

SCHOLASTIC

# ART

MARCH 1998

VOL. 28, No. 5

ISSN 1060-832X

PUBLISHED IN COOPERATION  
WITH THE NATIONAL  
GALLERY OF ART,  
FORMERLY ART & MAN

## African American Sculptors

Featuring Betye and Alison Saar

Working With Assemblage

WWW.SCHOLASTIC.COM

 SCHOLASTIC





COVER: BETYE AND ALISON SAAR.  
PHOTO © ANN SUMMA

SCHOLASTIC  
**ART**

Maurice R. Robinson, founder of Scholastic Inc., 1895-1982

FOR THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Director EARL A. POWELL, III

Head of Education LINDA DOWNS

Head, Education Resources RUTH R. PERLIN

FOR SCHOLASTIC INC.

President, Chief Executive Officer, Chairman of the Board RICHARD ROBINSON

Editor MARGARET HOWLETT

Managing Art Director JEFFREY DORMAN

Photo Editor MOYA MCALLISTER

Contributing Editors SUZANNE BILYEU

DENISE WILLI

Production Editor SUZANNE McCABE

Copy Chief RENEE GLASER

Executive VP, Publisher HUGH ROOME

VP, Editor in Chief DAVID GODDY

Director, Editorial Design AUDREY SHAGHNOW

Director of Photography SUSAN VERMAZEN

Executive Production Director RICHARD WALSH

Director, Manuf. & Distrib. J. G. BROWNELL

Assoc. Director, Manuf. & Distrib. GAY SICCARDI

Manufacturing Manager LAURA DAVIDSON

Editorial Systems Manager DAVID HENDRICKSON

VP, Telemarketing GREG WORRELL

SCHOLASTIC ART ADVISORY BOARD:

Lana Beverlin, Harrison R. IV School, Gilman City, Missouri • Carol Little, Charles F. Patton Middle School, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania • Lyda Narkiewicz, Pioneer High School, Whittier, California • Sue Rothermel, Wynford Middle School, Bucyrus, Ohio

POSTAL INFORMATION

Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 9360) is published six times during the school year, Sept/Oct., Nov./Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc. Office of Publication: 2931 E. McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710. Periodical postage paid at Jefferson City, MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmasters: Send notice of address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St. P.O. Box 3710 Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

U.S. prices: \$7.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each: \$18.00 student, \$31.80 Teacher's Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$1.90 student, \$2.95 Teacher's. (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian office, address below.) Subscription communications should be addressed to SCHOLASTIC ART, Scholastic Inc., 2931 East McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710 or by calling 1-800-631-1586. Communications relating to editorial matter should be addressed to Margaret Howlett, SCHOLASTIC ART, 555 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012-3999. Art@Scholastic.com. Canadian address: Scholastic-TAB Publications, Ltd., 123 Newkirk Rd., Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 3G5. Available on microfilm through Xerox University Microfilms, Inc. 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also available on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Worcester, OH 44091. Copyright © 1998 by Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved. Material in this issue may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without special permission from the publisher.

Printed in U.S.A.

# American

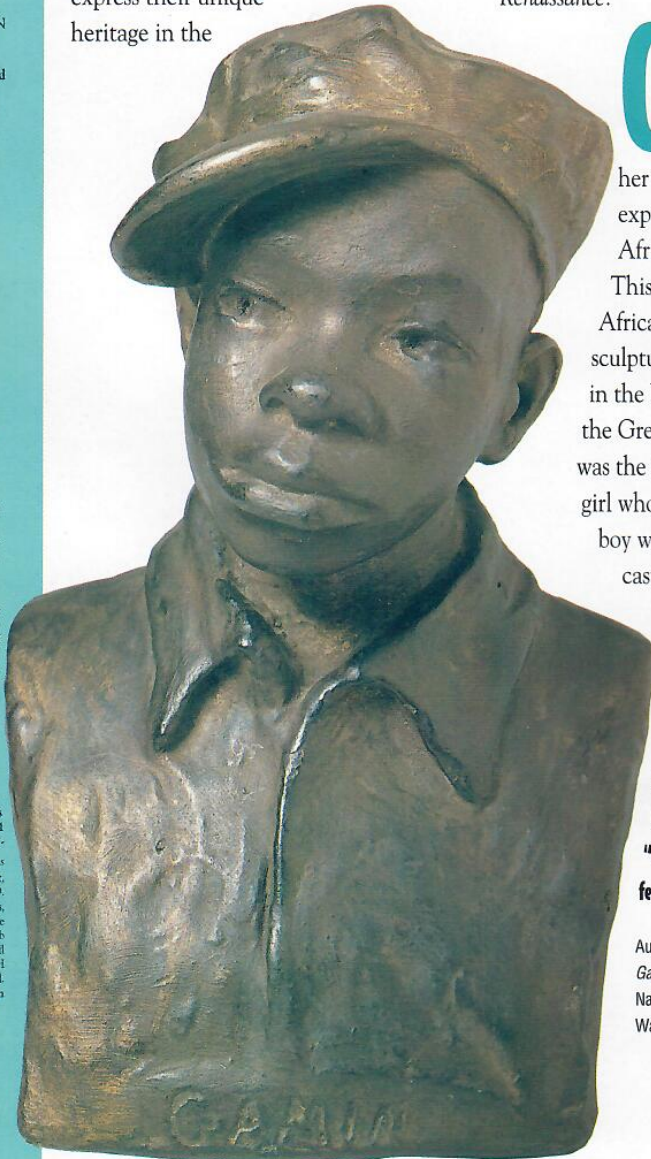
African Americans have always had an uphill struggle to gain equality in every field. This has been especially true in the visual arts.

In the early years of this century, African American artists began, for the first time, to take pride in their background. Many started to express their unique heritage in the

art they produced.

It was during the 1920s and 1930s that the careers of many important African American artists and writers began. Many of them lived in a certain section of New York City. So, the new cultural revolution they founded came to be known as *The Harlem Renaissance*.

One of the most influential sculptors of this period was Augusta Savage. In her work *Gamin* (left), Savage expresses a new awareness of African American identity. This subject's features look African American. The sculpture also reflects conditions in the U.S. at the beginning of the Great Depression. "Gamin" was the term for a homeless boy or girl who lived on the street. This boy wears a "be-bop" cap casually turned to the side.

