



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

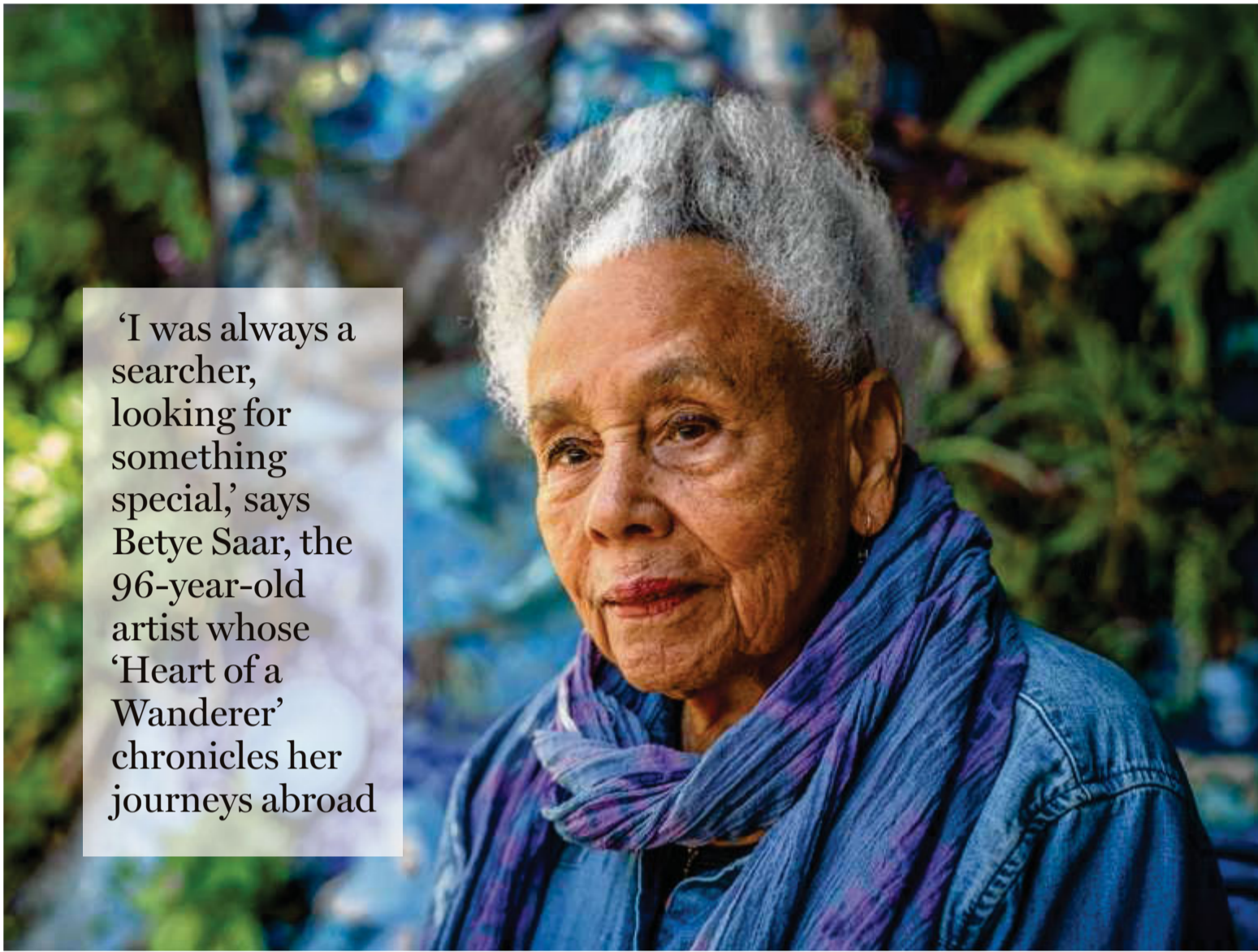
WOULD YOU PAY MORE TO BE ON A PLANE WITHOUT CHILDREN? A majority of Americans want adult-only flights. N15

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT ALEXANDRIA, VA. N15



SundayArts

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE MARCH 19, 2023 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/ARTS



'I was always a searcher, looking for something special,' says Betye Saar, the 96-year-old artist whose 'Heart of a Wanderer' chronicles her journeys abroad

PHOTOS BY DAVID BUTOW FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Artist Betye Saar at home in the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles.



Saar's interest in found objects started early.



Saar is known for assemblages with derogatory images of Black women, whom she transformed into heroines.

