A TEI Project

Interview of Betye Saar

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE JUNE 4, 1990

MASON:

> I thought today we would just talk about your early life and childhood and your family.

SAAR:

> Okay.

MASON:

> The way we usually start out is I ask when and where were you born, and then we just go on from there.

SAAR:

> Okay, that's a good place to start. [laughter]

MASON:

So when and where were you born?

SAAR:

I was born in Los Angeles, California, at the-- I think it was the Dunbar Hospital in Los Angeles on Adams-- I guess it was on Adams Boulevard. The old Dunbar Hospital. The day was July 30, 1926. Yeah, here it is, the Dunbar Hospital.

MASON:

You're reading from your birth certificate?

SAAR:

Yeah, yeah, I'm reading from my birth certificate. That was probably like a black hospital, or for Negros, as they were called then, or, according to the birth certificate, "colored American." [laughter]

MASON:

So is it far from where you were living? Or was it--?

SAAR:

Well, no, no, because the address that's here for my parents is 1238 North Commonwealth Avenue, Hollywood, California, and Adams is a street-- Let's see. Adams runs like Wilshire [Boulevard], it runs that way, so it runs from west to east or east to west. But it was on the east part of it and probably on the other side of Central Avenue, which used to be the black community, or the "colored American" community, as they say that. So this was in 1926 when I was born. I'm the eldest of three children, the eldest of five children by my mother.

MASON:

Okay, and the other two--

SAAR:

My mother remarried, yeah.

MASON:

So what are your brothers' and sisters' names?

SAAR:

Well, of the first union-- My mother's name was Beatrice L. Parson, and my father's name was Jefferson M. Brown. From that union-- Let's see if I have when they were married. Yes, they were married in 1925 in Los Angeles. From that union I had a sister, who is two years younger than I am, named Jeffalyn Harriet Brown. Johnson is her married name. And I have a brother named Robert Maze Brown, and he's two years younger than my sister, or four years younger than I am.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

When my brother Robert was just a baby, my father died. Yeah, he died. By then we had moved to Pasadena, but most of my early childhood was spent in Los Angeles.

MASON:

I want to ask more about your parents and your grandparents and what their interests and their occupations-- I know you said that your father used to like to write poetry and plays and things like that.

SAAR:

Yeah.

MASON:

Was he ever published? Did he ever publish anything?

SAAR:

I don't know. Let's see-- Well, my family is sort of interesting, because I feel that it's strongly matriarchal, because with my grandmother, with my great-aunt [Hattie Parson], with my mother, their husbands died and they remarried. Like in the case of one grandmother, there were three husbands. You know, they would just keep dying. But then that was also because medical help wasn't always available or whatever. To go back to my father, my father was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, so that meant that that's also the area my

grandmother is from, whose name was Irene Hannah. Maze was her maiden name. It's strange, because when my father's name is spelled--his middle name is Maze--it's spelled M-A-Z-E, but on this certificate here, her name is spelled M-A-Y-S, which could be an error.

MASON:

Yeah, that's interesting. I think that happens a lot with black people's birth certificates. Like a friend of mine, his grandfather's name was O. Neal, and now their family name is O'Neal.

SAAR:

Yeah, it's just the records, and either they don't catch it, or once it's there it's a lot of trouble to change it.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

So my father was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Let's see if I can find out how old he was. Well, I'll go back to that later. His mother was Irene Hannah Maze [Brown Draugh]. And I have a piece of paper here that says she was a midwife from the state of Louisiana. Well, let's see, maybe a nurse. Medical examiners, state medical society. Now, this says "Mrs. Hannah Maze"--so this is her mother, actually--"May 1909." So this is a great-grandmother that I didn't know who was a nurse.

MASON:

Oh, okay.

SAAR:

Yeah, "to practice midwifery," so she was a midwife. And if my grandmother had this--this is from New Orleans; I guess that's where the state medical examiners are--then that meant that my grandmother didn't come to California until after 1909.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

I'm trying to get this in order. The farthest back I can trace it on my father's side is to Hannah Maze, who is my great-grandmother from Louisiana. She had two daughters; one was named Harriet and one was named Irene. Now, Irene is the mother of my father.

MASON:

So it was Irene who came to California after 1909.

SAAR:

To California, yeah. She was married to a man, first name unknown, last name Estorage. And then she came to California. Now, her husband at that time, when she came to California, was Brown, Horace Brown. So he's my father's stepfather, but my father took his name, so my father became Jefferson Maze Brown.

MASON:

Do you know why they came out to California?

SAAR:

No. Probably, you know, floods and bad times, whatever. So that meant that they came out to California in maybe 1910, 1911. My father was approximately six or seven or eight, or could have been nine. The only date I have here is this certificate from my great grandmother, and then my father's high school graduation. He was born October 28, 1904. That's when my father Jefferson was born. Unknown when they came to California, but he was in California when he was in high school, because he graduated from Jefferson High School in the east part of L.A., which is now a totally black school. But during the time that he attended, it was quite integrated, because I have a photograph of him, the class picture.

MASON:

How many blacks were in his high school? In this picture, how many blacks were there?

SAAR:

Okay, this is Jefferson High School commencement, June 15, 1921. That's when he graduated from high school. This is the class picture. You can tell that it is quite integrated there.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

But, you know, with the Los Angeles school system, sometimes-- Well, when I was a student in Pasadena, graduating from the twelfth grade was graduating from high school, so I don't know if that was the same thing. There are--since you asked me--about nine black, there is one who looks Asian, and others could be Hispanic--Mexican, probably. Because when I was a child in Watts, which is where their home was, it was predominantly black and Mexican who lived there. It may still be that way, I don't know.

MASON:

Okay. Are you the family archivist? Because you have all of these--

SAAR:

Well, because I've always liked to collect old things, and when my aunt [Hattie Parson] died in 1975, I just didn't want to throw out those papers. I've always liked the old photographs, so I got all of that stuff. I made photocopies to give my sisters and brothers, because they were interested in having copies of the photographs. When my mother passed about three years ago, she had things pertaining to her family and my father, so I kept those, too.

MASON:

So what did his mother do?

SAAR:

His mother was like a practical nurse. She worked as a worker. She was married. Her husband, Horace Brown, worked. I think he just did odd jobs or whatever. I didn't know what he did. He had a truck, a Ford truck. He died when I was ten or eleven. And, you know, when you visit your grandmother, you just go down there and visit them. He was what my sister and I called the mystery man, because he had-- My grandmother had this house, a large frame

house. It had three bedrooms. She had her bedroom in the front, he had his bedroom in the back, and we were not allowed to go in his room. He left early in the morning before we got up. Now, this is during the summer or vacations when we spent time with her. He came in at maybe five [o'clock] in the evening, and we had already eaten, so we didn't eat with them. He had his dinner and listened to the radio and went to bed.

MASON:

So he didn't talk much.

SAAR:

No. On Sunday, if we were there over the weekend, we all piled in his truck and went to church up in Los Angeles, that's the church that he belonged to. A Baptist church, as I remember. He was a very quiet man and didn't speak much.

MASON:

Why do you think that was?

SAAR:

I don't know. Tired, probably! He had to work those long hours. He just wasn't very communicative. There were no children in that union. My father was an only child, as was my mother an only child. But he raised my father. My grandmother had remarried, and he raised my father as his son, and my father took his name. About my father. He was not wealthy, because both of his parents-- Both Horace Brown and my grandmother Irene were working people, and so he worked also. He did odd jobs probably, like delivering newspapers or whatever. This is probably during high school. I'm trying to think of something that I read about him. There was an article in the paper at his death, which was in 1931. So he was quite a young man, just in his thirties, when he died.

MASON:

What did he die of?

SAAR:

He died of uremic poisoning. Uremic poisoning is when the urethra or something gets clogged up in the urinary system. It's not that it's not curable, but it's very hard to detect.

MASON:

So when you were saying that the medical care wasn't good, you were saying that the--

SAAR:

But in Los Angeles it was okay. By then we were living in Pasadena, and it wasn't rural or primitive or anything like that.

MASON:

So most of his life your father had sort of odd jobs or--?

SAAR:

No.

MASON:

He had a steady job?

SAAR:

He had a steady job. He worked for the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], Twenty-eight Street branch, and was a secretary there. It says he came to their staff in 1921 and served till 1930, so that's almost ten years that he did that.

MASON:

What paper is that that you're reading from?

SAAR:

This is just a letter, a letter of condolences to my mother upon his death. He was very interested in young people and working with them. He was sort of like a mentor encouraging young men to go to school. During that time after high school, he went to USC [University of Southern California].

MASON:

What did he study there?

SAAR:

His commencement book-- This is the seventh commencement of the University of California, Southern Branch, so this is actually UCLA. This is UCLA; it was called the Southern Branch until later on it was called UCLA. He graduated June 11, 1926. This is the year that I was born. He was in the College of Letters and Science and received his bachelor's [degree] from there. So that meant if he was teaching at the Y from 1920 on and was also married with a pregnant wife that he probably went part time. He was working on his master's degree when he died in '31, so from '26 to '31, it also meant that he was part-time in that. From 1930, when he I guess resigned from there-- Maybe that was when we moved to Pasadena. He was an insurance agent with the Golden State [Mutual Life] Insurance Company.

MASON:

Oh, okay.

SAAR:

Yeah, he was an employee there. He worked for them.

MASON:

But what about his writing? Do you remember that?

SAAR:

I think that he just had a tremendous amount of energy and the kind of mind that went in lots of different directions other than being a secretary at the Y. He was also a Sunday school superintendent for the Independent Church in Los Angeles. That was what he did on Sunday. And he was probably a devoted husband and son, because his mother still lived in L.A. He wrote something-- I think it was here, because it was just a set of index cards. Right here. "Play," it says. Here it is, just handwritten things. Maybe sometimes things were published in the YMCA Broadcast . This is something else. This goes to his address, sent to the Twenty-eight Street Y. During that time, during the early nineteen hundreds, poetry was really big. And this is a news magazine. It has lots of little poems and little jokes and little stories and things like that. That might have been the kind of thing he did. I'm just speculating on that, because

I don't have anything published by him. Because I was six when he died. But I have read other things that he had written to friends, copies of them that my mother made. I would have said that he was a spiritual person, like a New Age person, based on New Age philosophy as we know it today. A really positive person. So he had the job as a secretary at the Y, and then, when we moved to Pasadena, he worked for the Golden State Insurance Company. Basically, my mother stayed at home and was a care giver at home. She had kids every two years, at least from that first set, so when one was up, then she was pregnant again. There was a photo exhibit at the [California] Afro-American Museum about early Los Angeles. There's this woman who collected lots and lots of photographs. She used to be a librarian. You know her? Matthews.

MASON:

Miriam Matthews.

SAAR:

Yes. [tape recorder off] Miriam Matthews has a photograph taken--well, it had to be before 1931, because that's when my father passed--of the Junior Urban League, and my parents are in that photograph. So that meant that they were also involved with a sort of a black nationalist kind of movement or organizations or something. My father grew up in Watts and then married my mother. Did I tell you when they married?

MASON:

No.

SAAR:

Did I give you that date?

MASON:

No, not their marriage date. Do you know how they met?

SAAR:

They met at UCLA. They met at UCLA when they were students. They were married June 25. By the time I was born, they lived in Hollywood and then moved to Pasadena. We moved to Pasadena when my brother was born. I remember living in Pasadena when my brother was born, so that meant that

he was already working at Golden State Insurance Company. Okay, now, on the other side of the fence is my mother. My mother's people are from Missouri. The information that I have-- Let's see. Her grandmother's last name was White. That was probably another marriage, too, because her father's last name was Parson. Frances is her name, Frances Parson White. I don't know her maiden name. I'll just go back to this. This is my grandmother on my father's side. Grandfather unknown. The man that she was married to was-- I think his last name was White, first name unknown, because he probably had already passed over. From that marriage, Frances Parson White had three children: two girls--older daughter Mary [Parson], daughter Hattie [Parson]--who was my great aunt Hattie--and a son. The son's name was Albert Loden Parson. Albert is my mother's father. Now, it's really interesting. I guess ever since Roots , people got interested in tracing their roots and so forth. But I think a lot of the times with black families, people did not bother to get married, or with Frances White, who may have even been a slave, you know, I just don't have that definite information. She was a very, very dark-skinned woman, but her children were all fair. So I mean, just from that-- But you don't ask your mother how come Grandma is so dark and then, you know-- You just don't ask your mother that. So both Mary and Hattie Parson were very fair-skinned. My grandfather Albert was ruddy complected, looked Native American. They probably went to grade school, high school. My Great-aunt Hattie became a teacher, so I have--

MASON:

In grade school? A grade school teacher?

SAAR:

Grade school teacher? Maybe. I didn't pull that out, because I didn't think you would--

MASON:

That's all right.

SAAR:

Yeah, because from her things I have-- They were living in Kansas City, Missouri. She went to probably an all-black school and received a high school

diploma and then probably [went to] I guess what they call normal school or teachers' school and received a teaching credential. She also married twice. So all these women had different husbands, because they have all these different last names. Anyway, the reason I talk a lot about her is because she took care of my mother when she was little. My grandfather Albert married a woman named Emma [L.] Kelley. This is September 17, 1898. And this certificate of marriage is in Polk County, Iowa.

MASON:

They were steadily moving westward.

SAAR:

Yes, they were steadily moving westward, but there was a complication, too--not a complication, but something that made them maybe want to move into another area, because Emma Kelley was Irish. Her family--this is my grandmother--was originally from Virginia. She had two brothers and a sister. But after she married my grandfather, her family disowned her, and she only had contact with her sister. My mother had a photograph of her [Emma L. Kelley] riding in a carriage with her mother and her aunt and her cousin. But when my mother was nine years old, her mother died, so that part of the family is just gone. Anyway, Emma L. Kelley married Albert Parson, and the child from that union is my mother, Beatrice. Her name is Beatrice Lillian Parson. And then she married my father, Jefferson Brown. My Great-aunt Hattie had come to California in the twenties, I guess. I could look that up. Maybe in the twenties. She worked, just domestic work, for an actor named Reginald Denny. That probably accounts for the Hollywood address for my mother. Maybe they shared a place.

MASON:

I was just wondering. She has her teaching credential. Do you think she couldn't find a job teaching?

SAAR:

Coming to California? Probably not. Because in Missouri the teaching restrictions would be different than in California, and maybe she didn't want to go back to school to do that. And it was maybe the beginning of the

Depression, or she had to come and find a job right away. But I don't have any information that she was a teacher in California. So she left her family in Missouri and came to California. This is my Great-aunt Hattie. When my grandmother died, she and Frances White raised my mother. She was nine years old. She went to schools back there, and then when my aunt Hattie came here, my mother stayed part of the time-- When she was a young woman, she stayed part of the time with her father, but he married another woman who didn't want to have my mother there, so that's why she was raised, rather than by a stepmother, by her great aunt.

MASON:

She just didn't like kids? Or she didn't want to be reminded of his previous--?

SAAR:

Probably all of it, because they never had children. She seemed to be from-- Because she was still alive when I was a teenager-- She was very self-centered. My grandfather and Emma and my mother made a trip to California for a vacation or something, probably to visit with my aunt. And then after my mother finished high school, she came to California and maybe worked, went to school, because that's where she met my father, at UCLA.

MASON:

Do you know what she was studying at UCLA?

SAAR:

It might have been in the same school, letters and Science. That seems to be-- Well, let's see what they had here. They didn't have too many schools then. The schools that they had were teachers' college-- She could have been doing that, but she didn't say that. A lot of people are in teachers' college and the College of Letters and Science, which is the biggest college, and military, which is ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps].

MASON:

She wouldn't have been in that.

SAAR:

No, no. But, see, the College of Letters and Science had economics, English, French, geography, history, Latin, mathematics, philosophy, poli[tical] sci[ence], Spanish, zoology.

MASON:

That's probably for more serious students, rather than going to the teachers' college, where you can get a general--

SAAR:

Yeah, but she could have been in teachers' college. But I don't think she graduated then. This is '26; she was already married and pregnant. I think she had two years of college, so she did not graduate. But that's where she met my father.

MASON:

The women in your family seem to be really ambitious, aggressive, about getting an education and, I guess, looking out for themselves.

SAAR:

Yeah. Also willing to move on with-- On their own, you know, with a child. I just figure that that's the way my grandmother did it. She came out with her son. She may have been married to Horace Brown, but she may not have. That's a big question there. Certainly my aunt came out as a single woman, because her husband died. She was married a brief time, and her first husband died. Her being there [California] was the attraction for my grandfather, and my mother to come out for a visit, and then she [Beatrice L. Parson] came out and stayed and was a student. Before she was a student, or at the same time she was a student, she probably had to work. There's a woman who is still alive, who was her close friend, who-- They got a job together; they worked for a laundry in East L.A. It was the first time that they had hired blacks. Both my mother and this woman were fair-skinned, so they were able to-- Not that they passed or anything, but--

MASON:

But they just didn't mention it.

SAAR:

No, I think they were known, but it's just that-- During that time, people were really conscious of skin coloring and hair texture. That was part of the social strata. Anyway, she had a job there just working in a laundry, which seems like menial labor now, but if you're kind of moving into an area where blacks didn't work before, then that was, I guess, looking up, other than being a domestic. So then, when they were at UCLA, they met and they got married. I was born the next year. At that time, they lived on Fifty-third Street, because we lived next door to this woman who was my mother's best friend. And at that time, my father was working at the YMCA. He may have even been working for the Golden State Insurance Company as an agent, because that's not-- You don't have to go to an office; you just go around and sell insurance. And then he's working at the Y, and then he's teaching Sunday School on Sunday. The reason that I mention this house, which is on East Fifty-third Street--I don't remember the address--is because that's the earliest time that I can remember. Maybe I can remember a little bit. When I look at a photograph when my sister was born, two years later--I was '26, she was born in '28--there is a house that has stairs going up, and that was on Adams Boulevard. I remember that house, because I remember those stairs. My sister was an infant. Then we moved to Fifty-third Street. So that meant that I was almost three years old on Fifty-third Street. That's the farthest back that I can remember about being here in Los Angeles. And I guess that's usually the time when children remembe, anyway.

MASON:

Or you sort of think you do.

SAAR:

Yes, you think you do. But there are certain things that I can remember. The reason that I want to talk about this is because I think that it has a connection with my sensitivity as an artist, because at that time my mother tells me that I was clairvoyant.

MASON:

But you don't remember being--?

SAAR:

The only thing that I can remember is the house that we had was a framed house, and it had a porch across the front. I can remember the way that house looked. But in the back there was a barn, because this is preautomobile and garages, and when people had a house, they built a barn, and if they got a car, they parked the car in the barn. So this was larger than a garage. It would be like a three-car garage, only it was framed. But it was a place that I was really, really intrigued by being in. You know, it was like--

MASON:

It was your own playhouse?

SAAR:

Yes, it was like a mystery place, and I was a kid that had a really, really vivid imagination and liked secret places and fairy tales and all sorts of things like that. Anyway, in that barn was an imaginary friend, because many kids have that, but this imaginary friend gave really valuable information, you know. [laughter]

MASON:

I think you said someplace her name was Rosie.

SAAR:

Rosie, that's right. Rosie lived in the barn. I can't tell if it's my imagination or it's-- Because, you know, your mind-- There are all these little recesses in your mind where memory hides and you don't know. So part of the time I'm just feeling it. Okay, so I'm just feeling it, that these conversations with Rosie would come. You know, she would give me this information, and I would come in and report that information to my mother. And she would say, "Oh, did Rosie say that?" My mother was very lenient towards-- [laughter] She never did anything to discourage this wild imagination. It would be like-- Oh, well, one example she would give me was that I would say things like, "Oh, Daddy's really mad because he missed the bus." And then he would come home late and he'd say, "Oh, I missed the bus," and she would say, "Betye said you were going to miss the bus." That's an incident. But that's because I remember that she told me that.

MASON:

You don't remember?

SAAR:

I can't remember myself saying that to her. But that was a really special place. And the feeling that I have from that place, I can experience that feeling in other places.

MASON:

Like where? Are they private places?

SAAR:

After my father died, we lived with my aunt for a while in Pasadena. She had a big, big garage that was similar in feeling, except it was more modern than that barn. And it had rooms on the other side of that, because it was a garage on one side and it was an unfinished storage place on the other. That had that feeling. Also, because I travel a lot, special places-- Like I remember I went to Spain, and we went to the Alhambra.

MASON:

What year was this?

SAAR:

The year was 1968. And there were special rooms in the Alhambra--because I guess it used to be a harem or something when the Moors had it--that had that feeling.

MASON:

I think it's kind of a mystery about the building. Nobody knows quite what it was.

SAAR:

Yes. But certain rooms in the Alhambra that are sort of lower down-- And then in Barcelona, Spain, there's a cathedral, but under the cathedral is an old Roman city, and it's like this real definite pull to the past, to ancient times. And, you know, if I try to think of it logically, it doesn't make any sense, because my mind just gets boggled. So I just go with how that feeling feels. And that's what I think, that when I make certain pieces of art, that's what I try

to capture: a feeling of ancient history, but without being pinpointed to any particular place or time or era.

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SAAR:

But more like with the Alhambra, because of the Moorish influence. With the cathedral, like the Roman times, but that sort of aged and-- I haven't been to Egypt, but I experience the same feeling with certain exhibits that are about Egyptian artifacts. There's a museum in Chicago called the Field Museum [of Natural History], and they have a fine collection of Egyptian art. That's something that-- I guess what I'm trying to do is sort of weave in the things that sort of got together to help me be the kind of artist that I am now.

MASON:

So this feeling that you mean, it's a feeling of recognition when you're in different places? You feel connected with them in a way you can't explain?

SAAR:

Yeah, it's-- I feel connected with it-- I feel like, not that I've been there before, but I could experience what kind of thing was there before without really seeing it, just feeling it, sensing it, sensing it through the skin somehow.

MASON:

So in Barcelona, when you were over this Roman city, you knew it was a city before you--?

SAAR:

No, it was just on the tour, and we kept going deeper and deeper, and they say, "Now, this is the remnants of a Roman city that was--" You know, then it was an earthquake or something that-- Oh, no, an eruption of a volcano, because a lot of it had been covered with lava and stuff. And it's a strange-- I feel detached from this century when I experience things like that. But not so much with the barn, because it wouldn't have been that old. I mean, if this was in the thirties, then the house maybe was built thirty years previously or something like that, because Los Angeles isn't that new. But anyway, I feel

that that feeling is important and is a direct connection with what I try to do with my art.

MASON:

Did you do a lot of reading when you were younger about different places, old cities?

SAAR:

No, no. It's not that I don't care about those things, but the feeling is more important than the printed word about it.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

Okay, to go back to this other information, the certificate of marriage for Albert Parson and Emma Kelley was in Des Moines, Iowa, but my mother was born in Perry, Iowa. So that meant that they spent some time in Iowa. After my grandmother died, I guess they had moved back to Kansas City, or maybe even before then.

MASON:

So I guess both of those places are a part of what they consider Polk County.