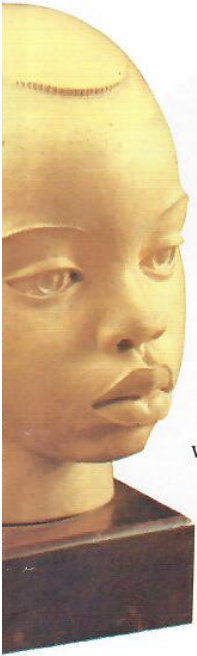


Compare the sculpture of a teenager on the left with the one shown above. Which of these boys do you think looks "real"? Which one has the perfect features of an African or Egyptian prince?

Augusta Savage (1892-1962). *Gamin*, 1930. Painted plaster. 9" high. National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.







William Artis  
(1914-1977).  
*Head of a Boy*,  
1937. Terra-cotta.  
12" high. Private  
collection.

# Portraits

At the beginning of this century, a new group of artists was emerging.

While he stares defiantly past the viewer, his wrinkled shirt, and awkward, unsure expression reveal the true nature of this boy's life. Modeling in clay, Savage couldn't afford to cast this portrait in bronze. So she cast it in plaster, and painted it to resemble metal. The artist used traditional sculptural materials and a very

realistic style, but her sculptures were among the first to express African American pride.

Other early sculptors also expressed African-American qualities, but in a more stylized manner. *Head of a Boy* (above) by William Artis is highly simplified. The boy's symmetrical features have been reduced to a few lines and shapes. A tiny area of texture suggests hair. Artis, who studied with Augusta Savage, modeled most of his portraits and ceramics in clay, then fired them.

**"I have always wanted my art to make other black people aware of their potential."**

**—Elizabeth Catlett**

Even though she has lived in Mexico for nearly 50 years, American-born sculptor Elizabeth Catlett has devoted her long career to creating works that express the struggles of many African Americans. The simplified curves carved into the gleaming black marble in *Singing Head* (right) also celebrate

African American features. The smooth, black surface has been highly polished until every surface reflects light. The artist has abstracted this head and transformed it into a symbol of dignity and power.

Elizabeth Catlett  
b. 1915. *Singing  
Head*, 1980. Black  
marble. 16" high.  
National Museum  
of American Art,  
Washington, D.C.





# African Heritage



**These sculptors combine African traditions with their American experiences.**

**T**he works created by today's African American artists are completely personal and individual. However, many of them have several things in common. They all express experiences unique to African American artists, and they are all made of non-traditional sculptural materials.

Georgia-based sculptor Beverly Buchanan draws on childhood memories of the small shacks she used to see in rural South Carolina. These little houses were built from discarded scraps by poor migrant workers. The structures had no water or electricity. Entire families lived in one room. The artist constructs small versions of these shacks by combining found objects—pieces of old wood, bits of tin, and tar paper. She regards sculptures, like *Richard's Home* (left), as portraits of the people who lived inside. The bright, swirling colors that cover the work

suggest the warmth and interaction of the family living in it.

In works like *Five Black Face Images* (above), sculptor Ben Jones makes plaster casts of body parts, then decorates them as if preparing them for a tribal ritual. In this sculpture, brightly colored masks appear to cover the features of five black heads. Jones uses a series of marks based on patterns used for African masks. The artist's use of contemporary symbols, graffiti-like lines, and modern fluorescent colors emphasizes the connection between the African past and today's American culture.

While Beverly Buchanan's shacks and Ben Jones's faces are recognizable, the sculptures of Martin Puryear are completely *abstract*. Puryear spent some years in Africa, as well as Japan and Scandinavia. His giant, handcrafted sculptures combine the techniques and traditions of several cultures. Puryear has done many works dedicated to a little-known 18th-century figure named James Beckwourth. Son of a white man and an African-American woman, Beckwourth went west, fought in the war with Mexico, and eventually became chief of the Crow Indians. *For Beckwourth* (right) is a large wooden

---

**"The people who lived in these little houses, sometimes for their entire lives, still had their hopes and dreams." —Beverly Buchanan**

Beverly Buchanan, b. 1940. *Richard's Home*, 1993. Mixed media. 78" x 16" x 21". Courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NY. Photo by Adam Reich. © Beverly Buchanan





◀ "I try to create works which point a direction to an evolving black aesthetic."

—Ben Jones

Ben Jones, b.1942. *Five Black Face Images*, 1970. Acrylic on plaster. 8 1/2" high.



**This powerful abstraction was created by Martin Puryear, one of the most important African American sculptors to emerge in recent years.**

Martin Puryear b. 1941.  
*For Beckwourth*, 1980.  
40" x 34" x 34"

shape with a layer of earth on top. The rounded top contrasts with the solid, geometric base. This mysterious sculpture can be "read" in many ways. Its shapes, textures, and natural materials refer to basic buildings and machines important to the early history of the U.S.—sod houses, wooden cabins, wagon wheels. The people from different backgrounds who built these structures—like Beckwourth—were vital to the settlement of early America.





## ABOUT THE MASTERPIECE

# Betye Saar:

## Transforming Objects From the Past



"I want to communicate emotions, memories, dreams, and fantasies."

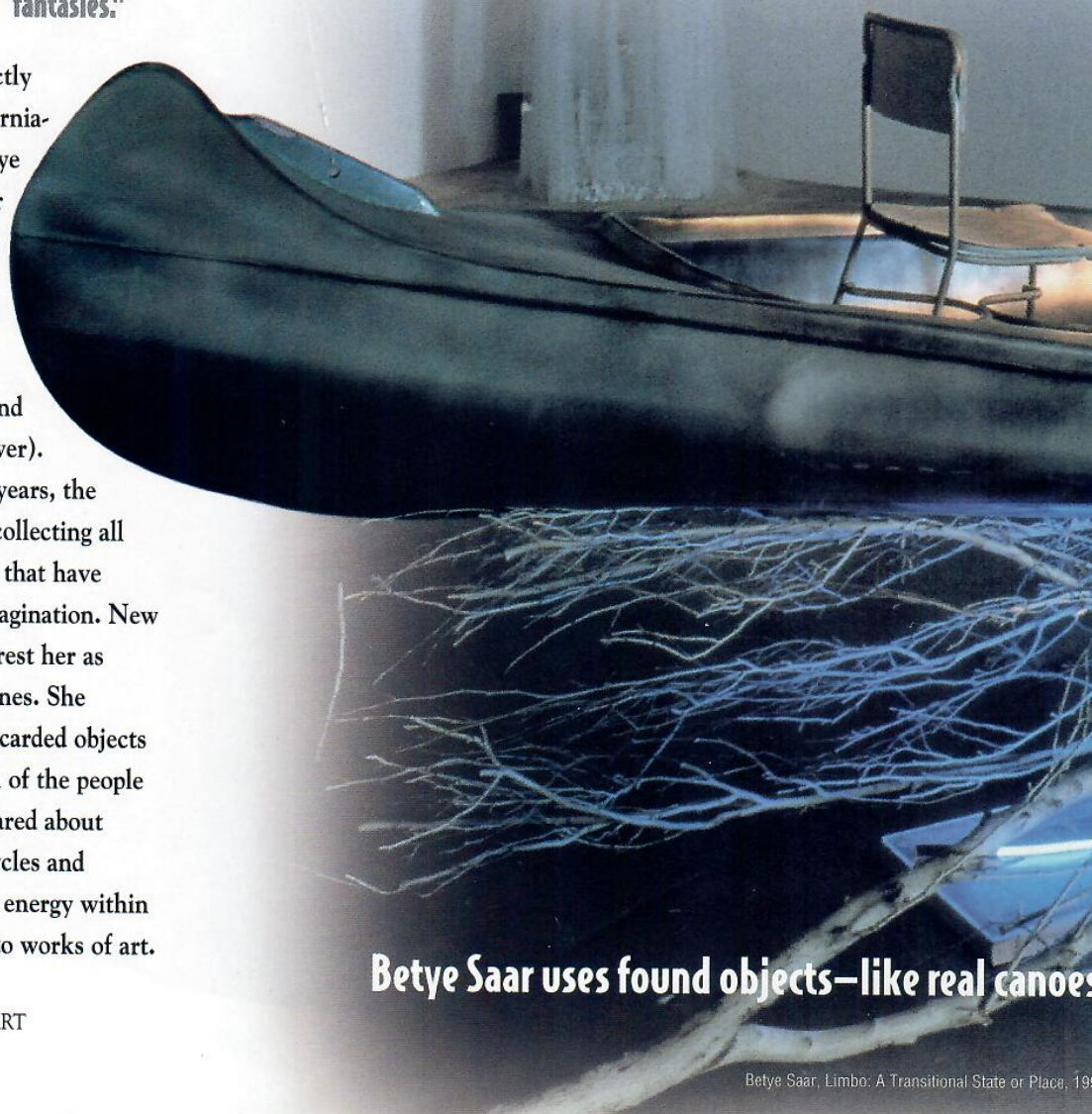
And this is exactly what the California-based artist Betye Saar does in her assemblages and installations (sculptural environments that surround and involve the viewer).

For the last 30 years, the artist has been collecting all kinds of objects that have captured her imagination. New items don't interest her as much as older ones. She believes that discarded objects are what remain of the people who used and cared about them. She "recycles and transforms" the energy within these objects into works of art.

One of Betye Saar's most recent works (below) is called *Limbo: A Transitional State or Place*. This installation takes up several rooms. At the entrance, a sign spells out the word "Limbo" (in the Christian religion, a place where forgotten people wait). The viewer enters a darkened space in which a canoe holding two chairs and a table of burning candles floats over a pile of branches. In a corner, a gauzy dress blows in the breeze, projecting a twisting reflection above a pair of painted footprints. A set of bedsprings hanging from the ceiling casts a dark shadow which includes two human skeletons. The objects in the

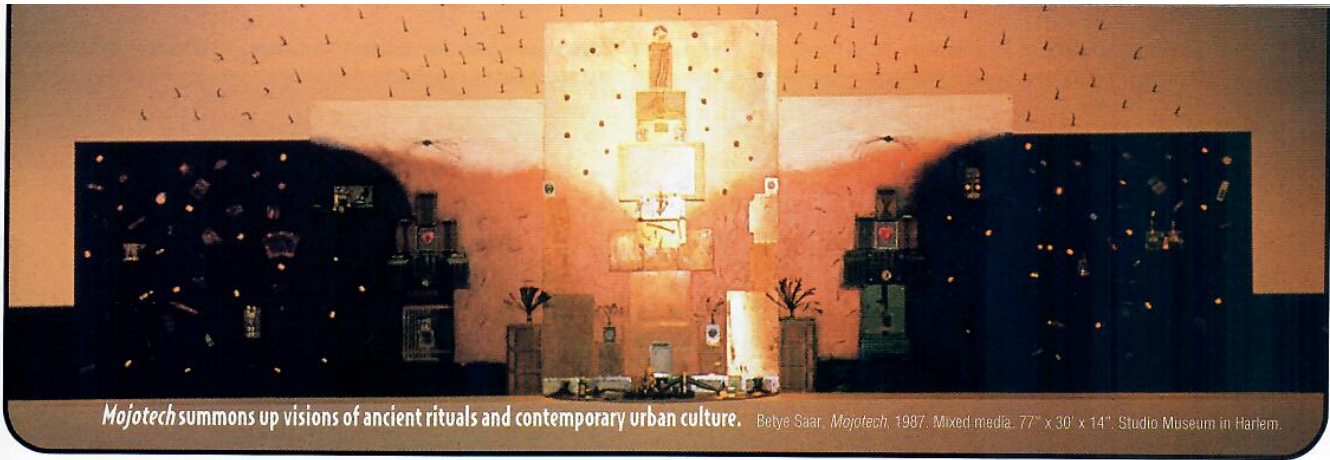
work interact to suggest many meanings related to journeys, shadow lives, and perhaps escape into death or dreams.

In her assemblages, Betye Saar not only combines objects from American society, she incorporates elements from many non-Western cultures. The large construction *Mojotech* (right) combines modern technology with ancient African spiritualism. (A *mojo* is an African charm.) Covered with bits of leather, fur, wool, and microchips, this work's **symmetrical composition** and combination of **organic** and **geometric** objects bring a number of images to mind. Every part of *Mojotech* glows,



**Betye Saar uses found objects—like real canoes**





*Mojotech summons up visions of ancient rituals and contemporary urban culture.* Betye Saar, *Mojotech*, 1987. Mixed media, 77" x 30" x 14". Studio Museum in Harlem.

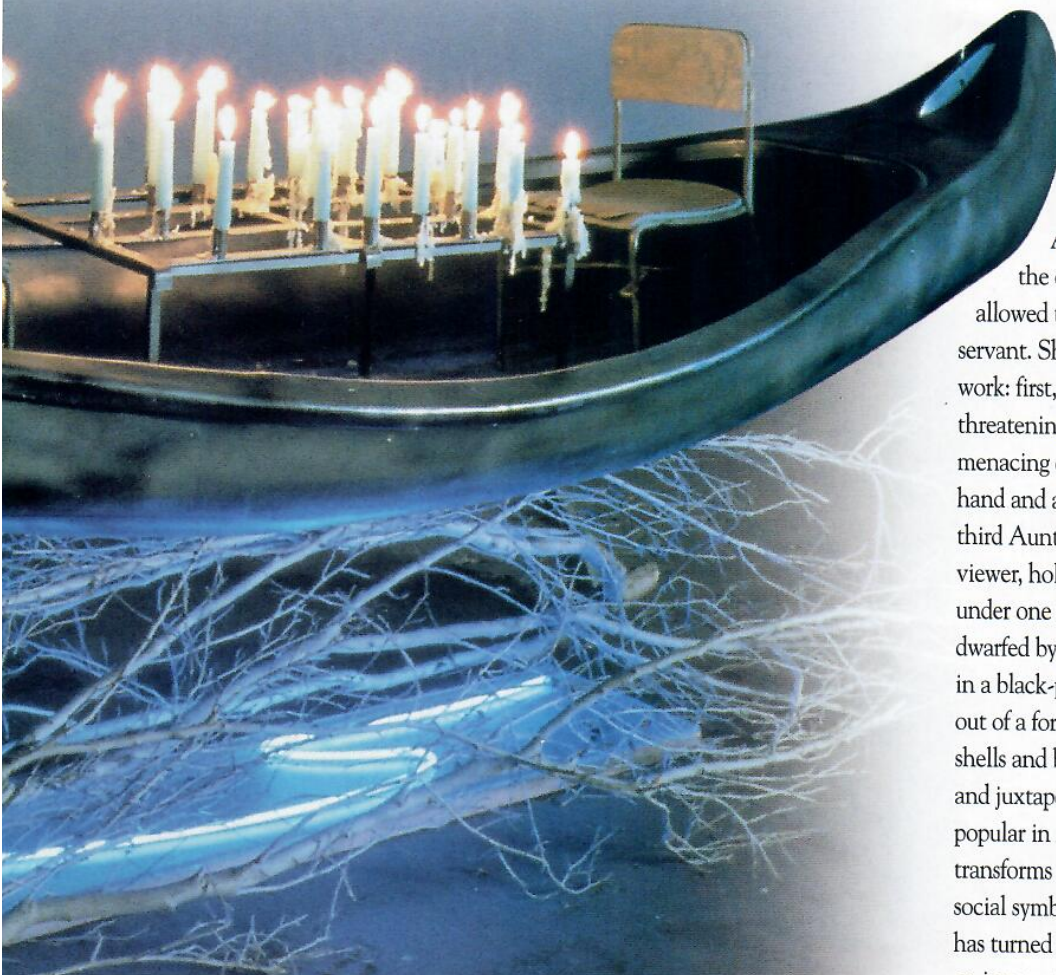
suggesting a giant computer, a cityscape, an altarpiece, an illuminated cathedral.

Betye Saar was born in Los Angeles in 1926, studied art at Pasadena City College, and spent the 1950s raising a family (one of her three daughters is

rising art star Alison Saar; see page 10). During the 1960s—a time of great social change in the U.S.—the artist began to make powerful political statements. Many, like *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (pages 8-9), were constructions

assembled inside small boxes. Created during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* centers around a well-known American advertising figure. The work raises many questions about American society, its values, its history; who has power, who doesn't; the changing roles of blacks and women.

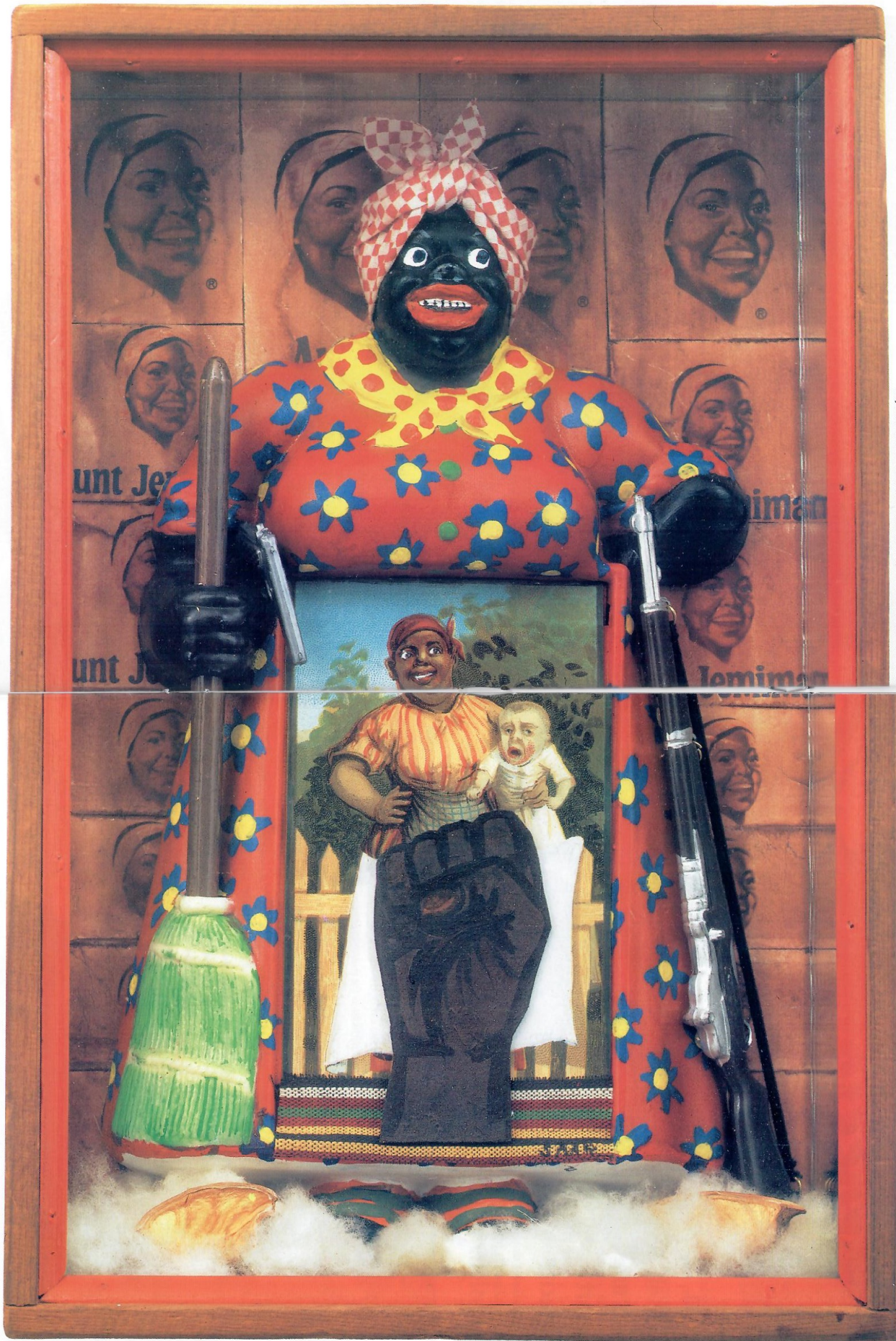
"Aunt Jemima" had appeared on cereal boxes for years, a symbol of American marketing. She represented the African-American woman in one of the only occupations she was allowed to have—that of household servant. She appears three ways in this work: first, as a smiling, unreal, non-threatening consumer image, then, as a menacing doll with a broom in one hand and a shotgun in the other. The third Aunt Jemima, seen closest to the viewer, holds a screaming white baby under one arm. In this version, she is dwarfed by a huge brown fist, clenched in a black-power salute. The fist rises out of a foreground filled with peanut shells and balls of cotton. By selecting and juxtaposing mass-produced images popular in American culture, the artist transforms them into political and social symbols. In this work, Betye Saar has turned a negative stereotype into an image of power.



**to communicate her feelings about today's world.**

Installation, 16' x 40' x 30'. Photo courtesy of the artist.





Betye Saar, b. 1928, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, Mixed media, 11.54 x 8 x 8 in.

347. University of California, Berkeley, Art Museum. Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (selected by the committee for the acquisition of Afro-American Art).



# Expressions of Protest

Many African American artists use their art to criticize racial oppression.



Alison Saar remembers spending hours with her mother, Betye, during the 1960s, looking for found objects in burnt out lots in the California hills high above Hollywood. Although both artists work with many of the same themes—magic, spiritualism, non-Western art—the art of Alison Saar is very different from her mother's. Her large, roughly carved figures, (like the one at left), resemble ancient African totems. In these works, the artist uses myths from the past to explore conditions in the present, especially racism.

One of several figures that loom over the viewer, *Conkerin' John* (left) is part of a series called "tree souls." The stiff pose of this figure contrasts with the twisted roots on which it stands. The tree souls may have been inspired by

stories of 19th-century slaves who escaped through swamps and hid in the roots of mangrove trees (the roots grow above water). In this series, the artist links traditional African medicines and charms made from roots with modern political black-power images.

Tom Miller creates his works from the kind of furniture he grew up with. Assembling discarded pieces from the 1930s and 1940s, he paints what he refers to as a "skin" on top. This gives the sculpture a whole new meaning. As the artist expresses it, "I use imagery created years ago that stereotyped African Americans in very negative ways." Miller's best-known piece, *And the Livin is Easy* (below right), was made by juxtaposing two ordinary pieces of furniture and painting them.

**"I'd like my work to show the strength that grows from constant opposition."**

**—Alison Saar**

Alison Saar b. 1956. *Conkerin' John*; *Love Potion # 3*, 1988. Wood, tin, nails. 6' x 5' x 4'. Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.







**"I wanted to be able to participate in the civil rights movement through my work."—Mel Edwards**

Melvin Edwards, b. 1939.  
*Chibuku*, 1994. Welded steel.  
CDS Gallery, NY, NY.

The bright colors and cartoonlike shapes catch the viewer off guard. Not until we look closely at the designs—watermelons, smiling mouths, black crows—can we read Miller's ironic messages. The artist says, "Once you understand what is going on, these stereotypes of hate and rage lose their power."

For the past 35 years, Mel Edwards has been creating a series of sculptures he calls "Lynch Fragments." These bold abstractions gain even more power from their subject—the

historic oppression of blacks in America. Works like *Chibuku* (above) are made up of metal objects, some found, some created. A list of these items sounds relatively objective—farming tools, hammers, nails, saws, horseshoes, nuts and bolts, knives, chisels, padlocks, chains, barbed wire. But the way these objects have been twisted and melted into small, tight masses expresses very strong feelings. The results may be abstract but the jagged edges, and cold black steel surfaces communicate pain and fury. *Lynch Fragments* are about a terrible period in history. But like all great art, the sculptures are also about remembering and overcoming.

**"My goal was to create a personal set of symbols made up of images many people don't like."—Tom Miller**

Tom Miller, b. 1945. *And the Livin is Easy*, 1989. Steven Scott Gallery, Baltimore, MD.





ARTIST OF THE MONTH

# Megan Pahmier

## Reconstructing Herself



How many images can you recognize in the emotional Scholastic Art Award-winning self-portrait (right) created by 17-year-old Megan Pahmier? A senior at Southside High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Megan spends half of her day in school. The rest she spends teaching art to elementary students, for which she gets high school credit. In her spare time, she creates art in her basement studio. "My goal right now is to become an artist," she says. "Because I believe art is very therapeutic, I might pursue a career in art therapy."

### How did you first get involved with art?

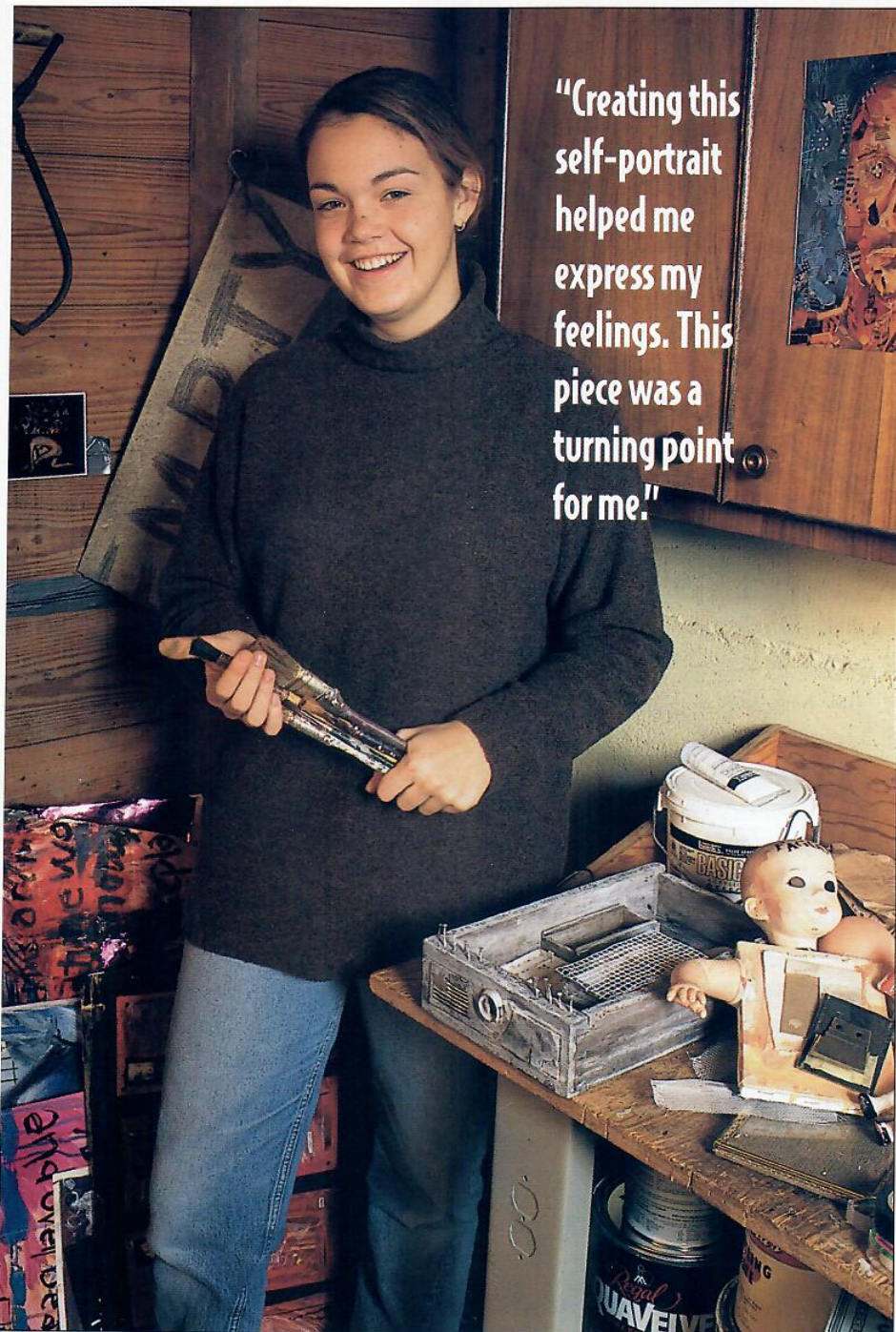
I don't think I chose art, I think it chose me. Art is something I've done and lived with my whole life. When I was doing art I was always happy. It made me feel free. With art, I get a lot of stuff out. It's how I deal with and get through a lot of things. Everything I create today is about my life in the moment. It's about raw emotions going on in my head right now.

### Where did you get the idea for this work?

I did it as part of an independent study class in my sophomore year. When I created this work, I was feeling really down. I guess you could say I was having an art block. Then my teacher said, "Why don't you do a self-portrait?" I didn't really want to, but I went into my studio and just allowed things to come out on paper as I felt them. This was the result.

### Is your collage autobiographical in any way?

Definitely. I did this work at a time in my life when I was really struggling. I was



"Creating this self-portrait helped me express my feelings. This piece was a turning point for me."

PHOTOS BY RON MAY



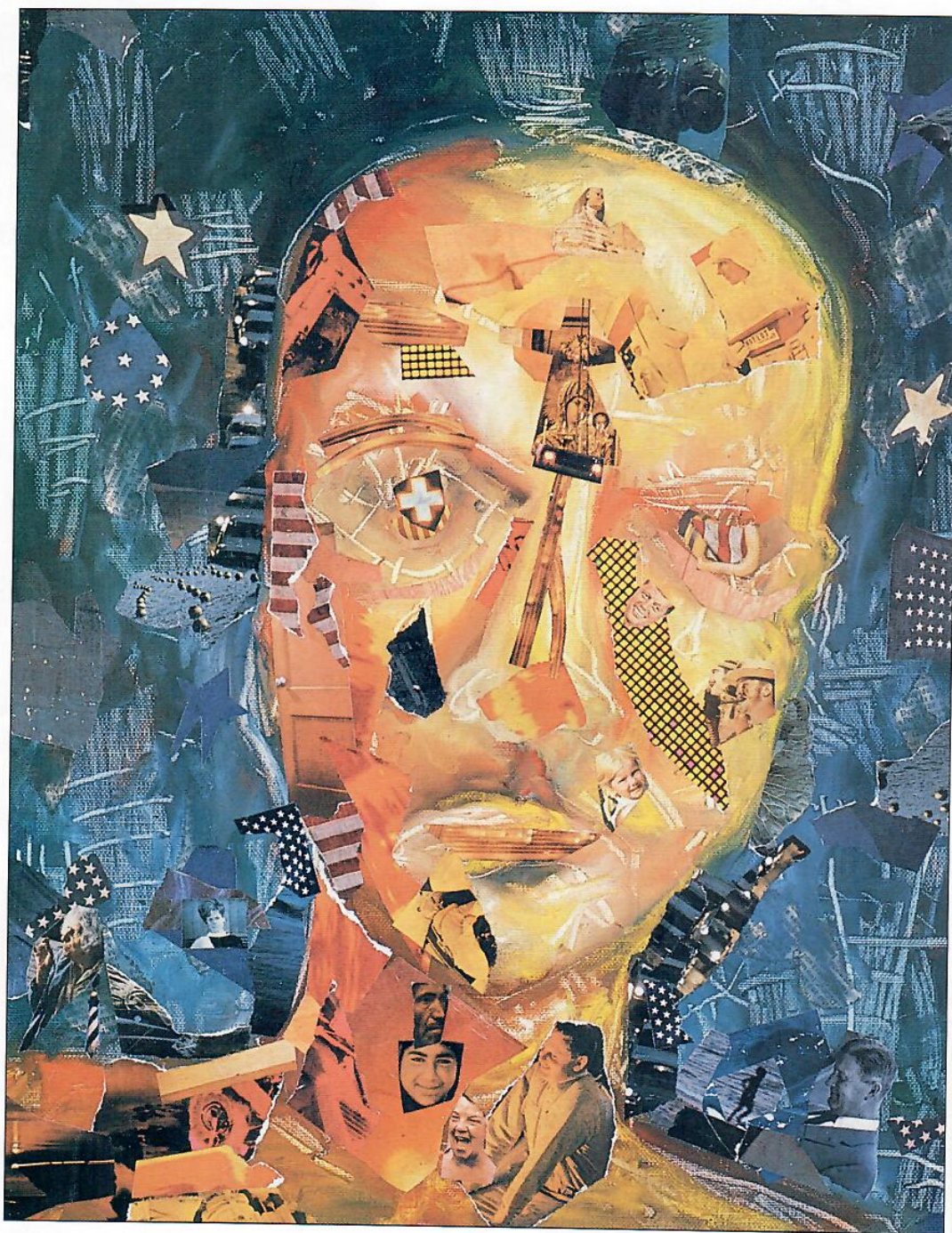
having a hard time in high school dealing with a lot of things. And I had just been diagnosed with clinical depression. I went through a lot of emotional upheaval, and creating this self-portrait helped me express my feelings. I feel this piece was a turning point for me. It was the first time I'd used art as therapy. Before that, I saw art as a creative process. Now, it became a way for me to understand what I was going through and to express my feelings to others. After that, art became my passion.

### What do the images mean?

Everything has to do with the way I was feeling about the world, about myself and my family. An image would remind me of my grandfather, of people I know, or of an emotion I was feeling. There are certain things I put in purposely, like the cross in the forehead. At the time I was questioning my life, my religion, my beliefs. With all my suffering, it felt like I was being given up for something higher than myself. So I think I wanted the cross to symbolize that feeling of being crucified. I also tore some images into strips because I was feeling down, lonely, and afraid—kind of torn, ragged, and worn out. I had become very interested in angels, so they are also a theme. I use stars a lot because of their mystical, angelic feeling.

### Can you tell us about the colors you chose?

The work actually started out as a painting. I put a form in the middle which became a head. I played with the colors to get the shades I wanted. I liked it, but I



knew it needed something. When I showed it to my art teacher, she agreed. Romare Bearden is her favorite artist, so she showed me some of his collages. I loved his really bright colors and the way he uses stories and experiences from his own life in his work. I got excited about collage as a medium, so I began adding magazine photos and designs to my painting and just went with it.

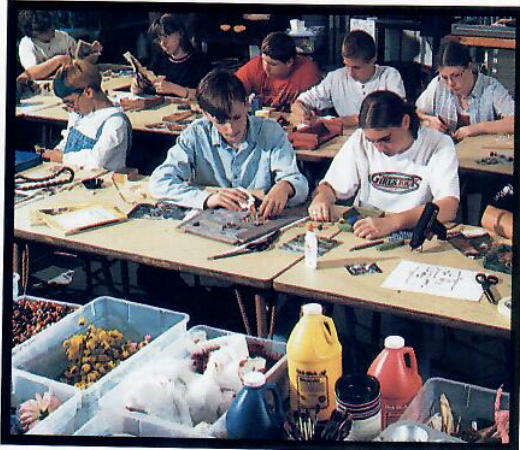
### When did you know you were finished?

I don't know. I don't ever really finish. I remember an artist saying he never finishes anything. He just abandons it and returns after a while. I do the same thing, probably because I don't want to think my work is done and it can't evolve any further. So I guess that's what I've done with this piece, I've abandoned it. Maybe some day I'll get back to it.

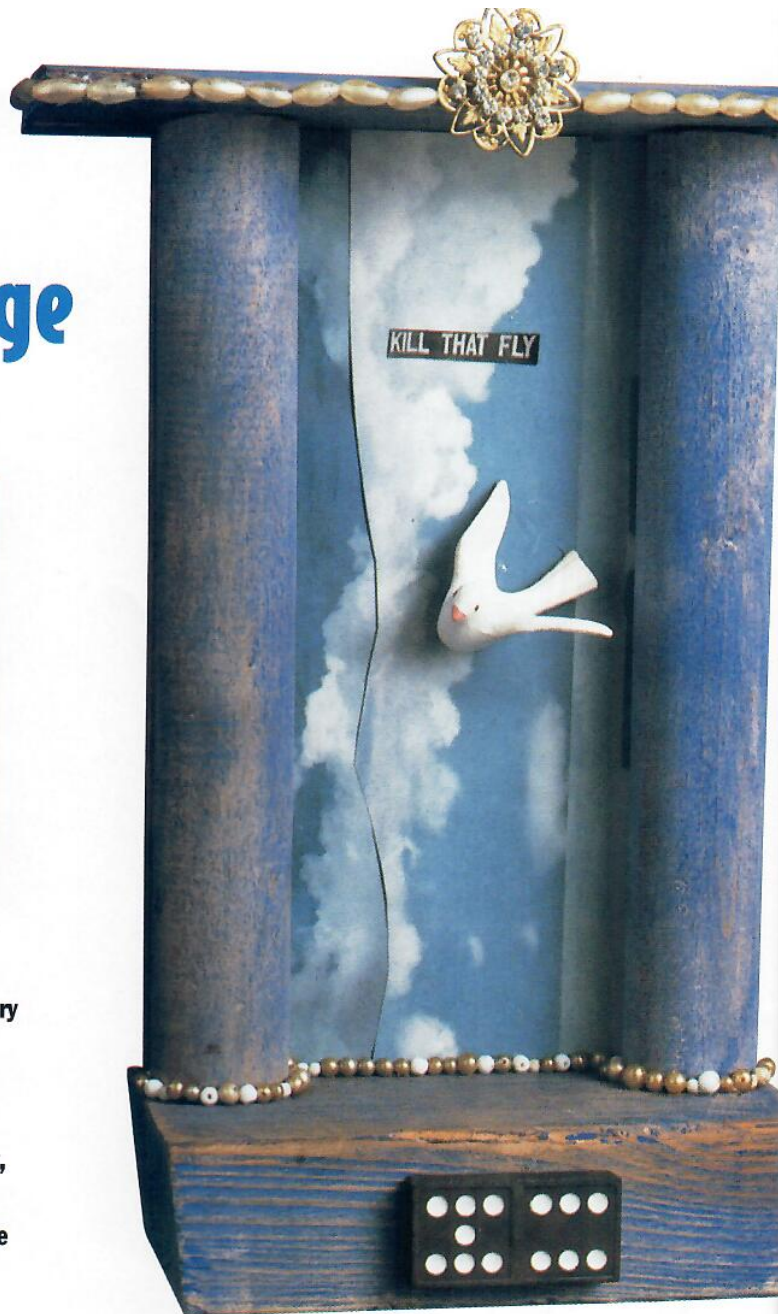


# Constructing a Visual Message

Create your own world  
inside a small box.



