

ALISON SAAR BREACH

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BREACH





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Williams Center Gallery  
Lafayette College, Easton Pennsylvania

2017

Published in conjunction with the exhibition  
Alison Saar, *Breach*  
Richard A. and Rissa W. Grossman Gallery  
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Murray, Kentucky 42071  
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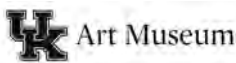
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THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER ART MUSEUM  
EBERT ART CENTER 1220 BEALL AVENUE WOOSTER, OHIO 44691-2381



# Introduction

We are delighted to have the opportunity to exhibit  
Alison Saar’s *Breach*, a body of work informed by the Great  
Mississippi Flood of 1927. The exhibition had its genesis in  
Saar’s 2014 residency at Lafayette’s Experimental Printmaking  
Institute (EPI). Saar, subsequently named the 2016–17  
Richard A. and Rissa W. Grossman Artist in Residence by  
the Department of Art, also was selected to deliver the 2016  
David L. Sr. and Helen J. Temple Lecture.

In an early discussion about the exhibition I described both  
the Lafayette galleries—one in the Williams Center for the  
Arts, and the second, the Grossman Gallery in the Williams  
Visual Arts Building—and let her select the one in which she  
would like to exhibit. She quickly determined the Grossman  
Gallery—situated over the Bushkill Creek and a block from  
the Delaware River—was the perfect location for a proposed  
exhibition about the relationship of African Americans and  
rivers. She wanted to explore such themes as the “politics  
of people of color living in floodplains and the history of the  
U.S. government’s negligence in flood control policy that  
puts those populations at risk.”

As Kitty McManus Zurko describes in her catalogue essay,  
Saar was in New Orleans in 2013 for a residency at the Joan  
Mitchell Center. She was dismayed to see how little had been  
done to rebuild African American communities devastated  
by Hurricane Katrina eight years earlier. Upon her return  
home to Los Angeles, she began researching the histories  
of American floods and effects on African Americans. The  
Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 piqued her interest.  
Though few now know of this historic catastrophe, the 1927  
flood, described as one of the worst natural river disasters  
in U.S. history, had a profound impact on the life of African  
Americans living in the Mississippi Delta and brought long-  
term social, cultural, federal policy, and political changes to  
the United States.

The exhibition would not have been possible without  
Saar’s enthusiastic cooperation. Additionally, College of  
Wooster Art Museum’s Director/Curator Kitty McManus  
Zurko wrote the insightful essay about Saar’s artwork  
included here. John M. Barry, award-winning author of  
*Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It  
Changed America*, provides a brief summary of the causes  
and long-term consequences of the event. Many thanks to  
poet Evie Shockley, who wrote “mami wata (how to know a  
goddess when you see one),” for her collaboration with Saar  
on the artist’s book of the same name. Poet Samiya Bashir’s  
“Unminded (LETHE),” “Consumption (PHLEGETHON),”  
“LAMENTATIONS ON THE ESPLANADE (COCYTUS),”  
“FLO/W/OE (ACHERON),” and “REALM AND COIN  
(STYX)” are the poemtags of *Hades D.W.P., II*. “Unminded  
(LETHE)” is reproduced in this publication.

Alison Saar, *Acheron*,  
detail from *Hades D.W.P., II*, 2016

*Breach* presented opportunities for interdisciplinary  
collaborations on and off campus. “Confluence,” a series  
of lectures, performances, and films presented in the fall  
semester, not only placed the flood of 1927 into a historical  
and contemporary context but included a broad range of topics  
related to rivers and waterways. Programs ranged from a site-  
specific dance performance, discussions about flooding along  
the Delaware River, the lingering effects of Jim Crow, Ta-Nehisi  
Coates’ *Between the World and Me*; to presentations about  
Mami Wata, the African and African Diaspora female water  
deity. A list of the programs can be found on page 46.

In 2017—the 90th anniversary of the Great Mississippi  
River Flood—this compelling body of work also will be shown  
at four academic museum venues: the College of Wooster Art  
Museum, Ohio; University of Tennessee Downtown Gallery,  
Knoxville; Wrather West Kentucky Museum, Murray State  
University; and University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington.

Michiko Okaya  
Director of Lafayette Art Galleries





# breach /brē CH/

## noun

1.

an act of breaking or failing to observe  
a law, agreement, or code of conduct.  
“a breach of confidence”

2.

a gap in a wall, barrier, or defense,  
especially one made by an attacking army.

## verb

1.

make a gap in and break through  
(a wall, barrier, or defense).

“the river breached its bank”







*Breach*, 2016  
wood, ceiling tin, found trunks, washtubs, and miscellaneous objects  
Installation at Grossman Gallery, Lafayette College.  
Walls stained with acrylic, Bushkill Creek water, silt, and mud  
*Overleaf*: detail of Alison Saar, *Breach*

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# Alison Saar's *Breach*

Kitty McManus Zurko

Rivers flow along serenely and silently until they do not. These multifaceted bodies of water functioned historically as points of entrée for exploration, trade routes, centers of commerce, and generators of fertile agricultural regions. Like all great rivers, those in America carry the residue of past and present cultures as well as the metaphorical burden of human projection and reflection.

Most riverine myths and beliefs focus on destruction and salvation. Such myths are rooted in the delicate balance between punishing floods that wreak havoc on those living nearby while simultaneously replenishing water habitats and soils. Never the same from one moment to the next, these flowing wellsprings of life have a unique ability to both connect and divide humanity. These connections and divisions are the subject of *Breach*, a 2015–16 body of work by Los Angeles-based artist Alison Saar.

Throughout a career spanning more than three decades, Saar has consistently hewn to the 1960s-era slogan “the personal is political.”<sup>1</sup> Ever the visual storyteller, the artist traverses both terrains—the personal and the political—by incisively drilling into issues such as identity, motherhood, feminism, race, and politics.

Her compelling sculpture, paintings, drawings, and prints have many influences. Among them are the varied beliefs and energies embodied in African art, the origins and stylistic force of German Expressionism, and the unmediated candor of folk art. Most of all, Saar's work privileges communicative clarity without being didactic. In *Breach*, the artist's well-known practice of synthesizing disparate ideologies,

histories, and cultural signifiers coalesce into a timely conversation that asks us to consider today's divisive racial relations by reflecting on a disastrous flood that took place in 1927.

To start at the beginning of this particular tale, Saar was one of 24 Joan Mitchell Foundation grant recipients selected to participate in the Joan Mitchell Center's 2013 Artist-in-Residence Pilot Program in New Orleans. During the three-week residency, she frequently rode her bike through the primarily black Lower Ninth Ward and Treme areas where, eight years after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005, she was struck by the damage still evident in these neighborhoods, and unkept government promises to rebuild homes. This experience led Saar to research the history of flooding by major rivers in America and the striking similarities between the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and Katrina.<sup>2</sup>

While what happened in 1927 cannot be fully described here (see John M. Barry's essay in this catalogue for more information about the Great Flood), in short, after months of heavy rain, rivers in the Midwest and the South inundated over 16 million acres of land ranging from Oklahoma to Tennessee and from Missouri to Louisiana. Especially hard hit were over 27,000 square miles in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Over 630,000 people were affected. Of that number, more than 200,000 were African Americans. One of the more profoundly disturbing chapters in the history of race relations in America occurred during the flood when the levees above Greenville, Mississippi, gave way, and blacks living nearby were conscripted to work on shoring up

the failing levees.<sup>3</sup> Because African Americans were critical to the sharecropping economy of Southern plantations at the time, many blacks were forced into relief camps on the Greenville levees and guarded at gunpoint to discourage them from fleeing north, as many others had since the beginning of the Great Migration in 1910.<sup>4</sup>

Although what happened during Katrina still survives in our nation's collective consciousness (recall the horrifying images of mostly African Americans stranded for days in brutal heat in the Louisiana Superdome and on the Interstate 10 overpass), the bitter lessons of the traumatic Great Flood have receded with time like the waters themselves. Saar's research into river- and flood-generated disasters led her to consider questions such as: why are African Americans drawn to living

near rivers in the first place; what has been the effect of flooding on blacks and others living in flood-prone areas; and how have such disasters influenced music, art, and literature?

Her answers begin with four 2015 paintings on found and pieced together table linens and sugar and seed sacks. In these works, the artist explores the humanity-preserving response to catastrophe by focusing on the incongruity of what she calls, “dancing in the face of disaster.”<sup>5</sup> Each painting's compound title comes from two sources: bodies of water intermittently replenished by floods such as backwaters, swamps, and sloughs or slues, and early 20th-century music by and about the experiences of blacks during the Great Flood. Rooted in gospel music, these songs migrated north and planted the seeds of what became known as the Chicago Blues.

Lord, Lord, Lord, I'm so blue my house got washed away,

And I'm crying “how long for another pay day”

That's why I'm crying Mississippi heavy water blues.

I'm sitting here looking at all of this mud,

And my girl got washed away in that Mississippi flood...

“Mississippi Heavy Water Blues,” Robert Hicks (Barbecue Bob), 1927





*Breach*, 2016

wood, ceiling tin, found trunks, washtubs, and miscellaneous objects

The figures in *Backwater Boogie* and *Sluefoot Slide* (pp. 12–13) are shoeless as they dance in water up to their knees and ankles. Sightless, they move in a seemingly dissociative state, as if aware of being objectified, but concealing their true selves. In this sense, they exemplify what, in his 1897 essay “Strivings of the Negro People,” W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” and “two-ness” to describe the feeling of having two identities—that of being “... an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>6</sup>

While this Adam and Eve pair reside in the earthly realm, the figures in *Swampside Shag* and *MuddyWater Mambo* (pp. 14–15) are immersed in an aqueous domain, floating in “heavy” indigo blue water. Somehow, these otherworldly figures seem more real as they interact with catfish and peer into a mirror.

