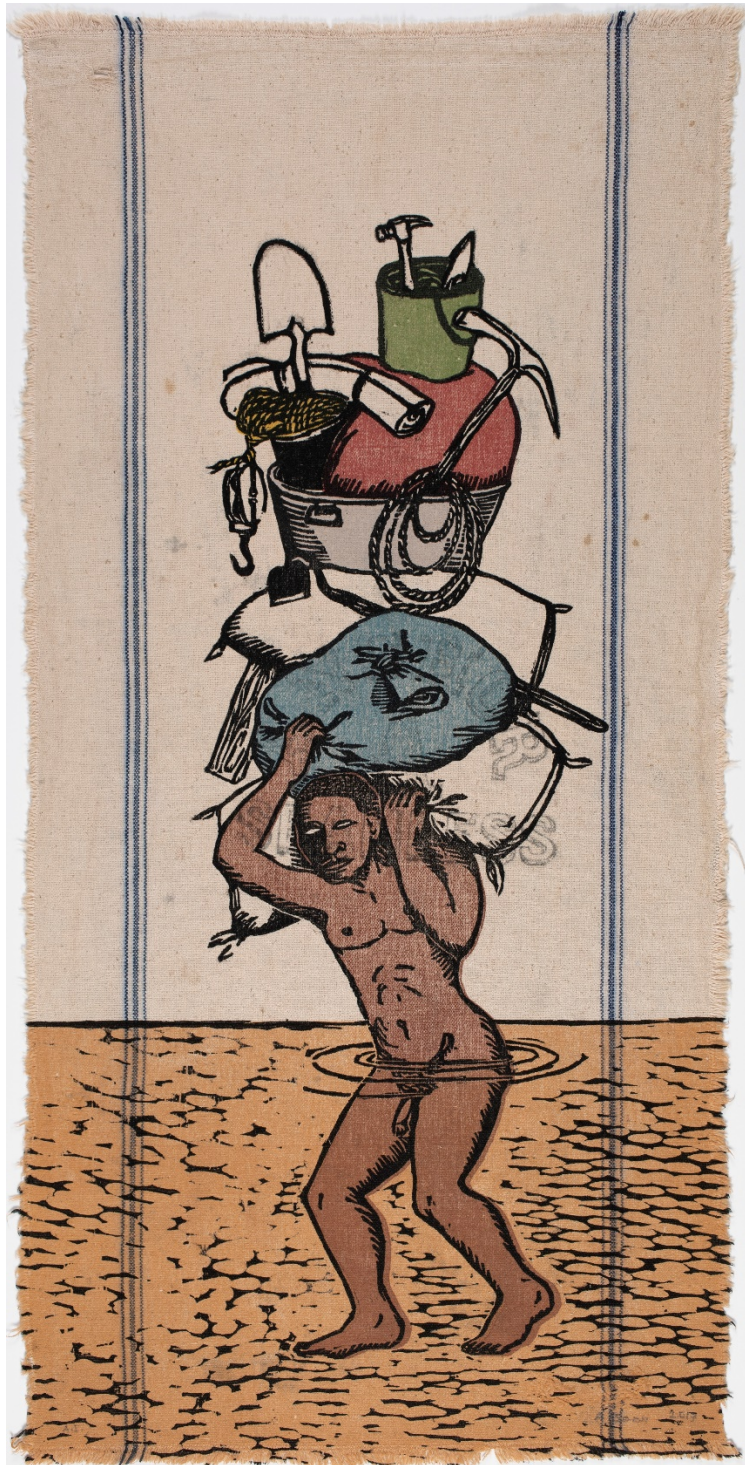




Alison Saar, *Stanch*, 2017



Woodcut on vintage linen seed sacks, 42 x 20 3/4 in.
Transfer from Tandem Press, 2020.8.53



Artist Biography

I wanted to make art that told a story, that would engage people. I wanted them to be moved by my work, whether it was specifically what my intentions were or not did not matter. I wanted them to be drawn in and affected by my sculpture.

