

THE GREENING OF GAIA: ECOFEMINIST ARTISTS REVISIT THE GARDEN

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When in 1987, I co-created the conference at USC, ECOFEMINISM: CULTURE, NATURE, THEORY, and then published REWEAVING THE WORLD: THE EMERGENCE OF ECOFEMINISM¹ as an outgrowth of that conference, I wrote in my chapter “Artists as Healers: Envisioning Life-Giving Culture”² that “In the creation of new cultures that neither pit humans against nature nor set them above it, but rather situate humans within the cycles of the cosmos and celebrate the interconnectedness of all things, the arts have begun to play a major transformational part. This, in itself, makes Ecofeminism a different kind of political movement, for instead of viewing the arts as adjuncts to political activity or as distractions from political activism, Ecofeminism considers the arts to be essential catalysts of change.” Here I was referring to some of the public arts events in which political activists and artists came together to co-create rituals of protest at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, the Livermore Weapons Lab, the Nevada Test Site, the Women’s Peace Camp at Greenham military base in England, and the Women’s Pentagon Action in Washington. In the eighties ecofeminist artists were honoring the Earth as THE GREAT MOTHER, and in a vast number of rituals and environmental pieces they also paid homage to THE EARTH MOTHER’s spirit, intelligence, history and cosmic cycles, as well as to the stored memories of her plants, rocks, soil, and creatures. The Ecofeminist arts, in the eighties and early nineties often invoked the symbol of The Great Mother (The Goddess) or Gaia in order to emphasize the interconnectedness of three levels of creation, all imaged as female outside of patriarchal civilization: cosmic creation, procreation, and artistic creation. The Great Mother, the Earth Mother, Gaia soon became the symbol for healing the splits between the material and the spiritual, the human and the non-human, the mind and the body, the sacred and the profane, nature and culture, and the masculine and the feminine, that have

¹ Orenstein, Gloria Feman REWEAVING THE WORLD: THE EMERGENCE OF ECOFEMINISM (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990)

² Ibid. p. 287

dominated patriarchal civilization in the West. In the works of Ecofeminist artists of the eighties, The Earth Mother signified that all forms of life, both human and non-human were interconnected with culture and the arts through their mutual creation by a sacred cosmic energy or agency originally imaged as female...an image that endured for several thousand years until the advent of patriarchal civilization, when the images of cosmic and cultural creation began to be imaged as male.

It has long been my contention that there was nothing Essentialist about that use of the goddess symbol, since it represented a de-centering of patriarchy and an empowerment of women, specifically contrary to the essentialist dictum of “Biology is Destiny”. When the empowered Cretan (Minoan) Mother Goddess whose uplifted arms brandish serpents, and she thus raises the serpent power, we recall that in Minoan society woman had public Roles as depicted repeatedly in their murals, and we understand that raising the serpent power in the works of contemporary women artists references The Cretan Mother Goddess, and signifies an empowerment of the female that was in harmony with nature, rather than one that would imply a domination over nature. The Serpent Mother Goddess, arms uplifted, is an image that stands for the public power of women, noty their subordinate status.

Thus, through public and private rituals, ceremonies and art performances, Ecofeminist artists of the eighties, artists who reclaimed the Earth Mother Goddess’ iconography and symbols in their works, were creating an ecstatic rebirth of a new culture from the ethos and mythos of the ancient Earth Mother Goddess. Those art rituals were rites of evocation and transformation—mythic reenactments of a journey back to the matrix of being, to our sacred origins in the womb of the Great Earth Mother, Gaia. In reclaiming the Earth Mother Goddess’ history and mythos, Ecofeminist artists of the late seventies and the eighties such ass Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson, Helene Aylon, Vijali, Helene de Beauvoir etc. were consciously linking their contemporary images to symbols derived from a long tradition that had empowered women for more that 35,000 years, for they related the signs and symbols in their contemporary works to those of the Paleolithic and the Neolithic as well as to iconography from the Cretan and Celtic civilizations. Those images, then, fused modern meanings with ancient symbols to create highly charged signs that reminded viewers of the erased history of pre-patriarchal cultures and of their values. The image of a woman with her arms uplifted, derived from the Cretan Mother Goddess, is one example of how the ancient Goddess image was used in a self-portrait by Ana Mendieta. Another early Ecofeminist artist was Helene de Beauvoir, the sister of Simone de Beauvoir. In a series of two paintings we see how contemporary women encounter the Cretan Goddess, and learn from her how to wield the serpent power themselves in order to make changes in the direction of a world that honors our interconnectedness with animals and all of the non-human world.

