To / From Los Angeles with Betye Saar

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"What does a woman need in order to become an artist?"[1]

In 1972 Betye Saar created what has become perhaps her most iconic work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (fig. 2). The central figure is a stereotypical mammy, black woman as nurturing symbol of white America, who, since the late nineteenth century, has offered comfort and sustenance from the safe space of a box of pancake mix. Yet here she has been transformed into a warrior, armed with guns and the strong fist of black power.[2]

Saar's engagement with exploding African American stereotypes was a practice clearly connected to the black arts movement. Succinctly described as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,"[3] the movement championed the aesthetic pleasure of blackness and focused on reception by black audiences. It was art with African American specificity. In the realm of visual art there was an emphasis on representational imagery, graphic style, bold color, and embedded words that clarified message and content. Important themes were African heritage, black heroes, and black families. Mary Schmidt Campbell has also identified works that dismantled "icons of racism" (including the American flag) and thus fulfilled their role as "weapons" of the black cultural revolution.[4]

Confronting black stereotypes allowed African American artists of this period to create figurative, representational work that was recognizable and thus available "to the masses" yet at the same time demonstrated art's role as weapon by enacting the destruction of negative imagery. By incorporating these problematic figures, artists sought to consume their power, enact physical and artistic cannibalization, and thus drain their negative magic. Saar made a number of pieces between 1970 and 1972 that function in this way, including *Whitey's Way* (1970), *Sambo's Banjo* (1971–72; plate 15), and *Black Crows in the White Section Only* (1972; plate 18). Other artists creating work in this vein included Murray DePillars, Jeff Donaldson, and Joe Overstreet (fig. 10). As Jane Carpenter and Betye Saar argue, however, Saar was the first to integrate *actual* historical objects, so-called "black collectibles" into her pieces.[5]

Detail, plate 18

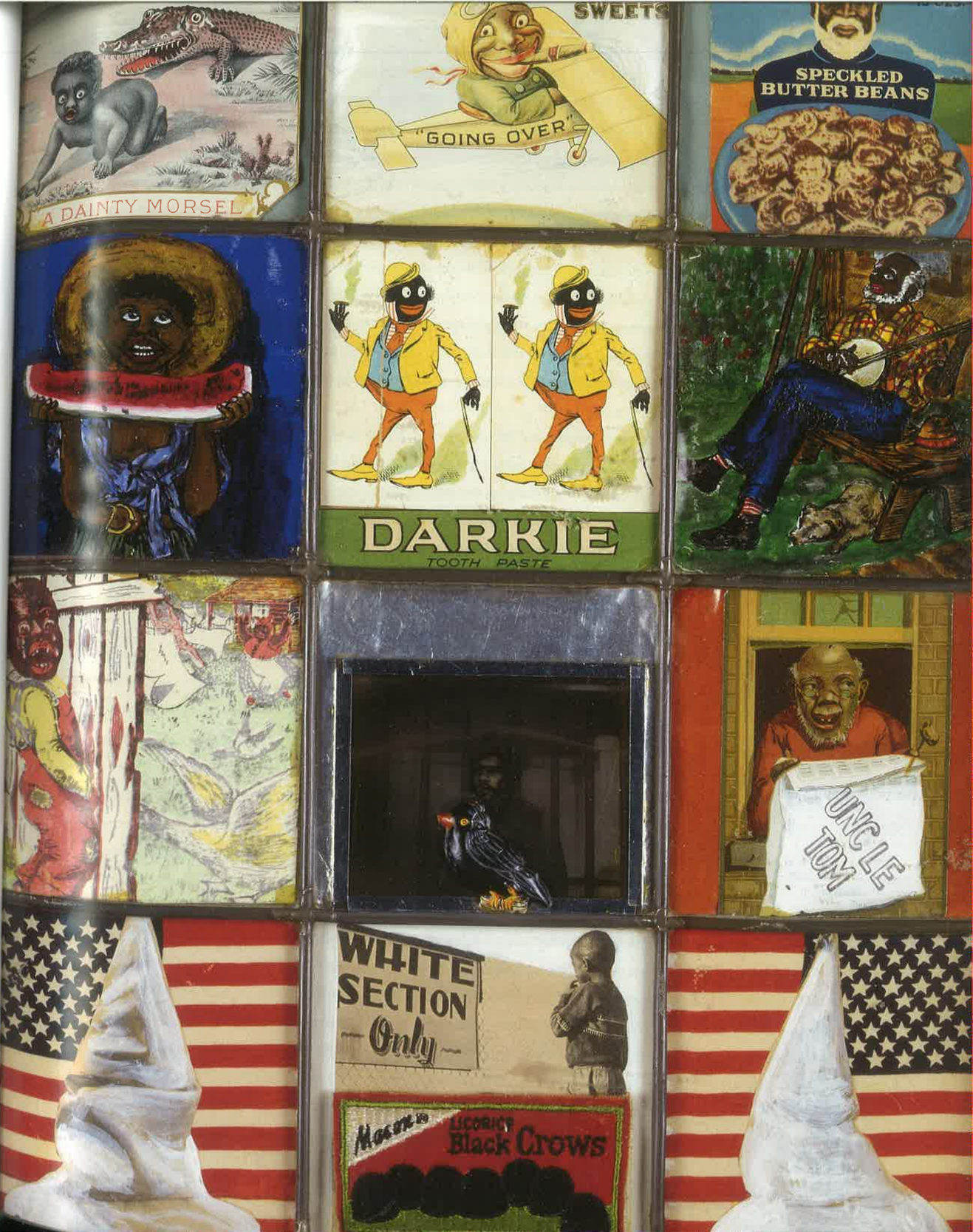

Figure 10
Joe Overstreet (b. 1934)
The New Jemima, 1964
Acrylic on fabric over plywood construction
102⅜ × 60¾ × 17¼ in.
The Menil Collection, Houston

Figure 11
John W. Outterbridge (b. 1933)
Case in Point (Rag Man Series), ca. 1970
Mixed-media assemblage
12 × 24 × 12 in.
Collection of the artist

If the black arts movement seemed to represent the tenets of black power, it also more broadly reflected the climate of the times. By the 1960s, Betye Saar's Los Angeles was just one of many U.S. municipalities that contained black urban ghettos marked by raging unemployment, substandard housing, schools, and municipal services, and the destruction of a legitimate black commercial sector, as well as a level of police brutality that assumed the proportions of an occupying army. And it was usually abuse by police that ignited the rebellions that marked the inner cities during this moment. According to historian Robin D. G. Kelley, "Between 1964 and 1972, riots erupted in some 300 cities, involving close to a half-million African Americans and resulting in 250 deaths, about 10,000 serious injuries, and millions of dollars in property damage. Police and the National Guard turned black neighborhoods into war zones, arresting at least 60,000 people and employing tanks, machine guns, and tear gas to pacify the community."[6]

Los Angeles, though a sunshine paradise and land of economic opportunity in the twentieth century, was also home to one of the largest riots by African Americans of the era. Initiated by a driving infraction turned brutal on August 11, 1965, the eruption came to an end six days later after the deployment of the National Guard. The result: 34 dead, more than 1,000 injured, 3,952 arrested.[7] Because of its size and scope, the Watts rebellion seemed cataclysmic; it took on symbolic and almost mythical affect. It announced in a big way and in no uncertain terms African American anger and disgust at abuse, discrimination, and inequality that had lasted for centuries. It became a touchstone of change, the sign of a shifting and radical approach to subjectivity and to art.

The Watts neighborhood's iconic landmark, the Watts Towers—a series of fantasy structures created from a mosaic of refuse (figs. 16, 17)—was a fount of inspiration for Betye Saar's practice as an artist.[8] In the postwar American art scene, mixed media quietly began to take hold, in the neo-Dada of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and the junk sculpture of Mark di Suvero and John Chamberlain, and on the West Coast in the parallel development of assemblage by Edward Kienholz, Bruce Conner, and others. While all these styles used the detritus of American consumerism to make art, California assemblage more famously privileged narrative and metaphor, and exploited a surrealist edge, offering a critique of materialism and societal repression. Such strategies found a comfortable home with Los Angeles artists working under the black arts movement rubric such as Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge (fig. 11), John Riddle, and Saar. These artists (and others) engaged with bits and pieces of their environment, in particular the remnants of the Watts rebellion, through which they could refer to African American culture and life without relying on simplistic painted representations of the black figure. In this way African American artists working in Los Angeles also provided an alternative to the standard visual formulas of the black arts movement. Their take on black heroes, affirmations of cultural identity, and links with the African past followed different routes. Their visions were not particularly two-dimensional, graphic, colorful, or solely representational.