SAAR:

Yes. That's probably where there was a minister of the peace or a marriage parson or something. One of the interesting things that my mother told me about her mother was that her mother maybe worked. She doesn't mention that she worked. My grandfather did odd jobs, but he had a lot of friends. I think he worked in a restaurant, or he was a delivery person. He always provided a home for them. A traumatic thing that happened to my mother when she was young: They used to keep the money in a grandfather clock, and there was a fire in their house. My grand-father delivered ice cream by the bucket to different restaurants or people or whatever, and this fire came, so he used that-- He threw out the ice cream and was using water to put out the fire. They had kept the money in a clock, and my grandmother had moved the hiding place to another place, and he went and risked his life to carry the

grandfather clock down. So that's the story that is in my mind about things that impressed my mother, because I sort of believe that the images and the things that impressed your parents somehow are handed down to you in another way in one form or the other. Now that the world is moving so fast, there's probably not enough time for that, but in the days when things moved slower--

MASON:

When would your mother tell you these stories about her mother and her father?

SAAR:

Sometimes we would ask, or sometimes things would just trigger it. A grandfather clock might do it, and she would say, "Oh, yeah. I remember we had this grandfather clock," and she would run down this story about it. The thing that I remember that she told me about her grandmother is that her grandmother did china painting as well as embroidery. We have a few things that she's embroidered--lacemaking, crocheting, all sorts of woman crafts art. And china painting was one of the things. There was a set of porcelain, a cocoa set of a pitcher and little cups, that my grandmother had hand painted, and there's another vase that I have that she hand painted. So that was like an artistic link to my mother, too, because there was her mother painting and doing all of these things with her hand, which she did. Then my sister and I saw that, so then we in turn were interested in doing things with our hands, because both myself and my sister, my children, my daughters, and my mom, we're project oriented. We always have a project, something to do with our hands.

MASON:

So you say you have one sister that's two years younger.

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

And what's her name?

SAAR:

Her name is Jeffalyn.

MASON:

Jeffalyn.

SAAR:

Yeah, a derivative of my father's Jefferson. Middle name Harriet, which is my grandmother's sister's name.

MASON:

And you have a brother who is four years--

SAAR:

Four years younger. His name is Robert [Brown]. Maze is his middle name, which is my grandmother's maiden name. Robert [E. Keyes] is my Aunt Hattie's second husband. That's his first name.

MASON:

So would you say that you and your sister were fairly close?

SAAR:

Yes. We're still very--

MASON:

And you worked on projects together?

SAAR:

Yeah, but that's another story. The other thing about my mother, I showed her a photograph that I had taken from that-- When my Aunt Hattie left. And it's my grandmother sort of posed formally, because photographs were-- Like we take videos now to document the way someone looks. My mother saw this photograph, and she said, "When my mother bought that fabric, I started to cry. And she asked me, 'Why are you crying?'" And she said, "I don't know." This is my mother talking in this conversation. Then her mother made this dress. So her mother also sewed, because my mother also sewed. And I did,

and my daughters do. The dress that she was wearing in the photograph was the dress that my mother cried over the fabric to. It was also the dress that she was buried in. It was like somehow in her own way she was sensitive to that, too. Not that I'm saying that she was also clairvoyant, but she had a particular sensitivity and sensibility of knowing that that was a little warning sign of something bad going to happen. A lot of not bad, bad things had happened to my mother, but-- She was an only child. Her mother died when she was nine years old. Her father then remarried and abandoned her. She was raised by a grandmother and an aunt who took really good care of her, but it still doesn't make up for that double loss. And then she had been married five or six years, and her husband died. It was like everyone she really loved and cared about died, which is sad. She had a sort of quiet mood about her, a sadness about her. Not that she wasn't fun loving or friendly or anything like that. But there was that--

MASON:

So she had moods or--?

SAAR:

But also it was like an ultrafeminine kind of way, like when you think of an old-fashioned feminine woman. She was that. She had that kind of thing.

MASON:

Did she get that from your Aunt Hattie? Because I know the pieces that you've done, your Aunt Hattie had extremely feminine qualities.

SAAR:

Yes, yes. But that's mostly because of that time. However, I think my Aunt Hattie was tougher. She was a tougher woman. She was an older woman and knew that she had to make her way, and she became a schoolteacher. She got married, her husband died. She moved to California. She did that on her own. You know, more of a pioneer, where my mother was sort of guided. Destiny changed her life. Her mother was gone, so she moved in with her aunt. They took care of her. She took a trip with her father, and her aunt was there, so she went to stay with her aunt. She went to school, and she married my father. It's like she never really--and I can't say ever, because I don't know

what her personal victories were--but she never was a pioneer that way. Destiny just sort of guided her life, whereas my sister and I are quite different than that. I think in a way we are a lot like my mom because we are both quite feminine, but we still have a toughness to us that is more assertive--my sister more so than I.

MASON:

I guess what I was thinking about with your Aunt Hattie is sometimes, you know, when women have to be tough and they have to be aggressive, they make up for it by being somehow overly feminine. Not overly feminine, but extremely--

SAAR:

Yeah, they play up that side. Which is okay.

MASON:

So what about your brother?

SAAR:

My brother was quite a bit-- Well, he's four years younger. He was sort of like the favorite, because he was the only boy, especially with my aunt and uncle, you know, after two girls, and this was the boy. And since he was a namesake for my uncle-- Then my aunt again becomes like the grandmother, the mother, the protector. My other grandmother in Watts, they all sort of rallied around to protect my mother. She was a widow with three young children and no particular skills. When she moved back to Pasadena, she got a job as a secretary with Golden State Insurance Company. She did that. She worked as an elevator operator in a department store. She did jobs like that. We had like a caregiver, someone who would come in and sit with us during the week or take care of us during the week. But at that time, my aunt and uncle had provided a home after the death of my father. This was in Pasadena. My aunt had remarried, and she had married a man [Robert E. Keyes] who was from Kentucky but who worked for the railroad, and after his retirement--he was a cook on the railroad--he bought a restaurant in New York City, so he was like a "city fella." He and a partner had a restaurant in New York City, in Harlem, called the New Libya. The New Libya is what it was called. That was a very

fancy restaurant with an orchestra and so forth. I have all of his papers, too, from that, with the photographs. They're really wonderful photographs.

MASON:

What years were--?

SAAR:

This was before the Depression, so this was in the twenties.

MASON:

In the Harlem Renaissance period.

SAAR:

Yes, absolutely, because William [E. B.] DuBois came there one time for dinner.

MASON:

Oh, really? What an honor!

SAAR:

I know. He has a menu of "This is what I would like for dinner." It was New Year's Eve or something. My uncle saved all of that. So he was like a society fellow. He marched in the Easter parade--I guess the Harlem Easter parade--and he was into the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and all these clubs and stuff like that. Then he moved to Pasadena and started another restaurant, and he met my aunt. I have their love letters. That's what started this series [the Aunt Hattie series], because I started doing collages using the love letters from my uncle to my aunt.

MASON:

I haven't seen any of those?

SAAR:

No.

MASON:

You haven't shown them?

SAAR:

They were in other exhibitions. They weren't in the UCLA show [Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar]. They weren't works from this era.

MASON:

We have catalogs from your other exhibitions, and maybe they just weren't reproduced.

SAAR:

Maybe. Or they might have been. The ones with my aunt usually have part of the love letters in there, and there's a xerox or photograph of her, and then there are words there. Those are from her love letters. Anyway, he was a cook, and she was an upstairs maid, and they worked in an area called Flintridge, which is comparable to Beverly Hills but in the Pasadena area and the La Cañada area. They bought a house, and that house was inhabited by my mother and my sister and brother and me and then my aunt and uncle when they would come home on Thursdays and Sundays. So our life took a whole different framework from the time that we lived with them, which was the time when I was maybe six or seven until twelve, when my mother remarried. In that house, I can remember those days more vividly. My mother worked, my aunt and uncle worked, and we had someone who came over and took care of us during the day. And then in the summer, my mom took us to a church Bible school or a craft class. She always made sure that we had an active life with arts and crafts. So that was another connection to my art thing.

MASON:

When you were going to Bible school, was that because your family was fairly religious, whatever that means? Or it was just an activity because you're--? You know, of course, in the black community, the church is also a community center.

SAAR:

Yeah.

MASON:

So was it more of a social activity? Or was it also for religious importance?

SAAR:

Well, it wasn't so much for the religious importance. Religion has played an active part, but more of a variety of religions. My religious training is very eclectic. When my father was alive, he was a Sunday school superintendent for the Independent Church, which meant nondenominational. My mother was raised Episcopalian, but when she was married, she was part of that [Independent] Church. So as a little kid, I went to the Independent Church in Los Angeles. When I stayed with my grandmother, we went to the Baptist Church, because that's what her husband was, that's what she was. She was quite religious. She would wear white on Sunday, you know, like the elder women do.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

And Friday, Friday afternoons, we had prayer meeting with a neighbor of hers. There were three neighbors within maybe a three- or four-block radius, and we'd move from one house to the other on Friday afternoons. There was Sister Owens and Sister Spencer, and they would sing. It was more like Baptist or Baptist gospel.

MASON:

Were you the only kids there, you and your brother and sister?

SAAR:

Yes. Yes.

MASON:

No other kids?

SAAR:

No, because their grandchildren-- Either they didn't have grandchildren or they didn't live near there. They may have come on other occasions. But my grandmother had the youngest grandchildren, and we would go there. And,

you know, we would rather be playing, but we would have to sit there, and we would say it-- We would have to say our Bible verse, and they would read the Bible, and they would sing a couple of songs, and they would have lemonade and cookies, and then it was fun, you know. And then we would walk home. Also during that time, my grandmother lived half a block from the railroad track. The railroad track, which they are revising now for the Long Beach [Metro Rail] line, went through Watts and past where Simon Rodia was building the Watts Towers.

MASON:

That's something that often comes up in your interviews.

SAAR:

Yes, because-- See, that was a really important thing, because that was a dedicated artist. But he wasn't saying, "Hey, I'm going to build this monument and make this." He just started puttering around and did-- I never saw him, but I saw these spires. And because it triggered my imagination--they were like fairy castles or something very mysterious-- So as a kid I was drawn to mystery and sort of the unexplainable and strange things. Just really, really somehow connected with fairy tales and that sort of a mysterious thing, too.

MASON:

So you never actually saw him working? You just saw the--

SAAR:

I may have seen a man there, but it would be like from here to the house across the street where I would say-- And I would always want to stop and go look and see, "What's he doing?" "Oh, he's just some crazy man doing something."

MASON:

That's what your grandmother would say? Is that how people thought--?

SAAR:

Oh, probably. He was pretty eccentric. They used "crazy" for "eccentric," because when people don't understand what's going on, something outside of their lives or their awareness, then it's pretty eccentric. So we would walk to

town on Saturday. She would do her shopping. We would buy shoes or whatever we would need and then walk back. It was a good half-hour walk. She did not drive. And that was what we did in the summer. We played in the yard. On Friday we had prayer meeting, on Saturday we went to Watts and back, and on Sunday we went to church. Okay, so that takes care of that. Also, in her yard, that would be a place where-- They didn't have a garage or any kind of curious thing, but I've always been intrigued by looking for something that somebody had left. So we would dig in the yard. Pieces of glass. You'd go to the beach and you'd look for shells. You would move to a new house and you would immediately go to the trash in the garage to see what the kids who had lived there before had left. That really was always interesting to me, and it's not surprising now that that's what I use to make my art.

MASON:

What would you do with these things that you found?

SAAR:

Save them. They would be in my room until I had to clean up the room and it would be too disgusting, and we would have to throw it out. Usually they were small things. "Look, this is a beautiful little bead," a glass bead, so you would save that. They would be like treasures that kids find.

MASON:

And your mother thought it was okay? Because my mother used to always call me the pack rat.

SAAR:

Yeah?

MASON:

She would just make me throw everything away.

SAAR:

Well, she did that, so if it was really special you would hide it or you would keep it in a neat container, and then it was acceptable. Like if you found beautiful marbles and things, if they were all in a nice container, a jar or something, that would be acceptable.

MASON:

And you were saying that you used to make gifts for people. Did you use some of these things in the gifts?

SAAR:

Yes. Now, this really started to happen when I lived with my aunt and uncle, because that's when my mother would take us to Saturday craft classes or summer craft classes. When you were old enough to go to school, they would have parks and recreation programs, and they would have the craft classes. If it was at a facility where we couldn't walk, then she would drive us. Sometimes she would be there, or she would take another kind of class herself. But it was something where we would maybe do pottery. Or I remember puppetry classes, making puppets, making things out of wood, you know, hammer and nails and carving. For Christmas-- We were the only children in the family, because my parents were both only children, so we had no cousins. We were three children in a family of adults. So Christmas was always really good to us.

MASON:

Did you ever use any of the little things that you found?

SAAR:

No, I never thought about that. They were too special, I think. No, we'd start with new things. But I can remember making coaster sets out of cork. You would cut it out, and you would paint a little design on it, and you would shellac it, and then you would give it to your aunt or uncle for Christmas or something. Or a string holder--gifts that were pretty simple, but everyday object things that you could use in the house.

MASON:

So that's something that you enjoyed doing?

SAAR:

Yeah. First of all, we had a small allowance, because money didn't have the same inflation that we have now. We were given maybe a quarter a month or something like that. Part of that we were expected to have for the saving plan

at school, which was like a nickel or something that you would put in. And then my mother would buy us the supplies, like cork or watercolor sets or woodburning sets. Because I was really interested in art, I got lots of things like paint sets or woodburning sets. Not that my sister and brother weren't, but they were really active. You know, they got neat things like bikes and roller skates.

MASON:

More athletic?

SAAR:

Yeah. Or bats and balls. Games and things. We always got games. We always got lots of other things, too, but the artistic things-- Coloring books.

MASON:

So you wanted something where you could spend time by yourself just making--

SAAR:

Yeah, although my sister would sometimes do those things with-- My brother was a little bit younger and didn't have the same kind of muscle coordination. So we went to the craft classes. We did that. During that time, my mother, when she was a widow, became Christian Science. And Unity.

MASON:

Christian Science and Unity?

SAAR:

Yeah, Unity also. Unity is a book that you get about positive thinking. It leaned more towards, I guess, the Independent Church, which you would consider like Unity/Unitarian. But it wasn't really called that, at least when she went to it. Christian Science was sort of on that board. Science of Mind is another one that's similar to that today, but away from the ritual of religion and more towards the philosophy and the intellectual kind. So then we went to Christian Science Sunday school, which was pretty alien, because it was predominantly white, and it was-- I mean not-- They did read from the Bible, because it's a religion that was founded by Mary Baker Eddy in Boston. It has to do mostly

with healing, but Science of Mind kind of philosophy and positive thinking, which I guess was really important to my mother at that time, having lost a husband and a mother before then. And it was a difficult time to be just sort of out there. And sometimes we would go to the Episcopalian Church, which my aunt and uncle belonged to. That was more of a social thing, because my aunt would have teas and receptions, or there would be-- And the Episcopalian Church where they belonged, they believed-- You could have dances. You know, with the Baptist Church, you could not dance, of course. So they would have dances and parties. My aunt and uncle also paid for dance classes for us, so my sister and I were a duet--tap dancing. We were the Brown sisters. This was probably from seven, eight, nine, ten. We took dancing classes, and we would dance. And then, when my uncle's social club or my aunt's church group would have a party at the big auditorium--

MASON:

You were the entertainment.

SAAR:

Yeah, or we would have to entertain at their parties and things like that. We didn't have that much musical training, but we had dance and arts and crafts. When my grandmother-- I guess I was maybe ten when my grandfather died and my grandmother gave us her piano, an upright piano, and we studied piano. But that was when I was about twelve and my mother had remarried. So the early childhood was my sister, brother, and me in this household with an aunt, an uncle, and my mother. Sometimes my grandfather would stay or my grandmother would come and visit. But basically that's the extended family. That covers social and religion up to that point. At this time we're Christian Science, Episcopalian. When we visit grandmother we're Baptist. So we had a pretty broad exposure to religions.

MASON:

I guess the other thing I wanted to ask was, were any of the women in your family involved in using home remedies for colds and things like that?

SAAR:

Grandmother. My grandmother is from Louisiana.

MASON:

I guess there's a lot of--

SAAR:

Yes, so that says a lot right there. And grandfather, too, because my aunt wasn't there all the time. If you got sick, you would maybe go to a doctor. But you would have castor oil and milk of magnesia. And you would have mustard plaster things put on your chest. Vaseline was very popular. My grandmother really liked Vaseline. She used that as a cosmetic like many people do. She had really beautiful skin. And if you had a cold, you had Vicks and Vaseline. And probably teas, you know, of things. With medicines and things like that, they're always so unpleasant, and you don't want to remember them.

MASON:

Yeah. I was just wondering, coming from Louisiana.

SAAR:

Yeah, but she was pretty closemouthed. She never really went into a lot of other things. The only thing that I can remember that maybe links it is she used to fix a drink for us that was coffee and canned milk with lots of sugar, and she called it "gunga," which is like-- Well, that's an ordinary kind of thing, but the name was probably something that it was called from her childhood. I mean, you know, you just make up things like that. My grandfather also had funny names for things. But he was from the Midwest. He's from Kansas City, from Missouri. But, you see, Louisiana is a place that draws me, that I really would like to go, and also my daughter Alison [Saar].

MASON:

You've never been?

SAAR:

Uh-uh [negative]. I go there this year for the first time. We had hoped our UCLA show would go there, but they couldn't afford it.

MASON:

Oh.

SAAR:

Because we felt that it would really, really be nice. Alison has been there once on a vacation. Right now she's designing an album cover for the Neville Brothers, so she thinks she will be able to go down to Louisiana to do that. But that's a place that for me holds mystery, because I've never really been. Maybe when I get there it won't be anything.

MASON:

I haven't been there, and I'm going for the first time hopefully at the end of the year, as well. I'm looking forward to it, too.

SAAR:

Yeah.

MASON:

But you know William Pajaud?

SAAR:

Yeah, William Pajaud.

MASON:

He went, so it would be nice maybe if I talk to him or maybe if you talk to him before you go there and see what his memories are.

SAAR:

Yeah. Well, when I was an adult, I met William Pajaud when he was still married to Harriette [Craft]. They hadn't been out from Louisiana very long. But the thing that I remember is my grandmother would take us to catch crawdad, because it would be a creek, oh, a few miles from her house in Watts. And she taught my mother how to fix gumbo. So the cooking with the food, like gumbo was something-- We would go crawdadding, catch these crawdads, and then put all the other things in it, and that would be like a food link to her home. But a lot of times when people come out, they want to forget all of that, you know, and they don't want-- They will be connected to their family as far as letter writing and things, but old wives tales and folklore and things like that were not repeated much. My grandmother would still

work. She was working, I know she was working. During the Depression she was a seamstress. She would work in a factory making clothes, doing sewing.

MASON:

So she was leaving the house doing work?

SAAR:

Yes, she was leaving the house. She was not always in the house. And if there were any stories to be read, they might be Bible stories, something like that. We had to entertain ourselves. So not too much of a link. At least I can't remember it. I might talk to my sister to see if she remembers, because we remember different things. Okay. So that brings us up to the time just before my mother remarried.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Because then there's another family that comes in. I'm trying to think if there was anything else that was a link to the house on Forest Avenue. Any kind of social connection, any kind of-- Oh, but with the fact that we lived with my aunt and uncle and they were involved socially with the black community in Pasadena, that meant different changes, because my grandmother would only take us to church. And there would not be any kind of mingling in the community in Watts at all, or even in the church, except to go there and to come home. And then my grandfather spent the rest of the day either reading in his room or listening to the radio, and we just played quietly or something like that. But when my mother moved in with my aunt and uncle, then that changed, because they were quite active socially with teas and receptions and parties and all that kind of thing that we were exposed to. A different kind of lifestyle.

MASON:

What kind of friends did they have that you remember? Were they intellectual kind of people?

SAAR:

Their friends were, yes, were doctors. There were also other people in service, because they had money, you know, because other people were hard hit by the Depression, but they had a place to live. They also had things that were cast off. So their house was nicely furnished. It was a really beautiful house, still is a beautiful house. We were given lessons, you know, like I mentioned before, dance lessons and-- Teachers, people in education. Not that they were wealthy, but we would be considered middle-class, upper-middle-class, during that time. With my grandmother, that wasn't as important. But with both families, with all of them, there was this color kind of thing that they tried to instill in us in that there were certain kids that we couldn't play with because they were trash, or--

MASON:

Because they were too dark?

SAAR:

Sometimes because of that, sometimes because of low education. Sometimes if they were Spanish you couldn't play with them.

MASON:

Why?

SAAR:

"You can't play with those Mexican kids." You would say, "Why?" "You just can't play with them." See, during that time you did not question your parents or your grandparents. Not that we were ever spanked or anything for that, but you just did not question.

MASON:

Right.

SAAR:

And the school that I went to when I stayed with my grandmother, there were some whites, but they [her grandparents] had no white friends. There may have been like a Mexican neighbor that they would speak to, but there was no playing with them. We played with the other children down the street. And if they were what they considered trash, meaning they didn't go to church or

they drank, then-- That's what they meant by trash, as well as color, skin color, too. So it was hard being a kid there when you're sort of open and you want to play with everyone.

MASON:

Yeah, and you don't see any reason why.

SAAR:

Yeah! I mean, they're just kids. They're having fun.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

If you were out on the street, you could talk to them, but you could not go over to their house or anything like that. And the same when I moved to Pasadena. There were neighborhood children that we could play with and neighborhood children that we could not play with. But it was different in Pasadena. Across the street was a family from Mexico. Their eldest daughter was our babysitter. But we were friends with those because, see, we were already moved from my grandmother's environment where she was a lot more strict. My mother worked most of the time, and she liked that family, so it was okay.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE JUNE 27, 1990

MASON:

Today I just thought we would continue to talk about your family life, your mother [Beatrice Parson Brown Trowell]'s new husband [Emmette G. Trowell] and how your life changed after she remarried, and to start to talk about your beginning interest in art and your early schooling. And maybe we'll get up to your decision to go to UCLA; it depends on how far we get today in an hour.

SAAR:

Okay.

MASON:

But before we start that, I just wanted to go back to something that you said in the last interview. You talked a little about how your family, you said particularly your grandmother [Irene Hannah Maze Brown Draugh], was fairly strict about who you associated with, who you played with. I was just wondering if you felt that even then they sort of had an idea of what sort of life they wanted you to have when you became an adult? Or, just your being the oldest, do you think that they had, even back then, a particular idea of what sort of person they wanted you to be? What sort of career path they wanted you to take and that kind of thing?

SAAR:

I think so. I think because my father [Jefferson M. Brown] had gone to university and my grandmother could read and write and her mother [Hannah Maze] was a midwife and had been a practical nurse, that education was really, really important. My great-aunt [Hattie Parson], who had raised my mother, had been a schoolteacher, so education was also important on my mother's side. My mother had attended only two years at UCLA before she got married and had children, so that was one of the things that we were just expected to do. We never even thought of dropping out of school. Then, of course, back in the thirties and forties, you didn't drop out of school, anyway, unless things got bad and you had to go to work. But that was never a consideration for us. We just knew that we would go through high school and go to college. That was just one of the things that you did.

MASON:

Okay. And I was wondering, you mentioned living with your uncle and aunt in Pasadena--

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

--and that they had a certain circle of friends that they invited over to the house. And they led a fairly middle-class life.

SAAR:

Yeah.

MASON:

I was wondering-- In 1978 you did--just to jump ahead for a moment--a piece called Shield and Quality .

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

I was wondering if you were thinking about this period of your life when you did that piece, because you've talked about the piece before, saying that it has to do with middle-class black life.

