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BOMB

Thread to the Word: Alison Saar by Hadley Keats

Alison Saar and Hadley Keats take a stroll through Madison Square Park to explore the origin and curse of the Bombshell.

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Alison Saar's "Spring," 2011 in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Dee, Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

The only legend I have ever known is the story of a daughter lost in hell. And forced and imposed there, she becomes the queen of all it. Come and Persephone the summer, And the train thrug about the legend is the story of a woman in hell.
—Ezra Pound, "The Pisan Cantos"

On the Saturday night before I met with Alison Saar, I walked through Madison Square Park. The Shake Shack was packed, people crowded into the papery fall air. Some leaves littered the ground under my feet, others clung and rustled overhead. The seasons turned into each other.

Saar's Sweeney, however, were hesitant to emerge from the darkness the serpentine branches of "Tortoi" had sought quick grains of coffee, a cringe fortified period specifically against "Sunnyside" crumbled wonds, and "Spring" with its ankle-length dress and bare feet.

"Harlan and Fellows" the installations of four seasons that Saar created for the Madison Square Art Program, was revealed in its full splendor the night before I met with Saar. Sweeney, Tortoi, Spring, and Sun bowlerooted in 1994, the pieces form a large-form City Suite of bulbs, seasons, and implications. They operate, most directly, through the mythological figure of Persephone, who, in Greek and Roman iconographies accumulate the images of each piece—the spinning of the seasons is a constant reference to Persephone's cyclical journey between the world of the living and the underworld, and her symphonies said to having towards the King of the Underworld.

It is almost too tempting, though, to understand these digits from tall bodies as straight allegory. They connect with such springs in Persephone's legend that their other meanings—gynecological, artistic, mythological—become secondary, or tertiary, or quaternary. Saar's work articulated in our conversation, "Harlan and Fellows" was not an medium for the artist's meditations on her multiple subjectivities as a woman, a mother, a daughter, a lover, a creator, a complex both one woman, and many, one process, and many.

This sense of personal entanglement is perhaps the best way to approach the Bombshell, the curse of Saar's family that Saar's ancestors guards Betsye and Richard Bass, who gave birth to Saar's mother that it is completely normal for family and art to be inextricably connected. In 1994, Saar's mother, Betsye Bass, was a well-known Los Angeles and Hollywood to periodically dragged from the backyard to become somebody's legs. It's no wonder, then, that the women in Saar's work can be read as a kind of family portrait, and that the family portrait is inevitably suited to the monstrous creation of Madison Square Park, they would be at home anywhere.

Throughout our walk around the Park, Saar described the process and significance behind each of her sculptures. We began with "Spring" and ended with "Sun." It seems fitting. "Verrine Jasmine"

SPRING

Alison Saar:
You know, I'm surprised at how many people actually look up and see "Spring," crouching there. She's kind of—you can ignore the stuff around her, and she's just hulking her up—she's perched up, there, in a limited space.

Each of the pieces is about—I know, the cycles of nature, but they're also about the cycles of women—our bodies and their machinations. And the cycle of women's bodies, and how that ties into the cycle of the earth. Thinking about the earlier today. The cycle of the earth, the cycle that's rotting, really, were the "Tortoi" that constructed nearby eighteen years ago. And, I'm sorry, I'm forgetting the name of the artist I was pregnant with my daughter, who died eighteen in December. In so many ways, then, the work has come full circle. It's pretty powerful to be here, and to be in this space, and to be in this neighborhood, and to be back to show the ways that creativity is a process of four and seasons.

Hadley Keats:
So talk to me about "Spring" specifically. How does she fit into that process?

AS:
Well, "Spring" is an adolescent. She's kind of in a stage of limbo—she's up in the tree, and her feet aren't touching the ground. The moths that are around her are kind of—they're kind of—they're transformational moments two worlds. So, I don't know if you can see, but there are the caterpillars crawling on her, and their cocoons, and then the full bodied moths are coming out of the cocoons. And they're transformed into butterflies.

I had to be so careful with her because I don't want—I'm very glad she Mexico much more been ten of about that time, she was just starting in get sassy—and I was like, you know, or a newborn, for two months, and I was like, I don't want to do that to her. I don't want to do that to her. And she's laughed. This piece here is actually very similar to "Tree Bark," that's where this figure is a young adult sitting on a climbs tree, and she's looking up at the moon. And she's kind of—she's—she's—she's

don’t write, when I can’t write for whatever reason, I feel, frankly, de-stabilized. It’s dangerous for me not to write.

— Sigrid Nunez

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