

BOMBLOG

ART

THREAD TO THE WORD: ALISON SAAR

by Hadley Roach Nov 17, 2011

(Q&A, BOMBlog)

Alison Saar and Hadley Roach take a stroll through Madison Square Park to explore the stages and cycles of the *Seasons*.



Alison Saar's "Spring" (2011) in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

*The only legend I have ever loved is
The story of a daughter lost in Hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.
And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere. And have.
—Eavan Boland, "The Pomegranate"*

On the Saturday night before I met with Alison Saar, I walked through a moonless Madison Square Park. The Shake Shack sent greased smoke into the papery fall air. Some leaves littered the ground under my feet, while others clung and rustled overhead. The seasons leaned into each other.

Saar's *Seasons*, however, were hesitant to emerge from the darkness: the serpentine branches of "Fall's" hair caught quick glints of traffic; a ring of fireflies pulsed sporadically against "Summer's" rounded womb; and "Spring" and "Winter" remained curled in shadow, waiting.

"Feallan and Fallow," the installation of four seasons that Saar created for the Madison Square Art Program, was revealed in its full splendor the following Wednesday. Accompanied by two towering "Treesouls" that Saar constructed in 1994, the pieces form a larger-than-life loop of bodies, seasons, and implications. They operate, most directly, through the timeless mother/daughter myth of Demeter and Persephone—pomegranates punctuate the imagery of each piece, and the spinning of the seasons is a constant reference to Persephone's cyclical journey between mother and lover (or captor, depending on how sympathetic we're feeling towards the King of the Underworld).

It is almost too tempting, though, to understand these eight-foot-tall bodies as straight allegory. They connect with such synergy to Persephone's legend that their other meanings—genealogical, artistic, environmental—could easily get lost behind the mythology. As Saar articulated in our conversation, "Feallan and Fallow" use the myth as a medium for the artist's meditations on her multiple subjectivities as mother, daughter, historian, and creator. They embody both one woman, and many; one process, and many.

This sense of perpetual entanglement is perhaps the best way to understand Saar's peculiar worldview. The daughter of art-community giants Betye and Richard Saar, she carries with her the sense that it is completely normal for family and art to be inextricably connected. In Saar's life, the kitchen table is the easel, the children are the assistants, and driftwood is periodically dragged in from the backyard to become somebody's legs. It's no wonder, then, that the women in Saar's work can navigate so many different roles and meanings, and can seem so perfectly suited to the incongruous crowds of Madison Square Park; they would be at home anywhere.

Throughout our walk around the Park, Saar described the process and significance behind each of her sculptures. We began with "Spring" and proceeded, in Saar's words, "reverse-seasonal."

SPRING



Alison Saar's "Spring" (2011) in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

ALISON SAAR You know, I'm surprised at how many people actually look up and see "Spring" crouching there. She's kind of—you can ignore the stuff underneath her, what's holding her up—she's perched up there, in a liminal space.

Each of the pieces is about, of course, the cycles of nature, but they're also about the cycles of women—our bodies and their maturations. And the whole project also came to embody, to me, the cycle of creativity. I was thinking about this earlier today: The works that got this whole ball rolling, really, were the "Treesouls" that I constructed nearly eighteen years ago. I know that so precisely because I did them while I was pregnant with my daughter, who will be eighteen in December. In so many ways, then, the work has come full-circle. It's pretty powerful to be able to see the process begin with those "Treesouls," and then to cycle back to show the ways that creativity is a process of flux and nature.

HADLEY ROACH So talk to me about "Spring," specifically. How does she fit into that whole process?

AS Well, "Spring" is an adolescent. She's kind of in a stage of limbo—she's up in this tree, and her feet aren't touching the ground. The moths that are on and around her symbolize the metamorphosis, her transience between two worlds. So, I don't know if you can see, but there are the caterpillars crawling on her, and then cocoons, and then the full-bodied moths are moving up her body, describing the stages of change she's going through.

I had done a piece called "Rise, Sally, Rise" and—hmm, my daughter Maddy must have been ten at about that time, she was just starting to get sassy—and I was like, you know, on a residency for two months, and I was getting these photos of her in like booty-shorts, and going into motherly shock (*laughter*). This piece here is actually very similar to "Rise, Sally, Rise", where the figure is a young adult sitting in a child's chair, and also experiencing this "between two worlds" phenomenon. She's still very much a young girl, but also getting there—getting, I guess, completely out of my control.

HR It's so interesting, too, with the myth that you're working with and referencing throughout these pieces. It's dealing with so many mother/daughter questions of control and transformation.

AS Right. Well, I wanted to work in that dialogue because the Persephone myth is definitely dealing with questions of loss, of a mother losing her child, and also this cyclical, seasonal process. That's something that I'm very much grappling with personally right now. Not that Maddy is *lost-lost*, but, when they move out, when they go away to college, you definitely go through that separation anxiety a little bit.

HR Has your daughter seen these pieces?

AS Oh, yeah! She actually worked on them with me—both my kids, my son and my daughter. My son moved to Portland in February, and he worked on "Fall" and "Summer" before he moved away, and then Maddy actually cast all those moths, and polished them up. So she is very connected to this, I suppose.

HR That's so cool—and talk about full-circle!

AS Yes, well, they're great employees, these kids (*laughter*).

HR So you said your son helped with "Fall" and "Summer," and then you and your daughter moved to "Spring" and "Winter." Was that the order in which you conceived of the pieces?

AS They actually were all conceived at the same time, and drawn out together. But in terms of the physical process, the first one we did was "Fall," and then we moved to "Summer," then "Winter," and "Spring" was our last one. That's, in part, because the method I use involves carving everything out of foam, then covering it with clay. I was able to recycle some of the foam and the clay, and the more bent-up, twisty pieces came after the more "normal" ones, in order to repurpose the materials. It seems a bit backwards, the way we went, but . . . my whole process can get really pretty wasteful if I'm not careful!

HR I bet. I was wondering, actually, if we could backtrack a little to talk about your family, because you come from such an amazing, rich family of artists, and it seems like your own kids continue to be very connected to *your* work.

AS Yes—both of my parents are artists; my father was a painter and ceramicist, and he became an art conservator when I was maybe about twelve or so? So he gave me this very classical training. When I started doing art conservation with him, that was a real education in materials, specifically in dealing with stuff like fresco.

And on the other hand, you know, my mother was sort of this polar pull, where she's talking about non-western cultures, mythologies, totally different histories. I grew up in this house where there was constantly work going on in the studio, which was also the kitchen (*laughter*). And I guess my own household is like that now, too, this sense of . . . the kitchen table, unfortunately, doubles as my drawing table, that kind of thing. And it's neat, because the art is something we've always done as a family, and that we continue to do as a family.

SUMMER



Alison Saar's "Summer" (2011) in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

AS Here's "Summer." She's pregnant with fireflies. I wanted her pregnancy to signify a very fertile stage in a woman's life, but also the *idea* of summer, and a time of year when everything is coming to fruit. You actually can't see the fireflies during the day, but I'm hoping they're still going off at night. There are these little lights that are timed, actually, to simulate what a firefly would look like, flashing around. Unfortunately we put these up after the real fireflies had left, but I'd be curious to see if they'd be attracted to the lights—buzzing around, banging their heads on her plexi-belly (*laughter*).

HR Well, I can reassure you: I know the fireflies are still lighting up, because I walked through here on my way home the other night—

AS Oh, good! That's a relief!

HR —yes! I walked through, and I wanted to ask you, at that moment: given the public nature of this park, who do you see as being part of your audience? Because, it really—I came through quite late, and seeing "Summer" lit up here gave me this real awareness that this park is a gallery space that never closes.

