Primary Maker: Betye Saar
Title: Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines
Date: 2017
Medium: Mixed media and wood figure on vintage washboard, clock
Dimensions: Overall: 21 1/2 × 8 5/8 × 1 1/2 in. (54.6 × 21.9 × 3.8 cm)
Credit Line: Purchased through the generosity of Louise Mirrer; Ernest Tollerson and Katrinka Leefmans; Pam and Scott Schafler; Marilynn Gelfman Karp; Margi and Andrew Hofer; Linda S. Ferber; Frances Ann Schulman; Nicole, Nathan, and Brian Wagner; an anonymous donor; and members of the Frederick Douglass Council. Additional support provided through the Women Artists Fund in memory of Mildred Mirrer
Object Number: 2019.76

Classification: MIXED MEDIA

Curatorial Remarks:
Betye Saar is a contemporary assemblage artist who collects found and vintage objects—bird cages, clocks, window frames, shells, etc.—and combines them into three-dimensional collages. She emerged at the intersection of the predominantly white feminist art movement and the predominantly male black art movement of the 1970s and is known for creating highly charged political pieces that challenge race and gender stereotypes. Saar’s breakout piece and best known assemblage, The Liberation of Aunt Jemima (1972), features a grossly caricatured Jim-crow era figurine of the famous pancake-making mammy. By arming this figurine with a rifle and gun, Saar transformed an object designed to denigrate into a heroine liberating herself from that very denigration. Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines (2017) belongs to a series of washboard assemblages that Saar has been
creating since 1997. As Saar explains, these washboard assemblages honor the labor of the washerwomen who worked 16 hours per day in hot and steamy conditions in one of the few types of jobs available to black women after abolition. This particular assemblage features a relative of Saar’s first weaponized Aunt Jemima: a stereotypically cartoonish and grinning mammy figure, now holding a semi-automatic rifle and breaking out of the frame of a washboard that would seek to contain her. The pattern on her apron features a multitude of bodies packed into the cargo hold of a slave ship—part of a famous diagram of the slave ship Brookes circulated by abolitionists in the late-18th and 19th centuries. Layered on top of the Jim Crow mammy figure, the Brookes diagram links the subjugation of black people under slavery to their continued subjugation under oppressive post-slavery labor systems. Reinforcing this link is the stopped clock mounted on top of the washboard: when measured by the constancy of racial oppression across centuries, time stands still. On the back of the washboard, the Brookes slave ship diagram reappears: its overlay on a conventional maritime painting of a ship at sea elicits from a romantic vision of the high seas a darker history otherwise elided from the genre. The artist herself describes the work as follows: "In my assemblages, I use vintage materials. I feel every object has a story of their use before they were discarded. By creating an assemblage, I reinterpret their use and rewrite their story. In ‘Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines,’ the washboard is used as a background element to depict racism and sexism. In this assemblage, the figure on the washboard, a wooden mammy with an apron patterned with a slave ship diagram wields a machine gun, transforming the servant mammy into a warrior. Since the 1960s, I have collected derogatory black images such as mammies, piccaninnies, Uncle Toms, and others. I purchased this wooden mammy figure at a swap meet. My guess is that this figure was created in the mid-20th century, as a student’s project in a woodworking class. A vintage clock sits atop the washboard to juxtapose the passage of time with the lack of social progress."

Physical Description:
Assemblage featuring a vintage washboard and stopped clock. On the front is a stereotyped Jim Crow-era mammy figure holding a toy assault weapon. On her apron are diagrammatic slave bodies packed into the cargo hold of a slave ship. Above her is the text "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines." The back of the assemblage depicts the slave ship cargo hold overlaid on a maritime scene.

Related Objects: