

AMALIA MESA-BAINS AND BETYE SAAR: ALTAR MAKERS FOR THE SAKE OF LIFE

Submitted by

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In her article, "Why We are so Inclined...", Kay Turner quotes two psychologists who say that women's "identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care," and that "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make, and then to maintain, affiliations and relationships."¹ This deep concern with creating and maintaining positive relationships, not only with other people, but with all aspects of life, finds its most eloquent, all-inclusive voice in a uniquely "feminine" art form--the home altar.

The form and function of altars varies from culture to culture and from individual to individual, but they have certain characteristics which are fairly universal. Altars are generally created in an organic, cumulative fashion. They are most often three-dimensional, expanding in all directions as more items are added to them. These are generally an eclectic group of items that have some significance for the altar maker (and often for viewers familiar with the tradition) that expands beyond their ordinary identity. The assembled items usually imbue the altar with a sense of sacrifice, personal remembrance, and human history.

The oldest home altars known to have been made by women were excavated in what is now Turkey, and date back to 8,000 to 6,000 B.C.² The continuation of the making and keeping of domestic altars throughout history has been documented all over the world. Conclusive evidence as to the gender of the altar makers is not always available, but where such evidence exists, women are found to be the primary practitioners of the art.

"The earliest home altars were used to enhance fertility, to invite the protection of the gods and goddesses, and to memorialize dead ancestors. All of these functions prevail today,"³ but they are often less literal, having more to do with relationships that are established and maintained by the altar maker. Above all, contemporary altars (whether they are created for private use in a home or for public viewing in a museum or gallery) are an art about and in the service of relationships. Thus, Kay Turner and many other feminists interested in art see altar making as uniquely suited to the female psyche. As Turner points out, "In the long view, much of women's art, like our lives is oriented toward preservation, continuance, and support."⁴ Altars conceptually and formally nurture relationships between every realm of their creators' lives: heaven and earth, life and death, the past, the present, and the future.

Amalia Mesa-Bains and Betye Saar are two contemporary altar makers. What follows is a discussion of their work, how it developed, its formal and conceptual elements, and how it relates to their lives.

Amalia Mesa-Bains is a Chicana who grew up around San Juan in what she describes as a traditional "Mexicano" family--one which retained much of traditional Mexican culture.

This is a culture steeped in the religions and symbols of indigenous, Spanish colonial, and African (specifically Yoruba) traditions. Catholic saints were adopted or adapted to the indigenous pantheon of gods. Often Catholic churches were built over ancient "pagan" worship sites. Thus, the deeply venerated Virgin of Guadalupe could be at once "Tonantzin the ancient goddess of fecundity and regeneration, and Mary the Mother of God."⁵ Similarly, "In

sections of the Spanish-speaking world with a strong African presence and patrimony religious practices from vodun and santeria interpenetrate Roman Catholic ceremonies and symbologies."⁶ Yoruba deities, then, are joined with the Catholic and Indigenous pantheon, and this "Syncretic joining of symbols and attributes charges each religious figure so invested with doubly (or triply) powerful and miraculous authority."⁷

Altar-making is an integral part of all three of the religious traditions that contribute to contemporary Mexican Christianity. Thus public and private altar-making is an extremely potent, dynamic tradition among Mexicans, and in many cases, among Mexican-Americans. And in these cultures, as in so many, knowledge and understanding of home altars in particular is passed down through the generations from mother to daughter.

These are personal family altars which usually include a diverse array of images and objects such as two or three dimensional images of the Virgin or favorite family saint (called Santos), "requerdos, (such as flowers or favors saved from some dance or party), family photographs, personal mementos, talismans and fetishes."⁸ All of these objects are mingled together, added and subtracted as family circumstances or the altar maker's needs fluctuate. Thus altars "often serve as a cumulative narrative for the life of a family. Their collection of photographs and objects spanning generations comment on the special events, tragedies and celebrations, which are commemorated as life markers."⁹

Thus the altar is "a threshold, a point of departure"¹⁰ to the past (as a history of a family and a culture), to the present (as an

expression of a woman's present concerns), and to the future (as a place charged with powers that a woman tries to channel in a positive, life-affirming way). Kay Turner makes the analogy that the altar is "microcosmic archetype of the earth."¹¹ Both are "in-between" places; surfaces from which we evoke the past (or underworld), the present, and the future (or heavens). Therefore, in the process of creating and maintaining altars, the need to create and sustain positive relationships, both on a personal and on a cosmic level is fulfilled.