AS Yes. You know, actually, when I lived in New York, I lived not far from here. And it used to be the case that, in the '80s, coming home late at night through this park was a really hazardous thing to do—it was rough, and kind of spooky. So, you know, it's great now; it's turned into this really interesting community. There are the people that live in the neighborhood, those who work in the neighborhood, there are the nannies and the kids, and just the people who happen to be walking through the space minute-to-minute—it's fascinating. I feel that the park, actually, plays a really important role because often (almost always) it's costly to go into a museum. To be able walk through here at any time, and to see these pieces, to see how they change in the light, and how they will change throughout the seasons—it's a really ideal way to see the work, and I'm blown away at how respectful the public is about that. I have never had pieces vandalized; it says a lot about what this park has been doing, and I love that. It's also pretty cool that the park is this big loop, and you can really walk around the whole thing and see these works in exactly the cycle that they represent.

I've always had issues with museum settings because—well, as I'm speaking to you, you can see: my hands move all the time. I'm really tactile and I like to see things, not necessarily from afar, and to be able to get a real *feel* on them, so museums are always a challenge for me. Actually, part of why I think I went into sculpting was this sense that it's all very much about textures, the tactility of work, and I love that pieces are still in that environment here: outside of the pristine, don't-take-pictures, don't-touch walls of a museum. This is an important venue for these works, certainly.

TREESOULS



Alison Saar's "Treesouls" (1994) in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

HR Were the "Treesouls" originally part of this project? How did they come into the physical and ideological space of the seasons?

AS Martin Friedman, who is on the selection committee here at Madison Square Park, had commissioned these pieces for a show eighteen years ago, and he really brought these pieces to the attention of the committee, who became interested in them and some new works as well. So that was really kind of the springboard. But they also relate in that . . . well, they're all the same scale, first of all. They're all eight feet tall, scale-wise, so that's almost, but not quite, double human scale.

The selection committee here said, do you want to think about some new works that would go along with these "Treesouls"? I had been doing some research on works about Demeter and Persephone, and this seemed like a natural segueway. Again, it was that closing of the circle: works that started eighteen years ago were coming back again now.

The "Treesouls" are a male figure and female figure. I was living near Prospect Park when I built them, and some of their branches actually came out of the park. They were cutting some trees, and so their bodies are basically two logs, and then their roots are branches that have been turned upside-down. I'm still pretty amazed at their engineering; I had an engineer help me with these, like, 175-pound figures that are somehow resting on tiny, one-inch stems.

Coming from Laurel Canyon, a quasi-rural neighborhood sandwiched by cities, and then moving to New York, I was struck by the role these public parks play within the urban environment. They really take on the responsibility of being city-dwellers' touch-stones to nature. What I loved about some of the trees in Prospect Park is that they possess these incredibly deep histories; some of them are upwards of two-hundred years old; they were here during the Civil War, they witnessed all the history and grew up with the city itself. I like that they have a memory, kind of, of all the things that have transpired beneath their boughs. So the "Treesouls," for me, are similarly bearing witness to life in New York City. They've gotten around, too—they've been to LA, to Ohio, in the Brooklyn Museum; so they've had the full tour. They've seen a lot.

HR That sense of history seems really important to your work. Something I've read about the "Treesouls," in particular, is that they seem to come from many different histories and ancestries. Are you still working from this blend of influences?

AS Over the years, I have become interested in very different things. The work has definitely changed; when I first came to New York, I was working a lot with sticks, pieces of nature, landscapes. And then suddenly I was doing work that felt very urban. And when I moved back to LA, it went rural again.

In terms of the different mythologies behind my pieces, I mean, I just keep re-discovering new aspects, new histories; it's not so much that I've cultivated all of them in making the work, it's more that they take on these different significances. But it's interesting: with these pieces, I feel that I've closed one circle, and I now can open some very new, very different projects, explore new materials. We'll see—now that I've got my kids almost pushed out of the nest, I might have time to think about things other than the directly maternal (*laughter*). Even as an artist with a career, you're still a *mom*, and so much of your life is really cycling around, you know, that. It's interesting, how over-powering it can be; so I'm eager to see what will come after life with kids in the house.

HR I was also wondering if you could talk a bit more about the Demeter and Persephone myth you're working from; there is so much text surrounding that particular story. Some of my favorite books of poetry—Rita Dove's *Mother Love*, Louise Glück's *Averno*—are all about this myth and the many dimensions it can assume; what were some of the things you were looking at as you started putting this all together?

