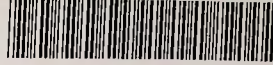


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An investigation of the work of some Irish
artists in the context of revival of the
Goddess (1970's, 1980's) in America.

A Thesis submitted to

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and Complementary Studies

and

in candidacy for the Degree

Faculty of Fine Art
Department of Painting

by

Brigid Teehan

March, 1991

So of what the hawks' eyes saw all I can
here recall to words is this: It was the
Universe of power. It was the network,
field, and lines of the energies of all
the beings, stars, and galaxies of stars,
worlds, animals, minds, nerves, dust, the
lace and foam of vibration that is being,
its all interconnected, every part of another
part and the whole part of each part, and so
comprehensible to itself only as a whole,
boundless and unclosed.

(Ursula K. LeGuin, 1985)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE NUMBER

ILLUSTRATIONS

4

INTRODUCTION

6

CHAPTER 1

8

CHAPTER 2

24

CHAPTER 3

29

CHAPTER 4

44

CONCLUSION

47

BIBLIOGRAPHY

49

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONSPAGE NUMBER

- | | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 1. | Leslie J. Klein: <u>The stones bear</u>
<u>Witness</u> . 1988 | 9 |
| 2. | Diana Kurz: <u>Durga</u> . 1977 | 11 |
| 3. | Judy Chicago: <u>Earth Birth</u> . 1985 | 13 |
| 4. | Ann McCoy: <u>Temple of Isis, Pompeii</u> .
1987 | 15 |
| 5. | Ann Mendieta: <u>Arbol de la Vida</u> .
Tree of Life/Silhouette series. 1977 | 17 |
| 6. | Mary Beth Edelson: <u>See for Yourself</u> .
Grapceva Neolithic Cave Series. 1977 | 19 |
| 7. | Ann Gauldin and Denise Yarfitz:
<u>The Great Goddess Diana</u> . 1978 - 1981 | 21 |
| 8. | Caren Eve Reid: <u>The Empress</u> . 1989 | 30 |
| 9. | Ursula Kavanagh: <u>Melusine</u> . 1984 | 32 |
| 10. | Una Walker: <u>The Ties that Bind</u>
(1) Detail. 1988 | 34 |
| 11. | Kathy Prendergast: <u>Enclosed Worlds in</u>
<u>Open Spaces</u> . 1983 | 36 |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS (Contd.)

PAGE NUMBER

- 12(a) Kathy Prendergast: To Control A Landscape - 37
Irrigation. 1983
- 12(b) Kathy Prendergast: To Control a Landscape - 37
Oasis. 1983
13. Pauline Cummins: Celebrations at the National 39
Maternity Hospital. 1984
14. Pauline Cummins: Aran Dance. 1985 41

INTRODUCTION

I am interested in investigating influences or similarities in the work of a number of Irish artists in the context of what has been called Goddess art in America during the 1970's and 1980's.

Since the 1970's the Goddess revival in America has had a major influence on some artists living there.

A number of feminist artists in particular, redirected their attention to ages and cultures which involve a matriarchal aesthetic. This was seen as involving a non-linear or circular view of history, a non-competitive, non-hierarchical structure, a communal or shared expressiveness and a ritual often therapeutic intention. Sexuality, especially female sexuality was held to be divine/sacred. These feminists focused on the reality of the body and, with it, to social and personal realities.

In chapter one I will explore aspects of the Goddess art in America and the various beliefs inherent in the work of a number of artists with reference to the political overtones.

In chapter two I will discuss one of the main theoretical stumbling blocks associated with Goddess art, namely the accusation of essentialism. This has been a focus point of much criticism which seeks to invalidate Goddess art. The nature/culture split will also be discussed in relation to the Goddess.

The third chapter will shift its focus to Ireland and examine a number of Irish artists in the context of the American Goddess artists discussed in chapter one.

Chapter four contains a brief development of the findings in chapter three and explores ways in which the work of these Irish artists can be read.

The conclusion will involve how Goddess art can be relevant to Irish artists today, especially in the light of the daily destruction of the earth.

CHAPTER ONE

In the 1970's America was feeling the effects of the women's movement. One such effect was that women's studies programmes began to be established in American Universities, sponsoring explorations of history and culture which would broaden women's understanding of their oppression in patriarchal society. It was in 1976, with the publication of Merlin Stone's When God was a Woman, that feminist inquiry into the ancient Goddess religions and cultures became widespread. Merlin Stone surveyed the many manifestations of the Goddess dating from Paleolithic times, and she asked why a religion that lasted over 10,000 years was consistently referred to as a 'cult', when the Goddess was revered as the supreme deity everywhere. She also noted the many attributes, talents, skills, and inventions of the diverse goddesses, and she discussed the elevated status of women living in goddess-centred societies, while documenting the destruction of her temples and the desecration of her shrines. 1

Knowledge can lead to action and thus with the support of the women's movement and the uncovering of the goddess culture, artists began to use the symbol of the goddess to retrieve values, forms and images of women from societies that challenge our patriarchal perceptions. Not all artists reclaimed the goddess in ways that are 'feminist', which has led some to use the term 'Feminist-matristic' which emphasises the political concerns of certain work. Let us now look at a number of these artists.