—Alison Saar¹

Through sculptures, assemblages, drawings, prints, and installations, artist Alison Saar (American, b. 1956) explores interconnected issues of race, gender, history, and politics, especially as it concerns the experiences of women. Born and raised in California, Saar is the biracial daughter of acclaimed artist Betye Saar and painter and art conservator Richard Saar. Growing up as a light-skinned person of mixed race, she felt rejected from both white and black communities and subsequently feels that her artworks “are between two worlds.”² She recalled in high school, “A group of us hung together: a gay male, a woman who was Native American, a black woman who was raised in the white suburbs, and myself. We clung to each other. No one recognized us in any form.”³ [implications in her sculpture]

She earned a BA in studio art and art history from Scripps college, where her study of non-Western art history was very influential to her future art. From there, she earned a MFA from Otis Parsons Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) in 1981. Saar’s debut exhibition occurred in Los Angeles in June 1982. She moved from California to Brooklyn the following year for a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Saar has received many fellowships and awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984 and 1988, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1989. In 1993, she was included in the Whitney Biennial. In 1995, she returned to Los Angeles from New York, where she continues to live. She was a 2013 Joan Mitchell Foundation grant recipient, selected to participate in the Joan Mitchell Center’s Artist-in-Residence Pilot Program.

In 1991, Saar was selected to create artwork for the Harlem-125th Street aboveground subway platform by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The resulting work, *Hear the Lone Whistle Moan*, is created of bronze grilles and reliefs. When the station was improved in 2018, the project was expanded through the addition of 24 more laminated glass panels showing Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s, when it was the hub of a dynamic cultural scene.

Saar’s work synthesizes elements of African, Latin American, Caribbean, and European-American histories and cultures. She frequently utilizes found natural and human-made materials, such as soil, wood, wax, roots, kitchen utensils, and vintage textiles, to materially signify those histories and cultures in meaningful ways. Of these varied influences, she has said: “I guess because my personal background and personal make-up is mixed, it has made me curious about other cultures, some of which tie into my own personal history and some of which don’t.”⁴

¹ Gary Brewer, “‘I Wanted to Make Art that Told a Story’: Alison Saar on Her Eloquent Sculptures,” [Hyperallergic](#) (May 1, 2018)

² Ronica Sanders Smucker, “Interview: Alison Saar,” *Art Papers* (July/August 1994), 16

³ Ronica Sanders Smucker, “Interview: Alison Saar,” *Art Papers* (July/August 1994), 16

⁴ Ronica Sanders Smucker, “Interview: Alison Saar,” *Art Papers* (July/August 1994), 15



Chazen Museum of Art Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Resiliency and Surviving Trauma

The Chazen Museum of Art will be exhibiting an exhibition of Alison Saar's artwork this summer, running from June 5 to August 8, 2021.



Location

Stanch is currently installed at the Chazen Museum in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Stanch is a multi-color woodcut print created by Alison Saar in 2017. The large vertical print measures forty inches by twenty and three fourths inches and is printed on cloth from a reclaimed linen seed sack that has been separated. The cloth from the sack is off-white in color, has irregular frayed edges and occasional brown spots which suggest wear. A set of matching blue stripes runs vertical along the sack and divides the linen surface into thirds. Each set of blue stripes is composed of three individual bands and a black stamp indicating the seed sack's branding is evident across the center of the linen, although partially obstructed by the central figure. Standing directly center and spanning the height of the sack is a nude African American male. His brown body bends slightly to our left and he carries a stack of household objects stacked upon his shoulders. His eyes appear devoid of life as they are empty white ovals. The stack of objects includes, from his shoulders upward, two white objects that resemble seed sacks, a blue gunny sack, a hoe, and a gray basin. The gray basin holds several pails and handheld tools including a pickaxe, rope, shovel, hammer, garden spade, grappling hook, a mound of red fabric, and a rolled-up object which resembles a scroll. He balances the weight of the stack on his back with his arms raised above his head, holding the two white objects that resemble seed sacks. He stands in waist high water as evidenced by a black horizon line that runs perpendicular to his waist. The water occupies the lower third of the image which has been printed a golden-brown. A halo of lines circling his waist mimicking ripples, such as those caused by a pebble being dropped in water indicates that he is standing in, not outside, the water. Black gouge marks from the woodcut process spread across the golden-brown surface which suggest texture of uneven earth like sand beneath his feet. They also read like facets across the surface of a diamond. These black marks have varying density and are more heavily concentrated on the right side of the image.