Amalia Mesa-Bains' family always had a family altar in their home, and as she grew up, Mesa-Bains continued to create private altars and "nichos" in her own home. As time went on, this practice grew in importance to her and became a powerful personal and political process and form of expression. Though she had been trained as a painter, Mesa-Bains let go of this mainstream identification, and instead began to think of herself as a "cultural worker."¹² Like many Chicano artists during the 1960's, she became involved with what they called the cultural reclamation program. They saw that Mexican-Americans, struggling to survive in an essentially hostile environment, were losing their cultural identity. As Mesa-Bains said, "The less Mexican we were, the safer we were."¹³ In an effort to reclaim and reaffirm the history and identity of Chicano people, artists revived the traditional folk art forms of altars, *requerdos*, *santeria*, and *nichos*. They were "remembering what (they) had chosen to forget."¹⁴ Mesa-Bains has said that she feels that "art for its own sake doesn't have as much meaning as art for the sake of life."¹⁵ Her altars revivify and carry on this ancient art form which is inextricably linked to life. They "reveal, recollect, heal, and

celebrate"¹⁶ the life of her ancient cultural tradition, contemporary Chicano culture, and her own personal past and present.

Mesa-Bains' earlier altars were in the tradition of the altars built for the Dias des los Muertos. The Dias de los Muertos is a Mexican holiday celebrated annually around October 31 to November 2. They are days of remembrance and ceremony for the dead, rooted in the strong funerary traditions of indigenous, Spanish colonial, and Yoruba peoples. By incorporating the Spanish observances of All Saints Day and All Souls' Day with their own Day of the Dead, Mexican peoples created a holiday which involved to construction of home altars in honor of and as offeratories for the souls of their dead relatives and ancestors who returned each year to be with their families. These "ofrendas are generally personalized for the special tastes of the deceased."¹⁷ They are usually two or three-tiered and often include photographs of the honored dead, special bread in the shape of human figures (pan des muertos), flowers, incense, and fruit. "Altars honoring children have skeleton toys, sugar skulls, candies and games like loteria. Those honoring adults might feature the deceased's favorite brand of cigarettes, liquor or items of special significance during the life of the deceased."¹⁸

Dias des los Muertos altars "are not typically erected in Chicano homes as they are in Mexico."¹⁹ When they have been erected in the United States, it has usually been within the context of the cultural reclamation program of the Chicano art movement. Such is the case with Mesa-Bains' early altars.

"Excavation as a theme both historical and psychological begins with these initial altares and continues as a recurrent impulse in all

subsequent work. Initially the intent was to excavate collective heritage while also mining personal family history."²⁰ Her utilization of traditional forms, and the traditional aesthetic of abundance and display were one way of delving into her cultural heritage. Another was to make altars of empowering images of Mexican (and Chicana) womanhood such as Freida Kahlo and Dolores del Rio. She also made altars to member of her own family, such as her Uncle Luis E. Mesa, who was a skilled artisan. This altar "became a large-scale installation intermingling death imagery re-interpreted from the graphic production of Jos Guadalupe Posada with personal momentos from the Uncle's life. This filiation and fusion of cultural artifacts from both sides of the border reclaimed Mexican heritage on a personal and collective level."²¹

"Continuing the process of excavation and reclamation, the artist now focuses inward exploring her feminine psyche and generating an ancestry or lineage of women significant in her own life."²² These include women such as Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, Santa Teresa de Avila, and the Virgin Mary. Freida Kahlo, Dolores del Rio and the Artist's own grandmother. Again, these altars serve many function. They are both political and personal statements, recollecting and honoring different aspects of these women and their cultures, and strengthening Mesa-Bains' personal relationship with them. At the same time, the altars serve mimetic functions in Mesa-Bains' life. For example, she made an altar to Freida Kahlo when she had to have a hysterectomy. Kahlo had lived her life in a lot of pain due to terrible injuries she suffered as a child. Mesa-Bains' altar to Kahlo

helped her to reconcile her own inability to bear children and encouraged in herself a "productivity of another order."²³

Similarly, when Mesa Bains' turned forty she built an altar to Dolores del Rio. What follows is a description by Toma's Ybarra Frausto of this altar which was one of several Mesa-Bains has made to del Rio:

