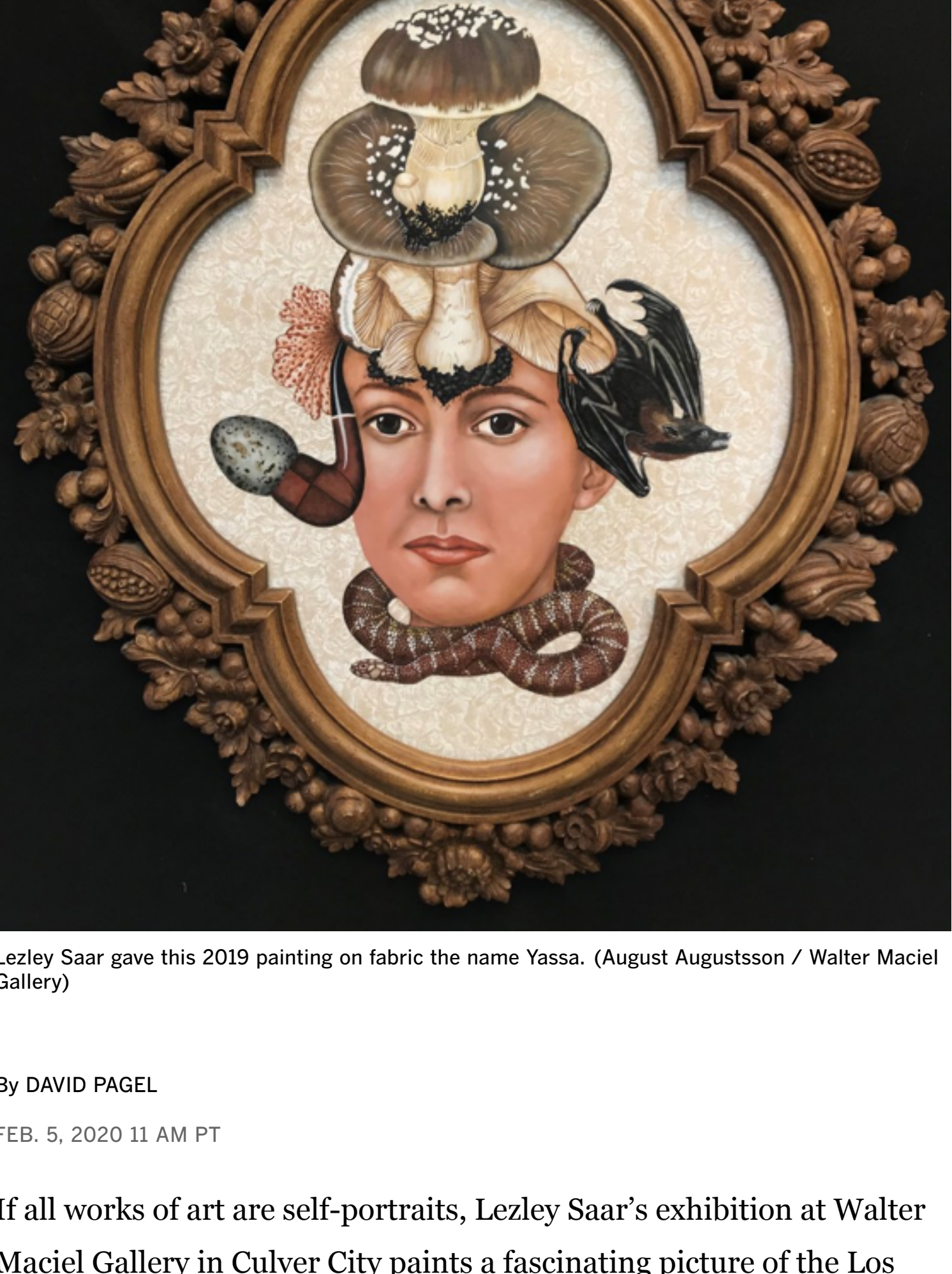




ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Yassa, Septime, Burvis. Meet the magical women of Lezley Saar’s world



Lezley Saar gave this 2019 painting on fabric the name Yassa. (August Augustsson / Walter Maciel Gallery)

By DAVID PAGEL

FEB. 5, 2020 11 AM PT

If all works of art are self-portraits, Lezley Saar’s exhibition at Walter Maciel Gallery in Culver City paints a fascinating picture of the Los Angeles artist.

