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W O M A N V F E M A L E

(Changing Definitions)

B Y

C A T H Y A D D I S

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INTRODUCTION

The objectification and representation of women is one that is really ground deep into our culture, so that it is not really that men and women are different, but that difference is inscribed politically and ideologically in our society. In order for alternative readings to be read will require not just a changed consciousness, but the result of a different strategy of production of the image in relation to this social space, inside and outside the image.

(MacCarthy 1987, 'Visibly Female' p.11)

During the 1970s the need of many feminist artists to change the definition of "woman" began - provoked by the constant oppressive views surrounding femininity and womanhood. Women, cast as 'other', were both misunderstood and degraded, causing a number of feminist artists to use their work as a defensive tool; fighting against these widespread negative assumptions. Using their bodies as a primary medium, they aimed to challenge this Western thought of "woman" and 'womanhood'; and saw this only to be possible by disregarding the "female" and 'feminine' aspects of their beings.

However, while their work was both striking and provocative, it failed to penetrate into the established male art world, causing several successive female artists to question both their own aims and society's reaction to them. Due therefore to this re-evaluation and questioning, 'feminist' art began to take on a process of change. These female artists no longer set out to challenge the essence of "woman" or 'womanhood'; but instead, decided that by not challenging society's ancient beliefs of the "female", they could use them instead as a source of power to investigate themselves and their history.

This curious separation of "woman" and "female" has become the main area of questioning by female artists over the last twenty years, causing each decade to redefine what they believe to be the 'true' representation of the great myth of both "woman" and "female". By tracing the development of this changing feminist movement (through text and relevant issues) and questioning whether "woman" and "female" are opposites or complementaries; it soon becomes clear that this is a relevant issue, concerning not only today's contemporary 'female' artists (such as myself); but also Western society, where certainly a new wave of thought could do no harm.

A SEARCH FOR WOMANHOOD

....And it is said that all sin originated in the flesh of the body of a woman and lives in her body. (And the old text reads that Christ was born of a virgin in order that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated.) And we are reminded that we have brought death into the world.

(Griffin 1978, p.11)

Inquiries surrounding 'feminine' stereotypes, have had a long history. This has caused many female artists to seek to unravel the unchanging derogatory connections that women have had; fusing her with many negative taboos. These negative thoughts, believed to be an integral part of her being, are used constantly by Western societies to maintain her aura of 'difference'. As a consequence, women have come to realise, that these so called 'feminine stereotypes' are simply a "product of a patriarchal culture that constructs male dominance, through the significance it attaches to sexual difference" (Parker & Pollock 1981, p.81).

During the 1970s', this new wave of feminist thought was to mark a period of growing awareness of the discrimination women now faced in the wake of a post 1950s' retrenchment of the patriarchal system (Rosen 1989 p.178). It started when female artists began to contradict this dominant mainstream view of the female and allow 'another' representation to be seen. Believing that the term "feminine ensures masculine meanings and (therefore) masculine dominance" (Parker & Pollock 1981, p.81), they turned to their own bodies for inspiration. They made statements, not only about

their own bodies and the myths surrounding them, but society in general. They realised that by continuing to show images of this 'constructed' femininity, they too contributed to the male dominance that keeps women in this 'position of difference'.

By breaking down the barriers attached to so many taboo subjects (such as menstruation, pregnancy and motherhood), they started to validate their own existence and show that there was more to their bodies than some images or thoughts until this time depicted. Through the exploration of their own bodies and its functions, these artists aimed to identify to society, what their bodies were really capable of and bring to the fore a dimension of the female that had been checked and repressed. They opposed the long standing relationship women had with nature and joined as a united force, to demonstrate that their concerns were with the constraints that society placed on womanhood as a whole.

The menstrual taboo is universal. Generally the object of a taboo may be a source of good or evil, but in the case of menstrual blood, the ascription's are almost universally evil.
(Weideger, 1982, 'The Psychology of the Female Body', 1989)

Socially repressive attitudes towards menstruation, are related to many aspects of women's bodies. The fact that half the world's population spends the equivalent of a full six years menstruating is a reality society would rather ignore. Ideology and misunderstanding seem to form the basis of an explanation that has aroused very little discussion or writing; especially from the woman's point-of-view. Women, therefore use the word 'curse' to describe or explain menstruation and have come to regard it as a 'nuisance' or embarrassment that strikes once-a-month. Society views 'her condition' with caution and unless women challenge these negative prevarication's, they will spend one-sixth of their reproductive lives in adversity; with the knowledge that these negative beliefs are harmfully affecting their self-image and identity (Ussher 1989, p.42).

Women remain constantly surrounded by taboos and myths that both degrade and objectify; beliefs that society creates to debase women, simply because they can reproduce and men can't. Society has imposed taboos that lead women to resent their own bodies and its functions; which it then uses to control the female. For example, when a woman reaches adolescence and becomes sexually mature, she begins to believe that because she can menstruate, she is now more emotional, will have violent mood swings, regularly under go physical discomfort and have to accept a disruption of her social activity and inter personal relationships. Taboos that advise adolescent girls not to bath, wash their hair or swim during their period, ensure that from an early age, women feel guilty towards their sexuality and question their 'femininity'.

Historically in some cultures, menstruating women, were forced to live in separate living quarters, isolated away from food, with the belief that they cause contamination. Purification ceremonies have also been known to take place, often involving fumigation and physical punishment. The Apaches of North America, for example, practise traditional purification ceremonies and rituals, specifically aimed towards developing young women. During these ceremonies, rituals such as rubbing the vulva with nettle leaves and enforcing the temporary separation of the young girl from the community occurred. In ancient Persia, women also suffered isolation from their society and were placed in separate rooms. During that time, any woman who menstruated for more than the normal four days, received severe lashings, a further five nights of seclusion and believed to be an 'evil incarnate' by her society (Weidger, quoted by Usher, 1989 p.43).

Menstruation is therefore a universally, delicate subject that appears to contradict all that society associates with being 'female'; a force, uncontrollable by man, it is both evil and fearful. Due therefore to these many misunderstandings, women are not only left to deal with this 'curse' that takes her over once a month, but also deal with the fact that society unquestionably views her as 'contaminated', dirty, unstable and over-emotional.

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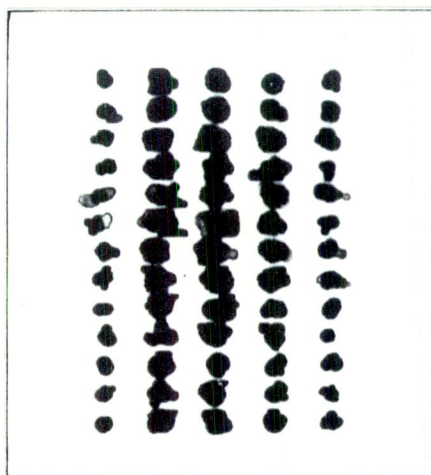
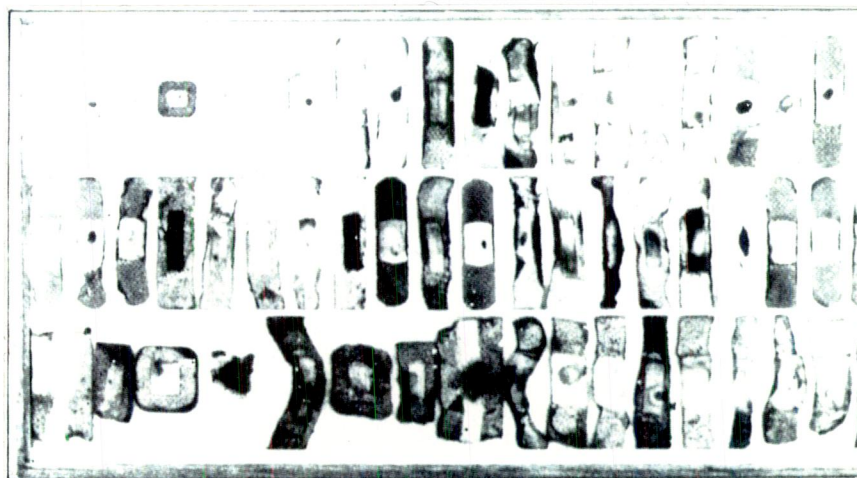
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The natural mysteries of childbirth and menstruation are as directly convincing as death itself, and remain to this day what they must also have been in the beginning, primary sources of religious awe.
(Usher 1989, p.11)