Highlighting the art deco images of Hollywood golden era, the shrine to Dolores del Rio sought to reflect the glamour and allure of her celluloid image. An ultra feminine dressing table constructed of mirrors trimmed with satin, ribbons and lace contained juxtaposition of intimate bedroom accouterments like crystal perfume vials, strings of pearls, dried flowers, discarded facial tissues imprinted with lipstick kisses and even discarded letters from silver-screen beaux. The objects were disposed and arranged to evoke her presence via the process of association. Movie stills, photographic scrapbook and textual chronologies of the life and times of the glamorous star expanded the informational context. The underlying aim being to shift perception of Dolores del Rio from being merely a fashionable commodity to her recognition as a woman of significant accomplishment--the first Mexican superstar breaking the racial taboos of mainstream Hollywood, Dolores del Rio becomes an evocation of an ageless beauty.²⁴

As this description illustrates, the altars are excellent instruments of communication. They communicate to the viewers information about innumerable empowering aspects of the honored individual's life. The viewer senses history and life at the altar; not only the life of the altar's "subject," but their own life as well. Thus, altars are instruments of communicative exchange. This exchange is especially potent for the altar-maker. As Turner points out:

It is important to understand the altar as an art object, but ... it is also important to see it as a performance space. ... The images on the altar

act as receivers for the transmission of messages which are sent by the altar maker. Altar makers encounter what they make through the use of ritual acts (gesture, object manipulation, gift-giving) but most crucially through speech and song. At the altar, a special kind of speech is heard: that of a woman seeking and receiving power. These women encounter deities and speak with assurance in their mutual ability to change things.²⁵

It is interesting to note that Mesa-Bains says she has always identified with female deities: "I always thought of virgins as really sort of self-sufficient women who didn't need men and who were capable of procreation from a place within themselves, and that for us they offer a kind of sustenance, a kind of nurturance and protection. More than anything else, they are reminders of the solitary sufficiencies of women."²⁶

In 1987, Mesa-Bains had a one-woman show at the Intar Latin American gallery in New York. It was called "Grotto of the Virgins" and included altars to Dolores del Rio, Freida Kahlo, and Mesa-Bains' grandmother. They all shared the same space reached by passing through a grotto opening or doorway constructed out of pieces of pink and grey stone, broken pottery, and mirror shards embedded in concrete. Thus, the space itself became holy, alluding to all ritual spaces, and the individuals honored therein were all "canonized into (Mesa-Bains') personal feminist pantheism of goddesses, saints, and virgins."²⁷

As the content has become more personal, the form of Mesa Bains' altars has changed drastically over the years, becoming less like traditional Mexican-American altars, and more like installations. The altar to her grandmother for the "Grotto of the Virgins" show was in the form of a confessional. To view the assembled photographs of her grandmother and other family members, one had to kneel down on a

stool and peer through the screen, thus paying homage to her grandmother. While kneeling, one could look through a book (or confessional) which contained stories about her grandmother and about the sins of pride and desire. This was the sparest of all the altars in the show. The rest of the altars continued the traditional aesthetics of abundance and display, although many tend to "emphasize organic materials"²⁸ such as dirt, stones, twigs, leaves and rose petals. These are often scattered on the floor, trailing away from the altars, collapsing the distance between the viewer and the altar, thus including the viewer in the sacred space.

Like traditional Mexican-American altars, all of Mesa-Bains altars are ephemeral. They evolve "organically through layering and accretion."²⁹ Mesa-Bains has commented on the "great power and freedom"³⁰ the ephemerality of her altars allows her. The all-important process does not end with a final product that can be sold. Thus, the organic process of altar-making retains its traditional importance. In any case, as she pointed out, how could she sell items such as her first communion flowers, her rosary beads, or her grandmother's hair? Mesa-Bains' altars are eventually dismantled and many of the items find their way into subsequent altars. Thus, they bring with them the accumulated power and memories associated with having been in previous altars.

These ideas of the accumulative powers of the altars, and the absolute personal attachment of Mesa-Bains to her altars is especially evident when she speaks of her initial trepidation at knowing how to handle "intimacy and personal revelation"³¹ in a public setting where people might not share the same "language and codes."³²

Part of Mesa Bains' solution is to hide private items in the altars where no one will see them. This way, there is something of herself there that is secret, and, in a sense, magical. Also, she conducts private ritual and blessings before anyone else sees the altars. She often writes and then burns the writings as part of these rituals. The ashes are accumulated and included in subsequent altars, bringing their own special cumulative powers of recollection and memory.