*Swampside Shag* and *MuddyWater Mambo* continue Saar’s long-running dialogue with the fluidity of cultural appropriation and re-appropriation. In *Swampside Shag*, the catfish are painted in a manner that recalls the sinuous movement of koi in European 19th-century Japonisme-style paintings and prints.<sup>7</sup> The woman in *MuddyWater Mambo* peers into a hand mirror reflecting the face of Greek goddess Lethe whose attributes include spewing memory-obliterating water from her mouth, while the mirror itself references Mami Wata, or “Mother Water,” a powerful half-human, half-fish water spirit usually depicted in Africa and countries of the African Diasporas as a mermaid with long hair and a serpent around her neck, holding a mirror. According to art historian Henry John Drewal, Mami Wata emerged in Africa around the 15th century in response to European contact, and “straddles earth and water, culture and nature.” A composite of Western and Central African water spirits, Mami Wata represents danger but also

bestows wealth and fertility. Variants of this powerful and quixotic water deity are honored in shrines on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>8</sup>

Saar’s artist book *mami wata (or, how to know a goddess when you see one)*, 2016 (pp. 30–33), was produced at Lafayette College’s Experimental Printmaking Institute (EPI). Housed in an altered box, this project was a collaboration between Saar and contemporary poet Evie Shockley. Shockley’s three-part poem in the artist’s book speaks to human projection onto nature through the creation of water spirits whose powers parallel the life-giving and life-taking nature of water itself. Printed on stained fabric, Shockley’s poem “mami speaks” is formatted in a zigzag pattern reminiscent of both a snake and the fish-like tail of La Sirène, one of the many incarnations of Mami Wata. Three pages in the book are printed on water-dissolvable paper, suggesting the transformative and mutable nature of water environments as well as offerings to Mami Wata.

Two small wood sculptures from 2016, *Silttown Shimmy* and *Black Bottom Stomp* (pp. 16–17), echo the figures in the four paintings described above in that the sculptures have stolid, strong, twisting bodies that project a strong sense of self-possession. They also are embedded with commentary on the circular nature of influences. Specifically, *Silttown Shimmy* references a sculpture Saar first encountered in the 1980s at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)—*Dancer with Necklace*, 1910, by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, 1880–1938). Kirchner was a founding member of a group of German Expressionist artists in Dresden in 1905 called Die Brücke (the bridge), and his wood sculpture was inspired by the Cameroon and Palau art he studied in the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden (Ethnographical Museum Dresden). As the *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight so aptly noted in a 2016 review, *Silttown Shimmy*’s “... oblique reference to it [*Dancer*



with *Necklace*] reminds us that European Modern art in the 20th century is unthinkable without its profound, complex relationship to African art.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most visually arresting work in this exhibition, however, is the over 12-foot tall showtitting sculpture *Breach*, 2016 (p. 8). A virtual lexicon of Saar’s favored materials—wood, found objects, and ceiling tin—the figure’s sense of equilibrium and confidence has no equal in the artist’s oeuvre. Covered in tin ceiling tiles suggestive of ritual scarification, the life-size figure stands on a pallet-cum-raft with her punt pole at the ready. The superstructure she carries on her head is taller and wider than the figure, and is comprised of what might be hastily assembled travel necessities such as trunks and suitcases, and domestic needs such as pans, buckets, washbasin and washboard, lantern, and mirror. More than anything, this gravity-defying load speaks to the limits of human endurance (pp. 3, 45).

In this homage to strength, Saar intentionally makes connections between Atlas, Greek god of endurance, and the Senegalese women and children she encountered during a visit to Senegal in 2006. Essentially mobile agents of commerce, these African women and children routinely balance gravity-defying loads of calabashes and other market goods on their heads with the same grace and equanimity as the figure in *Breach*.

On the other side of this tale lies Saar’s hard-hitting installation *Hades D.W.P., II* (pp. 18–21), 2016, and two drawings, *Acheron*, 2016, and *Silted Brow*, 2016. According to the artist, *Hades D.W.P., II* (D.W.P. stands for Department of Water and Power in Los Angeles) began as a nexus between the five stages of grief and recovery and the five rivers of death in Greek mythology. However, the installation eventually

morphed into searing commentary on the national disgrace of the toxic water supply in the mostly black city of Flint, Michigan. In this work, Saar etched five glass jugs and jars with figures in distress. Each glass vessel is labeled with the name of each mythological river: Acheron, river of pain; Phlegethon, river of fire; Lethe, river of forgetfulness; Styx, main river of hatred; and Cocytus, river of wailing. Chipped enamel ladles and cups hang in front of each of the vessels, and five poems by Samiya Bashir, also a contemporary poet, are printed on muslin strips and tied to the jug and jar handles. Each poem’s staccato prose lingers on or repeats phrases such as “the absurdity of living,” “how much longer?,” and “let go.” Light shines through the acidic green and rust-colored water to metaphorically expose both the hidden “river” of lead pipes in Flint, and the 2014 decision by that city’s managers to use water from the polluted Flint River instead of the water supply previously purchased from Detroit. This national disgrace came to light slowly after city residents noticed that their tap water was discolored. City water tests in 2015 revealed lead content in Flint’s residential water to be seven times the Environmental Protection Agency’s limit for lead in drinking water.<sup>11</sup>

Both *Silted Brow*, 2016, and *Acheron*, 2016 (pp. 22–23), are pithy examples of Saar’s wit and skill in transforming found materials. Drawn on sugar and seed sacks attached to the bottom of trunk drawers, the artist’s use of secondary surfaces as a substrate for drawing suggests that there is always more to any story than first meets the eye. In *Silted Brow*, the horizontal figure lies beneath the dark water with her head awkwardly angled, as if she has a broken neck. Catfish swim languidly above. Paired with the female figure they reference the Nigerian Yoruba water orisha

or spirit, Yemoja, whose name means “Mother whose children are like fish.” In *Acheron*, the clothed figure stands up to her waist in what we surmise from the title to be a river of pain. She carries a loaded basin on her head beneath a dark and ominous black sky. The sliver of light on the horizon signals either dawn or dusk. The confident figure in *Acheron* looks straight at us, and the gravitas of the work slowly materializes as our gaze drifts down to the reflection in the water to reveal the true weight of the load she carries—human skulls, universal symbol of death.

## Notes

1. Although the phrase “the personal is political” has become so widely used that authorship is almost irrelevant, the phrase stems from a title given by editors Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt to an essay by Carol Hanisch published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (New York: Radical Feminists, 1970).
2. The Lower Ninth Ward and the Treme were flooded in August 2005 by storm surge that came up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet after Hurricane Katrina made landfall east of New Orleans. The force of the surge caused two major breaches in the Industrial Canal located to the west of the Lower Ninth Ward.
3. A levee or revetment is a sloping structure placed adjacent to rivers or streams. Intended to hold back seasonal floodwater, levee breaches can occur naturally during floods through overtopping or crevassing, or when they are intentionally blown to relieve flooding downstream.
4. The Great Migration took place from 1910–70, and refers to the movement of 6 million African Americans from the rural South to urban areas in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Cities that saw the greatest number of transplants include St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and New York.

Cumulatively, the intent behind the paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints in *Breach* merge into a flood of consciousness we would be well advised to heed. Although the Great Flood may seem as if it has no bearing on today, Katrina and Flint prove otherwise as they painfully exposed the still corrosive and festering divisiveness of race relations in this country. In this compelling body of work, Alison Saar asks us to consider the psychic “breach” embedded in these shared histories because when the levees of life give way, the political is most definitely the personal. For everyone.

5. Alison Saar, interview with the author, July 8, 2016.
6. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1897, 194.
7. A French term, Japonisme was first used in the late-19th century to describe the influence of Japanese art and design on Western culture, and, in particular, on European art.
8. Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Los Angeles, California: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008), 23–25.
9. Christopher Knight, review of “Alison Saar Traces Diasporas in the Exceptional ‘Silt, Soot and Smut’ at L.A. Louver Gallery,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2016.
10. Alison Saar, written correspondence to author, received August 29, 2016.
11. Merrit Kennedy, “Lead-Laced Water in Flint: A Step-By-Step Look at the Makings of a Crisis,” NPR, April 20, 2016, [npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis](http://npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis).

**Kitty McManus Zurko**, Director/Curator, The College of Wooster Art Museum (CWAM), has organized and curated over 65 exhibitions. Some of her projects include solo exhibitions of artists such as Ann Hamilton, Lorna Simpson, Alejandro Almanza Pereda, Shirin Neshat, Jim Campbell, and Hiraki Sawa. The author lives in Wooster, Ohio.



*Backwater Boogie*, 2015  
acrylic, gesso, and  
charcoal on found  
sugar sacks and linens



*Sluefoot Slide*, 2015  
acrylic, gesso, and  
charcoal on found  
sugar sacks and linens





*Swampside Shag*, 2015  
acrylic, gesso, and charcoal  
on found and dyed denim,  
sugar sacks, and linens



*MuddyWater Mambo*, 2015  
acrylic, gesso, and  
charcoal on found and  
dyed denim, sugar sacks,  
and linens







*Far left: **Silttown Shimmy**, 2016*  
wood, ceiling tin, enamel, paint,  
tar, and silt  
Private Collection