Populated by 21 distinct personages, “[A Conjuring of Conjurers](#)” reveals that identity is a lot more complex than it’s often made out to be.

In Saar’s hands, the self is neither singular nor unchanging: It’s a gateway to other selves, a stepping-stone to community, a portal to the beyond.

Saar has installed her exhibition so that it resembles a series of seven shrines — sacred places where visitors may commune with spirits from the past, present and future. Each of her altars consists of some combination of a life-size sculptural figure, a large painting on luxuriously woven fabric, an intimate and meticulously rendered painting in an antique frame or a large group of photographic collages, some whimsical, some haunting, some both.

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Lezley Saar, “Nesida is a hit-or-miss mindreader. Sometimes tears trickle from her ears when she is overwhelmed by the inner feeling of others,” 2019. Acrylic on fabric, embellishments and curtain rod. 64 inches by 53 inches. (August Augustsson / Walter Maciel Gallery)

Rather than giving her works titles, [Saar](#) has given them names.

On the back wall across from the entrance is Septime, a blue-eyed black woman painted on a mural-size tapestry that hangs from a carved wood curtain rod. She is guarded by Paonne and Fernest, 7½-foot-tall manikins dressed in flowing robes, patchwork skirts, dazzling blouses, ornate shawls and shimmering scarves.

The guardians are adorned with handcrafted necklaces, brooches and belts, from which hang keys, seeds, plants and beads — along with an assortment of charms and talismans. Their heads, sculpted from tufts of jet-black polyester fiberfill, resemble thick puffs of smoke, which give them a ghostly presence and echo the shape and color of Septime’s hair.

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Lezley Saar’s installation “A Conjuring of Conjurers,” 2020, including Paonne, Septime and Fernest (Lezley Saar / Walter Maciel Gallery)

Saar provides thumbnail descriptions of these phantasmagorical beings. Septime is “a collector of breezes, hoarder of voices, and gatherer of olfactory ephemera” who “once changed her lover into a lake to protect him.” Paonne is a time-traveling shaman, and Fernest is a forest spirit who makes potions from leaves and rainwater.

Another grouping includes Fokusnik, a Russian alchemist; Esseintes, the protagonist from J.K. Huysmans’ “Against Nature”; Ozile, a clairvoyant; Yassa, a shape-shifting trickster; and Burvis, a hunchback philosopher who, fueled by libations, weeps and dances through the night.

Lezley Saar, “A Conjuring of Conjurers,” 2020, installation view including Lefu, Clotilde and Mourna (Walter Maciel Gallery)

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Saar hops, skips and jumps among media, extracting the best of each and creating wholes greater than the sum of their parts.

As a painter, she marries realistic details and fantastic apparitions. As a sculptor, she repurposes found materials with verve and aplomb, skillfully — sometimes magically — transforming ordinary things into extraordinary incantations. And as a collagist, she cuts and pastes discarded bits of imagery into unexpectedly resonant constellations of possibility.

Her works take visitors on trips that leave European Surrealism — and its American variants — in the dust. [Saar’s artistry](#) is a form of magical realism. Scrappy and ravishing, it’s, at once, down to earth and out of this world.

Lezley Saar

Where: Walter Maciel Gallery, 2642 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A.

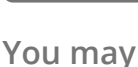
When: Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Feb. 22

Info: (310) 839-1840, wultermaciellgallery.com

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