SAAR:

Yeah, it was because I was raised as part of the black bourgeoisie where you behaved in a certain way, and there were just certain things that you didn't do and certain things that you felt that you had to do. You went to college. And when-- At least the time that my sister [Jeffalyn Brown Johnson] and I were at UCLA, we belonged to a sorority. We're both AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha]s. That sets up a whole framework. In the eighties and nineties, those things-- Maybe they are important, but I don't deal with that sort of framework in my life anymore. But all I can remember about being a child is you had to dress a certain way, you had to have manners. All of those things were instilled in us. That was just the way it was, and you didn't dispute your parents. You respected your parents, you respected your teachers. I can remember with my grandmother, because she was a religious person, that we were not allowed to use slang. We couldn't say "gosh" or "shucks" or anything, let alone a swear word. You know, boy, that was serious business. That was a serious spanking if you ever used something like "damn." You just did not say those words. We held to that behavior up through college. And then we left. Not that we went wild. It leaves a pretty strong imprint on how you behave.

MASON:

All right. I just want to start now to continue chronologically with your life and begin with your mother's remarriage, which you said came when you were about twelve years old?

SAAR:

That's right, it came when I was twelve. She had three children, my sister and my brother [Robert Maze Brown] and myself. My brother was maybe four years old or something, I don't know, and I was twelve. My stepfather was a veteran from World War I, and he got a bonus. He had been in the navy.

MASON:

What's his name?

SAAR:

His name is Emmette Gerard Trowell. He was from Galveston, Texas. He was one of two children. He came-- And I'm telling you all of this because his background was different than my mother's and my father's background. His father had been a barber who had died when he was quite young. He had an older sister, and his mother sort of favored the sister, I think. So I don't think his childhood was that happy. He joined the navy when he was sixteen, which means that he probably did not finish high school. He could read and write and everything, but there was a big educational gap between him and my mother. After the navy, he got a job in Pasadena. He wasn't a mechanic at an auto agency, but he worked on cars, he moved cars, delivered cars, and things like that. But he had a good-paying job, a job that was a fairly respected job, because during the thirties and forties, segregation and discrimination was prevalent all over, and it was no different in Pasadena, California, than any other place. But because of his job, he could provide a good living. And because he received a bonus from the navy, he was able to build a modest house for his new family. So that's what he did. But we moved into a different school district.

MASON:

Do you know how he met your mother?

SAAR:

Probably at a social event, a party. They both belonged to this sort of social strata where they gave big parties at, I think it was, the Elks auditorium on Central Avenue, because Central Avenue used to be the street in Los Angeles. That was in the black community, and that was sort of the hub. It's entirely different now, but I think it was KCET [television station] that gave a television

presentation about Central Avenue, because there were lots and lots of clubs, nightclubs, and musicians, and night life and shows. It used to be the Lincoln Theatre that had stage shows, and Fats Waller and all the black musicians would play there. At this place called the Elks auditorium, which was like a black Elk organization, they had fancy dances. There were lots of social clubs. Social clubs were really prominent then. So they had huge pictures-- What's that woman? We talked about her before.

MASON:

Miriam Matthews.

SAAR:

Miriam Matthews. She has some wonderful photographs of parties that were given in the Elks. So they probably met at a place like that, or they had mutual friends or something like that. I'm trying to think, because I was only twelve, and, you know, we had met him. And then they were married, and then we moved to another house, and we went to a different school.

MASON:

Where was the new house?

SAAR:

The new house was in an area that was racially mixed; it was in the northwest section of Pasadena. Was that northwest? Yes, northwest section of Pasadena.

MASON:

So you weren't too far from your aunt and uncle, then?

SAAR:

Well, a bit far to walk, but we could walk it. Yeah.

MASON:

What kind of person was he? And how did your life change after your mother remarried?

SAAR:

Well, he was-- Because we had been raised with my mother and an aunt and an uncle, and my mother worked, there wasn't a lot of discipline. I mean, we behaved ourselves, and we were taught manners and so forth, but he was a lot more strict. He didn't like backtalk or sass or any of those things that kids like to do. We changed churches, for one thing, because he was [African] Methodist [Episcopal (AME)]. So then we began to attend a Methodist church.

MASON:

So your mother was--?

SAAR:

Episcopalian, Unity, Christian Science. Up to that time, we had been attending either the Christian Science or the Episcopalian, which my aunt and uncle belonged to.

MASON:

Did that confuse you? I know you were saying before that you were brought up in a mix of religions, and I was wondering--

SAAR:

Yeah, that just added another religion. But that marriage enlarged our social circle, because my stepfather had his own friends. We moved to a different neighborhood where there were more black kids. The Christian Science church that we went to was almost all white. There would be like two other black families, or mixed families, there. The Episcopalian church was a black church, but when we went to the Methodist church, the AME church, in Pasadena, it was all black, and they had a strong church structure with youth groups and so forth. So we were part of that, began to socialize with-- You couldn't have parties, but there were hayrides or beach parties or excursions to different places, you know, through the church, church school, summer school, and things like that.

MASON:

Did you continue to visit your grandmother?

SAAR:

Yes. We would spend a certain amount of time each summer with my grandmother.

MASON:

Okay. And your mother had two other children with him?

SAAR:

Yes. I'm trying to think of the difference between-- I might have been fifteen when my brother was born.

MASON:

What's his name?

SAAR:

His name is Emmette, Emmette G. Trowell Jr. And then, when I was eighteen, my younger sister was born. Her name is Sharon, Sharon Layone. Her name was Trowell, too, but her married name was Maupin.

MASON:

Did that have a big impact on your--?

SAAR:

Yes, because my sister and brother and I were really close to each other, just like every two years. So this meant that, being a twelve-year-old, there was a new baby, and I was really attached to my younger brother. I became like the nursemaid/sitter. But I liked doing that. It was good, because I think it really prepared me for motherhood, because I had had experience in taking care of younger children. And then I also like to do crafts and things, so it was like a young kid to play with with all of those things, too--with drawing and making things and entertaining a young baby. And, of course, when I was eighteen, in high school, my younger sister could have easily been like my own child. So then I was more experienced and able to care for her and was able to really help my mother that way by caring for her. But I was very attached to them as babies.

MASON:

When you started school in the new school district, you continued-- Well, as you said, when you were taking care of your younger brother and sister, you continued with making things and--?

SAAR:

Oh, yes.

MASON:

Do you think it became more important for you? Or was it just something you did to spend time?

SAAR:

Well, I think from the time we were little, we were oriented to have projects and to do things. You know, you'd get bored, because there was no television, so you'd either read a book or you made something. Because my mother was also a seamstress, we--my sister and I--made doll clothes. My grandfather [Horace Brown] was also project oriented. He liked to carve, and he would-- We always had something to do that we would make. We liked to do things with our hands, and it just seemed to be-- That's what we did. It didn't seem like we were different or anything. But that's what we did. And then my mother continued the policy of either going to a summer camp or a church school or the parks and recreation department, where you would go on craft day and make things. So we continued to do that. And then, let's see, I guess I was thirteen or so when I went into junior high and could then take art classes. And that's when I really started-- They required a general art class, but then--

MASON:

General art meaning--?

SAAR:

Meaning you could draw or paint or do clay, you didn't have to be particularly-- It wasn't an elective. That was something that you did. You took music and art and math and history and homeroom or something like that.

MASON:

Was there any art history?

SAAR:

No, there's no art history until you get to-- Well, the Pasadena school system was kindergarten to the sixth grade, and then the seventh grade to the twelfth grade was junior high--it's two years of junior high and two years of high school. And then you went to a city college, which was a junior college, which was the last two years of high school and the first two years of college.

MASON:

So it was mandatory that you go to the city college before you go to a four-year college?

SAAR:

No, no, because you could just finish your-- You'd get a high school diploma, and then you would get your junior college degree. And if you got your high school diploma, then you could go to college after that.

MASON:

Okay. So did you receive any encouragement in high school, say, to continue in art?

SAAR:

Well, I made good grades, and grades were always encouragement, and I just really liked doing it. That was what I wanted to be, definitely from-- Maybe from junior high I started thinking about being in art or mostly being a designer, because that was what I was interested in--costume design or designing for fashion or illustration. It's hard for me to remember exactly what the focus is, and they don't really emphasize that, because, you know, you'll take a craft class, and you'd make several things maybe out of wood or clay. Then when you're at the junior college level, then you would take ceramics or then you would take illustration or then you would take watercolor, and then you would take a little bit of art history. It's a general survey thing.

MASON:

So why did you decide to go to Pasadena City College?

SAAR:

That was the only-- Well, let's see. I'm trying to remember if it was broken up then. The district that we lived in, it was easier to go to the Pasadena City College, or [Pasadena] Junior College, as it was called. There was another one called John Muir, but it was near our older neighborhood and too far to go. But this way we could take public transportation.

MASON:

Okay. So you decided to do that instead of getting your high school degree and--?

SAAR:

Going to college? No, that seemed to be the best thing. First of all, my parents had five kids, and there wasn't that kind of money. So you would go as far as you could go with something that was free. I think you had a student body fee, but that might have been like two dollars or a dollar a semester or something like that.

MASON:

So you chose design as your major?

SAAR:

Yes, or-- It was art. Probably it wasn't so specific that it was design at junior college. It was just an art major.

MASON:

How did your family feel about it?

SAAR:

No negative feelings. They liked the things that I did. And then, like I mentioned before--or I can't remember if I mentioned before--it was the policy to design the float for the Tournament of Roses [Parade], because they had a children's float. The junior college art students could enter that competition, so the whole class was designing floats. Mine had won honorable mention, and I got some tickets to the [Rose Bowl] football game. Then, one time it won third place, and it was like tickets-- I don't know, something, money or something like that.

MASON:

So you got the money from the school? Or--?

SAAR:

Yes, it's from the Tournament of Roses Association or whatever.

MASON:

Okay. You said in other interviews that you felt that at Pasadena City College there was kind of an art clique that you felt excluded from.

SAAR:

That's true.

MASON:

Could you talk about that? Who was in this clique, and why did they exclude you? And how did that make you feel?

SAAR:

Well, Pasadena City College was still-- Now, this was in the forties, mid-forties, and even though certain things had opened up for minorities, you can't change the mind-set. So many times minorities were just invisible. There were still segregated clubs. Like we had a black sorority. And there were certain clubs-- Like if it was glee club, then it was fairly mixed, because it involved music, or maybe even in the dance. There was an art organization honorary. It was an art honorary. They had an art club that anybody could join, and I was part of that. Then, from that, they would tap or select the people to belong to the art honorary.

MASON:

Who would tap?

SAAR:

The previous members. And the head of the art department was also head of that organization. I was an A and B student--probably a B student generally, but an A, A-, B+ art student--so it wasn't my grades. But it was also a social kind of organization. They just selected their own, you know. And, of course, I

had feelings of being hurt or sensitive of being excluded, because I felt that I was just as good and I was just as talented as they were.

MASON:

So what happened? You petitioned to be part of it? Or they would approach you?

SAAR:

They approached. They selected.

MASON:

So they just never approached you.

SAAR:

That's right.

MASON:

You said it was more social. Were they--?

SAAR:

Well, they would have an art banquet, or they would have a special exhibition by the art honorary. It was just like any other thing, that sort of exclusive-- You know, you want to be part of it.

MASON:

If someone had chosen art as a career, do you think that not being part of that club would in any way affect that career in art? Were they exposed to certain other artists, maybe, in the area?

SAAR:

I don't know, because I never went to their meetings. They may have had guest speakers who were like that. I think they met once a month or something. From the people that I knew that belonged to it when I was a student there, one woman became a designer and taught at Art Center [College of Design] in Pasadena, because I've seen her name. I remember her name. She became a designer. One woman who belonged to it also went to UCLA, and she was a student there when I was there. See, also during that

time, it was the end of World War II, so there weren't that many male students there, so there wasn't a large male population in the art classes. There were mostly women. That's what I remember. There was one--and I don't know if I had mentioned this to you--who was a doctor's aide or a nurse's aide when I went to a holistic center. She had gone to Pasadena City College and had actually been a Tournament of Roses princess and had been this art major. When I look back at that--and actually, even when I graduated from UCLA, because it didn't change that much when I went to UCLA--I figured out, "Well, success is the best revenge." Where they are now and where I am now lets me know that, in spite of all those snubs and things, if you've got it, you've got it, and you make the best of it. It wasn't a miserable time, and I wasn't unhappy. And I had certain teachers that were very encouraging that I really liked.

MASON:

Do you remember any in particular?

SAAR:

There was a woman who probably is deceased now; her name was Carolyn Woodhull. She was quite flamboyant, quite a large woman, over six feet tall. She had taught the watercolor class. It was really wonderful, because we would go on these excursions throughout Pasadena and the Pasadena [Art] Museum, which formerly was the home of a woman named Grace Nicholson. She had lived in China, so her home and the museum was very Chinese in architecture and landscape. She had lots of artifacts from China. And there was a beautiful little garden. Our class would go there and paint in that garden. We'd also go out to-- The [Los Angeles County] Arboretum is what it's called now, but it was [E. J.] "Lucky" Baldwin's old mansion out in Sierra Madre. What was that called? I can't remember the name of the place, but where they used to make the old Tarzan movies. There was a lagoon there, and it was quite rustic. So that would be another location we would paint. And other places that were close to campus. It was sort of a free class. You would carpool, and you would go to these locations. You would take your watercolors, and you would paint outside. And that was very pleasurable. It was, I feel, a really valid experience. It was something that I continued. When my kids were little, we would take our paints, and we would go someplace and

paint. It was a real fun sort of thing to do. That was a class that was really a pleasure.

MASON:

Were there any others that were--?

SAAR:

Let's see. I took a ceramics class, but I can't remember that instructor's name. He moved out into the Claremont area and became fairly well known out there. But mostly the watercolor class stands out in my mind.

MASON:

Is there anything that you really hated?

SAAR:

No, because I liked art. I liked making things and doing things with my hands. I wasn't a good student in language or in math, you know; that was really hard. And when I had made the decision that I wanted to go to college, I had to stay an extra semester in order to catch up with certain things that were college requirements at that time. I didn't like math but made A's in algebra and trigonometry. It probably meant that there was a little abstract part of my brain that didn't like the totally linear way of adding numbers up.

MASON:

You said that when you were quite young you and your sister would dance together.

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

Did that continue at all, the dancing and that sort of thing?

SAAR:

No, I think as we got involved in-- Well, when we moved, when my mother remarried-- No, we still took dance classes then. But I think by the time we finished junior high, we were into being teenagers, so we were really

interested in social dancing. Although I remember that my aunt and uncle's social club-- My uncle belonged to a club called the Nine O'Clock Club, which was a men's social club, and they gave a big party at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium that had a show. My sister and I danced on that show. We were probably fourteen or so. But then, otherwise, we got involved with dance at school. I was the kind of kid that was always about twenty pounds underweight from what the supposed norm was supposed to be, so I didn't have much of a physical education program until I could get to electives. And I always elected dance. And, let's see, I think my sister did that. But she was also more sports minded; she was probably into tennis and things. But we would still participate in things. When we were in Pasadena City College, there was a group of young black women, and we were friends. And, like I mentioned before, social clubs were really prominent during that time. We organized this club of about six or seven women our own age called the Gay Charmettes.

MASON:

That was you and your sister?

SAAR:

That was my sister and other friends that went to school with us. We were just all good friends, and they would-- House parties were really prevalent then, so we would-- You know, house parties would go around. So we had this organization, and in order to make money we would give a party and charge people. I guess it was another version of a rent party, when people used to have parties and charge people to come in. I remember once we had one at the school through the parks and recreation [depart-ment]. We rented their auditorium. We had like a cabaret with tables and punch, because we couldn't have drinks or anything like that. We put on this show, and we asked our friends to either sing or perform or play records and lip-synch and dance. So our club had a chorus line and did things like that.

MASON:

So you would say that most of your friends at that time were creative people, more or less artistically inclined?

SAAR:

Well, not so much artistic, but interested in music and shows and things like that. Another social thing was that the big band era was on then, and not that they came to Pasadena that often, but they played at all the big theaters in downtown Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Theatre, the Orpheum [Theatre], the Million Dollar [Theatre], all of those theaters had stage shows, and Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Louis Jordan, all those people came. We would take the red car, usually with a group of friends, to go over and see those shows, like a matinee show, a midday show. Those were things that we were interested in.

MASON:

Okay. I'll go back to the religion question. Did that recede a little bit for you?

SAAR:

No, that was still part of it, because some of the friends in our club went to the same church that we went to or a neighboring church, the Baptist Church or the Episcopalian Church. And there wasn't that separation of religion; it was just friends.

MASON:

So when did you make the decision to go to UCLA?

SAAR:

There was a group that-- And I don't know how they found out. Maybe it was a white organization that raised funds or contributed to send minority students to university. Both my sister--Jeffalyn is her name--and I were invited to come out to this house in Altadena, in the foothills where there were these large houses, and meet this group of people. We really didn't know what it was about, but we went. And then they told us, "We sponsor people to go to university if they have a certain grade average." Probably what they did is just went through Pasadena City College and found out what minority students had a certain grade average. So that's how I went to UCLA, because every year they gave us our tuition. And then my parents, all they had to do was transportation and lunches and things like that. And then we both had summer jobs and weekend jobs that--

MASON:

So you had to go to UCLA? Or could you choose another school?

SAAR:

Well, because UCLA was-- See, at that time, there were two universities, USC [University of Southern California] and UCLA. And UCLA was--even now still is--much more reasonable financially to go to. I think it was probably something like $100, $200 a semester to go to it. It was really reasonable. And then because we lived in Pasadena, then it was the transportation. Every week our mother would give us an allowance for transportation. It would either be carpool or taking the red car over and bus and so forth. It would take about an hour from Pasadena.

MASON:

What did you think you wanted to do at university?

SAAR:

Well, by then I knew I was an art major. It wasn't fine arts, because it had all been lumped together at Pasadena, but it was design. I started there [UCLA] in 1947. My sister had already been there a year. I had to take another semester to catch up on my foundation, because I had planned to go to art school, actually. I thought--

MASON:

Which one?

SAAR:

At that time there was Chouinard Art Institute. They discriminated against non-whites going there, so it was really difficult. I can't even remember if I was even accepted to submit a portfolio. I don't think so.

MASON:

Yeah, William Pajaud is the first black person to go there and go into the day program and graduate.

SAAR:

There was a friend of mine who later on went there, and I think he was one of the earlier ones, too. When was William Pajaud there?

MASON:

Let's see, it was about 1956.

SAAR:

Oh, no, this guy, Joseph Mims, was there before him.

MASON:

Maybe he wasn't in the day program.

SAAR:

Oh, no, he went as a full student. Pajaud could have been in art and Joe could have been in design, so they could have split it.

MASON:

No, Pajaud was in design. Advertising.

SAAR:

In advertising design?

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

Because Joseph Mims was a couple of years ahead of me, and I know that he had gotten in. But you could have been right. He could have only gone there at night, because, you know, I was a student at UCLA. But I know he did attend there and got some credentials from there. So that's why I didn't go to an art school. And once this opportunity came up where we were supported by funds to go, and also because my sister went there [UCLA]-- My sister is a lot more assertive than I am, so it just made it nice to go, because we would either go together, if we could work out our classes together-- My sister--

MASON:

What was her major?

SAAR:

She was a prelegal major. I guess she was in sociology, general studies, or whatever it was classified as. She went there at sixteen because of her birthday and her skipping grades. She was quite young when she started. I think she started in the spring semester at sixteen. And then when she went back, she was of course seventeen.

MASON:

So she skipped grades before because she did so well in school?

SAAR:

Yeah. The following spring is when I came, in spring of '47, and then we graduated together in '49.

MASON:

What courses did you take at UCLA that you remember?

SAAR:

Fortunately, I didn't have to take any math or language, so it was art classes and then the design. Interior design was what I was primarily interested in.

MASON:

Not theater design?

SAAR:

No, because I don't think it was even broken down into theater. They didn't have a theater arts department then. UCLA at that time was-- What you know as the student union building, that was the education, art, and music department. And where the art department is now, it was just a wild ravine. Schoenberg [Hall] and all of those, it was just a big sort of canyon there. So it was Royce Hall, the [College] Library, the student union, the men's and women's gyms, and-- What's the big building directly across from Royce Hall?

MASON:

Powell Library.

SAAR:

Yes. But there were other classes there; other departments were there. Those were the buildings. Everything else has come up since then. I took a lot of crafts, because they required-- Because I guess when you think of design, it would get into fabric or ceramics or-- I didn't take any metal smithing. I know I didn't take that. But I took a lot of fabric design and won some prizes there, because certain fabric companies would offer monetary prizes for fabric design. That was just a competition that you could enter at school. And ceramics I didn't do too well in.

MASON:

Why? Why didn't you?

SAAR:

Oh, because I just couldn't throw on the wheel. It was really amateurish. And it was a kind of dexterity that I just didn't have.

MASON:

Did you try any hand building?

SAAR:

Yes, but they were all sort of small and cutesy. I took bookbinding several times, because I really liked that, and I liked the teacher. And I was really interested in illustration, so I took a lot of illustration.

MASON:

Illustration like fashion illustration?

SAAR:

No, illustration for books and records and that kind of design. I was really interested in that, where you could combine painting and collage and things like that. But it was design; it wasn't fine arts. I did not take any fine arts. No, that was really scary for me.

MASON:

Why?

SAAR:

Well, because I just didn't consider myself a painter or an artist. I was a designer, or I could do crafts. So I majored in those things--weaving, book-binding, fashion design, illustration, commercial design, things like that.

MASON:

How did you settle on interior design as a career?

SAAR:

Well, I liked that, and I liked objects and things. I liked the teacher, and it seemed to be ideas that seemed to come fairly easily. It also seemed to be a field that I might be able to do something with--do interior designs for other people rather than trying to get a job as an illustrator or something like that.

MASON:

So what was it about interior design and the projects that you were working on that you think was the most interesting for you?

SAAR:

Well, some of our assignments, especially when I was in the advanced class, we would be given an assignment to go to a place like a restaurant--which I think at this point is Madame Wu's on Wilshire Boulevard--to go in and redesign the restaurant. You know, you'd go in and look at it. We were given a map of all the dimensions and so forth, and then we would go in and redesign it. We could select a theme and make it anything we wanted. Or to do a project of an environment that we knew, like our home or our room or something like that, and redesign it and make a budget and things like that. Looking back at that, I can see where my assemblages sort of correlate to that, because it's like a miniature little environment. Not that it's interior design, but it is interior design; it just isn't for interior space, for people to live in with furniture and so forth. But I know that my emphasis on design has a lot to do with how I make my art, because I have a real imprint of what balances and how space is divided and color and pattern and those things that artists trained differently don't get involved with. Painters maybe think about those things as far as color and how they break up space, but they don't think of the space first or the color first. They just go at it. I divide things in my mind or with the actual things by that kind of judgment.

MASON:

And you said you liked the teacher who taught design.

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

So you thought it was a well-taught course? Did the teacher--? Did you have a personal--?

SAAR:

Well, she was a good teacher, a sort of not indifferent teacher, but she wasn't as close as some other teachers had been. She knew her business and everything. Her name was Archine Fetty. She may still be alive. I don't know. I took art history.

MASON:

What kind of art history courses were being taught?

