

Town and Country  
Creative Diplomacy  
Kevin Conley  
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BETYE SAAR

In the late '60s, partly inspired by Joseph Cornell and his boxes, Betye Saar began incorporating figurines she had collected—Uncle Tom, L'il Black Sambo—into her work. "Slavery was abolished," she says, "but here were images of slaves on cookie jars—still in the kitchen. And I thought, How can I give Aunt Jemima personal power?" By turning her into a rifle-toting warrior in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, exhibited in Oakland in the '70s, when the Black Panthers were there. "I was apprehensive about what people would think, but everybody got exactly what I meant." The artist, who turns 90 in July, has been part of the State Department's art efforts for decades. Her large commissions in the mid-'80s in Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines came from Elizabeth J. Montgomery, an enterprising curator with the now defunct U.S. Information Agency who ran a program that set the pattern for AIE's later expansion. Saar's work continues to be included in many exhibitions, in places like Morocco, Haiti, and Ethiopia. These days "I have cages, and I keep wondering why I'm collecting them," Saar says during a tour of her home-cum-studio in L.A.'s Laurel Canyon neighborhood. "Then I realize, Oh, racism is a cage. You think you're free, but there's always something holding you back."

BLUE BELLE  
Saar, at her home  
studio in Los Angeles.