Leslie J Klein's The Stones Bear Witness expresses many themes associated with feminist matristic art. It refers to hand-prints found on the Paleolithic cave walls, where Venus figurines and Goddess carvings have been unearthed along with paintings which were once believed to symbolise hunting magic. Klein, however says that



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'the silent rock and pigment testify to the artistic creativity of cavewoman' (Klein, 1988). 2 Not only do the Goddess carvings and statuettes attest to the fact that the cave was the sacred site where the religion of the Great Goddess was practised, but the small hand prints indicate that the artist who painted the animals (which were frequently pregnant) were most probably women, and the twig and leaf impressions were symbols of the cycles of life, not hunting spears, as once was thought.

The symbols on the the cave walls of this drawing have been recognised as female symbols and, as such, offer testimony of ancient female power, spirituality, and universality. The Great Goddess still resides in the caves and recesses of our psyches - driven underground, sealed and unlit for ages, but enduring.

(Klein, 1988) 3

Cavewomen were obviously the first women artists to be written out of art history. They were also, most probably, the first artists to have created images of the Great Mother, creatress of all life, that have endured for approximately 30,000 years, and still testify to the origin of life and creativity, as well as to the source of creation - the Great Mother.

As research into the Goddess grew, a number of artists began to visualise the Goddess in their work based on this historical research. Let us look at one such artist, Diana Kurz. She had studied Buddhism for many years before she painted herself as the Hindu Durga. Durga was a Goddess known as 'The Inaccessible'. She was traditionally depicted as a beautiful yellow woman with each of her ten arms holding a weapon. She also rides a lion. It is said she absorbed a former Goddess of destruction called Nirriti, who was a deity representing death. Durga was a demon-destroying aspect of



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Parvati. Parvati was the wife of shiva, depicted beside him and discussing everything from love to metaphysics. Parvati has many aspects besides Durga: Uma the gracious, Bhairavi the terrible, Ambika the generatrix, Sati the good wife, Gauri the brilliant, Kali the Black. 4

Diana kurz has consciously created an imaginative rendition of what was once actually real. She has depicted an ancient Goddess from a time when women had positions of power and honour. Through painting a contemporary image of herself as Goddess, she consciously relates to an ancient matristic past as a source of empowerment.

Judy Chicago is another artist inspired by the Goddess. Her collaborative piece The Birth Project, done in needlework by women around the United States, shows the many ways in which the Goddess symbol can be powerful, as procreative creation, cosmic creation and artistic creation intermingle.

The various pieces of needlework executed by women working in quilting, applique, weaving, macrame, needle point, smocking, and batik show the ordinary mother in the labour of childbirth as a woman as powerful as the creator of the universe. Her work explicitly depicts the way in which each birth is literally, a cosmic event; how its wavelike energy emissions spread through the cosmos in ripples and surges. Every birth has a cosmic resonance, as the rhythms of female labour echo the rhythms of nature.

These monumental images of female power become multiple metaphors for female creativity on all levels. In her book The Birth Project (1985), Judy Chicago has written:

It is perfectly clear to me that the ancient statues of Goddesses represent a time when women enjoyed social and political equality. The replacement of those wonderful, powerful female icons with male deities was a disastrous



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event for women. I have endeavoured for many years to 'make the feminine holy', and one I way have expressed that is by making images of a female God.

(Chicago, 1985, p.177) =

Judy Chicago has exposed the sociohistorical and psychological processes surrounding the creation of art aswell as it's technical and aesthetic aspects. Thus, while the female imaged in The Birth Project is almost archetypal, the process of creation has been contextualised through extensive documentation. The art-making processes portrayed in The Birth Project may trigger our imaginations to thinking about what women's working processes might have been in ancient cultures where women did the weaving and made the pottery. Thus, the contemporary and the ancient cultures are linked through women's creativity. Ironically, The Birth project, in making us conscious of how the birth experience has been excised from patriarchal art, also makes us aware of how taboo is female sexuality in Judeo-Christian cultures.

The Goddess as an archetype of the unconscious may seem at odds with the conscious reclaiming of the historial Goddess. Yet it is important not to underestimate the unconscious in conujunction with the conscious in the art-making process. It is with this in mind we shall see how Ann McCoy was inspired to draw, The Temple of Isis.

The events which led to the making of the Temple of Isis came from a dream fragment. In the dream I was handed an ancient instrument by an unknown woman. The next day as I was looking up a word in my dictionary, I saw a picture of a sistrum, the ancient instrument from my dream. The following afternoon I found a brochure from an Egyptologist in the street. I entered his shop and saw a sistrum at a greatly reduced price. The sistrum was thought to contain



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the magical properties of Isis, and when rattled was believed to make the Nile rise and fall.

In a second dream, I was with a group of archeologists restoring an ancient temple site. A child entered the site on a donkey. Unlike Christ, the child was a radiant Goddess. For me the dream signaled, not the return of a matriarchal monotheism, but an integration of the divine feminine into the psychic lives of both men and women.

