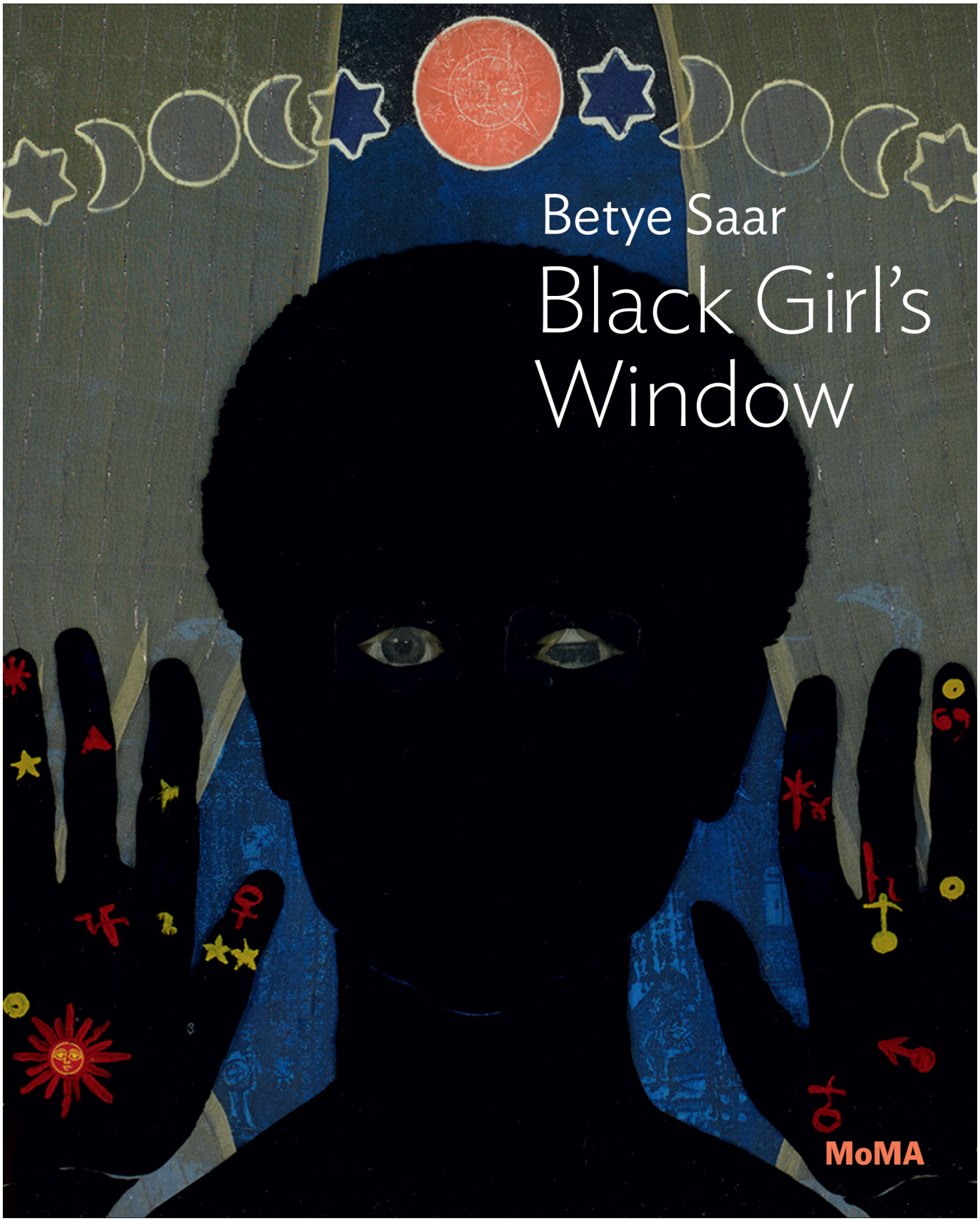
Betye Saar
Black Girl's Window
MoMA

BETYE SAAR
BLACK GIRL'S WINDOW

ESTHER ADLER AND CHRISTOPHE CHERIX

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

AS A CHILD, THE ARTIST BETYE SAAR OFTEN KNEW WHEN SOMETHING HAD happened—that her father had missed his bus, for example, and would be late getting home—before being told about it. Her engagement with another dimension ended abruptly when she was five years old, when the death of her father, Jefferson Brown, changed everything: "His death marked my life."[1] Perhaps because Saar could no longer rely on second sight, the physical world, with all its indecipherable signs, became a source of fascination. Fragments of it—in the form of found objects and materials both discarded and discovered at flea markets and specialty shops—became her primary medium. The mysteries and emotions they suggested became her source of inspiration and exploration.

