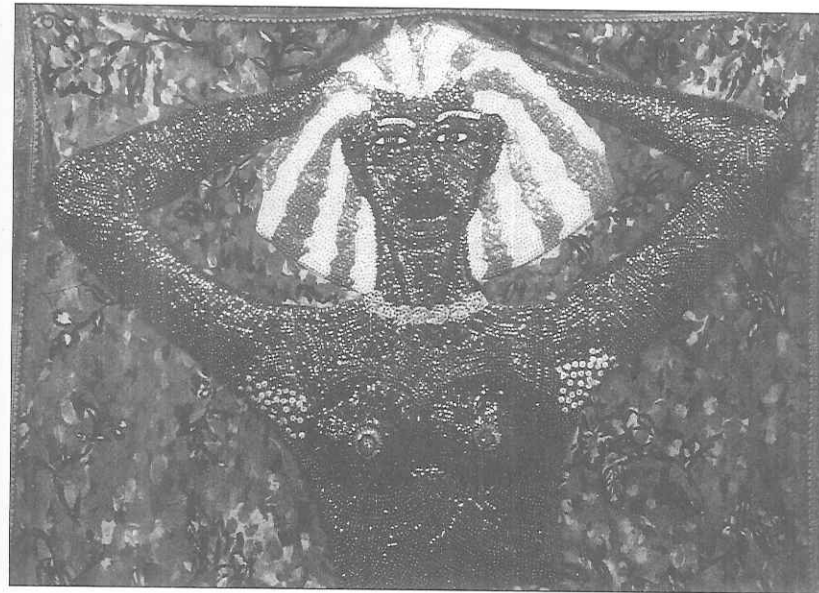


The Poetics of Soul: Art for Everyone

BLACK PEOPLE comprise half the population of the small midwestern town that I have lived in for the past six years, even though the neighborhood where my house is remains predominately white. Cooking in my kitchen one recent afternoon, I was captivated by the lovely vernacular sounds of black schoolchildren walking by. When I went to the window to watch them, I saw no black children, only white children. They were not children from a materially-privileged background. They attend a public school in which black children constitute a majority. The mannerisms, the style, even the voices of these white children had come to resemble their black peers—not through any chic acts of cultural appropriation, not through any willed desire to “eat the other.” They were just there in the same space sharing life—becoming together, forming themselves in relation to one another, to what seemed most real. This is just one of the many everyday encounters with cultural difference, with racial identity, that remind me of how constructed this all can be, that there is really nothing inherent or “essential” that allows us to claim in an absolute way any heritage.

Sadly, at a time when so much sophisticated cultural criticism by hip intellectuals from diverse locations extols a vision of cultural hybridity, border crossing, subjectivity constructed out of plurality, the vast majority of folks in this society still believe in a notion of identity that is rooted in a sense of essential traits and characteristics that are fixed and static. Many contemporary African-Americans, especially those from non-materially privileged backgrounds, are seductively engaging a narrow nationalist identity politics that leads them to invest in notions of ethnic purity, that makes them both fearful and dismissive of those individuals who do not share the same set of assumptions. Among the black poor and destitute, whose lives are ravaged by exploitative and oppressive institutionalized structures of domination, narrow nationalism takes hold because it intrudes on the concrete realities of postmodern malaise.



Alison Saar. Sapphire. 1986. Beads and sequins. 25" x 34." Courtesy of Jan Baum Gallery.

When the ground is shaking under one's feet, fundamentalist identity politics can offer a sense of stability. The tragedy is that it deflects attention from those forms of struggle that might have a more constructive, transformative impact on black life.

Black folks who are interrogating essentialist assumptions about black identity are engaged in an act of decolonization that empowers and liberates. In the essay “Minimal Selves,” the black British cultural critic Stuart Hall affirms this: “It may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kind of ‘closures’ which are required to create communities of identification—nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc.—are arbitrary closures; and the forms of political action, whether movements, or parties, those too are temporary, partial, arbitrary. It is an immensely important gain when one recognizes that all identity is constructed across difference.” Given this reality, acts of appropriation are part of the process by which we make ourselves. Appropriating—taking something for one's own use—need not be synonymous with exploitation. This is especially true of cultural appropriation. The “use” one makes of what is appropriated is the crucial factor.

