

Membership Office

THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM



200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11238-6052

DIRECTIONS

Subway: 2 or 3 to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum. Or switch to 2 or 3 at Nevins Street (across platform) from 4 or 5. Bus: B71 stops in front of Museum. For detailed directions by car, call (718) 638-5000.

The Woods Within

A Grand Lobby Installation by

Stones have been known to move and trees to speak.

—Macbeth, IV, iii, 209

Alison Saar

The work of Alison Saar addresses humanity in the broadest sense. Through the use of archetypal images, Saar reaches out to audiences from backgrounds as culturally and ethnically diverse as her own. Her mother, well-known artist Betye Saar, has European, Native American, and African-American ancestors; her father, Richard Saar, painter turned conservator, is of German and Scottish origin. Fragments of lore, myth, and legend as well as the practices of the everyday, rooted in these cultural backgrounds, are woven into Saar's powerful images, where contemporary expression enshrines centuries of man's spiritual evolution.

Alison Saar was born in California and grew up in Laurel Canyon in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time the area was not a fashionable part of Hollywood Hills but a neighborhood of progressive people on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Saar sees her upbringing as rural, and her understanding and love of nature are rooted in that experience. The Saars were members of the inclusive and tolerant Unitarian church, which was well suited to the inquisitive minds of their three talented daughters. In keeping with the openness of the time, both parents encouraged the girls to look at a wide range of works of art. They were given books on Leonardo da Vinci and taken to the area museums. They also saw whimsical outsider art, such as the visionary artist Simon Rodia's famous Watts Towers in Los Angeles, a group of three monumental structures of pottery-encrusted steel tubing reaching 100 feet, and Grandma Priscilla's Bottle Village in Simi Valley, a complex of buildings with walls from discarded bottles joined with cement. Alison's fascination with vernacular folk art and the visionary artists' ability to build an oasis of beauty from cast-off objects had a profound and lasting influence on her.

During high school Alison began assisting her father in his restoration work. Dealing with artifacts from different cultures—Chinese frescoes, Egyptian mummies, and Precolumbian and African art—taught Alison about properties of various materials, techniques, and aesthetics. At Scripps College, Saar studied with Dr. Samella Lewis, a noted scholar in the field of African and Caribbean art. Having taken more art history courses than studio classes, she graduated with a thesis on southern African-American folk art. Saar did graduate work at Otis-Parsons Institute. While preparing for her graduate exhibition in 1981, she rejected all of her already completed work

and within a few weeks developed a new aesthetic that she still follows today. Unlike her earlier works in handmade paper, which relied on Joseph Albers's color theories and Mark Rothko's abstractions, these new works were crudely carved figures with intensely visible fabrication and a clear relationship to folk art.



Tree Souls (2 details), 1994. Wood copper, circa 16 feet high. Collection of the artist

Like many outsider artists, Saar lacks formal technical training in carving and sculpture, which brings to her work the energy of the new and unexpected. She increasingly chose found objects for materials: "I liked the fact that found metals and found pieces of wood have a history. It was almost a fetishism. So I liked that about these materials—that they had had another function at one time and that ghost is still hanging around." Found objects persistently coexist with other materials in most of Saar's work.

The Woods Within comprises two distinct works—*Tree Souls*, completed in 1994,¹ and *Stone Souls*, made expressly for the Grand Lobby. The installation's title is enigmatic. It alludes to the mysteries hidden from our direct observation of nature and suggests that within trees and stones there are spirits that enliven them, give them supernatural qualities, and connect their fate with ours. The work invites a multiple approach—we can admire visible reality by simply observing the majestic forms, and we can concentrate on the spiritual significance of the iconic figures revealed through contemplation.

The male and female figures of *Tree Souls* are monumental variations on the body-tree construction that began to appear in Saar's work in the mid-1980s. The proudly naked, upright bodies emerge from pyramids of tangled roots, their beautiful physiques recalling the dignified postures of Egyptian statuary or archaic Greek sculpture. One sees the marks of chain-saw carving and the raw surfaces enlivened by patches of copper sheathing. *Tree Souls* may be seen as protective, linked perhaps to the

stories of nineteenth-century slaves who escaped through swamps in Florida and hid in the roots of mangrove trees on their way to freedom or to the myth of the Greek nymph Daphne, who found freedom from the unwanted pursuit of the love-struck Apollo by being changed into a laurel tree.

The shade of trees provides comfort, and the crowns of trees offer security. Under the sacred oak trees of northern mythology, national heroes were believed to be born, tribal chieftains were elected, and priests conducted ceremonies. Tree-deities were, and still are, considered omnipotent in societies around the world.

Stones have equally anthropomorphic properties. Some are believed to represent a deity, a man, or a particular object; others may be endowed with special powers or have a soul dwelling in them. Saar's *Stone Souls* are ovoid shapes, each containing a dreaming figure partially emerging from its own mass. The allusion to an egg refers to fertility rites prominent in many developing societies. The figures are presented in fetal position, as if protected in the comfort of the womb through which they must break during the trauma of birth, possibly achieving the heroic proportions of their tree-soul companions.

Together *Tree Souls* and *Stone Souls* constitute a magic landscape, a sacred space, made significant by the events that might have taken place there and enlivened by the invisible spirits believed to be residing in all of its elements. It is a landscape based not on a particular locale but on the artist's vision of the rituals and experiences of the landscape's imaginary inhabitants. Saar has a unique ability to endow her work with a powerful visual narrative. She invites us to carry our inquiry into her work past its compelling surfaces to reach the meanings hidden within.

CHARLOTTA KOTIK
Curator of Contemporary Art

1. Judith Wilson, "Down to the Crossroads: The Art of Alison Saar," in *Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1990), p. 41.

2. *Tree Souls* were exhibited for the first time in *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century* (Denver Art Museum and Columbus Museum of Art), May 1994–January 1995. See pp. 224–27 in the exhibition catalogue.

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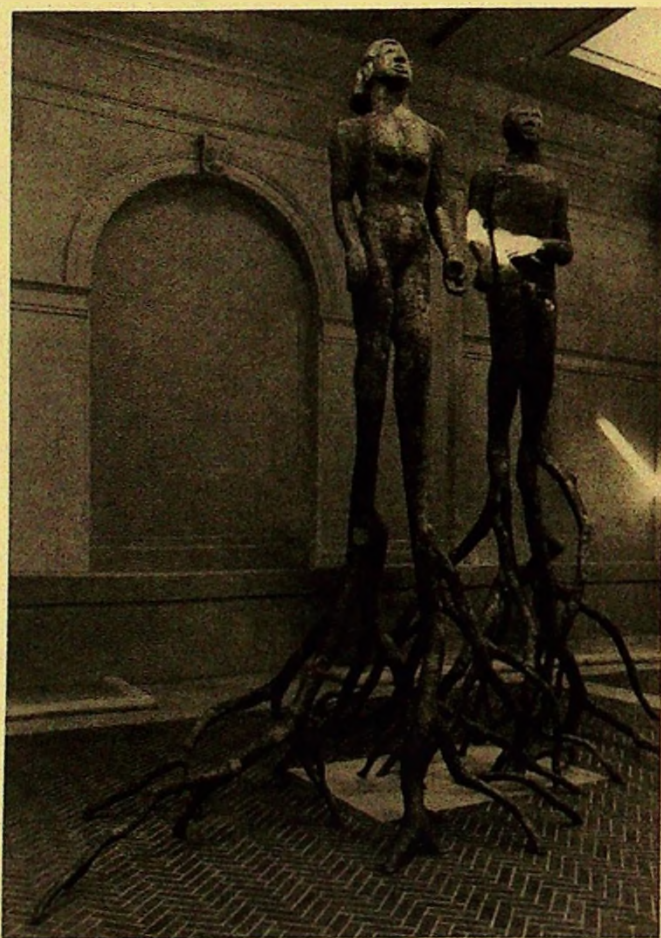


THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM
OCTOBER 13, 1995–SEPTEMBER 8, 1996

The installation is made possible at The Brooklyn Museum by a generous grant from the Peter Norton Family Foundation.

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Tree Souls, 1994. Wood, copper, circa 16 feet high.
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