THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
NEUBAUER COLLEGIUM FOR CULTURE & SOCIETY

Let's Get It On: The Wearable Art of Betye Saar

Opening Reception: Introductory Remarks and Discussion
Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society
Jan. 30, 2025

Tara Zahra: Hi everybody. Welcome. My name is Tara Zahra. I am the faculty director here at the Neubauer Collegium, and I'm not going to speak for very long, but I just wanted to say welcome, especially to those of you who are here for the first time and might be wondering what this place is. The short answer is that we are here to incubate and support collaborative research projects with a humanistic perspective, and one thing that's really unique about us is that we integrate the arts with research. That's obviously evident in our gallery, but also in other projects. We support arts practice as a form of research and art as an expression of research, and we really believe that this kind of research is more important than ever to understanding and addressing the big problems that we face today as a society. In fact, this is our 10th anniversary year. We've been here for 10 years, which is very exciting.

I can't think of a better way to celebrate that than with the work of Betye Saar. Our motto for our 10th anniversary is "The solution is human." I know all problems are human as well, but we hope that by thinking humanistically and thinking with the arts, we can think creatively about ways to move forward at a time that is really challenging.

This is a particularly special opening for us, first and foremost because of the extraordinary work of Betye Saar and her career, which you'll hear more about shortly, and we are so grateful to her for trusting us with her work. This exhibition is also part of a broader series of events that have developed in connection with the Panafrica research project, which is a research project that's been ongoing for five years in partnership with both the Art Institute of Chicago, where the exhibition *Project a Black Planet* recently opened, and the Field Museum. The research team will be organizing Panafrica Days, a series of discussions and performances that will take place at sites across the city March 5th through 8th. That will include a reception here in our gallery on March 7th which Betye plans to attend, so we hope you'll come back for that. It's going to be very special, and a flyer with the full schedule of events and activities is also available at the front desk. We're also excited tonight to have two of our close

partners from the Field Museum, Susan and Jaap, with us, and you'll hear more from Susan Neill in a bit. The tunic in this exhibition that inspired Betye Saar so much is on loan from the Field Museum, and we're very grateful for that.

As always, we're also grateful to Brenda Shapiro for her imagination and support for this gallery and the broader project of integrating arts and research. And finally, I really want to thank all the members of the Neubauer team for the months of work that have gone into preparing this very special exhibition, with special thanks and congratulations to Rachel Johnson, our events manager and gallery assistant. It's been pretty incredible what she's accomplished. And of course, Dieter Roelstraete for his visionary curation. I'm going to turn things over to Dieter now and he'll be introducing you to our speakers, but I just want to say again, thanks for coming and we hope you'll come back for other events and exhibitions in the future.

Dieter Roelstraete: Thank you, Tara, and thanks everyone for coming out in such impressive numbers. Mark Sorkin, my colleague in communications, warned us earlier this week that 525 people had RSVP'd to the event, and I'm so glad that they are not all showing up at one time because, of course, that would be far beyond the legal capacity of this building. And of course, when 525 people RSVP to an opening event, one has to assume that it's in the expectation that Betye would be here. She's not, and I apologize and I sympathize.

I'm happy that so far, I haven't really had to feel a rebellion, but as Tara mentioned, she will be coming on March 7th. That is the plan. Of course, we always have to say she's 98 years old, and was recently forced to evacuate her home of more than 65 years in Laurel Canyon because of the wildfires, but she has safely returned home. Anyway, you're all welcome to come back on March 7th for which I expect 1,000 RSVPs to flood in, of course. One of the reasons why she didn't want to come is because January is too cold for her, too arctic, and interestingly, when we asked her, "If you don't want to come for the opening in late January, is there any chance that you would like to come sometime in February to see the exhibition of your work?" She actually refused and added that she objects to being "wheeled out" during Black History Month. So as soon as Black History Month comes to a close, she'll be here. Anyway, I want to once again thank all my colleagues at the Neubauer Collegium, and Rachel Johnson in particular, for helping realize this exhibition. I also want to thank Julie Roberts and her crew at Roberts Projects in Los Angeles for helping us organize the show. And then, obviously, Betye, if you're listening, and your family. Thank you so much for entrusting us with your work, and thanks to the panelists who have agreed to speak here today in Betye's stead. So, just increasing the pressure a little bit.