***Black Bottom Stomp**, 2016*  
wood, acrylics, ceiling tin,  
silt, tar, and wax

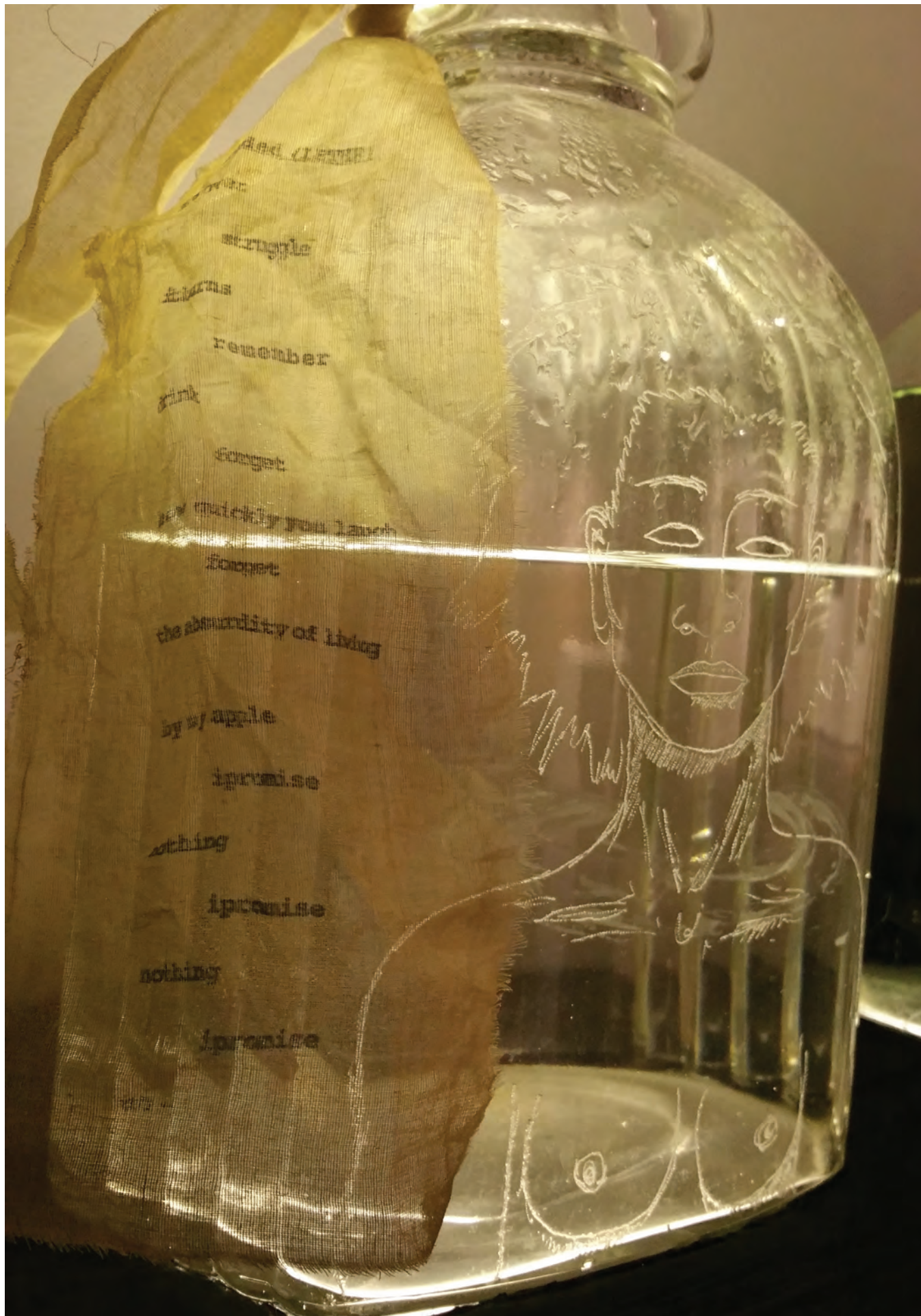




*Hades D.W.P, II, 2016*

etched glass jars, water, dye, wood, cloth and ink transfer,  
electronics, found ladles and cups; poems by Samiya Bashir





## Unminded (LETHE)

it's over  
     struggle  
 it burns  
     remember  
 drink  
     forget  
 how quickly you laugh  
     forget  
 the absurdity of living  
  
 by my apple  
     i promise  
 nothing  
     i promise  
 nothing  
     i promise  
 no -

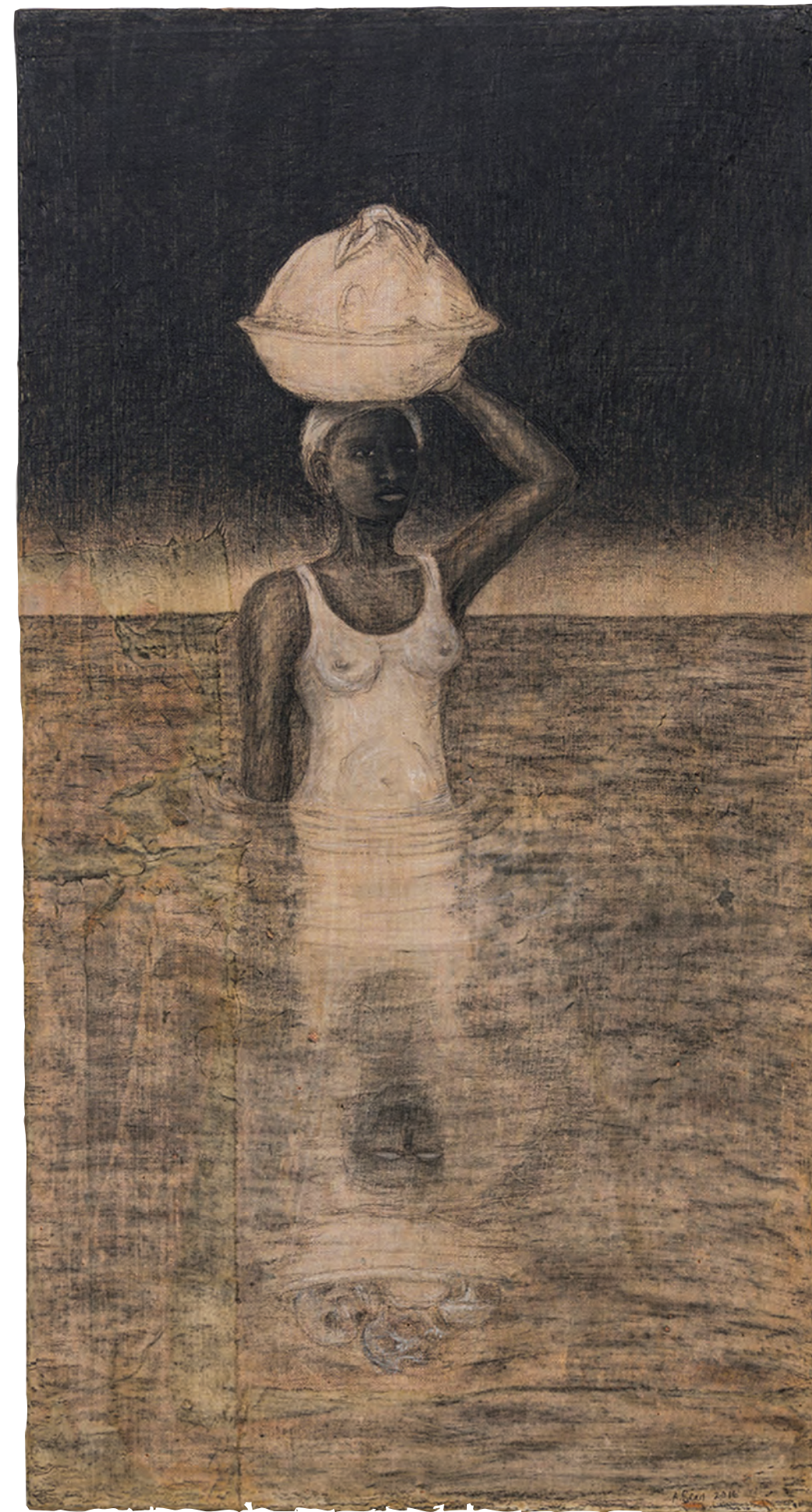
Samiya Bashir, "Unminded (LETHE)" © 2016

Left: *Lethe*, detail from *Hades D.W.P., II*, 2016 with  
 "Unminded (LETHE)" on poemtag





*Silted Brow*, 2016  
charcoal, chalk, and acrylic on  
linen and found-trunk drawer



*Acheron*, 2016  
charcoal and chalk on found-  
trunk drawer and sugar sacks





Above: *Breach*, 2016

charcoal, chalk, and acrylic on found seed sacks and linens

Right: *Staunch*, 2016

charcoal, chalk, and acrylics on found seed sacks and linens;

Installation view, Grossman Gallery, Lafayette College,  
walls stained with acrylic, Bushkill Creek water, silt, and mud  
by Alison Saar





Far left: *Deluge*, 2016  
woodcut on hand-dyed paper  
Tandem Press

*Backwater Blues*, 2014  
woodcut, chine collé  
Tandem Press





*Morass*, 2017  
collagraph, serigraph, woodblock relief  
Experimental Printmaking Institute



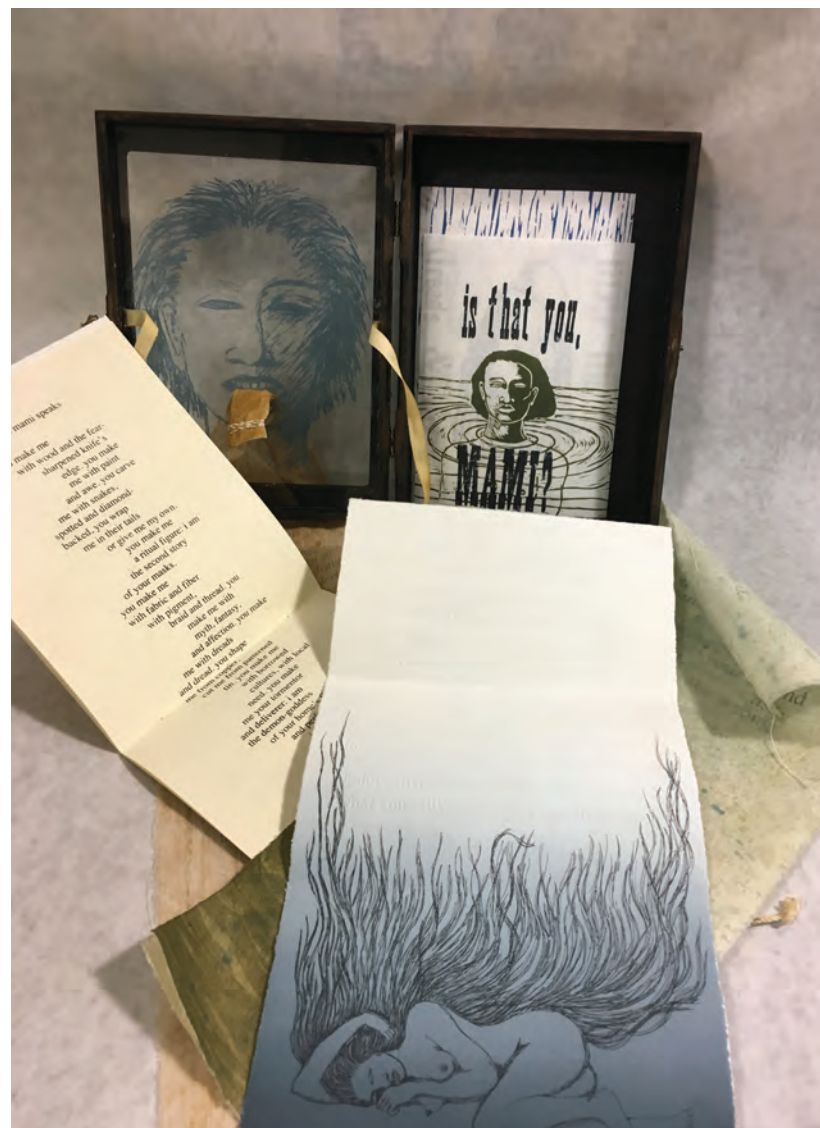
*Lethe*, 2017  
collagraph, serigraph, woodblock relief  
Experimental Printmaking Institute



# mami wata (or, how to know a goddess when you see one)

A collaboration between Alison Saar and Evie Shockley

Alison Saar's work is informed by many influences, including artistic and historical traditions of African art, ritual, and belief systems. In collaboration with poet Evie Shockley, she conjures Mami Wata, the African and African Diaspora water spirit, a presence that can be felt in the exhibition. The result is the artist's book *mami wata (or how to know a goddess when you see one)*, 2016. Shockley wrote "mami wata (how to know a goddess when you see one)," a poem in three parts, for the book of the same name. The artist and the poet, in collaboration with Experimental Printmaking Institute master printer Jase Clark, explored different ways to integrate the poem with artwork. The result is a dynamic artist's book: found boxes holding different elements that invite viewer interaction.



