

# David Lewis

Mary Beth Edelson  
*Shape Shifter*  
March 3 - April 14, 2019

David Lewis is pleased to present *Shape Shifter*, Mary Beth Edelson's second solo exhibition at the gallery.

The gallery's 2016 exhibition *The Devil Gave Birth to the Patriarchy* was the last exhibition installed by the artist herself and also the first to focus on her seminal 1973 series *Woman Rising*, a series of performative self-portraits shot in the Outer Banks, North Carolina which were later hand-painted and collaged by the artist, transforming herself into archetypes of feminine divinity and power.

*Shape Shifter* builds on the artist's development of the historic achievement and searing insights of the *Woman Rising* works by presenting two complementary bodies of work from the mid-1970s: the Great Goddess Cut-Outs, which were first exhibited at Corcoran Gallery of Art/Henri Gallery, Washington D.C. in 1975, and Edelson's serial ritualistic black and white photographs of the mid-to-late 1970s. The exhibition of these important bodies of work coincides with the wider current global celebration and consideration of the artist's important legacy and achievement.

I. Whereas the seminal *Woman Rising* works display the power and possibilities of private ritual (and in doing so are an evocation of the Goddess on an intimate scale) the Great Goddess Cut-Outs, shaped paintings lining the gallery walls, are towering and life-like with their monumental presence. They conjure Goddess archetypes from various cultures and historical feminist figures. Together they create a temple, a space of communal ritual and of female power. Their presence suggests a universal communion of women across time and space, as per Edelson: "The ascending archetypal symbol of the feminine unfold today in the psyche of modern Everywoman. They encompass the multiple forms of the Great Goddess—Reaching across the centuries we take the hand of our Ancient Sisters."<sup>1</sup> The imagery, emblematic and geometric, draws upon a range of mythologies and narratives, and the artist's contemporary icons, including "Louise,"— an homage to Edelson's friend and mentor Louise Bourgeois. Prominently featured are two "Sophia" Goddess, crowned with full circles, described by the artist as the "Philosophia... who bears the world disk zodiak, planets, sun and moon, and again the Feminine Self as the creative center of the Mandala... the symbol of Everywoman united in spiritual transformation."<sup>2</sup>

The works also demonstrate Edelson's remarkable prowess as a sculptor and painter, which would later dominate her artistic output in the 1980s. These works, though two-dimensional, become three-dimensional through both the depth of their layers of paint and the history metaphorically inscribed into their surfaces via markings and scratchings. These marks are in a sense Edelson communicating with each Goddess, writing an oral history into each work and contributing to each of their individual histories.

II. The front gallery presents a selection of mid-to-late 1970s black and white photographs. While the Great Goddess Cut-Outs assert monumentality, iconic and archaic presence, and deploy a range of painterly materiality and technique, the photos instead present highly choreographed sequences of private ritual disappearance: disappearance into space, into the landscape, into the abyss of (non)-self. The figure is ethereal, ambiguous, and eternal: the artist's identity is concealed, prioritizing the land and performed actions. The landscapes are empty and implicitly haunted; the artist is reduced to a sibilant whisper in a ruin, a hissing in the grass. Edelson selected and visited sites "where collective energies have been important in the past." (i.e. Yugoslavia, Iceland, etc.). The serial, narrative quality of these works suggests a passage of time, or passage into another realm altogether.<sup>3</sup> This is the flip side of the active,

heroic, assertive quest for archetypes of powerful feminine divinity that reaches a literal apex in the Great Goddess Cut-Outs. It is also a rigorous engagement with the the conceptual orientation and experimentation of advanced art in the 1970s: the artist reducing herself to an ghostly trace within the carefully constructed meditation on the possibilities of the indexical medium of photography. The work anticipates Francesca Woodman while glancing back to Victorian spirit photography; it also (and this is typical of Edelson) re-writes a patriarchal art-historical canon by re-visiting Yves Klein's famous (and famously fraudulent) leap into the void. Similarly, the suggestive and often poetic use of landscape in the photographs point to Edelson's drawings and ideas for feminist Utopian Land Art and Earthworks—an analogous reclaiming of a heroic masculine set of traditions. As Adam Weinberg observes, "The rituals Edelson performs are not documentary attempts to recreate historical or "primitive" rites from other cultures but rather are her own personal creations. She seems to suggest that each generation must evolve in its own rites and that each of us must attempt to realize a primordial experience on our own creative ground."<sup>4</sup>

The two important bodies of works presented in the exhibition thus serve as mirror images, or twins, of Mary Beth Edelson's practice in the mid-1970s.

Mary Beth Edelson (b.1933, East Chicago, IN) is a celebrated American artist, activist, and pioneer of the first-generation Feminist art movement. For the past 50 years she has created iconic artworks - ranging from photography, painting, sculpture and drawing to performance, book/print making, collages and murals - often using her own body as canvas and subject matter. Edelson is currently the subject of a retrospective at Kunsthalle Münster, and was the subject of a celebrated retrospective mounted by Malmö Kunstmuseum, Sweden, which traveled to Migros Museum, Zürich (2006), as well as the traveling retrospective "Shape Shifter: the Art of Mary Beth Edelson (1988-1990)." Edelson has had numerous solo shows internationally and was included in important survey exhibitions including "Painting 2.0," Museum Brandhorst, Munich; "WACK! Art of the Feminist Revolution," MOCA, Los Angeles; "NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star," New Museum, NY; "Greater New York 2015," MoMA PS1, New York; "Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography," The Museum of Modern Art, New York; "Mothers of Invention," Mumok Museum of Contemporary Art, Vienna; "Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women," David Zwirner Gallery, New York; and the traveling survey, "Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Verbund Collection."

Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, NY; Tate Modern, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY; Walker Art Center, MN; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; Malmö Kunstmuseum, Sweden; and Sammlung Verbund, Vienna, among others.

#### Notes

1. Mary Beth Edelson, *Woman Rising* (Self-published, 1975), 4.
2. Erich Neumann in Mary Beth Edelson, *Woman Rising* (Self-published, 1975), 5.
3. For Lucy Lippard, this also points to the "familiar feminist rejection of the single image, single focus, single style imposed by the dominant mainstream arts." (Lucy Lippard, "Fire and Stone: Politics and Ritual," quoted in Mary Beth Edelson, *Seven Cycles: Public Rituals*. (New York: Self-published, 1980), 6-9.)
4. Adam D. Weinberg, *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1989), 108-109.