Anyway, just a couple of words about the exhibition as such, and then I will proceed to introduce the panelists. So, in October 2023, Betye came to visit the Neubauer Collegium in the company of Susan Neill, our colleague at the Field Museum. The Field Museum had invited Betye to come visit Chicago to reacquaint herself with an object that she first encountered in person in April, 1974, almost 50 years ago to the day. In fact, the exact date of this encounter was April 12th, 1974. An object that literally changed her life and proved utterly transformative in the way in which she would go on to think of herself as an artist.

This item or artifact—this artwork—is a traditional ceremonial robe made by the Bamum people of Northwestern Cameroon sometime in the latter half of the 19th century, which the Field Museum acquired on—and once again, I have the right date—August 7th, 1925. That's exactly 358 days before Betye was born on July 30th, 1926. This robe is here on display in the gallery in the largest vitrine that you'll ever see; we had to kind of take off one of the doors of the building to actually wheel it in. And the robe is shown here opposite and in conjunction with samples of Betye's work primarily in costume design that she was predominantly producing prior to and at the time of this encounter in 1974.

And one of the objects on view in the show is a "cheetah dress"—which Betye made in 1968—that eerily foreshadows the epiphany of her discovery in the Field Museum. When you look at the Bamum robe and then the cheetah dress, it's quite telling to think of the serendipity of that encounter. Much of the work on view in the gallery has never been shown before, and the central argument of the exhibition is that it was the encounter with the ceremonial garment of Central African origin, made of jute and human hair, that helped Betye realize the continuity between what she had been making as a designer for all these years up until then, and what she was increasingly focusing her energies on making from the early to mid-'70s onwards. Namely, pure or fine art. Right?

She was trained as a designer in the applied arts for much of the '60s and early '70s, and made a living primarily as a designer. That's what's on view here in the gallery, but sometime in the early '70s—a very pivotal moment—she embarked on the path that would take her to become the artist that she is known to be today, and the encounter with the Bamum robe in the Field Museum in 1974 was a particularly pivotal moment in that regard.

Anyway, a lot of costume design, none of which we're wearing for the occasion, even though we talked about that briefly. Anyway, but hence the title of this exhibition, which Betye, I should add, came up with herself. *Let's Get It: On the Wearable Art of Betye Saar*. So now I want to "let's get on" with it and allow me to introduce the panel.

So, we'll be listening to Bill Brown, Nyeema Morgan and Susan Neill. And I would invite the panelists to take place if they are so inclined. Bill will be speaking first, a literary scholar here at the University of Chicago who specializes in both American and material culture. He'll talk a little bit about the broader context of Betye's pioneering work in assemblage and sculpture in particular, which started in the early '70s. Bill's remarks will be followed by Nyeema Morgan's, a Chicago-based artist who has taught at UIC and SAIC. The daughter of an artist herself, who I believe showed with Betye Saar sometime-

Nyeema Morgan: They did.

Dieter: They did.

Nyeema: I don't have the dates. Yes.

Dieter: Yes, I like dates. So, let's work on that. Nyeema will be showing her work at the Neubauer Collegium Gallery as well next year—spring of next year. And then finally, Susan Neill, who is the exhibitions planning director at the Field Museum, without whom we wouldn't have a Betye Saar show at all. So, I'll invite Bill to speak, followed by Nyeema, Susan, and then after that, we'll wrap up with an invitation for the audience to ask questions of the panelists, of the curator, and of Betye, which I will try to channel. Thank you so much for coming.

Bill Brown: Thanks very much, Dieter. I work on assemblage theory and the social sciences and on assemblage art practices, especially in the US. That means necessarily that I spend some time thinking about California assemblage and the California assemblage movement, which is thriving by the end of the 1950s. But then within that is also the key Black Assemblage movement, especially in Los Angeles, led in the first instance by Noah Purifoy, but thereafter also Betye Saar and John Outterbridge, all of them close friends and mutually supporting friends. Of those artists, Saar has definitely achieved the greatest national—international—renown. There's a show that the Prada Foundation did in Milan. Her work is currently the first piece you see at the Tate Modern when you walk into the Artists and Society exhibition.