## i. a deity's history

*if you show your tail  
i'll spank it, the mamas  
would say to the daughters*

*meaning keep your behind  
behind you, meaning ass-  
backwards is the wrong*

*direction. later, this threatened  
showing called up negro chaps  
in paris, uniformed, fighting*

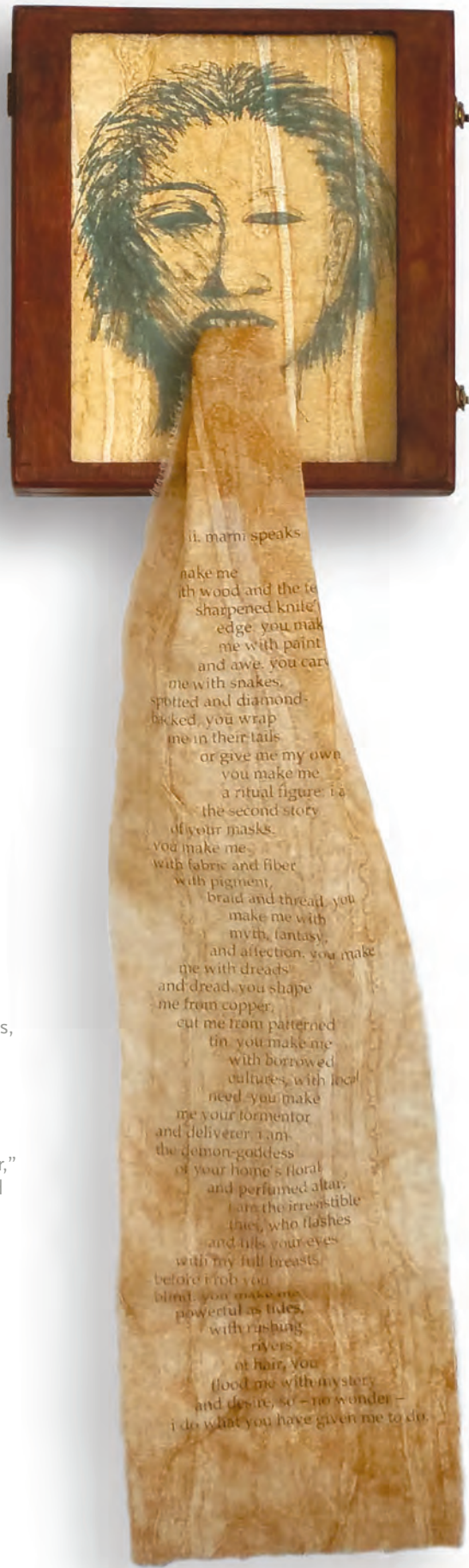
*wwii-era stereotypes. now tails  
speak of grown-ass women  
who catch the secrets of fish,*

*whose bare blue breasts hint  
at the source of their power  
stirring beneath the water.*

"i. a deity's history," etching, serigraph, hand painted and stained; Kinwashi rice paper; 2-page print, hand-sewn edge, rolled and tied.

Evie Shockley, *mami wata (or how to know a goddess when you see one)*, © 2016





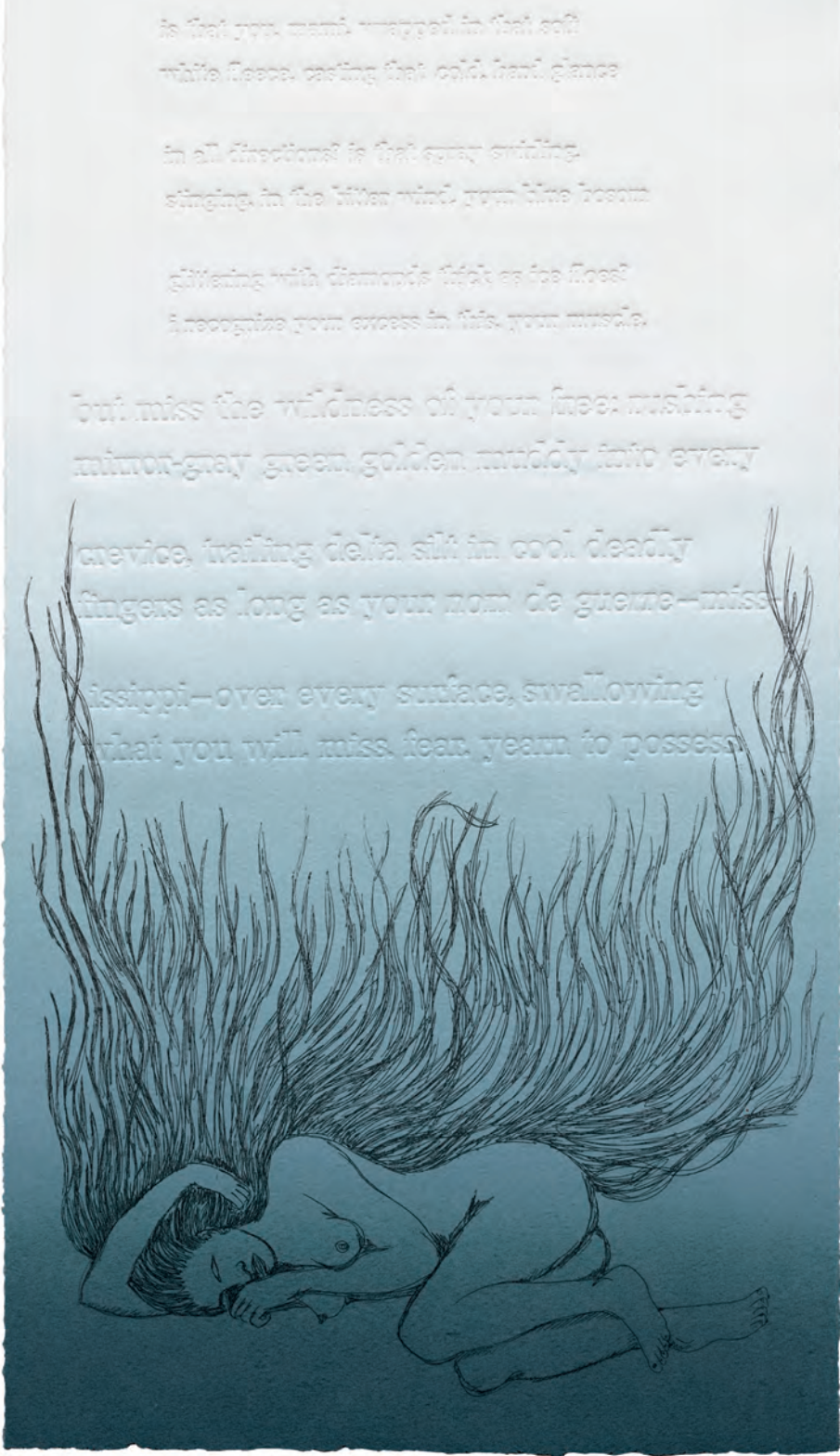
“ii. mami speaks,” unique found box, with inset Plexiglas, serigraph of Lethe; serigraph and collagraph text on stained fabric

Far right: “iii. migrant’s prayer,” etching, serigraph, embossed letter press text, (Rives BFK) cotton rag paper; etched and embossed with letterpress; folded and tied with hand-dyed cotton.

ii. mami speaks

you make me  
with wood and the fear-  
sharpened knife’s  
edge. you make  
me with paint  
and awe. you carve  
me with snakes,  
spotted and diamond-  
backed, you wrap  
me in their tails  
or give me my own.  
you make me  
a ritual figure: i am  
the second story  
of your masks.  
you make me  
with fabric and fiber  
with pigment,  
braid and thread. you  
make me with  
myth, fantasy,  
and affection. you make  
me with dreads  
and dread. you shape  
me from copper,  
cut me from patterned  
tin. you make me  
with borrowed  
cultures, with local  
need. you make  
me your tormentor  
and deliverer: i am  
the demon-goddess  
of your home’s floral  
and perfumed altar.  
i am the irresistible  
thief, who flashes  
and fills your eyes  
with my full breasts  
before i rob you  
blind. you make me  
powerful as tides,  
with rushing  
rivers  
of hair, you  
flood me with mystery  
and desire, so—no wonder—  
i do what you have given me to do.

iii. migrant’s prayer



iii. migrant’s prayer

is that you, mami, wrapped in that soft  
white fleece, casting that cold, hard glance  
in all directions? is that your spray swirling,  
stinging, in the bitter wind, your blue bosom  
glittering with diamonds thick as ice floes?  
i recognize your excess in this, your muscle,  
but miss the wildness of your free: rushing  
mirror-gray green golden muddy into every  
crevice, trailing delta silt in cool, deadly  
fingers as long as your *nom de guerre*—miss-  
issippi—over every surface, swallowing  
what you will. miss. fear. yearn to possess.





Installation view,  
The College of Wooster  
Art Museum (CWAM),  
Sussel Gallery.



# Great Mississippi Flood of 1927: A 75-Mile Wide Inland Sea

John M. Barry

In August 1926, it began to rain. It rained hard, it rained long, and it rained across all of the central United States, pelting South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma, then moving east into Iowa and Illinois. It rained so hard that—at a time of year when rivers normally run their driest—on September 1, water poured over the banks of dozens of streams and flooded towns from Carroll, Iowa, to Peoria, Illinois, 350 miles apart. On September 4, floods hit parts of Nebraska, Kansas, and Indiana, while Iowa and Illinois suffered anew. Those floods were on tributaries to the Mississippi, which itself washed out bridges and railroads in the upper Midwest. A separate storm in northwestern Iowa dumped 15 inches of rain in three days, sending rivers exploding over their banks, drowning 10 people and inundating 50,000 acres including Sioux City.

When the rains began they had relieved the region of the summer heat. Now they frightened. People could do nothing but watch their crops drown and their rivers rise; reminded of their own impotence and of the power of God and nature, they prayed.