(McCoy, "Artist's Statement")

As she began the drawing she had two more dreams which inspired her to take a pilgrimage to the Temple of Isis in Pompeii. This experience led to a deeper understanding of the Goddess Isis and her meaning for the modern world as a symbol of psychological and spiritual renewal. Isis also symbolises an agricultural renewal of our environmentally devastated world. Ann McCoy's work stresses the importance of intuition and dreams as forms of knowledge about the Goddess from ancient matrilineal history.

An integral part of the Goddess is her connection with the earth. The ancient matrilineal cultures identified the earth with woman as both were seen to be creators of life. The earth was seen as sacred. Life and death were merged in her body as parts of the endless process of growth and decay. This reverence for the earth and its energies has inspired a number of American artists. Ana Mendieta was one such artist whose work was, in her own words, 'a dialogue between the landscape and the female body'. She often used her own body in private earth rituals which symbolised, 'a return to the maternal source' and as a way of reestablishing, 'the bonds that united me to the universe'. In many of her Earth works she has used the uplifted arms in the motif of the Cretan and Minoan Goddess as a metaphor for the self-reflecting in the image of her

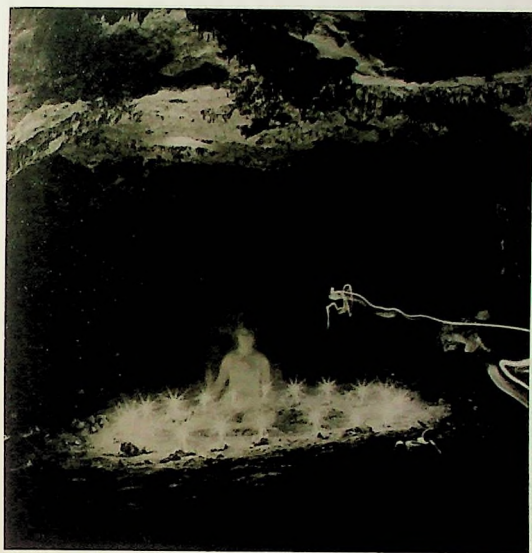


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Creator, the Earth Mother. In the Tree of Life Series, she has used her own body, caked in mud, standing, arms uplifted, against a tree, to show how we are made from this earth and how we must recognise that we are composed of the earth's matter and energy. We are not 'above nature', but we are 'of nature', and each of us, like a tree of life, is made from this earth.

This view of interconnectedness with the earth is a basic belief of Wiccan witchcraft, the Earth Religion of the Great Mother, which teaches that the Goddess is the symbol of 'Immanence - the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interfacing and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance' (Starhawk, 1982). ♡ This awareness of interconnectedness links the Goddess with contemporary ecology and is a valid metaphor for ecofeminists and feminist matristic artists.

Many ecofeminists today have been inspired by the Goddess and have made journeys to sacred sites associated with her. Mary Beth Edelson studied the available archaeological and mythological sources about sites and cultures of the Great Goddess that existed in prehistory and early history, and has drawn her own revolutionary feminist matristic conclusions, which then became the focus of all the energies in her art. Today one can buy packaged tours to the Goddess sites and one can arrive at Delphi or Eleusis in a tourist bus. It is difficult to imagine just how revolutionary it was in the early to mid - 1970's for a woman like Mary Beth Edelson to make a pilgrimage to an isolated site like that of the Grapceva Cave on Hvar Island off Yugoslavia. Yet she went there in order to perform private rituals of herself in a fire ring in the cave, so that she could reexperience the energies once felt by those who celebrated the earth as the Great Mother and the cave as her sacred womb. The flamboyant image of herself seated within the fire ring in the cave



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has almost become an emblem of feminist spirituality, so often has it been reproduced.

In a recent interview Mary Beth Edelson talked about the ecofeminist context of her art. She defined her creative process as one that visualises the interconnectedness of all things human and non-human. She talks about her process being liberatory, because it is one of 'not yet knowing', a concept that was inspired by reading Susan Griffin's writing. She is not constrained by pre-existing solutions, categories, or so-called objective observations. She sees rituals as the perfect vehicle for getting at new knowledge through an attitude of 'listening to the universe of other people' (Edelson, 1988).¹⁰ Her recent work Black Spring was a response to the Exxon oil spill in Alaska, which involved site-specific wall paintings of fish images and figures or heads.

Let us look at how a group of artists have used their Goddess-consciousness to inform their social critique of female stereotypes in a contemporary urban setting. They are known as The Waitresses, so-called because they believe that the waitress is a contemporary metaphor for the Great Goddess and for the mother. The modern waitress is often expected to mother the customers, to be friendly, to smile, to bring them what they need or what they desire, to please them, as well as to nurture them. By creating consciousness-raising events among the customers of their neighbourhood restaurants they point out that the stereotype of the modern waitress is a debased and degraded image of the Great Earth Mother. In their performance piece The Great Goddess Diana (1978-1981), Anne Gauldin and Denise Yarfitz dress as the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus and perform her sacred role of nurturer in local restaurants. They use dialogue, sprinkled with humour, to critique society's devaluing of the Great Mother, reflected in its



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treatment of waitresses which are generally overworked, underpaid and sexually harassed.

