

ALISON SAAR

Breach

About the Artist

Alison Saar was born and raised in Laurel Canyon, CA. She received a BA in studio art and art history from Scripps College, Claremont, CA, and an MFA from Otis Parsons Institute, Los Angeles (now Otis College of Art and Design). Selected awards include: three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1984, 1985, and 1988); a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (1989); a Flintridge Foundation Award for Visual Artists (2000); a Joan Mitchell Foundation Award (1998); and a Joan Mitchell Artist-in-Residence Pilot Award (2013). Saar was also named one of 50 USA fellows in the United States Artists Program in 2012.

Her public sculpture commissions include those in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, and her prints were featured in a solo exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, in Fall 2016. Alison Saar is represented by LA Louver, Venice, CA, and lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.



Map of river catchment areas in the United States. Pink areas indicate all watersheds that drain into the Mississippi River.

Rivers flow along serenely and silently until they do not. These multifaceted bodies of water functioned historically as points of entrée for exploration, trade routes, centers of commerce, and as generators of fertile agricultural regions. Like all great rivers, those in America carry the residue of past and present cultures as well as the metaphorical burden of human projection and reflection.

Most riverine myths and beliefs focus on destruction and salvation. Such myths are rooted in the delicate balance between punishing floods that wreak havoc on those living nearby while simultaneously replenishing water habitats and soils. Never the same from one moment to the next, these flowing wellsprings of life have a unique ability to both connect and divide humanity. These connections and divisions are the subject of *Breach*, a 2015–2016 body of work by the Los Angeles-based artist Alison Saar.

Throughout a career spanning more than three decades, Saar has consistently hewn to the 1960s-era slogan “The personal is political.” Ever the visual storyteller, the artist traverses both terrains—the personal and the political—by incisively drilling into issues such as identity, motherhood, feminism, race, and politics. In *Breach*, the artist’s well-known practice of synthesizing disparate ideologies, histories, and cultural signifiers coalesce into a timely conversation that asks us to consider today’s often toxic racial relations by first reflecting on the political and cultural fallout of The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927. (

Cumulatively, the intent behind the paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints in *Breach* merge into a flood of consciousness we would be well advised to heed. Although the 1927 flood may seem as if it has no bearing on today, there are striking similarities between that catastrophe, Hurricane Katrina, and the contaminated Flint River water supply. Each exposed underlying assumptions and inequalities. In this exhibition, Alison Saar asks us to consider the psychic “breach” embedded in these shared histories because when the levees of life give way, the political is most definitely personal. For everyone.

Kitty McManus Zurko, Director/Curator
The College of Wooster Art Museum

Breach was curated by Michiko Okayo, Director, Lafayette College Art Galleries, Easton, PA. Works courtesy of the artist, LA Louver, Venice, CA, and a private collection, Topanga, CA.

ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF BREACH & THE GREAT MISSISSIPPI RIVER FLOOD OF 1927

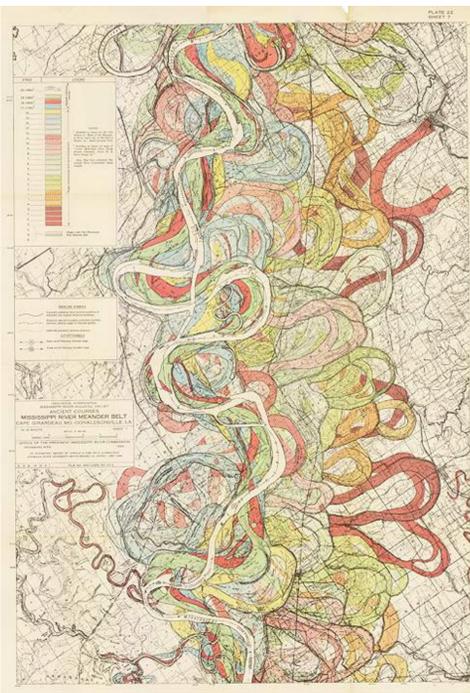
To start at the beginning of this particular tale, Alison Saar was one of twenty-four Joan Mitchell Foundation grant recipients selected to participate in the Joan Mitchell Center's 2013 Artist-in-Residence Pilot in New Orleans. During the three-week residency, she frequently rode her bike through the primarily black Lower Ninth Ward and Treme areas where, eight years after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, she was struck by the damage still evident in these neighborhoods and promises not kept by the government to rebuild homes. This experience led Saar to research the history of African Americans living near major rivers in America and the striking socio-political similarities between the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and Katrina.

While what happened in 1927 cannot be fully described here, in short, after months of heavy rain, rivers in the Midwest and the South inundated over 16 million acres of land from Oklahoma to Tennessee and from Missouri to Louisiana. Especially hard hit were over 27,000 square miles in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Over 630,000 people were affected. Of that number, more than 200,000 were African Americans. One of the more profoundly disturbing chapters in the history of American race relations occurred after the levees above Greenville, Mississippi, gave way, and blacks living in the area were conscripted to work on shoring up the Greenville levees. Because African Americans were critical to the sharecropping economy of Southern plantations, many blacks were forced into relief camps on the Greenville levees where, at times, they were guarded at gunpoint so they would not flee north as many others had since the beginning of the Great Migration in 1910.

Although what happened during Katrina still survives in our nation's collective consciousness (recall the horrifying images of mostly African Americans stranded for days in brutal heat in the Louisiana Superdome and on the Interstate 10 overpass), the bitter lessons of the traumatic Great Flood have receded like the waters themselves. Saar's research into river- and flood-generated disasters led her to consider questions such as: why are African Americans drawn to living near rivers; what has been the effect of flooding on blacks and others living in flood-prone areas; and how have such disasters influenced music, art, and literature?

Her response began with four 2015 paintings on found and pieced together table linens and sugar and seed sacks—*Sluefoot Slide*, *Backwater Boogie*, *Muddy River Mambo*, and *Swampside Shag*. In these works the artist explores the humanity-preserving response to catastrophe by focusing on the incongruity of what she calls, “dancing in the face of disaster.” Each painting's compound title comes from two sources; bodies of water intermittently replenished by floods, such as backwaters, swamps, and sloughs, and early twentieth-century music by and about the experiences of blacks during the Great Flood as expressed in gospel and other music genres that migrated north. The exhibition's apogee is arguable expressed in the eponymous monumental sculpture located at the far end of this gallery.

Left: Plates 7-10 (of 15 plates) from the Geological Investigation of the Mississippi River Alluvial Valley showing the ancient courses of the Mississippi River Meander Belt from Cape Girardeau, MO, to Donaldsonville, LA. Prepared by Harold N. Fisk, PhD, Consultant, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, 1944, Army Corps of Engineers.



Greenville,
Mississippi

