

Art

Reviews Weekend

# Lezley Saar’s Melancholic Poetics of Identity

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by Lita Barrie  
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Lezley Saar, *Vesta the Johnny*, (2015), acrylic on fabric over wood panel, 20" x 16" (Photo: August Augustsson. Courtesy of Walter Maciel Gallery.)

LOS ANGELES – Lezley Saar explores the ambiguities of being neither black nor white, male nor female. For decades Saar has looked behind the veil of superficial appearance, to explore the emotional conflict underlying mistaken identity from the perspective of a biracial woman who looks white – but feels black. *Gender Renaissance* at Walter Maciel Gallery extends her critique of identity politics into an exploration of transgender experiences inspired by her 24-year-old son’s female-to-male gender transition.

As Betye Saar’s daughter, she is a legacy artist and second-generation feminist, but she was the fairest skinned member of a family of black feminist artists, which also includes her sister, artist Allison Saar. Her own experience of feeling different allowed Saar to empathize with her son, whom she has described as “a tomboy who always disliked being in a female body.”



Lezley Saar, *The Silent Woman* (2015), acrylic on fabric over wood panel, 20" x 16" (Photo: August Augustsson. Courtesy of Walter Maciel Gallery.)

With *Gender Renaissance* Saar goes beyond identity politics by creating a melancholic poetics of identity. It takes its impetus from her feminist stance on gender transitioning as an emblem of gender’s fluidity in an era when both sex and gender are understood as a spectrum, much like her own relationship with race. The melancholic tone of her paintings exposes their internal conflict, evoking both the sadness of losing her daughter and the relief and pride in her son’s courage to transition.

The exhibition contains two banners from her earlier *Mulatto Nation* series exploring the contradiction between

perceptions of biracial people by others and their own internalizations of their mixed heritage. Saar’s integration of Mexican colonial painting into her aesthetic accentuates the mixing of cultures, while her use of collage reflects her legendary artist-mother, who learned from her grandmother how to make gifts from found materials. Each female generation in this prominent artistic lineage learned how to make art organically, by recycling everyday things around them, but Lezley found her artistic independence by approaching painting through collage.

In “Dorothy Champ” (2002), glistening crystal tears falling from the sad blue eyes of the beautiful biracial actress conjure the actress’s emotional conflict over leaving a successful Broadway career to become a Bahai activist, while in “Nella Larsen... Passing” (2003) she places a white lace veil over a portrait of an author who explores biracial identity. These are monuments to founding mothers of a mixed nation caught between two worlds. A third banner, “Fez” (2004), is from her series of portraits of biracial prostitutes in western colonial countries who turned to the oldest profession because they were rejected by both worlds from which they descended.

Lezley Saar, *Forbidden Fruit* (2017), acrylic on fabric over wood panel, 24" x 18." (Photo: August Augustsson. Courtesy of Walter Maciel Gallery)

Saar’s new paintings, displayed in the main gallery space, are small, tender portraits of effeminate mixed race men proudly dressed in fashionable female attire. Unlike her earlier mulatto series, her transgender and cross-dressing characters are playfully rendered, celebrating gender bending. These intimate portraits are based on the real and fictional historical figures who frequented Molly Houses, like The Uranium and The Cave of the Golden Calf, in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, where homosexual men could meet in drag. Saar lifts the curtain to explore this secret society, using small scale, altered perspective, and curious objects to represent the unique stories of people who subverted binary notions of gender long before transgender was normalized.

In several works, Saar juxtaposes artifice with nature. For the artist, “nature symbolizes truth,” whereas cultural constructions of race and gender are arbitrary. She has said that, “my own experience of not fitting in being black, but looking white, led me to question what is truth.”

Deeply influenced by Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, she explores his idea “of turning to nature to get at a certain truth” – “a person’s own truth” – in her paintings. Three paintings in the exhibition invoke birth through the iconography of eggs. In “Vesta the Johnny” (2015) a vaudeville male impersonator, based on real life male-impersonator Vesta Tilley, stands pensively in thought, beside a gigantic egg; in “Teetering on the Ledge of a

Lezley Saar, *I felt in love with this piece of you* (2017), acrylic on fabric over wood panel, antique frame with glass, 23" x 17". (Photo: August Augustsson. Courtesy of Walter Maciel Gallery.)

Transient Thought” (2016) a dish of eggs is precariously balanced on a man’s head and a shell and bat adorn his face; and in “A Perfect Gentleman” (2016) three egg-like mushrooms sprout from a patch on a man’s head and a butterfly and pink rose adorn his face.

In other works, Saar uses moths as a leitmotif. “Brainville” (2016) and “I Felt in Love with this Piece of You” (2017) use mental landscapes to suggest that gender resides inside the brain – the transgender subjects might feel out of sync with their assigned gender but the moth suggests their authentic truth might be a metamorphosis.

In these cameo paintings Saar uses intimate scale to take us inside the private worlds of people who are outside the norm. In contrast, the exhibition’s centerpiece, “I Dream the Body” (2017), is a heraldic banner portraying a regal albino black with a long white afro mane who assumes the role of royalty in this realm of otherness.

The flat frontal focus of Saar’s cameo paintings and portraits recalls the charming naivete of early American Limner portrait painting. The sincerity of her painting style is grounded in an appreciation for authentic expression: Saar’s heartfelt historic narratives raise questions about contemporary social

issues that allow the viewer to ponder and draw their own conclusions. Like her grandmother making gifts from things around her, which influenced her mother’s pioneering assemblages, Saar recycles stories from her historic research and gives them to viewers for their own reflective musing.

*Gender Renaissance continues at Walter Maciel Gallery (2642 S. La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles) through July 1.*

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