

ART  
ON MY  
MIND

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Visual Politics

bell hooks



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## *Contents*

Introduction: Art Matters	xi
Art on My Mind	1
The Poetics of Soul: Art for Everyone	10
Talking Art with Alison Saar	22
Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat	35
Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation	49
In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life	54
Diasporic Landscapes of Longing	65
Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems	74
Facing Difference: The Black Female Body	94
Talking Art as the Spirit Moves Us	101
Critical Genealogies: Writing Black Art	108
Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary	119
Women Artists: The Creative Process	125
Being the Subject of Art	133
Workers for Artistic Freedom	138
Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice	145
Architecture in Black Life:	
Talking Space with LaVerne Wells-Bowie	152
Aesthetic Interventions	163
Straighten Up and Fly Right: Talking Art with Emma Amos	171
Intervening Printmakers: Talking Art with Margo Humphreys	194
Representing the Black Male Body	202
The Radiance of Red: Blood Works	213

# Talking Art with Alison Saar

*bell hooks:* Alison, talking about your work, you have said, “I love the idea that materials have memory, the idea of working with materials that have experienced more than I have.” There is in each of us and in the objects that surround us a place of primal memory. I believe that we have memories that extend beyond what we have consciously experienced. That we carry within us ancestral memory. When I look at your art, I am not troubled by the fact that you draw upon realities you have not directly experienced.

*Alison Saar:* We don’t just remember things that we’ve experienced. There are the memories that come to us in visions—as dreams. It’s similar to when you’re growing up and there’s this playing and pretending—an inventing of worlds. That’s actually also where I started getting these materials from, and so those sorts of games are things I continue to do, to put myself in those places. Before I do a piece I spend time in that imaginative space. For example, the piece I did about South Africa came to me after I finished reading in the paper about the life of a boy there. I felt a psychic connection with his story and began from there to invent.

*bb:* Imagining as a way to be empathic, to move into worlds we have not experienced yet have come to understand, is a way of knowing reality that is no longer valued in our culture. I found that critics and reviewers commenting on your work don’t discuss imagination. They are much more fascinated by your family history than by the way your imagination works. And they often assume that your aesthetic vision is shaped more by family tradition in art making than by your autonomous engagement with that imaginative realm you just talked about. You identify with something and create worlds around it. It is often assumed that if we have an experience to draw on, we do not need to rely on imagination, that it

just sort of comes naturally to us in some way. When I look at your art work, I see it as coming out of a powerful imagination. I don't assume that your experiences as a black person and your use of black subject matter mean that you do not vigorously work to create. Everyone assumes that Picasso was inspired by African art that he imaged differently. Yet your engagement with African, Native American, and other cultures conveys an active, intellectual seeking for inspiring subject matter that can go unnoticed or be devalued. Your work is so dreamlike.

**AS:** Someone asked me if I dream any of my pictures. I don't. Actually, I dream all of my anxieties about making art.

**bb:** That dreaming, though, is part of the creative process.

**AS:** When I'm working with specific ideas, information from cultures outside of my own, I seek to understand them through my own personal experience in relation to everything I feel: my pain, my understanding of love or anger, what I hope for and dream about.

**bb:** The influence of dreams, whether those that happen when we are asleep or daydreaming, is evident in your work in pieces such as *Sanctified*, where you see this secret preacher doing his thing and, like a riff in a song, you take it and fly with it, take it somewhere else. On one hand, you're walking around like a normal person and you see an image in everyday life, but all of a sudden you begin to have a vision about that image, a kind of waking dream. It has a mystical dimension, as though you take that concrete image and you have these X-ray eyes or something, where that image begins to visually deconstruct and then is reinvented in this imaginative space as something similar to what it was yet different. That process is happening throughout your work.

**AS:** I make art about everyday experiences and often the concrete process is very ordinary and mundane. I take the ordinary and go with it into the surreal.