These days it is often assumed that any act of cultural appropriation wherein one ethnic group draws on the experiences of a group to which they do not belong is suspect. Issues of authenticity are raised to devalue work that emerges from cultural borrowings. For a more expansive understanding of cultural appropriation to emerge in this society, critical thinkers would need to construct both a revised ontology and radically different theories of knowledge. This would mean taking seriously ways of knowing that may not be deemed rational. Right now, direct experience is privileged in many of the debates surrounding identity politics as the most relevant way to apprehend reality. Experience is clearly one way to know, yet there are many other ways as well.

The appeal to experience is central for all claims of authenticity. This has been the case especially with respect to black vernacular culture and its appropriation by individuals who are not black, or by black folks who are from materially privileged backgrounds, or who were raised in predominately white environments, or with mixed ethnic or racial parentage. Countering claims to black authenticity in the essay "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," Kobena Mercer contends: "When the trope of 'authenticity' is used to define the question of aesthetic and political value, it often reduces to an argument about who does, and does not, 'belong' in the black communities." Oftentimes the issue of authenticity is raised when individual black artists produce work that is well received by the white mainstream. Within the realm of cultural production, as more white producers and consumers traffic in the commodification of blackness, showing both interest in and fascination with subject matter related to black experience, particularly to black vernacular culture, issues of cultural appropriation, ownership, and authenticity come to the fore. Individual African-American artists are more likely to be interrogated about issues of identity than ever before.

When Alison Saar recently exhibited her work at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., African-American critics and artists were among those who judged her work from the standpoint of narrow identity politics. Accused by critics of self-consciously appropriating black folk art in an attempt to mask her privileged upbringing, Saar found that her identity and not her aesthetic became the central issue. Hank Burchard's review of the exhibit in the *Washington Post* was particularly scathing. In a mean-spirited, ridiculing tone, Burchard asserted: "She

seems not so much a talented African-American in search of her artistic identity as an accomplished artist in search of an African-American identity. The immediate, powerful impact of her sculptures fades rather than builds because one cannot help seeing that Saar 'dumbs down' her first-class craft skills in imitation of the rude execution of folk art." This comment is highly ironic since it is precisely the self-conscious display of artistic skill and craft evident in Saar's work that is meant to startle audiences, making them aware that they are looking not at folk art but, indeed, at art that is informed by the aesthetic principles and ideals of that gentle art. Saar's work fuses traditional academic study of art, both history and craft, and Saar's own aesthetic experience of folk art traditions. That fusion necessarily carries with it mimetic traces that proudly assert themselves in the work, even as Saar reveals her unique artistic vision. Unfortunately, reviews of the Hirshhorn exhibit that focused narrowly on questions of personal background deflected attention from Saar's artistic vision. It was as though the exhibit was the "To Tell the Truth" game show and the only question that needed to be asked was "Will the real black person please stand up?"

Robyn Johnson-Ross's short polemical piece "Ersatz Africa: Alison Saar at the Hirshhorn" was even more aggressive in its insistence that the value of the work could be assessed without direct consideration of anything except the artist's identity and personal history. Asserting that the artist is, "after all, neither black nor white, but something in between," Ross negates all understanding of identity as locally constructed, formed by both choice and context. In the first half of the piece she addresses Saar's failure to render an "authentic" version of the biblical narrative of Salome—as though this were the function of art, to document already existing narratives. Throughout her review Johnson-Ross demonstrates no interest in Saar's aesthetic vision and is content to dismiss her work as inauthentic, as "willed rather than lived." Ultimately, this dismissal is directed at a white museum structure that Johnson-Ross perceives to be showing too great an interest in validating art that clearly in no way interests her. "You could say that African-American themes have, at present, a great hold on the contemporary gallery and museum agenda, so even the New Directions, which has a reputation for 'difficult' art, will have a place for Alison Saar's narrative folk sculpture." Indeed, if this contention were true, we would be witnessing major needed transformations

in the art world. Unfortunately, it is the type of uninformed hyperbolic assertion that misleads, even as it deflects attention from the extent to which structures of domination based on race, sex, and class remain unchanged and intact in galleries and museums, functioning to exclude marginal groups or dismiss their work through the use of the binary paradigms Johnson-Ross relies on.

Trained in traditional institutions to think about art in the usual Eurocentric ways, Alison Saar chose to break with that thinking and reeducate herself. That process of nurturing critical consciousness enabled her to form an oppositional perspective that could embrace her holding in high esteem vernacular aesthetic practices, especially folk art, even as she continued to be interested in canonical works within white Western classical traditions. Freed of the academic biases common in old-school art departments, which devalue folk art and vernacular culture, Saar looked to those traditions as resources, allowing them to shape her aesthetic.