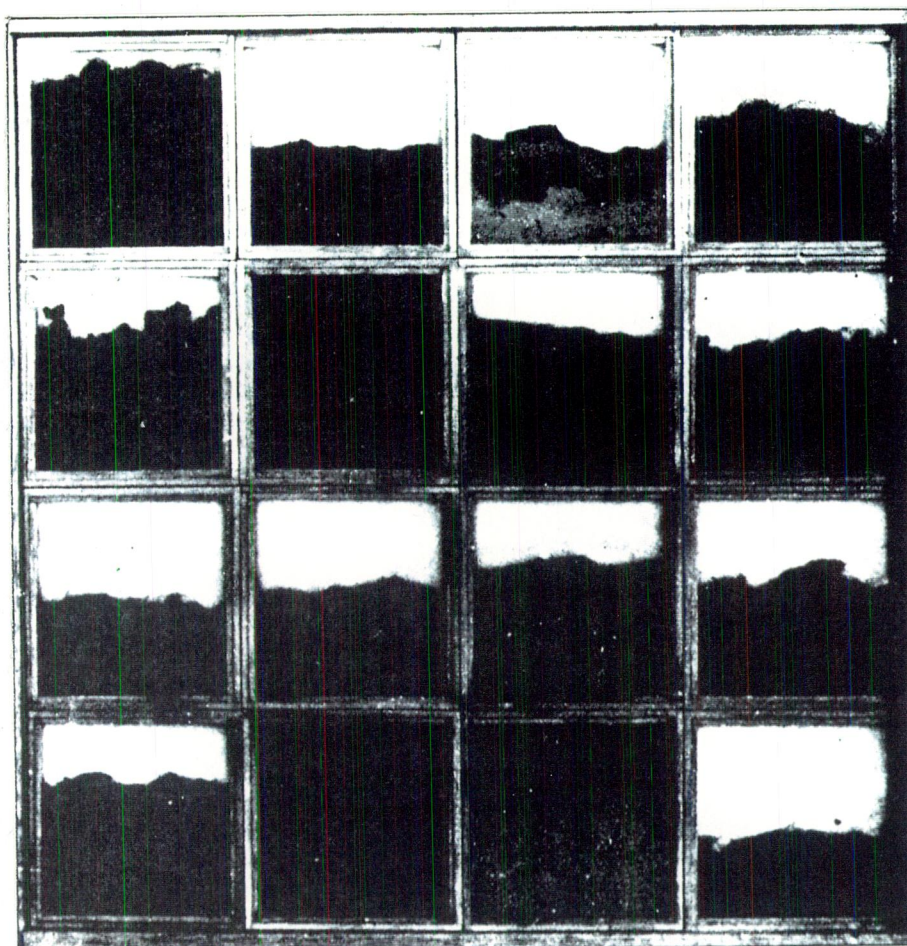
Due therefore, to these generalised assumptions surrounding menstruation and femininity, several artists during the 70's tried to change these repressive views. They rebelled against the 'feminine' stereotype by directly depicting and bluntly showing the 'real' flesh and blood of a woman. Judy Clark, for example, is one such artist who reacted conclusively to this Western belief surrounding these mythologies. She questioned intensely this area of menstrual taboos and based much of her art on hidden, discarded material; such as bodily secretions and waste. Her aim was to de-mystify women's bodies, and show that women, rather than societies, control their own bodies. Through the 'crude' use of her own bodily fluids, she aimed to show that "woman" is the being; while "female" is the myth.

It was through this use of 'bodily fluids' (which was a particular trend in the 70's), that many feminist artists found they were able to define an imagery that was purely female; one with which women could identify and society could learn. The materials that Judy Clark chose to work with included dust, urine, nail-clippings and menstrual blood; all showing parts of the violated female body. By mounting a collection of plasters in "Small Wounds", blood stains in "Menstruation" (see Fig. 1a & b) and 'objects' into boxes, not unlike museum cabinets in "Soft Surfaces" and then displaying them in galleries, she questioned society's whole attitude towards the female body (see Fig. 2).



*Judy Clark, from the exhibition "Body Works" 1974
 (1a - top) "Small Wounds"
 (1b) "Menstruation"*





Judy Clark, from the exhibition "Body Works" 1974

(2) "Soft Surfaces"

Hoping for public recognition and understanding, many artists during this time concentrated on menstruation because it remained the emblem of 'feminine' insecurity and inferiority in a modern patriarchal society (Parker & Pollock 1997, p.271). By exhibiting used sanitary towels and bloody tampons, these artists deliberately showed unseen female matter to raise a public awareness through shock. Instead of showing the 'idealised' female form that originated from the goddess; they exposed a 'femininity' never before publicly shown or talked about. It was a conflict between unacceptability and acceptability that either had the positive effect of opening up the 'fear of the unknown', or remained to be seen apathetically.

Women are never acceptable as they are, as de Beauvoir has suggested they are either the raw material for their own cosmetic transformations, in which nature is present but fetchingly 'culturized', or for the artist's. Alternatively, and at a deeper level, they (we) are somehow inherently disgusting, and have to be deoderized, depilated, polished and painted into the delicacy appropriate to our sex.
(Parker & Pollock, 1987, p.270)

