

Betye Saar

Teaching Resource

Betye Saar: Call and Response / September 25, 2021 – January 2, 2022

About Betye Saar

An avid collector of discarded items, Betye Saar uses found objects to create assemblages that address spirituality, gender, and race. She creates her sculptures by selecting an everyday object—a piece of clothing, an old postcard, a clock—and combining it with other items to explore multiple layers of history and meaning. Saar grew up in a mixed-race household in southern California, where she studied design and printmaking. After seeing an exhibition of assemblage art by Joseph Cornell in 1967, Saar was inspired to recycle items into sculptures of her own, often reappropriating derogatory images such as Black mammy figures found in old advertisements. In her over-five-decade career, Saar has created intensely personal work that also highlights the connectedness between different cultures.



Betye Saar in 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California; photographer David Sprague.

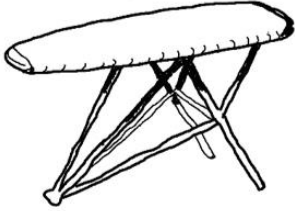
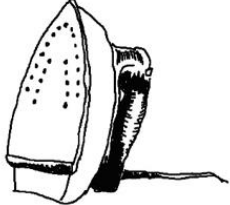

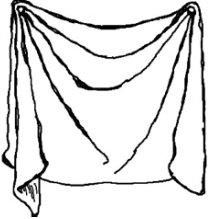
I'll Bend But I Will Not Break

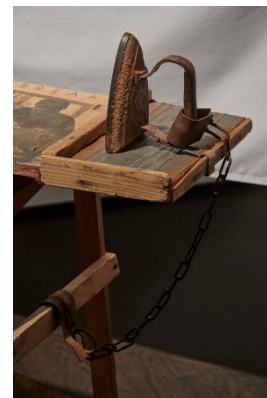
This sculptural tableau uses household items to present overlapping references to the history of racism in the United States. The iron and chain that Betye Saar has affixed to a wooden ironing board allude to the branding irons and chains that were used to mark and contain enslaved Africans. On the surface of the ironing board is a printed diagram of the 18th century British slave ship, *Brookes*. A white sheet appliqued with the letters "KKK" is a visual reminder of the robes worn by the Klu Klux Klan.



I'll Bend But I Will Not Break, 1998. Vintage ironing board, flat iron, chain, white bedsheets, wood clothespins, and rope. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Lynda and Stewart Resnick through the 2018 Collectors Committee.

Look at these four components of Saar's assemblage, *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*.
 With a partner or in a small group, fill in the chart below.

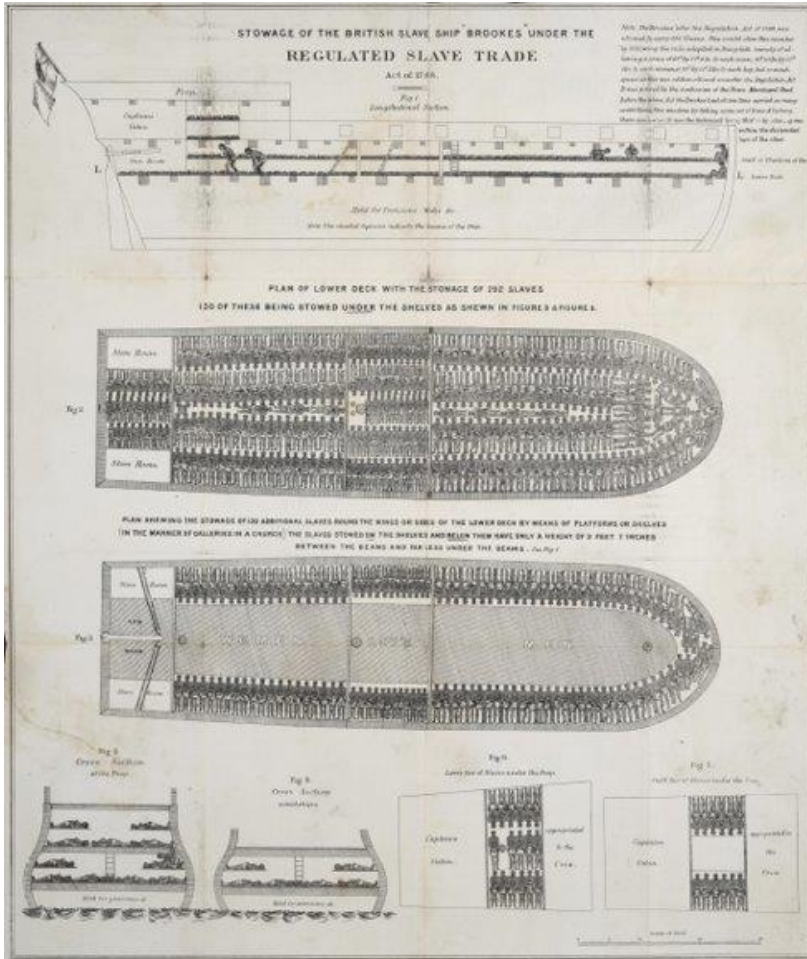
 <p>Ironing board</p>	<p>Ironing boards are used for:</p> <p>Ironing boards remind me of:</p>
 <p>Iron</p>	<p>Irons are used for:</p> <p>Irons remind me of:</p>
 <p>Chain</p>	<p>Chains are used for:</p> <p>Chains remind me of:</p>
 <p>Sheet</p>	<p>Sheets are used for:</p> <p>Sheets remind me of:</p>



