

“There has been an apparent thread in my art that weaves from my early prints of the 1960s through later collages and assemblages. . . . That thread is a curiosity about the mystical.” Works like *To Catch a Unicorn* and *The Beastie Parade* reveal this longstanding interest of Saar’s, which was supported in part by her broader cultural explorations of the occult in the 1960s. Evoking medieval imagery of unicorns and maidens in jewel-like colors, Saar’s characters appear under the sun and the moon, underscoring the interconnection of the natural and supernatural. A similar sense of mystery imbues Saar’s richly layered landscapes, such as *In the Dell*.

The natural landscape was a common subject of Saar’s early prints. Here, emotion pervades the scene, with soft bands of color filtering through the dense vegetation. The imagery was likely inspired by the artist’s visits to the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve outside Los Angeles. At the time, Saar lived in nearby Redondo Beach and took printmaking classes at California State University, Long Beach. This work was the first Saar formally exhibited, including it in her first group show, at the Palos Verdes Library Gallery in 1961.

A merry band of “Beasties” marches across this large-scale etching, as if illustrating a fairy tale Saar invented for her children. Below the trumpeting elephant, whose face is obscured by an eagle, stands a proud lion, the symbol of Saar’s astrological sign, Leo, and a frequent motif in her work. Rows of smaller animals, made with rubber stamps (on view later in this exhibition), line up beneath them, while a floating mermaid appears on a banner above. Saar has joyously included a range of characters, both real and imagined: as she has frequently said, “You can make art out of anything.”

In 1965, Saar earned a top prize for this print from the Hollywood–Los Feliz Jewish Community Center. The bull, a recurring motif in her work from this time, also becomes a space for exploration of various textures made possible by different etching and printing techniques. The same image appears in the print *Black Angus Meets Big Brahma*, on view nearby. With wry humor, Saar contrasts her majestic animal, which is considered sacred in Hinduism, with a butcher’s carving map.

One of Saar's few early experiments with screenprinting, *Anticipation* depicts the artist pregnant with her third child. The seated female figure, holding flowers, recalls Western religious imagery of the Virgin Mary, but Saar captures both the joy of impending birth and the exhaustion of pregnancy. If her back is straight and her gaze serene, her body is heavy as she finds a moment of calm. *Anticipation* also shows Saar's interest in exploring different textures and patterns in her printed work, from the wall she rests against to her richly colored dress.

During the 1960s, Saar's three daughters—Lezley, Alison, and Tracye—were simultaneously her full-time job and her models and muses. *Girl Children* depicts them together, with the oldest in strict profile and the middle child peeking out from behind the baby, who is front and center. Both playful and mysterious, this and related works celebrate the intimacy of family and hint at Saar's developing interest in ancestral lineage. They also prioritize the experiences of a woman artist and mother, unrecognized by many in the art world in the 1960s.

The woman in this image prefigures the central character of *Black Girl's Window*, her hand raised to the viewer, a band of suns and moons above her head. Layers of marks and imagery fill the rest of the composition, with textures from fabric, letters from rubber stamps, and hand-drawn astrological signs and symbols revealing Saar's interest in incorporating found materials and popular symbols in her prints. Influenced by the work of Joseph Cornell, whose shadow boxes of collected props she saw exhibited in 1967, she would soon transition to using three-dimensional objects in this way, arranging them in display boxes as in *Omen*, made three years later and on view nearby.

“Even at the time, I knew it was autobiographical,” Saar said of her now-iconic assemblage *Black Girl's Window*. The black girl of the title, with her winking blue eyes cut from novelty glasses, occupies the work's large central panel, appearing between parted curtains and against a backdrop of Saar's print *Lo, The Mystique City*, on view at right. The upper portions of the window are like thought bubbles of Saar's interests and reflections, encompassing her family history, astrology, and the unknown. “Death is in the center,” she said. “Everything revolves around death.” To Saar, however, death is not an end but rather a transitional state linking the past and the future, much as a window links the inside and the outside.

