.