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at Philip Morris
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This brochure accompanies Alison Saar's installation *Slow Boat*. The essay, written by Thelma Golden, branch director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, is illustrated with reproductions of original woodcuts by Alison Saar.

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945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

Alison Saar

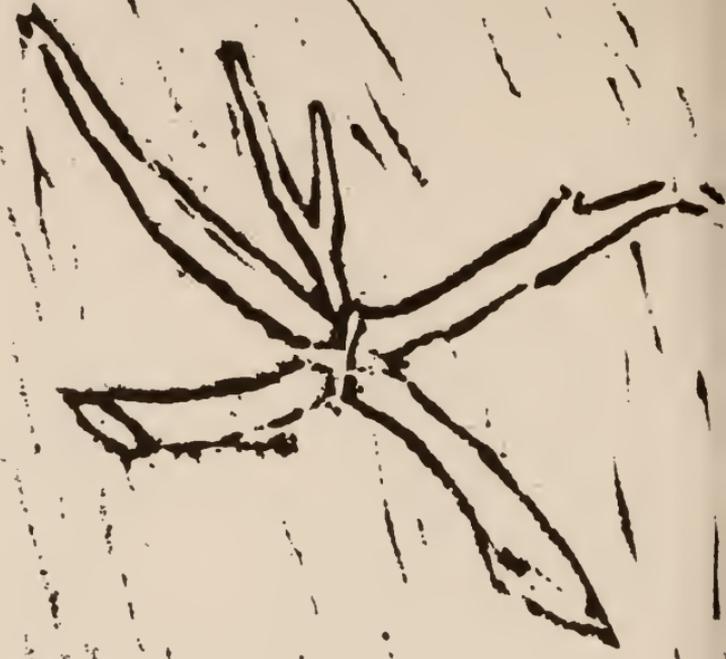
Slow Boat

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

February 20–April 18, 1992







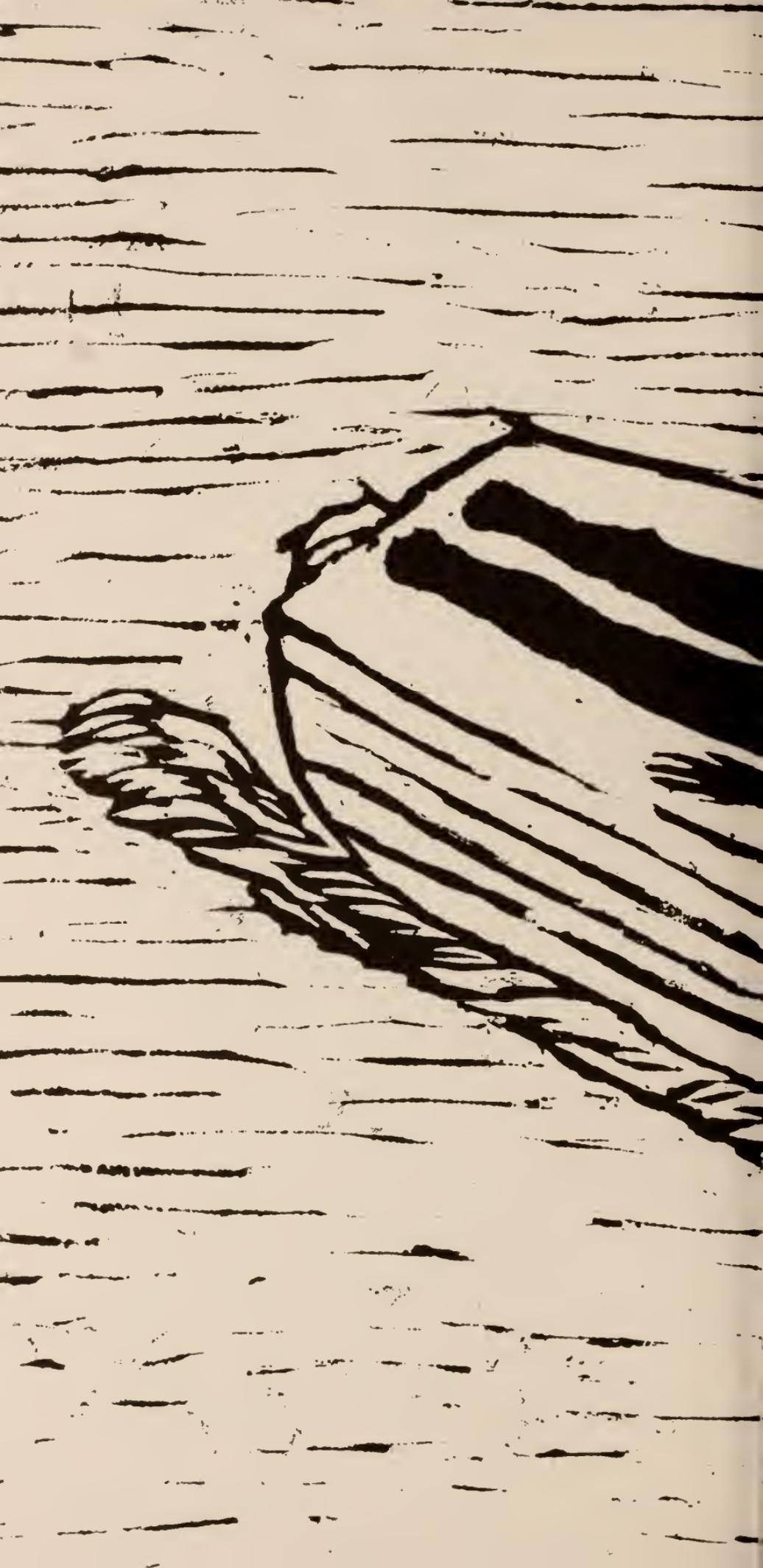
*but to be part of the treetops and the blueness, invisible,
the iridescent darkness beyond,*

*silent, listening to
the air becoming no air becoming air again*

— Frank O'Hara, "Three Airs," 1958

Somewhere between the habitual groove of living and the actuality of death is the process of dying. The irreconcilable space between the two recognizes the beauty of one and the inevitability of the other. It may be the imminent end of the century or the enveloping despair which accompanies the current health crisis, but death seems the appropriate point of entry for speaking about life in current contemporary art practice. *Slow Boat*, a new installation by Alison Saar, speaks to the process of natural order. The accoutrements of death, the coffin and the corpse, are transformed into mediums for the act of dying. Vessels to the hereafter.

