



Betye Saar, *The Edge of Ethics*, 2010.  
Photo: Craig Smith

From a symbolism expressing Black captivity to allusions to Paul Laurence Dunbar's image of aviary confinement in his 1899 poem "Sympathy," Betye Saar's *The Edge of Ethics* (2010) has been explained by many critics in a steadfast, predictive manner. While these interpretations are not necessarily incorrect, they sidestep the sculpture's heterogeneity, its conduct-probing, conditional title, and its implicit paradoxes. Instead of the Black female torso embodying "suffering," "burden-bearing," and "vulnerability"—superficially expressed by being chained to a vintage glass flask and standing with attached bird legs on the back of a toy alligator—could this figure represent a philosophical and abstract statement and not just something reactionary? Has Saar created a structure that is not so much victimization incarnated but, rather, a materialization of a state of mind that, as its title suggests, hovers between an ethical stance and a moral principle? This deviation from seeing *The Edge of Ethics* as representing anguish and instead, invoking an exposition on proprieties-versus-values relies on a comparable analytical instrument: the bocio, or the assemblages comprised of wooden carvings, ephemera, and bindings created by ritual experts from West Africa's Guinea Coast region. Like the alchemical entities contained within bocio sculptures, *The Edge of Ethics* itemizes its spiritually imbued components, whose aggregate—contained in a trefoil arch-shaped green cage and flanked at its rear by a spindly coral fan—puts into three-dimensions a metaphorical house of cards. This edifice, overflowing with meaning, creates an autonomous, existential conundrum for the sculpture's discerning creator and viewers.

-Dr. Richard J. Powell