

## Cycle of Creativity: Alison Saar and the Toni Morrison Papers

February 25 – July 9, 2023



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*Cycle of Creativity: Alison Saar and the Toni Morrison Papers* brings sculpture, prints, and textiles by the artist Alison Saar into conversation with the writings of Toni Morrison, whose vast trove of papers from her career as a novelist, essayist, playwright, professor, and editor is held in the Princeton University Library. The exhibition reveals various facets of their practices through themes that resonate in the works of both artists, including musicality, labor, and ancestors. Born in 1931 in Loraine, Ohio, Morrison, who died in 2019, is best known for her novels but also wrote poems, lyrics, and many essays as part of her lifelong exploration of the power of language. Saar, born in 1956 into a family of artists in Los Angeles, had early exposure to diverse artistic mediums as well as the capacity of artworks to embody cultural values. This foundation emerges in her work, which includes sculptures cast in bronze or assembled from found wood and metal, paintings, and prints on paper or textiles. Saar shares Morrison's dedication to giving voice to the African American experience, particularly the lives of Black women, drawing inspiration from past generations to create space for future cultural production through a dynamic that represents a cycle of creativity.<sup>1</sup>

As can be seen throughout these galleries, the practices of Saar and Morrison are rooted in Black history. They call on ancestors, both the named and the unknown, not in order to impose a historical viewpoint but rather to define a space for present and future generations of African American artists, writers, thinkers, and creators to see themselves represented and to imagine their own voices.

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## GALLERY 1

**Alison Saar**

**Swing Low (maquette for Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial, New York City), 2007**

Cast bronze

Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA



**Toni Morrison**

**Selected writings (facsimiles)**

Courtesy of the Toni Morrison Papers,  
Department of Special Collections,  
Princeton University

This bronze sculpture is a study for Alison Saar's *Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial*, which, when installed in Harlem in 2008, was the first public monument to an African American woman in New York City. Born into slavery in 1822, Tubman escaped to relative freedom in Philadelphia, returning south in the 1850s to guide other enslaved individuals to freedom in the North. In *Swing Low*, Saar represents the renowned abolitionist as well as the many people she ushered to freedom in the dark of night, who appear as faces, amulets, and soles of shoes—symbolic of both their journey and their souls—on Tubman's skirt. Leaving a train of roots behind her as she returns south, Tubman is portrayed as an ancestor figure, suggesting that those whom she helped escape enslavement were the foundation of the future generations who later formed a vibrant, creative, and scholarly African American culture in Harlem.

Generational lineages and the transfer of experiential knowledge are also important in the writings of Toni Morrison. Her remarks on accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 included a parable about an encounter between a group of children and a wise elder. The "old woman, Blind. Wise," Morrison wrote, "is worried

about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes. Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences.”<sup>2</sup> Here Morrison makes a case for her purpose as a writer: to stake a claim through language for the specificity of her voice and, more generally, the importance of distinctive, diverse voices that speak in multiple cadences and represent a multitude of identities.

## GALLERY 2

**Alison Saar**

**Torch Song, 2020**

Wood, copper, ceiling tin, enamel paint,  
leather belts, and vintage piano keys  
Tia Collection, Santa Fe, NM



**Torch Song, 2020**

Oil on found wood tabletop  
Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver,  
Venice, CA



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**Soundtrack, playlist compiled by  
Alison Saar**

**Toni Morrison**

**Selected writings (facsimiles)**

Courtesy of the Toni Morrison Papers,  
Department of Special Collections,  
Princeton University

*Torch Song* is the title of a trio of works by Saar—the captivating sculpture and painting in this gallery and the linocut in the next—all of which feature a beautiful, lithe, and elegantly dressed singer whose passionate voice is embodied in the flame that she holds between her open mouth and her heart. Black women have often given voice to the African American experience in songs that process grief, summon strength in the face of adversity, and express the joys of life. Saar assembled the playlist of songs in this gallery to accompany *Torch Song*.

The experiences of Black women are a recurrent theme in Morrison's writing, as are lyricism and musicality. In her essay "A Knowing So Deep," she addresses Black women directly, and in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she sets out to identify the distinctive character of African American literature. She describes the importance of capturing the cadence of storytelling and of passing on history and morals through practices of oral recitation and song when creating space for a Black voice. The draft of the opening pages of Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, shows the care she took to craft prose that echoes the patterns of speech but also of call-and-response sermons—what Morrison would call writing that includes "a chorus."<sup>3</sup>

## GALLERY 3

**Alison Saar**

**Copacetic, 2019–21**

Multiblock linocuts



**Hepcat, 2019**



**Hooch 'n' Haint, 2019**



**Jitterbug, 2019**



**Paradiddle Diddle, 2019**



**Shebop, 2019**



**Syncopatin', 2019**



**Table for Two, 2019**

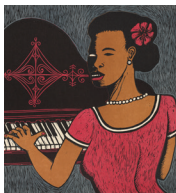


**Torch Song, 2019**

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase,  
Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art

**Queen of the 88's, 2021**

Princeton University Art Museum.  
Museum purchase, the Henry E. Bessire,  
Class of 1957, Contemporary Art Fund



**Trotters, 2021**

Princeton University Art Museum.  
Museum purchase, the Henry E. Bessire,  
Class of 1957, Contemporary Art Fund



**Juke Joint Djinn, 2016**

Wood, acrylic, ash, tar, wax, and found ceramic jug  
Collection of Carla and Cleophus Thomas

**Toni Morrison****Selected writings (facsimiles)**

Courtesy of the Toni Morrison Papers,  
Department of Special Collections,  
Princeton University

Music, motion, and rhythm define both the subject and the approach to composition in Saar's series of prints *Copacetic* (2019–21), inspired by the multicolored-glass windows she created for the 125th Street subway station in Harlem. Saar's figures pay tribute to the African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. The dynamic hand-carved lines of each linocut print evoke the sounds of instruments and the rhythm of dance steps.

