

BOOK BRIEFS

The Blues Artist

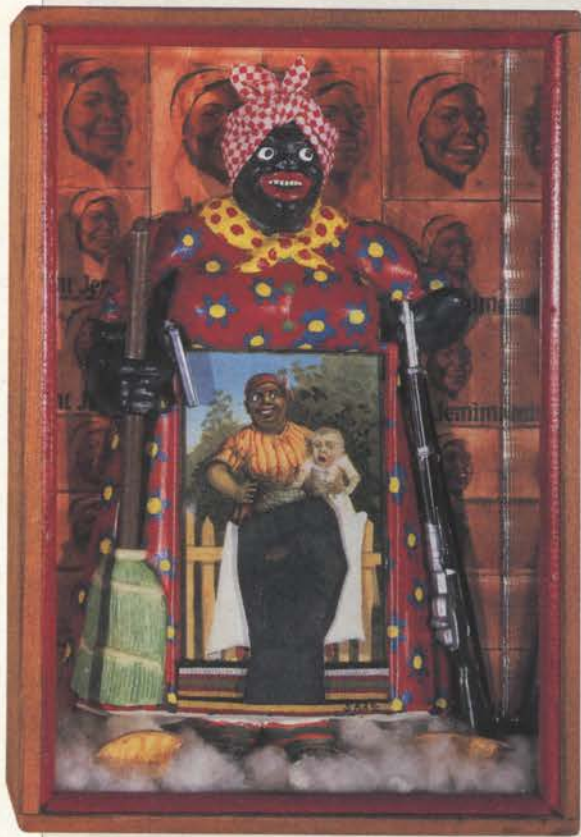
BETYE SAAR, ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S most important assemblage artists, was born in Los Angeles in 1926. Inspired by the Watts Towers as a child—Saar played in the neighborhood as Simon Rodia was erecting his seashell-and-bottle-shard-encrusted masterpiece—she became fascinated with the idea of using found objects to create art. Poring through flea markets and garage sales, Saar gathered minstrel figurines and washboards, yellowing family photos and ads for “Darkie Tooth Paste.” Sheet music and African relics became both muse and material. *Sambo's Banjo*, a mixed-media piece constructed inside a banjo case, places a jumbo slice of (wooden) watermelon and a blackface puppet alongside a photo of a lynching. In *The Liberation*

of Aunt Jemima (left), the kerchiefed mammy trades in her mixing bowl for a side arm and a rifle. In Saar's hands, pop culture detritus is reborn in works of unimaginable power—and horror.

Betye Saar: *Extending the Frozen Moment* (University of California Press, 176 pages, \$40) is the first book to span Saar's career, concentrating on the artist's use of photographs and photographic fragments, the “frozen moments” of its title. In some pieces Saar uses discarded family portraits, the people in the pictures long forgotten, to address the hierarchy of skin color among African Americans. Many place familiar historic images against disquieting backgrounds, forcing the viewer to see these artifacts anew; in *I'll Bend but I Will Not Break*,

Saar imprints the infamous 1789 schematic of the slave ship *Brookes*, its passengers laid feet to forehead like kindling, on the surface of an ironing board. While several pieces explode racial stereotypes, others, like *Bittersweet* (Bessie Smith), are memento-filled tributes, while still others incorporate elements of mysticism and African ritual. No substitute for seeing the pieces in person, this book, with its beautiful full-page images of 61 of Saar's pieces, comes awfully close.

Over the years Saar's art has made its way into the permanent collections of the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan, and LACMA. But Los Angeles is missing a major opportunity. This year an enormous traveling exhibition of Saar's work—to which *Extending the Frozen Moment* is an accompaniment—will bypass L.A., the artist's longtime, and present, home. —Robert Ito



known them for years but themselves, in art the storyteller feels obligated to justify everything. If a character does something that doesn't make sense on the face of it, given everything else we've been told or shown about him, there's always someone like me to gripe about it in print, which may have the effect of making art so much less spontaneous and unpredictable than real life. It's not clear to me if Ennis has been so deeply in the closet his whole life that he doesn't realize it, or if he's an otherwise straight man who happens to fall in love with another guy. While female sexuality has always struck me as amorphous enough to render such a distinction unimportant, I believe male sexuality is more defined by nature—but I'm perfectly aware that Annie Proulx, who wrote the 1997 *New Yorker* story on which *Brokeback Mountain* is based, may understand something about male sexuality that I don't and might be saying that we've all known guys like Ennis and just never knew we knew them. She may be saying there are such things about ourselves that we don't know.

So in principle I accept that while I'm in a reasonably excellent position to judge the chemistry between, say, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, or for that matter Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, I'm out of my league when it comes to the chemistry between Ledger and Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain*. For all I know, the air between them positively crackles with erotic tension. I also accept in principle that characters in movies or books are entitled to their mysteries and have secrets from their own narratives; that said, Ennis's moment in the tent with Jack never stops feeling like a fluke of the heart or the body too untethered from anything else about him to sustain a passion of 20 years, and the leap of faith this love story calls for is about a country mile too far for the short legs of my imagination. More than that, the movie never gives me a reason to jump. Rather, watching it I kept thinking that sometimes Jack and Ennis seem more like pawns of an agenda, although I don't know whose, and I kept having the peculiar notion that Jack and Ennis could be characters in a gay satire of Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, with Gus and Woodrow's cranky, long-standing friendship as Texas