

Betye & Alison Saar

Conjure Women of The Arts

Time: 15 minutes

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Betye & Alison Saar: Conjure Women of the Arts is a film about two artists, a mother and a daughter who regard themselves as colleagues, "sisters" and friends. Their relationship, contrary to competitive Western values, is more like those in African and Asian traditions, where parents commonly pass on their creative skills and knowledge. Betye Saar describes the connection as a relay race: *I've been running with my art all these years, and it's as if I have the baton and I reach back to Alison and she takes off. We're not in competition. Alison's not under my wing or my eye. I'm really proud of her. But you see, we're running the art relay for the art.*" Quote from article compiled by Susan Latempa for [Datebook](#), Los Angeles.

Both women use found objects in their artworks and are influenced by a variety of religions and cultures, including astrology and the occult, but each works in a unique way. Betye tends to keep the objects intact in her work, while Alison is more likely to change them in some way before incorporating them in her pieces. Much of Betye's work is assemblage and collage; Alison's is sculptural, often figures with secret compartments filled with surprising artifacts and images.

Both have separate careers and live on opposite ends of the country - Betye in Los Angeles and Alison in Brooklyn. Their first collaboration shown in this film was done in 1990 and reveals both their shared spirit, talent and skill and also their separate and distinct identities as women and artists.

Betye and Alison Saar are truly "conjure women" because they do magical things to help us see the world differently and understand life more.

TO THE TEACHER:

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTISTS

You may want to begin by sharing information about the artists and their accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

BIOGRAPHY

Betye Saar (1926-) was born in Los Angeles, CA., and grew up spending her summer vacations with her grandmother in Watts. She watched the construction of the famous Watts Towers, and the towering spirals made from discarded objects were a great influence on her work.

She received her B.A. degree from UCLA and continued her studies at California State Long beach, California State Northridge and the University of Southern California. Her first artworks were strong statements about the social and political concerns of African Americans during the 60s. She has evolved into doing more intimate and sensitive expressions of her own heritage and beliefs.

Her work has been widely exhibited in numerous galleries and museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Studio Museum of Harlem in New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. ,The Philadelphia Museum of Art and The San Francisco Museum of Modern art. She has done site installations in Taiwan, New Zealand, Malaysia, and the Philippines as well as in the U.S. The artist has had several public art commissions and received awards from the J. Paul Getty Trust, The National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Alison Saar (1956 -) was also fascinated by Watts Towers and credits the "magical castle" as the stimulus for her decision to become an artist. Her mother was an inspiration to Alison and her two sisters (all of whom work in the arts) and she recalls being encouraged to do her own art projects as a child. She was an apprentice to her father, who was an art restorer and conservator, who taught her drawing and took her to museums.

She received a B.A. degree from Scripps College in 1978 and an M.F.A. from the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1981 Her work has been described as "rougher, more percussive" than her mother's. She is most well known for her massive figures, sculptural portraits, drawing on popular culture, mythology and outsider art.

Her work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions and is in the collections of major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, corporations and individuals. She has received grants and awards from such entities as the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation of the Arts; she has also been an artist in residence.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.

- Watch for the definition of conjure women.
 - Watch for where the artists look for materials.
 - Watch for the different ways both artists work.
 - Watch for the Watts Tower and how Simon Rodia made it.
 - Watch for artifacts from Africa, China and New Guinea.
 - Watch for information about the artists' family life and their memories as mother and daughter.
 - Watch for the large figure that has a compartment that opens.
 - Watch for how the artists describe recycling.
 - Watch for how the artists find things for each other and how they feel about "the hunt."
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- Watch for how the artists describe the ways art can help you deal with life.
 - Watch for the House of Gregory "house" installation the Saars did together.

QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Betye and Alison Saar and their work.

- ? Why do you think Betye and Alison Saar are described as conjure women ?

- ? Where do the artists look for materials?