Studying African and African-American art with the black female artist Samella Lewis as a teacher, Saar found her new directions affirmed. She embarked on research to uncover subjugated knowledge about African-American artists and became passionately engaged with folk artists, in particular those who believe their work to be visionary, metaphysically guided by powers greater than humankind. These artists offered an aesthetic pedagogy that ran counter to the notion of "great art" produced primarily for elite audiences. Saar was impressed by the depths of their commitment to making art, not for fame or money but for the elevation of the human spirit. To these artists, making art was tantamount to religious service, and to Saar's amazement they were devout in their aspiration "to make art for anyone who would take the time to look at it." Drawing on these patterns of devotion, commitment, and a vision of both the artist and the individual work as functioning to serve and sustain life, Saar began to realize her own artistic destiny.

Like her predecessors, she searched in the world around her for material to use in making art. Working with salvaged "found" objects, as well as with specifically selected and sought-after materials, Saar began to create a body of work celebrating fusion, cultural borrowing, and intermixing that bears witness to a poetics of soul.

Against a backdrop of postmodern nothingness, fragmentation, and loss, Saar's work invites us to engage the mysteries of the soul. Yet as an

early piece like *Enchante* suggests, the soul is complicated. That which lures us to pleasure also takes us close to danger. The soul evoked in Saar's work is not a simplistic metaphysical construction. It is, as Thomas Moore suggests in *Care of the Soul*, "closely connected to fate, and the turns of fate almost always go counter to the expectations and often to the desires of the ego." The figures that inhabit the world of Saar's work know this. They know the unpredictability of life and circumstance, how quickly the good can change to evil, the darkness to light. It is this paradoxical mystery Saar calls us to embrace in a modern world that privileges order and control, that denies the power of destiny and fate.

Sexual longing and desire remain one of the spaces of human need where mystery is encountered, where the will to surrender overwhelms rational concerns. Many of Saar's images, including *Ju Ju Eugene*, *Invisible Man*, and *La Pierna Blanca*, depict dangerous desire: Men who seek to possess and lure, who leave their lovers lost and wondering. Women who lust with a vengeance, whose will to possess and consume the desired object is as intense and potentially violent as that of any man. An odd mixture of torment and delight surfaces in Saar's pieces. *Wallflower* is one of the few sculptures displaying an entire body that is light-colored. The blank downcast look on this blond-haired light body bespeaks the existence of a world beyond the white-supremacist aesthetics that overvalue these very traits. In this lopsided world, such traits are not markers that incite interest and desire. In Saar's sculpture *Sapphire*, she shows an image of conflicted longings, the black female who sees herself as most desirable when she has a look of whiteness. Although she appears strong and capable, when her heart and soul are bared she reveals that she has fragments, bits and pieces, where her heart would be. In the dark blue *Diva*, the black female figure with songbird magic in her chest is incomplete, uncertain, has a look of hesitation. Her longing is so intense she appears otherworldly, as though what she sees from her bright green eyes is a world so astounding it cannot be expressed in mere speech. Installations such as *Love Potion #9* evoke the desperate yearning for love that leads folks to lose their minds to, as we used to say in the South, "a shoot-and-cut kinda love," the "if I can't have you nobody will." Thomas Moore suggests that "soul is to be found in the vicinity of taboo." Saar's work reveals a fascination with the tragic dimension of love and desire. Figures like *Sweet Thang* and *Heathen Tea at Trump's* hint at the power of desire to



Alison Saar. *Diva*. 1988. Wood, tin, paint. 32" x 30" x 10." Courtesy of Jan Baum Gallery.

disrupt and challenge norms. Even when it comes to structures of domination, racism, sexism, and class boundaries, love and desire can lead folks astray, can alter what appeared to be a fixed dynamic, a set location. It is this aspect of desire that Saar captures in the piece *Fear and Passion*. With intense longing comes the fear and possibility of betrayal. Saar highlights the black female body precisely because within sexist and

racist iconography it is often depicted as a site of betrayal. Just as the white female in racist sexist iconography most often symbolizes innocence and virtue, the absence of sexual passion, the black female body is usually marked as the opposite.

Many of the naked black female bodies pictured in Saar's work assume seductive poses, their bodies open for entry. As "sweet thangs," black females must use sexuality as a means to survive. Saar suggests that there is integrity in this choice. For example, Saar's sculpture *Cleo* posits that female longing can be positioned as worthy even as the female remains sexual, driven by passion. Clearly, Saar depicts Salome as a woman driven by unrequited longing to destroy the object of her affection and desire. In Saar's sculpture, Salome tenderly cradles the head of John the Baptist. Her mouth is open as though she hopes to breathe life, to nurture and restore all that mad desire has driven her to destroy. That the death of the longed-for mate does not release Salome from torment is the most tragic and sorrowful culmination of this taboo desire. It has driven her to the edge but not afforded her peace. These are love's fatalities—envy and jealousy are emotions that can strip away reason, creating unresolvable inner tension and conflict. Yet it is this surrender to an all-consuming yearning that exposes Salome's soul, the vulnerability she would use power, status, and position to mask.

Paradox and contradiction are the mysteries of the soul. The weird, the uncanny are sources of knowledge. To know the self, Saar's work suggests, one must open the heart wide and search every part. This requires facing the unacceptable, the perverse, the strange, even the sick. Without this critical embrace of metaphysical complexity the soul cannot be understood. Moore contends: "Sometimes deviation from the usual is a special revelation of truth. In alchemy this was referred to as the *opus contra naturam*, an effect contrary to nature. We might see the same kind of artful unnatural expression within our own lives. When normality explodes or breaks out into craziness or shadow, we might look closely, before running for cover and before attempting to restore familiar order, at the potential meaningfulness of the event. If we are going to be curious about the soul, we may need to explore its deviations, its perverse tendency to contradict expectations." Unlike the visionary folk artists who inspire her, Saar does not see the soul as in need of spiritual purification. For her the soul is a site for excavation—holding archeological stores of emotional meaning to be

examined without judgment. Refusal to embrace a negative, darker side of being is tantamount to denial. Truth, particularly about the self, cannot be known if any aspect of the soul is repudiated. The true seeker who longs for self-realization journeys wherever the soul leads.

It is this relentless searching that is ever-present in Saar's work: the constant yearning for clarity of vision and insight that may or may not come. Value is found in the nature of searching. That yearning is expressed politically, in grieving for sorrows in the past that were not acknowledged. To see Saar's *Dying Slave* in a white-supremacist culture that would have everyone suppress both the horror and pain of that historical moment is to engage in an act of ritual remembering. *Scar Song* blindly evokes that pain. Saar will not allow the hurt inflicted upon the body to be forgotten. It is the intensity of suffering that creates the passion of remembrance.

With the installation *Fertile Ground*, Saar constructs visual monuments that bear witness to the holocaust of slavery and its aftermath. Her intent is to remind us, to work against the silence and erasures of the past. This work bears witness even as it demands recognition of the reality that black people were and are more than merely our pain. This "more" can be understood only in a context where the soul is recognized—where the experiences of the body are not seen as the only markers of personal integrity. The state of being that surpasses the body and encompasses the soul is the ontological understanding that has always provided exploited and oppressed folks both the hope for and the concrete experience of transcendence. Enslaved black bodies could care for the soul by forging intimate connections and communities with the land. The ground is precisely the space where the dehumanized aspect of the self can be laid to rest and an integrity of being that transcends the physical plane can be claimed and affirmed. This understanding of the power of the earth, present in the religious beliefs held by the Native American dwellers and the first Africans who journeyed here, not as slaves but as seekers, is a legacy of spiritual resistance that continues into the present day. Offering testimony, Saar shares her experience of standing on this ground as a non-Southerner, feeling "the spiritual presence in the landscape." The installation is commemorative. It does not take the place of the experience. Saar declares: "To actually *be* there, to see that, to have that feeling, to stand on that ground, to be in *that* place is important." Without being

heavyhanded, Saar's *Fertile Ground* attests to the historical relation black folks have had to land, to the agrarian South. Both *The Cotton Demon* and *The Tobacco Demon* are haunting figures. The spirit of aggressive emptiness and desolation conveyed by "the cotton demon" deconstructs the image of whiteness as pure and innocent. Here the whiteness of the soul, the interior self, as a sign of deprivation and lack, will be precisely the state of being imposed on those humans enslaved for profit, who must plant, pick, and harvest the product. Ultimately, it is a barrenness of spirit that drives this demon, an absence of soul.