**bb:** Talking with you about your work is different from other interviews I've done, because you are one of my girlfriends as well as a powerful artist

whose work I knew, loved, and was moved really deeply by before I met you. Our speaking together is a more intimate thing. When I was writing my questions, I found myself preparing them differently, like I'd write, "Don't you just love it when Bessie Harvey says, 'When I first found him, he was a big limb, but I knew he was a beautiful man: I knew that when I pulled him out. I said to him, "Ain't you pretty?" He said, "Granny, I ain't nobody," but I saw him and I just couldn't wait to get him home.'" I love this statement—there is just something so basic yet deep in it. And it's just the earthiness, the matter-of-fact tone of this statement made by a black woman folk artist that leads the complexity of vision behind that statement to be ignored, go unseen. When I think about Bessie Harvey's work, I am reminded of the Buddhist tea ceremony: the way she takes something that appears ordinary and exposes its elegance and grace. But she does so by bringing it to a space of simplicity. A similar energy is at work in your stuff. Both you and I love folk art; it enchants us. I am enchanted by your work because of this quality, the way that so much of it appears simple, but in actuality emerges from a very convoluted, complex visionary process.

*AS:* What's most amazing is that the piece was complete in Bessie Harvey's mind, and when she saw that thing, that piece was made.

*bb:* I know, that is so deep.

*AS:* And that's how she makes it, that way is mysterious. Other people can't see it. That's true of visionaries. They're just not bogged down with technical bullshit in terms of how the piece has to be realized. They just see this thing, tie it together with wire, or glue it together with spit, or what-not. The fact that their mind does not consciously register the process doesn't mean that it hasn't happened. Most artists can't work that way.

*bb:* All visionary artists risk making work that will not be seen in its complexity because they maybe lack the skills to adequately articulate the process. We can see this in the way Horace Pippin's work was written about for the catalog accompanying the retrospective. Critics called attention to biographical details or the social context without speaking directly about the images. It's difficult to describe exactly what happens

in visionary moments. I put a lot of sophisticated ideas into my head that come to me from books, from schooling, and from other people. However, when I sit down to write, often it's as though I'm transported to a magical space. I don't always remember what happens. I have a magical encounter with words where all of a sudden something appears on my page that is totally not in line with anything that I consciously thought. Artists like yourself, and other folks who've gone to school and been trained, also have those moments where all that training falls away and you're at that visionary moment where you see it and can make it happen. Intellectual elitism, certain academic ways of thinking about creating art, leads to the insistence that the process of a folk artist or a native artist is so radically different from that of an artist who's been trained. Because you have had academic training, the folk elements in your work that enable you to fuse the ordinary with the surrealistic can be, and sometimes are, perceived by people as "contrived."

AS: It's peculiar, because, again, you know, the separation of artists into these two camps happens in art magazines like *Artforum*, where these people are considered great artists because they're crazy, or because they're totally out there, and the reality is that it's a genuine clear vision that guides their work. Many artists, taught or untaught, still experience this magical process, but they are forced to demonstrate technical finesse to fit the work into this rigid, linear format. It has to go on this rigid track that art dons have dictated art has to go along. It has to go through all these machinations where one thing precedes another in a linear fashion that can be documented. There's this assumption that it's all cause and effect, that things happen one after another, but they don't always. At times things happen simultaneously. My art comes to me from directions that don't always follow a rational, linear process.

bb: The critic Susan Crane writes that "Art is not simply the discreet, delectable, beautiful object, but the transcendental power of creativity, the alchemical potential of materials." The primacy of material is always highlighted in your work, the way the material works on you. Unlike Bessie Harvey, you don't always have the image in mind; sometimes the material makes this demand on you. It's as though there is this kind of spirit power. Daddy Gus, my grandfather, used to say that there was a

