

# ARTFORUM

Mary Beth Edelson

November, 20. 2011



Mary Beth Edelson in her studio, 2011. (Photo: Emily Hope)

*Mary Beth Edelson has lived in New York since the 1970s. Active in the civil rights movement, she was a founder of the Heresies collective and journal as well as an early member of A.I.R Gallery. She is a key voice from the first generation of American artists to base their practice in feminist issues, and she has shown her paintings, collages, installations, and photographs worldwide. "Burn in Hell," two solo shows of collages, opens at Balice Hertling & Lewis in New York on November 10 and at Balice Hertling on Paris on the 17th.*

THERE IS A FEMINIST ADAGE: The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. To which I say: Let's get some other tools! Fuck his house—who goes there anyway? I've always felt that we can claim our own tools by deeply examining history, by researching the eras when women were revered in a different way—or so the myth goes. This is why I am so interested in ancient goddess figures—for example, the enigmatic Baubo, the trickster Sheelana-gig, an Egyptian bird goddess, and Minoan snake goddesses. All four of these figures can be reinterpreted and repurposed, and thus they show up over and over again in my collage work.

I've been making art since I was twelve years old and have saved basically everything. The first task in trying to organize these exhibitions was to sift through and narrow down this massive amount of work I have produced—

since I am really, really old. When I was in school, artists were either sculptors or painters, and for a long time I was just a painter, but I arrived at a point where I realized that I didn't need to follow such a narrow road. In the early 1970s, I was living in Washington, DC, and very involved in a Jungian seminar. I was fascinated with Jung's ideas about the collective unconscious and tried to make work that depicted that—very presumptuous of me, but to some extent it was good and became important to me as a feminist. The critique that Jung made of the symbolic world, myths, and the figures therein was liberating, and around that time I began working with fire, photography, collage, and performance. I was still painting, too! Over time, though, I began to understand that what Jung offered was still in the end a patriarchal construct, and I broadened my approach and analysis, informed by feminism.

The title of the new show references a project I made in 1994, *Combat Zone: HQ Against Domestic Violence*, a three-month-long storefront space in Times Square that was sponsored by Creative Time. The most successful thing I did there was to invent ways for women in abusive situations to use self-defense. While working on that project I also started an artist's book about Lorena Bobbitt, exploring what it meant for a woman to castrate a man, and what effect it had on culture. The book included eighty-one drawings and is the anchor for the Paris show.

My interest in Bobbitt is obviously a feminist one—I had a point of view about it immediately and wanted to examine and express that. I started thinking of her as Saint Bobbitt because she really did something for all women: She retaliated. In addition to the book, I've also created a lot of other drawings and a sculpture of a Kali figure that I made out of a mannequin. She has a number of arms and a girdle of knives around her waist as well as a bracelet of severed penises around her arm. In short, she is decorated. I first exhibited the work at *Combat Zone* and put this very dramatic lighting on it. It sums up my feelings about the Bobbitt situation, a situation that I feel the same way about today as when I first heard about it—I thought it was really funny. As someone once said: A hundred ten million women worldwide are survivors of genital mutilation, and then there is just John Bobbitt—one man, one name.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler