

# Alison Saar

## **Sluefoot Slide**, 2015

Acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on found and dyed denim, sugar sacks, and linens

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

The figures in *Sluefoot Slide* and *Backwater Boogie* are shoeless as they dance in water up to their knees and ankles. Sightless, they move in a seemingly dissociative state, as if aware they are being objectified but they are not going to allow their true selves to be seen. In this sense, they exemplify what, in his 1897 essay *Strivings of the Negro People*, W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” and “two-ness” to describe the feeling of having two identities—that of being “. . . an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

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## **Muddy Water Mambo, 2015**

Acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on found and dyed denim, sugar sacks, and linens

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

Immersed in indigo blue water, the figures in *Muddy Water Mambo* and *Swampside Shag* continue Saar's long-running dialogue with the fluidity of cultural appropriation and re-appropriation. The catfish in *Muddy Water Mambo* are painted in a manner that recalls the sinuous movement of koi in European nineteenth-century Japonisme-style paintings and prints.

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## **Swampside Shag, 2015**

Acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on found and dyed denim, sugar sacks, and linens

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

The woman in *Swampside Shag* peers into a hand mirror reflecting the face of the Greek goddess Lethe whose attributes include spewing memory-obliterating water from her mouth. The mirror also references Mami Wata, or “Mother Water,” a powerful half-human, half-fish water spirit usually depicted in Africa and the countries of the African Diasporas as a mermaid with long hair and a serpent around her neck, holding a mirror.

According to art historian Henry John Drewal, Mami Wata “straddles earth and water, culture and nature.” She emerged in Africa in the fifteenth century in response to European contact, and is a composite of Western and Central African water spirits. Mami Wata represents danger but also bestows wealth and fertility. Variants of this powerful and quixotic water entity are honored in shrines on both sides of the Atlantic.

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## **Breach, 2016**

Wood, ceiling tin, found trunks, washtubs, and miscellaneous objects

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

*Breach* is a virtual lexicon of Saar's favored materials—wood, found objects, and ceiling tin. The figure's sense of equilibrium and confidence has no equal in the artist's *oeuvre*. Covered in tin ceiling tiles suggestive of ritual scarification and aquatic plant life, this female atlas stands on a pallet-cum-raft with her punt pole at the ready. The superstructure she carries on her head is taller and wider than the figure, and is comprised of what might be hastily assembled travel necessities such as trunks and suitcases, and domestic needs such as pans, buckets, washbasin and washboard, lantern, and mirror. More than anything, this gravity-defying load speaks to the limits of human endurance.

In this homage to strength, Saar intentionally makes connections between Atlas, the Greek god of endurance, and the Senegalese women and children she encountered during a visit to Senegal in 2006. Essentially mobile agents of commerce, these African women and children routinely balance gravity-defying loads of calabashes and other market goods on their heads with the same grace and equanimity seen here.

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## **Silttown Shimmy, 2016**

Wood, ceiling tin, enamel paint, tar,  
and silt

Private collection, Topanga, CA

*Silttown Shimmy* was inspired by a sculpture Saar first encountered in the 1980s at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)—*Dancer with Necklace*, 1910, by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, 1880–1938). Kirchner was a founding member of a group of German Expressionist artists in Dresden in 1905 called Die Brücke (The Bridge), and his wood sculpture was inspired by the Cameroon and Palau art he studied in the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden (Ethnographical Museum Dresden).

As the *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight so aptly noted in a 2016 review, *Silttown Shimmy's* “. . . oblique reference to it [*Dancer with Necklace*] reminds us that European Modern art in the 20th century is unthinkable without its profound, complex relationship to African art.”

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## **Silted Brow**, 2016

Charcoal, chalk, and acrylic on linen  
and found trunk drawer

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

Both *Silted Brow* and *Acheron* are pithy examples of Saar's wit and skill in transforming found materials. Drawn on sugar and seed sacks attached to the bottom of trunk drawers, the artist's use of secondary surfaces as a substrate for drawing suggests that there is always more to any story than first meets the eye.

In *Silted Brow*, the horizontal figure lies beneath the dark water with her head awkwardly angled, as if she has a broken neck. Catfish swim languidly above. Paired with the female figure they reference the Nigerian Yoruba water *orisha* or spirit, Yemoja, whose name means "Mother whose children are like fish."

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## **Acheron, 2016**

Charcoal and chalk on found trunk drawer and sugar sacks

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

*Acheron's* clothed figure stands up to her waist in what we surmise from the title to be a reference to the Greek river of pain. She carries a loaded basin on her head beneath a dark and ominous black sky. The sliver of light on the horizon signals either dawn or dusk. Confident, she looks straight at us. The gravitas of her situation materializes as our gaze drifts down to the reflection in the water to reveal the true weight of the load she carries—human skulls, the universal symbol of death.

# Alison Saar in collaboration with Samiya Bashir

## **Hades D.W.P II, 2016**

Etched glass jars, water, dye, wood, cloth, and ink transfer, electronics, found ladles and cups

Courtesy of the artist and LA Louver, Los Angeles

Saar's hard-hitting *Hades D.W.P. II*, 2016, (D.W.P. stands for Department of Water and Power) began as a nexus between the five stages of grief and recovery and the five rivers of death in Greek mythology. However, the work eventually morphed into a searing comment on the national disgrace of the toxic water supply in the mostly black city of Flint, Michigan.

In this work, Saar etched five glass jugs and jars with figures in distress. Each glass vessel is labeled with the name of one of the five rivers of death: Acheron, the river of pain; Phlegethon, the river of fire; Lethe, the river of forgetfulness; Styx, the main river of hatred; and Cocytus, the river of wailing.

Chipped enamel ladles and cups hang in front of the glass vessels, and five poems by contemporary poet Samiya Bashir printed on muslin strips are tied to the jug and jar handles. Each poem's staccato prose lingers on or repeats phrases such as "the absurdity of living," "how much longer?," and "let go."

Light shines through the acidic green and rust-colored water in the jars and jugs to metaphorically expose both the hidden "river" of lead pipes in Flint, and the 2014 decision by that city's managers to use water from the polluted Flint River instead of the water supply previously purchased from Detroit. This national disgrace came to light slowly after city residents noticed that their tap water was discolored. City water tests in 2015 revealed lead content in Flint residential water to be seven times the Environmental Protection Agency's limit for lead in drinking water.