AS Mostly, actually, I was going back to Homer, and reading all of his hymns and writings on this story. I also do a lot of reading, and I'm sure it all comes to bear in some way in each of my pieces. But the way these pieces tend to come about is usually centered around an obsession with a particular object. For example, I'm fixated on, um, large scissors right now (*laughter*). I'm sure it's some kind of symbolism for cutting the umbilical cord, I don't know, and then I start reading into sources of cutting and threading, which led to these three figures that are the beginning of life, the threading of the needle, and then the cutting of the thread. So they are centered on Greek mythologies, but you also find these other pieces coming out.

Someone, a man from Mali, actually recently said to me, he said, "Oh, we have this saying that any one thing will be the 'thread' to the other." So he said that my work was the "thread to the word." Which—I'm not entirely sure I know what he meant—but it was really poignant to me, this idea that a work of art could, somehow, turn a page, or shed a light, or lead back to a source. And that's one of the things that's exciting about being an artist; that your work threads people to other places, and not necessarily in straight lines.

FALL



Alison Saar's "Fall" (2011) in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

AS "Fall" is gathering up pomegranates. In my neighborhood in Laurel Canyon, there's a pomegranate tree that's totally untended, and nobody harvests the fruit. We get to see all these stages of—well, the fruits are just growing right now, but come winter they'll be split open, and they'll stay on the trees until the birds come and knock them off. I love this futile fruit that's up there, blown around and not put to use. The ovaries are often portrayed as being pomegranate-like, even in Biblical mythology—some even think that the original forbidden fruit was a pomegranate, which I found really intriguing. I wanted to burst them open, let loose all sorts of mayhem (*laughter*). So these fruits, here, are much larger than life, and she's gathering them up in her skirt. I'm really interested to see how this will look come winter, when that skirt will also be a basket of snow.

There's a sense of barrenness here, too, that connects back to the Persephone myth; she's gathering the fruit of the underworld. Her branches are completely bare, and the imagery of loss and separation can really be seen.

HR How do the bodies of each of these pieces carry the seasonal and female significance of the project? Did you construct each of these bodies separately, creating them based on age or season, or is each body a similar structure that took on its different meaning through symbolism?

AS I guess the two standing figures are very similar, in that they're quite upright. But the others, because they're so curled, are embodying very different positions. Scale-wise, they're all the same; if "Winter" were to sit up, she'd have the same physical dimensions as "Summer." The textures are different, though—the texture for "Winter" is very stone-like, a little decrepit. It doesn't exactly look like skin; it reflects this sense of aging, the transformation of hewn flesh to stone. I don't see the figures as different stages in the same person's life, necessarily, but rather figures that can each carry different significance *about* the stages in life, in seasons, in creation.

WINTER



Alison Saar's "Winter" (2011) in Madison Square Park. Photo by James Ewing. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

AS "Winter" has like a squirrel audience right now (*laughter*). She's pretty sad; when you come into the park, you're looking at her back, and she looks like a stone, is petrified, and hibernating. She is curled up, in a dormant stage. When I think of that notion of mapping the chapters of creativity, she becomes this really important, overlooked part of the process: there is always this stage, after the execution of a project, when you're just kind of down low, dormant, re-collecting yourself to start the whole process over. It's always interesting when someone comes into the studio in the "winter" stage of my process; they just stand around, watching me do nothing, wondering if this is what I do *all* the time.

HR She'll be pretty interesting to see in the snow, too.

AS Mmhm; it will pile around her, maybe even cover her; everything is still surprisingly lush and green now, but in the winter the park will be totally black-and-white space. In some ways, each of the pieces will be much more visible. Now, they're kind of tucked away; you have to look for them, they're within the landscape instead of jutting out from it.

HR And obviously that transformation is pretty embedded in the whole cyclical concept of your pieces.

AS Yes, exactly. I feel so fortunate to have this slot, because I'll actually get to see my *Seasons* going through each of the seasons, you know? Full circle, yet again.

Mad. Sq. Art is the free, contemporary public art program of the Madison Square Park Conservancy. Alison Saar's "Feallan and Fallow" and "Treesouls" are on view daily through December 31st.