spirit force calling out to us in every object. Sometimes I look at a piece of yours and it's as though the material itself said, "Alison Saar, this is what you're going to do." And it's not—as people seem to think when they're writing about your work—that Alison Saar says, "Well, OK, I'm going to take my little journey to Mexico now, and I will appropriate such and such." It's not a conscious, premeditated process. Even moments of premeditation are disrupted by the unexpected. I was struck by a critic saying that they get the feeling that you don't just "use found objects," you use "sought-after" objects, and I thought, well, but one can go seeking and find something that one was not looking for. One can find something and see in it something that one has been seeking. The desire to flatten everything out into this binary model again and again is something that really blocks our understanding of the creative process. It is important, when we look at the work of any group of people who've been marginalized, whether we're talking about white immigrants or any of us, that there be a willingness to acknowledge complexity—profundity—multilayered possibility. There is so much cultural criticism that extols the virtues of cultural hybridity, traveling, the notion of bricolage, of moving between different environments, border crossing, all these terms—yet I am fascinated when critics don't bring these theoretical standpoints into the discussion of your work. They continually quote a phrase you once used where you said you often feel as though you are "floating between two worlds"—usually to refer to your having both African-American and Euro-American ancestry. Since you talk about this mixed background, critics often ignore the significance of the "border crossings" you choose that are not "givens." Much of the passion in your work is expressed as you celebrate those border crossings that take place in the imagination, in the mind as well as in real life, and those journeys are not talked about enough.

AS: Actually, when I first used that phrase, "floating between two worlds," I was talking about the two worlds of reality and magic. Yet when critics applied the statement to my background, that made sense as well. Meanings change. Pieces that I made ten years ago have very different meanings for me now. When people ask me to help them understand this work, I have to state again and again that for me the work means different things at different times, depending on my experience and as I accumulate knowledge.

*bb:* Also, historical context changes. Much of your early work was very prophetic in that you were creating art that articulated ideas about border crossing way before there was all this fancy theory, before Bennetton ads, before all of these things. Yet critics now act as though you do the “ethnic” thing because it’s in style. And some of them demonize you by suggesting that the work appropriates the folk or black underclass and poor experience in an opportunistic manner. Yet so much of your work predates that kind of hedonistic consumerist approach to the “other” that says, “Oh, yes, now I have all these ethnic shops where I can buy cool artifacts from Africa, Mexico, Tibet.” I had this experience yesterday. I was hanging out with a friend who was looking for an apartment. He went into a building where we knew an apartment was for rent, a building I had once seen a South Asian woman exiting. So we went into the apartment for rent. There were all these South Asian artifacts and little Buddhist things. I was expecting to meet the South Asian woman I had seen before. We opened the door to the bedroom, and the tenant was sitting in there. Suddenly I thought about the assumptions I had made, that there would be this linear correlation between the interior vision all those objects in space were giving and the person who put them together. I think it’s that kind of longing for linear order that people have in a xenophobic and crazy society. So many folks want to be able to identify, codify, contain everything. And we’re constantly challenged when these fixed notions of identity are disrupted. I think there are some people who would have been offended by the fact that there were no artifacts in this space that came from white culture. To me, that gap is interesting. I don’t want to place a sort of value judgment on a person, saying, “Oh, she’s appropriating; that’s bad.” To me it is much more interesting to know what are the energies and longings that move her to those objects! And I feel like that same interest emerges when I see your work, the artifacts you borrow from diverse cultures.

*AS:* Sometimes because of the fact that I was doing my work long before there was any interest in multiculturalism, etc., people have come up to me and said, “Oh, the Whitney Biennial really just pissed me off, because here are all these artists of color being shown, and it was a barrage, and a multicultural bandwagon sort of thing.” And I’ve pointed out to them that many of the artists in this show had been making art for twenty



years. Yet it takes being in this show to legitimate the art—to make it more visible.

*bb:* The moment white people decide it's cool to "eat the other," the response to all our work changes. And suddenly issues of authenticity, of "Will the real black person please stand up?" come into play.

*AS:* Right. It's clear that people are very suspicious.