Betye Saar is a Black woman who grew up in Los Angeles. Although no one in her family made actual altars, as a black person, she is connected to the traditions of altar making and the aesthetic of fragmentation, power, accumulation and display. These are integral to the art of Africa, and therefore continue to influence many African-American artists.

In a broader sense, "religion, perhaps more than any other socio-cultural form, has consistently been an important source for the arts created by Blacks in the western world. That should come as no surprise to us, since religion and art in Africa were seldom viewed as separate practices."³³ Furthermore, African-American art has been called "man-centered and self-centered in the finest sense of the word, around human experience."³⁴

This is certainly true of the art of Betye Saar, which is at once highly personal, and at the same time inclusive of so many aspects of the human experience so that all of our lives are validated and celebrated. Like Mesa-Bains' work, Saar's art "speaks with the authority of tradition ... and the authenticity of experience."³⁵ It is an art that has its roots in her early childhood experiences and

has evolved naturally, organically, throughout her life, embracing all of her experiences. And, like Mesa-Bains' altars, Saar's altars are essentially about and in the service of relationships that include her past, present, and future, the conscious world and the world of the unconscious, as well as formal relationships between objects.

When she was a child, Saar spent her summers in Watts with her grandmother. She remembers digging in the back yard with sticks, treasuring the bits of glass and beads she found there, as well as the odds and ends she would collect along the railroad tracks as she and her grandmother made their weekly walks to the grocery store. Though she did not necessarily use the collected items in art works as a child, she did grow up in a creative household. Her mother was a seamstress and Betye and her family were always making things out of the fabric scraps. They would repaint the faces of worn out dolls, make clothing for them, and have puppet shows. Another of Saar's most powerful memories is of watching the construction of Simon Rodia's Watt's Towers. She described them as "magical and strange and curious."³⁶ The towers were constructed of bits and pieces of mirrors, broken crockery, and bottlecaps embedded in concrete. They must have had quite an impact on her art work.

Her interest in the occult also has roots in her childhood. Like many African-Americans, Saar's mother was interested in the occult or in forms of the Yoruba religion that have survived the ordeal of slavery and flourish in Haiti, the Caribbean and areas of South Central, and North America. As a child, Betye Saar was clairvoyant and psychic. This gift left her at the time of her

father's death when she was six. As an adult, "dreams, feelings, and intuitions became important sources for her art."³⁶

Saar got her early formal training in design and print making at a time when, as she says, "Blacks and other minorities were not encouraged in the arts."³⁷ By the time she had completed her graduate studies, her interest in occult imagery had emerged. In 1969, she created Black Girl's Window by putting images behind the panes of an old leaded window. This was a landmark piece in her development.

It's occult images (zodiacal sign, crescent, star, skeleton, tarot card figures, etc.), its symmetry, the rows of boxes stacked one on top of the other in the upper zone of the piece, the assemblage of bits and pieces of objects into the piece and most importantly, the sense that the work of art itself was an object of power, marked the beginning of Betye Saar's ritualistic art.³⁸

Around this time, Saar also began to use the format of the box (which she later saw as coffins or reliquaries) as a kind of sanctifying enclosure for the objects she so passionately collected.

In 1968, she was deeply affected by the death of Martin Luther King. She began to collect "derogatory stereotypes" of Blacks such as "Jim Crow, Aunt Jemima, pickaninnies, watermelons, golliwogs and grinning darkies."³⁹ Images "which white Americans had used to objectify a guilt and fear."⁴⁰ As Saar said, she wanted to "explode the myth, and was astute enough to turn the weapons of white stereotypes to task."⁴¹ She looked at the stereotypes and thought, "this is a really negative thing, and how can I, as an artist, change that to make it into a positive thing, to make it a thing of beauty, a thing of interest?"⁴² An example of this is her piece The Liberation of Aunt Jemima. This is an assemblage that contains the image of a

passive, smiling Aunt Jemima transformed into a "gun toting revolutionary"⁴³ with a raised black fist superimposed over her skirt. Another piece from this period was I Got Rhythm. This time, Saar attached a small image of a Black man to the wand of a metronome, where he ticked back and forth like a time bomb.

"Since the end of the 60's, with the passing of the active phase of the Black movement, Betye Saar ... found her own political interests subsiding into an introspective concern with her own life."⁴⁴ This was partly triggered by the death of her ninety-eight year old Aunt Hattie who died in 1975. Saar began to do highly nostalgic pieces. They were boxes and collages created from the "remnants of Hattie's life."⁴⁵ She described these "black nostalgic pieces" as "softer and gentler." "They evoke a bittersweet nostalgia for the days of her childhood-the twenties and thirties. Boxes with faded old photographs of black children, bits of feathers and lace, old gloves, butterflies, tarnished silver spoons, and dried flower petals."⁴⁶ Some of these pieces still communicated forms of social criticism, though not with the intensity of her earlier works. The Shield of Quality (1974) had an old photograph of "upper-middle-class black people surrounded by symbols of elegance--lace, a painted dish, a bit of a feather boa, a silver spoon. These pieces come in a yellow box, symbolizing the high yellow color (lighter skin color) that in black society is sometimes considered necessary for upper-class status. In this way, the piece criticizes the idea in American Black culture that whiteness or lightness is superior."⁴⁷

Peter Clothier wrote that in the "deepest self" we find "deep images." "Fragments of collective identity whose resonance speaks

beyond self and echoes in the human memory."⁴⁸ Saar's works that began during this period of intense introspection often have such "deep images." The faded photographs are not of our ancestors, and although the handkerchiefs and autograph books belonged to no one we knew, they could have. Gathered together so beautifully, they evoke a wistful nostalgia for all of our pasts--a longing for their beauty and wishfulness that they had not been so hard.

Saar began to make her more three dimensional altars at this time. These works do not always look like altars in the way that Amalia Mesa-Bains' often do. They are often more like traditional sculpture in that they are not disassembled after they are completed. They are usually fairly compact, portable constructions that can be set on a table top, so that they retain an intimate scale. Like her boxes and her collages, Saar's altars reflect the strong duality of the personal and the communal. They are "intensely personal, intimate statements, requiring the viewer to come close to touch them, open a drawer, catch a wisp of fragrance or a glimpse of him or herself in the fragments of mirror embedded in them. Some, like Indigo Mercy or Sadhana, look like a family heirloom ... personal statements, the altars are also public monuments. As altars, they emphasize communal beliefs, shared experiences."⁴⁹

During this time, Saar also traveled quite a bit, to Haiti, Mexico, and later to Africa, and immediately began to adopt and adapt new aesthetic ideas, and to include more of the signs and symbols of many religions and beliefs. These are as diverse as palmistry, phrenology, astrology, and the religions of Ancient Egypt, Africa, the far East, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Oceania. She uses these symbols

not as specific invocations to specific gods, but as power objects with which to charge the altars, and in an inclusive way, to indicate the oneness of all religions and the similarities of all people in their need for rituals.

Saar's art was deeply affected by Arnold Rubin's 1975 article "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture." In that article, he described how in African art the purpose of accumulation is to "define and focus group identity and reinforce the sense of continuity."⁵⁰ He wrote that "display materials (beads, bells, fabrics, mirrors, etc.) are primarily oriented toward enhancement of the splendor of the objects to which they were attached" and that power objects such as "horns, skulls and sacrificial accumulations" (such as blood and saliva) "brought into conjunction and activated through appropriate procedures have the capacity to organize and concentrate what might be called 'available capability.'"⁵¹

Saar transforms these ideas into her own terms. In her altars "objects have a communal value and the materials assembled are assembled for their visual and sensual attractiveness (display) or for their affect--evocative, mnemonic, magical, seductive--(power) they have on a viewer."⁵² The objects Saar chooses and organized, in other words, become beautiful and engaging visually so that the viewer is attracted to them and then a deeper relationship is established between the altar and the viewer (or between Saar and the viewer) because the objects are "imbued with a personal symbolism, a sense of history, the passage of time and the continuity of life"⁵³ ... sentiments we can all understand or at least sense. In some cases, spaces in the altars are left vacant so that a viewer can fill them

with her or his imagination, causing the altar to become even more individualized and magical. In one altar called Mti, viewers were encouraged to add their own items, expanding even further the ideas of accumulation and inclusion. Thus, the altars, through the accumulation of all kinds of "power objects," are imbued with the "power to engage the viewer in a transforming experience."⁵⁴

Clearly, the kinds of transforming experiences which Saar's altars elicit in viewers are different from those intended by African altars. There, where the viewers would have an understanding of the meaning and reasons for the inclusion of each object, and perhaps participated in the creation of the altar, the altar could cause very specific kinds of responses or transformations. Saar's altars have to be more general or open ended in their intended effects on viewers. In fact, she says that she definitely senses the power inherent in the objects, but that when she chooses the objects for the altars, she does not necessarily choose them because of specific powers they will bring to the altar. For instance, if she includes a bird's skull, it will not be the sake of including some form of power that is associated with birds. Rather, she includes many of her objects as references to the four basic elements: water, earth, air and fire; or simply because of the power of a past life that all old objects carry with them.