Rain continued. In October, the Neosho River in Kansas and 600 miles to the east the Illinois River reached their highest levels in history, with disastrous flooding. The Mississippi at Vicksburg had only broken 30 feet on the gauge six times in history, followed each spring by major flooding. The river at Vicksburg had never broken 31 feet in October. In October 1926, it broke 40 feet.

Precipitation continued into the winter over the entire Mississippi Valley, which stretches from New York to the Rockies and drains 31 states and two Canadian provinces. The U.S. Weather Bureau noted that the average reading through the last three months of 1926 on every single river gauge on each of the

three greatest rivers of North America—the Ohio, the Missouri, and the Mississippi itself, draining nearly 1 million square miles and stretching the width of the continent—was the highest ever known.

On Christmas Day, 1926, both Nashville and Chattanooga—on two different rivers—flooded. On New Year’s Day, 1927, the main river at Cairo, Illinois, broke flood stage, the earliest on record. In January, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville flooded.

And water still came. Tributaries drowned people from Virginia to Oklahoma. While a vast snowpack melted, in April 1927 the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* warned, “The roaring Mississippi River, bank and levee full from St. Louis to New Orleans, is believed to be on its mightiest rampage.” That spring saw five separate storms, each of which was greater than any single storm in the preceding 10 years. And the Memphis paper issued its warning *before* the greatest of those storms.

A man standing on the levee then saw a river that seemed the most powerful thing in the world. From the breadth of the continent, from New York to the Rockies, down came the water, down as if poured through a funnel, down into this immense writhing snake of a river, this Mississippi.

The sea had once reached north to present-day Cape Girardeau, Missouri, but the Mississippi system had deposited sediment to fill in the area from Cape Girardeau to the Gulf, nearly 35,000 square miles in seven states. That was the river’s natural flood plain.

In April, the river shouldered aside the levees and reclaimed more than three-quarters of its flood plain.

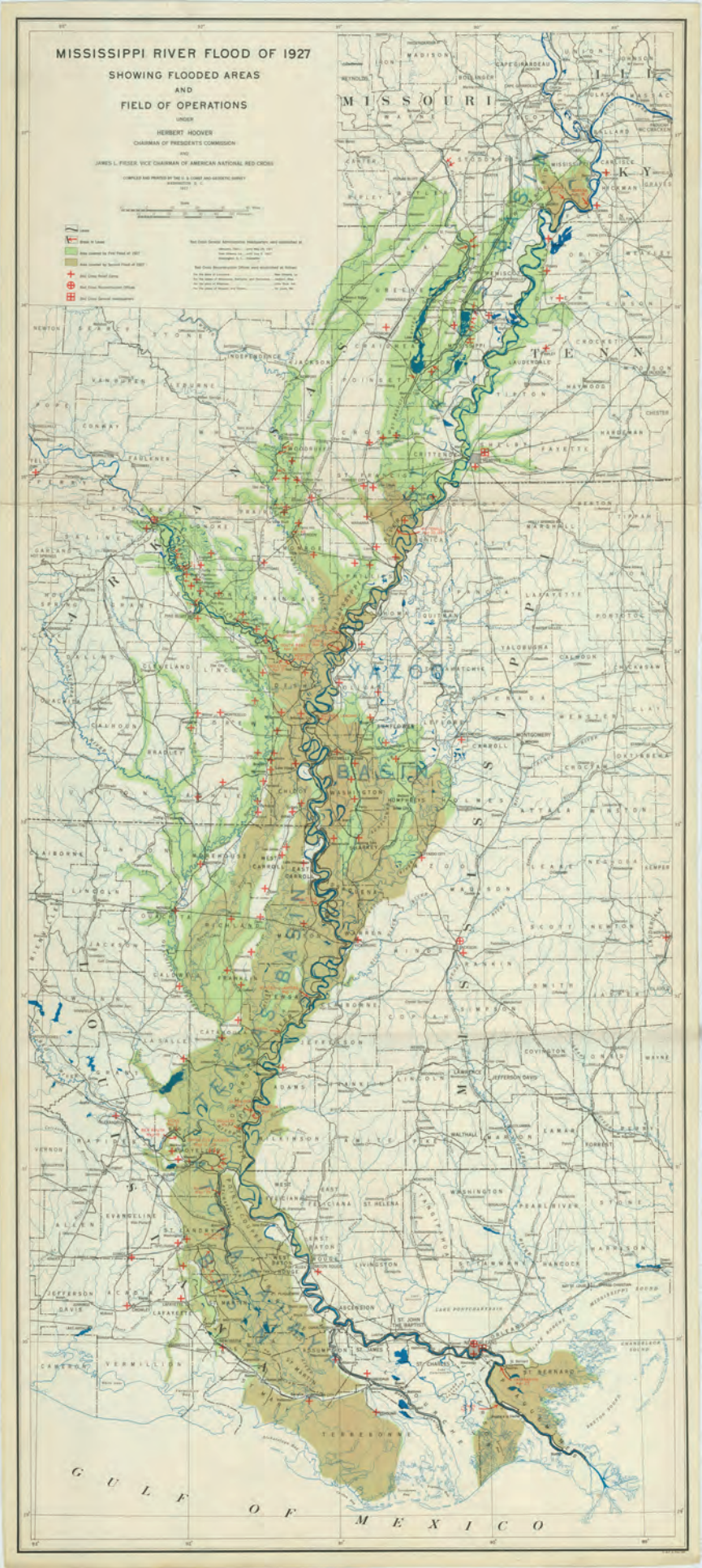
The statistics recounting the damage are staggering. At its widest, the river created a vast inland sea more than 75 miles across—one could travel the

70 miles over normally dry land from Vicksburg to Monroe, Louisiana, by boat. This inland sea was silent; not the bark of a dog nor the lowing of a cow was heard. Not counting the flooding of such cities as Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, just along the lower Mississippi alone, the homes of more than 920,000 people were damaged. Roughly 1 percent—perhaps more—of the entire population of the country was flooded. The number rescued by boat from rooftops, trees, levee crowns, and second stories reached 330,000.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of thousands of buildings were destroyed. No one knows the death toll—the Red Cross claimed it was only 246, the Weather Bureau said 500, and a professional disaster expert estimated the dead in Mississippi alone at 1,000.

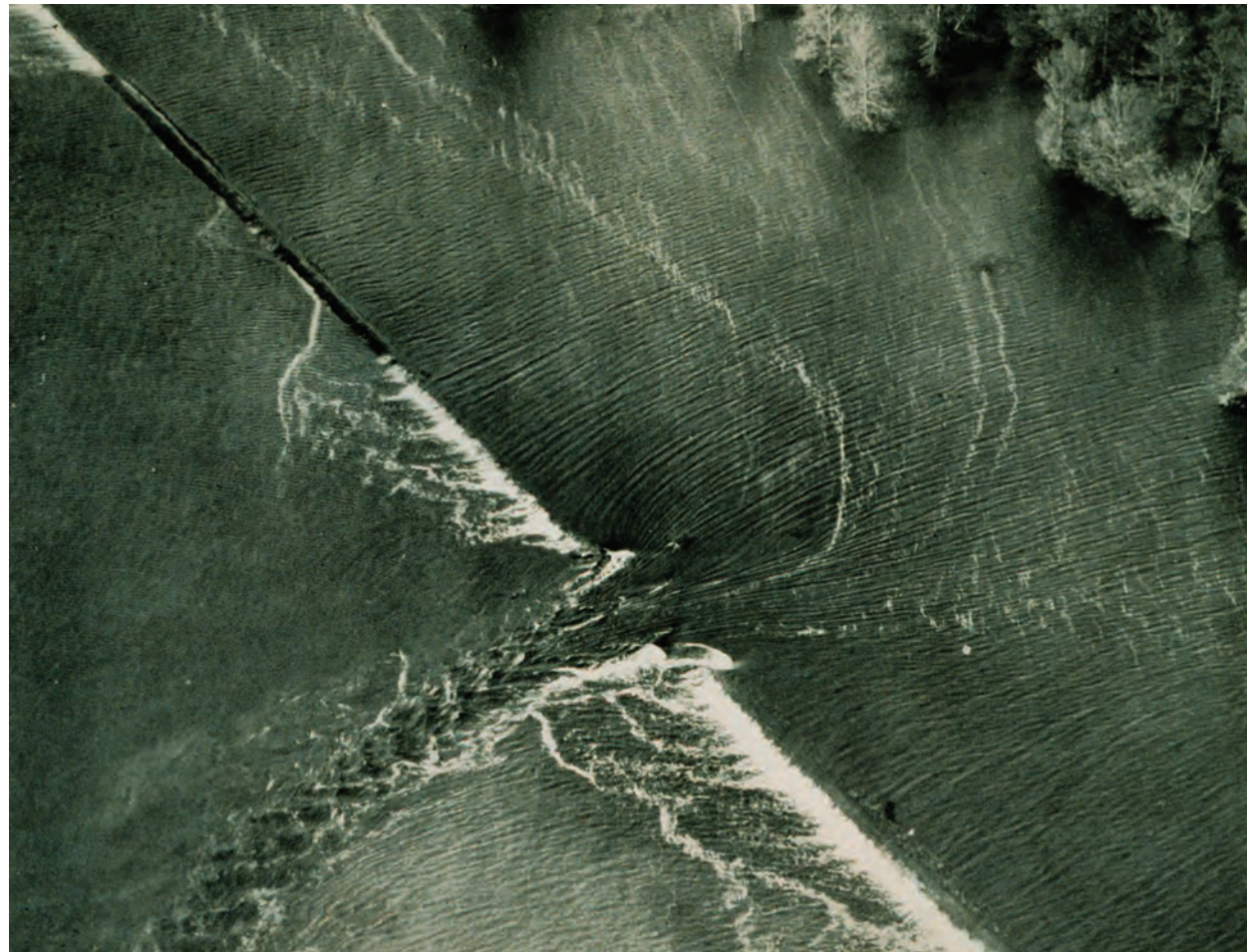
Individuals, local communities, and entire states were devastated. But the biggest impact of the flood was on America itself. Far more than any other natural disaster, the 1927 Mississippi River flood changed American history and, even though forgotten today, imprinted itself on American culture. It did this in several ways.

First, the flood settled an engineering argument over how to handle rivers. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had pursued what it called a “levees-only” policy toward flood protection, refusing either to use reservoirs to prevent water from entering the river or outlets to, where feasible, let water out of the river. Even a head of the Corps of Engineers had run experiments and concluded that “the investigations ... have rendered untenable the scientific theory behind this policy.” Why the Corps followed it in defiance of all scientific evidence is a case study of bureaucracy and turf warfare. After 1927, engineers recognized that rivers had to be

“Mississippi River Flood Map of 1927, Showing Flooded Areas and Field of Operations Under Herbert Hoover,” illustrates the Mississippi River from Cape Girardeau, Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico and includes the locations of levees, levee breaks, areas covered by the first and second floods, Red Cross relief camps, reconstruction offices, and General Headquarters; Records of the Department of Commerce, Coast and Geodetic Survey, Record Group (RG), 23 Mississippi Flood Map 1927, NAID 2436794; National Archives at College Park, Md.







### The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927

“Frontispiece—beginning of crevasse breaching levee at Mounds Landing, Miss.”

From: “The Floods of 1927 in the Mississippi Basin,” Frankenfeld, H.C., 1927 Monthly Weather Review Supplement No. 29  
NOAA Archives

accommodated and could not be constrained, and the following year President Calvin Coolidge signed into law the Flood Control Act of 1928. The Army Corps of Engineers developed flood control projects including locks and reservoir, spillways, channel improvements, and floodgates and levees. The success of this approach was demonstrated in 2011, when another great flood came down the Mississippi and put almost 10,000 square miles under water—virtually all of it by design, in floodways used for farming.

Second, the flood elected a president and changed politics. Herbert Hoover was an immensely wealthy man, who owned mines and oil fields in America, Russia, China, Australia, South America, and Africa. He wanted to be president but, having left the United States soon after graduating from Stanford and not returning until the country entered World War I, he had no political base. Indeed, he had not even voted in a presidential election until 1920. But he had accomplished much, organizing the feeding

of occupied Belgium, overseeing American food production and distribution during World War I, and feeding much of Europe immediately after the war. John Maynard Keynes said he was “the only man who emerged from the ordeal [of the Versailles peace conference] with an enhanced reputation.” He became known as “The Great Humanitarian.” President Warren G. Harding named him Secretary of Commerce, and in 1927, President Calvin Coolidge put him in charge of the response to the flood.

The flood was the biggest story of the year—bigger even than Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic—and it lasted for weeks. Hoover had said, “The world lives by phrases,” and he had owned newspapers in Washington and Sacramento. He and his staff worked diligently to exploit the coverage; no newspaper was too small. Hoover personally communicated with weekly papers from Arizona, Texas, Washington, Nebraska, and Indiana. James Carville said, “Hoover had a better press operation than any politician I know



“Birdsong Camp at Cleveland, Miss., April 29, 1927, African-American flood refugees stand in line at Birdsong Camp. Tents in background.” A catastrophic levee breach occurred on April 21, at Mounds Landing, Mississippi, sending water into the lower Yazoo Delta. Some areas would remain underwater for months.

Courtesy of the Archives and Records Services Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

today.”<sup>2</sup> Routinely, the press hailed Hoover as a hero and a savior. A California paper proclaimed, “He is the ablest and most efficient American in public life ... In personal fitness for the presidency there is no other American, even remotely, in Mr. Hoover’s class.”<sup>3</sup>

Coverage like that prompted Hoover to confide to a friend, “I shall be the nominee, probably. It is practically inevitable.”<sup>4</sup>

Hoover’s confidence was not based on the media alone. He finally had a political base. That base was the African American community, then overwhelmingly Republican. Although African Americans could not vote in most elections in the South, they often controlled the Republican Party in southern states. And there was one place they could vote—at the Republican National Convention for the presidential nominee.

Hoover made a deal with Robert Moton, the most powerful African American political figure and head of both the Tuskegee Institute and what was

called “the Tuskegee Machine.” Hoover promised to break up large plantations and turn sharecroppers into landowners. An ecstatic Moton told allies this would be “more significant than anything which has happened since Emancipation.”

In return, Moton would investigate and whitewash a scandal over distribution of aid to black flood victims—some were forced into virtual slave labor, or charged for what should have been free, or given dregs of food and supplies after white refugees got their pick—and support Hoover for president. That gave Hoover a solid base of convention delegates on which to build. Hoover won the GOP nomination on the first ballot, then won a landslide election victory.

But Hoover broke his word, ironically because of his landslide. Since Reconstruction, no Republican presidential candidate had carried a single southern state. Largely because the 1928 Democratic candidate Al Smith was Catholic, Hoover carried five states—Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, Florida, and



North Carolina—and GOP political operatives tried to create a Republican Party—an all-white party—in the South that could defeat Democrats. Hoover pursued this policy and never mentioned his own proposal to transform sharecroppers into landowners again; he also nominated a man to the Supreme Court so racist that a Senate controlled by his own party rejected him.

Moton and other black leaders regarded all this as a personal betrayal. In 1932, Moton had no love for Franklin Roosevelt, saying if he “has done anything for the Negro as Governor of New York, I have not heard of it.”<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, he and his allies refused to endorse Hoover for reelection; their emotional connection to the party of Lincoln had snapped. There were three other impacts of the flood, impacts that changed the culture.

The “Great Migration” of blacks out of the South had started earlier, but had died off during the early 1920s. Yet flooded areas in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana had counties with the highest percentages of African Americans in the nation. Penned up in refugee camps—called “concentration camps”—patrolled by armed guards as if they were prisoners, mistreated and cheated out of Red Cross supplies, they had nothing to go back to—the largest cotton plantation in the world produced only 44 bales of cotton in 1927—and they had nothing to go back with. In Arkansas (no figures are available for other states) a family of four, after having their cabin and everything they owned washed away, received \$27 worth of tools, clothes, furniture, food, seed, and supplies when they left a refugee camp. So they didn’t go back. By hundreds, by thousands, by tens of thousands, they left. They went north to Chicago, packing Illinois Central trains, and west to Los Angeles, and everywhere in between. In total nearly 1 million blacks left the South in the immediate aftermath of the flood, the vast majority from flooded areas. Then, in the 1930s, this migration dropped to a trickle.

Meanwhile, the horror people went through seemed made for the blues, and the blues told much of the story. Even before the Mississippi itself breached the levees, flooding along tributaries had caused Bessie

Smith to record “Backwater Blues.” Just days after the single biggest levee break—on April 21 more water poured out of the river in that single breach at Mounds Landing, Mississippi, than five times the average flow of Niagara Falls—Lonnie Johnson recorded “South Bound Water.” A year later he released “Broken Levee Blues,” singing about being forced from his home to sandbag the levee. Charley Patton recorded the anger of virtual imprisonment in “High Everywhere” in 1929, and in that same year Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie’s “When the Levee Breaks” described the desperate conditions of levee work. At least one black gospel song blamed sinners for the flood. At least several dozen blues songs recorded the pain and tragedy, a history that lived on in Randy Newman’s great 1974 song, “Louisiana 1927.”<sup>6</sup>

But the most important effect of the 1927 flood was also the subtlest: it changed the way Americans viewed government’s responsibility in a time of crisis. Although there is no scientific polling data on the question, existing policy and newspaper editorial commentary suggest strongly that most Americans in the 1920s felt the government had no responsibility to provide any direct assistance to individuals. There was certainly a widespread sense that people who sought government help were at best weak and at worst immoral, and government policy reflected such sentiments. In 1905, a yellow fever epidemic erupted in New Orleans. Public health experts knew how to contain yellow fever, but before Theodore Roosevelt’s administration would send public health experts to help, it required New Orleans to pay \$250,000 in advance to cover the expenses. And in 1922, when a flood in Louisiana had made 40,000 homeless, Gov. John Parker refused even to ask the Red Cross for help, saying, “Louisiana has issued no call for aid and will not.”<sup>7</sup> That attitude was reflected in federal policy toward flood relief. In 1927, the Red Cross fed over 600,000 people, some for a year, and more than 300,000 lived as refugees in tent cities. All the money for this was raised privately. Not only did the federal government spend nothing to feed, clothe, and shelter these people, the army demanded

reimbursement from the Red Cross for use of its tents and field kitchens.

When it came to recovery, the story was the same. The federal government spent nothing to help these people and the devastated states recover—the agricultural economy in parts of seven states and the banks that had financed the agriculture were destroyed. Coolidge not only ignored numerous pleas to visit the flooded territory, he refused even to autograph pictures of himself to be auctioned off at fundraisers. Hoover personally urged bankers and big businessmen to privately finance recovery efforts, but the government did nothing.

And, for the first time, Americans thought that doing nothing was wrong. Months of media coverage of hundreds of thousands of desperate Americans changed the country’s view of government’s role. In 1927, John Parker was no longer governor of Louisiana but was in charge of the state’s recovery. In 1922, he had refused to seek aid. Now, with 200,000 Louisianans homeless and destitute, he asked for all the aid he could get from every quarter. That reversal

in attitude also was demonstrated by the one source of public opinion that is measurable: newspaper editorials. Hoover’s staff combed hundreds of newspapers and reported that, whether papers were Democratic or Republican, “at least four-fifths of the editorials coming in” demanded federal action. “There continues to be considerable criticism of the attitude of the President,” Hoover’s staff reported.<sup>8</sup>

Because of Coolidge’s intense opposition, Congress did not act to directly help individuals or businesses. But in 1928, Congress did pass the Jones-Reid Bill, a massive flood control act—the most expensive domestic program the federal government had ever launched—which set a precedent in reordering state and federal responsibility.

In short, the 1927 flood had vastly more substantive impact on the nation than any other disaster in U.S. history. Yet it is less well-known than the San Francisco earthquake, the Chicago fire, even the Johnstown flood. That fact in itself is a lesson; to understand history, one must look deep.

## Notes

1. Marion Bragg, *Historic Names and Places on the Lower Mississippi River* (Vicksburg: Mississippi River Commission, 1977), 91.
2. Author’s personal communication with James Carville
3. “The Mississippi Flood and Mr. Hoover’s Part in Relief Work,” news summaries for May 23, 1927, Hoover Library.
4. Craig Lloyd, *Aggressive Introvert: A Study of Herbert Hoover and Public Relations Management, 1912–1932* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 84.
5. Donald Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1985), 269.