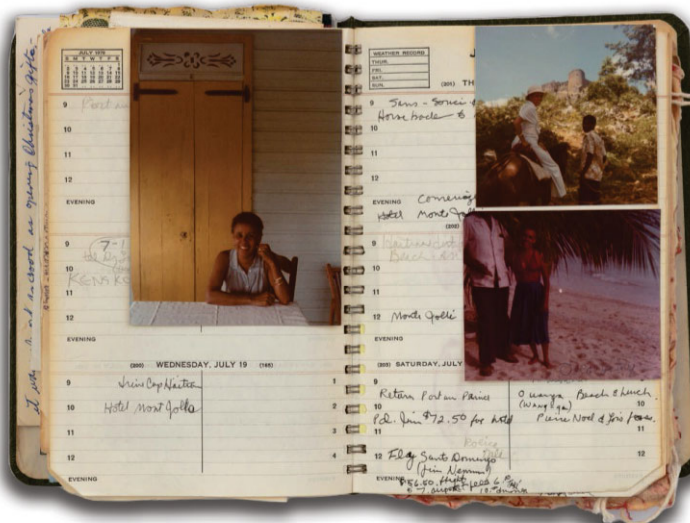
To search, to seek, to see

BY CATHERINE G. WAGLEY
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LOS ANGELES — The artist Betye Saar lives up three flights of stairs in a house with a pink door, tucked into a Laurel Canyon hillside. She has lived in the canyon, one of few truly woody enclaves in LA, since 1962. "I feel lucky that I live up here in nature," Saar, 96, said one afternoon in late February. She sat at her dining table while her youngest daughter, Tracye Saar-Cavanaugh, a writer and the director of Saar's studio, worked in the room next door.

It had been unusually frigid, and Saar preferred not to venture across the patio — past the

SAAR, Page N13



ROBERT WEDEMEYER/BETYE SAAR AND ROBERTS PROJECTS

Travel snapshots from Betye Saar's datebook for her trip to Haiti, July 17-23, 1978.

At the studio in her house, artist Betye Saar organizes found objects thematically.



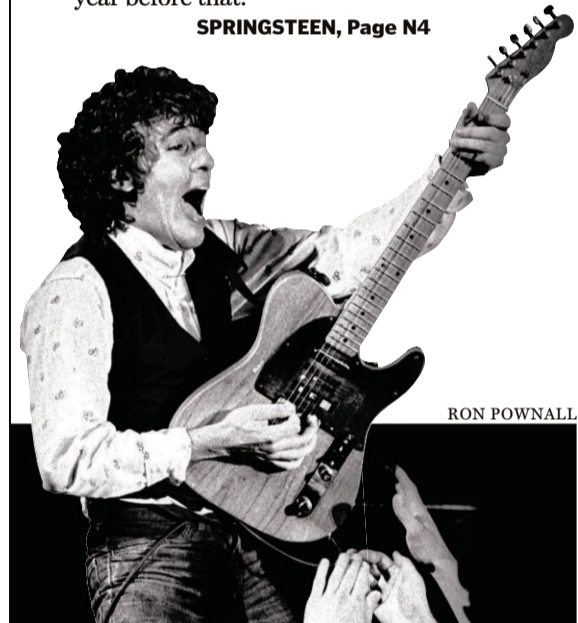
MUSIC

For four nights in 1977, the Boss owned Boston

By James Sullivan
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Mike Grenier wasn't buying all the hype about this gawky kid named Bruce Springsteen. Grenier, a big music fan, was well aware that the skinny wailer from New Jersey had been on the cover of Time and Newsweek at the same time in 1975. He knew that a writer from Boston's weekly Real Paper had grandly declared the then-little-known Springsteen "the future of rock 'n' roll" a year before that.

SPRINGSTEEN, Page N4



RON POWNALL

Bruce Springsteen at the Music Hall on March 25, 1977, the final show of a memorable four-night run at the theater.

Inside

BOOKS

A SOLVABLE PROBLEM

In 'Poverty, By America' Matthew Desmond looks at those who profit from poverty

N6

ARTS

HONORING CREATIVITY

Scholastic Art and Writing Awards winners' work reflects on their lives, world

N9

TELEVISION

With 'Lucky Hank,' Odenkirk feels fortunate indeed

By Stuart Miller
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In the opening moments of AMC's "Lucky Hank," the title character, college professor William Henry "Hank" Deveraux Jr., launches into a tirade at a student in his creative writing class. The student had objected (justifiably) to Hank being mentally checked out, but he gets pompous and defensive when Hank finally engages by shredding the student's writing.

Then, as another student records the diatribe, Hank, played by Bob Odenkirk, really steps in it, speaking with perhaps McGill/correspondent Jimmy McGill/Saul Goodman would in a month of "Better Call Saul" episodes.

Hank declares the student's work is definitively lackluster because "you are here."

ODENKIRK, Page N14

Art



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Saar brings her travels to the Gardner

► SAAR

Continued from Page N1

“Blue Grotto,” an ongoing outdoor mosaic of broken blue porcelain that she builds with the help of handymen — to the chilly studio above her converted garage.

When she arrived in Laurel Canyon, with her then-husband and their three daughters, it was home to hippies, artists, and young families. By the late 1960s, the musicians who would make the canyon legendary started arriving. Saar predated and outlasted that scene, and though homes in the neighborhood now list for a median of \$4 million — “It’s not a neighborhood where you borrow a cup of sugar,” she quipped — the hills remain quiet. “It cleanses my mind,” Saar said of her environment, which was especially nurturing during the pandemic, when she rarely traveled abroad.

Saar did travel to Boston last October, to accept the W.E.B. DuBois medal from Harvard’s Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, and to stop by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. There, she spent an afternoon exploring the galleries with curator Diana Seave Greenwald, discussing plans for her exhibition “Betye Saar: Heart of a Wanderer,” which runs through May 21. The show features the vivid journals Saar kept over the decades, as she traversed Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, alongside sculptures that relate — sometimes closely, others loosely — to her experiences abroad.

The idea for the exhibition came to Seave Greenwald in 2019, when she was in LA for a conference on Manet. She visited an intimate exhibition, “Betye Saar: Call and Response,” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and encountered Saar’s travel journals in a vitrine. “They were so colorful and so vibrant,” recalled Seave Greenwald over the phone.

When she joined the Gardner Museum earlier that year, Seave Greenwald inherited an exhibition about the travels of the museum’s founder herself. Saar had visited many of the same places as Gardner, who died in 1924, just two years before she was born. Both women kept detailed records of their excursions. A show about Saar would complement and complicate the Gardner exhibition and offer a chance to tell a more holistic story about Saar’s work.

Saar is still best known for the work she began to make in the late 1960s, assemblages with racist images of Black women, which she collected at flea markets and secondhand shops. She then transformed these women into heroines. One of Saar’s most famous works, an assemblage called “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima,” 1972, depicts the mammy figure used by the Aunt Jemima syrup and pancake mix brand toting a rifle in one hand and broom in the other. The sculpture became a flashpoint, included in exhibitions about feminism and Black power: Scholar Richard Powell credited Saar with beginning to “redefine Black consciousness in art.”

“There is, of course, political work,” said Seave Greenwald, “but it’s not the only thrust. There’s all this other work — in relation to her travels, in relation to her encounters with a range of spiritual systems, and her own interest in conjuring a spiritual experience for audiences — that hasn’t gotten as much attention as it should.” For Saar, even the



RICHARD W. SAAR/BETYE SAAR AND ROBERTS PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Top: “Heart of a Wanderer” by artist Betye Saar is grouped by region and on view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Above and below: Saar at Watts Towers, 1965 and in Florence, Italy, 1968.



BETYE SAAR/ROBERTS PROJECTS

Aunt Jemima figures she incorporated into her assemblages had always been spiritual, stand-ins for the Black American matriarchs who worked so that their descendants would survive, and more aligned with her mystical work than separate from it.

Saar was born in Los Angeles in 1926, the eldest of her parents’ three children. Growing up in Pasadena, she became fascinated with spiritual dimensions at an early age. Her mother claimed that, as a child, Saar had second sight: She would say, for instance, “Daddy’s mad; he missed his bus,” then later, her father would appear, verifying Saar’s premonition. Her interest in found objects started early, too. After her father’s death from uremia in 1931, the young family moved to Watts to live with Saar’s paternal grandmother. Nearby, self-taught artist Simon Rodia was building the Watts Towers. Saar would gaze at the looming, interconnected towers made of concrete, colored glass, tile, and other found objects (she called them “fairy castles” in a 1990 oral history). When her family returned to Pasadena, she scavenged for items left by previous occupants of the houses they lived in. “I was always a searcher, looking for something special,” she recalled, sitting at her dining table, her collection of porcelain elephants visible behind her. “Back then, I didn’t think of it as art.”