Saar also likes to expand the idea of display by including items that entice our sense of touch, smell, and sound. Her piece Spiritcatcher is a pyramidal structure, intricately constructed of sticks, string, and basket work. Its shape and airyness is reminiscent of Rodia's Watts Towers. Some of the parts move,

clattering together, and there are incense packets at the bottom. Typical of her inclusive spirit, she has attached a star of David, the Islamic crescent, an Egyptian Ankh, rosary beads, bones, shells, feathers, a bird's skull at the apex, and a tiny ladder inviting our minds to climb it like a monument. When asked about its ritual purpose, Saar said that as a "spiritcatcher, it is meant to repel and entice spirits. When a good spirit enters, it will be caught, and you can get power over it. She explained that it doesn't actually work in this sense because she didn't have time to "get into the ritual part"⁵⁵ and make it work, but that she could if she tried and that some of her altars do actually "work."

Peter Clothier wrote of Betye Saar that she makes no separation between her art and her life. "She lives her life as art and lives her art as life."⁵⁶ In fact, when one interviewer asked her how she managed to raise three daughters and still do her art, she replied, "What's the difference?"⁵⁷ This makes a lot of sense since "Motherhood-the ritual of giving birth, nurturing seeing one's children through their various 'rites of passage,' like death, can lead to a consciousness of an archetypal mythic past and only reinforces rather than contravenes a sense of the importance of ritual in life."⁵⁸

For Saar, creating her art is a ritual process, with very clearly defined steps. The first step is what she calls the Imprint. The Imprint is her past -- all the elements of her past life that make her who she is. This, combined with her present "dreams, feeling, and intuitions"⁵⁹ make her create the art she creates.

The second step is the Search. This step involves the search for and collecting of the items that will be combined to make a particular piece. She gathered the parts for the Spiritcatcher for three years. "I would find a part and know that it would go to that particular piece, and so in that sense they're organic in the way they are constructed. The piece would sit around for a year or so, and it would just come together. It's not difficult; it's just that I can't go and knock one of these things out."⁶⁰

Saar has said that she prefers the things she collects "to look old. Having a feeling of being used and having gone through someone's lifetime. That's a kind of power-gathering ... each item I collect has a certain energy from its previous function that carries over into its new use."⁶¹ This idea of objects increasing in value as they age and accumulating the energy and powers that is associated with having been used is one which is widely understood in African art.

Saar says that her motto during this phase of the ritual is "when in doubt, have it out."⁶⁴ She begins by including an over abundance of objects, and then simplifies until she leaves "spaces for the viewer to fill in, which adds to the mystery." The idea of mystery is very important to her. In some cases, she purposely includes an object whose meaning is mysterious to her, but at all times, she follows her intuition. She says, "Intuition is the most important level of consciousness. The intellect can come later. You do it, and then you find a vocabulary for it ... My rule of thumb is this: the logical side will lie to you. But the intuitive side, your heart, your feelings, will be honest and true."⁶⁶ And so she works in

a stream of consciousness and the work becomes a purifying ritual for herself. She is unaware of her body as she works. "My energy is directed in one way. I become the medium, and the energy or the force which is the cumulative consciousness goes through me and produces all this work that I leave behind."⁶⁷

The final step of the process is the Release, or the "sharing or exhibition of the work."⁶⁸ This step is crucial to Saar. Typical to her spirit of inclusion and to her need to celebrate all of life, her work needs to be seen by the public to be complete.

Saar's altars, like Mesa-Bains' are instruments of communication, and the ideas communicated are essentially about relationships. The physical nature of altars is one of relationships and associations established or suggested between an eclectic group of objects.