I'll Bend But I Will Not Break, 1998, Mixed media tableau: vintage ironing board, flat iron, metal chin, white bed sheet, six wooden clothespins, cotton, clothesline and one rope hook, 80 x 96 x 36 in (203.2 x 243.8 x 91.4 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Lynda and Stewart Resnick through the 2018 Collectors Committee.

Nasher Sculpture Center

Betty Saar has said that the shape of the ironing board she used in *I'll Bend but I Will Not Break* reminded her of the diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*, shown below. Published in the eighteenth century, this print shows how African people were packed into extremely close quarters aboard a ship carrying enslaved people across the ocean. The diagram shows 454 enslaved people crammed below deck in unimaginable conditions. Many died onboard before reaching the destination.



It is estimated that millions of enslaved Africans were transported via the transatlantic slave trade. During the voyage and upon reaching their destinations, African passengers were treated as property rather than people. In the United States, enslaved people performed a variety of unpaid occupations, ranging from agricultural work in fields to domestic work as cooks, seamstresses, and nursemaids.

Saar has said that the title of her sculpture implies "the political message that you can treat me as a slave and I'll bend down—I'll bend down to pick cotton, I'll bend to do this, to be a laborer—but I *will not break*."

Diagram of the *Brookes* slave ship loaded to full capacity with 454 people in the hold, created circa 1787, this version 1808, British Library, London.

Look back at the images of *I'll Bend but I Will Not Break*. How did Betye Saar use the *Brookes* diagram in her sculpture?

What connections can you make between the *Brookes* slave ship and the four items included in the sculpture? Write any additions to the chart on the previous page.

Cream

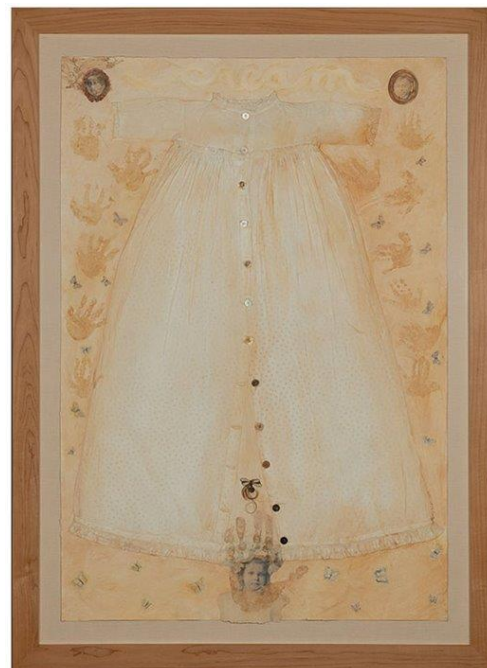
Betye Saar's heritage has inspired many of her artworks. Her family was of mixed African, Irish, and Native American descent. In her collage, *Cream*, she combined an array of personal objects to create a family portrait. The photographs at the top and bottom of the artwork show her grandparents and her mother. The handprints were made by the artist's youngest granddaughter and by Saar herself.

Read the following poem by Betye Saar and consider how it relates to her family portrait.

Tangled Roots

*My roots are tangled.
My unknown ancestors from
Africa, Ireland and America
have blurred the boundaries.
I cannot recall the lost legends of forgotten tribes nor revive
the rituals of fragmented cultures.
A blend of black, white and red,
I am labeled Creole, mulatto, mixed, colored in every sense.
Enslaved by the 'one-drop-rule'
But liberated by the truth
That all blood is red.*

- Betye Saar, 1996



Cream, 2001, Collage of dress, buttons, photos, printed papers, lock of hair, metal ornament, handprints, and paint on paper.

What do Betye Saar's artwork and poetry tell us about her family history?