In his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D. G. Kelley asks us to remember the driving visions with which radicalism begins, reminding us of the influence that liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have had on those in the U.S. Importantly, he also claims that the energy we usually associate with the black power movement after 1965 occurred as early as the 1950s. Inspired by Kelley's example, I began thinking about the roots / routes of the black arts movement in southern California. While so many had spoken of the palpable change in the emotional, social, and political climate after the Watts rebellion, as always with African American culture I knew there was more there than originally met the eye.

In its "Speaking of People" column, *Ebony* magazine offered brief snapshots of African Americans with interesting vocations. Featured in the October 1951 issue were artists Curtis Tann and Betye Brown (soon to be Saar), who created jewelry and other fine crafts from enamel under the moniker "Brown and Tann." The piece explains how enamelware is made and how the work is marketed and distributed "in gift shops and interior decorator studios." These outlets, in addition to state fairs, local competitions, and exhibitions in homes and churches, served Brown and Tann and other African American artists throughout the 1950s. The *Ebony* article confirms such working methods and informal networks: "[The] couple uses Tann's garage as a workshop, and his living room as a display room for prospective buyers."[9] With the expansion of the African American population in Los Angeles after World War II, we also find a growth in the community of artists and creation of structures to support their work. Curtis Tann recalls that Brown and Tann exhibitions were extremely popular, particularly those held in homes; they would clear out all furniture, set the place up like a gallery, and often sell out.[10] Unlike those in New York, artists in southern California had space: the beach, the desert, the sky but also homes, backyards, and garages, which were easily converted into studios and temporary exhibition spaces. This space of the home is interesting, not so much because of the possibilities that size seems to suggest but because it was identified with "hobbyists," "amateurs," and "homemakers," labels attached to black women and men struggling to make a living and to support their predilection for artmaking. If they were lucky they found work as graphic or window designers. As art historian Judith Wilson points out, craft, applied, or functional arts have been the space where women thrived, often creating in the sites of homes or clubs, the antithesis of the male "fine" artist brooding in the garret.[11] However, African American men have also flourished in the crafts, a fact that almost certainly reflects the "usefulness" that such functional art had under slavery and in the postbellum period for people trying to make a living in this country.[12] Wilson also cites modernism's predilection for incorporating traditions from outside the Western fine-art canon, whether these were the arts of Africa, Asia, or Latin America or characteristics of the functional world, such as the Bauhaus. In California the line between fine and applied art has been more permeable, and not only, it seems, for African Americans. This was evident in the 1950s and 1960s

Figure 12
Betye Saar
Anticipation, 1961
Serigraph
18 × 14¼ in.
Collection of the artist

with the huge popularity of Peter Voulkos, an artist working with ceramics on a monumental scale.

Personal domestic space is a place where African Americans have traditionally been able to dream and thus create. In a world where labor and the public environment often meant inequities of tasks, advancement, and services or flat-out violence, the home and spiritual side of life was the place where you could, to paraphrase bell hooks, come back to yourself, make yourself whole. That art along with visions and dreams of radicalism would be nurtured in such spaces is no surprise.

In the 1950s, what indeed did it take for a woman to become an artist, especially in a postwar environment in which more women than ever were trained in the profession yet were denied access to careers and professorships?[13] Betye Saar began the decade as a social worker doing small interior design jobs and creating posters. However, it was her work in enamel, her association with Tann, and her contact with an integrated community of artists (largely based in Pasadena) that opened her eyes to art as a vocation. Like a number of her colleagues, she started out by designing greeting cards during this period. Known as studio cards, they were based on artist's individual sketches and then sold by agents to small boutiques. But by the late 1950s Saar felt herself being pulled increasingly toward the fine arts—she returned to college to get a teaching credential and to study printmaking. By then she was married with a family and often took one of her children to class. As she recalled, "In 1956 I had two children, so it wasn't as easy to work as an artist, but I still did my greeting cards."[14]

Saar began to focus primarily on printmaking around 1960. Already visible in her early work was the development of a number of thematic threads and strategies that she would continue to explore throughout her career. Among these were the centrality of images of women, alternative spiritual practices and cosmologies, and the collision of textures. All this is evident in the serigraph *Anticipation* (1961; fig. 12), with its play of patterns and focus on a pregnant black woman (perhaps Saar herself) in a meditative state.[15] Saar's focus on the female body a full decade before the preeminence of feminist artmaking in the 1970s speaks to her force as a member of the vanguard and a visionary, similar in a sense to the groundbreaking work of Carolee Schneemann and her move from painting to multimedia practice, also in the early 1960s.[16]

By 1966 Saar had largely replaced figures with symbols, drawn primarily from astrology, tarot, and palmistry. The prints were meshed with found window frames, which

Figure 13
Betye Saar
Black Girl's Window, 1969
Mixed-media assemblage
35¾ × 18 × 1½ in.
Collection of the artist

provided a new kind of support but also set up a fresh narrative structure, which, like a film storyboard, allowed the action of the picture plane to unfold incrementally, as in *Mystic Window for Leo* (1966). In works from 1966 through 1967, the hand becomes the marker of identity, whether the schematic of the palm reader's trade or an impression of the artist's own. These alternate with images of lions for the zodiac sign of Leo—Saar's birth sign. As has been argued elsewhere, the mystical arena evoked by Saar and others, like Sun Ra, during this period represented a surrogate space of liberation, and for Saar one that pointed back to the self.[17] *Black Girl's Window* (1969; fig. 13) is perhaps a turning point in this regard, where we see Saar re-embrace the black body and make the connection between the black female form and her surrogate, the lion. Yet in a piece from the following year *Self-Window with Reflection* (1970), Saar offers us an even more complex view of race and womanhood. In a multipanel window frame Saar renders herself as black, white, and as a phrenological study; the black portrait is covered with a small window shade, which, in a nod to the performative, can be raised to reveal another image of herself as white on the verso. Saar's piece clearly anticipates feminist theory's interest in gender as performance and complicates it by adding the layer of race.[18]

In their discussions of 1970s feminist practice in the U.S. and its impact on postmodernism, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard recognize this influence in feminist art's privileging of "non-high art forms" and questioning of standard Western categories such as "genius" and "universality"; its focus on figuration, portraiture, and decorative arts were arguments for an "expanded definition of modernism."[19] The preeminence of the female body early on has been compared, retrospectively, to the "black is beautiful" formulas of the black arts movement. Yet, just as there was, at least initially, no real space for lesbian imagery in the feminist art movement, neither was there much room for that of women of color.[20] But that didn't matter, sistas had been doing it for themselves for quite some time. Indeed, we can return to the example of those nurturing home spaces of mid-century Los Angeles for African American art and, in some cases, look back even earlier.[21] It is not surprising that black women played an important role in these places, that they would oversee, run, and energize these environments. That they would translate these experiences with domestic and church-based exhibitions into later opportunities of a more formal sort and that this would result in national and international recognition for African American artists should not have been unexpected.

Saar's contemporaries—artists and culture workers including Samella Lewis, E.J. Montgomery, and Ruth Waddy—created some of the important exhibition and publication benchmarks for African Americans in California in the 1960s and 1970s, including the magazine *Black Art* (now the *International Review of African American Art*) and the two-volume book project *Black Artists on Art* (1969). Waddy founded the artists group Arts West Associated in 1962 to press mainstream arts institutions in southern California for greater African American representation. Montgomery, who was active in Los Angeles art networks in the 1950s and early 1960s, moved to the Bay Area in 1965 and by 1967 had founded an African American artists advocacy group there after Waddy's example, calling it Arts West Associated North. In 1968 Montgomery joined the staff of the Oakland Museum as an "ethnic art consultant," a position she held through 1974 and under the guise of which she curated eight exhibitions. Lewis, paralleling Montgomery in northern California, was hired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as a coordinator of education in 1968. During the seventies she would go on to open her own galleries in Los Angeles and, in 1976, found the Museum of African American Art there. Suzanne Jackson, another artist-turned-gallerist, opened Gallery 32 in 1969. Though in existence for barely two years, Jackson's gallery featured younger artists and more political work that often had a hard time finding a venue. With *The Sapphire Show* (1970), she presented work by black women practitioners, including Betye Saar, Yvonne Cole Meo, Gloria Bohanon, and Senga Nengudi.[22]

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Imagine, if you will, a far-flung network of moles, each tirelessly burrowing underneath a cultural landscape that spans from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to the Whitney Museum in New York. The moles may not be entirely aware of it, but after several thousand of them individually put in a decade or so of

Figure 14
Houston Conwill (b. 1947)
Detail of *JuJu*, 1976–78
Mixed media / performance / installation

Figure 15
Betye Saar
Mti, 1973
Mixed-media floor assemblage
42½ × 23½ × 17½ in.
Collection of the artist

subterranean overtime, it appears that together they quite literally made an imposing mountain range out of vigorously displaced earth. Never again would anyone dare to regard their peaks as an insignificant patch of molehills. And while excavating the buried history of women's achievements, these moles also tunneled new communications routes that would anticipate the paths of art and intellectual inquiry for years to come. The result was nothing less than a massive reconfiguration of American art.[23]

In the epigraph above, moles are a metaphor for women who changed the landscape of late-twentieth-century American art. Like Lewis, Waddy, and Montgomery, Betye Saar undoubtedly fits this profile. By 1975 she had had major solo shows on both coasts including one at the Whitney Museum of American Art. But we also see and feel her impact clearly in the work of younger artists who she so profoundly influenced. Suzanne Jackson was actually part of this next generation of African Americans working in Los Angeles. Many of them—for example, David Hammons, Houston Conwill, Maren Hassinger, and Senga Nengudi—followed the multimedia path of Saar and other contemporary *bricoleurs* but used such devices as part of a more conceptual, active, and performative practice (see fig. 14). They were inspired by Saar's use of materials and the way found objects could resonate not only with past use but with collective memory representing deep time. They were captivated also by the alternate cosmologies and sense of mysticism that she inscribed in her pieces. By the early 1970s, Saar's use of window frames as organizing structures for her ideas had given way to shallow boxes and small altars. The work became more theatrical and increasingly grounded in traditional African American belief systems. This is visible in two of what she refers to as her "ancestral boxes,"[24] *Ten Mojo Secrets* and *Gris-Gris Box* both from 1972. In each Saar uses words (*mojo* and *gris-gris*) alluding to African American ritual or conjuring practices.

In two interviews from 1979, one collected on video and the other in print, Saar converses with two younger African American artists—their reverence and respect for her is palpable. Houston Conwill's "Interview with Betye Saar" appeared in an issue of *Black Art*. He introduces Saar as a "high priestess" and her pieces as exquisite "tabernacles" for "spirits in transit" before engaging her in a conversation on the role of process and materials.[25] In Barbara McCullough's video piece *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* (1979)—a meditation on the place of ritual in the work of contemporary African American artists—Conwill and Hammons are featured and both reference Saar's investigations as a way to understand the integration of spiritually encoded practice, ancestry, and memory in art.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Saar's approach to metaphysical traditions was the idea recognized by Hammons that "ritual" was an "action word."[26] This younger group translated that concept into performative acts and contemporary rites, even if Saar herself

did not create performance art. She was, however, very active with installation. And in a sense this became a site of dialogue with artists like Hammons and Conwill, a discourse encompassing materials, metaphysics, and the desire for greater viewer engagement and participation. An example of such a creative conversation begins with an assemblage like *Mti* (1973; fig. 15), which starts its life as a small altar. In a later incarnation this element becomes the centerpiece of a larger site-specific installation to which the audience is invited to add personal objects. McCullough's video ends with a tête-à-tête between Saar and the filmmaker. While the other segments take place in informal settings—on the street, for example—McCullough reserves a more formal, reverential style for her discussion with Saar, conveying her significance as an artist and an understanding of the influence she had (and has) on the Los Angeles scene and beyond.

Notes

For all the creative women in my life, especially for my mother, Hettie Jones, and my sister, Lisa Jones.

1. Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970–1975," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 32.

2. On the image of the mammy and visual art, see Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), particularly chap. 3, "Aunt Jemima, the Fantasy Black Mammy / Servant."

3. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Anchor Books, 1972; originally 1971), 257; first published in *Drama Review* 12 , no. 4 (Summer 1968).

4. For early black arts movement visual theory, see Jeff Donaldson, "Ten in Search of a Nation," *Black World* 19, no. 12 (October 1970): 80–89. Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963–1973*, exh. cat. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985) provides a wonderful overview of visual art and black arts movement practice. For a California perspective, see Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Cecil Fergerson, *19 Sixties: A Cultural Awakening Re-evaluated, 1965–1975*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: California Afro-American Museum, 1989).