Diana was a goddess worshipped thousands of years ago.
Great many-breasted mother, ruler and nourisher of the
animal kingdom, provider of sustenance, both physical
and spiritual, for all creatures, great and small. How
could you stand it? Sweat of reaching hands, open
mouths, empty bellies, questioning, smiling, giving
menu, silverware, placemat, napkin, food, spoon, drink.
White, wheat, or rye? Eyes, ears, legs? Thousand,
roquefort, french?

(Gauldin & Yarfitz, Texts on Diana and the Waitresses) 11

In this performance piece, the waitresses hope to rekindle the proper relationship of love and respect between the nurturer and the one who is nourished. After 1981 they expanded the subject matter of their performances to include broader social and political concerns such as world hunger. The waitresses' mission is both spiritual and political. Their vision is feminist-matristic.

NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

1. Stone, M. 1976, p.2
2. Klein, L. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.127.
3. Klein, L. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.127.
4. Farrar, J. and S. 1987, p.216 - 217, p.256, p.260.
5. Chicago, J. 1985, quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.94.
6. McCoy, A. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.111 - 112.
7. Mendieta, A. quoted in Making Their Mark, women artist move into the mainstream, (1970 - 1985). Randy Rosen, Chatherine C. Brawer, (eds.) 1989, p.105.
8. Mendieta, A. quoted in Making Their Mark, women artists move into the mainstream, (1970 - 1985). Randy Rosen, Chatherine C. Brawer, (eds.) 1989, p.105.
9. Starhawk, 1982, p.44.
10. Edelson M.B. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.123.
11. Gauldin, A. and Yarfitz, D. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.123.

CHAPTER TWO

The reclaimed Goddess symbolises today the sacredness of woman and nature, the linking of spirit to matter, a reclamation of the values represented by ancient pre-patriarchal cultures and a new-found reverence for the Earth and it's energies, as well as for women and their contemporary cultural creations.

Feminist - matristic artists do not wish to substitute systems of 'rule by women' (matriarchy) for systems of 'rule by men' (patriarchy) as a source of inspiration. This by no means implies that they do not support the political leadership of women. One could simply say that the feminist-matristic vision is about politics in the feminist sense, rather than about political systems as such. It is about the values and ethics held by both the women and men who envisage the cosmic creator as the great mother rather than father god.'

Some feminist critics are uneasy about spiritual matters and concentrate on the notion of essentialism as a way of invalidating feminist-matristic art as an effective feminist strategy. They see the symbol of the Goddess as 'defining a "feminine" essence, based on biologically determined essence in the female body'. It is understood that there is no one definition of feminism but rather feminist readings.

Therefore feminist critics construct feminist readings. So rather than seeing feminist-matristic art as defining an essential 'feminine' knowledge and also a specifically feminine experience of the world. This shows that culture is not 'un-gendered' which challenges one of the central concepts of idealist thought. Feminist-matristic art challenges the falsely claimed gender-free art of men.

It is felt by some feminists that artists reclaiming the goddess depict the 'feminine' as unproblematic, and this limits the power of their art to challenge a fixed and rigid notion of 'femininity'.² The 'feminine' has been shown to be a patriarchal social construct. The 'feminine' has also different meanings in different cultures and at different periods in history (aside from being a patriarchal construct). The problem occurs when you separate femaleness from femininity in order to explain gendering processes.³ But gendering processes never end and a feminine subject is never completely formed. Gendering processes, per se, are not intrinsically oppressive or exploitative. The domination of women depends not on ideologies of femininity but on the reproduction of gender relations, which cannot take place outside the institutional contexts which give those relations meanings and consequences. It is not as if there were a residual 'femaleness' to turn to instead. Women's desire to be addressed as feminine subjects is evidence of their shared cultural identity and not their oppression.

Just as women have begun to share their experiences and to describe a feminine knowledge, some feminists have begun to doubt that women exist as a thing or group. Here a distinction is made between women's experience and feminism which suggests that political values and ideological interests, do not derive from specific, concrete lived relations but from the professional practices of an elite group. The experience of white, middle-class educated women is being accorded the status of feminist 'analysis', while other women's experience is seen simply as evidence of their subordination.

When various strategies emerged in feminism there was a fear that important differences between women were being obscured by the generalisations made. Of course symbols may over-generalise and obscure differences but there is still a need for women to generalise

at a symbolic level. These images can be liberatory because they 'emphasise the potential for the construction of symbols for women's knowledge of their own oppression'. They permit women to see similarities and to make images of women's diverse strengths and powers an integral part of a new shared description of reality. Incorporating symbols from ancient Neolithic and Paleolithic cultures such as the labrys, the labyrinth, the egg, the spiral, the cave, the serpent, and so forth, into the new feminist matristic iconography is actually a way to reverse Essentialism. It reminds us that our patriarchal historical context is far too narrow. It recontextualises the lives of women with an expanded historical framework including millennia in which their connection to nature was not demeaned, but rather honoured.