*bb:* Alison, we were always involved with Frieda Kahlo's work. I've loved Frieda Kahlo's work since I was a little girl, but then when it became this kind of hip sign of cool, I began to feel somehow like my claim to a relationship to that work is validated not through my experience as a Southern black girl involved in spiritual mysticism or interested in Mexico or what have you, but filtered through the validation Kahlo now receives from white folks; validated by Madonna, saying in some magazine that she's interested in this. It becomes this wacky thing, because there's a part of us that wants then to pull back and let our fascination with that artist go, because you don't want folks to see it as coming out of this culture of consumerism—where everyone wants to "eat the other." Let's face it, the culture of consumerism that eats the other has indeed made Frieda Kahlo a household word in places where she might never have been heard of, and there's a vulgarization of work and process there. However, to subvert this, all of us who have loved her work and who think critically about it have to lay claim to contextualize those moments in our lives when that work first came to us. The same is true of your work. A lot of your work calls for a recognition of the importance of subjugated knowledge. Your work and your being were actualized at a historical moment when there was this real demand on the part of African-American people in resistance against racism for the recovery of subjugated knowledge. That process of recovery wasn't then related to class positionality or regional status—whether you are a Southern black person or a Northern black person, whether you grew up in a rich or poor neighborhood. It was related to the collective yearning to know more about ourselves as black people in the diaspora. It's as though we were saying, "There's this knowledge that we don't have," and none of us have it. So much about black life—black history—has only recently been documented. Nobody

had all the information. It's not as if poor people were sitting on it, and rich people went and took it from them or what have you; that just was not the case. Can you talk about your experience searching for subjugated knowledge? What did you want that knowledge to do in your life? I know when I went to Stanford University, I began to see the rural South that I came from in a new way. I went back to those artifacts that I had often taken for granted in my life and saw them in a new way. I hear that same shift when you talk about going to roots, both real and imaginary, that you might not have thought about in Laurel Canyon.

*AS:* Yeah, for example, I did this piece about the South, and I've never lived in the South. I can say that my mother's people came from there; but it was never a concrete part of my experience. Yet when I went there, I saw this place as a part of my heritage that I did not know anything about. To me, the South was Hollywood versions of it, *Gone with the Wind* and so on. I was shocked to find that when I went there I felt a deep kinship, a connection to these surroundings, that was transformative.

*bb:* And the reasons you felt that intense spiritual connection cannot be explained—they are part of life's mystery. You know, I've been in love with this man who lives in another country, and I was writing him a letter in which I said, "You return me to the South, even though you've never been there." That his presence does this is pure mystery. The danger of identity politics, and of too much narrow essentialist value being placed on direct experience, is that it denies the realm of magic, of mysticism.

*AS:* Everyone out there is just highly suspicious of any bond between cultures and folks that can't be documented and explained by hard facts, by direct experience. Most folks don't want to feel the magic happen. When individuals see my work and feel alienated, usually it's because they want my connection to the places to be explained in a way that makes sense. The work doesn't exactly work that way.

*bb:* No matter how much folks in the academy validate new epistemologies—ways of knowing that transcend reason—most folks want everything explained in a linear, rational way. For example, maybe reincarnation informs our sense of connection to places, people, objects we

know nothing about. This is a realm of experience that many people in our society might say they don't believe in. Jung's notion of the collective unconscious is so tied to African diasporic notions of ancestral knowledge and to a belief in ancestral memory that lives within people. While many Afrocentric thinkers are eager to acknowledge that there are real artifacts that document African cultural retentions in the so-called New World, specifically from the culture of West Africa, these same individuals refuse to acknowledge psychic connections that bind people, that transcend time and space.

*AS:* That is why the work of an untraditional scholar such as Robert Far-  
ris Thompson has meant a lot to some of us. He's willing to look beyond  
the rational explanation. The first time I saw him, I must have been sev-  
enteen years old. After struggling with art history, seeing it through the  
eyes of Germans, of the English, seeing the limited way these great, pow-  
erful, wonderful art objects were talked about—so coldly and without  
passion or tenderness—I was delighted to see a professor who was willing  
to take his tie off and put it around his waist to show what a different pos-  
ture in another culture looked like. When he talked about diasporic con-  
nections—a link between African music and the blues—folks did not  
want to hear it mixed up, really. They questioned how these connections  
could be documented.

*bb:* And connections that can't be scientifically documented are not rec-  
ognized as meaningful by the academy. Yet when we do enter those sub-  
cultural worlds in the United States at Santeria, or in Yoruba, we enter  
into a world where people are totally comfortable with notions of a border  
crossing that's not concrete, that emerges from spirit possession. In those  
worlds, the idea that you can be entered by a force and speak a language  
you don't know, all of these things, is accepted. Many of the white folks  
who talk endlessly about multiculturalism would be uncomfortable with  
truly accepting ways of knowing that challenge the privileged place that  
reason occupies in the West. We lack ways of talking about that sense of a  
connection with an artifact from another culture that feels primal, like  
my obsession with altars. As a little child, I was drawn to altars. One of  
my favorite church songs was one that asked, "Is your all on the altar of  
sacrifice laid?" And it was sung with this kind of spirit of anguish and

longing that intrigued me. I wanted to see altars—to know what they meant in our lives cross-culturally. I let that passion lead me to where altars can be found. That passion for altars that surfaced in a Southern black church, in a little town, led me to France, to Montserrat, where I saw the shrine of the black Madonna, where I saw all these white hands stroking that shrine. Rather than seeing no connection between the altar of that Southern black church and the shrine of the black Madonna, I see it as a palimpsest, where there's a thread that's woven through our lives that pulls us toward things. And you are lucky, Alison, because you were given some of these threads early in life.

When you talk about your dad being interested in pre-Columbian art and African art and da Vinci, he was offering a world where you could make certain connections.

AS: That's true.

bb: And what's exciting about your work is the way you make border crossing a sacred yet playful ritual. That spirit of playfulness that I see in you as a person, the way you like to mix the delightful with the deadly serious, is there in your work. The spirit of play in folk art or primitive art is so rarely talked about as ritualistic, as evoking a vision of life, an ontology, that we can use to apprehend reality. I see that ritual play in specific figures you have created, like *The Tobacco Demon* or *The Cotton Demon*, where, on the one hand, there is playfulness, yet these figures are constructed to embody evil, everything we might dread.

AS: I think I have to do that, mix the sacred and the profane in my work; it's a process of exorcism. If I didn't do it in the work, I'd just jump off a cliff. These are constructive ways of facing tragic, painful experiences. And that's how the slaves survived all that pain—through creating, by making music, dance, poetry. That's how, you know, we survive in Haiti, in Mexico. You just somehow turn it around; you're up against death, then you make death this buffoon, this trickster, and that's how you deal with what you face, and that's how you survive it, because otherwise you'd just lay down and die.

*bb:* I remember when I first learned in high school about carnival in other cultures. We did not learn its deeper meaning, about “eating of the flesh,” those layered metaphysical dimensions, the issues of life and death that are a part of the carnival. Instead, we were taught to think of carnival as primitive play. For too long in this culture we have had to witness African art and African-American art talked about in ways that deny there is something happening in the work that is deep—not obvious—that what you see on the surface may be a smiling face, but the smiling face may be tilted in a manner that speaks to suffering, that changes the meaning of that smile. That willingness to critically engage art by black folks in all its profundity is still very difficult in a culture of domination where people do not learn to look beneath the surface. For example, many folks look at your piece *The Snake Charmer* and see it as Grace Jones.

*AS:* It’s curious, he becomes Grace Jones, in people’s eyes, because of his hairdo. But as I produced the piece, in my imagination, it was a snake charmer, a man who had these powers, who could hold the snake suspended in his mouth. Whether he was a shaman or a gypsy, he could go between people and stir things up.