Content and Context

Stanch and its companion print, *Breach* (see Curatorial Connections section below), are part of a larger project in which Alison Saar explored humankind's complicated relationship with water—a powerful source of life, but one that can also catastrophically threaten people's well-being. Too often, destruction caused by hurricanes and floods disproportionately affect disadvantaged people of color, as evidenced by the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in 2017. The inspiration for the sculptures, prints, and drawings comprising Saar's work addressing these issues began during her three-week residency in New Orleans in 2013 at the Joan Mitchell Center. She often rode her bike through areas of the city that remained in disrepair eight years after Hurricane Katrina hit. Surprised by the lingering damage and the U.S. government's unkept promise to rebuild homes in these predominately black neighborhoods, Saar began researching the history of flooding in America, particularly its impact on African American communities and learned about similar racial inequities that occurred during Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927.

The Great Mississippi River Flood resulted from a confluence of factors, including severe storms in the fall of 1926 and the following spring and large snowmelts, which all-together caused tributary rivers to swell, breaching several levees. The resulting flood covered 27,000 square miles in seven states and displaced approximately 637,000 people. Many of these refugees were black men, women, and children who lived in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, in counties with the highest percentages of African Americans in the nation. Because of the Southern sharecropping economy of the Jim Crow era, many African Americans were forced into relief camps to keep them from fleeing north. They were guarded at gunpoint, cheated out of Red Cross supplies, and required to work on repairing the failing levees. In his essay, "Great Mississippi Flood of 1927: A 75-Mile Wide Inland Sea," John M. Barry surveys the history of the long-forgotten catastrophe and its transformative effects on politics, civil engineering, and blues music (see Additional Resources below).

Both Hurricane Katrina and the Great Mississippi River Flood are examples of environmental racism, "a form of systemic racism whereby communities of colour are disproportionately burdened with health hazards through policies and practices."⁵ This term was devised in 1982 by civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis.

In her practice, Saar creates prints and drawings that often relate to sculptures of the same subject. She tends to create bodies of interconnected work that explore a shared theme. This is the case for both *Stanch* and *Breach*, woodcuts that the artist created in 2017 at Tandem Press at UW—Madison. Both are based on standalone sculptures made the year prior (*Breach* is now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).⁶ The viewer might consider the subjects of the sculptures, along with the woodcuts, refugees of the 1927 flood. The figures are seen carrying a mass of belongings, likely the only possessions they have been able to take with them. Although they form a pair, the two nude figures—one male, one female (a modern Adam and Ever, perhaps?)—respond to the flood with different forms of resilience. Like the Greek god Atlas, who held up the world on his shoulders, the male figure uses

⁵ Peter Beech, "What is environmental racism?," *World Economic Forum* [website](#)

⁶ Alison Saar. *Breach*, 2016. Wood, ceiling tin, found trunks, washtubs, and other objects, 155 × 60 × 51 in. Collection of the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art



muscular strength to carry a pile of tools, such as a pail, a shovel, and a pick-axe, as he wades waist-deep in water. These are likely the tools that would have been used in the repair of levees.

In contrast, Saar modeled the female figure on Senegalese women and children she encountered during a visit to Senegal in 2006. These African women and children defy gravity by balancing massive bundles of goods atop their heads with ease. The woman in *Breach* does the same, balancing the mass while also standing upright on a raft and maneuvering it with a pole. In addition to these references, in regard to other sculptures she has created of figures balancing stacks of household items on their heads throughout her career, Saar has cited Yemaya, a creolization of the name of the Yoruba god Yemonja. This deity is considered the giver of life and mother of all other *orisha* (deities) in Yoruba tradition, as well as being closely associated with rivers and the ocean.

Saar's decision to print *Stanch* and *Breach* on repurposed linen sacks is emblematic. As the black man and woman are defined by the objects they carry and their actions, the cloth that materially supports their images speaks to histories of black labor in the United States. Notably, the man in *Stanch* carries similar sacks among his belongings. Originally designed to hold grain or other commodities, the sacks once contained products grown and harvested by African Americans, first as enslaved individuals on plantations and later as sharecroppers on farms owned by others. Both economic systems exploited black bodies for the commercial gain of elite white landowners. During the Great Mississippi Flood, the same types of commercial sacks became sandbags, carried by black bodies conscripted to shore up (stanch) broken levees (breaches).

In these prints, Saar has reclaimed the fabric of the seed sacks, this time to carry examples of another group of African Americans: those who—faced with the loss of their homes and way of life—took the opportunity to pick up their belongings and migrate north and west, to cities across the country from Chicago to Los Angeles, in search of higher ground and their own economic opportunities. Saar has attested to her fascination with the resiliency of black culture; in regard to slave narratives, she stated that she is captivated by the “strength to survive and transcend all of that pain... Through all that ugliness we have somehow managed to have hope and faith in ourselves.”⁷

⁷ Ronica Sanders Smucker, “Interview: Alison Saar,” *Art Papers* (July/August 1994), 19



Discussion Questions

1. Imagine that you had to suddenly flee your home and could only bring items that you could physically carry with you. What would you bring and why? How would you prioritize what to gather?
2. Saar intentionally printed this image on a seed sack, which adds another layer of meaning. How would this work be different had it been printed on paper? Is the seed sack integral to the interpretation, or meaning, of this work?
3. Saar has said that the three most important themes of her work are identity, empowerment, and spirit. Are any of these themes evident in this work? If so, what do you see that makes you say that?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Fabrice Monteiro (Belgian/Beninese, active in Senegal, b. 1972), [Untitled, #7 from The Prophecy](#), 2014, Color inkjet print, 38 1/8 x 53 7/8 in., J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund Purchase, 2020.10.

Fabrice Monteiro seeks to raise awareness of environmental devastation in West Africa through his series, *The Prophecy*. *Untitled #7* illustrates the harsh reality of poverty coupled with poor infrastructure in Senegal as the resident here is forced to live with standing flood water—an unfortunate annual occurrence. Both Saar and Monteiro reference Mami Wata, a water deity venerated throughout Africa and the African diaspora.

Alison Saar (American, b. 1956), [Breach](#), 2017, Woodcut on vintage linen seed sacks, 42 1/4 x 20 1/4 in., Transfer from Tandem Press, 2020.8.56.

A companion print to *Stanch*, *Breach* is part of a larger project in which Alison Saar explored humankind's complicated relationship with water—a powerful source of life, but one that can also catastrophically threaten people's well-being.

Unknown (Ivorian, Guro People). [Seri Mask Honoring Mami Wata](#), 1960s. Wood, enamel paint, 21 9/16 x 12 9/16 x 6 1/8 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2001.8.

This mask honors Mami Wata (“Mother Water”), a water deity venerated throughout Africa and the African diaspora. Mami Wata is a figure that Saar often references in her work.

Tom Uttech (American, b. 1942). [Nin Mamakadendam](#), 2010. Oil on linen, 84 x 96 in. Carolyn T. Anderson Endowment Fund, Chazen Museum of Art General Endowment Fund, Stanley J. Lenerz Endowment Fund, and Richard E. Stockwell Endowment Fund purchase, 2011.1. On view on Chazen Mezzanine.



Tom Uttech does not consider himself an environmental artist, however, his paintings of migrating animals have become synonymous with encroachment. As species of all stripes seemingly flee together, his work suggests a larger commentary on both wildlife preservation and the role humans play in environmental destruction.



Additional Resources

John M. Barry, "Great Mississippi Flood of 1927: A 75-Mile Wide Sea," in *Breach*, exh. cat. edited by Stevie O. Daniels and Kathyne Keck-Harris (Easton, PA: Lafayette College Art Galleries, 2017) [pdf of entire catalogue available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Beverly A. Cigler, "The "Big Questions" of Katrina and the 2005 Great Flood of New Orleans," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 67: *Special Issue on Administrative Failure in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina* (Dec. 2007) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Emily Elizabeth Goodman. "Alison Saar Breaches the Legacy of Environmental Racism," *Hyperallergic*, November 25, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/412891/alison-saar-breach-university-of-kentucky-art-museum-2017/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

L.A. Louver Gallery, *Alison Saar: Silt, Soot and Smut* (2016), 9 minutes, <https://vimeo.com/166994346>

Richard M. Mizelle Jr. "Introduction" and "Conclusion," *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) [pdfs available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Bill Morrison, *The Great Flood* (Icarus Films, 2013), 78 minutes. Film accessible via UW—Madison Libraries: <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/9911219360402121>

Ronica Sanders Smucker, "Interview: Alison Saar," *Art Papers* (July/August 1994) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]