

ARTFORUM

Mary Beth Edelson

by Jeanne Silverthorne
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Mary Beth Edelson *Coming Round*, paint on canvas, 96 x 144."

MARY BETH EDELSON

I may be imagining it, but it seems to me there's something newly humorous about Mary Beth Edelson's latest notes on myth and ritual. Things seem serious enough as one checks off the budget of stock m & r icons: woman as lamia (bronzes of woman-headed snakes and spirals), woman as goddess (ruins of Greco-Roman busts), fire and water as purifying elements, journeys through caves as rites of passage, and so forth. At the same time, though, Edelson presents these as both melodramatic and petrified (or perhaps melodramatic because petrified). The legendary instruments of triumphant climax—the lightning bolt, the winged victory—are deployed as a couple of dusty, overworked props; the grays of the paintings show them hard and deliberately inert, victims of a Gorgon gaze. The tired old myths are chipped detritus.

Going back into the hills, regression in the service of the collective ego has been Edelson's choice, but now she seems to find the area barren. What do you do when you're between a rock and a hard place? Improvise, Edelson seems to say. The real innovation, to which most of the works form a lengthy prologue, is the introduction of a new archetype, a hybrid in a way (ridiculous as it sounds) of Bugs Bunny

and the Old One. The trickster rabbit (of which, surely, Bugs is the most famous example) was the somewhat mysterious protagonist of an earlier roundelay of drawings. Now his wiliness is joined with an Olympian wisdom to create the trickster goddess. This could be a rather Odyssean character, a paragon of opportunism, sly and cunning. As we infer the derivation of horned goddess from long-eared hare, the contrast between the former's placid classical features and her satanic smile is on the order of that between the angels and devils that materialized during crises of conscience in cartoons. Likewise, small bronzes of horned caves, which do double duty as figures, have the quirky air of souvenirs from a magic show. If these are miniature Mephistopheles, they play to the crowd by swirling their capes. This cave-retreat has been a significant device for Edelson before, but here it suggests that rather than a place to which woman may return to draw strength it is now an internal power she may possess, possibly enfolding others in it. The seemingly minor status of these pieces raises doubts about how important Edelson considers her new "paradigm," but the trickster goddess looks like a serviceable, or at any rate fresh, role model.