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AUTHOR

Lezley Saar at Walter Maciel Gallery



Lezley Saar, *A Conjuring of Conjurers*, Walter Maciel Gallery; Photo credit Betty Brown

Lezley Saar: History, Spiritualism & the Construction of New Narratives

Walter Maciel Gallery
through February 2020

Written by Betty Brown

Lezley Saar may reside with her family in Southern California, but aesthetically, she lives in the late nineteenth century. In her current body of work, Saar has depicted a gathering of imagined spiritualists (*A Conjuring of Conjurers*) in photographic, painted, and sculpted form. The inhabitants of her magical realm engage the viewer in a literary, almost filmic way. To enter her exhibition is to be submerged in an enchanted world of metaphysical marvel.

Saar's conjurers are a natural outgrowth of the artist's longtime interest in race and gender, history and identity. She addressed issues of race in "Mulatto Nation," 2017: of gender in "Gender Renaissance," 2016-7; and concepts of "normalcy" in "Autist's Fables," 2010. Her series of paintings from 2012, "Madwoman in the Attic," focused on the literary trope of female insanity in fictional texts like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" (1892) and related books about female confinement and oppression by Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontes, etc.

In "A Conjuring of Conjurers," Saar looks at the esoteric spiritualism of the late nineteenth century, an era dominated by a resurgence of occultism. The artist's focus on spiritualism is a savvy outgrowth of her earlier feminist concerns. As historian Alex Owen tells us in his *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989),

"It is no accident that Spiritualism, a movement which privileged women and took them seriously, attracted so many female believers during a period of gender disjunction and disparity between aspiration and reality. Spiritualist culture held possibilities for attention, opportunity, and status denied elsewhere. In certain circumstances, it could also provide a means of circumventing rigid nineteenth-century class and gender norms. More importantly, it did so without mounting a direct attack on the status quo. Spiritualism had the potential, not always consciously realized, for subversion."

According to historian Geri Walton, spiritualist seances (to contact and converse with the dead) "seized the interest of every sector of society." Mourning the loss of her son Willie, First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln held at least eight seances in the White House; her husband attended several of them. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a longtime participant in seances, wrote his *History of Spiritualism* in 1924, in hope that he would be remembered for that, rather than his Sherlock Holmes novels.

Magic shows also proliferated during the Victorian era. Harry Houdini attracted immense, awed crowds to vaudeville and film theaters to see his incredible escapes. (Houdini's career peaked in the early twentieth century, but he began performing in 1882.)

Saar's spiritualist exhibition includes photomontages, her distinctive paintings on vintage fabrics, and a coven of fashionable female characters built on dressmaker mannequins. Inter-spaced between the visual elements is a series of poetic texts the artist has composed to "introduce" the elaborately adorned figures.

"Drowning in grace" (2019) is a paper collage on photograph. The main image is an African (or Afro-European? or Afro-American?) woman, her hair drawn back into a bun, her neck encased in the high black collar typical of Victorian mourning dresses. Floating around her are seven circular images cut from additional prints of the original photo: three eyes, two ears, a mouth, and a smaller full view of the face. It is as if the atmospheric emanation surrounding her body has been fractured and scattered, then captured in what the nineteenth century called "aura photography." The number of collaged images is important: seven is considered "a highly spiritual number that is associated with intuition, mysticism, inner wisdom, and a deep inward knowing."

"Septime" (2019) is a painting on vintage fabric that is suspended from a horizontal bar like a woven tapestry. Saar tells us that 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." Septime is a light brown woman with thick, flame-like black hair. She wears a high collared black dress—much like the woman from "Drowning in grace"—and is ringed by seven floating bird eggs. (Again, seven.) Long associated with new life and rebirth, eggs have often been given magical powers. Several ancient cultures believed that the world was formed from a cosmic egg. Eggs crown each of the pointed roof elements on the Great Mosque of Djenne in Mali, Africa; German medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen's cosmological images include the world egg; Abu Yahya Zakariya ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud-al-Qazwini wraps a snake around the sacred egg in his codex *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing* (Persian manuscript, 17-18th century.)