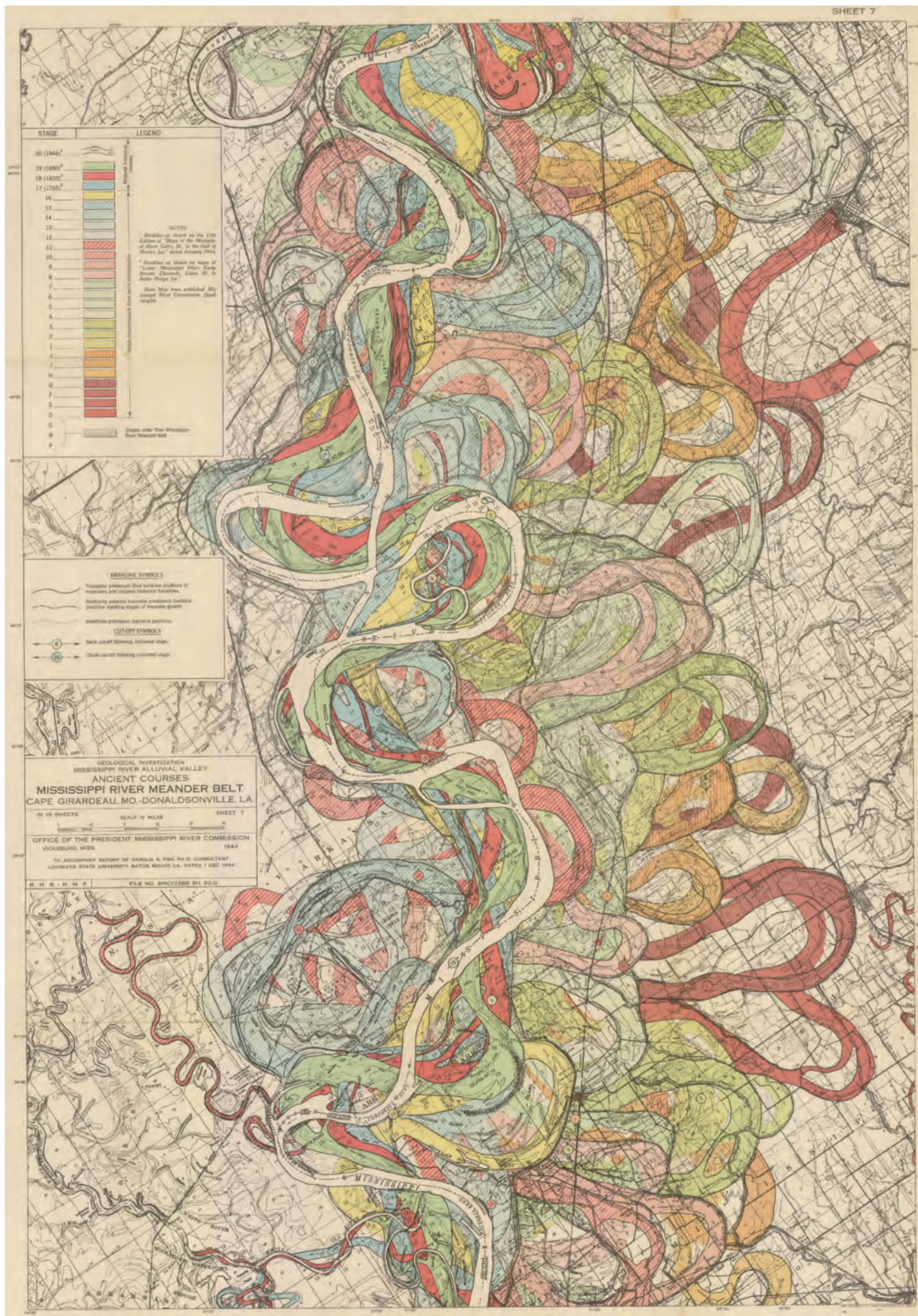
6. For a detailed discography, see Richard M. Mizelle Jr., *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); for a detailed discussion of blues and gospel written about the flood of 1927, see David Evans, “High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi River Flood,” in *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, ed. Robert Springer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 3–75.

7. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 29, 1922.

8. Press summary, undated early June (probably June 7) and June 17, 1927, Hoover Library.

**John M. Barry** is an award-winning author of *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. *Rising Tide* was the winner of the 1998 Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians, named in 2005 by the NY Public Library as one of the 50 “most memorable” books of the preceding 50 years, and was on the *NY Times* “notable” book list.





## Checklist

### **Breach, 2016**

wood, ceiling tin, found trunks,  
washtubs, and miscellaneous objects  
155 x 60 x 51 in. (393.7 x 152.4 x 129.5 cm)

### **Black Bottom Stomp, 2016**

wood, acrylic, ceiling tin, silt, tar, and wax  
30 x 9 x 7 in. (76.2 x 22.9 x 17.8 cm)

### **Silttown Shimmy, 2016**

wood, ceiling tin, enamel paint, tar, and silt  
28 x 8 ½ x 5 ½ in. (71.1 x 21.6 x 14 cm)  
private collection, Topanga, Calif.

### **Backwater Boogie, 2015**

acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on  
found sugar sacks and linens  
50 x 27 in. (127 x 68.6 cm)

### **MuddyWater Mambo, 2015**

acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on found  
and dyed denim, sugar sacks, and linens  
50 x 25 in. (127 x 63.5 cm)

### **Bluefoot Slide, 2015**

acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on  
found sugar sacks and linens  
53 x 26 ½ in. (134.6 x 67.3 cm)

### **Swampside Shag, 2015**

acrylic, gesso, and charcoal on found  
and dyed denim, sugar sacks, and linens  
48 x 27 in. (121.9 x 68.6 cm)

### **Breach, 2016**

charcoal, chalk, and acrylic on  
found seed sacks and linens  
65 x 30 in. (165.1 x 76.2 cm)

### **Staunch, 2016**

charcoal, chalk, and acrylic on  
found seed sacks and linens  
64 x 27 in. (162.6 x 68.6 cm)

### **Acheron, 2016**

charcoal and chalk on found-trunk  
drawer and sugar sacks  
29.5 x 16 x 4 in. (74.9 x 40.6 x 10.2 cm)

### **Silted Brow, 2016**

charcoal, chalk, and acrylic on  
linen and found-trunk drawer  
17 x 27 x 3 in. (43.2 x 68.6 x 7.6 cm)

### **Hades D.W.P., II, 2016**

etched glass jars, water, dye, wood,  
cloth and ink transfer, electronics,  
found ladles and cups  
Poems by Samiya Bashir  
overall: 30 x 50 x 16 in. (76.2 x 127 x 40.6 cm)

### **Backwater Blues, 2014**

woodcut, chine collé  
27 ¾ x 14 ¾ in. (69.5 x 36.5 cm)  
Tandem Press  
Edition 6 of 30

### **Deluge, 2016**

woodcut on hand-dyed paper  
23 ½ x 14 ½ in. (59.7 x 36.8 cm)  
Tandem Press  
Edition of 30

### **Morass, 2017**

collagraph, serigraph, woodblock relief  
9 x 11 in. (22.86 x 27.94 cm)  
Experimental Printmaking Institute  
Edition of 45  
courtesy of EPI and the artist

### **Lethe, 2017**

collagraph, serigraph, woodblock relief  
12 x 11 in. (30.48 x 27.94 cm)  
Experimental Printmaking Institute  
Edition of 45  
courtesy of EPI and the artist

### **mami wata (or how to know a goddess when you see one), 2016**

Collaboration between Alison Saar  
and poet Evie Shockley

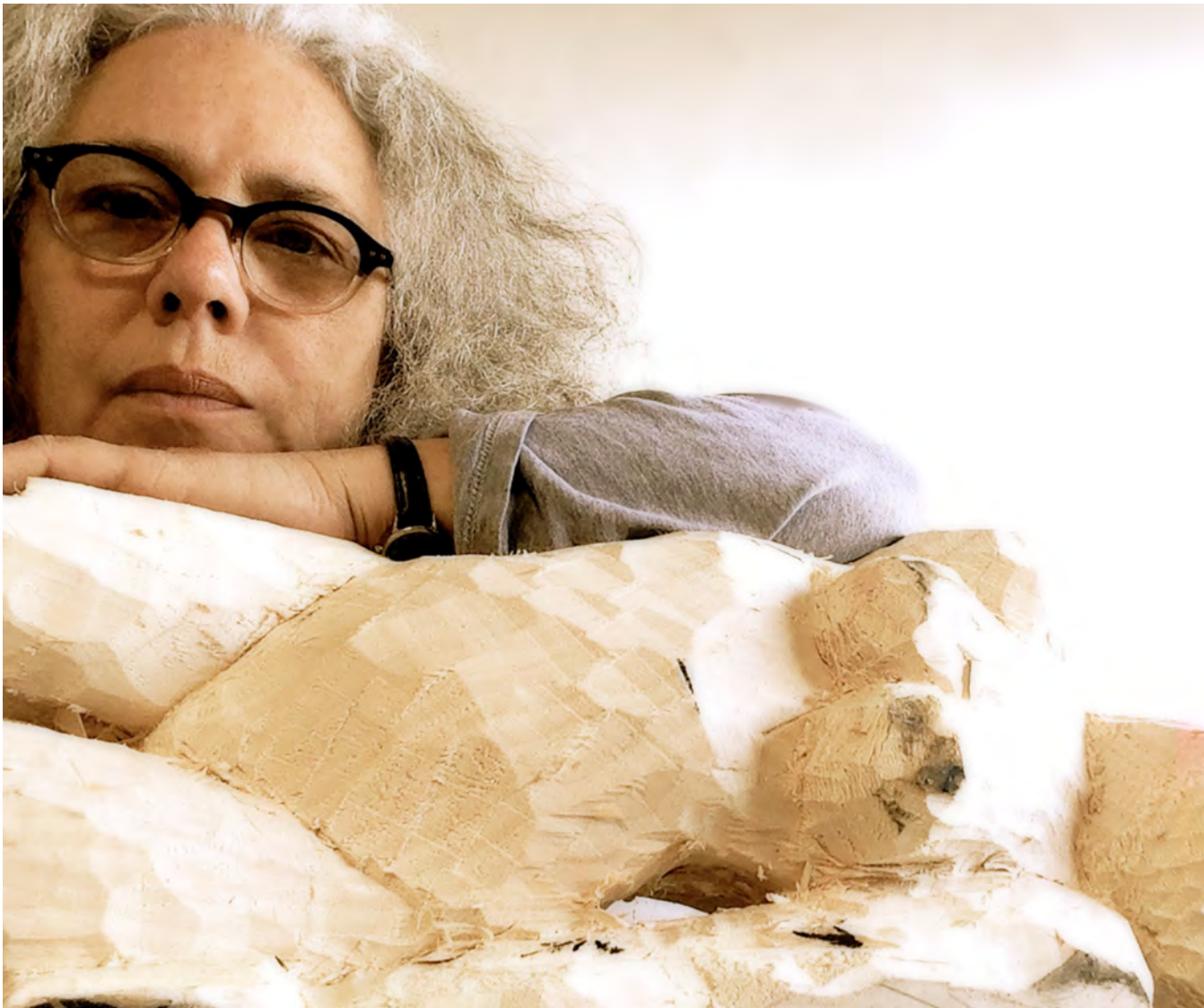
“mami wata (or how to know a goddess when you see one),” a poem in three parts by Shockley. Unique artist’s book consists of a found-box with cover serigraph of Lethe and “ii. mami speaks” on stained fabric. Within the box: “i. a deity’s history” (hand-sewn two-part print, etching, serigraph poem, paint and stain, rice paper); “iii. migrant’s prayer” (etching, serigraph, embossed lettering); three dissolvable prints (images derived from poem); colophon (collagraph, serigraph, hand-sewn binding, with text of poem) signed by Saar and Shockley; and small cloth bag with display hardware and note from Saar.

overall size varies,  
approx. 10 x 8 x 1 in. (24.4 x 20.32 x 2.54 cm.)  
Experimental Printmaking Institute  
Edition 20/20  
courtesy of EPI and the artist

Dimensions are noted above height x width x depth. Unless otherwise noted, all artwork is courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver, Venice, Calif. Artwork exhibited in each location might vary from this checklist.