These relationships are usually very personal to the altar maker, and at the same time have a universal appeal. The very nature of the art form is one of recollection and remembrance. In invoking the past, the altar maker perpetuates memories, and strengthens her own and her family's relationship with their own ancestors and cultural history. Since this is a highly personal art form, it has to be honest to be good. Working in a stream of consciousness or following one's intuition is a very direct method of creating. The work that results is potent with the personality of the creator and all their current feelings. Therefore, the work is also rich with the artists relationships to her present and future.

The work of altar makers can be as powerful politically as it is personally. Because they are such eloquent instruments of

communication, altars can speak on many different levels. They can, and have been used to renovate and rejuvenate relationships between groups of people. They can tear down stereotypes, reclaim and celebrate the good things about individuals and cultures. In their universality, altars encourage positive, life-affirming relationships between all kinds of people and all aspects of life. They celebrate life and they exist for the sake of life.

¹Kay Turner, "Why We are So Inclined . . .," Lady Unique Inclination of the Night Cycle 6 (Autumn 1983), 4.

²Ibid., 5.

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Ibid., 9.

⁵Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Cultural Context," Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality Among Contemporary Hispanic Artists, curator Amalia Mesa-Bains (Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, NM, 1988), 12.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ybarra-Frausto, "Cultural Context," 9.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Turner, 12.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Amalia Mesa-Bains, tape recorded discussion with the artist (University of Colorado, April, 1988)

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Cutorial Statement," Ceremony of Memory (Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, NM, 1988), 8.

¹⁷Ybarra-Frausto, "Cultural Context," 10.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Sanctuaries of the Spirit-the Altares of Amalia Mesa-Bains," Grotto of the Virgins: Installation by Amalia Mesa-Bains (NYC, Intar Latin American Gallery, Nov 31-Dec. 31, 1987), 5-6.

²¹Ibid, 6.

²²Ibid.

²³Mesa-Bains, taped recorded discussion.

- ²⁴Ybarra-Frausto, "Sanctuaries," 9.
- ²⁵Turner, 12.
- ²⁶Mesa-Bains, taped recorded discussion.
- ²⁷Ybarra-Frausto, "Sanctuaries," 9.
- ²⁸Ibid.
- ²⁹Turner, 8.
- ³⁰Mesa-Bains, taped recorded discussion.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Ibid.
- ³³Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ritual and Myth: A Survey of African American Art, (New York, The Studio Museum of Harlem, 1982), 7.
- ³⁴Ibid, 8.
- ³⁵Ibid, 4.
- ³⁶Mary Schmidt Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar (exhibition catalogue, 1980)
- ³⁷"Saar Explores Interior Space," (Vol. 1, No. 3, Summer, 1984).
- ³⁸Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ³⁹Peter Clothier, "The Other Side of the Past," Betye Saar, ed. Julia Brown (Museum of Contemporary Art, July, 1984), 20.
- ⁴⁰Ibid.
- ⁴¹Ibid.
- ⁴²Ishmael Reed, "Betye Saar, Artist," Shrovetide in Old New Orleans (Garden City, NY, Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1978), 146.
- ⁴³Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ⁴⁴Eleanor Monroe, Originals: American Women Artists (NY, Simon and Schuster, 1979), 359.
- ⁴⁵Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ⁴⁶Charlotte Streiffer Rubinstein, American Women Artists: From Early Indian Times to the Present (Boston, Mass., G.K. Hall and Co., 1982), 419-420.
- ⁴⁷Ibid.

- ⁴⁸Clothier, "The Other Side," 40.
- ⁴⁹Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ⁵⁰Arnold Rubin, "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture" (Artforum, May 1975), 37.
- ⁵¹Ibid, 39-40.
- ⁵²Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ⁵³Dorrit Kirk Fitzgerald, "The Magic of Altars" (Artweek 16:3, Feb. 16, 1985).
- ⁵⁴Ibid.
- ⁵⁵Suzanne Bauman, director, Spiritcatcher: The Art of Betye Saar from the Originals; Women in Art Series (WNET, 1980)
- ⁵⁶Clothier, "The Other Side," 16.
- ⁵⁷Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ⁵⁸Ibid.
- ⁵⁹Ibid.
- ⁶⁰Houston Conwill, "Interview with Betye Saar" (Black Art: An International Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 1), 12.
- ⁶¹Clothier, "The Other Side," 16.
- ⁶²Ibid, 38.
- ⁶³Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.
- ⁶⁴Conwill, 10.
- ⁶⁵Ibid.
- ⁶⁶"Saar Explores Interior Space."
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- ⁶⁸Campbell, Rituals: Betye Saar.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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- Fig. 2 Amalia Mesa Bains, Altar for Dolores del Rio, Grotto of the Virgins Installation, 1987.
- Fig. 3 Betye Saar, Indigo Mercy, 1975
- Fig. 4 Betye Saar, Spiritcatcher, 1976-1977.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