There has been a lot of her work shown. What has not been shown is what is shown in the other room, which is extraordinary. So, I actually want to begin by congratulating Dieter, Elspeth—congratulating the Neubauer—for this absolutely unprecedented exhibition, and its rare glimpse at the other side of her creative life, the design side. But what I'd like to do in the short amount of time I have is to try to break down that dichotomy between art and design a

little. At UCLA, she was, in particular, working on interior design and fabric design. Dieter's really already mentioned this, but while she's designing costumes, she is also making assemblages. So, it's not as though she did this and then she did that. She's doing these things simultaneously. But I'm especially interested in her use of fabric, thread, beads, feathers, woven cotton, woven leather in the assemblages, which is to say the way in which she's still designing and designing with textiles.

But I'm also interested, and this is a matter of going back to that room later this evening, in the costumes as composites. Especially the strippers. If you look at her description, that is Saar's description of the costume for the showgirl stripper, it's green turban with plum feathers, gold jewelry, sequin green halter, green long gloves, green garter belt with purple tassel, chiffon cape. So, there's a composite character of these costumes that she's clearly foregrounding. So, assemblages are made from heterogeneous non-art materials. The other point that I would like to make about Saar's assemblages is the way in which they assemble cultures—and in particular—American culture and African culture. And in particular, mass culture and what we would call high culture. She's also definitely fusing the mystical and the mundane, the ancient and the contemporary. So, I just want to show a few images of her work to provide a context, or let's say, fill in the creative sensibility that she is experiencing while she's doing the design work.

And I also want you to see what I'm showing, or much of what I'm showing, in relation to theater as a context—sets, props, characters, costumes—because I really do feel as though that provides an important context for the early work. So, this is *Nine Mojo Secrets* from '71 made from a salvaged window frame. The image is from *National Geographic*. It's of an African ritual, and the whole is inspired by an African aesthetic to incorporate things like wheat, feathers, woven leather, woven cotton, fur and bones. In part, this is to say that before she gets to the Field Museum, and indeed still in the '60s, she's fascinated by Africa, thinking about Africa. So, there's a kind of synapse clearly when she gets to the Field where she's actually encountering things that she's been imagining and reading about.

Okay, this is her most famous assemblage, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* from '72, which she describes as her response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Watts Rebellion. And this is the beginning of her incredibly extensive use of derogatory Black collectibles and her effort to differently inflect and empower them and to differently inflect and empower racist stereotypes. Clearly here, one can read the box as something inherited from Joseph Cornell, but also inclined to read it as a stage within which a familiar character is given new props. A shotgun in her left hand and a grenade. And I

don't know whether it's immediately recognizable, but it's a Black Power fist in the foreground.

So, there's a new reason why Aunt Jemima is smiling, right? And that is a sort of insistent move that Saar will make, not just in the 20th century, but also in the 21st. This is *Mti*, the Swahili word for wood or tree. This is currently being shown at the Tate Modern. It's the first of Saar's shrines. Spectators, audiences were asked to leave offerings, some mementos during their visit. And here too, one could imagine reading within the box of the shrine, something like the Cornell box. But I want to think about it also as a stage. And I think the closer you get, especially with things like the beads, I think you can imagine its proximity to her work in costume design and in general her work in theater.

Okay, this is a little bit later, '75, *A Secretary to the Spirits*. This is a cover design for the book of poems that Ishmael Reed published. She meets Reed at Berkeley at a Romare Bearden exhibition that's in '71. And here again, I think it's the combination, the convergence of references, ancient and contemporary, spiritual and mundane, that is poignant, aggressive, moving. And the Cream of Wheat man on the bottom is once again registering American consumer culture's use of Black stereotypes. And I'm fascinated by the way in which above that, beyond that, there are the stars, moons, the palmistry charts that transpose the piece into the realm of mysticism. But I really feel as though this is, among other things, reflecting her unwillingness to disambiguate the contemporary, and the ancient, and the quotidian, and the mystical, and indeed also American culture and African culture.

So, I'm going to conclude by leaping into the 21st century: *Migration: Africa to America*, 2006. The other side of this is a photograph of a young Black woman. And on this side, we're looking at an African female figure decorated with cowry shells, and cowry shells are used as money throughout Africa, but they're also used as symbols for the goddess of protection. And there are many ways of reading this extraordinary object, but one way is to see the powerful African figure costumed in a straw skirt and in cowry beads as a physical and spiritual presence rescuing Aunt Jemima from the racist confinement of American culture. Okay, I think I'll leave it there.