*bb:* You’re articulating that there’s this rupture between artistic intentionality and what is culturally received. Maybe somewhere in your unconscious you created this piece, which you envision as male, in a likeness similar to a woman. And audiences associate that piece with Grace Jones. I even began to think of it as her, or of her as a mysterious figure like a snake charmer. I didn’t have problems seeing this image in multiple ways. Again, it goes back to breaking out of the culture-of-domination’s insistence on binaries: it has to be either/or, it has to be what you intend, there has to be this control. And I think what we’ve been addressing today is that art is interactive in the sense that the pieces aren’t just your intentionality. They aren’t just even your life experience—they are all of these diverse elements coming together.

*AS:* The people who see that piece as Grace Jones are addressing issues in their own lives. And I think it’s really great that these images are so powerful that people are immediately drawn to them and that somehow their lives are being addressed by these images.

*bb:* On one hand, folks project onto your work much that you did not intend; on the other hand, they don't always pay attention to what is there. I am fascinated by the proactive sexual images in your work. Pieces such as *Fear and Passion*, *Love Potion #9*, and *Queen of Sheba* evoke pleasure and danger, and desire. Romance and desire not as the boy-meets-girl stuff, but as fatal attractions of erotic passion that drives folks wild. You make a link in the work between obsessive longing and suffering.

*AS:* My experience with passion is that it can easily turn into something really self-destructive. It's very scary and, at the same time, it's alluring, seductive. I made this piece *Dance with Danger*, and it's this woman doing a really hot dance, and there's this male figure that at one angle becomes a skeleton, and it's desire depicted as life-and-death struggle, as all-consuming. I've always been struggling with how far I can go out there to the edge without really endangering myself, without falling off. The danger isn't just physical; it's mental, psychic danger. We can let go or become so obsessed with a thing that it can really kill us and just drown out every rational thought in our heads. My work explores the tension between the wildness within, the primitive, and the rational animal. There is that dual quality within all of us. And both are really important aspects of who we are.

*bb:* There is this teasing, seductive quality in your work when you come face to face with danger. You present an image that is ordinary or archetypal, like the heart—using it to symbolize romance and desire. Then you expose the darker side, the vision of being driven mad by desire. When I think of fictional work that is akin to your art, works like Marguerite Duras's *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* and Clarisse Lispector's writings come to mind. Like these writers, you create a world where people's longings are so intense they threaten to consume the self.

*AS:* These pieces emerge from personal struggle. It was initially very difficult for me to make those pieces, because it felt like I was walking around naked.

*bb:* I participated in Shu Lea Cheang's installation *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, which was at the Whitney. The museum was not prepared for

the responses it engendered. In the installation, you could put a quarter into these red phones and talk. I read a very intense, passionate love letter that I wrote to a man in my life, and I was really stunned by the number of people who listened to it over and over and over. There was even some tension in the museum about the fact that they were acquiring so many quarters. And people were raising the question Is this art? or Is it too much like the real thing? I mean, you're dialing 1-900-DESIRE. But I think what people heard on those phones that we don't often hear is anguish, an aspect of loving that we don't often talk about. African-American expressive culture, particularly music, has always given voice to tragic dimensions of love. We rarely see an equivalent in art. We do in your work. Your sculpture *Sapphire* is an erotic, sexualized image. It articulates black female notions of female desirability, the sense that the biracial woman, or white-looking black woman, is truly sexual, truly exotic, but always tortured. In your work you expose the inner contradictions that may not be manifest on the outside. There's the outer surface and then there's this inner world that is full of interweavings and complexities. We can all draw that heart shape, yet you open up these figures and there's so much going on. In your *Black Snake Blues*, who is that mysterious lady on the bed?

AS: The idea for this piece came to me from the song "Black Snake Blues." It's about a black snake crawling on this lady's bed—and it's a way to talk about infidelity, transgression. The woman's longing for some black snake to come into her bed is exposed. She needs and desires more. People aren't really ready to deal with fierce female passion.

bb: The politics of passion and desire that is articulated throughout your work needs to be discussed more by critics. We need to do more to describe the naked black figure. We need to talk about the vulnerability in these images—the passion of remembrance. These longings that we know to be universal in people, the longing to connect, to experience community, to embrace the mysterious. Your work calls us again and again to that realm of mystery.