MARY BETH EDELSON, A.I.R. Gallery:

MARY BETH EDELSON’s work at A.I.R. Gallery is avowedly feminist; it’s about fabricating and discovering images that glorify women. Artist as spiritual Prometheus plunges deep into her subconscious to bring back the dripping symbols for the new world. That’s what I gather from the archival quantity of material—including texts both boxed and bound, and large yellow paper collages bestrewn with pencilled quotes, strips of photos, symbological indexes, and larger motifs (mostly circles and wavy lines)—that she’s unloaded for this exhibition. Unlike ‘30s Surrealists and ‘50s abstractionists concerned with myth-making and archetype retrieval, Edelson neither obscures her symbology nor heroizes herself. Instead, launched within a conventional lectern Conceptual all-white installation, Edelson has constructed her works to perform a didactic function.

In Outward/Inward, a white-painted table and stool are jammed up against the paper sheet on the wall. A four-part wooden box on the table contains cards stamped with themes upon which you’re asked to write: “mother stories,” “father stories,” “your philosophy,” and “the story of your life.” Lots of people wanted to write their philosophy, and most of it is of the “be here now, yes, ain’t it grand” variety. Reading the cards (I filled one out too) complicates and intensifies your response to the work—even if you don’t fill out a card, you think of what you might write.

It’s a tight system. New information is continually channeled through the piece, and each successive viewer has an idea of how others have responded. Should Edelson close it up—give out no more cards—Outward/Inward would become a report on response then and there, and a public version of other works in which a similar box contains painted wooden placards, her own meditations on themes in the sheet before the viewer.

Sexual Fantasies is a clear illustration of how Edelson assimilates and extrapolates the material she culls. A book of contributions solicited from various artists lies on the table next to a box of tiny wood slab paintings illustrating symbols from the stories in the book. Some of these become small panel drawings on the yellow sheet beneath a large central cunt dripping white paint, ripple lines, and a quote: “What struck me about the sexual fantasies that I collected from some living American artists was the recurrent desire to unite with a god.”

By her lights, maybe. But this insistence on the mythic component of sexuality is frequently heavy-handed. Handwritten sentences on Bird Altar/Woman Rising announce her purpose: “The ascending archetypal symbols 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.” To write your “mother,” “self,” “heroine,” and “womankind” stories for Bird Altar, you have to kneel down on a mat and look at pictures of a woman sticking her hands in the air—a praying posture that Paleo-Christian artists called orant. (Edelson calls it “evoking” or “calling” in the titles of several striking series of photos altered with paints and ink. In one of these she stands nude, haloed and radiating, enframing her face with her hands.)

Is woman-raising the next step after consciousness-raising? A lot of feminists have written to refute Freud. This can be done in political terms (as Edelson acknowledges in another story box in the show), but it often becomes involved with dismantling the belief structure, patently illustrated in mythological examples, that lies behind modern psychology. Assembling another, and for that purpose composting religious ideas and some implications of Reichian and Gestalt psychology (transformation, centering), is a central purpose of Edelson’s mystical Zeitgeist feminism.

— ALAN MOORE

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