Left: Harold Fisk, *The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River*, 1944, Plate 7 of 15, the maps visually track the meanderings of the Mississippi from “ancient courses” through 1765, 1820, 1880, and 1944; Maps produced and published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Mississippi River Commission, [lmvmapping.erd.usace.army.mil/](http://lmvmapping.erd.usace.army.mil/)





## Alison Saar

Alison Saar was born and raised in Laurel Canyon, California, the daughter of renowned artist Betye Saar and painter/conservator Richard Saar. She received a BA in studio art and art history from Scripps College, Claremont, California, and an MFA from Otis Parsons Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design). She has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1984 and 1988), and was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1989, Flintridge Foundation Award for Visual Artists in 2000, Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 1998, and Joan Mitchell Artist in Residence in 2013. Saar was named one of 50 USA Fellows in the United States Artists program in 2012.

Saar revealed *Embodied*, a new public work, in Los Angeles in 2015. Commissioned by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the 12-foot-tall sculpture is located in front of the Hall of Justice. Saar's prints were featured in a solo exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., through Oct. 2, 2016. *Silt, Soot and Smut*, an enlarged version of *Breach*, was shown at L.A. Louver, Venice, California, in 2016, and *The Nature of Us* will be at the Harvey B. Gantt Center, Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2017.



Alison Saar, *Breach*, 2016, detail of back, the texture of the rusted ceiling tiles suggests ritual scarification.

Her association with Lafayette College began in 2014 as a residency artist at the Experimental Print Institute (EPI), during which she produced two prints, *Fall* and *Brier Patch Blues*, for the David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland. She returned in 2016 for a collaboration with poet Evie Shockley on a limited edition artist's book, "mami wata (or how to know a goddess when you see one)." The artist and poet, in collaboration with EPI master printer Jase Clark, experimented with several ways to incorporate the poem with artwork. The result is a dynamic artist's book: a found box holding different elements that invites viewer interaction.





*Breach: Left Behind*, 2016.

## Confluence

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2016

This wide-ranging series of interdisciplinary programs associated with rivers and inspired by Alison Saar's *Breach* was sponsored by the Lafayette Art Galleries, academic departments and programs, and community organizations.

### Dance:

*Breach: Left Behind*, by choreographer Jessica Warchal-King in collaboration with Alison Saar

Jessica Warchal-King of The Embodiment Project Philadelphia, created this site-specific dance experience. Performed in the Grossman Gallery September 18 and October 1, it featured original music by Muhlenberg College musician/composer Paul Fejko, professional dancers Laura Baehr, Jennifer Yackel, and Katherine Kiefer Stark (The Embodiment Project), and dancers from the Lafayette and Easton communities: Kelly Prentice, Nandini Sikand, and Carrie Rohman.

One of Warchal-King's ongoing creative interests is the interconnectedness of people and their environments. Her inspiration for this dance grew from Saar's research on American rivers, flooding, and their historical relationship

to the lives of African Americans, and Warchal-King's own experiences as a female artist and a witness to the central Texas floods of 2016. She asked, "What's left behind after a natural disaster? How do we define and determine what has value?"

Audience members, some of whom had been affected by the Delaware River floods of 2004, 2005, 2006, and/or 2011, were invited to participate in a movement exercise to embody their own ideas of the importance of water, feeling left behind, and defining what they value as individuals and as a community.

*Breach: Left Behind* and Warchal-King's Movement Meditation Mandala residency were funded by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation called Choreographers on Campus, an initiative of Lafayette College and the Lehigh Valley Dance Consortium (LVDC). Part of the work was developed during PhiladelphiaDance.org In Process residency.



Alison Saar with "Dynamics of Sculpture" students.



Installation view with students' sculptures.

### Films:

The *Great Flood*, Bill Morrison's 2014 film about the 1927 flood, and Andy Goldsworthy's *River and Tides* presented in classroom screenings

### Lectures by Lafayette Faculty:

**D.C. Jackson** (History) on the St. Francis Dam disaster of 1928, the subject of his recently published book, *Heavy Ground*

**Wendy Wilson-Fall** (Africana Studies), "River Slaves and Ocean Mariners"

**Dru Germanoski** (Geology and Environmental Science and Studies), "Persistent Flood Hazards in the Delaware and Mississippi Rivers"

**David Brandes** (Civil Engineering and Environmental Science and Studies), "Understanding the '100-Year' Flood on Our Changing Planet"

### Guest Lecturers:

**John M. Barry**, author of the award-winning *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*, and "Can New Orleans Survive: Coastal Destruction, the Future of Louisiana, and The Most Ambitious Environmental Lawsuit Ever"

**Susan Kart** (Africana Studies and Art and Architecture, Lehigh University), "Wade in the Water: Beyoncé, Mami Wata, and Black Feminist Power"

**Evie Shockley** (essayist and poet, Rutgers University), author of "mami wata (or how to know a goddess when you see one)"

**Bethany Wiggin** (German and the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities, University of Pennsylvania), "Forgotten Places, Radical Hope, and the Environmental Humanities: Travels on an Industrial River"

### Concert:

Lafayette Cultural Programs: *Harmonious Visions: Reflections on Nature Through the Fabric of Sight and Sound* by composer Frances White with images by Jim Toia.

### Creative Writing:

A Six-Word Story project, the suggested story topic was water, co-sponsored with Department of English. Stories were collected and displayed in two locations on campus: adjacent to the Grossman Gallery in the Williams Visual Arts Building and at the Williams Center for the Arts.

### Arno River Flood Commemoration:

*Florence Under Water: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Great Flood*, curator Diane Cole Ahl, Department of Art. This photography exhibition in Lafayette's Skillman Library featured another devastating flood—the Arno River in November 1966. The commemoration also included a screening of *Florence: Days of Destruction (1966)*, a documentary film by Franco Zeffirelli, and eyewitness accounts by art historians David G. Wilkins and Ann Thomas Wilkins.

### In the Classroom:

Among the classes the artist visited was "Dynamics of Sculpture," joined by high school students in the Community-Based Teaching Program. Students created clay heads which were incorporated into the exhibition (see photos above).

### Community Partnerships:

**The Gallery at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Easton:** community artists' exhibition, *Water/Rivers/Floods*.

**Arts Community of Easton (ACE):** Alison Saar artist's talk  
**Riverside Festival of the Arts, Easton:** Preview reception of *Breach* exhibition for Festival participants.

**Nurture Nature Center, Easton:** Open Mic night began with river/flood-themed work: participants presented original poems, songs, or narratives; contributed six-word stories. Saar was the invited guest.

**Chautauqua at the Forks of the Delaware:** Book discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and related topics. Lafayette first-year students who read the book over the summer as preparation for orientation were the facilitators for the community discussion. The *Breach* exhibition and issues it raises inspired the Chautauqua group to organize a monthly fall reading series about African American experiences.



# Selected Bibliography

for more information on the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927

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*Michiko Okaya, Director  
Lafayette Art Galleries*



Alison Saar, *Cocytus*, detail from *Hades D.W.P., II*, 2016



**The Grossman Artist-in-Residence and Exhibition Series** was established by Richard A. Grossman, a 1964 graduate of Lafayette College, and his wife, Rissa W. Grossman, to provide opportunities for intensive interaction between students and major 20th- and 21st-century artists. The series also supports the presentation of significant exhibitions.

Alison Saar (2016)*	Sam Gilliam (2001)*
Judy Pfaff (2016)*	Ann Hamilton (2000)
Audrey Flack (2015)*	Gregory Gillespie (1999)*
Pope.L (2012)*	In Search of Master Artists: Selections from the Moore Collection of African American Art (1998)
Terry Winter (2011)*	Leon Golub (1997)
Chakaia Booker (2010)*	Elizabeth Murray (1996)*
Kay WalkingStick (2009)*	Richard Anuszkiewicz (1995)*
Xu Bing (2008)*	Robert Beauchamp (1994)
Glenn Ligon (2006)*	Faith Ringgold (1993)
Fred Wilson (2005)	Dorothea Rockburne (1992)
Stephen Antonakos (2004)*	
Ursula von Rydingsvard (2003)*	
Frank Stella (2002)*	

The Richard A. and Rissa W. Grossman Artist-in-Residence Series has brought to campus some of the most significant artists of the 20th and 21st centuries. The strength of the residency lies not only in the quality of the artists but also in the intensity of their interaction with students. For more than two decades, the program has profoundly influenced Lafayette students. Over the years, Richard and Rissa have been unfailing in their support, advice, and encouragement, including support of the gallery program in the Art Department’s Williams Visual Arts Building. On behalf of the Art Department, I thank them for being such great friends to the arts and to the College.

*Robert S. Mattison*  
*Marshall R. Metzgar Professor of Art*

\* Indicates an exhibition of the artist's work

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Charles Stonewall, cover, pp. 46, 47L  
John Wynn, 1, 4–5, 17, 18–19, 24–25, 47R, 49  
Cover: closeup of wall in Grossman Gallery, Lafayette College; walls stained with acrylic, Bushkill Creek water, silt, and mud by Alison Saar