SAAR:

Let's see. I had Oriental art history from S. [Stanton] Macdonald Wright, who's quite known at UCLA. Dr. [Karl E.] With also came to our department and taught art history. It was mostly oriental. I took history of costume, and I think a woman named [Louise Pinkney] Sooy taught that. And just general survey art history, and then a contemporary art history as far as it came up to the forties then.

MASON:

In that class, did they talk about New York artists or European artists or California artists?

SAAR:

Mostly European artists, because a lot of California artists were just emerging. That was when the California art scene really started to come out, in the late forties and fifties. Otherwise, the artists were just doing landscape, portraits, things like that, because, again, since the art world is comprised mostly of

white males, they were in the service, and they were just coming back under the GI [Bill], so men were just beginning to get into the art department and come out. It was also the first time-- That's when the art movement began to be educated artists, artists who had gone to college. Because before, except on the East Coast, they studied with another artist--they were like an apprentice-- or they just started doing it. But many artists were at UCLA and were trained as artists and went out to do it.

MASON:

At that time, were you aware of this emergence of California artists?

SAAR:

No, I'm just a student in school. I'm just doing my thing in school. And then we graduated in '49, but it's also like yourself. School is important, but the rest of your life is important. And if you're a teenager, there are all these parties and all these cute guys, and there are all these great things to do. So you're interested in all of that, too. School is just something that you've got to go to. I felt fortunate that I was in art and that I could do something that I really liked, because I did like making art. And then also, during that, my job was-- In the summer and on weekends, I taught extended day and nursery school, so I got to work a lot with children and use my craft knowledge and think of neat projects for them to do, because I also thought, "Well, maybe I'll just teach elementary school," because you could do that at that time.

MASON:

As a career?

SAAR:

Yeah, as a career. So that's what I did. I still made things at home--sewing, arts and crafts sort of projects--but not taking-- Oh, sometimes I would go with my mother to Pasadena City College. We would take a jewelry class together or something like that. We would still have that sort of relationship where we would do things like that.

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MASON:

I just want to ask you a few more questions about UCLA. We were talking about your social life at UCLA. Was there also an art group there?

SAAR:

Oh, yes, there was. There was an art honorary [Delta Epsilon] there, and I belonged to that. They weren't-- Well, because they were artists in-- Let's see. I guess it had been a couple of years, or at least three years, since city college, so many of the people in there were veterans. They were older, more mature people. Some of them had been people who had been away and come back to school, so they just didn't have that sort of narrow attitude about who belonged to what, because there were other minority art students in that organization. It was an art honorary, and it had a pin, and your picture was in the yearbook and all that kind of stuff. It was also a service club. They would design posters for the school and things like that. They had lectures and parties and whatever. But that was my last year at school. I wasn't really terribly active in that.

MASON:

You've said before in interviews that you didn't think about fine arts because it was just something that wasn't encouraged and--

SAAR:

Wasn't particularly encouraged, and I didn't feel qualified to be a painter or a sculptor.

MASON:

Who were you comparing yourself to? Other students?

SAAR:

Well, first of all, I didn't know of any, any minority artist. And I just wasn't terribly interested in that, I don't think. I mean, I had been to museums and things, but I was more interested in objects. I think that that also relates to the kind of art that I do, because I really like objects rather than a painting. It's not that I didn't appreciate that, because I've always been exposed to museums, either through class projects or-- I can remember being quite young--by that I mean like eight or so--and going with my mother and an aunt--this was my mother's close friend that we called aunt--to the Huntington Library, [Art

Collections], and [Botanical] Gardens and seeing Pinky and the Blue Boy and those really making an imprint, those big paintings, those huge portraits by these famous artists.

MASON:

Was that--? Why? Is that why it appealed to you? Because you had seen something in person that you--?

SAAR:

No, I'm just saying that it wasn't that I hadn't been exposed to it. It's just that I never felt that that was what I wanted to do.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

And I hadn't seen that much contemporary art, like what was happening with galleries, because there weren't that many galleries at that time featuring contemporary art or the new things, the new art movement.

MASON:

So as far as the galleries are concerned, did you go out and look for galleries?

SAAR:

No. And being in the craft department-- See, there would be exhibitions that would show crafts and things. I'm trying to recall if there was anything that I saw. I don't even think-- UCLA did not have a gallery then. There were exhibition windows of students' work and things like that. There would be art publications that I could look at. There would be slides that would be shown. But to see the actual art, that was not really something that I experienced.

MASON:

Which art publications? Do you remember any?

SAAR:

No, maybe Art and Craft or something like that, because I was in the design field rather than fine arts. Because I don't think Artforum existed then. Maybe it did, but I never saw it.

MASON:

So you graduated from UCLA, then, in 1949.

SAAR:

Yeah.

MASON:

And I guess you got married shortly after that?

SAAR:

No, I didn't get married until the fifties.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Well, that's not that long ago. But I returned to live in Pasadena. I worked as a social worker for a couple of years. My sister had a job as a social worker, and they seemed to be hiring, and that's what I did for a couple of years. I've always had an affinity with older people--and I worked with old age security, where you would take an interview of an old person applying for aid, and you would make a home call, visit them. And then I went to another section and moved to Los Angeles, where I stayed with a family friend. I wanted to move out of the home and try to be on my own. My sister had married by then. I lived in Los Angeles and worked at a social welfare office in Los Angeles with old age security, what they called affirmation. Once a year you would see an old person and inquire about their health and see if they still were eligible to receive a pension. Also during that time I met-- And I'm trying to think how that happened. There were a few black artists that I knew. And--

MASON:

This was in the late forties--?

SAAR:

Then we started the early fifties.

MASON:

Early fifties.

SAAR:

Yeah, the early fifties. There was a woman named Ruth [G.] Waddy. Maybe William Pajaud mentioned her. She was interested in artists, in theater and dance and so forth. I really can't remember how I met this person--it might have been through someone in the church--but I met a man named Curtis Tann. Sounds like a rhyme. [in sing-song voice] "I met a man named Curtis Tann." His wife was an actress, and he was an enameler, a designer. He was from Cleveland, Ohio. He had been part of Karamu House.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

That was an art movement in Cleveland, Ohio. Lots of people have come out of that. Charles White used to be affiliated with that, and so did Elizabeth Catlett.

MASON:

I think-- Was it one of the WPA [Works Progress Administration] art centers maybe?

SAAR:

It could have been a center that started like that, yeah. Anyway, he was now in Pasadena. I had maybe met him through my family. I don't know. But anyway, I really got interested in enameling. I would go over to his house, and he taught me how to enamel on copper. So that became a big project. Then we started this business called--because my maiden name was Brown--Brown and Tann. We did enameling. Once we were featured in Ebony magazine. You know, they have a little feature of people doing things.

MASON:

What year was that? Do you remember?

SAAR:

I don't know. I probably still have the clipping, but it would be in the early fifties. Because somebody submitted us, and the photographer came out and photographed us. We would have a holiday sale where we would sell jewelry and ashtrays and bowls and things that we had made. He had a large place, a garage that we converted to a studio. Now, he knew a lot of people. William Smith was also from Ohio, who was a printmaker. And he knew Tony Hill, who was a ceramist. He knew William Pajaud, and that's how I met William Pajaud when he was still married to Harriette [Craft] Pajaud, because we once went out to his house. That sort of began a real change in my life of getting together with artists, because I always had felt, not out of my realm, but not in my own group. You know, especially when you relocate. You would know that coming from another place. It's like all these people are out here, and some of them are nice, and some of them you like, and some of them you don't like. But for you to gel with certain people-- That's when I began to communicate with artists and move into an artistic circle. That was the early fifties then. And we began to exhibit. Pasadena used to have an art fair, so we would exhibit there. We would meet other artists in the community. A couple of times we entered the gift show. They had it at the Biltmore [Hotel] and at the Alexander Hotel. We rented a room and had jewelry and bowls and things, and different shops would come there and order from us.

MASON:

So this was just you and Curtis Tann and not the other--?

SAAR:

No, that was just the broader circle. This was just Brown and Tann. During our first year, two doors down from me was a room that had ceramics, and my ex-husband, Richard Saar, was in that room. So that was how I met my husband, from that gift show. But I think before then, I went with Curtis Tann and some other people to a party that a dentist gave that had a sort of artist following. There was a-- Oh, and the artists weren't segregated to black artists or whatever, because I met a sculptor named Julie MacDonald. And there was a painter named Zorthian. I forget--a hard first name [Jirayr]. He was also an

artist, a painter. So the community of artists in Pasadena would get together, and that would be a social group for parties or shows, because then you could have a show, an exhibition in your home or so forth.

MASON:

Who would you invite to these exhibitions?

SAAR:

You would have a general mailing list--family, friends, anyone we knew. We would just make a general mailing list. And then you would add to your mailing list. Like when we had a public art showing at the art fair, we would have people sign our mailing list. Then they would be the people that we would invite to our sales and so forth. So we had this little business, Curtis Tann and I.

MASON:

Do you remember who was buying the things? What kinds of people--?

SAAR:

Just ordinary people. They would buy earrings or they would buy an ashtray. We would also enter the state fairs and art competitions, go out to those. There would be lots of community competitions where you could enter your things. And sometimes you would win a prize. Or you would go there and you would sell your piece there, something like that.

MASON:

So you were doing this while you were being a social worker?

SAAR:

That was my job.

MASON:

So as you began to sell things and began to become more involved in the circle of artists--

SAAR:

No, I was still a social worker.

MASON:

You were still a social worker?

SAAR:

Yeah. [laughter]

MASON:

While--?

SAAR:

Yeah, I was still a social worker. Then also I would do small interior decoration jobs. There was a man in our community who became a lawyer, and he opened an office down in southeast L.A., so I went to suggest and decorate his office on his limited budget. Or I would continue to do illustration, like doing a poster or a printed mailer or brochure for an organization or things. But it was really sort of small-time stuff. But the enameling, I think that venture really pushed me into another direction where I had a lot of communication with other artists. And through that, I also met Charles White, because at that time then, he had moved to Pasadena.

MASON:

Right.

SAAR:

And then I think it was '52, that's when I got married. And my ex-husband was an artist. He was a manufacturer of ceramics. Then I began to embrace his friends, his group of friends who were also artists. And most of them-- Because he had gone to art school in Los Angeles, so--

MASON:

What was his name?

SAAR:

Richard Saar is his name, Richard W. Saar. And met other designers.

MASON:

He went to art school?

SAAR:

He went to Jepson Art School, which was a school that no longer exists. But it was right around where Otis [Art Institute] and Chouinard [Art Institute] were. They were all in the Alvarado [Street]-Wilshire [Boulevard] district. The only thing that's left there now is [the] Otis [Institute of] Parsons [School of Design]. But they were all sort of in that area. He was a veteran. He was from Cleveland, Ohio. He didn't know Curtis Tann, but he was from Cleveland, Ohio. He had been in the Coast Guard, and he was going to art school on the GI Bill, like many of the men that returned there. So there was that sort of art community. Through him I met a woman who was a designer for, an illustrator for--was it Mrs. Magland's? It used to be a famous upscale department store called Haggarty's. I'm really confused about that, because as soon as somebody goes down the tubes I can't remember the name. That's what that was. But through that group of people I met Rudi Gernreich, who became a really famous fashion designer, and just then began to go more to museums and galleries, because galleries were coming on the scene then.

MASON:

Which galleries and which museums?

SAAR:

Oh, the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] every year began to have an open competition, or every two years for Los Angeles artists from the vicinity. Then the Pasadena Art Museum began to show more contemporary art. Let's see, then my family-- I began to have kids, and my husband at that time was involved with the ceramic business. That was in the South Bay. We moved to Redondo Beach, so I sort of lost touch with my friends in Pasadena, because, you know, I was a mom. But also during that time, that's when I began to design greeting cards. I had a small kiln that I did enameling in, and I continued to make small ashtrays and earrings and things like that. But then I began to design a line of greeting cards under my own name, Betye Saar Designs or something. They were Christmas cards, birthday cards, get-well cards. I did that for maybe three years. And I had an agent.

MASON:

Do you remember what they looked like?

SAAR:

I still have some of them. They were sort of whimsical cards, puns--you know, not realistically drawn, just color with line. At that time, during the early fifties, the greeting card business changed from using a line of poetry with a bouquet of flowers into what was known as studio cards, where they became more like cartoons or whimsy. That was the line that I was in. More like greeting cards today. You know, there are just lots and lots of different things. There are jokes, there are cartoons, rather than having an old-fashioned card with about an eight-stanza verse and a pretty picture.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

So I did that for about three years.

MASON:

Did you make a lot of money doing that?

SAAR:

No, but I quit-- I wasn't a social worker then. By the time my first child was born, I stopped being a social worker, and I just did the enamels and the greeting cards and took care of kids.

MASON:

And you saw your art friends just on occasion?

SAAR:

Just on occasion. It would be a social thing. They would have a party, or they would have an exhibition, or there would be a public space like a church space or a recreation center having an exhibition. I remember going to see William Pajaud's works, but where I don't know.

MASON:

Oh, he mentioned-- I think it was a cooperative gallery called Eleven Associated. I was wondering if you knew anything about that?

SAAR:

No, I wasn't part of that.

MASON:

Do you know anything about it? He couldn't quite remember--

SAAR:

No, no. But there weren't that many galleries until maybe the late, late fifties. A woman named Suzanne Jackson, who was also an artist, had a space. She opened a space where she lived. I'm trying to think. It's on Lafayette Park Place.

MASON:

This is Gallery 32?

SAAR:

Yeah, Gallery 32.

MASON:

Okay. Now, I don't know much about that. So it was in her house?

SAAR:

Well, on the street level there were storefronts, and then it went up into a space. It could be a commercial space with a mezzanine that could be a living situation. There were offices up there--designers, architects, lawyers--as well as just open commercial shops. And she had one. On the lower floor was her gallery, called Gallery 32. So it might have been number thirty-two.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

But that was what she had.

MASON:

Did you ever show anything there?

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

Your jewelry that--?

SAAR:

Not any of the jewelry. But-- In order for me to show there, I changed. Okay. When did that happen? In '52, I got married, and then the next year I had a child, and then two or three years later I had another child. So that's-- We're still in the fifties--maybe in '56 or the early sixties--and I was still living in the South Bay. I decided to go back to school to get a teaching credential. I went to [California] State [University] Long Beach. If you have my résumé--?

MASON:

Yeah, it's in '56 that you went to Cal State Long Beach.

SAAR:

That was another turning point, because--

MASON:

Okay. Well, we've gone for an hour now, so unless there's something else--

SAAR:

No. Well, then we'll start with '56, because that's when I moved from doing just crafts and objects into the fine arts.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE AUGUST 15, 1990

MASON:

Today I was just wondering-- Well, we decided to fill in some loose ends from the L.A. arts scene in the 1950s and the things that influenced you and things

that were important to you during that period. So if you'd just like to talk about some things that were important--

SAAR:

Well, I had graduated from UCLA in 1949 and spent some time as a social worker, but I continued to draw and do things like that. I had mentioned before that I had met Curtis Tann, who came from Cleveland, Ohio. He was maybe the first professional artist that I knew. He had been affiliated in Cleveland with the Karamu House. And his wife was an actress, May Henderson. So they sort of-- Well, they did move to Pasadena, and I became friends with them. That was sort of my first experience in belonging to a black cultural artistic group, because it involved black theater, and it involved black dance as well as the arts. Curtis also taught me how to do enameling. We set up a small business called Brown and Tann, which I had maybe mentioned to you before. We made jewelry and ashtrays and so forth. He knew William Pajaud, and that's how I met William Pajaud at that time. He also knew Tony Hill, who did ceramics, and then a printmaker named William Smith, and different other artists, but those are the ones that I predominantly remember.

MASON:

You remember them because you were close to them? Or was there something about their work?

SAAR:

Well, there was a social exchange with parties and exhibits, maybe when we would go to visit their house. We would look at their art or so forth, maybe like small exhibitions. I remember a place, it was on Adams [Boulevard], run by a woman named Jenny LeJong-- I think that was her name. She would have exhibitions and lectures and things like that. So Curtis and I would go over to some of those events. It's sort of vague because I can't remember names very well.

MASON:

She exhibited her own work?

SAAR:

No, I think she was primarily a dancer, but exhibited the art of other people.

MASON:

Oh.

SAAR:

I'm trying to think if Charles White was a member. He might have been a member of that, but I don't think he was in Pasadena at that time. That was later on, when he relocated to Pasadena, and then I knew him in the arts scene there. So I continued to design and do my enamels. In 1952-- I think that's when I got married and moved away from Pasadena, moved to Los Angeles, and then later on to Hermosa Beach. Then later, in the fifties, I began to design greeting cards. It was a change from the old-fashioned greeting cards. They were called studio cards. Many artists started to design these. So I got a printer and an agent who sold my greeting cards to gift shops--not so much department stores but small boutiques and things like that.

MASON:

What did they look like?

SAAR:

They were drawings. The format changed. It used to be that greeting cards were sort of a square format, and then they began to emerge into different shapes, like a long shape, like a legal size. They were sketches. They were sort of like puns and one-line jokes, or get-well cards, Christmas cards. And then I was pregnant and had my first child, my daughter Lezley [Saar]. But I still did my greeting card business, as well as enamels, and would participate in art fairs and things like that, where I would sell these.

MASON:

Where were they having art fairs? In Pasadena?

SAAR:

Pasadena, yeah, because I still had a strong connection to Pasadena. My family still lived there. Maybe a home show and sale where I would just invite friends over to look at the enamels or pick things out.

MASON:

And what did the enamels look like?

SAAR:

They were jewelry, they were bowls. My ex-husband [Richard W. Saar]--my husband at that time--did enamels, because I had a small kiln, and one of the bedrooms was set up as a studio, so I worked that way. Then we relocated to the South Bay, to Redondo Beach. Also at that time I had-- I guess, I don't know, maybe '56-- I forget when my kids were born. Did I tell you that information?

MASON:

I have it in my outline. Lezley was born in '56?

SAAR:

Okay, so she's '56. Alison--

MASON:

No, I'm sorry. Lezley is born in '53, Alison [Saar] in '56, and Tracye [Saar] in '61.

SAAR:

Tracye in '61. She's the only one I really remember. So in 1956 I had two children, so it wasn't as easy to work as an artist, but I still did my greeting cards. And then when Alison was maybe four years old, I decided that I would return to school and get a teaching credential. It used to be that if you had a bachelor's and you wanted to teach art in junior high, you could just get what they called a California teaching credential. So I returned to [California] State University Long Beach to work on that. I just went in the evenings and worked out a program with the sitter, because I had to do student teaching and so forth. But I became interested in printmaking at that time.

MASON:

What kind?

SAAR:

Intaglio. The class also included wood print and lithography, but I really liked intaglio, because there's a technique called soft ground, which is like a thick coating of grease. You can put things down, you can make a collage of

different textures. You could put a leaf down and run it through the press and then lift it up, and it shows on the metal underneath, and then the acid bites through that. I had a lot of fun experimenting with different textures and patterns and scratching through. So printmaking became something that I was really, really interested in.

MASON:

Do you remember the sort of process that you went through, where you came to the point where you said, "Okay, printmaking is something that's fun"?

SAAR:

Well, I just kept taking courses as well as working on my teaching credential. Also, by this time I had had a third child, but I was-- I don't know if I mentioned this before: I had Alison, who was not quite five, who went out to school with me. I mean, all the time I was still a mom. Lezley was old enough to be in school most of the day. But I would work out a ride with my husband and drive out to Long Beach. Alison would go to the ceramic department. I think that's when she really became interested in art and doing things with her hands, so that sort of shows why she's an artist now, because we always did art, one way or another, from crayons up to going to the university and making something. My prints during that time, the early prints that I have here-- I think the first one was a small intaglio called Ring around the Rosie that showed my three girls. Then I did a lithograph in 1960 that was called El Gato.

MASON:

Maybe you can describe--

SAAR:

Yeah. Well, a lithograph is a printing technique that's on stone. It always bewildered me because it was so complicated, because it was-- Well, for this particular one, it's like water and oil. Where you put oil, the water doesn't hold. And then you remove the oil, and then the ink goes where the oil was. It sounds complicated. My first print, and probably the only litho that I did when I was in school, is called El Gato , the cat. It's a cat lying down, sphinx-like, with the moon in the sky. In 1960 I was still pregnant. Another print that I did was

called Lost Travail . It was about the birth process. It shows an embryo, and it's sort of abstract with-- It's a color etching in browns and lavenders and blues. That's 1961. Recently I gave that print to my eldest daughter. She has a little girl [Sóla Augustsson]. The baby's face looks so much like the face in the print. When Tracye was born, her face looked like it. I gave her that print, so it's like from '61 to '89, when my first granddaughter was born-- Yeah! [laughter]

MASON:

So these were really personal.

SAAR:

Yeah, well, they were personal then, and because it was about the birth process. I did another one that was a serigraph, because I was quite heavy with my pregnancy, and my print teacher was apprehensive about me having the baby on the premises. [laughter] So I started to work at home, and I did a serigraph of a pregnant woman, and I did another one of my daughter, Tracye, the youngest daughter. But when I did the print of a pregnant woman, which was, in a way, a self-portrait--it's called Anticipation-- Well, I finished it in the afternoon, and by eight o'clock I was in the hospital having the baby. So it was like, "Oh, I finished my assignment for school, and now the baby's going to be born." So it took a while to get back to getting into art with two children, two young youngsters, plus a brand-new baby. And then my husband relocated his work. They moved out to the [San Fernando] Valley, so we moved to Hollywood. So there was a big space between when I could take classes and finish working on that degree. But I was well into printmaking. Let's see what some of these other prints are. I have another one that's a portrait of the girls that's called Girl Children. That's 1964. But that's a print I made after I left Long Beach and that area.

MASON:

I guess what I meant when I said personal, you don't-- When I look at catalogs of your work, it's hard to find reproductions of your prints, and I wonder why you choose not to reproduce any of--

SAAR:

Well, it's probably because when I was exhibiting, the exhibitions that I was involved in did not involve a catalog.

MASON:

No, but I mean today, like your-- Well, it wasn't in the Wight Art [Gallery] show [Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar]. But some of the retrospective--

SAAR:

No. Oh, but this one is. This one called Girl Children is in the Wight Art [Gallery] show, but I don't know if it's in the catalog. That's the curator's choice. But it is in the exhibition, because the exhibition was also showing what it was like to be in the home of an artist, and that was one of the prints. My earlier prints had to do a lot with mysticism and-- Not so much the occult, but they would involve like a chart of a hand, of a palmistry chart. As a child, I was always really, really interested in mysteries. You know, I read mysteries. I was also interested in fairy tales and fantasy. I was intrigued by certain things that I saw, like the Watts Towers, because that was like a mysterious house. You know, "What is this thing going up that this man [Simon Rodia] is building?" And also like a fantasy. My father [Jefferson M. Brown] had died when I was six, and my mother [Beatrice Parson Brown Trowell] remarried when I was twelve. My stepfather [Emmette G. Trowell] would take us on drives on Sunday afternoon, and one of the places that we happened to drive by was a house that was like a little miniature castle. That would always be a favorite place for us to go and sort of snoop around and look. People lived next door to it, so we couldn't really go into it. But I was intrigued by places like that. Another thing that made an imprint was during the thirties and forties when I was a kid and we were on these rides, there would be gypsy encampments. I mean, gypsies would actually have wagons and camp out in fields.

MASON:

You mean from Mexico?