- ? How are Betye and Alison Saar alike and different as artists? How does each make her work?

- ? How and why did Simon Rodia make Watts Tower? What did he use to make it?

- ? How does non-Western art influence and inspire the artists?

- ? How did Alison Saar learn about art from both her mother and her father?
- ? What is the "magpie" instinct? Why is it a good comparison for the two artists?
- ? What was the subject matter of Betye Saar's first artwork? How was she influenced by her background and what was happening at the time?
- ? What do the Saars say makes a great artist?
- ? What is an installation? Describe the one the two artists made for the House of Gregory.
- ? What can you learn from Betye and Alison Saar?

EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of the Saars' message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. Sharpen up your vision. Go outside with a meter of string. Form it into a circle on the ground. What do you see? Write down everything you discover. If you find something that would be interesting to use in making art, save it.
2. Ask everyone in your class if they have a collection. Find out what they collect, why they collect it and where they keep their collections. Keep a record of this information. What do these collections have in common? Stage an exhibition of the collections and invite other classes to come and see it.
3. Find out more about Watts Tower, the artist who made it and the symbol it has become. Compare Rodia's work to Antoni Gaudi, the famous Spanish architect who constructed remarkable and fanciful buildings. Write a report and share it with the class.
4. The artists make several statements about art and artists in the video:
 - What makes a great artist is having a vision and having something to say."
 - The essence of being an artist is finding your jelly bean: getting in touch with the inside part of you.

- Art can help with pain, anger, any of your emotions, but you have to have the technique.
- Artists makes us see what we haven't seen before.

Which of these statements do you agree with? Why? Choose one statement and write a paragraph about why you think this opinion is true. Graph the class responses to see which statement has the most support.

5. Start building a collection of objects to use in making art. Look at things you would ordinarily throw away from a different perspective. Do they have an interesting color, shape, texture? Can they be a symbol? What natural objects can you find - leaves, twigs, shells, rocks? Will you use them in their present form or change them?

6. Create an assemblage using objects from your collection. Use a sturdy box, like a shoe box, as a framework. Decide if you want to paint the box or wait until you have completed the project and paint both the box and the objects in it then. Experiment by placing the objects in the box. Once you are satisfied with the composition, glue everything in place. Ask a classmate if he/she can interpret what your artwork is about. If you want to focus on a theme in this project, a suggestion is to have the outside of the box represent how other people see you; and the inside of the box show how you really are.

7. Use your collection objects in a different way. Take one or two objects and change them into something else. For example, Alison Saar took a piece of tin and turned it into a dress on a figure. Use paint, clay, wood, fabric, buttons, paper clips, nails, paper, markers, wire, yarn or any other material. Share your transformed object with the class and see if they can tell how you changed it.

8. Imagine that an artist was walking along a sidewalk and saw an interesting scrap of metal. He takes it home to his studio, nails it to a piece of wood and signs it. Is his creation "art?" If someone who was not an artist did this, would it be considered "art?" What value does the artist's signature have?

9. Do you think it would be easy or hard to work with another family member? Why? Ask a family member to work with you on a project - making an artwork together, planning a party, cooking a meal, planting a garden, helping an older person. When it is over, write a story about what happened and how you felt about it. What did you learn? What did you teach? What would you like to pass on to someone else?

10. Create an installation in your classroom or another location at school. Brainstorm ideas for a theme of the installation; in the film you see an installation made by Betye and Alison Saar on the theme of a house - The House of the Gris Gris - referring to an African charm. Review the film to see how they constructed it and the objects used inside and outside. Large refrigerator boxes are one suggestion for housing the installation piece or dividing the room. Ask everyone to contribute objects from their collections and to collaborate on the installation.

What colors, line, shapes, composition can best express the thematic idea? How can everyone work together effectively?

VIDEO SERIES

Betye & Alison Saar: Conjure Women of The Arts, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about **Betye & Alison Saar: Conjure Women of the Arts** and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Video, Inc.
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