

ARTFORUM

Mary Beth Edelson

By Prudence Peiffer
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View of "Mary Beth Edelson," 2013. Foreground: *Fire Altar*, 1973. Background, from left: *Passage Series: Two Clouds*, 1972-73; *Passage Series: Dawning*, 1972-73; *Passage Series: Night Passage*, 1972-73.

"We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence," Virginia Woolf writes in *The Waves*, 1931, her famously elusive novel in which multiple narrative voices intertwine to form a collective consciousness. It's an apt description of Mary Beth Edelson's exploration of the collective unconscious in the terrific "*22 Others*, 1973": What do we make of images that keep coming to us, and how do we make ourselves continue to see new things, even forty years on?

"*22 Others*, 1973" re-presents most of the art from a 1973 show held at the Washington, DC, venues the Corcoran Gallery, Fletcher's Boathouse, and Henri Gallery that was among the first major exhibitions of Edelson's art. Inspired by a five-year Jungian reading seminar and a desire to expand her material practice, Edelson in 1971 asked twenty-two friends and colleagues to provide prompts for new works. These ranged from ruminations on subject matter ("I am enclosing a copy of *National Geographic* in case you would like to include a giant tortoise") to blunt commands about material ("make a painting with honey"). This exhibition of the resultant efforts spun its compass needle as if some geomagnetic force were under the gallery's cement: The various works included a propane-gas

tank feeding a circle of flames (*Fire Altar*, 1973), seashells on a wooden shelf wreathed in spindly wires (*Chance*, 1973), and an enigmatic black box with stool (*Alice's Dream*, 1972), which dared you to sit and peer inside a mirrored cavern of infinite protuberances (the husks of gourds)—a kind of miniature Louise Bourgeois environment.

The ambition and risk of this collaboratively conceived exhibition remains, forty years later, thrilling. As does Edelson's transparency of process, demonstrated by the materials assembled in the container *Work Box*, 1972, where one could leaf through a curt letter from Georgia O'Keeffe answering a request for her photograph, sketches of prompts that didn't work, and snapshots of Edelson sitting in her yard, stuffing foam rubber into canvas pillows that would become *The Waves*, 1972. Before this reprise, few might have realized that Edelson's best-known artwork, the feminist touchstone *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper*, 1972, actually came out of artist Ed McGowin's prompt for "22 Others" to "expose whatever negative aspects [of organized religion] might occur to you." It's one of the show's only works that's been exhibited in the interim (and the one of that feels most bound to its historic moment); most of the others have been waiting in storage for this chance to resurface.

Honey Painting, 1972, seemed particularly impatient to reclaim its space: A stain of honey seeped out from paper pasted on board and tracked a gooey path down the impeccable white wall to a blue ceramic bowl resting on a rock; some of it puddled on the floor. Three commanding, oneiric canvases from "Passage Series," 1972-73—*Night Passage*, *Dawning*, and *Two Clouds*—filled the main gallery. One of the paintings featured lumpy extensions of its gray undulations that mirrored *The Waves* across the room and invited visitors to lounge, suspended, for a spell. (As in *Honey Painting*, material here had a sweet, bodily awkwardness that slowed down perception.)

Most compelling, and related to Edelson's ongoing "Story Gathering Boxes," 1971-, was *Sequential Religious Piece*, 1972, based on a suggestion by curator and critic Walter Hopps and comprising a box filled with four quadrants of thirteen illustrated wooden tablets each. As one shuffled through these colorful, abstract, and organic cruciform symbols and collages, one was reminded of the clairvoyant early-twentieth-century production of Hilma af Klint—another important woman artist now having her moment—and of Edelson's insistence, over fifty years of working, on the palpable and the sacred within any form.

Time has a funny way of flipping references, or maybe archetypes have a funny way of flipping time: Seen in 2013, the wonderfully weird painting *Knapdale*, 1973, looked like a Wes Anderson prop, complete with kitschy branch frame, plastic palm fronds, and a dangling fish skeleton Edelson found near the Delaware River. The artist Paul Richard had offered a prompt describing a remote Scottish peninsula with wild goats and orchids. In Edelson's hands, this image becomes a universal souvenir from someplace we hadn't even realized we'd visited. Or, to paraphrase Jung, dreams give us more than we ask.