SAAR:

Gypsies from Europe, from Mexico, from wherever gypsies come from, you know, because they are a particular race. And they still have their family things, only now they probably book the Hilton Hotel or something, because they all seem to be driving Cadillacs now. But anyway, they would have their signs out, the palmistry signs, and they always intrigued me. Of course, in the last three or four years, those signs are prevalent around, too. You'll see psychic reader signs. If we go down Crescent Heights [Boulevard], just before you get to Sunset [Boulevard] is a very expensive house with this psychic reader sign that has a palmistry thing on it. But during that time it really made an imprint. So a lot of that came out in my work: a hand for a palmistry chart, or an astrology chart. We're in the sixties, which had to do with love-ins and alternative bookstores and coffee houses. All that sort of occult mysticism was part of that movement. So my husband and I had friends who-- When we would go to a coffee house, there would be a fortune teller, or there would be bookstores that had books on the occult and so forth.

MASON:

Like which ones?

SAAR:

Let's see, they're probably all out of business. The Ash Grove, which is a place that is now the Improvisation on Melrose [Avenue], used to be a coffee house. But that was just part of the atmosphere that was there, of alternative thinking and health foods, and-- Part of that has continued to be. Rock music began to come in then, and all sorts of folk music. All that stuff was part of it. But the part that dealt with the occult and the mysticism was something that I started collecting books about that had images of those things, and those images were incorporated in my work. I was still doing printmaking. By the time we moved to Hollywood, I had a neighbor up the street here in Laurel Canyon who had a small press. I would take my kids, when they weren't in school, up to Gabi [Brill]'s house. She is still a printmaker. She and her husband [Klaus Brill] are both printmakers. That was like the bridge from school to printmaking. Also, she was a student at Cal[ifornia] State [University] Northridge, in the Valley. So I began to take classes there. I just transferred my credits from Long Beach there and continued working on my degree. During that time, I also exhibited more, and my contemporaries were part of my

faculty. And then it just became sort of hard to keep up classes, with three children and a husband and trying to do art.

MASON:

You mentioned Suzanne Jackson the last time.

SAAR:

Well, after I got into printmaking and showing around, I showed a lot in the South Bay at the Palos Verdes [Central] Library and museum and different galleries. I'm trying to think of when-- When I started in the late or middle fifties, I started using my prints and drawings in windows. And then I began to exhibit more. Also, at that time, when my daughter [Tracye] was quite young, in '65, I started drawing her. So I went from printmaking to drawing, because there she was, this little person in a rocking chair. I made lots of drawings. And then the drawings led--also prints--into making these assemblages with windows and then exhibiting them more.

MASON:

What about selling?

SAAR:

Selling? I had several galleries. I had entered something in the all-city [exhibition] at [Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery] Barnsdall [Park] and it had won a prize. A woman [Beverly Gleaves] saw my work who had a gallery; it was called the Kozlow Gallery in the Valley. She sold many, many of my works. I had several solo shows there. Then also a gallery called Orlando Gallery in the Valley--which is still in business--also sold some of my work. And the works still dealt with mysticism. I think the first piece that I used, that sort of broke out from that, was like in 1969, when I did Black Girl's Window. That was a window that had prints in it, drawings, photographs, objects, and the bottom pane-- It was six small panes at the upper part of the window and a larger pane at the bottom, which had a silhouette, which was the outline of my head with my hands pressed against the window, and the hands were sort of like a palmistry chart.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

That was when the black art community began to sort of get together in L.A. There were several people who worked at the L.A. [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art [LACMA]: Jimmy Allen, Claude Booker, and Cecil Fergerson. Those were the people. And another guy named Louis Fuller. But they were like black preparators who worked there. That meant that they hung the certain shows and so forth. But Claude Booker of that group really became active in organizing black artists to get together to have meetings. Also during that time, two galleries came up. The first one that I remember was Suzanne Jackson's gallery called Gallery 32, which was at a little-- But she was somewhere before she moved to that space. I don't know. She had a double space that she lived in. She was quite eccentric. She had a hearse that she drove around, and she dressed really eccentrically. She was quite a free spirit. I think she was also a go-go dancer at that time, too, when she--

MASON:

Was she doing her acrylics then?

SAAR:

Yeah, she was painting. But she was supporting herself by dancing, by this gallery, and by doing her own painting. She had exhibitions that I was part of. And then later came Alonzo [Davis] and Dale [Davis], Brockman Gallery. Brockman was their mother's maiden name. They were on Crenshaw [Boulevard]. They set up a gallery. So we had those two galleries that were part of the artistic community that David Hammons was part of--who has moved to New York--and Dan Concholar. And when we would have these exhibitions-- I remember once at my sister [Jeffalyn Brown Johnson]'s home, who lived in Altadena, she had a fund-raiser for the Pasadena NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], and they had an art exhibit. I think that was one of the first times that I really had a conversation or got close to Charles White. I had seen him, but just like at an opening, just to say hello and small chit-chat. Because by then he and his wife [Frances Barrett White] had relocated to Pasadena.

MASON:

So you had known about his work for a long time.

SAAR:

Yes. And he had shows. But he was with the Heritage Gallery. That's where he had his exhibition. And then, later on--

MASON:

I was just wondering what he was like then and what you talked about.

SAAR:

Well, you know, Charles was an established artist from Cleveland when he moved out. He had also lived in New York and Chicago and all sorts of places. Maybe he wasn't from Cleveland; maybe he was from Chicago.

MASON:

Yeah, he was from Chicago.

SAAR:

Yeah. So he was like a big-time artist for us. He had been published and everything. And we had seen his work. He was the master, in a way, so whatever he said we believed. He liked to talk. He had all of his stories. And he had a really wonderful sense of humor. When I visualize him, he looked very much the same: gray hair, sort of thick glasses, constantly smoking. He was a chain-smoker, which probably destroyed his health. But he always had encouraging words to say to artists. He really encouraged young artists, up-and-coming artists. He was just a really important figure in the art community.

MASON:

Well, he was there, and Curtis Tann was there, so I'm just wondering--

SAAR:

Those were sort of my mentors who really sort of led me into the art scene there. And then, of course, Suzanne, with her gallery, and Alonzo and Dale with their gallery.

MASON:

I was just wondering, if an artist from Los Angeles wanted to become a professional artist, did they feel like they had to move to New York eventually? Or was there enough going on--?

SAAR:

Some of them did, yeah.

MASON:

There wasn't really enough going on in Los Angeles at the time?

SAAR:

Well, at that particular time, in the sixties and seventies--late sixties and seventies--there was that gallery, and also Samella Lewis started her gallery. It was just a small space, but it was a space where, when there was an opening, the black art community came out to it. And collectors were beginning to look at work and think about buying art. Because many of us did prints, and then art was-- The dollar was quite different. I mean, I look at prints that were selling for $70 that now, if I had a copy of them, might sell for $2,000 just because of the escalation of the dollar. And also there is how one's reputation changes. But there were always fun meetings and so forth. I was trying to think of-- I think this was in the early sixties when California artists first heard about the-- Oh, why does that escape me? I don't know if I mentioned it before, about the art organization that's really prevalent in the East and South and Midwest.

MASON:

CAA, College Art Association?

SAAR:

No, no. That's a white organization. This is a black-- NCA, the National Conference of Artists.

MASON:

National Conference of Artists.

SAAR:

Right. Once a year they had it. And one year-- Did I tell you this story before?

MASON:

No, no.

SAAR:

They had it in Chicago, and several Los Angeles artists wanted to go--myself and David Hammons, Dan Concholar, I think Greg Pitts. It's hard to remember. But anyway, we had a fund-raiser--I think it was at Suzanne Jackson's gallery--where we would sell work or get contributions and donations. It was called "Going to Chicago." And we got funding, too, because we tried to set up a West Coast chapter of the NCA and got funding to get our airfare. We would pay half, and then this organization would pay half. There was a man who was a collector and a supporter. I think he had-- He was a businessman and maybe had a liquor store. I can visualize him, but I can't remember his name. Cecil Fergerson would remember his name. He might be another person that would be interesting to talk to, because he might remember--

MASON:

I'm going to do him [Fergerson] next.

SAAR:

Yeah, yeah. Then the pieces would dovetail a little bit better, because he's still active in curating shows and things like that. Is his name Jim--? I forget his name. But he sort of got the NCA started here. Anyway, we had this trip to Chicago. That was my first trip out of California, going east, and to be involved with the art community. So we went to Chicago. By then I also knew Dr. Samella Lewis--not very well, but I knew her.

MASON:

What year was that?

SAAR:

I don't know. I have it written down somewhere when it might be.

MASON:

Well, I know Samella Lewis was at LACMA in '68, '69, but I'm not sure what year--

SAAR:

She came to California? Or when she opened her gallery? I could look up when she opened her gallery, because I would still have a mailer for that.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

But she was part of this conference as an art historian. We went on a tour to see the Chicago murals, because they were still in fairly good condition. We went to the black school that was there, that was the Muslim school. It's not Malcolm X, but it was Muhammed--you know the guy who died that Malcolm X replaced. Anyway, that's what the school was called.

MASON:

Elijah Muhammed.

SAAR:

Yeah. It was his school. Afri-Cobra was a group that was of black artists that was really active. They were at that meeting, too.

MASON:

They were New York-based, right?

SAAR:

They are New York-based now, but at that time there was a Chicago branch or something, because Napoleon Jones, Jeff Donaldson, a lot of those people there, that's where we sort of met. That really expanded our awareness of different artists. Also, New York artists were there: Benny Andrews, Camille Billops, Vivian Brown. Those were the people whom I met. We had all sort of heard of each other and seen each other's work in catalogs of black exhibitions and so forth. So David Hammons and I took a midnight flight to Chicago. Chicago is his home. We went to the Field Museum [of Natural History] together. My work changed then. Did I--? It seems like I told you this before.

MASON:

You briefly mentioned--

SAAR:

Yeah, because the Field Museum was an important step in my development as an artist, because I saw lots and lots of African art, Oceanic art, and Egyptian art. They had rooms and rooms of it. I had never seen that much, because our [Los Angeles County] Museum of Natural History here just has a small collection of African art. So with this sort of new black awareness and this thing about African art being really prevalent-- I mean, I looked at all of that work and looked at the materials that they had used in making that art and the feelings that it had. So upon return, I had started a series of works that were sort of ritual pieces--mojos they were called.

MASON:

You've mentioned in an article that there was one piece in particular that really struck you. It was a headdress with yellow feathers? I was just wondering which piece--

SAAR:

There were several. They were probably New Guinea pieces. But the thing that I think of that's the strongest piece that affected both my work and David Hammons's work was a robe of an African chief. The robe was just a rectangle of fabric folded over with an opening cut out for the head. [tape recorder off] This piece of fabric was quite amazing, because it had a pattern, and when you looked closely, you could see the pattern was composed of a little bit of hair that was made into a hairball and sewn to this cloak. So it was like the chief was a guardian of this village, and everyone in the village had contributed a little bit of hair that decorated his cloak. It was so powerful, because not only was it a rough fabric and beautiful to look at, but it had a little bit of everybody on it. For me, even in a glass display case, it was almost like an electrical shock that came through that display. And when I made a collage, I used that piece. I can't think of the name of that collage. I probably have a photograph of it. David Hammons, years later, when he relocated in New York, did an installation where he took pieces of wire, maybe three or four feet, and had little balls of hair stuck on them. Do you remember that?

MASON:

I saw a photograph of that. And I remember him saying something about he would go to the barbershops--

SAAR:

Yeah, and get that. But that's where that idea came from, because both of us were just blown away by that exhibition. That was an important part of my development, to see a lot of ethnic art, you know, Oceanic art from New Guinea, the other island, Fiji, Africa, and Egypt, because they were all there. So whenever I get a chance and I'm in Chicago, I go to the Field Museum--which I did this last time in July--because there's always something there for me to get-- When I need inspiration, I go to a natural history art museum, because-- It's not that I don't get an inspiration from a contemporary museum or the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], but there's something that really draws me to art from those countries, and that's where you see it, in a natural history museum. And now a buzzword is Afrocentric, but that's true--just because of a natural attraction, a natural magnet that pulls me to art of those countries.

MASON:

And I guess in the sixties there was a revival-- It seems like maybe in the thirties and forties Africa was kind of downplayed a little, and then there was kind of a revival in the sixties. So is this what people in the National Conference of Art were--? Was everybody talking about African art?

SAAR:

Yeah, yeah, and the national colors of red, green, and black. And those who painted hard-edge or abstract would use African patterns or abstract masks or things like that. That was a really strong art element during that time. Also in the late sixties, early seventies-- I'm trying to think if I can remember when Martin Luther King [Jr.] was assassinated. Was that in 1968?

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

But during the late sixties, then I started doing assemblage pieces using derogatory images. It became important for me to use an Aunt Jemima figure and turn her around to be a hero, a heroine, because I felt that that was one

way that African Americans survived, by this woman who worked her way into the white folk's house and sort of learned their ways and educated her children a certain way. Even someone like Uncle Tom, who was also what they derogatively called a "house nigger," that was a technique of survival. Even though we put people down as being an Uncle Tom, that was a way of survival, because the militant people, the assertive people, were maimed or eliminated. Not that they didn't-- Some of them survived, or their spirit survived, but it let me know that there are lots of ways to survive. And then, later, in my work, I--

MASON:

I just wanted to ask, you did a whole series of--

SAAR:

Yeah, using the liberation of Aunt Jemima as a theme. It started with a string holder that I found at a swap meet, maybe at the Rose Bowl, that was made out of celluloid, which would mean that it was from the thirties. There were lots of derogatory things put out then, because that was a way of keeping black people in their place--you know, postcards, kitchen aids. I still have one up there. It's more like a maid. Can you see that one by my stove?

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

It's a maid. By her dress she's probably late thirties, early forties, but many of them were reproduced like an Aunt Jemima, a mammy thing. Even the Aunt Jemima on the package of pancake flour went through a revolution in how she looked, from a very black, ugly woman to just a brown-skinned lady who had a scarf on her head or something. But anyway, there was lots and lots of that material, and I was collecting that material. Sheet music and postcards and sculpture, little statuary pieces. I mean, whatever they wanted to print or fabricate, they did. And then those images worked their way into my work with the Aunt Jemima series. Also a series where I used false teeth, and I said, "white lies." And Little Black Sambo, all sorts of things like that, the way children were depicted in those images. I felt myself as a recycler, not only of

the material and the information, but of how to look at those images and not look at them in a derogatory way or a way to be ashamed--that we could look at them as heroes and heroines. That's what that series was about. And one of the later ones, when I started working with maybe more contemporary things or photographs, I made one called The Victory of Gentleness , which was about Rosa Parks. Because here was this really sweet woman who just sat down because she was tired and refused to move, and started that movement.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Last year at a Kwanzaa party--Kwanzaa is an organization of black actresses here in Southern California, in L.A.--

MASON:

Is that like Kwanzaa, the Christmas holidays?

SAAR:

Yeah. They give a fund-raiser at a fancy hotel to get money, because they give it to hospitals, and they give food baskets and food credit, things for markets, and so forth. But anyway, they had their party at a Beverly Hills hotel, and Rosa Parks was one of the guests and she sat at my table. I was really thrilled, because it was like the full circle of reading about her and seeing her pictures. And even then, she's just very modest. She said, "Well, I was just tired, so I sat down." But she got standing ovation after standing ovation, because everyone knew that she, by her gentle, unimposing way, had started a movement to help people recognize that they had certain rights. So from Aunt Jemima to Rosa Parks, there was this female heroine that I used in my work.

MASON:

Could you describe the Rosa Parks piece for me?

SAAR:

It's a box that has a portrait of her. It has a little yellow bus on it. It has flowers and sort of feminine things. It's quite a feminine box. But it's just like the

yellow bus. I'm trying to think if there are any words to it. I don't know if it's in this catalog that I've got here or not. Probably not. But the title was The Victory of Gentleness, of how being a gentle person can have the same kind of power as being an aggressive, assertive revolutionary. They're just different ways of looking at it. From that series, then, that really brought black images into my work, because before, it was my family or it was nature or it was mysticism. Then I started thinking about how to use it, once the anger was gone from showing those revolutionary pieces. Because I also have a piece called Sambo's Banjo , which is now owned by the California Afro-American Museum, where it's a banjo case, and it has on the front of it the head of a black man with a gold tooth, and he's smiling. When I did the female pieces, the assemblages, they were about Aunt Jemima. When I did the male, it was either about Uncle Tom or an entertainer. Because I felt that entertainment was also a way that black people survived; they could sing and dance. And then white people began to imitate them with the minstrels. That was one way to survive. If you remember the story of Roots , where Fiddler played the fiddle at the weddings or whenever there was an occasion--like the white folks had a party, and he came up and played the fiddle, and that's how he got his name--he was a militant in another way, because he was about survival in another way. So then the pieces began to soften, and I switched to just using photographs, vintage photographs of black people, and collecting those, and either reproducing those images on xerox or using them in my work. They became just black people at the turn of the century and in the 1800s living their everyday lives. But I still felt, not that it was militant, but it was about another kind of revolution. It was really about evolution rather than revolution, about evolving the consciousness in another way and seeing black people as human beings instead of the caricatures or the derogatory images. I did a lot of series like that--pieces called Grandma's House , Grandma's Garden --then moving on to my own family, working on pieces where I would use a xerox of a photograph of my great- grandmother [Frances Parson White], my great-great-grandmother, or my great-aunt [Hattie Parson]. Just showing them as everyday people. And when I started exhibiting those people, all sorts of people came up to me and said, "Oh, that reminds me of my grandmother's house." And the fact that it was a black person, it was-- It's not that it was irrelevant, but-- It was not the important thing, but it was about the feeling that I had captured. So then, again, my work changed.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO AUGUST 15, 1990

SAAR:

So I began to make another connection with my work about the importance of the feeling of the piece. The feeling of the piece became-- Also saying not just the technique, not just the materials, not just the visual impact, but what all those things combined made the viewer feel like. So a lot of it was sort of subconscious as I put materials together, but once it was done, I knew that I had a piece that was successful, or successful to me. It had accomplished what I wanted.

MASON:

How did you know? Just from the way--?

SAAR:

Just the way it felt. It was a strong piece. Which is sort of like intuition. Rather than a piece that is more like an illustration, or with-- Not so much a superficial message, but certain pieces have an impact when you see them.

MASON:

And did you show them to people to get their reaction?

SAAR:

No, but I would exhibit them, and I would hear a reaction. But I rarely worked to show my pieces except to a curator who was working on a show. A neighbor of mine and a woman that I've known for a long time, Josine Ianco-Starrels, who was at one time a curator of the Lytton Center [of the Visual Arts] down on Sunset Boulevard, gave me a lot of encouragement and showed my work in her shows. I would show my work to her a lot and get some feedback from it. In 1975-- Well, do I have to go back and say that in 1968 I got divorced? Well, let's do that for the record, for the chronological part. I became a mother with three young people, three young daughters, to raise, and I had to get a job, so in '69 or '70-- How did I work that out? I think maybe it might have been '69 or '70, but it had to be before then. It had to be '68. I got a job as a costume designer at the Inner City Cultural Center. I had not really designed costumes except for Halloween or something like that. I had

also studied at UCLA with the Aman [Folk Ensemble] dancers, the Aman dancers that are folk dancers. I was interested in North African dance--dance from Morocco and belly dancing and so forth. So I had made costumes for that, for myself. But when I went to Inner City I became a salaried person, because I had to have a salary. They, at that time, had a contract with the city schools, where they worked from late August to late June or July during the school term. They would produce plays that high school and junior high school students came to. I started as an apprentice working with a designer and then became a designer for small productions and worked up, because I worked there maybe three years, two or three years, as a costume designer and did not make that much art during that time.

MASON:

Just out of curiosity, did you know someone named Irene Clark? She was someone from Chicago who was in the Charles White circle. She came out here to do costume designing.

SAAR:

But I don't know if she came to Inner City.

MASON:

No. She was in the area, like around--

SAAR:

No, I didn't know her.

MASON:

Just curious.

SAAR:

No. But that opened a whole new world for me, working with theater people, which was really a trip.

MASON:

They have their reputation--

SAAR:

Well, you know, they have their egos and their moods and so forth. But I met a lot of nice people, and many of those people have gone on to become quite famous and active in the theater and so forth. Glen Thurman was there, Paul Winfield, Isabel Sanford, Marguerrite Ray--who was until recently on a soap opera--and Olga Adderly. And, oh, who was that guy? He died three years ago, but he was a really fine actor. He was in The Color Purple . He played the father-in-law in The Color Purple . [Adolph Caesar] Anyway, he was there. Then the acting ensemble from New York came to visit our theater, so I met people from the East, like Graham Brown and Rosalind Cash--Roz Cash. I can't think of the rest of their names. Also Teatro Campesino, the Chicano group, came. This really broadened my cultural horizons. And because I would have to work on Saturdays, my kids came down. They saw productions, they got familiar with the theater, even though they were quite young. And also, I think theater sets and lighting influenced my later work, when I went into installation art, because I liked a certain kind of theatrical feeling to my installations. So as early as the late sixties and early seventies, theater became part of the information that I stored there.

MASON:

You said these groups were playing for high school students?

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

It sounds pretty professional just for high school students.

SAAR:

That's true. Well, then, in the evening and on weekends, they had open theater. But there was always a morning performance. And then Thursday, Friday, Saturday, there was an evening performance, and sometimes a matinee, maybe on Saturday or Sunday. The first production that I worked on was A Raisin in the Sun. That was with Bea Richards. I can't remember the lead. Also some original plays that people in the company had written.

MASON:

So you were pretty much free to do whatever kind of--?

SAAR:

No, I was assigned a production.

MASON:

Okay. I mean, when you started to actually work on the sets and the costumes and things, were you free to do what you wanted to do? Did you try some experimental things?

SAAR:

Well, there was one production that was an original production written by a Chicano playwright-actor [Joe Rodriguez]. I think it's called El Manco . I'm not sure. But I have all that information there. When you're a costume designer, you're at the bottom of the line. You're just staff. You're assigned what production you're going to work on. You have to please the director first and the producer, and then the actors and the actresses. But in that particular original production, which was a fantasy, I could create elaborate costumes and things like that. There's a woman named Kathy Perkins who's planning an exhibition to be shown at the California Afro-American Museum next year, next spring, which is about black designers, you know, costume and stage settings. I think she's going to reproduce one of the costumes that I have. That's an upcoming exhibition. I saved all that stuff, so I've got that to be exhibited. West Side Story, with Tally [Zatella] Beatty, from New York-- It was really hard. When you're your own person when you're making your art, and then you have to satisfy a director and everything-- And the concept was West Side Story and the sixties. And because he was an original choreographer during the production in the fifties, we kept going back and forth about the length of the skirts and so forth. But it was a good lesson for me in diplomacy, I guess, and how to hold my temper. Anyway, it was a good experience. But it was only from September to June or July. Then I had either-- I was on unemployment during the summer, and then, later, the Chicano fellow who wrote the original play, Joe Rodriguez, got affiliated with a summer stock theater company in the Napa Valley, and I would go up there one month to work on one production there, and I would take my kids. We stayed on a ranch, and it was like a summer vacation, a working vacation for me, because-- There was a pool, and they could just be in the theater or whatever. So that's the way my-- Until I started teaching, it was maybe three seasons of the

school year working on costumes with Inner City, and then summer stock in Napa Valley. Then in '72 or so, I got an opportunity to teach at, I think it was, [California] State [University] Hayward for Raymond Saunders, an artist friend of mine, who was teaching there. He went on a quarter sabbatical. So I went up there and taught there and did a few sort of freelance things, visiting artist and so forth.