5. Jane H. Carpenter with Betye Saar, *Betye Saar* (San Francisco : Pomegranate, 2003), 43.

6. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 78.

7. Lawrence B. de Graaf and Quintard Taylor, "Introduction: African Americans in California History, California in African American History," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 38.

8. Among the earliest as well as the longest-lasting evidence of Watts as a cultural hub are the famed "Towers" that have marked the site for most of the twentieth century. Created by Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant and laborer, between 1921 and 1954, they are composed of a series of interconnected spires of steel rods and concrete embedded with shells, stones, broken glass, and all manner of refuse brought together in a mosaic-style surface. The structures, including fountains and birdbaths, reach almost 100 feet at their highest point. After Rodia abandoned the property in the mid-1950s, the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers was formed to protect the landmark.

9. "Speaking of People," *Ebony* 6, no. 12 (October 1951): 5.

10. Curtis Tann, *African American Artists of Los Angeles: Curtis Tann* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California, 1995), 151–52.

11. Judith Wilson, "How the Invisible Woman Got Herself on the Cultural Map: Black Women Artists in California," in *Art / Women / California 1950–2000: Parallels and Intersections*, ed. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 201–16.

12. For information on early African American creators, see John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); and *Winterthur Portfolio* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1998), a special issue on African American decorative arts.

13. Laura Cottingham, "L.A. Womyn: The Feminist Art Movement in California, 1970–1979," in *Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A., 1960–1997* (Humlebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 190.

14. Betye Saar, *African American Artists of Los Angeles: Betye Saar* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California, 1996), 94.

15. Indeed, Saar gave birth to her third child Tracye in 1961. Her other daughters Lezley and Alison were born in 1953 and 1956, respectively.

16. Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

17. See John Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977); cited in Carpenter with Saar, *Betye Saar*, 18.

18. Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2004).

19. Broude and Garrard, "Introduction," *Power of Feminist Art: Emergence, Impact and Triumph of the American Feminist Art Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

20. Arlene Raven, "Womanhouse," in *Power of Feminist Art*, 63. Saar recalls organizing a show of work by black women artists titled *Black Mirror* for the Los Angeles alternative gallery Womanspace in 1973. The exhibition was attended primarily by African Americans (men and women) and hardly seen by any white audiences whatsoever. Saar cited in Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *Power of Feminist Art*, 152. Samella Lewis recalls that she was one of the few women of color active with the Woman's Building in Los Angeles in the same period. Samella Lewis, *Image and Belief*, interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the Arts and Humanities, 1999), 216.

21. For example, in 1935 Beulah Ecton Woodard was the first African American to be given a solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum. Soon after that she founded the Los Angeles Negro Art Association, which presented a "Negro Art Exhibit" during fall 1937 at the Stendahl Art Galleries on Wilshire Blvd; in the mere week the exhibition was on view, attendance reached 2,500. Though the association was short lived, perhaps due to the exigencies of the Depression, Woodard's name appears again in connection with another black collective, 11 Associated, some fifteen years later. In fact, she served as the director of this cooperative gallery, which had a space on South Hill Street in Los Angeles and offered one of the few "professional" opportunities for the sale and exhibition of work by African American artists. See Wilson, "How the Invisible Woman Got Herself on the Cultural Map," and Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "Working from the Pacific Rim: Beulah Woodard and Elizabeth Catlett," in *Three Generations of African American Women Sculptors: A Study in Paradox*, ed. Leslie King-Hammond and Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, 1996).

22. Lewis, *Image and Belief*, 199–201. Suzanne Jackson, *African American Artists of Los Angeles: Suzanne Jackson* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California, 1998), 253–54. Ruth Waddy, *African American Artists of Los Angeles: Ruth Waddy* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California, 1993); E. J. (Evangeline Juliet) Montgomery, interview with the author, May 18, 2003.

23. Carrie Rickey, "Writing (and Righting) Wrongs: Feminist Art Publications," in *Power of Feminist Art*, 120.

24. Carpenter and Saar, *Betye Saar*, 25.

25. Houston Conwill, "Interview with Betye Saar," *Black Art* 3, no. 1 (1978): 4–15. For more on Saar's collaboration with younger artists, see Kellie Jones, "Brothers and Sisters," in Richard J. Powell, David Bailey, and Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Back to Black: Art, Cinema, and the Racial Imaginary*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2005).

26. David Hammons in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*.