Saar's "mystique city" of 1965 is populated by animals and mysterious figures peeking through windows, its skyline a mixed row of found shapes and curious details. An arc of suns, moons, and stars rises above it, inspired by a graphic the artist saw above a newspaper's astrology column. These forms, in various arrangements and sizes, are a regular motif in the artist's prints from 1965 on, made from copper shapes (on view in the case nearby) that Saar purchased in bulk at a jewelry store. Another copy of *Lo, The Mystique City*, printed in a different color, can be found in the lower half of *Black Girl's Window*.

Saar's personal collection of found objects includes items that continue to inspire her, like the plaster phrenology model marked with the areas of the brain purportedly tied to certain emotions and faculties. She has kept many of the materials she used to make her prints of the 1960s. These include the etched plate for the Phrenology Man figure that appears in many works in this exhibition and the stamps, stickers, and copper shapes she used in her soft-ground etchings.

The soft-ground etching process allows an artist to capture the outline and texture of an object by pressing it into a waxy ground. This technique was particularly attractive to Saar as it provided a way to include found objects in her prints.



Photo courtesy Bill Fick

Phrenology, a pseudoscience that has been definitively debunked, links portions of the human brain to different character traits and capacities. It gained popularity in the nineteenth century and was cited by proponents of slavery and segregation as proof of the inferiority of African Americans. That a black woman adopted this motif in her work may seem subversive, but according to Saar, she was attracted to phrenology as a map of the unknown, in keeping with her interest in astrology and palmistry. Her own Phrenology Man, who appears in this print and several other works on view, has the words “SEX” and “HATE” tumbling through his mind, together with animals, flowers, and astrological signs.

Tarot cards, depicted in this print, are dealt and read as a way to predict the future. Saar included imagery drawn from a deck she owned, while also using her signature vocabulary of images. Her selection of cards includes *Les Etoiles* (The Stars) and *La Lune* (The Moon), as well as one filled with the animal stamps she used frequently in her printed work from this time. Many of these images are hand drawn by Saar in exquisite detail.

Throughout her career, Saar has kept sketchbooks of drawings and ideas for her work. These two examples from 1968–69, the period when she completed *Black Girl's Window*, reflect her exploration of astrological symbols and characters, as well as her exacting draftsmanship and love of bold color. The spiral-bound book is filled with images of lions and mythical creatures inspired by a trip to Italy the previous year, and a near duplicate of the cover drawing appears in *Black Girl's Window*. Saar's daughter Alison added her own drawing to this book, *Give a Lion a Home*, several years later.

Saar's exploration of the mystical did not protect her from the harsh realities facing African Americans in the United States during the 1960s and '70s. "The anger just built and built and built. . . . I had three kids, so I couldn't march. . . . But I could make art." The signs of political awareness that emerged in *Black Girl's Window* dominate later works. Here, Saar juxtaposed found racist caricatures with drawings of hooded Ku Klux Klansmen and a picture of a small black boy looking at a "White Section Only" sign. For the artist, recognizing the historic denigration of black people was critical to understanding, and fighting, racial violence and oppression.

Across the span of three window panes, Saar transforms a banjo-playing minstrel figure into a rifle-bearing revolutionary. In the central panel, an outline of the musician is set against a photograph of a lynching, a crowd of white onlookers testifying to the horrific "entertainment" value of this crime. From these two images emerges the third, a black man set against the colors of the Pan-African flag, armed and ready to fight against these historic wrongs and their contemporary legacy.

Saar continued to explore in subsequent bodies of work the themes of family history and ancestry that appear in *Black Girl's Window*. "Keep for Old Memiors" is one of a series of assemblages she made with items that belonged to her great-aunt Hattie Parson Keys, who had died the previous year. "The letters, autographs, hankies, scraps of lace, and fabric are fragments from the past," Saar said, "a sort of sentimental journey back when time moved slower and people collected memories." Here, these elements are collaged into a picture frame caressed by two gloves.