In 1949, when she graduated from University of California, Los Angeles, with a bachelor’s degree in design, Saar didn’t see a clear path toward becoming an artist. At the time, the city barely had a contemporary art scene. The museums privileged historic art, and LA had few galleries. But the scene would change as dramatically as the next few

years of Saar’s life.

By the mid-1960s, after a few years as a social worker followed by a stint running a design studio with fellow artist Curtis Tann, Saar was raising her daughters, making prints, and newly incorporating discarded objects into artworks. She had fully immersed herself in assemblage by the time she made works like “Africa,” 1968 (included in the Gardner show): a toy elephant cut in two, a bone resting on top of a swatch of fur, and kenti-cloth-like fabric inside a mirrored wooden box. Soon, Saar became one of an increasingly influential group of local Black assemblage artists.

Saar was also an organizer of people. At Suzanne Jackson’s Gallery 32, a gathering place for Black artists, she helped plan “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show,” the West Coast’s first all-Black-women exhibition. “I said, ‘Let’s concentrate on something for women, because men have always ruled the art world,’” Saar remembered. The show, which opened in 1970, was playful and materially diverse (with Saar’s assemblages, alongside Jackson’s ethereal portraits and Senga Nengudi’s plastic bag sculptures). In 1973, Saar co-curated “Black Mirror,” another all-Black-women exhibition at Womanspace, the first feminist gallery in LA. “Women, Black or white, wanted the same thing,” said Saar. “Women wanted their share and more.” (Nonetheless, she has acknowledged, white women did not make a strong showing at the “Black Mirror” opening.)

In 1974, Saar received a National Endowment of the Arts grant. “I thought, ‘Oh, I’m really an artist,’” she recalled of the award, which came at a time when she was deeply embedded in her LA community but did not yet feel recognized beyond the city (her 1975 solo show at the Whitney Museum further changed that). The grant funded her trip to Haiti. It wasn’t the first time she’d been abroad — she’d visited Europe and Morocco in 1968, taking inspiration from the Alhambra in Spain — but now she began traveling for her

Scholar Richard Powell credited Saar with beginning to ‘redefine Black consciousness in art.’

work. Her observations of rituals and ceremonies in Haiti informed her 1977 sculpture “Spirit Catcher,” an otherworldly being made from wicker, bones, feathers, and fabric.

Saar always travels with sketchbooks and portable watercolor kits, the kind elementary school students use. She would spend tranquil late afternoons in hotel rooms, transferring into her sketchbook the day’s sensations. Though she tried not to amass too many bulky objects while abroad, she carried plastic bags just in case. Often, she gave lectures in cities she visited. “I always ended with, ‘Is there anyone here who knows some old shops?’” Saar said.

Sometimes, objects she collected on trips ended up categorized among her extensive collection of art-making materials. Other times, they’d go directly into artworks. Objects from her 1988 trip to Malaysia made it into “House of Ancient Memory,” 1989, an altar-like red and gold sculpture that features at its center a painting in which tongues of red and green flames emanate upward, toward a yellow crescent moon and two ethereal purple orbs filled with star-like marks. This sculpture appears in “Heart of a Wanderer” at the Gardner.

Saar visited the museum to give a lecture comparing her own work with Gardner’s in 1994, a year particularly full of travel (she also went to Italy, Cuba, and Brazil). Exploring Gardner’s collections, Saar recognized the same affinity that Seave Greenwald would note almost 30 years later. “Her work is so much like mine. It’s just collecting things and putting them together,” Saar said. Though they didn’t share everything — Gardner, a white woman of the Gilded Age, “married a man who was very, very rich and did anything she wanted,” noted Saar, adding that she had no such wealthy husband — the two shared an interest in artifacts and watercolor. In her travel paintings, Gardner tried to emulate what she saw, while Saar intuitively interpreted what she observed and felt. On one page from Saar’s Haiti sketchbooks, earth tones overlap a Haitian postage stamp.

Recently, watercolor has again become Saar’s primary material. She still has ambitious sculptures underway in her next-door studio, including one involving a handmade wooden canoe, but she allows herself to prioritize whatever brings her pleasure, which is occasionally just painting cards for loved ones: her daughters, who all live close by, or her six grandchildren.

“I’ve exhibited a lot, and I’ve sold a lot and won awards,” Saar said. “I feel like I’m just totally free to do whatever I want.”