These images, whether newly created or reclaimed from an ancient past, create new cultures, foster solidarity and forge new bonds among women in 'a society where isolation and fear divide and control women, whose knowledges are systematically represented as neuroses, aberrations and fantasies within the discourses of patriarchal culture'. (Partington, 1987). ■

Art critic Thomas McEvelley sees the goddess - reviving artists as 'reacting to the fact that for millennia the female body has been culturally colonised by the patriarchal order, they are trying, in effect, to take their bodies back'. (McEvelley, 1989) ♣ This is set against a notion of deconstructivists trying to take their minds back. This presents feminist work as a hierarchical progression from nature to culture and sets one against the other. The Goddess art of the seventies is presented as nature, and deconstructionist art of the eighties is presented as culture. This construct advances the idea that women artists working with nature have accepted their bodies and intuition at the expense of their minds and that

deconstructionist artists have accepted their intellects at the expense of their sensual bodies. This confusion about the Goddess keeps in place the nature/culture construct which 'works to keep in place treatment of the sexes as they have been historically polarised with a reimposition of rigid notions of male and female'. (Edelson, 1989). 7

Feminist-matristic vision wishes to go beyond the nature/culture dichotomy. It does not wish to elevate women and nature above men and culture. Rather culture is seen as the creation of humans who are part of nature. When only men are considered the creators of culture there is a disservice done to humans and nature. When feminist-matristic artists look at cultures in which women were creators they are aware of a different attitude toward nature. The question now becomes how we can account for women's different relationship to nature without reasoning that women are 'more' connected to nature than men. Chiah Heller says that 'women are not more connected to nature than men, but rather that women remember their interconnectedness to the natural world more than men'. (Heller, 1987). 8 She stresses that these inclinations are only 'tendencies' for naturally, there can be women who have also forgotten their interconnectedness with nature as well as men who remember theirs.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

1. Barry, J. and Flitterman - Lewis, S. quoted in Visibly Female, feminism and Art:
An anthology, Robinson, H.(ed.), 1987, p.108.
2. Barry, J. and Flitterman - Lewis, S. quoted in Visibly Female, Feminism and Art:
An Anthology, Robinson, H.(ed.), 1987, p.110.
3. Femaleness and femininity have been separated in order to try to explain how, for instance, a cultural object both addresses a gender-specific audience (already formed as it were) and at the same time contributes to the 'gendering' of the viewer'. Kuhn, A. quoted in Visibly Female, Feminism and Art: An Anthology, Robinson, H. (ed.), 1987, p.245.
4. Partington, A. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.73.
5. Partington, A. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.74.
6. McEvelley, T. 1989, p.194.
7. Edelson, M.B. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.74.
8. Heller, C. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.23.

CHAPTER THREE

In Ireland the women's movement began in the 1970's but it did not spawn the women's studies programmes, as witnessed in the United States. Today, there is only a handful of feminist spirituality groups in Ireland. It is no surprise, therefore, that the reclaiming of the Goddess is not directly informing the work of many women artists. However, there are a few artists working in feminist-matristic ways, some more consciously than others. I wish to discuss a number of these Irish artists in the context of the Goddess.

Caren Eve Reid is a self-taught artist whose themes involve woman as Goddess in all her aspects, and the unconscious connection and harmony between all living things. Her images derive from various mythologies, alchemy, dreams and her own imagination. In 1989, she painted The Empress which is based on the tarot card of the same name. It represents a woman as Goddess, holding the Tree of Life. The painting contains elements from the tarot card such as the two birds, the two moons and the Tree of life. The Empress has also echoes from the various images of the Virgin Mary found in Christian iconography. It is different in many ways. The serpent is seen not as a symbol of evil to be crushed underfoot by women but as a symbol of the cyclical nature of life and death. The Empress reclaims the symbols of the moon, the stars and the dove which were incorporated into the image of the Virgin Mary. While Mary intercedes with a masculine God in heaven, the Empress is linked with the earth and both are seen as sacred.

Reid is creating a Goddess iconography inspired by research into the areas which contain knowledge about the Goddess and also by her unconscious awareness of the Goddess symbol manifest in her dreams.



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Reid's Goddess consciousness relates to her response to nature which emphasises interconnectedness between all living things. This is evident in The Empress through the use of various symbols: the seahorses, the birds, the moons, the serpent, the tree, the stars and the woman. The earth, sea, sky and woman are consciously drawn together to symbolise the Goddess. Reid uses the symbol of the Goddess to search for a deeper and richer awareness of her being.

I try to get at and affirm deeper levels of meaning and truth that are commonly experienced in our Western materialist lifestyle but which are realities of the Psyche, i.e. the Unconscious. (Reid, 1990). 1

Reid also explores the everyday aspects of her visual world in her paintings which reflect the pleasure she finds in life. Reid finds pleasure, she is not given it. It is important that female desire is articulated as well as an awareness of female oppression.

Reid consciously creates the Goddess and remembers her interconnectedness with nature. This reflects a basic theme of feminist-matristic creation.

