

STUDIO MUSEUM

IN HARLEM
Quarterly Bulletin

2033 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10035/ (212) 427-5959

1980 Summer Issue

BETYE SAAR'S RITUALS: A MYSTIQUE

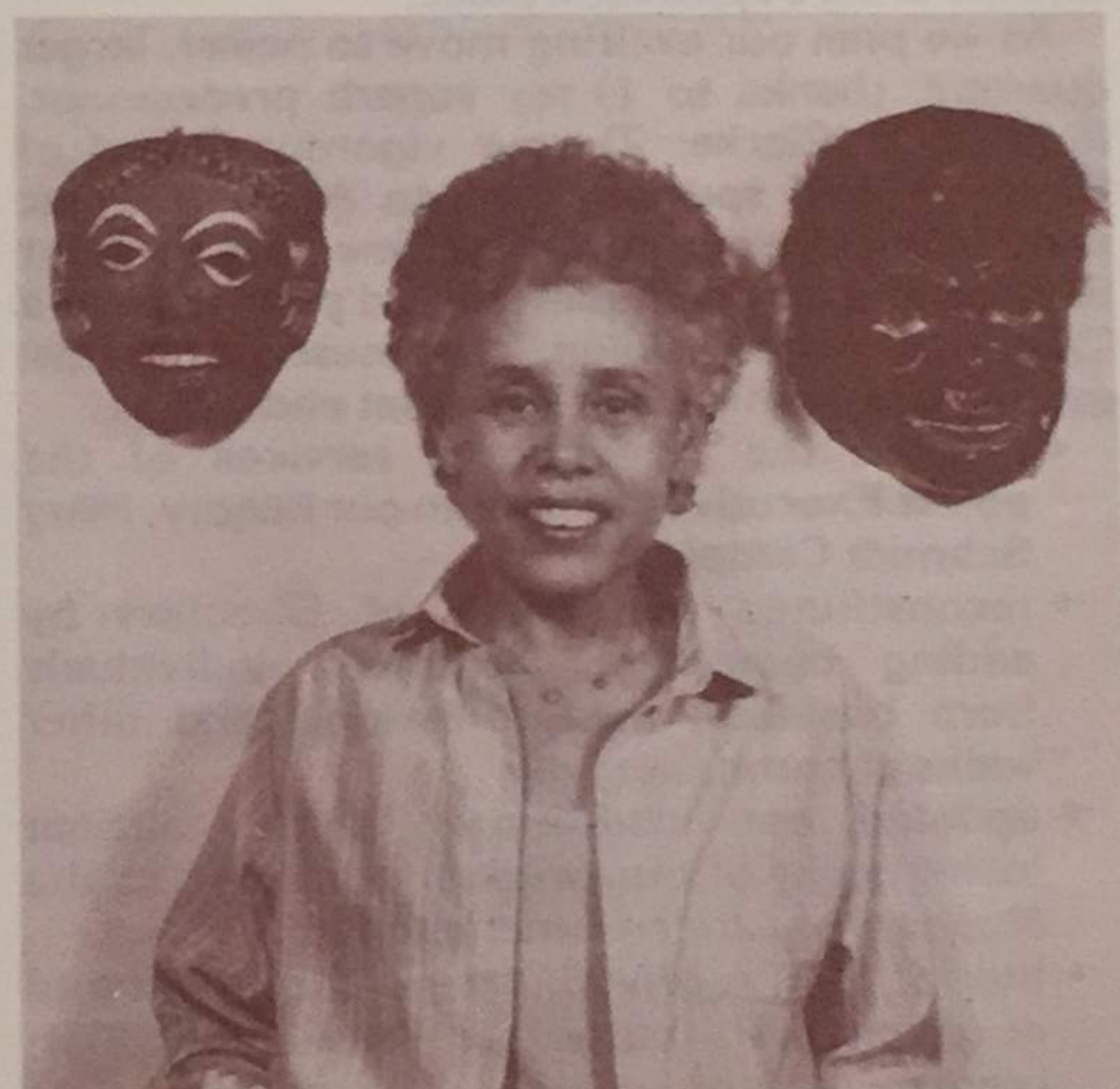
"Rituals; the art of Betye Saar" is an exhibition conceived and designed especially for The Studio Museum in Harlem. The idea of Ritual is the essential unifying concept of Betye Saar's art and the over fifty works in the exhibition illustrate that concept. There are six distinct formats which have been assembled: ritual collages, handkerchief collages, wall assemblages, line cuts, altar-pieces, and a site installation piece designed at the museum under Betye Saar's supervision with the assistance of Studio Museum in Harlem artists-in-residence, Candace Hill-Montgomery, Jacqui Holmes and Louis Delsarte.

Betye Saar's concept of ritual includes not only the content of the art but the process of making it, and the viewer's experience of the finished piece as well. According to Saar, the ritual begins with the "imprint," that is the ideas, dreams and memories of the artist. Next comes the "search". Because most of her art is made of found objects, the act of collecting and searching is a vital part of the artistic process. She conducts her search in the most mundane places — local swap meets and flea markets — or in the most far flung exotic places — Haiti, Mexico or Africa. The objects she assembles have been used so that for her they bear the energies of a past life.

After the search comes the "recycling" that is the act of transforming the materials, the found objects, paint, chalk, materials, boxes, etc. into an art object. Last in the ritual process is the "release," the sharing of the experience.

The opening of the exhibition, Sunday, April 13, 1980, celebrated the donation by Nzingha Society of Indigo Mercy, a ritual altarpiece.

There is one object in the exhibition which has visitors participating in an art experience. The altar, entitled Mti is labeled with an invitation from the artist to add or contribute to the piece by taking something from your pocket or handbag to place on the object itself. The assortment of things has included business cards, books, jewelry, cut-outs, handbills, prayers, a few pennies, aspirins, candy wrappers, drawings on napkins, and similar items — ticket stubs, subway tokens, and a wood carving.



Betye Saar, one of the leading artists of our time, is pictured with two of her masks in her California studio. The collagists creates objects from used materials of all kinds for their psychic energy. Miss Saar says that "used objects live on with energy which remains from the former owner." (Photo by Lezley Saar)

A major installation of an altar was arranged by the artist herself in The Studio Museum in Harlem. Visitors to the museum were invited to watch and experience with her the ritualization process of making art. Jorge Rodriguez, a museum instructor, and Candace Montgomery, a museum Artist-In-Residence, worked closely with the artist. Bill Stevens, the museum's video communications coordinate, taped the procedure, and supervised the film "Spirit Catcher" which is shown during the show's run. The film aired over Channel 13 (WNET) several years ago and is about 30 min. in length. The interview with the artist reveals special insights into the ritual of Betye Saar. The exhibition closed June 30th.