

(re)Rooted*: A Womanist* Cartography of Alison Saar's "Flourish"

Ashara Ekundayo, Curator

Upon entry to the San Francisco International Airport Terminal 3, we find ourselves in a quintessential "third space," a site of transition, a threshold of the "unfixed" between now and next. It is here that Alison Saar's *Flourish* sits as a steel sentinel keeping watch and inviting the traveler to observe and imagine, even if only for a rushed minute, our personal and collective histories of movement. Saar's figure, a Black girl with braided-up hair forming a botanical cosmos of roots, branches, and flowers, provides the spiritual and theoretical groundwork for an expanded conversation. This foundation invites a chorus of twelve woman-identified and gender-expansive artists of color to illuminate the multifaceted experiences of migration, memory, and becoming.

In her own words, Saar envisioned her sculpture as "a beacon that welcomes new travelers to San Francisco" and "a reminder of the common immigrant roots and the riches that thrive from diversity...." This chorus of interdisciplinary artists are the cartographers of these memories and remind us that as we move across borders, whether by choice, by force, or by spiritual calling, we do not arrive empty, nor empty-handed. We carry the gifts, knowledge, dreams and spells that transform a terminal into a temporary sanctuary.

Rooted in the intertwined themes of *The Architecture of Hair and the Crown*, *Organic Memory: Seeds, Stones, and Sustenance*, *Our Body As Archive: Thy Self As Geography*, and *Patterns of Displacement and Reclamation*, the artists' works extend Saar's invitation to witness the sacred architectures we build from what we carry. Their practices braid material, ritual, and story through the re-membering of ancestral codes that cultivate new geographies of belonging. Each work is a gesture and a meditation on flourishing across distances, across time, and across the thresholds of home.

(in order from left to right)

Myra Greene approaches this reclamation through the "cut and sew" of textile history in her work, *To Tailor A Pattern: 01*. Using Dutch Wax traditional African patterns, textiles with complex, globalist histories of their own, she silkscreens, cuts, and reassembles fabric into abstract shapes. This mimics the global migration story: we take the "lessons learned in home cultures" and reimagine them on a larger, more complex scale. These are intentional and informed (re)deux, (re)compiled, and (re)imagined spaces.

The "flourishing" Saar describes is often a process of healing. **Taller SANAA (Shanna Strauss and Jess Sabogal)** bring this to life in, *Serpiente de las Estrelas*, a portrayal of Colombian Doula Karen Lopez, who harmonizes Western medicine with indigenous healing. The "Serpent of the Stars" she holds is a visual manifestation of the "gifts we

bring with us." Like the roots growing from Saar's figure, Lopez's medicinal practices are ancient technologies transplanted into a modern nursing context.

Eve Sandler's *Cornucopia (with Okra Pods)* provides a direct material lineage to Saar's botanical branches. By utilizing dried okra pods, that contain seeds necessarily braided into the hair of African women who were enslaved, to ensure survival in the "New World" Sandler honors nature as a container of culture. The okra represents an "otherwise possibility" in its most literal form: a vegetable that becomes a bridge across the Middle Passage. Furthermore, the use of synthetic hair is both a historical and contemporary act of feminine creativity that engenders expansion, celebration and make-believe.

Saar's use of hair as a site of radical growth is echoed with haunting precision in the work of **Olomidara Yaya** (aka Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle). In *The Wig* from her *Uninvited Series*, Yaya presents a figure whose hair is constructed from skyscrapers. Like Saar, Yaya recognizes the head as the seat of the ancestral mind, but she complicates this by layering the weight of colonialism and modernity onto the Black feminine form. This "magical hair" is a fugitive technology that can represent how we carry the city, the village, and the dream simultaneously.

This theme of the "head-as-home" extends into the material rituals of **Trina Robinson**. Using handmade paper from palm fronds gathered in Cameroon, Central Africa, Robinson creates a *Crown* of protection. Her copper photogravure process deliberately softens the image, a poignant acknowledgement that while we carry our ancestry, we can never fully "see" what they saw. It is a crown of recovered memory, much like the branches in *Flourish*, protecting the traveler as they navigate the unknown.