Ursula Kavanagh is an Irish artist whose interest in her ancient matristic past has inspired her travels to Goddess sites in Ireland, England, Brittany, Italy, Sardinia, Malta and Sicily. She studied the archaeology and history of the cultures relating to the sites she visited. She began to extract and sift the Goddess out of all the material, linking the symbols of the Goddess from site to site and paying homage to the powers and energies of the Great Mother. In 1982 she began a series of work called The Arethusa Series. Inspired by a mosaic image of a mermaid that she found in front of the main altar in a church at Otranto, Italy, she found that Arethusa was originally a nymph who was changed into a spring. In this series Arethusa is linked to various other Goddesses including Melusine, a

serpent Goddess with matriarchal origins.

Ursula Kavanagh has established a vast visual iconography of varied multicultural Goddess images which she feels are relevant for contemporary society.

My research has led me to the Neolithic - a culture where to live as a human being was, in itself, a religious act, where the fertility of the earth, the importance of woman, the sacramental value of sexual union, food and labour were all integrated.

(Kavanagh, 1988). 2

She believes that the values and visions of the Neolithic, 'constitute a model for our future', (Kavanagh, 1988). Ursula Kavanagh's reclaiming of the Goddess through her journeys and creative symbolic imagery is feminist-matristic in vision.

Una Walker moved from the city to the country in the early 1980's and became interested in the landscape with its daily, monthly and yearly cycles of growth and decay. She also became influenced by mythology and archaeology. During 1988 she made a series of fire installations, constructed in five separate venues, collectively called The Ties That Bind. It was intended that each installation was complete in itself, but all the installations formed a larger work. There were two separate threads of thought woven together in the installations. These were documented in the catalogue. One established the pre-eminence of women in Ireland's rich tradition of myth, legend and religio-philosophical beliefs, and traced the change in the mythic representation of Ireland as a woman, from Goddess of war to the passivity engendered by the cult of the Virgin Mary in Catholic Ireland. The other related to personal recollections of a childhood divided between the North and South, with references to a range of issues - childhood, marriage, age,



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status, identity, etc. 3

In The Ties That Bind Una Walker explored the interconnected cycles of growth and decay in the landscape and the lives of women, from the early Irish Goddesses to contemporary women, and how they pivot around rituals related primarily to death. Natural materials were used in a symbolic way, and meanings were secreted through a carefully arranged series of interrelated images. Women were represented by colour-coded rag dolls and dough figures with references made to the various stages of womanhood - child, mother, crone. These were placed among various arrangements of natural materials such as leaves, peat-moss, clay pots and unleavened bread which refer to customs, superstitions and rituals of growth and decay.

By relating the cycles of woman's lives to the earth's cycles of life and death, Una Walker reconnects women with nature and this suggests that we are made from the earth and are bound to partake of it's cycles of growth and decay. The Ties That Bind is feminist-matristic in vision because it recreates an awareness of our interconnectedness with the earth and recontextualises the symbol of the Goddess in her various aspects within the cycles of contemporary women's lives.

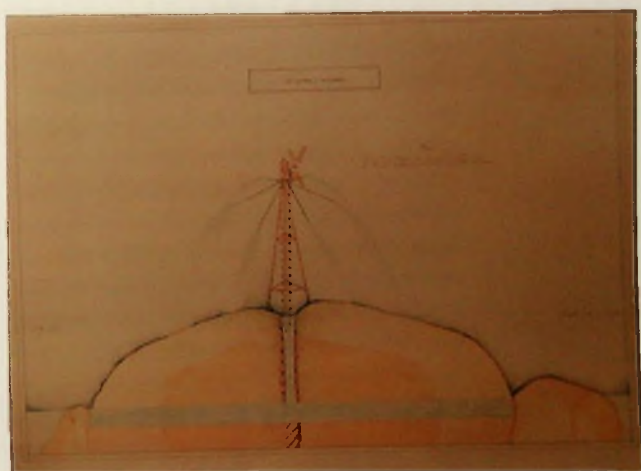
In 1983 Kathy Prendergast made a series of 11 drawings in ink and watercolour, called Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces. These were exacting studies of the female body drawn in a map-like manner. In one half of the series, the body, what we see of it, is a land mass, partly surrounded by sea, mapped onto a grid of latitudinal and longitudinal lines. The areas and features of the body make up a terrain. Nipples, for example, are volcanic mountains and are labelled as such. Between the stomach and vulva, which are declared a central desert and a harbour, a journey is mapped. In Enclosed



11.



12(a)



12(b)

Worlds in Open Spaces the female body/landscape is explored and mapped. The journey is an exploration and an account is given on the thigh, of the numbers inscribed along the way. Nos. 1,3,5,7 and 11 are stables. Nos. 2,6,10 have refreshment rooms, Nos. 4,8 and 12 have a good Inn. There is a sense of enjoyment about the idea.

However the second half of the series all is not as pleasant. Explorations of a different kind take place. These drawings are enlargements of part of the body/land and show cross-sections of how the body/land is harnessed and mined for it's resources. There are water tables, wells, shafts, tunnels, caverns, nipples working as sprinklers but no sign of the implied engineer. These drawings have titles like, To Control a Landscape - Irrigation and To Control a Landscape - Oasis, which suggest how the female body/land is controlled and abused. There is no resistance to the interference which suggests that the body/land is vulnerable.

Yet there is a suggestion that the body/land cannot be charted objectively. The more you blow up a detail, the more there is to see. So while the landscape becomes a female body, it does not lose it's sense of vastness. Trying to see both in their entirety becomes an illusion and this threatens the control implied by the titles.

Kathy Prendergast's exploration of the female body as landscape suggests the interconnections between them. The drawings refer to attempts to control both, and suggest the futility of scientific, objective observation. There are similarities between these drawings and a feminist-matristic vision of interconnectedness between the female body and the earth, which calls for a reverence for both.

In the late 1970's Pauline Cummins began painting about motherhood when she was expecting her first baby. She was living in Canada at the time and she began to explore ancient matristic



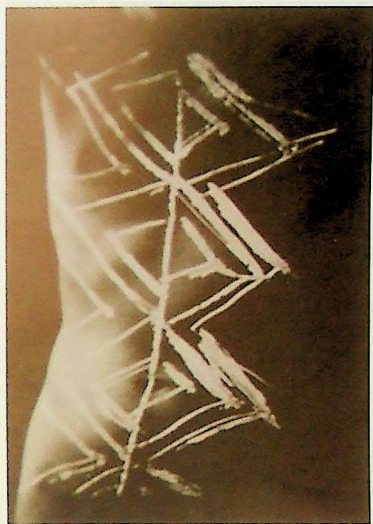
13.

cultures where women were strong. She discovered information about the cave paintings, many of which were made by women. This was a source of pride and encouragement to her because the work was done in the woman's home and still exists today. The Irish image of the Sile na gig also inspired her because she is both dangerous and nurturing. Cummins found it a powerful image which enabled her, in some way, to deal with the conflict between motherhood and a fierce determination to work. 4

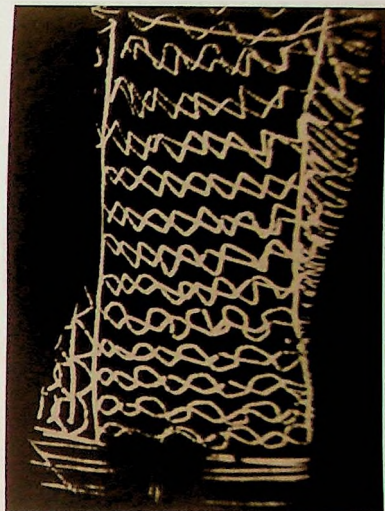
In July 1984 she worked on a mural in Holles Street Hospital, which was entitled Celebrations at the National Maternity Hospital. She identified with the women at the hospital and wanted to celebrate, share and remember the importance of childbirth in a society where women with babies are generally not respected or acknowledged. The mural was painted on a large scale and Cummins borrowed images from other periods of history in order to describe childbirth as part of our history which stretches back to prehistoric matristic times. This is feminist-matristic vision which links women's contemporary experiences of childbirth to ancient matristic cultures in order to show how women have always created life and this should be honoured and valued today.

Pauline Cummins then began to explore slide/sound installations and performance. In 1985 she made a slide/tape piece, called Aran Dance. It was a personal view of how perhaps the Aran sweater might reflect women's dreams and fantasies as they created patterns. In the piece, the images of the patterns begin to reveal a naked male torso, the hidden body beneath the aran sweater. The sensual pleasure of knitting moves to sexual arousal in a celebration of male sexuality.

By using the aran sweater and talking about knitting, Pauline Cummins celebrates a craft which is rarely seen in an art context.



14.



14.



14.

The piece exposes a hidden area of women's talent which has been taken for granted by many people. Part of the tape reflects on knitting as drawing.

And if knitting is like drawing with a long piece of wool then women have been drawing with wool for quite some time.

(Cummins, 1985). 5

The sexual arousal of the male is described by the artist who images the unspoken thoughts of women when they imagine the male body hidden beneath their creations. A woman articulating her desire and pleasure in sensual male body, has traditionally not been a legitimate subject for art. Aran Dance expresses women's enjoyment of sex without any apologies.

Pauline Cummins has used her intuition and imagination to create work which speaks of female creativity and pleasure. Aran Dance is feminist-matristic in that it retrieves an ancient female creativity and links it to female pleasure in creating patterns, some of which are about the male body. This develops to female enjoyment of the sexual male body. By reclaiming these connections Pauline Cummins makes a space for contemporary articulation of female pleasure.

NOTES ON CHAPTER THREE

1. Reid, C.E. Unpublished artist's statement. 1990.
2. Kavanagh, U. quoted in The Reflowering of the Goddess, Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, p.82.
3. Notes from catalogue, quoted in Circa, No.41, August/September, Kieran Walsh, 1988, p.34.
4. Cummins, P. quoted in Circa, No. 32, January/February, 1987, p.16.
5. Cummins, P. Slide/tape text, quoted in Circa, No. 36, September/October, 1987, p.26.