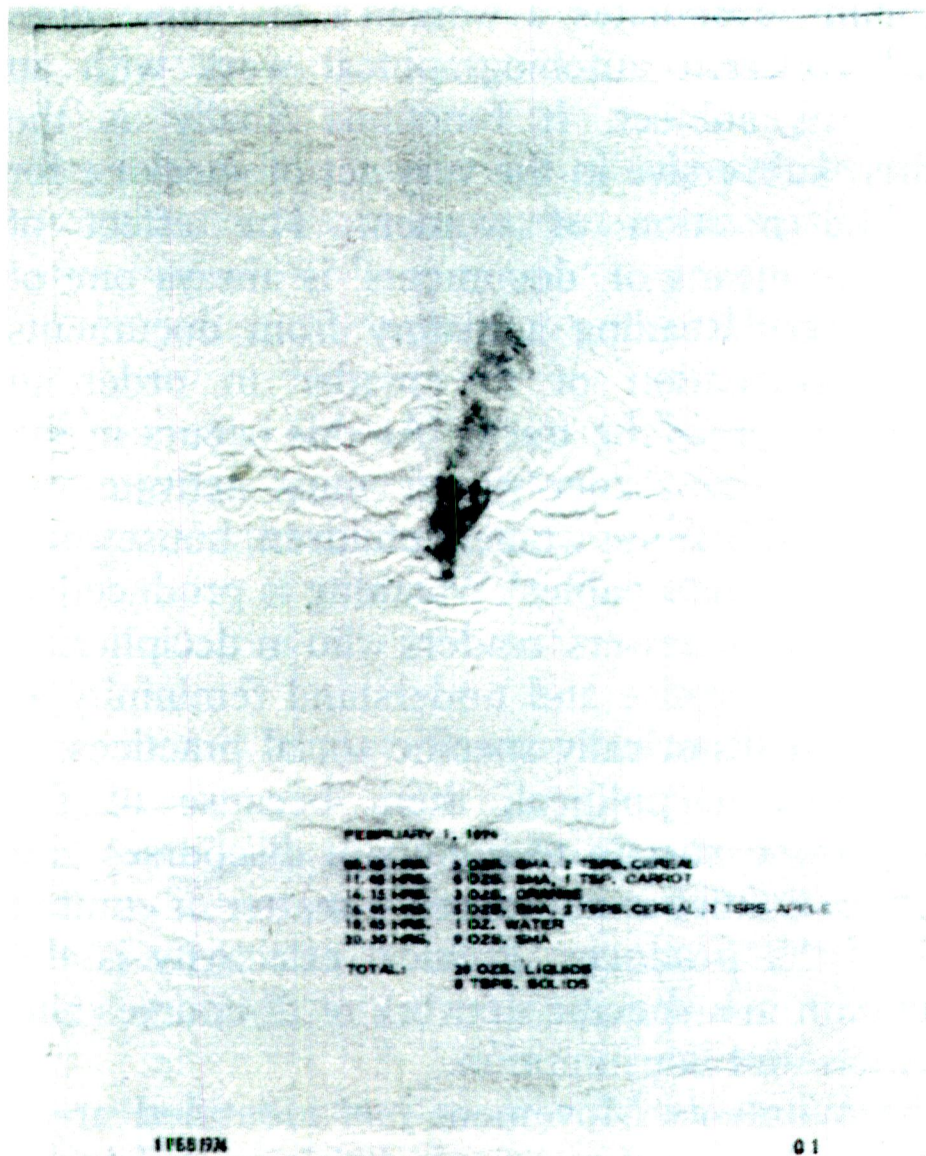
It is therefore not unfair to conclude that reproduction (and everything associated with it), is a negative experience in our society. 'Culture', is believed to be far more rewarding than 'nature': and for this reason reproduction is degraded. However, among the Munduracus tribe of South America, a completely different attitude exists, as reproduction is very powerful and regarded to be all important. Here, the men over-ruled the women who originally had access to the tribe's most important symbol - 'The Sacred Trumpets'. The men, now having full ownership of these trumpets truly believe that they are 'female' and have control of fertility and reproduction. Interestingly, it is only through their ownership of the trumpets that male members of the tribe feel they can gain respect from their society and deserve to hold power over the tribe (Sanday 1989, p.87). They know that reproduction is an essential element for their survival and therefore regard it as all-powerful.

In this tribe, the problems surrounding negative beliefs attached to reproduction and motherhood are groundless simply because the whole society is in awe of the female and her ability to reproduce - so much so that it is a power tool. The problems in our Western society, therefore emerge from the fact that women are in a constant depreciative position, with respect for their bodies being non-existent.

Mother and child relationships determine the whole process of socialisation, in so far as it constitutes the dominant factor in the formation of unconscious mental life.
(Kelly, 1992, p.181)

Mary Kelly, another artist from the 70's, is concerned with the many disapproving beliefs that encompass motherhood and housework and who approaches the subject from a political point of view. In her piece 'Post Partum Document', she tries to break down barriers surrounding these taboo subjects. Through the exploration of the mother and child relationship and by using taboo 'objects' (such as soiled nappies), she was able to pose questions about women being associated with nature and all things natural (see Fig 3). She concluded, through her work, that the mother and child relationship, instead of being completely natural and instinctive, is instead determined by our social situation and therefore not fully beyond our control (Parker & Pollock, 1987, p.181).

In my work, I have tried to cut across the predominant representation of women as the object of the look, in order to question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity and to foreground instead its' social construction as a representation of sexual difference within specific discourses.
(Kelly, 1983, p.xviii)

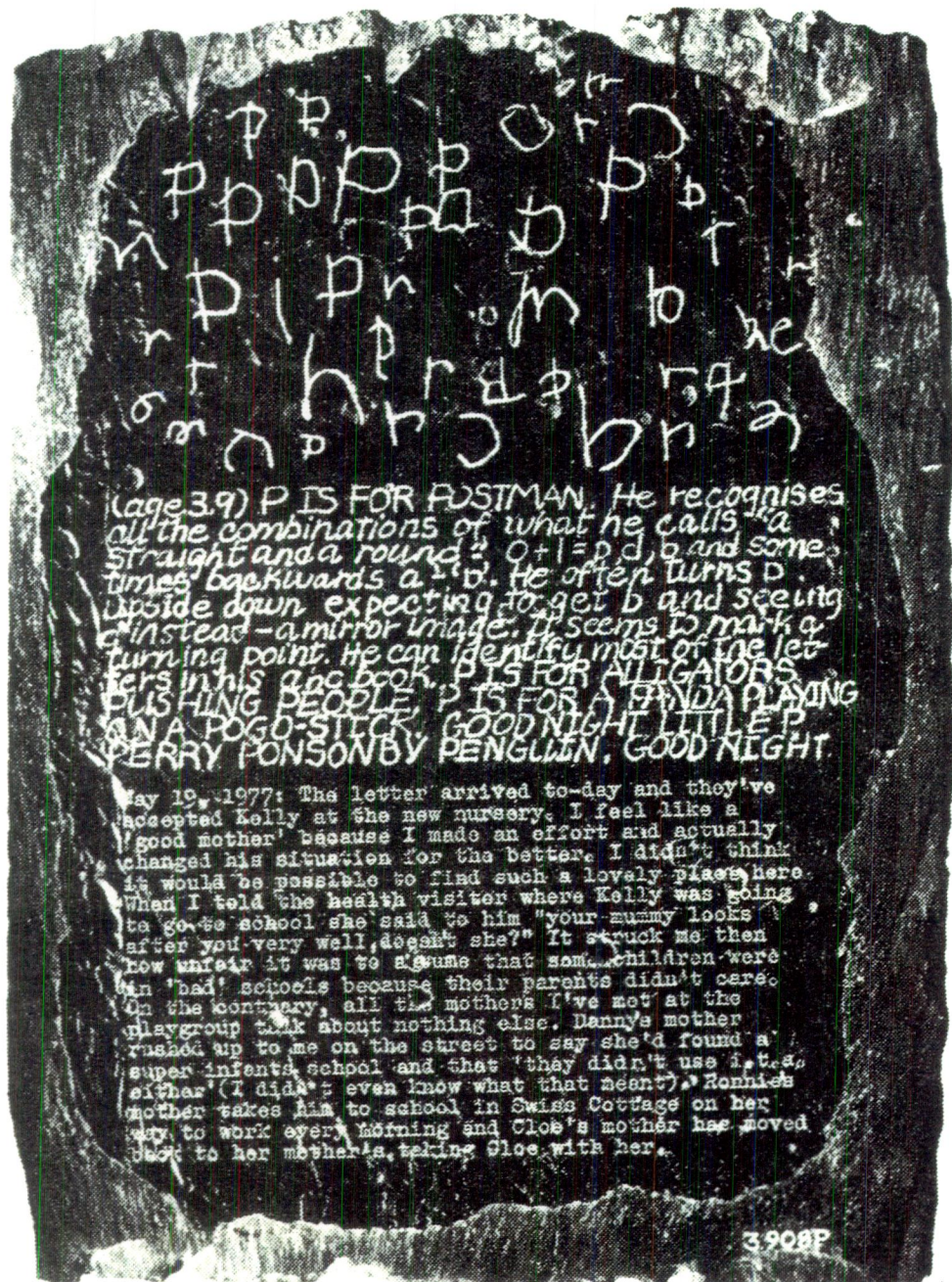


Mary Kelly "Post Partum Document", 1974 - 1979
(3) "Documentation I - Weaning From The Breast", 1974

While the piece is divided into six sections, each marked literally by different elements - starting with soiled nappy liners and ending with the child's own writing on slate (see Fig 4), Kelly did not simply try to document a child's development. Instead, she attempted to show, from the woman's point of view, all the experiences linked with becoming a mother and society's reaction to it. By using 'unconventional' taboo materials, such as nappies that are "equated in masculine ideology as messy, emotional and private" and presenting them as art, (instead of the expected photograph of a mother and child 'naturally' together), Kelly was able to show and analyse for society what 'mother's work' means (King, 1992, p.179).