Dieter: Great.

Nyeema: Thank you, Bill, and thank you, Dieter, for the opportunity to say a few words tonight. The exhibition presents such an inspiring pivotal moment in the evolution of her artistic practice. And as an artist, it's a heartfelt honor to be drawn here in this space with all of you, with Betye's work at the center, and so, I want to say a few words about kinship. I think that describes my relationship to Betye's work as an artist, and I want to give a little context for how I came to

know Betye's work. Dieter mentioned that one of my parents is an artist. Both of my parents are artists, in fact. They didn't have as public of a career as Betye did. And a few days ago, over a phone call, Dieter asked me if I'd ever met Betye, and I had to pause. I said, after a moment, "I'm not sure. I'm not sure."

And part of the privilege of being raised by artist parents—my parents were born in the '50s, so they were 24 years Betye's junior—was that the community of Black artists in the US making work in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, was small. They knew each other. So, I remember throughout my childhood, I had met many of my parents' peers and artist friends, often in passing as I was dragged to openings and other social and professional functions and conferences. In fact, last year I saw the photographer Deb Willis, and I went to say hello and introduced myself, and she said, "Last time I saw you, you were knee high. You were this high," and of course, bashfully, I couldn't remember. But that describes the encounters that I had with a lot of these amazing figures and artists, and so I do recall growing up in our home, hearing their names often, and hearing Betye's name spoken of with affection and admiration from as early as I can remember.

I was aware of their and her presence, and I felt her kinship long before I decided to become an artist, and that familiarity was a foundation that gave me artistic permission that I didn't have to search for as an aspiring artist in art school. And because of Betye, I had permission to explore, to dream, to gather, to repurpose, to reflect with vigor. She gave me permission. She gave me permission to be an artist out in the world. And when I needed reminding, often in times of personal uncertainty, she, Betye through her work, would serendipitously show up, like she did last summer on an impromptu visit from Rome to Milan to the Prada Foundation. I didn't bother researching what was on view, and I walked the grounds for hours moving through the exhibition space, trying to shake that intrusive hyper-awareness of my foreignness being in Italy.

And I remember this moment really distinctly when I entered the fourth floor, because there was Betye, and her architectural installation, these curvilinear walls awash with these gestural mid-tones of blues, and I released a sigh of comfort. Inside were her assemblages of hauntingly composed sculptures, and the installation was called *The Alpha & Omega*. And I remember the words, the work struck me as particularly salient then, but even more so now as I'm recalling them in this moment—another kind of psychic nudge from Betye.

And some of the works in that installation were—and these titles are important—*The Weight of Betrayal*, *A Need for Forgiveness*, *Journey to Elsewhere*, *The Game of Time*, and lastly, *When Tears Are Not Enough*. And this is the kinship of Betye Saar, it's a familiarity and a comforting recognition or

affirmation that's always right on time and then moves across time and oceans, and it's mediated so poignantly through her work. And so, in March, I'm looking forward to meeting Betye, maybe again. We'll see. Thank you everyone at the Neubauer for bringing us together to revere and celebrate such an important moment in Betye's creative life. It's a joy and a privilege and an honor. Thank you.

Susan Neill: I think I'm not really going out on a limb to say Betye's awesome at titles. We struggle with those in the exhibition-making realm. But to reiterate your words, it is a joy to be here tonight, and just to celebrate Betye Saar and the opening of this glorious exhibition that really is filling in the gap in the exhibition array that has come out over the years. So anyway, my pleasant task tonight is just to share some words about the connection that Betye Saar and the Field Museum share. I guess I should get a slide up there. I didn't know all of the archival works and sketchbooks that made it into the exhibition, so if you've already been in the exhibition, you're going to see some of these, and if not, you'll see them when you get in there. But in 1974, the National Conference of Artists convened in Chicago, and a contingent of artists from Los Angeles came. Betye Saar, David Hammons, and Alonzo Davis were among those folks that are named here on the fundraising flyer.

