

Art in America

Mary Beth Edelson

by William S. Smith
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Mary Beth Edelson: *To the Rescue*, 1973, oil and ink on silver gelatin print, 10 by 8 inches. Courtesy David Lewis, NY

Patriarchal Piss (1973), on view as part of Mary Beth Edelson's solo show "The Devil Giving Birth to the Patriarchy," is a hand-painted photograph of the artist standing nude on a sand dune in North Carolina. Severed (male) heads hang from her biceps, and an angry cloud has been scribbled over her head. She appears poised to ram the patriarchy right back up the devil's ass. The work is one of seventeen painted photographs from Edelson's "Woman Rising" series on view here. Most reproduce the same image of the artist, but are embellished with varying symbols and patterns that make reference to female goddess archetypes. Some works allude to the artist's peers—Louise Bourgeois and Lucy Lippard in particular—and other worldly figures. The series seems to contain the kernels of multiple aesthetic traditions within feminist art: Wonder Woman and Kali join forces within the repeating, serial structure of Conceptual art.

The walls of the main gallery are covered with intricate collages that expand the aesthetic of "Woman Rising," melding photographs and reproductions of artworks with drawings: the face of Botticelli's *Venus* appears multiple times, partially obscured by tangles of black lines. Presiding over the space is *Kali Bobbit* (1994), a multi-armed mannequin wearing black lingerie and a belt of chef's knives. Coming from Edelson, who began working as an activist during the civil rights movement, the homage to a woman who struck back at her violent husband reads as a wry monument to direct action.

Original article:

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