MASON:

What subject did you teach?

SAAR:

Art. I think it was-- Maybe it was drawing? Because I think those were his subjects, drawing and painting.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Then I taught at Cal State Northridge and almost all of the Cal State universities, either as a short-term visiting artist with an exhibition, or for a semester or so. Then after Northridge--and I think this was maybe like '78--I got a position at the Otis Art Institute [of Parsons School of Design]. By then, my kids were older. Especially my older girls. They were in college. I taught there until maybe '82 with maybe a year teaching at UCLA, but always part-time so I would have time to do art.

MASON:

But the Otis job was more permanent part-time?

SAAR:

It was maybe three days a week. It was always either two days a week or three days a week. The last semester, because I was-- My youngest daughter was finishing up college, and I wanted to do some remodeling. I had two days at UCLA and maybe three mornings at Otis-Parsons. With a year like that, you don't get that much art made. But at the same time, I was exhibiting and still producing art and moving around at a much more active pace. It was difficult, because that meant that my children had to sort of-- Well, their father was

around. He was down in-- Not in the house, but he had his own apartment. So if I had to travel, he would stay up here with them or something like that. But they got used to having a professional art mom at an early age. Your life changed, you had to travel, you had to do things like that. You had to fit everything in and juggle things around, which I think helps them now, with the two older ones being mothers. Especially Alison, who is an artist. And how you make art with a youngster around, and even with Tracye, the youngest daughter, how to be really flexible and change, and what things you have to do to make money to support yourself. But you can do it and still have a flexible, changeable lifestyle. You don't always have to have a nine-to-five. And if you do have a nine-to-five, you only have it for a few months, and you can stand it. Okay. The other thing that made an impression on me was an article that I had read by Arnold Rubin, who taught art history at UCLA. I went to visit him with a neighbor of my ex-husband's who-- No, actually a friend [Judith Bettleheim] who was teaching at Northridge when I was a student there. I went to visit his [Arnold Rubin's] class, and then I read this article that was in Artforum about African sculpture. "Accumulative Power and Sculpture Display." I talk about it a lot, because reading that article-- It told about the power of African art, sculpture, masks, and so forth, and what made it that way. Because I'd always been attracted to it, ever since my experience at the Field Museum. But what the elements were and how they were combined, that made it have a sense of power. Like that cloak that the chief had: it wasn't so much that it was a cloak that he wore, but the fact that there was something from the human body stitched on it that gave it this particular essence. So I thought, "Well, I want to make art that's like that. I want to make contemporary, powerful, ritualistic art." Then I started doing these altars and these shrines, accumulating things that were organic that were from special places when I travel. I had gone to Haiti in '74 and had gone to Mexico a lot. Or if I was at a country that I hadn't actually experienced, I could find something from Japan or China that had those feelings. It was an intuitive way of making art. And sort of like what I called my ancestral history, that I just made up. Because I can't trace my tribe, and because my family is really mixed and integrated, all I can do is select my tribe and invent my tribe. Part of it is fantasy of maybe civilizations that are even lost. That's where a lot of the sculpture comes from, where I just invent these things. Sometimes they're collages that have that feeling, the Ritual series, that deal with rites that are

made up. It's not that I'm emulating Haitian voodoo or New Orleans hoodoo or Chango or Santeria or any of the different cults. I just take a little bit from each one so it's multicultural. That sort of developed that way, doing that in my current work, too. Basically it's one planet and how everybody contributes to that through their ethnic origins or their cultural practices or whatever.

MASON:

Okay. Maybe we could talk about how you began to learn about the other cultures. I think you did your first altar either right before or right after you went to Mexico?

SAAR:

Or Haiti. It might have been. The first one is Mti. I can pull the slides on that, and we can do that and talk about many more individual pieces and then move into installation and so forth.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 12, 1990

MASON:

The last time we met, we left off before we got to really talk about your altars. You had mentioned a little about the Field Museum [of Natural History] and the things that you saw there that impressed you, and you said that the mojo pieces came out of that. Would you like to talk some more about the mojo--?

SAAR:

Yeah. "Mojo" is a term referring to a magical amulet or charm that either works magic or heals or does something like that. That's why I named the pieces that I made that were inspired by the Field Museum that, since they were sort of emulating African art. A friend had given me some scraps of leather, heavy leather, and I painted different symbols on those and hung bones and feathers and beads. They were mostly like hanging charms or hanging mojos. And, well, there's an old blues song called "I've Got My Mojo Working." So that's the kind of thing. Actually, it's a term that's used in the United States, too, in Louisiana and places where they sell charms and things like that to bring magic.

MASON:

About how many of them did you--?

SAAR:

Oh, maybe ten or twelve. I had an exhibition at Samella Lewis's gallery called Contemporary Crafts, which was just off of Olympic [Boulevard], and that's what it was, these hanging charms and mojos and other pieces that I had made. After that, like around 1975-- It was really an extension of this Mojo series, but I started a series of--or the beginning of a series--of altars. I had read an article ["Accumulative Power and Sculpture Display"] by Arnold Rubin. Had I mentioned him before?

MASON:

Yeah, you mentioned him the last time.

SAAR:

He had written--I guess it was in Artforum --about accumulative African sculpture, about the power elements and the display elements. And it had gotten me to thinking, because I've always been attracted to African art, like what parts were really powerful and what parts were really decorative. He listed certain materials like bones and animal parts, or how things were put together, and the rituals that put them together. So I thought that would probably apply to contemporary art, also. I had also read a quote by Picasso which said, "If art was taken to its highest place, it would cure a toothache." It was just a random quote out of context, but that came back to that same feeling, only this was from a contemporary artist who had been inspired by African art but at the same time reinterpreted it in a different way. So I started making these assemblages that were floor-standing, that were basically a table with things stacked up on top of them, and using some organic material, using paint, using etchings and drawings, and--

MASON:

You would use the etchings and drawings that you had done--

SAAR:

To line the inside, yeah. I incorporated everything-- If I had an etching of a palmistry chart, I might have glued that in the back. And I collected--

MASON:

So you even recycle your own works, as well.

SAAR:

Yeah, even recycle my own works. I rarely make over work, but I do recycle sketches and drawings, and in this case the prints. The first one I did was called Mti , a Swahili word meaning wood. Everything in the piece was wood. It was a table that was made out of wood, out of palm frond stalks and stems, and a chalk box, an old-fashioned box that held blackboard chalk, and other elements that sort of stacked up on it. I think the top part was part of a top of a banister. And it had a mask on it. In the back of that table there is a little palmistry drawing that Tracye [Saar], my youngest daughter, made when she was five years old, and maybe wooden clothespins, and they were decorated with masks. There was a wooden sort of-- Not a wooden, but a stuffed mammy doll that was in the background of it. These items were all in front of it, and I placed candles on it. That was the first altarpiece I did. I don't know if I have a slide to give the date of that, but it was in the seventies.

MASON:

'Seventy-three.

SAAR:

Is that what we have for that? Yeah, '73. So actually that started before I read that article. It was an extension of the Mojo series. But I think that that article reinforced it, because I know that article was 1975.

MASON:

How did making the assemblages freestanding--? What did that allow you to do that the ones hanging on the wall didn't?

SAAR:

They became larger, and they became three-dimensional sculpture rather than something that was on the wall and you didn't see the back or walk around it.

MASON:

Okay. I mean, in terms of the feeling that--?

SAAR:

In terms of the feeling, they seemed to take a lot longer to fabricate, because I really wanted to be selective about the materials that I found. I was really intent on separating the materials into materials that had an essence of power or magic and materials that were just decorative, that seemed to support the piece and make it look a certain way.

MASON:

So that's what you usually do, then, for your altars?

SAAR:

Yeah. Well, even for smaller assemblages, too. But for the altars, or those that belong to what I call the Ritual series, they deal with the feeling of ritual. Mti was the first one that became an installation, too. This was at Jan Baum's gallery [Baum-Silverman Gallery] and in 1977 it was in a small room on a platform. It's this first one here. And people left offerings to Mti.

MASON:

Okay. So is this your first work where the materials accumulated were-- Well, you've spoken about how you like to be neat with your works, but in this case people left things everywhere.

SAAR:

Yeah. I would have to go in there once a week and throw out trash--you know, scraps of paper, things that weren't interesting, that people-- They wanted to participate in it, but it was like a crumpled piece of notepaper or something like that. So I would sort of weed that out. I did that at several different installations, several different venues of using that. People would contribute, so that became like an ongoing thing. It was at the Studio Museum [in Harlem] in 1980, and it was at University of California, San Diego [Mandeville Art Gallery] in another installation.

MASON:

Was your work being represented by Jan Baum?

SAAR:

Yes. I was with her gallery then. And I'm trying to think of the other place-- Oh, at MOCA-TC [Museum of Contemporary Art--Temporary Contemporary] in 1984, that piece was exhibited. In 1988 I think it was, it was at Cal[ifornia] State [University] Fullerton, where I had a retrospective of the different installations. It was also part of that. And at each one people left contributions or offerings.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Since then, I've made other ones. I've made Spiritcatcher.

MASON:

You consider that an altar as well?

SAAR:

Yes, because the three-dimensional things all seem to be that sort of format, that altar structure. Otherwise, they're just an assemblage box that sits on a table or hangs on the wall. But as soon as they're three- dimensional-- Even the exhibition that I had with the installation called Sanctified Visions down at MOCA in connection with the play on Zora Neale Hurston--it was a child's rocking chair--that for me is also like an altar in a way, because there are all these things-- Maybe not so much an altar, but a power object or something.

MASON:

This was the rocking chair that had this--?

SAAR:

It had a fur seat, and then it was covered with all these animals and everything.

MASON:

I remember that. That's kind of similar to a chair that I saw by Lucas Samarras. He uses flowers and, in kind of the same way, transforms the chair.

SAAR:

Yeah. I have another chair that I had used at an installation at MOCA. It was a child's rocker, and it was painted pink, and it had flowers, like rosebuds, in the seat and candles around, twenty-one candles. It was a ritual piece for becoming a child into an adult or something. But I'm recycling it for my granddaughter now, changing the scene and taking the candles off and repainting it in a way. So that's the altar series that sort of grew out of the Mojo series.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

And the Handkerchief series are 1977. They grew out of part of my Great-aunt Hattie [Parson]'s belongings, because she had all these handkerchiefs from the 1800s, where women embroidered and did lacework on handkerchiefs.

MASON:

Could we go back a little before you start that? I just wanted to ask-- You got an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant in '74.

SAAR:

'Seventy-four.

MASON:

And that was to travel to learn more about--

SAAR:

Oh, to Haiti. Part of that funding I used to go to Haiti, because that seemed to be a place that still practiced magical ceremonies and was fairly close. And I gathered materials that were used in Spiritcatcher. I can't remember if that was '77 or '79 when I went to Africa. It was 1977. I gathered more things to use in Spiritcatcher. That piece has more of the things that I've traveled and collected. Sometimes they're just a shell from a beach.

MASON:

How is Spiritcatcher structured?

SAAR:

Mti is made out of wood. Spiritcatcher, the basic structure is mostly rattan. It started out with a rattan seat, a little stool, and then over that is a little bamboo structure. It's straw and rattan and bamboo.

MASON:

It must be pretty big, then.

SAAR:

Yeah, it's larger than the other one.

MASON:

It's about--what?--two, three feet--?

SAAR:

Over three feet.

MASON:

It's hard to tell in the pictures how-- And it looks like something that--

SAAR:

It's also several things put together. We don't have a picture of it here, because these are the altars. But I think these are all the recent ones. I have a postcard that probably has the size, so you could get that information off of it.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

But Spiritcatcher was one that I think is an important piece. That's a piece that I'm going to give my grandson, since he was the first one from the new generation, and the first boy, too, so he gets Spiritcatcher.

MASON:

One last question about the NEA. Was that something that you think gave your career as an artist a big boost? Or was that something that came along after you felt that you had established yourself?

SAAR:

No, no. That came along at a point where-- I was teaching school at [California State University] Northridge and making art. I don't think I was still doing prints, but I had just started with the assemblages. When I received that, it-- Well, the money was important, because I had two daughters in college, and it gave me a boost to buy certain materials, because in assemblage art I just worked with found objects, too. That wasn't why I did it, because I had a low income, but because I was really attracted to used materials. But that gave me personal self-confidence to know that here was a group of people that I didn't know who had selected my work for financial reward. That was really meaningful. That was the point where I said, "Yes, you really are an artist, because here is $7,500 that says you're an artist. You're not just fooling around." So that did make an important difference just in my own attitude about being an artist and also gave me the confidence to move away from that teaching job, by the time I got the funding and everything, to just teach part-time and still be able to make my art and support my family.

MASON:

Did you also go to Mexico at that time?

SAAR:

I might have. Was that '74? I might have gone to Mexico, too.

MASON:

I was just wondering. There are some elements I see in your work that remind me of Frida Kahlo.

SAAR:

Like what? Because she's a painter.

MASON:

Your techniques are different, but just in the sense of how you both have a kind of personal iconography that you use in your art.

SAAR:

Yes, that's true.

MASON:

There was another installation that you did. I think it was the one In My Solitude, where you have a dress hanging there, which reminds me of a painting she did.

SAAR:

Yeah, with the dress.

MASON:

I was just wondering if you thought there was--

SAAR:

I hadn't seen her work. I was only fairly recently--maybe in the last five or six years--exposed to the actual work when there was a show at La Plaza de la Raza over in East L.A. I was surprised at how small her paintings were. And then I had seen something--oh, maybe it was earlier than that--in New York at the Grey [Art] Gallery [and Study Center] at New York University, where they had a show of her work. Maybe some of the symbols, too. But she's a lot more surreal than I am. But they are narrative works; you know, they tell a story. My influence from Mexico comes mostly from the churches, from the altars, from the altars in little shops, you know. You'd go into a little shop or a stall, even a food stall, and they have a painting of the Virgin Mary or Our Lady of Guadalupe with candles and flowers and things like that and all sorts of other little offerings, and that's what really impressed me. They're folk altars, altars that don't have the special grandeur, meaning like they are in a church, you know, where there's a statue of Christ or the Virgin Mary and all the other things. Because I had seen those in European cathedrals and so forth and made sketches of those. But mostly just sort of small churches or just the altar in someone's home or place of business.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

In the eighties I went to Oaxaca, Mexico. It was right around Eastertime, so there was lots of celebration and altars and-- But most of the homes where we would go to the craftspeople, they would have a piece of bright-colored linoleum covering a table, and there would be photographs of family members, plus statues and paintings or sculptures or reproductions of different saints and Christ and flowers growing out of coffee cans and all sorts of things like that. That really made an imprint about all the things that are used to make a special place in your home or place of business.

MASON:

Were these maintained by women mostly? Because it seems like mostly women do--

SAAR:

Yeah, maybe so, but I don't know. I would imagine that if a man was unmarried or something he might still have it. I don't know.

MASON:

Do you want to talk about the handkerchiefs?

SAAR:

Okay. The handkerchiefs-- The first series-- I don't know. It seems like they were earlier than that. Anyway, in 1977, I did an autobiographical series about the women in my family. I have one of my paternal grandmother, Irene [Hannah Maze Brown] Draugh. And since, except for myself and my mother [Beatrice Parson Brown Trowell], at that time they were all deceased, I used a butterfly, which has to do with metamorphosis, sometimes a cross. There was always a cross in it. She [Irene] probably changed religions several times, because she was from Louisiana--Lake Charles--and maybe was Catholic at one time, but during her married life she was Baptist and then became Holiness. So there was this picture of miscellaneous, unknown women, like the deaconess of the church, in white dresses. I'm sure there are stillchurches here in L.A. that have that: here they wear their white dresses and their white gloves and their hats and so forth. And then I always had something organic, like a branch or a fern or a pressed flower. So that was Irene Draugh. That was the only one, because she was the only woman I knew from my father

[Jefferson M. Brown]'s side of the family. My grandmother had a cousin here, but I didn't have a photograph, and she wasn't that close to me. The rest of them are my maternal side. This is Frances Parson White, who was my great-grandmother on my mother's side. There are these little crosses in the corner and the butterfly. Her children were Aunt Mary [Parson], Aunt Hattie [Parson], and my grandfather, Albert Parson. But I didn't have a photograph of Aunt Mary. She lived in Kansas City, so I never really knew her. I have the portrait of my Great-aunt Hattie, again with flowers. Each handkerchief is sort of like the kind of person they were. Like for my grandmother, it's a very plain handkerchief with just a little drawn work around the border. For Frances Parson White, it has a little lavender in it and some embroidery. For Aunt Hattie, she was quite an elegant lady, so this was chiffon with the handmade lace and embroidery on that, too. And then mygrandmother, who was Emma Kelley Parson, she died when my mother was nine years old, which would be 1910 or something like that. She has an old-fashioned handkerchief that has lots of lace around it. Her photograph is again-- Well, it's a xerox from it, but it's a picture that was taken-- Did I tell you that story about the dress that when she bought the fabric my mother cried? This was a picture of her taken in this same dress that she was later buried in. With these I've used the butterfly. This is a colored butterfly--lavenders and pastels. It also symbolized the skin coloring in a way. This is sort of a mulatto kind of coloring for my grandmother with the dark part of the butterfly and the light. This one, with this great-grandmother, was a dark butterfly. This is a white butterfly with my grandmother Emma. And then this pale-colored one, again, a mulatto. Then we go back to my mother, who, again, was half white and half black. She has that butterfly in the fern, but it's a picture of her as a child. I always loved that picture of her when she was maybe three or four years old with her dog.

MASON:

That's also xerox?

SAAR:

Yes, xerox--like a sepia color, because I didn'twant to really give up the photos. Her handkerchief is sort of curlicued and ornate and embroidered on the edge, a fluted edge. The other one from the series is myself around three years old in a wedding. This piece is called Rainbow Babe in the Woods. That's

the reproduction I gave you. So I made the butterfly rainbow and-- I guess it was to symbolize the promise that all children have of being happy and being successful and having a joyful life, which I sort of associate with the rainbow, like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The promise, the promise of being a child. And then this last one is when I'm a little bit older--maybe four years old--and it's a photograph with me and my father. Here's that same little photograph of me when I was in that wedding, which is younger. I'd have been-- No, two would be too small. And this photograph of my father was torn in half with the little black, embroidered cross there, because he died when I was six.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

So that's that series of autobiographical--

MASON:

So this was--

SAAR:

These are all 1977. Let's see if this one's alater one. Where is that reproduction? Was that '74 or--?

MASON:

That's from '79.

SAAR:

'Seventy-nine. So this, the rainbow one, was a later one.

MASON:

Okay. And then the boxes you did in the Aunt Hattie series were simultaneous?

SAAR:

Let's see if I have any of these. I don't have very many of the older works in these slides, I don't think. I have installations. Let's see. She passed in '74, and

we dismantled her house, so they probably didn't start till like '75 or '76. In '76 I started things about her, because I did a series of larger collages called Letters from Home, because she had left a packet of letters from her second husband, Robert [E.] Keyes, and I just used those letters. It was mostly about her leaving. I have one called Wish You Were Here, which is a silhouette of a woman standing alone, and in the background, in an envelope, is a group of people. So it's like leaving your friends and family in Kansas City to come to California and start a life on your own and alone. That was one of those. Some of them were love letters from my uncle, and some of them were night letters, special delivery, when he was away or something like that. So sometimes they're called night letter special delivery or whatever. This one is called Letter from Home. Another one is called Red Letter Day, just because the piece is red. So probably around that same time, I was doing the boxes, too. But it takes longer to do the boxes, because first I have to have the box, and I have to have the proper things to go into it. I kept handkerchiefs and I kept gloves and I kept-- There are some little round things from a quilt or pieces of a quilt.

MASON:

Satin?

SAAR:

Yeah, those little satin things. And I kept all the photographs. I shared some of them with my family, but there were photographs that nobody wanted but me, so-- And dance cards, like the box Record for Hattie, which is a box about her life from a photograph of a child to an autographed book, which is when she was a student, to dance cards and her graduation program. All those kinds of paper things that she had saved, I saved, too, and integrated them into these pieces.

MASON:

You said before that you saw the women in your family as very feminine but strong.

SAAR:

Yeah. All of them survived two husbands, so--

MASON:

From what I've been reading, a lot of people see the series as kind of a direct counterpart to the Aunt Jemima series.

SAAR:

Well, not so much a counterpart but the extension of it. During that time, during slavery time, that was all they could do is be a slave, either working in the fields or working in the house taking care of children, but still a nurturing person. I just reinterpret that as the women in my family--or women, whomever's photographs I find to use in my work--as a nurturing person, a feminine person, but still a person of strength. They just dress differently. They don't wear a headrag on their head, but sometimes they had servitude jobs. When my aunt came out from Kansas City, she probably worked as a maid. She taught school in Kansas City, but maybe that was the only job she could get out here. And since she raised my mother after her mother died, she was like a grandmother. She was the grandmother figure in our life. She was also a figure of strength, too, but still very feminine. I guess as a feminist I don't put down femininity, but I consider that a strength, that you don't have to imitate masculinity to be a strong person. Because I sort of believe in the natural superiority of women.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

[laughter] So that it's just natural that we are-- And certainly we have more stamina. I can't imagine a male having a child. I mean a stamina to pain. Men have more physical strength, and they have a different way of thinking. And I think that that integration and overlapping and meeting is really important. But women don't have to think less of themselves just because they're feminine.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

So that's my feminist statement. [laughter]

MASON:

Most of the pieces that you've done with men in them have been-- Well, you said in the stereotype series they were mostly dancers and entertainers.

SAAR:

Yeah, because that was a way of survival, also. Just like Aunt Jemima, by being the nurturer in the family, survived, the male survived by entertainment. When we think of what's happening today, the top people--Like in television it's Bill Cosby; in sports they are usually a black sportsperson; also in entertainment is Michael Jackson. Those are the people that make the most money. I guess there are other things, maybe old money, but certainly in entertainment they are. Not that women don't do it, too, because there are women who have made a lot of money from doing it. But especially sports, I think. That was a way that-- In certain sports they were accepted. Basketball. Jackie Robinson had to make his mark in baseball, and also football because of his size, too, maybe.

MASON:

What about the piece that you did called Invisible Man?

SAAR:

Invisible Man is a personal statement, in a way, because I'm a divorced woman and a single woman. It really sort of refers to men in my life since I was married, like boyfriends or lovers or whatever, and in particular to one man whom I had a relationship with who did not live in this country. Even my men friends today, they're good friends and everything, but they are not the special male in my life, so it's like being visible and invisible. So that piece is about that.

MASON:

Okay. And there's only one other piece I can think of, called The Occidental Tourist.

SAAR:

That was based on that photograph.

MASON:

Okay. Because I think that's the only one you've done with a white figure in it.

SAAR:

Yeah. There's another one that's even earliercalled Two Darkie Songs. It's a photograph of an older man and a young boy. That's part of the derogatory image thing, but also part of the nostalgic piece. In the piece of music, it's called Two Darkie Songs, and-- Again, it was about survival during slavery time, or Depression time, or the role of the black male and how society looked at him, even today. You know, they have to work harder, do things tougher. But still, in the minds of a lot of white people, they're still darkies or pickaninnies or whatever.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

But most of the pieces about men are political. Black Sambo, like Sambo's Banjo. Or pieces about Little Black Sambo. He was in the derogatory images [series]. But The Occidental Tourist was based on that photograph of this arrogant, pompous white man in Asia with this parasol.