At the time of that trip, and really for most of her career or her artistic life, Betye Saar has been a sketcher. She is a constant sketcher. And that being said, these days, she seems to need to rely on her daughter to take some photographs to help her gather the fodder for recording what she sees, and then she can work from it later. But she loves sketchbooks. If you ever have the chance to talk to her about sketchbooks, she loves sketchbooks. She had an exhibition catalog that opened like a sketchbook. She collects sketchbooks. Yeah, it's a thing. So, if you run out of something to say, ask her about that.

But in addition to her sketchbook, she kept ledgers that document her artwork, and all of these are incredibly…it's just a boon to all of us researchers. Her gallerist, Julie Roberts, has worked tirelessly to compile information from all of this, and I understand that all of these incredible resources will go to the Getty eventually, so that's really amazing, and we should celebrate that. But here you see a page from a notebook that she labeled "places," and if you look closely vertically along that spiral binding, you'll see she wrote "Egypt, Field Museum, Chicago, April 12th, 1974." And it's exciting to me—and apparently also to Dieter—to have a specific date. But on that day, she made quite a few sketches. And then after the fact, she added this fabulous color.

In a 1990 interview by the Center for Oral History Research at UCLA, Betye Saar said, "The Field Museum was an important step in my development as an artist because I saw lots and lots of African art, Oceanic art, and Egyptian art. They

had rooms and rooms of it. I had never seen that much." She continued. "The strongest piece that affected my work was a robe of an African chief. It was like the chief was a guardian of this village, and everyone in the village had contributed a little bit of hair that decorated his cloak. But it was so powerful because not only was it a rough fabric and beautiful to look at, but it had a little bit of everybody on it." Clearly, it was a life-changing moment for her.

She goes on to say, "For me, even in a glass display case, it was almost like an electric shock that came through that display. It wasn't so much that it was a cloak that he wore, but the fact that there was something from the human body stitched on it that gave it this particular essence. So, I thought, well, *I want to make art that's like that. I want to make contemporary, powerful, ritualistic art*."

During a second visit to Chicago in 1990, Saar came back to the Field Museum and made more sketches. And then, as Dieter mentioned, on a third visit in the fall of 2023, our staff was privileged to host Betye, her daughter, Tracye Saar-Cavanaugh, and Julie Roberts on a visit to the Anthropology Collection. This is a still from a five-minute video that we posted a couple of days ago to the Field Museum's blog post about Betye. So just Google "Field Museum Betye Saar." It'll take you right to this and go to the... well, read the whole thing, but then at the bottom you'll see this image.

And it was just such a moving day to be with her and kind of witness the spark as she not only engaged with these objects, but just kind of charmed everybody she met along the way. At any rate, you'll see in the video that she's quite moved when she encounters this robe again. And to see it here in the gallery today is really fantastic as well. So, as I said, it was a joy to be a part of that tour and to see Betye Saar's reunion with some of the works that she saw on display nearly five decades prior. Here in this slide, you see a sketch from that "places" notebook and a similar fan from Benin that was on display in 2022.

Here, she's considering whether the fan in the tray is the one that's in her sketchbook, and I think everyone decided eventually that indeed it was. And the collection manager was thrilled that he'd pulled the right one. So, everybody was happy. But as someone who's been making exhibitions for a long time, I think it's really important to bear in mind that regardless of what we exhibition-makers plan, people come in with their own experience, and they are going to make their own meaning. What our big idea is, and what feelings we hope it will inspire, and what messages we want them to take away, they might not matter, or at least not to everyone, because people are going to make meaning regardless. And sometimes our work has more impact than we

could ever imagine. Betye Saar provides us with a rare and glorious glimpse of the sparks that can occur.

So lastly, *Globetrotters*. This is one of my favorite Saar works, and it featured prominently in the exhibition *Betye Saar: Heart of a Wanderer*, which was organized by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. For a time, the Field Museum considered presenting a similar exhibition with her works in dialogue with pieces from our collection. And we discussed with our colleagues here at the Neubauer the possibility of presenting concurrent shows at both institutions. So, although the Field project didn't materialize, fortunately, *Let's Get It On* did. And since she's not here, I'd like to give the last word to Betye Saar: "To me, the trick is to seduce the viewer. If you can get the viewer to look at a work of art, then you might be able to give them some sort of message."

This transcript has been slightly edited for length and clarity.