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New York Art Galleries: What to See Right Now

Mary Beth Edelson's "Great Goddess Cut-Outs"

by Roberta Smith
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Mary Beth Edelson's "Great Goddess Cut-Outs" in her new show, "Shape Shifter," at David Lewis gallery.
Mary Beth Edelson and David Lewis, New York

Some basic facts regarding the 18 examples of Mary Beth Edelson's "Great Goddess Cut-Outs" that currently line the walls of David Lewis's gallery in her new show, "Shape Shifter": They were made in 1974-75 with acrylic and plywood in her studio in New York. They or others from the series were shown in her solo exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1975. They have almost never been seen since, certainly not in such numbers.

A subsequent consideration may be how radically these works reshape your sense of Ms. Edelson's achievement or the history of 1970s feminist art. Surely my amazement is not unique. A favored Edelson motif is the goddess as a metaphor for women's powers – of resilience, transformation and anger. Her best-known '70s works are her "Woman Rising" photographs, in which she enacts mythic rituals, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, amid natural landscapes, as shown by several examples in this exhibition. But the power of the cutouts is less about narrative than materiality and form: totemic presences conjured by brusque but beautiful painted surfaces and towering scale. They are aggressively alive with spirit while also raising issues regarding primitivism and essentialism that are much more suspect today than earlier. But they are among the physically most convincing works of Ms. Edelson's career. Feel them first; parse them later.