Similarly, in *Our shared horizons*, **yétúndé olagbaju** uses the Earth itself as a medium. By printing family archival imagery onto travertine stone sourced from geothermal pools, olagbaju anchors the ephemeral horizon of the ocean which represents both separation and hope onto a primordial weight. These stones are "rooted," much like Saar's steel figure, suggesting that the narratives of intentional migration and travel are etched into the very crust of the planet.

Sydney Cain's *Black Flight* further expands this into the realm of spiritual evolution. Through genealogy research and "ghostly remembrances," Cain transforms stories of suffering into a blueprint for healing. Their work suggests that "flight" is not just movement through air, but movement through time and space, a continuous evolutionary theme of Spirit and Ancestors throughout the African Diaspora.

Keisha Scarville extends this meditation on the Black body in motion through the diptych *Li/mb (in two gestures)*, which takes the Caribbean limbo dance as both

physical act and philosophical threshold. The limbo describes "a space defined by movement that tests the flexibility and adaptability of the Black body to negotiate often impossible spaces." Here, in the bend and arch required to pass under the bar, we find a metaphor for the adaptive brilliance demanded by migration and displacement. The limbo becomes what Scarville calls "a gateway for recollection, reconfiguration and in-betweenness"—a space where past and future meet in the elasticity of the present moment. Scarville's particular family history merges two distinct geographies, Guyana and America (and in particular New York), and then reaches back further to the Middle Passage that brought African slaves to this side of the world.

Erica Deeman's photographic practice offers us a critical entry point into understanding how the body becomes both map and territory. Her emergent shapes, cut from the borders of Caribbean nations, countries, counties, states, and parishes that define her heritage collapse the distance between flesh and geography. In the airport, we encounter what she calls "the migrant living and becoming on arrival, a hybrid being." This hybridity is not a deficit but a superpower, an unfixed identity that refuses singular definition. Like the roots sprouting from Saar's figure, Deeman's artwork, *Journey to An Illusion*, reminds us that "The body arrives full, pregnant with histories, languages, recipes, songs, and sorrows."

The process of being "violently removed" and the subsequent reclamation of space is central to **Adama Delphine Fawundu's** *For the Ancestors at Malaga Island* from her *Cosmic Echoes* series. By using organic materials from Malaga Island, which is an island located in the waterways of Portland, Maine and a site of forced eviction of formally enslaved African people via eminent domain, Fawundu honors a legacy that "the state" tried to erase. Her monoprints act as a "sonic soundtrack" of the landscape, a way of hearing the voices of the former inhabitants through the textures of the island.

Adia Millet's *Integrity (Portal)* brings us full circle to Saar's central metaphor. Millet describes the works in her *Portals* series as "nests that provide a nurturing sense of home," suggesting "a relationship to the branches and roots that emerge from the girl-figure in Saar's *Flourish*." The swirling shapes within depict "the process of 'becoming, a churning of transition, movement, and migration.'" Here we find perhaps the most essential truth of this entire constellation of works: that migration is not an event but a process, not a problem but a becoming, not an end but a perpetual threshold.

As we stand before these works in the airport, we are reminded that we are all, in some sense, in transition. We are all carrying something precious and precarious. We are all rooted in places we may never see again, growing toward futures we cannot yet imagine. And we are all, like the figure in Saar's *Flourish*, capable of transforming and (re)rooting an abundance of new life. This is not optimism but evidence, not metaphor

but material fact. These twelve complete works do not simply illustrate migration; they embody it, enacting the very processes of carrying, transforming, adapting, and flourishing that define diasporic existence.

*"Rerooted" means "to establish new roots, replant, or establish a firm foundation in a new location, often to improve growth" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.)

*Alice Walker first defined womanist as "a Black feminist or feminist of color... committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" in her 1983 essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*

<https://archive.org/details/insearchofourmot0000walk>

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/60943.In_Search_of_Our_Mothers_Gardens