Alison Saar: The Nature of Us  
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Alison Saar works mainly in sculpture and prints, most often with a focus upon a female figure or reference. She grapples with motherhood, the role of women, the intensity of their hearts, and their embodiment as nature and its forces. This exhibition of recent work mounted at the Harvey B. Gantt Center provides glimpse of these themes.

Saar has a more than three-decade career as an artist from a family of artists. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and her permanent site sculptures can be found from Los Angeles to New York. She is represented by the prestigious LA Louver Gallery in Venice, California which has been a generous collaborator in the mounting of this exhibition.

Saar’s work comes down to us from elevated mounting, and rises from the ground like virtual rootscapes. Folklore and African American cultural references animate works like the three disembodied hearts seeming to stride across the floor on vein-like/root-like legs in her Hankerin’ Heart series. Their folksy titles indicate attitudes of each heart’s journey: Gimpy, Hincty, and Mosey. Does the heart and its intentions live on after we are gone? Do hearts have minds of their own?

Undone soars 12 or 13 feet in the air; a woman sitting on a birthing chair with a long, gauzy skirt touching the floor. Beneath the skirt we see what appear to be her entrails or a form of afterbirth hanging below. If we move closer, we find that what hangs down is a form of bottle tree, a reference to that African American cultural phenomenon found in the South in front of meager dwellings to ward off bad spirits, attracting and capturing them by the gleam of the glass.
Saar has said, “I’m interested in incorporating very ancient religions into contemporary imagery and ideas, keeping the ancient ideas alive so that they can serve a very useful purpose in everyday life.” Bottle trees are improvisations upon Central African BaKongo practices and are associated with Black folk practices. Eudora Welty photographed one in Mississippi in the 1930s for a WPA project. Bottle trees, according to oral and written histories as early as 1776, come from Kongo practices and have been found in the Caribbean and across the deep South from Texas to South Carolina. Southern writer Eudora Welty photographed some in Mississippi during her time working for the WPA in the 1930s and 1940s.

The glass of bottles glitter and in Kongo traditions, as Robert Farris Thompson has written, the “intimation of glory in glittering objects and the embedding of spirit therein become a spiritual fundamental in the making of African-American charms.”¹ Thompson continues, saying that taking mirrors of glass from the home of a dead person in Kongo and in coastal Georgia, and using them embedded in the headstone or on the grave, “holds the spirit at a safe distance from the living.”

The umbilical bottle tree branch of Undone pulls from Kongo ideas and cultural remnants transposed into African American settings, but we might also explore Yoruba ideas of the womb as a spiritual portal giving women intimate contact with spiritual powers; an access unavailable to men. The womb is the threshold for spirits to enter this realm from the other.

Saar has used the bottle tree to transpose the hair of African American women into a metaphysical discourse in works such as *Delta Doo* and *Compton Nocturne*. She created a wonderful print version of *Delta Doo*, included in this exhibition.

The face of the figure in Undone is a dark, almost cobalt, blue, perhaps echoing Matisse’s *Blue Nude*, perhaps implying the long presence of indigo in African and African American histories. Indigo is the dye of choice in the traditional Yoruba practice of resist-dye *adire* cloth, often associated with Yoruba female orisha like *Oshun* (a riverine goddess) and *Olokun* (god of the sea), and is made by women.²

The implications and references in this work, as with most of the work in this exhibition, are deep, cultural, and extensive. Often they reflect back to the lives of women, particularly African American women, and intertwine with larger, symbolic ideas of feminine principles, motherhood, and nature. Male figures occasionally appear in her work and *Smokin’ Papa Chaud* offers a wonderful example.

Though figures like *Compton Nocturne* are presented nude, as are the majority of Saar’s figures, their nudity is more ritual than actual. The subjects are more archetypes and expressive tropes than classic Western reclining nudes like Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1539) or Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ famed *Grand Odalisque* (1814). Saar’s nudes are even removed from the sense of nudity in Picasso’s iconic cubist painting, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), and align more with Renée Stout’s signature, *Festish No. 2* (1988); a self-portrait as

² Indigo-dyed cloth has histories in Mali and Senegal and goes back to early Dogon practices in the 11th century.
ritual object when she presented herself as a Kongo *nkisi nkondi* object. (The nail figures from Kongo are nkisi nkondi objects.)

Alison Saar is one of the great contemporary artists operating in the United States today. She evokes ancestors, African cultural traditions, the contemporary experiences of women – the significance of their hair – as well as the tropes of women and nature. She uses nature as metaphor in imagined intersections with the female body.

Artists like Saar exert what Okwui Enwezor calls “The Diasporic Imagination.” Enwezor writes of the challenges of “how to build a cultural identity in the traumatic site of the New World and how to negotiate and bridge the gap between the subjugated memory of the African cultures and a dominant European model shaped by slavery.” Africans and their descendants also negotiated the incongruences of shifting from “a racialized self to a cultural self, a change of both cultural content and context.” They used charms, rituals, African spirits and religious formulae to gerrymander a new eschatology and epistemological frame and relationship to their new lands. Artists use this new cultural topology and experiences within it to ground their work; to root it beneath the superficial substrata of art worlds, art histories, styles, and popular culture.

Alison Saar, in her art, often works with female nudes in recognition of the female body as a site of identity formation. They allude to the metaphysical imperatives of women as the conduit for spiritual entrée into the world through birth, but also as manipulators of the

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4 Enwezor, pp 67-68.
unseen; the intuitive and relational aspects of being are given emphasis. With *Undone*, Alison Saar has expressed the universal within the specifics of African diaspora culture. The work is art, crossroads, nexus, charm, shrine or altar, and a statement that birth invites spirits into a cultural environment that will inform their journey through the four moments of the sun. For the uninitiated it might do artistic, aesthetic work only. These are not liturgical or ritual objects, but as art, we can excavate the cultural ideas mentioned here as a part of the frame within which the work sits. And struts. It speaks of art and personal histories and the lives of women, but also it whispers of sanctuaries and secrets and collective privacy to those who know.