Through her piece, Mary Kelly speaks for those who suffer in silence. This 'feminine' voice, obliges the viewer to "study the initiation of the child into a language (that) is the symbolic system of a patriarchal order" (King, 1992, p.170). By raising many questions surrounding motherhood and femininity, she tries to show (like Judy Clark) that there are many elements of the female that society represses, hides and then uses against her.

Through their art, these artists of the seventies sought to offer a 'new understanding' to society. They challenged many established conventions related to social order, reproduction, domestic labour and femininity, in the hope that society would change. By concentrating on issues surrounding 'womanhood' and "woman", these artists believed that it was only through their strong political statements and by involving an element of shock, that change would eventually occur.



Mary Kelly "Post Partum Document", 1974 - 1979,
 (4) "Documentation VI - On The Insistence of The Letter", 1979.

THE GLORY OF THE GODDESS = THE WHOLE OF WOMANHOOD

*Separating the sea from the sky she brooded over the waters until
she gave birth to life: Herself.
(Stein, 1992, p.26)*

The ancient belief is that creation is the beginning; it is the first spark in a black hole. It is the arising of a form from nothing, coming from the 'watery abyss' of the universe, to put disorder into order and life where there was none before. It is the birth of a whole natural world, that was seen in all ancient societies to be an achievement that could only be female.¹ She was called Pandora and it was her femininity, along with her reproductive powers that was the cause of her adoration. She was responsible for the birth of the fertile earth and all men were in awe of her 'power'

Her many female symbols still surround our consciousness universally. While much of this female power and glory is ignored by Western patriarchal society, for many female artists of the 70's, she was the ideal image of womanhood and her form was used as an escape from the oppressive patriarchal restrictions.

Judy Chicago, is just one of many artists who used the image of the goddess as a tool, to question society. However, while working along side Judy Clark and Mary Kelly, in a search for a true definition of "woman", her work was very different in its approach. Unlike their very direct political response to society, Chicago used the goddess to re-discover the past, to try and uncover the long forgotten aura she used to hold.

By tracing the development of the goddess worship, she was able to show that there was once a time when women were in both political and social control. She illustrated how patriarchal societies led to the gradual destruction of these matriarchal societies and on to eventual female oppression.

'*The Dinner Party*', by Judy Chicago was a combined installation piece that was made with the help of several other people, who merged as a united group to reach out to women at large and examine this journey from matriarchy to patriarchy. By looking at the contribution of women to the entire Western civilisation, it was hoped that the piece would be seen as a tribute to the whole history of women, that spanned from this great goddess up to modern day.

The installation itself, consisted of three long tables, placed end to end to create an equilateral triangle. The tables, covered with linen tablecloths and embroidered altar cloths containing the triangle, (the original trinity symbol of the goddess), were set with thirty-nine place settings. These settings were then marked by a beautiful hand-crafted plate, upon which a variety of symbols, metaphors and vagina-like images were painted. Each image was designed to represent one single woman who was grouped according to either her historical background, or simply her achievements, "all either historical or mythical figures, chosen for their accomplishments and/or their spiritual or legendary powers" (Chicago, 1979, p.52). Beneath these settings, the floor consisted of hand-cast porcelain tiles, with nine hundred and ninety-nine women written on them, each representing a small part of women's history.

The images on the plates are not literal, but rather a blending of historical facts, iconographical sources, symbolic meanings and imaginations.
(Chicago, 1979, p.52)

The 'Primordial Goddess', or Gaia is the first female figure that Chicago chose to honour (see Fig. 5). She is the mother and female of this fertile earth, through whose body life began. She symbolises life and creation itself and she embodies the centre of the universe.

She remains always the moon and her body the fertile earth. Her deep breasts are mountains and her watery openings, the ocean. Her skin is the fertile soil - the source of growth and nourishment. Within her body are both birth and death - the inner energy source where crystals and volcanoes are. From the sea of her womb emerge the serpent and the egg of all life, fishes, shellfish and the creatures that evolved onto dry land. From her womb come the birds and insects which continue to fly and crawl over her body. She shines in the universe above and is the planet and earth below.² She is the original evocation of the female to whom we owe our life and being.

...The Primordial Goddess (is the) original centre. She is the Primal Vagina - her centre, dark and molten; all her energy emanates from her bloody womb and core. She is the Sacred Vessel, the gateway to existence and the doorway to the abyss. In the beginning, life and death were merged in her body as parts of the endless process of rejuvenation and decay.

(Chicago, 1979, p.57)

Chicago attempts to regenerate this female form that, before the emergence of a patriarchal society, encircled many lives, whether male or females. In these ancient societies she was an ever present force that remained with them constantly, from the sea and sea creatures to eggs, spirals, circles and triangles, the self-renewing serpent and countless fertility figures.



Primordial Goddess

*Judy Chicago "The Dinner Party", 1971 - 1978
(5) "Primordial Goddess"*



Many of the Goddess fertility figures have been found in a wide variety of cultures throughout the world and they have been given the universal name of 'Venus'. They are invariably represented as "small faceless figures, usually with pendulous breasts, large bellies and rounded buttocks" (Chicago, 1979, p.58) and were an important aspect of the ancient way of life. Worshipped by both men and women, they were the primary origin of the Mother Goddess religion that was to spread world-wide.

Symbols, such as 'Vesica Picis' and the 'Yoni'³ were depicted on these fertility figures to represent vulvas. Sometimes they had other symbols of seeds and sprouts drawn over or beside them such as rippling water; strengthening the belief that the goddess was the sole source of the vegetative world and the waters of life. Many of these figures were also carved with their legs tightly together tapering to a point, so that they could be placed into the ground to enhance the fertility of the soil.

These small Venuses (and all that they stood for) were the source for the image on the 'Fertile Goddess' ceramic plate (see Fig. 6). The image was built up using thin washes of colour, with the forms created with a hatched line. Along the runner small clay figures were placed to represent the mother goddess. Coils, amulets and shells were also embroidered on the runner to reflect her ancient civilisation (Chicago 1979, p.58).

*The introduction of dimension on the surface allowed me to
symbolise another aspect of women's history - the rise and fall of
opportunities, and the efforts women have made in the last two hundred
years to change their destiny.
(Chicago, 1979, p.52)*

Chicago tries to bring back these ancient ways of thinking, not just for her own reasons, but for womanhood as a whole. By using the many symbols of the goddess in her installation, she revitalises the only real power that women once possessed in their long forgotten pasts.





Fertile Goddess

*Judy Chicago "The Dinner Party" 1971 - 1978
(6) "Fertile Goddess"*



She uses the circle form extensively to remind us that it represents the primary female symbol; its infinite form continuing with no end or beginning; nowhere superior nor inferior. It is used in many of the prime signs, such as the 'diameter', (which literally means 'Goddess Mother'), the four element signs, the sun, the spiral, the infinity sign and the Yin and Yang. It is a female equality symbol - a protected space that shields all within; 'the centre of the motherland' where all within remain equal (Walker, 1988, p.4).

With the spread of patriarchy (and Christianity) many of these symbols had their original meanings changed from being life symbols representing birth and rebirth, to symbols representing the evils of Eve. The loathed snake which, for decades, represented the goddess and rebirth (due to its re-shedding of old skin for new), soon came a universally feared creature, abhorred by most, whilst the goddess of moon and water became another monster to be slain.

They began to eliminate all who resisted their power...These women were harassed, intimidated and worst of all - burned, in a persecution whose real meaning has completely evaded the history taught to us today.

