

# DAZED

## The feminist history of women artists taking nudes in nature

From Francesca Woodman, to Carolee Schneemann and Judy Chicago, Mother Nature was a powerful force for liberation

by Lexi Manatakis  
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“Goddess Head (Calling Series)”, 1975  
Photography Mary Beth Edelson, Courtesy David Lewis, New York  
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Sandro Botticelli, Pablo Picasso, and Lucien Freud have two things in common: they hold some of the world best recognised female nudes, yet they are all men. Existing across time and space, the way their nudes, like Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” (1464), have been famed in art history shows how women were stripped of their own natural state so men could excel in the art world. Constantly at battle with a society who would rather objectify the female nude than let women dictate their own representation, women began to resist artistically in many ways. Take the activist-artist group, Guerrilla Girls, for example, who launched a poster campaign in 1984 aimed at New York’s Metropolitan Museum.

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?”, reads one of its most well-known posters, which targets the amount of male-produced female nudes that were in the space, as well as the museum’s role in propelling art’s gender disparity. Outside of poster art, many female artists took to staged protests and performance art within global cities to reclaim the female nude.

Beyond the city, women started to take nudes in the landscape as a form of resistance. The environment quickly became a key force in the fight for freedom as women turned to the purity and inherently feminine Mother Nature to set themselves free from the shackles of the patriarchy and the voyeuristic fixation of the male gaze. Tracing the evolution of this history is the Nevada Museum of Art’s upcoming show, *Laid Bare in the Landscape*, that will run from September 29 – January 27 2019. The show will run parallel to an Anne Brigman exhibition, and *Laid Bare* uses Brigman’s work as the starting point for the evolution of the female form and the environment.

Taking nudes in the landscape as early as the 1900s, Brigman would set the tone for women in the landscape, as shown by Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Laura Aguilar, and more who all feature in *Laid Bare*. “To compare the proto-feminist landscape photographs of Brigman”, explains the show’s curator Anne Wolfe, “to works by her feminist counterparts of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is to weave a new thread through generations of visionary women artists who have aimed to further alternative ways of seeing and knowing.” Beyond reclaiming the female nude, the landscape became a canvas for women to escape the confines of institutional art spaces while attempting to correct the masculine destruction of the environment caused by men in the Land Art movement, and using the earth to reclaim identity from racial oppression.

To launch the show, Wolfe walks us through six key artists from the show and why the female nude and the landscape were two of the most important tools for their resistance.

#### MARY BETH EDELSON

Ann Wolfe: Many artists embraced the outdoors as a grand stage upon which to evoke ancient rituals to convey the idea that female power was deeply rooted in the natural world. Beginning in the late 1960s, East Coast feminist artist Mary Beth Edelson frequently ventured to isolated outdoor places like caves and ruins to perform rituals and other solo nude performances that she documented using time-lapse photography. By interweaving her body together with artefacts from nature, she effectively created female goddess archetypes in her works of the early 1970s. In “Goddess Head” (1975), for example, she photographed herself in a rocky canyon with her arms outstretched to convey a sense of power and strength. The pose can be compared to Egyptian and Mesopotamian female goddess statuary. She manipulated her final image by overlaying a spiralling seashell onto her head, further alluding to primaeval creation myths and female interconnectedness and interdependence with nature.