CHAPTER FOUR

It is evident that reclaiming the Goddess is not a primary concern for many women artists in Ireland. Of course my research in this area is limited by the lack of information. It is possible that there is number of artists consciously using the Goddess symbol, in various ways, which is not adequately documented. However it is also evident that a number of artists are working in feminist-matristic ways without directly referring to the Goddess symbol. This shows how the values and meanings of the Goddess can be discovered in various ways. The Goddess overlaps with many other ways of thinking, for example, native American religions, the practise of Wiccan witchcraft, ecofeminism, the 'Gaia Hypothesis' , and the Green movement. What links all these positions is a belief that the earth is sacred and that since we are an interdependent part of it, we are sacred too. It is very difficult to analyse the exact influences and ways of thinking of certain artists. What is more important is a reflection on their work and how it can alter and expand the parameters of our vision.

Caren Eve Reid, Ursula Kavanagh, Una Walker, Kathy Prendergast and Pauline Cummins have celebrated the female body in various ways. The first three artists have explored woman as Goddess in connection with the earth. The female body becomes resacralised as well as the earth. These symbols remind us of the buried past when all of nature was seen as alive and interconnected and women were honoured and respected. Reclaiming these values expands our historical framework and shifts the values of our culture beyond a purely material base. While looking at the status and roles of women in Goddess-centered cultures, we are also considering the gendered nature of symbol systems in general, and how they affect

women's daily lives. The Goddess redefines women's bodies and sexuality outside of all patriarchal systems by valuing our cycles, our procreative powers and our sexual energy.

Kathy Prendergast has depicted the female body as the earth. She has made the ancient connection between them. However, she is aware of the interference of a culture which tries to drain the life-enhancing fluids/energies from both. While we celebrate our connections with the earth we must not forget the abuse of the earth which threatens all life on the planet.

Pauline Cummins reminds us that motherhood was once honoured and respected. Her images of motherhood concentrate on celebrating childbirth in a culture in which mothers and babies are seen as a nuisance. By referring to prehistoric times, Cummins makes connections and expands our understanding of female procreativity.

Pauline Cummins also uses the female voice to speak of pleasures both sensual and sexual. In Aran Dance, interconnections are made between the landscape and the male body which are hidden in the female creation of aran patterns. Cummins has imaginatively released these connections which were triggered off by pondering on an ancient craft invented by women. Female desire and pleasure is both ancient and contemporary.

These artists are working in feminist-matristic ways that are challenging the representation of women in society. By celebrating the female body, female procreativity, female desire and female connections with the earth these artists reclaim the ancient matristic past in which women were powerful. These artists make new images of women's diverse strengths and powers. It is important that women are not made invisible to themselves but continue to create images of their plural realities.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

1. The 'Gaia Hypothesis' was expressed by J.E.Lovelock in which he stated that 'the biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment'.

Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth. 1979, p.IX.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the symbol of the Goddess is not a prerequisite for creating work which has feminist-matristic vision. This was brought to my attention while I was studying the work of a number of Irish artists. The work of Alice Maher, Louise Walsh, Maggie Wright, Carole Key and Fiona Eucstace could also be read in feminist-matristic ways. Yet the symbol of the Goddess adds an extra weight and forces us to expand the parameters of our vision and analysis in the direction of prehistory. The expansion of the time frame that the Goddess symbol provides, forces us to ensure the inclusion of women's most ancient, most traditional and most contemporary concerns and values at every critical moment.

When we look at American feminist-matristic art we see how Goddess consciousness can influence an ecological awareness. This was witnessed in the work of Mary Beth Edelson. Betsy Damon, Miriam Sharon, Sonna Henes, Christine Oatman, Helene Aylon, Rebecca Belmore, Faith Wilding, Laderman Ukeles and Marsha Hewitt also relate the Goddess to their ecofeminist concerns which combine the political and the spiritual in their work. On a practical level, ecofeminism is certainly viable without the Goddess. Yet the symbol of the Goddess obliges us to think about the implications of the gendered image of the cosmic creator as we return to a concept of the earth as alive, an image such as that which prevailed in the millennia preceding patriarchy. The Goddess symbol inspires us to refer back to Goddess-centred cultures like those of the Neolithic where the Goddess signified a reverence for the sacredness of nature and the female. Feminist-matristic vision does not just shift the gender of the deity from male to female. It is a move away from the values that ensue from patriarchal systems that embrace a Father God

creation myth and a move towards the values that ensue from embracing a matristic Earth Mother Goddess myth of origins. The matristic world-view places humans within the context of their origins (the cosmos, the earth) and sees the earth as the Great Mother, the womb from which all life springs and humans as part of nature who are not above or outside of it.

While I have discovered Irish artists working in feminist-matristic ways I feel the Goddess symbol could enrich their artistic vision and create a wider framework for their work. The Goddess has the potential to signify a fusion of life-enhancing values, aesthetics and politics in a global ecological vision of survival, both for humans and all non-human life on earth. Feminist-matristic art has the potential to be cultural powerful.

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