(Chicago, 1979, p. 53)

The ancient myth surrounding the female power of the goddess was monumental. She was a force containing both life and death - each a vital part of her celebrated process and essential to each other. However, with an ever increasing patriarchal society looming in the future, questions and fears surrounding matriarchal superiority and the goddess soon arose.

Until this time the goddess consisted of four essential elements, fire, air, water and earth. When bonded together, all of these represented the disposal of the dead and the rebirth to the mother goddess. However, male authorities seized the elements' fire and air, considering them higher and more powerful, leaving the 'weaker' water and earth female. This meant that the female, left with only the two elements to represent her being, was instantly demoted;

from all-superior to subordinate. The males declared themselves superior leaving the females unspiritual, heavy, cold passive and muddy (Walker 1988 p.7). The males, identifying themselves with the solar day, left the females with the secret, damp abyss of the night.

Through this re-emergence of the goddess back into the minds of women, Chicago was able to begin the important step of questioning female origin. In bringing the goddess back to the minds of many women, she aimed to unite womanhood as a whole. By showing that the goddess held a major part in everyone's life before the patriarchal era, she proved that there was once a female vital force that guaranteed human survival, and was not male or oppressive.

¹ This stems from "pre-Hellenic Greece, to the Native American Hopi, to Africa and the Near East and South America", where they all believe that the female 'gave birth to the world' - Stein 1992, p.26

² This is the 'Myth of Pandora', or 'Gaia' according to the ancient belief. (Stein 1992, p.32)

³ The antediluvian symbol 'vesica picis' (vessel of the fish), is an ancient world-wide symbol for the vulva, that originated from the ancients belief that female secretions smelled of fish. This was an inherited name, that came from the original sign for the female genitals, the 'yoni'. There are many variations on this symbol, but it usually takes on the same form - an oval made up of two crescent moon shapes. (Walker 1988, p.16 and p.18)

A NEW DEFINITION OF FEMININITY

When a psychological need arises it seems inevitably the deeper layers of the collective unconscious are activated and sooner or later the memory of a myth of an event or an earlier psychic state emerges into consciousness.

(Orenstein, 1988, p.71)

As we slowly begin to move away from this male dominated, patriarchal society and into a more feminist era, the Great Goddess has again become the prime source of inspiration for female artists, as a new form blossoming in a feminist evolution. Contemporary artists are now searching for a new representation of 'female' that will at last change the negative stereotypes that have surrounded femininity for centuries.

Unlike Judy Chicago however, today's feminist artists are not using the goddess to prove women's former glory and show the powers of her dark womb, but are looking to use the female form to express "in both image and ritual an instrument of spirit-knowledge" (Orenstein G.F. 1988 p.72). Their aim being to restore and exalt the power that still exists in the natural world and convert the 'potent energy' on themselves¹.

No longer do they concentrate, solely on their physical bodies and its functions (as did Mary Kelly and Judy Clark), because they no longer feel that it is a necessary step in defining their own existence. Instead, they have tried to look beneath the surface and into their souls to hopefully find what their whole make-up really is. Now their concerns are about the whole definition of 'feminine' and what it really entails. To do this, they have delved deep into

their past, to be in touch with the goddess and all that she stood for. By using her female form and spirituality, they have finally begun an historic repossession of their own femininity and female history.

Women have discovered that these 'natural energies' of the goddess contain an enormous amount of power and potential that can only be rediscovered through their own bodies and experiences, as they are the only real shrines left in a world that seems to have forgotten the power females held over society.

Now these artists are able to discover a new learning of their own history, that for decades had been shrouded in mystery and fabrication. They wish to unfold and discover this female history, that holds the key to the natural world of the goddess (and restore her spirit within). Eventually through this 'return to the earth', women can at last begin to discover the power of the goddess for themselves and use it to awaken their own femininity and ensure their own protection for the future.

As bearers of sacred tradition, contemporary feminist artists use ritual to re-sacrilise the female body, creating a new sacred space for the enactment of those magical rebirth ceremonies that are first coming into our culture through art.

(Orenstein, 1987, p.161)

It has been known for a long time that many objects have lost their original meaning and symbolic difference. A shell, no longer represents female sexuality, just as the Yin and Yang no longer represent female wholeness (Kent 1993, p.9). As women revive these sacred beliefs within society however, we start to see a feminist re-interpretation of the old creation myth. By simply re-introducing the goddess into contemporary art, society is forced to start learning a whole new series of signs and values encircling the female. These signs, then put together, make up an image of femininity that can now become a new source of reality for women today.

In order to re-establish the validity of the natural image of the Mother and Child as incorporated in the archetype of the Fertility Goddess, contemporary artists are celebrating sexuality by invoking ancient images of the Great Mother that exalt procreation and superimposing them over the former image of the Virgin and Child.
(Orenstein, 1988, p.73)

These contemporary artists have begun their own investigation into the classical image of 'motherhood' and 'femininity' - the Virgin and Child. For these female artists, much of this sacred imagery originated from the goddess mythology and has therefore become a major source of inspiration for them. Using the classical image of the Virgin Mary and over-laying images from the goddess era, implies that the first function of this art "is to exorcise the sexist impact and interpretation of all sacred imagery" (Orenstein, 1988, p.73). It is for these reasons that two female artists - Eileen Lawrence and Joyce Tenneson, have used subjects of spirituality and mythology, as recurring themes in their art.

Eileen Lawrence is greatly influenced by the ancient goddess and uses many of the ancient symbols, such as the crescent moon, the triangle, feathers, geese, the 'yoni' and eggs, in her paintings. She combines the fertile goddess with the Virgin Mary, by using fragments of symbols to represent both. Yet she is not really interested in mixing pagan mythology with Christianity: rather she uses the Virgin Mary in place of the goddess. She shows quite sensitively, how this sexual fertility goddess progressed into her silent and spiritual daughter, the Virgin Mary², by using customary symbols to represent the two, (like a white Lilly to represent the Virgin). Taking a feather, coiled into a shell-like form, she reminds us that the origins of Christianity are owed to pagan mythology; and that Mary is simply an ancestor of the fertile goddess.

Through the many ceremonies of rebirth and reclamation, the rituals of mourning and self-transformation, the energising of new psycho-physical centres of being, the activation of a new Earth-Alchemy, the rewriting of sacred texts, myth, and history, and a new scanning of the universal system of hieroglyphics, women artists are bringing about a planetary goddess-consciousness revolution, a cycle of female rebirth, and a new feminist ethos in our time.

(Orenstein, 1988, p.74)

Eileen Lawrence uses these long forgotten symbols of the natural world and overlays 'contemporary and arcane' ways of viewing them (Kent 1993 p.9). Inspired by objects that were simply found on trips to the Scottish highlands and through her 'poetic' use of representation, she manages to turn these objects into something far more sacred. When painted on to handmade paper, linen or silk tissue, these objects are transformed readily into 'meditation sticks' or sacred texts, which conjure up images of life, death, spirituality and after-life.

When viewing her work, it is quite easy to avoid patriarchal constraints, as her work contains elements of a timeless tranquillity, that are able to fully absorb the viewer. Influenced by Japanese art, her work contains elements that are very thought provoking. Achieving a 'perfect equilibrium between life and death',³ she paints these objects, with an extreme fondness and exactness; that is without the sentimentality found in Judy Chicago's work. Neither is there the bitterness, aggression or vulgarity that typified the work of Judy Clark and Mary Kelly in the 70's. Instead, there is a celebration of the goddess and of femininity. She realises that many of these objects no longer mean anything to most of society: but more importantly they do for her. She doesn't want to force these meanings back onto this material world, but is content to know that they once existed.

Everything that the goddess ever stood for, is shown with a great proudness and joy, reflecting her admiration and affection for the ancient times of the goddess. Lawrence's paintings, while drawn purely from the natural world, clearly make statements, (sometimes metaphorically) about past and present cultures. While drawing on the goddess culture for inspiration, these paintings are evidently not nostalgic and unlike Chicago's piece, they are much more than a 'celebration of womanhood'.

In her painting '*Naples, Serpent, Facine*', (see Fig. 7), what appears to be a basic drawing of a vagina, covered with serpents or some kind of vegetation, is bordered by feathers and sticks. There is a definite sense growing, evolution, and layering in the painting, with a structured, ordered look. The layout of the painting, reflecting classical Greek architecture of temples, structures the whole painting and it appears to us that we are viewing this 'vagina' through a doorway of orderly columns, in the form of long branches.

The use of branches to represent people dates back to the 1st century AD. Sticks portraying Askr and Embia, the first humans, were found in a peat bog in Braak, Germany.
(Kent, 1993, p.11)

In Lawrence's paintings, her branches are drenched in a wash of dark blue that contrast with the lighter centre. This exploration of exterior dark moods and contrasting brighter elements, is a reflection of the Fertile Goddess, whose body contains the power of both life and death. 'Her' influence is seen in most of her paintings, where in many instances, a rich or sombre background provides a perfect setting for the over-layering of shining symbolic imagery; clearly enforcing this intrinsic mystery of rebirth.



Eileen Lawrence
(7) "Naples, Serpent, Facine" 1983-84



In her other painting "Wood, Thunder, Heaven" (see Fig 8) we also appear to be looking beyond the surface into another world. In the centre, a bundle of sticks stand upright, while behind them emerges the dark tendrils of old wood, preserved black over time. A border of tiny feathers evokes the feeling of transcendence and the sticks in the centre almost become a cross - indicating at her interest in mythology and Christianity.

In her painting "Isis" (see Fig. 9) Lawrence depicts how she has begun her own reclamation of the history of 'womanhood' and "pays tribute to the Egyptian goddess 'from whom all becoming arose', whom the Greeks identified as Ceres" (Kent, 1993, p.12). The vibrant, rich background clearly indicates her sensuous nature; a characteristic all mortal men should be wary of.

*'Mistress of the gods thou bearer of wings, thou lady of the red
apparel...pre-eminent mistress and lady of the tomb', who wielded the
power of life and death over her subjects.
(Budge, 1993, 'Eileen Lawrence', p.12)*

Her qualities included wings, reeds, snakes, shells and a vibrant gold-leaf sun. The snake is a prime symbol of the goddess and reproduction; the reed also has an interesting connection between this goddess mythology and Christianity. A reed sceptre is a symbol of male divinity and is used to distinguish the sacred Egyptian god Set in Egypt. It was adapted into Christianity however, when Jesus was presented with the same status symbol. The playing of flutes and pipes, however, remained essentially a female prerogative and in many societies, such as New Guinea, they were regarded as phallic symbols (Walker 1988, p.10).



Eileen Lawrence
(8) "Wood, Thunder, Heaven" 1991/92



Eileen Lawrence
(9) *"Isis" 1991*



The painting is a celebration of the goddess era and it is as "though the goddess was dancing with abandon or whirling like a dervish" (Kent, 1993, p.12). Lawrence has portrayed an image of the female that is both joyful and enchanted, all at the same time, without any of the animosity or vulgarity so much of the work in the 70's seemed to contain. It is through this spiritual exploration of the female, that Eileen Lawrence is able to express her own definite joy in being a female.

The body of the gods shines with such an intense brilliance that no human eye can bear it. Its splendour is blinding. Its radiance robs its visibility through an excess of light, the way darkness causes invisibility through the lack of light.The paradox of the divine body is that in order to appear to mortals, it must cease to be itself; it must clothe itself in a mist, disguise itself as a mortal, (and) take the form of a bird, a star, a rainbow.

(Vernant, 1989, p.37)

In Joyce Tenneson's work she too, is searching back to this time of great celebration, in the hope of understanding her ancient past. Through her delicate use of photography, she also manages to portray an extreme sense of female vulnerability; while retaining the joy and celebration. Her work, however, while carrying the same message, is in other ways quite different.

The figures in Tenneson's photographs, appear to be lost in time. The women, draped in white muslin, are tranquil and serene. The texture of the cloth also conveys a strong sense of transcendence and the viewer is left to question themselves as to whether they are really there. Perhaps these women are simply yearning for transcendence and a wish to be back in the natural world of the past, the world of the goddess. Also, it is unclear to the viewer as to whether these vulnerable females, wish to be seen or remain unseen.

Beauty as a subject, long associated with the goddess, is questioned constantly in these photographs. All of the women photographed have long hair and some are shown to looking in a mirror; an obvious sign of the goddess obsessed with her beauty (see Fig. 10). Purity is also another essential part of her being and when a mortal female is described as a 'goddess', it implies that she is quintessentially beautiful and pure.

This 'feminine charm' was an essential element of the goddess; myths and superstitions contained the belief that the goddess was trying to lure man against his will. If he succumbed to this temptation, it would be dangerous even fatal, for a mortal man to have intercourse with a goddess was forbidden. It is therefore due to these male fears and misunderstandings of the goddess, that ancient myths and beliefs were passed onto the mortal female without question.

*A body invisible in its radiance, a face that cannot be seen directly.
The apparition, rather than revealing the being of a god, hides it behind
the multiple disguises of a seeming to be 'that is adapted to feeble human
vision'.*

(Vernaut, 1989, p.38)

It is through Tenneson's juxta positioning of certain objects, with the human form of the model, that she too manages to create a delicate feeling of subdued, silent vulnerability, while showing the goddess influence. This aura of subtle vulnerability, is the common theme for both these artists. In Lawrence's paintings, she shows it through her delicate painting of shells and feathers, while Tenneson expresses it through her sensitive photography.

*If the gods are immortal and imperishable, it is because, unlike men,
they no longer have a body to display their beauty or an existence that
can win them glory. Living always in strength and beauty, the gods
have a super-body: a body made entirely and forever of beauty and glory.*

(Vernant, 1989, p.34)



Joyce Tenneson
(10) "*Carol and Mirror*" 1987



In '*Angel With Lit Wings*', (see Fig. 11) a female, wrapped in muslin, stands with her head dreamily turned to the side. Her face has the classical features we associate with the Virgin Mary, but with a longing sense of serenity and romanticism. Her body glows from the light and she appears to us like a vision, in the form of a heavenly angel.

In '*Suzanne With Snake*', (see Fig. 12) a female also stands partially naked, with her eyes closed and holding a golden snake over her fertile body. As in the other photographs, it is strongly symbolic, with the snake reminding us of the goddess and her reproductive powers. With her legs also bound tightly together, the female either becomes a classical statue from the past, or an ancient 'Venus' in the form of the goddess herself.

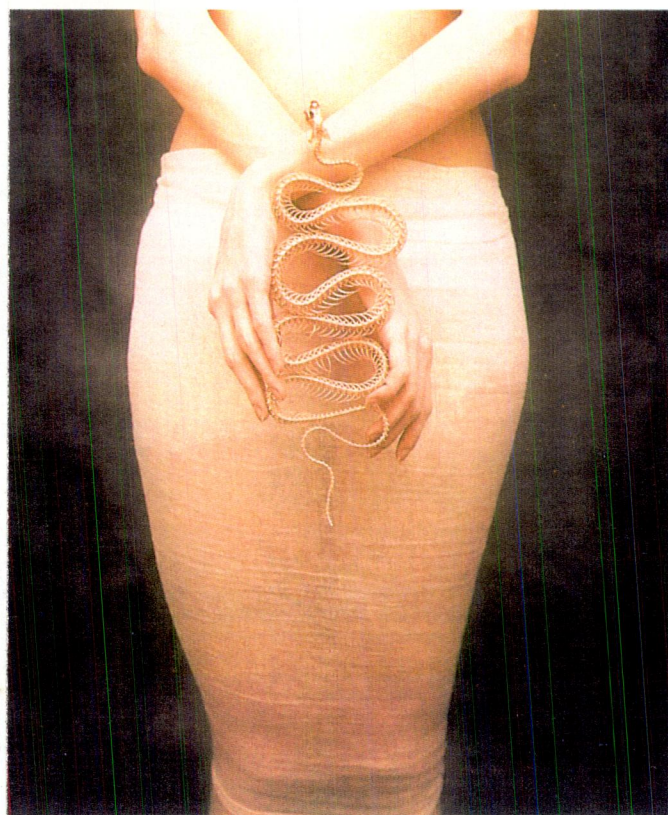
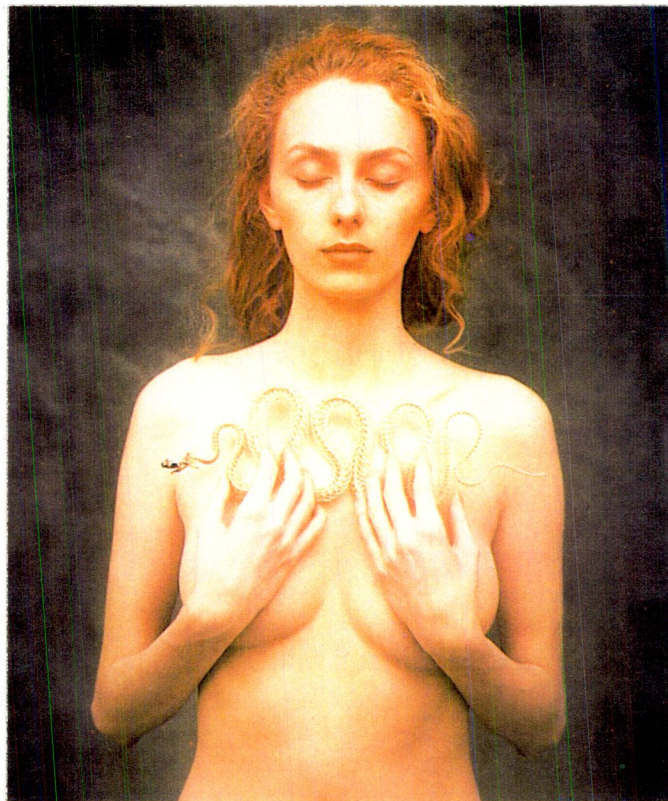
Eileen Lawrence and Joyce Tenneson have both shown that their concerns are with a personal longing to understand a part of their ancient 'feminine' past. In their art they use a new set of signs and icons, in order to create a 'new feminist myth'; one in which women are the 'vital link' between the mysteries of the natural world and "the great catalyser and transformer of all life energies" (Orenstein, 1988, p.86). By bringing the goddess back to life, through their art, they help to bring to light a new form of 'ecstatic consciousness' for the female.

Through their search for a new definition of femininity, these artists no longer look to make the broad and obvious statements made in the 70's surrounding perceived femininity; rather they allow the icons of the goddess (and nature) to retain their aura and mystique. By using these long forgotten symbols of the goddess and 'overlying' them with our modern way of thinking, the statements they make about 'femininity' are neither aggressive nor disturbing. However, by discovering for themselves the inner 'female', they too challenge the archetype 'definitions' that society made for them.



Joyce Tenneson
(11) "Angel With Lit Wings" 1991





Joyce Tenneson
(12) "Suzanne With Snake" 1991



¹ From Orenstein 1988 p.72 - where she says that "women are attempting nothing less than the magical de-alchemizing of the philosopher's stone, the reconstitution of the Earth Goddess's original herborium on the planet and the energising of the self through the internalisation of its sacred spirits.

² Kent tells us how Eileen Lawrence is "juxtaposing fragments of Christian and Pagan iconography, (and how) her recent canvases trace the evolution of (the) sexually potent fertility goddess into their more spiritual daughter, the Virgin Mary - 1993, p.12.

³ Kent says how Eileen Lawrence's work is like that of Japanese Art, but that "Japanese art at its most intense and transparent moments, reveals to us those instants - because each is only that, an instant - of perfect equilibrium between life and death - 1993, p.10.

WOMAN VERSES FEMALE (OPPOSITES OR CORRESPONDENCES)

*Gender, sexuality, the human body, and individuals' experience of
them are given meaning by the symbolic and cannot in any way be
understood as natural; unmediated*

by culture.

(Rando, 1991, p.48)

The belief system attached to feminism and its followers, has always been that women are different because of their sex (Fernandes, 1991, p.35). However, in order for feminism to be seen as a political movement, it was necessary for female artists to "divorce sexual practice from gender identification" (Fernandes, 1991, p.35). Early feminism, seemed to focus on and use a lot more sexual imagery than is used by today's contemporary artists, simply because it was more physically body-oriented. This was a necessary action for them to take, at that time, in order to validate their whole existence to the rest of society. To challenge society's beliefs, artists like Mary Kelly and Judy Clark used bodily secretions and intimate items of personal hygiene in their attempt to undermine many of the myths and taboos attached to women at that time.

By using the 'female' roles of menstruation and motherhood as a basis to validate their being as a person, they showed that their concern was not just with their own identity, but also with 'womanhood' in its totality. Using their 'sexuality' as a political tool, they displayed their imagery to other women and were able to provide the first steps forward in the women's movement; and speak for so many women who, until this time remained, unheard.

In the visual arts there was a profusion of images that explored either a woman's daily experience or her bodily functions. These images focused on the value of being a woman - politically, physically, and culturally.Early feminism was a process of self-identification - not only by looking at images of ourselves but by exchanging images and self-knowledge with other women.

(Fernandes, 1991, p.35)

Feminist art of the 70's, while providing much needed inspiration, and encouragement for many women, actually achieved very little. It failed to change society's views or affect women's powerlessness at that time (Fernandes 1991, p.35). While it had an appeal to many female audiences, it was an affront to man and simply shut out male interest and as a consequence they found themselves even more isolated than before. In other words, 'male' power continued, and so to the 'difference' that went with the word "woman". By failing to provide men with envy or jealousy, "men maintained their power in real ways; their stance (being) one of amused indifference" (Fernandes, 1991, p.35).

As many of these ideas from the 1970's developed, more and more contemporary female artists turned to look at the broader issue surrounding gender and femininity. They realised that the basis of male power over women lay in their believing that they are superior and women to be inferior. This male 'flaw' has been around for centuries, with women's bodies being used as 'objects' to be admired by male viewers. So, by using women's inner spirituality and femininity as a tool to deconstruct female suppression, they could begin to show that there was more to a woman than her 'biology'.

Theory moved beyond discussion of individual women and the biology of the female to the broader cultural constructs of that which defines "the feminine".

(Fernandes, 1991, p.36)

Through art, many questions surrounding gender and definitions of "female" and "woman" are discussed in an attempt at resolution. This 'feminine' stereotype, has had a long history of being a product of a male patriarchal culture that has been used to define sexual difference (Parker, and Pollock, 1981, p.8). It was believed (due to our system of language and signs) that "feminine" was the opposite to "masculine", and therefore negative rather than positive. So that by accepting to be called "feminine" you allowed male dominance and ensured the continuation of female negative stereotypes.

The term "feminine" however, has been challenged since the early sixteenth century when female artists were slowly arising; since then the 'phrase' has come to symbolise male dominance and repression. Today's contemporary artists, however, are now working against this long historical process and are choosing to pursue this 'true' meaning of "female"; and by doing so they automatically change a whole system of signs, that have been responsible for female repression in the past. Contemporary artists have set out to prove, that 'femininity' is not something that one is borne with, but a state that society has imposed. They are challenging the whole issue of 'gender' and demonstrating the conditioning power that society has over women. Therefore, they have started to change the whole engrained image of this term "female", and define it for themselves.