In the mid-1960s, while on vacation near Big Bear Lake in San Bernadino, California, Saar discovered an old, abandoned window frame next to a shed. She took it to her studio **[FIG. 1]** and in 1969 turned it into a frame for a diverse set of signs and symbols contained in her own drawings and prints and some small collected objects, and called it *Black Girl's Window*. Her prints were like records of objects that she captured through the well-suited technique of soft-ground etching; a soft ground coating applied to an etching plate can take on many different textures and surfaces when different materials are pressed or imprinted directly into it, which Saar did with objects such as fabric and rubber stamps of letters and numbers **[FIG. 2]**. She was not alone in this practice; a number of other

Betye Saar (American, born 1926). *Black Girl's Window*. 1969. Wooden window frame with paint, cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers, daguerreotype, lenticular print, and plastic figurine, 35 ¾ x 18 x 1 ½" (90.8 x 45.7 x 3.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF CANDACE KING WEIR THROUGH THE MODERN WOMEN'S FUND, AND COMMITTEE ON PAINTING AND SCULPTURE FUNDS


LOVE

FIG. 2. Rubber stamps used by Saar to create soft-ground etchings

artists were beginning to think of printmaking as a way to capture found imagery, rather than as just another way to draw. During these same years Robert Rauschenberg developed methods for transferring newspaper and magazine images onto paper, canvas, and lithographic plates **[FIG. 3]**. But Saar was less fascinated by the daily news than by the mysteries of the unknown to which she had once had direct access. Her color etching *Lo, The Mystique City*, of 1965

FIG. 4. Betye Saar (American, born 1926). *Lo, The Mystique City*. 1965. Etching and aquatint with relief printing of found objects, sheet: 19 13/16 x 22 15/16" (50.3 x 58.3 cm). Edition: 1/30. THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. THE CANDACE KING WEIR ENDOWMENT FOR WOMEN ARTISTS

[FIG. 4], is filled with quite ordinary visual elements—ready-made images and shapes made with small objects, geometric forms, and letters—brought together to create a fantastical landscape. An eagle spreads its wings above herds of cows while a frieze of celestial bodies curves overhead. To print the full moons, crescent moons, and stars, she used small plates she had found in a jewelry shop that was going out of business **[FIG. 5]**.[2] Saar thus turned printmaking into a playful collage of preexisting objects, which seem to announce the sculptural

FIG. 6. Jan and Hubert van Eyck (Flemish, c. 1390–1441 and c. 1385–1426). *Ghent Altarpiece* (detail). 1432. Tempera and oil paint on wood panels, 11′ 6″ x 15′ 1″ (350.5 x 459.7 cm). SAINT BAVO'S CATHEDRAL, GHENT

pressing her face against the window. This image has been painted on the verso of the glass, giving her placement a strikingly illusionistic quality, as if the girl were looking directly at the viewer through the window. The framed painting becomes a window on the world, just as the Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti asserted it should.[3] And with its heavy and divided wooden frame, *Black Girl's Window* does recall a Renaissance altarpiece, with its sections organized in a clear hierarchy: an upper register containing nine small allegorical scenes arranged in three rows of three, functioning as a predella or frieze, subordinated to the lower register and helping viewers to decipher the main composition.[4] A small image of the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb among the scenes in the second row links Saar's work with Jan and Hubert van Eyck's masterpiece, the Ghent Altarpiece, made more than five hundred years earlier **[FIGS. 6, 7]**.[5]

An altarpiece's large lower register contains the principal scene—in Saar's case, the silhouette—in a more static composition. Hers is rendered with elements common to the depiction of Jesus Christ, such as symmetry and the presentation

OPPOSITE: FIG. 7. Betye Saar (American, born 1926). *Black Girl's Window* (detail). 1969

of open hands. Her lenticular eyes, cut from novelty glasses and set into the silhouette, give an impression of movement as we pass the work, but it is her presence that draws us directly into it. She looks back at us as we look at her. But is she looking out from inside or is she on the outside, inserting herself into our viewing space as we contemplate the boxes of imagery laid out above her head?[6] Either way she anchors the work in the world as a real, if unidentified, person:

> Even at the time, I knew it was autobiographical. We'd had the Watts riots and the black revolution. Also, that was the year I got my divorce. So in addition to the occult subject matter there was political and also personal content. There's a black figure pressing its face to the glass, like a shadow. And two hands that represent my own fate. On the top are nine little boxes in rows of three marked by the crescent, the star, and the sun. The next row has a vision of a little black couple dancing. But look what's in the center. A skeleton. Death is in the center. Everything revolves around death.[7]

Saar had begun to make works in old window frames in 1965, with various personal, allegorical, and political subjects. *Black Girl's Window*, however, is the first work in which she intertwined all three. It reflects Saar's deep engagement with personal history, with her sense of connection to her heritage and the other worlds the spirits of her ancestors might now inhabit, and with her growing need to speak out against the oppression of black Americans. It is the contemporary equivalent of a votive object, entrusted with the dreams, outrage, and aspirations of all of those who believe and have believed that we will soon see a better future through our windows.

Saar's lifelong exploration of mysticism and spirituality, particularly through objects that she believes hold their own energies and memories, links her work with the tradition of African art identified by the art historian Richard J. Powell as "The materially amassed, spirit-imbued 'power' objects that have long existed in many locales throughout the African diaspora."[8] But Saar grew up comfortably middle-class in Pasadena, California, influenced by mysteries found closer to home. As a child, she regularly made the roughly twenty-mile trip to visit her paternal grandmother near the neighborhood of Watts, in southern Los Angeles, where her father had been raised. She often walked along the Pacific Electric Railway line from her grandmother's house to downtown Watts to go shopping, stopping each time at a curious construction site where, for thirty years, the self-taught artist Simon Rodia had been designing and constructing his own

FIG. 20. Betye Saar (American, born 1926). *Let Me Entertain You*. 1972. Wooden window frame with cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers and plastic skull, 14 ¾ x 24 x 1 ¾" (37.5 x 61 x 4.4 cm).
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