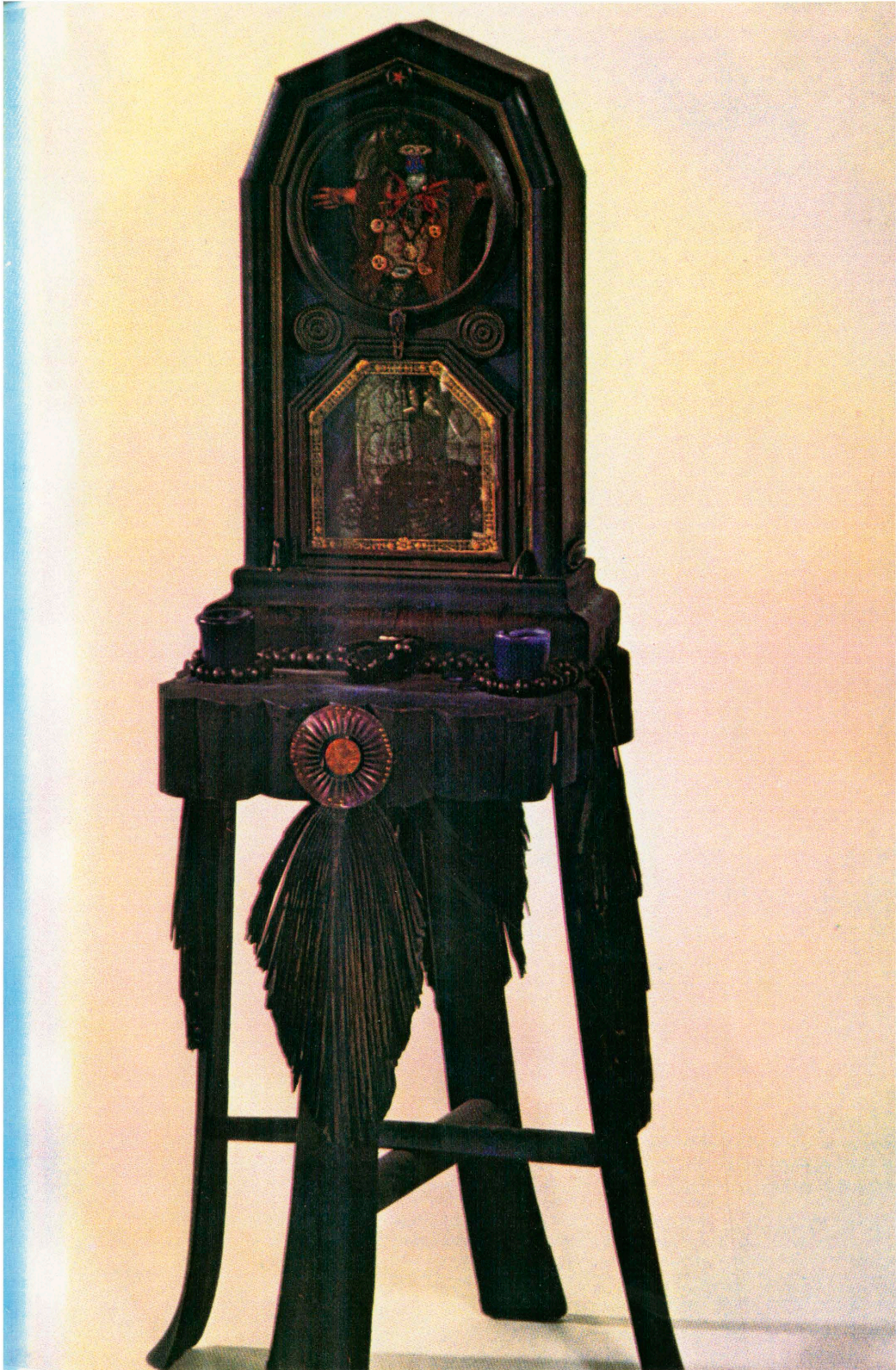


Fig. 4