Lawrence and Tenneson are just of these two artists, who are trying to change society's view of femininity, by showing that they are proud of being female (and their whole history). Through their art, they have deviated from society's engrained image of the female; who is both embarrassed and ashamed of her body and tied by her womb to nature. They remind us that there was, in fact, a time when the 'female', (as a whole being), was respected and her body envied. By romantically and nostalgically retracing the past through their art, Lawrence and Tenneson have shown that they don't need to enforce this image of the female to society, because they are doing it for themselves, in the name of femininity.

However, this is a very different perspective and one that contradicts quite strongly what the artists of the 70's were trying to achieve. At that time, artists were challenging any issue that connected the female to the natural world (such as taboos surrounding menstruation, pregnancy and labour). Their aim, was to persuade society to sever the bonds that constrain women within a male invented ideology, (such as the mother goddess). Through public display of intimate parts of the female body that had previously remained unseen, they were able to show that women are not these sacred mythical beings, evil on the one hand and virginal on the other.

In recent years, therefore, two very different 'feminist' ideas and objectives have emerged. There is the contemporary view and the one which emerged in the early 70's. Both agree that gender is socially constructed while the rest of society regards gender as a 'structural component of society' (Rando, 1991, p.48). If however, Western society were to take a look at other tribal communities, it would be acknowledged that gender is not the 'natural' state we assume it to be. It would not need artists to explain it to them.

The difference between the two however, begins with the terms "female" and "woman". Instead of the two being part of the same entity, they appear to be two opposites in conflict. Cultural feminists are those who believe that 'women' and the concept of "female", are 'a valid category of analysis'. Their dilemma has been that of wanting to keep the 'category of women and/or gender', but to call for its 'deconstruction' (Rando, 1991, p.49). In other words they are interested in looking at the female ancient history (i.e. the goddess figure) and the gap that has been created between this and our 'modern' image of womanhood. By looking to the past, this re-examination of the whole concept of "woman" becomes possible.

Their wish is to retain their gender difference of being "woman" and not 'man', also to but call for a new definition of "female". By keeping the exterior shell of a "woman", they wish only to re-define the inner "female" and still retain all that is associated with being a woman, (i.e. sexual difference). They are interested in what defines all that is "female" and all the metaphors attached to the term "woman". They are represented by these contemporary artists who are searching for something that goes a lot deeper than a simple gender difference.

Opposition to the 'female form' the contemporary artists seem to search for, begins with other feminists defining the term "woman". Where the "female" is known to be a completely a male constructed being, contemporary artists have ignored this controlling factor and are content to research her being; using her closeness to nature and her connection to the natural world as a positive part of their ancient history. However, what other feminists are concerned about, is that the redefinition of "female" and the concentration on the joy that accompanies her being, may simply add to the enforced gender difference that separates "man" from "woman".

They believe that by challenging the "concept of woman" they are rejecting "gender as 'privileged' marker of difference" (Rando, 1991, p.49); and their aim would be for individuals not to be judged or controlled by society. They oppose the term "woman"; believing that she is a male constructed being and in opposition to a male dominated culture, who seems to use her form to represent both traditionalism and essentialism.

For these 'other' feminists, "woman" represents the housewife and the mother, who obeys and accepts her position in society. She helps to perpetuate the male, patriarchal tradition, by her continuous acceptance of her simply passive and abused role. Seeing her as a purely male constructed icon, valued solely for her beauty and powers of the womb, they believe they should attempt to destroy any connections that she may have with the goddess era.

(The) concept of "woman" and the feminine is poised in opposition to the cultural order, it retains traditional, and essential, gender positionality, replicating a relationship - the opposition of the feminine, a natural essence, to culture, a masculine construct.

(Spivak, on the deconstruction theory quoted by Rando, 1991, p.50)

Through women artists wishing to re-define the term 'feminine', they have opened up an issue that is no longer concerned solely with the individual. By claiming that the 'feminine' side of a female is not 'biologically given',¹ they are basically separating feminism from sex; and contributing to an issue that has a much broader social context than the individualism of the 70's.

It therefore appears that the two appear to be direct opposites of each other. On the one hand, "woman" wants to get away from being connected with nature and is fighting against a patriarchal society; while the "female" wishes to return to the ancient values of the past, which then places her directly back into nature. Also, where one is based on the foundations of the feminist movement, the other appears to challenge the whole basis of the feminist theory.

However, if we were to concentrate on taking these two opposites and merging them into a whole, we would see that they are in reality, essential to each other. Just like the Yin and Yang, "woman" and "female" are two separate halves that link together. Each remains weak in isolation, but is strengthened by the other. "Woman", while remaining under patriarchal power, represents many aspects of the 'full female', responsible for being the child bearer, mother and supporter; all she requires is for her role to be respected and appreciated in society. The "female", represents the mystical part of her being; her ancient past and history. She is responsible for the mystery of reproduction, life, the moon and sun, and the deep waters of the earth. Her being remains free and cannot be tied by the controlling forces of patriarchy. She encompasses the earth and allows it to grow.

By merging these two images of "woman" and "female" it should be possible to create a perfect whole; and one that does not represent a sign of weakness. The key to this success, is that in order for women to change their role in society, old and new definitions surrounding the 'female' need to be constantly challenged and criticised - until woman becomes man's equal. By changing the ideologies and engrained definitions of language, it can then be possible to take the first step into a non oppressive, equal society.

¹ This comes from the quote by Fernandes 1991, p.36, where she states that feminists have become interested in issues surrounding "female", "as a way of defining femininity not as a biological given but, rather, as a social fabrication.

CONCLUSION

*So, this was how it looked, the determining, the crucial sky, and
this was how man moved through it, remote above the dwindled earth,
the concealed human life. Vulnerable life, that could scar.*
(Olsen 1978, 'Women and Nature', p.4)

A challenge and questioning of the traditional and conventional acceptance that 'femininity is biologically determined', led a number of female artists to explore the identities of both "woman" and "female". This investigation began to surface about twenty years ago, when the question of society's perception of femininity became more important to contemporary female artists. By questioning the relationship between identity and repudiation, and attempting to change society's definition from "woman" to "female", they have shown that these are still issues relevant, not only to the world of art, but also to contemporary Western society.

When the exploration of their relationship between "woman" and "female" initially emerged in the 70's, feminist artists began to challenge the Freudian 'doctrine' that "passivity is associated with the feminine" (Oliver, 1993, p.25). By searching for a 'true femaleness', "imprisoned by masculine representation" (King 1992, p.179), they fought on behalf of 'womanhood' and "woman", to show society their own sexual identity and difference. Initially they separated and redefined "woman" from the ideological "female" side of their inherited beings. Through serious questioning of their own bodies, they fought against the Western convention that women are different and therefore oppressed, because of their sexual difference.

Through the reversal of what they saw to be the weakness ("female") and concentrating on strengthening "woman", they raised the key issue - that it is only through changing definitions - whether politically or practically, that an understanding can begin. By raising these critical questions, they induced the essential political and practical investigations that have been fundamental to the contemporary female art movement of today.

Contemporary artists are now investigating the path that Judy Chicago first began when she sought recognition for womanhood through the past. These artists realised that by redefining 'femininity' and the "female" through the ancient past of the goddess; it is possible to find their true identity. They now see the goddess, not as a patriarchal construction, but as a patriarchal protection for themselves; the aims may be different, but the concerns are still the same.

This gradual discovery, has led to the evolution of a change of definition, (from the 1970's "woman" to the 1990's "female") and has perhaps become more important than the definition itself. Through the 'urge' to change these definitions and the oppression that accompanies it, female artists have consequently become more confident and stronger. Hopefully this new found confidence and understanding will lead to the questioning and challenging others - who unfortunately know no better.

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