Artists like Betye Saar use objects and images to create their own private universe. They combine ordinary items so the viewer can see them in a completely new way. The messages contained in many of Betye Saar's assembled boxes, such as *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, have a social message. As you create your box, you too may want to develop a political idea. Your message might be based on a real situation. Your theme could be rooted in fantasy. Or the objects in your box could take on symbolic meanings.



## Starting out

Several weeks before beginning this assignment, start collecting as many small, low-relief discarded objects and bits of wood as you can. Ask relatives and friends to help. Consider items such as jewelry, buttons, bottle caps, washers, wire, screws, nails, small metal pieces, string, rope, beads, fur, feathers, plastic flowers, dolls, small figures, etc. Will your objects be **solid, open, curved, geometric, mechanical, natural, pointed, jagged**? File and store objects. The more you have to select from, the better the sculptures will be.



## Materials

- Variety of wood scraps
- Old magazines
- Selection of manufactured and natural objects
- Elmer's Glue-All
- Hot glue gun
- Coping saw
- Sandpaper
- X-Acto knife
- School pencil
- Tempera paint—assorted colors
- Newspapers

## Step 2.

Look through magazines for visual imagery—especially large areas to use for backgrounds. Come up with themes you wish to explore. Collect images that support or connect to your idea. Think about using **photo images, negative space, color, texture.** Will your background be **plain, rough, smooth, shiny, dull?**

Assemblages by (left to right): Chris Paul Reed; Kimberly A. Deets; Damien P. Beveroth.



## Step 3.

Once you have determined size of box, select four wood pieces for a frame. Your frame can be **horizontal, vertical, or square.** All sides can be similar: both sides can match; top can be plain or decorated. The frame can suggest images—a house; a castle; columns; a stage; a figure. Cut wood pieces so they fit together; sand; lightly paint. Hold together temporarily with masking tape. Back to be cut from wood or stiff cardboard. Begin to assemble flat background images. Look through three-dimensional objects; select pieces to use. **DO NOT GLUE ANYTHING DOWN UNTIL COMPOSITION IS FINAL.** Arrange and rearrange. You may **weave, overlap or wrap images around frame.** Images may extend slightly beyond frame. Glue down objects only when you are satisfied with composition. Use tiny dots of glue to prevent wrinkling.

## Some Solutions

**Which of these frames are decorative? Which are part of the work's message? How do classical columns, romantic jewelry, and "eye" shapes repeated many times reflect the themes inside these frames? Which of these artists has used a nearly symmetrical (both sides are the same) composition to create a calm, classical feeling? Which scene's asymmetrical (visually equal, with different elements on each side) composition, square format, or curving shapes emphasize its feeling of romance? Are there any pieces here that may question contemporary American values? Is there a piece which might contrast images symbolizing basic values with images that stand for unimportant and trivial pursuits?**

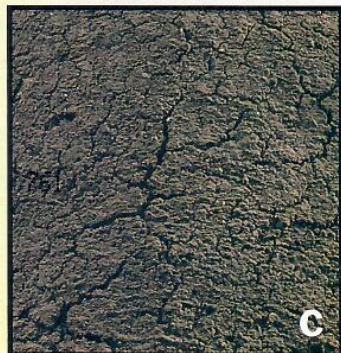
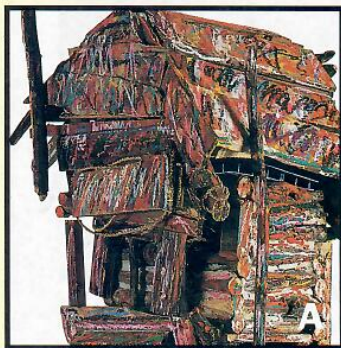
Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., Art Instructor, Morrison (IL) High School.  
Photos by Larry Gregory



# Telling Quotes

## Match the Art With the Artist's Words

Each of these sculptures appeared in this issue. Each statement was made by an artist who created one of these works. Can you match the artist, the quote, and the work of art? Read the quote. Decide which artist said it. In the box below, find the letter that corresponds with the artist's name. Write it under the quote. Then fill in the letter of his or her sculpture.



**1.** "I sort of stepped into the process of connecting metal objects together. When I started to weld, it was between me and the materials."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**2.** "When I'm stuck on a piece, I ask my mother. She sees it with fresh eyes. We support each other emotionally and artistically."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**3.** "I work with chance, accident, and rawness. I enjoy working with my hands. As I build a piece, it slowly begins to make its own statement."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**4.** "Sometimes people are dazzled by cartoon-like designs, decoration, and bright colors. They don't notice what's going on under the surface."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**5.** "I wanted this young homeless boy to look just like who he was."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**6.** "We both collect, gather, and accumulate things. But I tend to use small objects with magic overtones. Her art is larger than life."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**7.** "I like to polish the smooth contours of the marble to bring out its beauty."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

**8.** "I may not know the particular family who lived there, but I do know a family like them. I wanted to make the piece feel like someone lived in it."

Artist \_\_\_\_\_  
Art \_\_\_\_\_

- a) Beverly Buchanan
- b) Alison Saar
- c) Augusta Savage
- d) Martin Puryear
- e) Elizabeth Catlett
- f) Melvin Edwards
- g) Betye Saar
- h) Tom Miller

**Hints:** Consider facts about the artists' lives. Are they related? Think about the subjects in each artist's work. Consider the materials and processes the artists use. Do they carve in marble, weld metal, use natural materials, assemble found objects?