A hybrid creator, Saar traverses the east-west, north-south, high-low axis in search of herself. Without the self-consciousness which often envelops outright appropriation and cross-cultural meanderings, Saar's work is a joyful intervention into alternative idioms. The notion of conscious primitivism dies hard in the wake of Neo-Expressionism, but Saar proves the power of intuitive emotion versus borrowed technique. Diasporic, bicoastal, urban yet rural, Saar's style encompasses a multitude of traditions which she transforms into one. Emerging from a cross-cultural aesthetic intuition,





the sculptures combine the rawness of wood, the resistance of metal, the sensuousness of paint, and the power of the human figure.

The human figure has always been the verb in Saar's artistic grammar. Figured but not figurative, it is the point at which the work begins. Her early pieces used the body to speak about the inherent duality of the human condition. Figures often featured openings that revealed an inner life sometimes contradictory to their outer appearances. The figures were elaborately adorned with signifying vestments and reliant on the nuances of language and the collision and collusion of cultures in the modern world. Sculptures both spoke and felt their invented lives. Their titles and the discursive transcultural metaphors gave voice to both the silenced and unspeakable. Easily identifiable as characters, the figures created a pantheon of what art historian Judith Wilson refers to as "morally ambivalent and/or magically transcendent" characters.

An installational format provides a site for Saar's ever-expanding investigation of her uniquely personal idiom. Grouping the figures seemed inevitable; they spoke to each other, at each other, in different tongues but of the same language. Objects seem necessary to give the figures lives, possessions. Environments were wanted to more adequately confront this world and to be equally confronted by it. Stripped of its former, individual reading, the work becomes less about the figure and its individual interpretation and more about ideas elicited with the cumulative power of the parts. Installation has allowed the sculptures to become more minimal. Reductively fashioned and sometimes nude, they are less identifiable with race or class or national origins. Materials also take on a new, alchemic role, giving them what artist Mary Kelly calls "a more affective voice." Still committed to found objects, Saar now leaves materials closer to their natural states rather than embellishing them, reinscribing the focus on the forms in their environment.

The environment of *Slow Boat* is entered and viewed through a thicket of branches. Inside, it is anchored by a life-size relief of a female figure that stands at the center of the installation. Emerging out of a sheet of hammered copper, her body is riddled with holes that suggest lesions or wounds. A pyre of

molten rocks surrounds her feet. Stiff and lifeless, the figure seems mummified yet statuesque. This figure, with her implied absence of spirit and the obvious destruction of her flesh, exists halfway between a corpse and a live body. Not dead, but dying, succumbing to her decline. In front of the figure is a large, solid rowboat dragging a long strip of satin in its wake. Hollowing out the wood of the boat has left the impression of a 6-foot body. When viewers lie in this hollow, they see aspects of the ceiling that are unintelligible when observed from a standing position. Above hang a pair of wings fashioned from well-worn shoe soles. Surrounding the installation is a painted backdrop that encloses the room in a shadowy, blue-tinged haze.

This boat, this slow boat, which journeys from life to death, conveys Saar's central metaphor. Saar comments on the Judeo-Christian tradition, which sets up a life-purgatory-heaven- or hell sequence of events, each separate in its meaning. *Slow Boat* posits that this passage between life and death has no definitive markers; the living and the dead, the spirit and flesh are intertwined in the voyage of dying. The body, as represented by the relief, and the absence of a body or the presence of the spirit as represented by the hollowed-out boat, explicate this progression.

Slow Boat is Saar's encounter with death. Like a work-in-progress about purity and order tentatively titled *Clean House*, *Slow Boat* explores the ritual context of everyday life; the processes which mark the movement from one aspect of living to another. Slightly shamanistic in intent, the work seeks not to romanticize or validate morbidity, but to create a space to experience the frustration and suffering of a metaphorical dying.

Thelma Golden
Branch Director

Alison Saar

Born in Los Angeles, 1956

Studied at Scripps College, Claremont, California (BA, 1978)
and Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles (MFA, 1981)

Lives in Brooklyn, New York

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1985

Sculpture installation, Artpark, Niagara Falls, New York

"Shaman, Saints & Sinners," Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles

"Soul Service Station," Roswell Museum of Art, Roswell,
New Mexico, sculpture installation at Berrendo Road
and Montana Avenue

1986

"New Icons," Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York

1987

"Figures and Frescoes," Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles

"Rites of Spring," Zeus-Trabia Gallery, New York

1988

"Alison Saar," Thomas Barry Fine Art, Minneapolis

"Alison Saar," The New Gallery, Calgary, British Columbia

"Zombies, Totems, Rootmen and Others," Jan Baum Gallery,
Los Angeles

1990

"Milagros Pequeños," Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles

1991

"Dreamin's," Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles



Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Gallery Hours

Monday–Saturday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm

Thursday, 11:00 am–7:30 pm

Free admission

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday, 11:00 am–7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 1:00 pm

Tours by appointment

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