In her capacity as editor, Morrison dedicated herself completely to *The Black Book* (1974), an expansive survey of three hundred years of African American history. She not only directed the editorial work but also oversaw the book's distribution and publicity. Following its publication, in an essay about the project for the *New York Times Magazine*, Morrison wrote: "Finally, in this long trek through three hundred years of black life, there was joy, which is what I mostly remember. The part of our lives that was spent neither on our knees nor hanging from trees. . . . A glorious freedom of movement in which rites of puberty were acted out on a dance floor to the sound of brass, strings, and ivory. For dancing was relief and communication, control of the body and its letting go."<sup>4</sup>

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## GALLERY 4

### Alison Saar

#### **Cotton, from the series Topsy Turvy, 2018**

Wood, copper, ceiling tin, bronze, tar, and found vintage tools

Private collection, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA



#### **Reapers, 2021**

Linocut on hand-dyed found sugar sacks

Published by Tandem Press, founded 1987, Madison, WI

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art



#### **White Guise, 2019**

Color woodcut, relief printing, and hand-painting on shellac-stained kozo paper

Printed by Lari Gibbons

Published by P.R.I.N.T. Press,

University of North Texas, Denton

Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver,

Venice, CA





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## **Toni Morrison**

### **Selected writings (facsimiles)**

Courtesy of the Toni Morrison Papers, Department of  
Special Collections, Princeton University

In her sculptures and her prints on textiles, Saar transforms discarded materials, giving them new forms that are imbued with all the symbolism, texture, and patina of their past uses. The sculpture *Cotton* depicts a young girl, her hair sprouting cotton bolls, clasping a bale hook (a tool for harvesting cotton). In the haunting print *Reapers*, images of five young women are printed onto a piece of an indigo-dyed cotton sack. The woodblock print *White Guise* shows a woman holding an iron dripping with blood. The young women depicted here cultivated the commodities—cotton, indigo, sugar, rice, tobacco—of plantation economies or tended the homes of the families that enslaved them. Saar has integrated the materials and tools they handled—cotton, indigo, a bale hook—into their representations.

The experiences of enslaved African Americans not only are a historical subject but, as Morrison explains in her 1987 essay “The Site of Memory,” also continue to shape contemporary culture. She grounds her own literary heritage in the historical accounts of these individuals, since the “print origins of black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives,” and thus her work resides between nonfiction and fiction.<sup>5</sup> In Morrison’s writing, as in Saar’s sculptures, the past, the present, and the future are always intertwined.

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## NOTES

1. Alison Saar, in Hadley Roach, "Thread to the World: Alison Saar" (interview), *Bomb*, November 17, 2011, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/thread-to-the-word-alison-saar/>.
2. Toni Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 199–200.
3. Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers 1950–1980*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984), as cited in Morrison, *What Moves*, 339–45.
4. Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History: It's Like Growing Up Black One More Time," *New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1974, 14, reprinted in Morrison, *What Moves*, 54.
5. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), reprinted in Morrison, *What Moves*, 77.

Alison Saar was born in 1956 into a family of artists in the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles. She received her BA in studio art and art history in 1978 from Scripps College, Claremont, California, and her MFA from Otis-Parsons Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design), Los Angeles. She has received three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1984, 1985, 1988) and was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1989, the Flintridge Foundation Award for Visual Artists in 2000, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 1998, and the Joan Mitchell Center Residency in 2013. In 2012 United States Artists named Saar one of its fifty USA Fellows.

Toni Morrison was born in 1931 in Loraine, Ohio. She joined the faculty of Princeton University in 1989 as the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Humanities. She was also associated with the faculty of the Program in Creative Writing and was the founding director of the Princeton Atelier, which brings acclaimed artists together with students to create projects in a workshop environment. Morrison received a BA in English from Howard University and an MA in American literature from Cornell University. Morrison held the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities at the State University of New York, Albany, from 1985 to 1989. She was a senior editor at Random House. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 and received many other prestigious awards.

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*Cycle of Creativity: Alison Saar and the Toni Morrison Papers* is curated by Mitra Abbaspour, Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. For their collaboration, special thanks go to Alison Saar, Kimberly Davis of L.A. Louver, and, at Princeton University, Autumn Womack, assistant professor in the Departments of English and African American Studies, and AnnaLee Pauls, special collections assistant at Firestone Library. *Cycle of Creativity* is organized as part of a campus-wide collaboration that celebrates the creative and intellectual life of Toni Morrison. It is anchored by the landmark symposium “Sites of Memory: Practice, Performance, Perception,” to be held March 23–25, 2023; learn more at: <https://sitesofmemorysymposium.org/>.

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All artworks © Alison Saar. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

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