

Paper Mache for 8-7-26 by David Read

The Art of Telling the Truth. Maybe I'll start creating a title for each of my weekly columns beyond my usual byline. There's nothing new about artists taking a political stand in their work or expressing insightful and sometimes even subversive opinions on canvas. Art has always done more than decorate walls although it also does that very well. At its best, art asks difficult questions, challenges accepted narratives and gives voice to people whose stories have too often been ignored. Throughout history, artists have documented injustice, confronted racism, and examined the lasting impacts of colonialism. Their work reminds us that art is not simply about beauty, it is also about truth.

Few artists embodied that commitment more powerfully than Betye Saar, who I just learned about. She passed away two weeks ago at the age of 99. Over a remarkable career spanning seven decades, Saar transformed ordinary objects into extraordinary statements about race, identity, memory, and resilience. Her landmark 1972 assemblage *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* took one of America's most enduring racist stereotypes and completely reimagined it. Rather than depicting a subservient domestic worker, Saar presented Aunt Jemima as a figure of strength and resistance, armed and defiant. It's easy to view on Google Images. It became one of the defining works of twentieth-century American art and helped establish assemblage as a powerful form of social commentary. Saar believed that objects carry history. A discarded photograph, an old washboard, a vintage advertisement, or a weathered suitcase could reveal stories about prejudice, perseverance, and the complexity of American life. She challenged viewers to look beyond familiar images and ask who created them, whose voices were missing, and what they still communicate today.

A younger generation of artists continue that tradition. Among them is Rajkamal Kahlon whose work explores colonialism, migration, race, and the ways science and history have been used to classify and marginalize people. Kahlon's paintings and installations often reclaim historical photographs and anthropological images, transforming them into works that restore dignity and humanity to those once treated merely as subjects of study. Rather than erasing history, she asks us to reconsider who has been allowed to tell it. Sound familiar? In 2021, Yuba Sutter Arts & Culture hosted a gallery exhibition, lecture and panel discussion featuring Ms. Kahlon and her work. The events were all in collaboration with Cal State Sacramento. The project titled *And Still I Rise*, was a twenty-year survey of her work. Kahlon's research-based artistic practice resides at the intersection of visibility, violence and colonial histories. Working with archival materials sourced from books, military reports and photographs, her interdisciplinary practice transforms colonial narratives through painting. Originally from Northern California, Kahlon is now based in Berlin, Germany. *And Still I Rise* was her first solo exhibition in the U.S. since 2005.

These artists demonstrate that confronting difficult subjects does not divide us; it invites us to understand one another more fully. Their work challenges viewers to engage with history honestly, not to assign blame to today's generations, but to recognize how the past continues to shape the present. The arts have always been mirrors held up to society. Sometimes we like what we see. Sometimes we don't. But mirrors are not meant to flatter; they are meant to reflect. Artists such as Betye Saar and Rajkamal Kahlon remind us that creativity is not only an expression of imagination. It is also an act of inquiry, empathy, courage and even defiance. That may be one of the arts' greatest gifts. They encourage us not only to appreciate beauty, but also to seek understanding. And communities willing to listen to their artists are often the ones best equipped to grow, heal, and move forward together.