

ARTFORUM

Mary Beth Edelson

David Lewis, New York, USA

by Alex Kitnick
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Mary Beth Edelson, *Many Breasted Great Mother (Lucy Lippard)*, 1973, ink, grease pencil, and paper on silver gelatin print, 10 × 8".
From the series "Women Rising," 1973.

The seventeen photographs in this show offered a morphing, moving image of subjectivity. Drawn from Mary Beth Edelson's 1973 series "Women Rising," they were all self-portraits of some kind or other: black-and-white pictures of the artist standing naked on a beach in North Carolina with her legs spread and her arms held up and bent at the elbow. Most incorporated the same picture, printed from the same negative, though a couple of others offered variations on the theme. But the photographs served only as the ground for figures to come: With marker and paint, Edelson went to work on them, transforming herself into a cast of fantastic characters—in one (*Burning Bright*), she becomes a tiger, while in another she dons the bikinied costume of TV's *Wonder Woman*. The imagery moves in all directions—from the mythological to the mediatic, and the space where the two meet—but the striking thing about them is their anti-essentialism. They don't so much say, "I contain multitudes," as declare that the artist can try anything on.

Edelson often pays homage in her art to her predecessors and contemporaries—those people who sustain her work and make it possible—and one of the most powerful works in the series depicts Lucy Lippard, her face collaged over Edelson's, labeled "many breasted great mother." It's one of the most generative depictions of a critic I know, and it's worth noting that Edelson made the work (as well as the other pictures in the series) the year Lippard published her great file on Conceptual art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. But if Edelson acknowledges Lippard's canonical accomplishment, she also pushes her thinking into other registers. A related work in the group, *Dematerializing*, depicts Edelson engulfed in a swarm of dots, as if she were breaking up and disintegrating into space. Clearly, the new information economy had different consequences for different subjects, and different art practices internalized them in different ways.

But these photographs lined only the entryway of the exhibition. At its end, we entered a swarm. This work—for it was impossible to see it otherwise—is, in fact, a collection of many smaller works, and it has been some time in the making (the earliest pieces date from the 1970s and Edelson continues to create them). Each unit depicts an image from Edelson's private pantheon: Botticelli's *Venus* is here. Grace Jones appears again and again. Louise Nevelson is somewhere over there, perhaps next to a Cycladic figure, and she might be over here again. You couldn't keep track; you just followed your eye. The cumulative effect, somewhat similar to the work of Edelson's contemporary Nancy Spero, celebrates female multiplicity. Pinned in temporary position, the images repeat and enjoy different afterlives, making new kinships and alliances. Importantly, the installation was not fixed and the next owner will be allowed to reconfigure the components as he or she sees fit. Supported by raw canvas, the pieces seemed like parts of a patchwork quilt that would never be bound together in final form.

In the middle of this maelstrom was *Kali Bobbit*, 1994, a store-bought female mannequin reworked to take on patriarchy, with a belt of knives tightened fast around her waist. Sporting six arms like the Hindu goddess *Kali*—it is worth noting that one of the 1973 photo-drawings transforms Edelson into the same deity—the figure also evokes Lorena Bobbitt, who cut off her husband's penis one night after many years of abuse. If each age invents its own god(dess), I think it goes without saying that *Kali Bobbit* is a fitting one for our time.