In her recent work Saar continues to explore the way in which soullessness damages the human spirit even as she also creates images that celebrate soulfulness. The black female depicted in the lithograph *Black Snake Blues* has no difficulty claiming a space where she can dream and desire, where she can engage in the soul's reverie. Although she longs for pleasure that is mingled with danger—the healing poison of the snake that would release her spirit, set it free—she can reach fulfillment alone. Her soul can be satisfied as she lies alone, engaged in passionate erotic reverie. Lying on red sheets, holding her breasts, she boldly claims her passion without fear or shame. Neglected by others, by lovers who do not appear, she cares for her soul and her body. Waiting, for her, is the space for contemplation and reverie.

More than among any other group of people in the United States, in African-American vernacular there has always been a concern with the soul. Unfortunately, Thomas Moore's preoccupation with Eurocentric understandings of the soul leads him to ignore this focus on the soul that black people have consistently highlighted and shared with mainstream white culture. The aesthetic vision of "soul music" was precisely one in which a need to care for the soul was foregrounded. As in Saar's work, that vernacular emphasis on cultivating the soul, searching for depth and meaning in life, was continually connected to experiences of pleasure and delight. While Saar constructs a poetics of soul in her work that compels recognition of its dangerous mysteries and power, she also revels in the pleasure of soulfulness. That spirit of play and revelry is present in much of her work. It is quintessentially expressed in the installation *Soul Service Station*. A superficial look at this installation might lead one to see only quaint folk art-like figures that seem merely flat and naive; artfully constructed, but lacking, perhaps, in depth. Yet anyone who looks at these

images with an eye for spiritual complexity sees a barren landscape with a life force coming from a sign that, like the sun, promises to nurture. That sign says that the soul will be given care here—at a mock gasoline station. These images linking man and nature suggest that the ability to imagine technology that can invent the automobile, that can plunder the earth for resources to make gasoline to fuel cars, does not rid us of the need to care for the inner life, the world of the soul. Technology is presented here not as an evil but, rather, as a parallel universe. Just as the car must be given gas to go forward, to take us where we want to go, the soul must be acknowledged—cultivated and cared for—if we are to become self-realized human beings.

Saar's poetics of soul is situated within the context of everyday life, for it is there that our spirits dwell and stand in need of comfort and shelter. Rather than depicting the metaphysical plane as existing in some evolved higher state beyond the ordinary, Saar's work seeks to reveal the presence of holy spirit in our daily life. Saar endeavors to create art that awakens awareness of the metaphysical, showing that it may be, as A. David Napier suggests in *Foreign Bodies*, "embodied in the physical, even in what we recognize as the inanimate." It is this oppositional insight that inspires vernacular visionary artists. It allows Saar to testify: "I worked once with a tree. I thought about the African and American Indian belief that tree spirits had to be at peace before anything could be carved from them. I also think about the spirit of iron and the nature of iron." Napier contends: "At issue here is not simply what used to be called 'animism,' but an ontology, a system of connectedness by which an individual's awareness of self is predicated on a system of reciprocal exchanges in the visible world. In a universe of relations governed by Mauss's archaic notion of the gift—in which individuals 'know' themselves by actually exchanging with others those objects by which they are 'identified'—knowledge can exist in the absence of intellectualism, since much of what is worth knowing is quite literally self-evident. The self, in other words, becomes evident through a visible demonstration of its connectedness." It is this state of being, so often unfamiliar to those of us in contemporary culture, that Saar extols in her work. And for that reason the work is often critically misunderstood by both those individuals who celebrate it and those who see it as superficial. Years ago, when Saar first made the choice to commit herself to an art practice that would engage the ordinary, call

out the beauty in the everyday, and celebrate the metaphysical, she did not contemplate the reality that no critical framework existed to theoretically validate and illuminate the significance of this shift, its political subversiveness. Now she has lived with the implications of her choice and understands more intimately what we sacrifice when we choose to dissent. The spirit of sacrifice is reflected with elegance and grace in her new piece *Heart and Sole* (see cover illustration). The sole of the shoe is worn presumably by a rough journey, by the traversing of terrains that test and try the spirit. That the path walked is a journey to the spirit is evident by the heart that surrounds the hole in the sole. All that is sacrificed is made meaningful when the complexity of the soul is exposed, revealed, its beauty and integrity as ever-present witness.