MASON:

He's got on a white suit and a white tie.

SAAR:

Yes, getting his photograph taken in Japan. But you just know that, just his attitude and his body language, was like about a bigot. He could have been American, but for me he seemed like a foreigner, maybe from Europe somewhere, or England or something.The other ones in that series are-- Well, there's a couple where the man is white but the woman looks Native American.

MASON:

Which series is this?

SAAR:

That's called The Difference Between. This is the same series that was in the show at UCLA [Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar], because I had the one about the woman, Our Lady of the Shadows.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Yeah, that's one. Then there's one of a Hispanic woman, La Bonita. She's a middle-aged Spanish woman in a black dress with a black fan. And The Difference Between, which is a white male and a Native American woman. And one of two children, two white children. The series using the photographs-- In those, I used actual photographs and not the xerox, because they weren't really members of my family, so I just used them.

MASON:

But you're using just the figure. The human figure is really important in your work.

SAAR:

Not really. I only use it as a photograph. When I did prints, I would do etchings of the figure, but when I started doing the assemblage--unless it's maybe a littlefigurine or a little, small sculpture that I find, maybe a little Buddha or something like that--I don't use the full figure. I use things that represent the figure, like the hand or an eye or lips or the head, parts of the body. But Alison [Saar] almost always uses the full figure. Sometimes she'll use shoulders and head and bust, but it's complete in its feeling rather than fragmented like I do, because I guess I just want to have the code word for the human being. But if it's an old photograph in a nostalgic series, then I use the full figure; it's not fragmented.

MASON:

Okay. In the late seventies--'78--you and Ishmael Reed collaborated on a book.

SAAR:

On a book, yeah.

MASON:

Can you talk about that? It's called A Secretary to the Spirits.

SAAR:

A Secretary to the Spirits, yeah. He selected certain poems.

MASON:

When did you meet him?

SAAR:

I met him in maybe 1971, when I was a visiting artist-teacher at Cal[ifornia] State University, Hayward, but I lived in Berkeley. Romare Bearden had an exhibition at the university museum in Berkeley, and Ishmael Reed came to it. I had known a friend of his, another poet, DavidHenderson. He wrote a book about Jimi Hendrix-- But he lived in the [San Francisco] Bay Area. In the Bay Area at that time, there were lots and lots of poets and writers--and artists, too, but because the Bay area is much smaller than the [Southern] California area, there was a whole group of them. Here it was like the artists group that was divided between Brockman Gallery and Suzanne Jackson's gallery [Gallery 32] and Samella Lewis's [Contemporary Crafts], and then there was the Watts [Towers Art] Center.

MASON:

What do you mean "divided"?

SAAR:

Not divided so much, but separated just by physical location.

MASON:

Okay. I thought you were saying there were some artists who wouldn't--

SAAR:

No, no, no. But that was the art group: Gallery 32, which was her [Suzanne Jackson's] address, and Samella Lewis's Contemporary Crafts, and the Brockman Gallery. But, see, they're all on the Westside.

MASON:

Right.

SAAR:

And then the Watts [Towers Arts] Center, they had programs going. There were a lot of writers down there. The arts started up, but slower than the other artists, because artists that came and showed in those threegalleries came from Pasadena and Watts and everywhere. But that was sort of like the arts center. In the Bay Area, there was a place called the Rainbow Center or something. It had been an old mortuary, and it had art exhibits and readings and plays and dance performances. So artists from Oakland and San Francisco and Berkeley were part of that. Things got published up there, too. And maybe because Ishmael was from New York and knew publishers-- But anyway, that's where I met him, at Romare Bearden's opening reception.

MASON:

Had you known Romare Bearden before?

SAAR:

Yes, I had met him before, in trips to New York. But maybe not. I can't remember. But I met him there, too. And that's when I met Ishmael Reed, and we became friends, because he writes like I make collages and assemblages. It's just a verbal collage with layering of ideas and periods and characters and everything.

MASON:

It's interesting, because you were just saying you're a feminist, and, of course, he's gotten all that flak for a book that he did, Reckless Eyeballing.

SAAR:

That was a later book.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

He had written Yellow Back Radio Broke-down orsomething like that. And what was the other one? Mumbo Jumbo. But that was the one that I had read of his.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

We just immediately liked each other. And there were other things when I was teaching up there, so I got a chance to see him at other openings and so forth, and we talked about a collaboration. I'm trying to think-- You can find this out in the catalog, the catalog from UCLA, because in his essay about me he writes about the first time he did an interview with me. I think that that might have been before this book where we collaborated.

MASON:

He did an interview with you for Shrovetide in Old New Orleans.

SAAR:

Yes.

MASON:

So that was the first time you met, at that--?

SAAR:

No, that was-- That date might precede A Secretary to the Spirits.

MASON:

We can find out.

SAAR:

Yeah. But that's the way to check to see if that interview came before A Secretary to the Spirits collaboration. I have a feeling it did, because it might have been 1973. He might have just interviewed me right away.Anyway, whenever I go up there, whenever he comes down, sometimes when he's traveling around, he gives me a call, and we talk. He's very curious to talk to, because his mind works just like he writes. I mean, he's talking about all sorts

of things, and it's like-- I'm just sort of like the stable thing. "Well, you can't say that about that person." Because he likes to badmouth.

MASON:

Does he?

SAAR:

Yeah. But I have never ever had him make any anti-feminist remark to me. I always say, "Well, you know, women are the best," or whatever, things like that. But it's always a banter between us that-- But I know that with Ntozake Shange-- He's really taken potshots at her. And Alice Walker. When people found out that I was going to have him be my essayist for this thing, they said, "Oh, no, he doesn't like women." But that's not true. We've always been really close friends, but he's always respected me and has always been very flattering to me in things that he's written about me. There are certain women, yes, and I think because they're writers, too. But then there's another woman whom he really, really likes, which is Adrienne Kennedy. So it's not all writers. I think it has to do with personality, too, and how theywrite. But there's a group of writers and--

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SAAR:

That's why I selected Ishmael to write the essay, because first of all I wanted a male viewpoint, and also I wanted somebody outside of the art world.

MASON:

Why is that?

SAAR:

Because we had Judith Wilson writing about Alison. She's a really good art critic. And what's the name of the woman who wrote--? Lucy Lippard and Elizabeth [F.] Shepherd. I wanted somebody to come from an entirely different perspective. And also because I believe in integrating the arts. The visual arts aren't really separated from music or poetry or drama. As an artist visiting different places-- I always mixed. I have people in theater and film who are my friends, as well as musicians and poets and writers. When I go to New

York, I go to a party and I say, "Oh, have you seen so--?" "Oh, no! Who is that?" Maybe now it's more integrated, but I always thought, well, that's too bad; if you're a creative person, you should know about other creative people. That's one of the several reasons I selected him to write it.

MASON:

Okay. Well, what about the other creative people that you had mentioned--just briefly--in San Francisco? How was their work different, do you think, from the work that was showing in Los Angeles?

SAAR:

Well, there were printmakers and painters.

MASON:

Was Raymond Saunders--?

SAAR:

Raymond Saunders was there. Of course, his fame has really matured, so he's still-- But he's also from the East Coast and had a New York gallery, too. And Marie Johnson. She was a close friend of mine, particularly because she also worked with found objects and three-dimensional materials. We would spend time going to flea markets and gathering things. But her scale is much larger and more of a tabloid sort of thing, where it's against the wall--although recently she does installations--but some smaller things, like figures cut out and framed.

MASON:

Okay.

SAAR:

Cleveland Bellows was a printmaker that worked up there at that time. And, of course, Raymond Saunders. It's hard to remember right off the top of my head.

MASON:

I just wondered what your impressions were. Were things sort of racially integrated or segregated, do you think?

SAAR:

No, because that was a time when black artists were really supportive of each other. There would be lots of black art shows, and there would be an opening reception and dancing and poetry, or other things happening.

MASON:

Okay. I guess every black artist gets this question, but do you think that the black art shows that were happening in the sixties, do you think they were useful or helpful?

SAAR:

Oh, definitely. There was a woman named E. [Evangeline] J. Montgomery, who was a jeweler, who worked at the Oakland Museum. She did a series of exhibitions where she-- If it was an integrated one, she would integrate black artists into it, or she would have-- I remember there was a series using black art, the body. It was artists who did drawings or paintings of the human body. She did several exhibitions there while she was a curator or working there.

MASON:

I think she started an organization called Art West North.

SAAR:

Yes, yes, because Ruth [G.] Waddy started it down here, and she was really instrumental also in integrating writers and artists and dancers together.

MASON:

This was E. J. Montgomery?

SAAR:

No, this was Ruth Waddy in Art West [Associated]. From that, E.J. started the Art West North. Now she's with the USIA [United States Information Agency] in Washington, D.C. She's the one who commissioned me to do the trips to Southeast Asia and New Zealand.

MASON:

Oh, okay.

SAAR:

She really makes sure that Afro-American artists are integrated into these exhibitions. She has Southeast Asia. That's her territory, Asia and Southeast Asia. She's still doing her good work, but in a different capacity.

MASON:

Yeah. Okay. We talked about the book itself that you did with Ishmael Reed. How did that work? Did he write things--?

SAAR:

He gave me the poems that would be published, and from those poems I selected ones that I wanted to illustrate. I did them as a collage, using lots of old engravings and line drawings from encyclopedias and dictionaries. They were sort of surreal in that way, because it was all black and white. The cover was in color, so I did that in color. And then I sent them up to him, and he liked them. I think the publisher was in New York. It was a Nigerian publisher.

MASON:

NOK.

SAAR:

Yeah. NOK Publishing. Then we had book parties and things like that where we had-- I can't quite remember if I went up there and there was a signing party, or there was a party at the Studio Museum or other things like that.

MASON:

What was the theme of your works or of the poems? When I read through them, it seemed that one theme that came through to me was kind of the end of Western hegemony. There was one piece you did called--or maybe the poem was called--The Return of Julian the Apostate to Rome, and the piece you did had classical ruins in the background and that sort of thing.

SAAR:

Yeah.

MASON:

So was that a theme that went through all of the works?

SAAR:

No, no. That was just based on the poems. A certain word would give me an image, like Rome, so then it dealt with sort of classical architecture. One was called Freefall . I think that was just a figure falling through the air. There was another one-- I can't think of them, but usually I just selected certain words that connected with images that I had. He [Ishmael Reed] didn't have any preconceived idea of what he wanted, so it seemed to work out okay.

MASON:

There was another one that you did before that book called Dark Lady of Koptos.

SAAR:

Yes. That was an assemblage.

MASON:

And he wrote a poem called "Mojo Queen of the Feathery Plumes."

SAAR:

Yeah!

MASON:

It seemed like those two were connected.

SAAR:

Yeah, but "dark lady of Koptos" is a line from one of his poems, or a phrase from one of his books or short stories or something. Because he mixes up things like that. He's had other publications, his books, a series of books he and-- Oh, he has a partner [Al Young] that he does publishing with every once in a while. Conch is now the latest one. It's usually short stories, poems, and so forth. He's used my daughter Lezley [Saar]'s work a lot, because she does more graphic things, illustrations and so forth. Incidentally, she has a book show that just opened up above Jan Baum's Gallery, at Artworks.

MASON:

Okay. Because all three of you did a show--

SAAR:

Of our art books. We really liked that. That seems to be the common ground, doing that.

MASON:

Do you want to talk about that now?

SAAR:

Well, we all made our books, and we just showed them at one place, which was Artworks. Then we showed them again at WPA [Washington Project for the Arts] in Washington, D.C., and other shows. We just made books, and then somebody said, "Let's have a show of all three of you with your books." From that, Alison went on to bigger things, doing her large sculptures, and I did installations and kept doing assemblages. And Lezley's books are more like assemblages now, where she just sort of cuts the cover, or you open the cover, and then the inside's cut out, and there are figures and things in it covered with glass. Then she always writes a story, because she really likes writing, too. So hers really integrate writing and art.

MASON:

I know some of the works in the show that you did together seemed to be pieces of stories that would come through in some of the books, just lines.

SAAR:

Yes, they're just a one-page or half-a-page short story. But mine really have a narrative part to it or a rhyming in it, unless it's just something that was in the book already.

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MASON:

Today we're going to talk about your installations. Why don't you describe the process by which you go about assembling your installations just on a general basis?

SAAR:

Okay. As an assemblage artist, I like to collect different things to put them together. And somehow the need seemed to be to work larger and larger. At the gallery that I was affiliated with, I think in 1982 or 1980 I had a special little room, maybe ten [feet] by ten [feet], at the gallery, and I had an altarpiece called Mti sitting in the middle. It was on a platform. And I invited people to bring offerings to that. That really was the nucleus of expanding my work into installation. Then, at the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York I did a piece called Secrets and Revelations in 1980. It was sort of based on a ritual room where I had organic materials like bits of plants on the wall, gravel on the floor. And this is Mti.

MASON:

Right.

SAAR:

That's the Studio Museum, or one similar to that-- an altar and fans and bits of computer circuit boards andcandles and things like that. That was something that really seemed to interest me, especially when I could just bring all these small parts and put it together to make something larger.

MASON:

Was there anything you collected from the site itself?

SAAR:

No, no, except the gravel that the museum had in storage. And they use that. That also set up the formula of creating something especially for a large piece, a core piece, or an altarpiece, using organic materials, using something on the floor and something on the wall behind it. That sort of set up the format for my later installations. Then, in '84 I did a piece at Mount Saint Mary's College's art gallery. I had collages there and some assemblages, but also a small room--it was maybe ten [feet] by fourteen [feet]--in which I did an installation called In My Solitude. I had collected dried flowers and asked friends and family to collect dried flowers, so I had this strong fragrance of a garden of dried flowers. On one wall I had assemblages and collages that I had made, on another wall I had my shadow sitting in a chair, and in the center of this

corner--it wasreally sort of a triangular shape where the dried flowers were--I had a pink chair that had moss on the seat and candles on it, so it became like the ritual object. Basically it was about things that I did alone, like reading or making art or gardening and so forth. I also had a dress hung up in the back, which is like a shadow sort of thing, because it was out from the wall with a light on it, and it moved in the air-conditioning. It was a party dress, a chiffon dress, that had belonged to my aunt, so that was something that was from my past, a connection-- A piece that was an autobiographical piece. But it added another dimension which I used-- I was using something autobiographical, some autobiographical information, as part of the installation. In this case, it was a shadow, a painting of my shadow sitting in the chair. In other ones it was a handprint or a footprint or a photograph or something else.

MASON:

So you do use photographs like you use in your boxes and things?

SAAR:

Yeah, but more autobiographical. Then in '84 I did one at MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]. This was during the Olympics. It was called Oasis. One corner was covered with sand, with these glass ballsthat my friend Thurman Stamen fabricated, and a child's rocker--it belonged to my daughters--and it had twenty-one candles. It was about how each part of a person's life is an oasis, like childhood and old age and death and the path in between. Instead of a figure, I used a child's rocking chair and then an old rickety rocking chair to signify old age and dying.

MASON:

So it didn't relate to the Olympics at all?

SAAR:

No, it was just an art exhibition during that time. It was in two parts. The first part was my assemblages, and then the second part, which I guess opened in September, was about this oasis thing. But during the actual Olympics event here in L.A., it was a different kind of exhibition of my artworks. I have this sculpture called Spiritcatcher. The first one I did was in honor of Dr. Samella Lewis at Scripps College in Claremont. I had the piece on a pedestal, the

sculpture Spiritcatcher on a pedestal, and then made designs using branches and twigs and pieces of leather and other things on the wall. I also have repeated that one at the Studio Museum in Harlem, too. So sometimes I repeat the same one, but it always changes, because the room dimensions are different. And when Imake collages, I did a series on handmade paper. You had another question on that one?

MASON:

Yeah, because we skipped over your Australian show [Betye

SAAR:

Collages and Installations] in '83.

SAAR:

That came before. Way at the beginning. The Australian show was-- What do we have for Mti?

MASON:

That was 1977.

SAAR:

That was the first one. And then the next one was before I did the one at Mount Saint Mary's, when I was in Australia that summer.

MASON:

So that was Stranger in a Strange Land?

SAAR:

Yeah, in Adelaide, which is part of different collages and things I had exhibited. I wanted to do something on a small-- It was a very small gallery [at Women's Art Movement], like a mezzanine running around up above their gift store and their meeting room. I had collected things. I went to thrift shops, just picked up things like my baggage tickets. And a woman had given me a skull of a kangaroo, which for me symbolized a lot about Australia. First of all that, when people came to that country, they sort of set about destroying everything that was indigenous to it. Of course, the kangaroos are a pestand are a nuisance in certain places, but they just really want to slaughter the

kangaroo. You can find skulls and things all through Australia. So that was to symbolize that sort of destruction of the indigenous culture and so forth. And also reflecting on the aboriginal people. That actually was the first time I used something autobiographical, because it also had my silhouette in it and a drawing of me in that space and different sayings and words there.

MASON:

Do you have a slide of that and a slide of the other installation you did, Uneasy Dancer?

SAAR:

That was in Canberra. That was just under a stairway. I know I don't have slides of that, because somebody took slides, and they failed to send them to me, so I never had slides of that. I was really disappointed in that. I have maybe a black-and-white photo just from my own-- I don't have the one in Canberra. But this is Stranger in a Strange Land, 1983--that's the summer of 1983 in Adelaide--which is just a drawing on the wall and things I've collected and the head of the kangaroo.

MASON:

Where's the head of the kangaroo?

SAAR:

Let's see if it's in that. Right up there. See, there's a drawing of a kangaroo in the corner, and thenthe head is--

MASON:

Oh, I see.

SAAR:

Yeah, the skull.

MASON:

In Adelaide, you conducted a--

SAAR:

A workshop, a collage workshop, a mail art workshop, and gave a talk. I visited the aboriginal school that was maybe half an hour or so away from there.

MASON:

So you're saying that assemblage is not an Australian tradition, so what you were doing was--

SAAR:

No, mostly theirs is painting and some sculpture and some crafts and things like that. Because I was traveling very light at that time, I didn't really bring any assemblages with me--they were all collages--so they probably didn't see those. Except they saw the film [Spiritcatcher: The Art of Betye Saar], where I had assemblages in the film.

MASON:

And how did the aboriginal artists react to your work?

SAAR:

They're sort of wary of people coming in. They asked questions. They mostly asked about my home and what I liked to do. Mostly about my life here in the States, because the film is pretty explicit about how I make it [assemblage art] and do things like that.

MASON:

You did Uneasy Dancer--

SAAR:

Yeah, that was sort of impromptu. I gave a talk there, and they said, "Oh, can you make an installation?" There was a stairway that had a triangular space in it, so I just wandered around the campus and selected glass and other things that I found and did this piece under the stairs. I went to a stationery store and bought some maps and things like that. So it was another one that was impromptu. But there weren't very many aboriginal students at that school in Canberra. They were mostly white Australians or mixed.

MASON:

How did they react?

SAAR:

Well, they participated. They helped to assemble the things. They asked questions. That's about all I can expect. A lot of times I don't get a take on how they feel, except maybe I'll get a letter from somebody afterwards and they say, "Oh, the students really liked your work" or whatever. Pretty much like students here. You never know if you're making an impression or not.

MASON:

The Australian art that you saw, what kind of impact did that have on your--?

SAAR:

Well, I like to go to natural history or historical museums, so most of the art I saw was their collection.Let's see, this was in Adelaide and in Canberra. They have a pretty good African and New Guinea art collection. I also went up to Brisbane and gave a talk there and went to their archives. They have a lot of New Guinea art and Fiji and New Zealand, all the islands that are close to Australia, so I had a chance to actually examine these pieces and make sketches and so forth.

MASON:

Do you remember anything that was particularly interesting?

SAAR:

Well, some of the things that I started and made collages of I brought back and sort of recycled in my own work. I don't keep a written journal but a sketch journal, so I got lots of things that impressed me there about what I saw in their art department. It takes a while for it to come out, but sooner or later it comes out. In fact, I have a piece in my studio now that I'm doing for an art auction, and it's called Dream Time. Every artist was given a chair. There were twenty-seven artists invited to participate. And it's using some of the motifs and colors that the aboriginal artists use in their bark paintings--lots of little dots and so forth.

MASON:

Okay. This one's 1986.

SAAR:

Predictions. That's at the Women's Building.

MASON:

Yeah. You started to talk about Fragmented Visions.

SAAR:

Oh, with collage, yes. In making collage, I made a series on handmade paper. Some of them were really quite large, maybe three feet by two feet or something. And then I used those in a U-shaped space just hung on the wall at different angles and so forth. So there were, from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall, these collages on handmade paper, and I would draw in between them or-- I have this one that has a heart and two gloves are reaching for the heart and glued sequins on the wall and so forth. That one's called Fragmented Visions. That's been exhibited in several places, also. I think that photo is from Southwest Craft Center gallery.

MASON:

San Antonio?

SAAR:

Yeah, San Antonio, Texas. Predictions was a drawing that I had started for something else and recycled it to be in this corner at the Women's Building. It is an autobiographical piece. It's my shadow, my silhouette, with different objects hanging on the wall with sayings and drawings around them. The floor is covered with tarot cards, and there's a ladder propped up in the corner.

MASON:

What did the ladder symbolize for you?

SAAR:

For me, the ladder symbolizes a rise in consciousness from the lower level to the upper level. It also has a biblical reference, with the ladder that was to take Christ down. Or Jacob's ladder. It's a symbol that I seem to like to work with.

MASON:

When you talk about consciousness-raising, was that a specific reference to the work that you have been doing at the Women's Building?

SAAR:

No, it was mostly about the metaphysical sense, exploring your metaphysical part of you and your psychic part of you. It could, and also does, refer in a way to-- Well, any time you become more yourself, then you become more of a man or a woman or whatever. But it wasn't like a political consciousness-raising.

MASON:

Could you talk briefly about your work that you had done in the Women's Building?

SAAR:

Well, I had joined the Women's Building in the early seventies, when it was-- I didn't participate in a project called Woman House, but soon after they formed an organization of women artists. We met at different people's homes until a place on Venice Boulevard was obtained. That was called Womanspace. It was there untilthere was something with the lease, and they wanted to relocate in a bigger space for an exhibition. We relocated at the old Chouinard [Art Institute] building in the mid-Wilshire district. They were there for a while, and then they relocated at the Women's Building on Spring Street. I guess about that time was when I was asked to join the board and participate with that. I received a Vesta Award from them the second year that they did that and participated in some group shows and this exhibition here [Gentleman's Choice], which was-- Mid-eighties that I did that?

MASON:

It was '86.

SAAR:

In '86. But the contacts that I made there were really good.

MASON:

June Wayne was--

SAAR:

June Wayne, yeah. Also I curated the exhibition when they were at the Venice Boulevard location. I'm trying to think of what that was called when I invited different women, black women, artists to participate. For the reception, I invited women who braided hair, you know, the cornrows, and women who cooked special things. Harriette [Craft] Pajaud cooked some Creole food. And then someone who did design jewelry and things like that.I think it was called Black Mirror--you know, like black women's reflections of themselves. That was the exhibition.

MASON:

Who were some of the artists?