What connections might you find between her assemblages, collages, and poem?

Betye Saar incorporates imagery and references to her personal roots, or her heritage. What are some of your roots?

Write a poem about your family and the people in your life by completing the prompts below.

My family comes from

_____.

We used to be

_____.

Today, we are

_____.

Tomorrow, we will

_____.

We are defined by

_____.

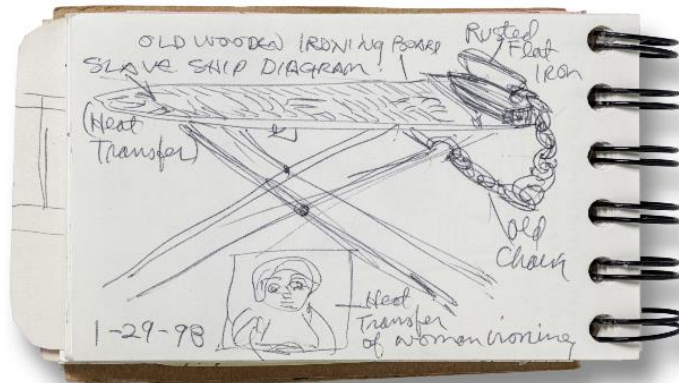
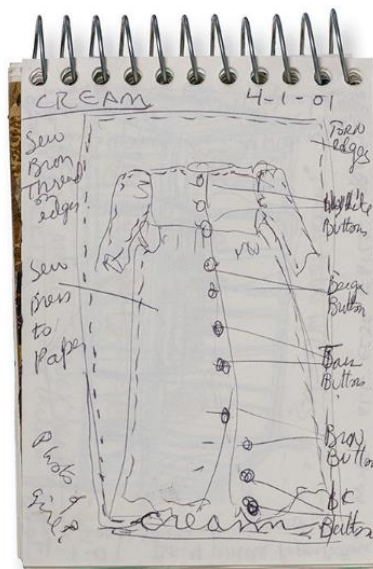
Sculptures & Sketchbooks

"I start with the found object and transform it, making it into something different, changing the idea of its use to an emotion or a feeling." – Betye Saar

Betye Saar often uses sketchbooks to brainstorm ideas for her assemblages and sculptural installations. Her spiral sketchbooks are typically small enough to hold in one hand, and she uses ballpoint pen to draw in them. In her drawings, she includes notes about materials, colors, and ideas for titles. Many of her sketchbooks offer a window into her process for creating sculptures. Other times, her sketchbooks contain more personal drawings and paintings made during her travels around the globe.

How do Saar's sketchbooks add to your understanding of *Cream* and *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*?

What elements of the finished artworks stayed the same? Did anything change?



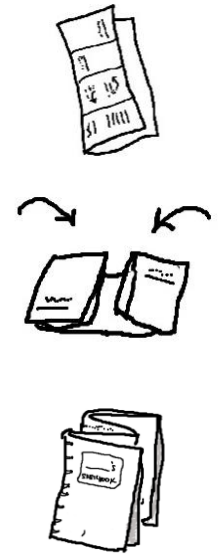
TOP: Sketchbook page for *Cream*, 1 April 2001. Marker on paper; ballpoint pen on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. © Betye Saar. BOTTOM: Sketchbook, 1998, Overall: 6 × 3 1/4 in.; Sheet: 5 × 3 in., Collection of Betye Saar, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Nasher Sculpture Center

Make Your Own Sketchbook

Follow the instructions below to transform the template on the next page into a sketchbook of your own.

1. Fold your sheet of paper in half “hot dog” style, so it is long and narrow. Make sure the sketchbook prompts are on the outside.
2. Fold it in half again, bringing pages 2 and 5 to the middle, facing in.
3. Fold it in half one more time, bringing the folded edges together.
4. Write your name on the front sketchbook cover. Read the prompts on each page to practice transforming objects from your life into new works of art.
5. When you’re all done, add a sketch to your front cover.



Sketches are quick drawings – they don’t have to be perfect! Try the following tips to take the pressure off while sketching or to try something new.

- Sketch with your eyes closed.
- Make a continuous line sketch by keeping your pencil on the paper the entire time you draw. Don’t lift it off the page until you’re all done!
- Use your non-dominant hand to sketch.

_____s

SKETCHBOOK

List 5 items! They can be from your home, school, friends, or hobbies.

2

Circle 3 of the items



Now, sketch one item on each of the following pages!



3

How would you combine all three items into an assemblage?

7

If it could talk, this item would say

9

This item reminds me of

4

This item makes me feel

5

8

What is another way you could combine your items? Make one last sketch!