Septime's eyes are a radiant robin's egg blue, crossed with the speckled brown patterns seen on rook and blackbird eggs. Her intense gaze is directed off to the left, as if she is looking beyond the present to a past (or future?) that requires considered attention. Has she conjured the magical floating eggs that surround her? Are they projections of her aura? Saar engages the mystery but refuses to unpack it. Instead, she simply shares it with viewers, allowing them/us to witness it.

"Esseintes" (2018) is an acrylic on fabric painting mounted in an antique frame. It portrays a young black man with fierce blue eyes. Piled on his head is an eerie and unexpected accumulation: a hat-sized tortoise, a spool of dark orange thread, a red and white tulip, a green leaf, and a strange tropical fruit. What is this headgear? Is it an incantation? The tools for casting a spell? Saar tell us, "Esseintes did not like reality, so he built his own dream-of-the-senses fortress, which ultimately was a disappointment, and this explains his love of tragedy."

"Olphida" (2019) is clothed in cream-colored fabrics, tapestries and tassels, layers of lace, and jewelry draped down to her knees. She stands behind a cluster of bones and whitened coral, her head wrapped in piles of raw cotton. The artist tells us, "Olphida, the abandoned bride, finds books in broken branches, sermons in stones, rituals in roots, and sagas in silent seas."

Another mannequin, "Reuel" (2019) is attired in gold and white, with braids of blackened steel wool constructing her turban-like head. A circle of golden fabric haloes her feet, with ritual objects encased in fringe: bottles, mortar and pestle, musical instruments (gourds, shells, wooden flutes), and the small figure of a black-robed saint. Like Olphida, Reuel wears necklaces that fall to her knees. A "cape" of brilliant yellow feathers rests on her narrow shoulders. (Are they remnants of angelic wings?) Saar tells us that "Reuel is a shaman and spiritual healer...a living personification of the head-on collision of Catholic and African religions." ...which could be said of several of the artist's conjurers.

The combination of deeply complex characters with accompanying poetic texts and the context of their rich, image-based world, give Saar's exhibition a cinematic quality. Viewers are surrounded by carefully wrought visuals and propelled by their literary interactions with each other. It is like a postmodern mash-up of Quentin Tarrantino's non-linear narratives and Salvador Dalí's surrealism (think of his dream sequence for Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, 1945) with the grace and beauty of a Julie Dash film (has there ever been a more beautiful film than her *Daughters of the Dust* from 1991?). I for one was swept away by the experience, and wished (not for the first time) that I could enter the exquisite world of Lezley Saar's imaginings.

Walter Maciel Gallery
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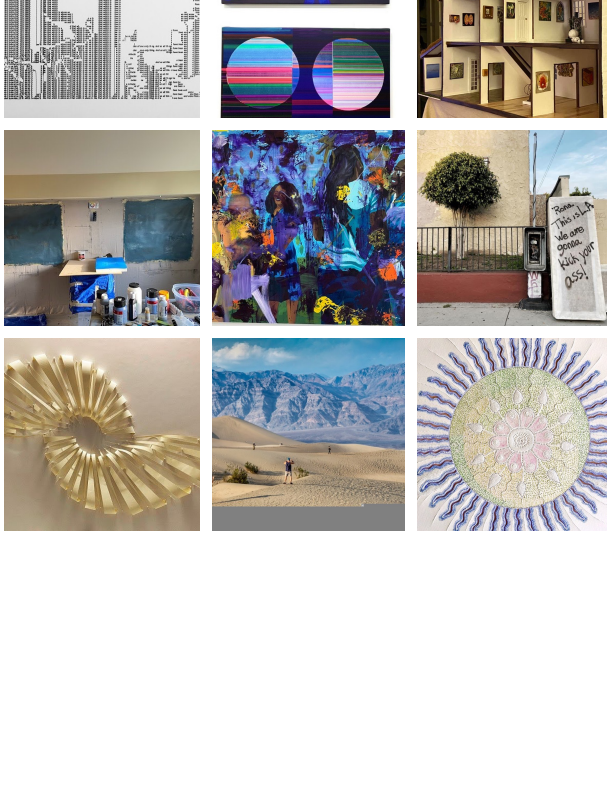
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