SAAR:

Marie Johnson from the Bay Area-- Oh, she now is at Yale University.

MASON:

Suzanne Jackson?

SAAR:

Suzanne Jackson, yeah, and--

MASON:

Samella Lewis?

SAAR:

She might have been there. I don't know if she was. Maybe Margo Humphries, I'm not sure. I probably have some information.

MASON:

Were they a part of Womanspace?

SAAR:

No, they weren't.

MASON:

And then in 1987 you did Mojotech. There were different parts to this, right? One called--

SAAR:

Mojotech was the mural that I did when I was a resident at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. My premise was to integrate magic and elements of technology, like the circuit boards from computers and different paraphernalia that either I found at a technology shop or salvage yards and so forth and make this mural that went from nature to the center, which islike a high-tech city, and then in front of it have a platform that people can contribute materials that I might use or whatever, offerings again. Another piece that I did was a hologram, using fragments of hologram and reassembling them. Again, it was like nature versus technology. So it was this hologram, but the frame was twigs and sticks and things like that.

MASON:

Did you do that yourself?

SAAR:

Yeah-- I didn't do all the holograms. They were just broken holograms that were given to me to work with, so they were fragments of those. For another piece, I used an electronic sign that prints out information. You program it. They have them in banks and different places.

MASON:

Like the LED [light-emitting diode] displays?

SAAR:

Yeah, a display sign. It was treated as an altar with carved snakes and bottles and charms and things like that. It was programmed to list all the items that one would find in a New Orleans magic shop, botanica charm shop, like gopher dust, or John the Conqueror root. And some of the times they were animated. It was just using a sign like that, which is technology, to give informationabout ritual powders and charms and things like that. I've used that piece of equipment in several other instal-lations.

MASON:

Yeah. That will come up again with the Temporary Contemporary show. And then you also did a satellite at the National Gallery of African American Art.

SAAR:

Yeah, where I used the same technique that I had used on the large mural, only it was specifically designed to fit under a staircase at their venue. It was called Wings of Mourning. Actually it was about-- It opened on Mother's Day, and my mother [Beatrice Parson Brown Trowell] had passed earlier that year, so it was an homage to her. Also at MIT I did a sound piece and light piece, The Alpha and the Omega, dedicated to my mother. I worked with a faculty member and two students using computer voices, electronic voices, to imitate nature, like an owl or frogs or crickets and things like that, but they were really computerized.

MASON:

Was that something that you were aware of that you could do? Or did somebody suggest that?

SAAR:

No, no. I said I would like to use sounds, and they said, "We've got equipment that will make all those sounds--"

MASON:

They've got everything--

SAAR:

Yeah, right. So they did that. The young man that helped me rigged up a chair so that when he sat in the chair-- It was a rocking chair, and as he would rock back and forth, these animal or nature sounds would get louder and louder. So if you wanted more crickets, you would rock faster and harder. Then it was the wall, and there was a florescent light, and then another wall. I drilled holes to show the constellation of Gemini, my mother's astrological birth sign. It was very dimly lit. But it's like you're sitting on your front porch at the cabin by the lake, only the things that you saw really dealt with technology and mechanical things rather than nature itself. On the floor was moss and things, so, again, it had the fragrance of nature.

MASON:

Did they get it? The students?

SAAR:

Oh, yeah. They loved it. They were probably more interested in, "Oh, well, this is a so-and-so," because many of the people who go there work in a technical way, and those kids are just so hip to all that. I just wanted to bring a little magic to it, and I think they sort of appreciated that.

MASON:

You're an artist in residence there. Usually whenyou're an artist in residence, that means that you have been commissioned to do an installation.

SAAR:

Yes, to give a talk and to give an installation and to somehow, if you want, integrate with the students, either by visiting their studios or having-- What I had was like an open studio, and they could come in every Monday afternoon and see me working or whatever.

MASON:

You said this was also participatory in that people--

SAAR:

They would leave things, and some I used, and some I just left there.

MASON:

How do you decide when you want to--?

SAAR:

They just seem to fit. They just sort of speak to me and seem to work out with what I'm doing. I don't know how much they collected as the show went on, but they sent me a box of stuff.

MASON:

In '87, Sacred Horizons.

SAAR:

Yes, that was at the Queens Museum. I integrated some of the things that I had done before--a table with two glass balls from Oasis that had been at MOCA. Also, I had worked with a friend who had set up a studio in Haiti for the artisans there to make bead and sequin pieces, and he had invited different artists in the States to make adesign, and then they executed it or fabricated it. So this was an installation using those pieces, the bead and sequin pieces.

MASON:

Are they also called vèvèr flags?

SAAR:

The vèvèr flag is when it pertains to their religion. But that's the same technique of fabricating the vèvèr flag for what we did. But mine were the different images that I like to use, like the fan and the fish and--

MASON:

Dice.

SAAR:

Dice, yeah, the sun, and the moon. They were all beaded with sequins and beads and odd shapes. I did a few that were rectangular that had different materials appliqued to it.

MASON:

What were some of the symbols in this?

SAAR:

It's the moon and the sun, and in the center here is a little fabric thing that was like a little case that opens up that has a heart in it. That's why it's called The Secret Heart. It's on a piece of Japanese fabric that was used for an obi. It's the different designs that-- Because one of the things that I do is integrate different cultures and different parts of the world. So this is something that's fabricated in Haiti, but this part, thefabric is from Japan. The other part, too, that--this little black part is this little flap--was from Japan. Sort of like the Caribbean and Asia. Two islands, really, Japan and Haiti, putting something on one piece for one idea.

MASON:

You did Sentimental Sojourn: [Strangers and Souvenirs]-- It's hard to make out some of those.

SAAR:

It's a lot of little items I had collected when I was on a residency in Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture], Maine, things that were made by people, either school kids when they had junior high school craft class or people who carve things. I was really interested in how these objects travel from one place to the other. They're like souvenirs, like they used to make souvenirs. For California, it would be a little orange crate or a little carved bear or something like that. From New York, it might be the Statue of Liberty. But I used mostly wooden things, things that were made by hand, whatnot shelves, things that you would find in your grandmother's house or something like that. Then I had a row of photographs of my feet in different cities that I had traveled through.

MASON:

Oh, those are hard to recognize.

SAAR:

Yeah, yeah. They're my feet. Sometimes I photographed them over a manhole, where I'm standing by a manhole, and I just shot the camera down when I was in Boston or Philadelphia, famous cities like that, New York. One I have where I just sort of lay down. I had my feet sticking up, and I had the photograph from the World's Fair out in Queens. It's a big globe that's there that's left from the [1964-65] World's Fair. One I have in Hawaii. Different parks, different places. It really started out where I took a photograph of my feet when I was roller-skating in Pasadena, which is my hometown. It was over a manhole that said "Pasadena." It's called Sentimental Sojourn. It was a piece that was commissioned by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in celebration of the bicentennial of the Constitution. It was about "We the people" and all of these items that had been touched by people in different parts of the United States, at least where I had traveled. But I found things when I was in Texas, I found things from Colorado and from Maine. And how souvenirs just sort of travel around as people buy them and take them back home, or they'll send them to someone, I was interested in how that idea--

Something that was made, or a thought of someone, or amemory for someone. For me, that spoke about the diversity of the people that lived in the United States. Later that piece was on exhibition at the Objects Gallery in Chicago on three walls. But this was an octagonal museum space. There were lots of walls uncovered. It was really fun.

MASON:

That has a big molding, too.

SAAR:

Yeah, it's an old building, and so those photo-graphs just sort of rested on the molding. On other parts of the wall we built a little shelf or something for things to rest on.

MASON:

You mentioned in this catalog that you were deciding how to work around the molding--

SAAR:

There's always something that you have to deal with in these places.

MASON:

So when you're installing things, does--? You mentioned having student helpers. Do you conceptualize something and make a sketch and then--? Or do you stay and tell people--?

SAAR:

Sometimes I make a sketch. I make a sketch. But when I'm there, I have to pretty much personally place everything. "This goes here." "Drop this two inches higher or lower." "Make this one higher." "Move it tothe left or to the right." Because then I'm just working like I work with my assemblage materials, only it's usually two people helping me in assembling a show like that: two to hold it, and then one to come up and nail it in or secure it. And I'm standing saying, "Over here," and then "We'll put this one here," and things like that.

MASON:

Is it difficult or easy for you to reassemble this show?

SAAR:

It's just always different. I can remember the way it was before, but I usually like to work with the way the space is at that time. That's what makes installation art so really interesting and exciting is that you never know until it's all finished how it's going to look. And then the lighting-- For me the lighting is really important, because the lighting sets the mood. I can set the mood with color and materials in the smaller things to a certain extent in an installation, but because it involves the whole person walking into it, I tend to like the lights a little bit lower so they right away feel that it's different than just an exhibition space where everything is on the wall.

MASON:

Right, because when you go into one of your installations, you're drawn to things. You just seem toget a feeling of the whole atmosphere instead of examining how things are put together.

SAAR:

Yeah. It's not separate but all integrated into how it feels in that space.

MASON:

Okay. In 1988 you took some trips under the USIA [United States Information Agency], and you were talking about Evangeline--

SAAR:

E. [Evangeline] J. Montgomery, yes. She works for them now; Southeast Asia is her territory. She wanted an artist to not only send their work but to do something that was different than what they saw, because they do a lot of photographic shows and painting shows and some sculpture shows. She wanted me to participate by doing an installation and actually visit the country. I had about a year and a half to fabricate the work, think of what it was like there. I worked with a sketch. I had floor plans, but it still does not give you a feeling of the space until you are actually there. In Taiwan, for example, they like to do things really, really big, so it's like twenty-foot ceilings and a thirty[-foot]-by-forty[-foot]room. I'm used to working really intimately. So it was a real challenge.The light was really important, to have it really

subdued, so as you moved around the space-- That one was about journeys, because I think I called the whole project Connections--you know, like being an artist from the United States connecting with these different countries. One way of connecting was through this journey, different ways of traveling. I had the foot photographs again, along with a diagram of a dance pattern, which also would have a metaphysical interpretation, like the dance of life as a path, or following the path.

MASON:

You mean the Arthur Murray dance step diagrams.

SAAR:

Yes, footsteps: left foot, right foot, and so forth. Then on one wall I had sky, because stars are really important for sailing and navigating the way. They had found an old rowboat, which I repainted and glued eyes on it, so these eyes were searching-- Or the guidelines are really the way the trip was made, by eyes on the boat. The other wall was more for land information, drawing a diagram. It was some of the materials from Spiritcatcher, where I used a branch of a tree to symbolize a line that would be on a map and different symbols like that. That would be like drawing a map, only it's an African map or a Native American map,where it's symbols that say, "Well, here is a tree" or "Here is where the lion lives" or "It's water here." I used these organic materials to do that. The other one was in Malaysia. The collection there with the country was using shadow puppets. I did a series of paintings on silk of my shadow. I had taken slides of my shadow on different spots, like cracked earth or downtown with cement or on brick surfaces, or so forth, and blew those up and projected them on large silk banners, so they were suspended. The space there was sort of an open house. It was a redesigned carriage house. It had walls on three sides, and then the other part was a metal grid, so the breeze came in. So I hung these banners. I also had wind chimes, so as the banners moved they hit the wind chimes. That's why it was called Shadow Song. So it was doing that. When I was there, I worked with three Malaysian students and two Chinese students and one Chinese designer. The Chinese designer spoke English, so he was the interpreter. They hung the things. We gathered stones from the river. We put it together. They had a chance to do their own installation, and I worked with a class of Malaysian and Chinese-Malaysian

students. We did collages. Then I had met a woman whohad a theater, sort of a Malaysian avant-garde theater, and I asked them to do a performance with it. They did a performance in the piece where they worked with traditional poems and music and interacted with the banners. I was really nervous, because they had candles, and I could just see--

MASON:

And with the breeze blowing.

SAAR:

Yeah, right. But it was quite spectacular, because it was dark except for these candles. So their shadows created and interacted with the other shadows. I don't know if I showed you that banner before. Those are the shadows, so it was like a presence there. A lot of students from different schools came to see it. And as part of that trip, I went to the tip end of Malaysia where it comes to Thailand. I went with an interpreter and did a lecture there showing slides and things like that about the different kinds of-- The last place we went was to Manila. There had been a typhoon a couple of weeks before, so I used the twigs and branches from that typhoon for the organic material and used some other banners and parts of that sort of table and chairs and-- I used the folding table and chair to set up like a seance, so it had to do with mysticism.It was interesting: At the reception there was a group of young men from Tibet, and they said, "How do you know so much about Tibetan art?" I was really pleased, because it was like my information is universal, because it's about mysticism and things like that, and they felt it was about Tibet.

MASON:

That's strange.

SAAR:

That was called House of Fortune. The following year, when I went to New Zealand, I sort of recycled those things. You know, the House of Fortune became Fragments of Fate. I used sound there and also used the bead and sequin pieces behind it. That was in Auckland, New Zealand. And then, in Wellington, I did some of the shadow ones, of silhouette, of the shadows, and lots and lots of brambles and sticks, and I had a tape of birds singing and

things like that. It was more an ecology kind of statement, about the shadow of humans and nature and about destruction, and how in the end nature wins--though it looks like it's touch and go right now.

MASON:

In New Zealand they seem to be really conscious of--

SAAR:

Yes, they are. I worked with the curators there,and some New Zealand women came to help volunteer. One of the outside things there was the New Zealand artist collaborative--there were writers and poets as well as visual artists--who came, and we had a little tea and talked. It was quite interesting, because they had a very formal presentation where they had songs and prayers first, and then they each made a statement. The last woman who spoke was like the shaman or the special person who made the statement. They spoke English, but sometimes they spoke in the New Zealand dialect, about how the earthquake brought me--because when I was there, there had been a big tidal wave or something just before. No, I know. The earthquake had been in San Francisco, and then there were repercussions about this natural kind of thing. And it was really meaningful to them, probably to lots of places, to see a woman of color come to represent the United States. That was really important for them to see that, because once, in Wellington, I went to the art council meeting, which was half white New Zealanders and half the New Zealand people, the Maori, and they said, "It's so nice to see you brown like us." I think that was one of the reasons that E. J. had wanted me to be part of that, to go and interact.My daughter Tracye [Saar] was there, and they, of course, loved her, because she's more the students' age, so there was lots of interaction there. We made some good friends. Since then, some of the people that we'd met on the previous trip have come to the United States to go to school, and we'll get a card from them and stuff. So it was a really valuable experience to do that. The most recent one has been the one in 1990 where I did a collaborative installation with my daughter Alison [Saar] as part of our traveling exhibition called Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations:[The Art of Betye and Alison Saar]. We created a house together called The House of Gris-Gris.

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SAAR:

In 1990 at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery, my daughter Alison-- I have three daughters. Alison is the second daughter. She lives in New York, the East Coast, so it was her work and my work. We did a collaborative piece called The House of Gris-Gris. It was fabricated at UCLA, and we split the fabrication and the design of it. She designed it, and I selected the materials, which were two[-foot]-by-four[-foot] wood columns with wire on the outside stuffed with leaves and moss and so forth. She designed the roof. One part of the roof is the constellation of the dog, Canis Major. The other was of a serpent. Holes were drilled--it was a corrugated tin roof--so that light comes in like starlight or any other kind of light from the outside area. I designed the floor, which was the Haitian vèvèr of the loa Freda Erzulie, so it was mixing Greek mythology with African mythology and voodoo, which is sort of our concept, mixing that all up. She made these angel wings, because a lot of our work is about the crossroads--when the spirit leaves the material world--and so these wings were suspended, just waiting for the person to make that transition. Shealso carved organs that were covered with tin that were on the floor, like leaving your material body and going into the spirit world. In that part of that installation, I made a ladder that was suspended, which is another way to cross the limbo, the bridge from the physical world to the spirit world.

MASON:

That was intimate, because they had a flashlight, and you could go and explore--

SAAR:

Yeah, you could go in and discover your own thing there. And inside was a small altar, in the corner. That is finishing up a two-year tour. It opens in Oakland this summer [1991]. So that's the last of that. We hope to maybe have that travel to different places, just the installation part. So that was a collaborative installation that I did with her. And then I did an installation at the Temporary Contemporary at MOCA, also, in the spring of 1990, because a performance group from San Francisco was doing a work on Zora Neale Hurston. I did an installation called Sanctified Visions.

MASON:

I got a chance to go there. There was one part on the outside where you used the LED display--

SAAR:

Yes, and the bead and sequin pieces, and the vèvèron the floor, because Zora Neale Hurston had really been influenced by her trip to Haiti and had gone back several times. So that was the Haitian information there. On the display board was information about her--when she was born, when she died, and different sayings, like, I think the first one was, "It was the morning of the day of the beginning of things." And "Hoodoo is a blade dat cuts both ways." And different excerpts from her work or from the play that was about her. In the other room there were three sections--about childhood, middle life, and death. The childhood one had moss on the floor and a rocker that moved. It was a wooden rocker covered with wooden animals. For me it symbolized the creative child that was really her creative ability that lasted her as long as she was writing. The middle passage was white sand with clocks in it and a table. It was called Time Table. It was about passage of time from childhood to old age and death. The other one was sort of a sad area, because it was just a metal, rusted bed, cot, on these twigs. And then there was a wave in neon. The wave for me symbolized another passage-- You can either climb to heaven, or you can go through the River Jordan, or-- Or the transition through water,which is like the same transition through birth, of being born, with the fluids from the body. That was the wave of transition, of washing into another realm, from life into death.

MASON:

And you also had windows.

SAAR:

And I had windows. That was to symbolize the house and the home, and because she started from her little cabin in Florida and sort of ended up there. And then these other houses and places in between.

MASON:

Did she have any special significance for you before you started the piece?

SAAR:

I had been interested in her work. That was one of the reasons I was interested in doing this piece, to say a little bit more about her in maybe a more metaphysical or mystical way. The next projects I'll be doing-- I received a Guggenheim [Fellowship] grant which will be effective in '92--because I have to finish up this exhibition and stuff here--where I'll be continuing to work with neon and video and different things dealing with technology, sounds and so forth, and integrating them into the installations.

MASON:

When have you worked with video before?

SAAR:

I'm just starting. I'm just thinking about it. Ihave a friend who is a video artist. He has a really great camera, so I'm working with him in doing that project. I'm just really sort of forming it in my mind. But I think it's going to be something that extends from the shadow, only having the shadow in motion. Before, they were sort of stagnant, except they were on the fabric that moved with the wind, or I had fans going. But having the shadow on different parts of the earth--Tracye and I were in New Mexico, and we did some filming of petroglyphs and petrographs--the shadow on that and on different parts of the earth. At this point, they seem to be earth rather than water, but it may extend into water. So it will be a video. I don't know how the installation will be, but somehow [it will be] integrated as part of that. And then the public artworks-- Did you have some questions about the public artworks?

MASON:

Yeah. Since I've never seen them before, I was just wondering if there were one or two that you wanted to talk about. There's one that doesn't exist anymore, so we should probably talk about--

SAAR:

Yeah. Well, I think that one-- Do we have a date for that?

MASON:

Well, let's see. There's L.A. Energy, which youdid in '83.

SAAR:

Yes, that was the first one. L.A. Energy was the first one, and it was in the space where Hope Street ended before it dropped down to Fifth [Street]. It was a pedestrian way, and that really intrigued me, because it was like a special little, private, intimate space. On the outside I painted these symbols, some that looked like 1's" and some that looked like a's," and some were just squigglies. Some were fan shapes or fish shapes. They were painted in acrylic paint, most of it metallic, so that when the sun was setting or going toward the southwest, it would reflect and change the color. Then I was commissioned to extend the wall to the First Los Angeles Business Bank, which-- That has been gone, too. I think there is just a tiny wedge of it between their garage and up to the corner that still exists. That was the first one. Then I was commissioned to do a train station in Newark, New Jersey. It was an old ticket window. The station had been built in the thirties, so it was an art deco window. They didn't use that window to sell tickets anymore. So I did five panels on transportation, old trains, and then a middle panel, which is the train comingtowards you, and the others that were trains in the future. I used modeling paste and different objects and items that were just glued down with that. That one's called Fast Trax. And that still exists. The other one [On Our Way] was at the Martin Luther King Jr. Metrorail train stop in Miami, Florida. And that still exists. They had required that you have some sort of interaction with the people of the area where the train station was. So I had a public day and drew people's silhouettes, just their outline--children and men and women that looked like they were either standing for the train, taking a pose like that, or going up the stairs or coming down the escalator. Then they were fabricated in enameled steel and adhered to those walls. The big waiting atrium had people just standing around. The color of the station was green and pink and blue or something like that, so that's what I fabricated the figures out of. They're sort of like cut out of wallpaper. They're not like portraits. And then people coming down the escalator, going up the escalator, and coming up and down the stairs. But they're silhouettes of actual people.

MASON:

Children?

SAAR:

Children and everything, yeah.The latest one [House of the Open Hand] that I did was at the Broadway-Spring [Street] center, Plaza Center. It's really a parking lot, but it's in between the new state building and the Grand Central Market. It's the lobby of the elevator, where you come out from the elevator. At one time, Biddy Mason's house had been in that area, and the reason I did that was as an homage to Biddy Mason. One wall has a big blowup of the house where she lived and started the first AME [African Methodist Episcopal] church. The other wall that faces the elevator is like you're facing the house; it's a picket fence and the window. The window is a memory or assemblage window of things that a woman-- Like wallpaper in the background and drapes and a glass curtain and a portrait of her in a frame and a bottle that was actually excavated from that site--like a medicine bottle that had flowers in it--and a fan, so it's something that you might see looking through a window into a house.

MASON:

An unusual public--

SAAR:

Well, because it's a very intimate space, and I wanted it to be something like that. It didn't have to be big; it didn't have to be grand. It's like looking into the past. It was also, I hope, very protected, becausethe guard station is right there, so hopefully it hasn't picked up any vandalism marks and graffiti and stuff. So that's what it is. The last year I've been traveling, doing the installation from UCLA and thinking about this project, because I also received a [J. Paul] Getty [Fund for the Visual Arts Fellowship] grant for this year, and it's sort of the same thing.

MASON:

Oh, terrific!

SAAR:

Yeah. It's just that I don't have time to do the work. It is really frustrating. So I plan to say no to a lot of things and just stay home and--

MASON:

What was the Getty grant for?

SAAR:

A similar thing: to collaborate or integrate technology with the magic, with the installations that I do, with the sort of metaphysical thing. It was also with neon and sound. Those are the things that I'm really interested in, but they're also really expensive, so--

MASON:

Yeah. Does it get easier or harder for you to make art as you go along?

SAAR:

Oh, some things are really easy to do. I'm just working on collages now, and that's how I get back into it. From the collages I go into the assemblages. When Ihave to work with these other elements, I have to work with an assistant or a technician to teach me, because it's-- It's not that I'm not interested in the technical part of it, but they have the know-how, and I just want a way to say how I feel about it.

MASON:

Yeah.

SAAR:

So we'll work with that. And then I'll have an installation at Pomona College, where-- I hope to use a neon piece with that. The next one will be next year, in March, in Connecticut. And then one at the INTAR Gallery in New York City, which is sort of a multicultural, Chicano-Hispanic gallery. Then I'll work again during the summer and do another installation in Colorado, unless something comes up that's really special, but try to get more components that deal with technology to sort of interact with the other things that I've done and recycle those and just see where it takes me.