Looking back over that early Ecofeminist art movement from the perspective of the new millennium, I see the Ecofeminist artists of the late seventies, the eighties, and the nineties reclaiming the Goddess image from ancient, pre-patriarchal cultures in order to re-examine the values of cultures that not only were non-patriarchal, but that lilved for centuries in harmony with respect for the cycles of nature and the integrity of the Earth’s

ecosystems. It was the recovery of the most intimate knowledge we could acquire of a world in which nature was not in need of healing. In contrast, the Ecofeminist artists of the new millennium, who have internalized the knowledge that humans did once and can again live on the earth without destroying it, do not need to be reminded of our non-patriarchal past any longer. It is more urgent for them to concentrate on the work that needs to be done to regenerate the Earth today, to heal Mother Gaia, whose wholeness and integrity have been destroyed in the patriarchal present.

Since the eighties Ecofeminist Art has undergone major shifts. Today's artists have eliminated the need for calling upon images of ancient Earth Mother Goddesses, and have focused directly on healing the damage that has been done through a direct, hands-on, interaction and collaboration both aesthetically and scientifically, with the earth, itself.

As Rebecca Solnit has written in *AS EVE SAID TO THE SERPENT: ON LANDSCAPE, GENDER, AND ART*³ "...contemporary artists recognize landscape not as scenery, but as the spaces and systems we inhabit, a system our own lives depend upon." She notes that today the viewer has become part of the landscape, and the artist has become a collaborator or mid-wife, working in harmony with the land. These works are often called site-specific, for they have left the "art space" or gallery, and have come to life at a site that already exists in the sense of being a "ready-made". If we begin to see all of nature in this way, every locale is a potential art site. These artists of the New Millennium, then, simply point out to us how, as residents of the site, we might see things differently when we collaborate with the regenerative cycles of nature, and are committed to developing and maintaining sustainable systems on Earth. The new Ecofeminist artist is concerned with listening to and understanding the language of nature, and in engaging in a healing relationship and dialogue with nature, speaking to nature in its own language—be that the language of the water, the soil, the air, the trees, the⁴ waste recycling processes, or any other process of life maintenance and ecological balance. Above and beyond the value of the aesthetic creation of an object like a sculpture or an Earthwork is the ethical consideration of how the project interacts with the earth at the site. Is the material of the work biodegradable or recyclable? Or does it leave any residue of toxicity at the site over time? In what ways can the artist collaborate with Gaia to create a visual experience that enhances the Earth's regeneration that purifies the pollution of a given site, or that increases our human understanding of our positionality within the Earth's body, making us conscious that we are the Earth, and that anything we do to Gaia, we do to ourselves.

Thus, in these works, ethics, aesthetics, and ecology are intimately integrated.

³ Solnit, Rebecca. *AS EVE SAID TO THE SERPENT: ON LANDSCAPE, GENDER, AND ART* (Univ. of Georgia Press: Athens, Georgia, 2001) p.47.

Some of the Artists whose work I discuss are: Lynne Hull, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Fern Shaffer with Othello Anderson, Jackie Brookner, Betsy Damon, Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Aviva Rahmani, Erica Fielder, Dominique Mazeaud, and Donna Marxer.

In my conclusion I state that I women artists left us their signature in nature in the ancient caves—as testimony to their artistic creativity used with spiritual power during rituals invoking fertility—today women artists are also leaving their signature in nature as well...they are signing their earthworks today with the creativity of their artscaping, their art and water-purification sites, their art-land-sculpting, their art-earth-regenerating...with the beautiful forms that grow from their healing hands tending the Earth and nurturing the Mother back to life. Today's Ecofeminist women artists are the counterparts of those women artists of the Paleolithic, who painted pregnant animals in the caves, who participated in rituals of reverence for Creation imaged in the feminine, and whose artistry was closely linked to fertility. The handprints of today's Ecofeminist Artists are left directly on the Earth in the work they do to restore the Wasteland and return it to its cycle of Reflowering. Today's Ecofeminist Artists are linking themselves to a long tradition of women artists whose creativity was always integrated with the cycles of The Great Earth Mother..

For those of us who are invited to visit, observe, and interact with these creations, our enlightenment or illumination is that THE EARTH MOTHER, HERSELF, IS THE PRIMARY ARTIST with whom we collaborate in the co-creation of a sustainable and aesthetically beautiful planet. When ecology, ethics, and community are integrated via the healing hands of visionary Ecofeminist artists, the Earth Mother, herself, reveals the aesthetic dimension as one of the many gifts from Gaia, almost blurring the distinction between the non-human world and humanity, so intimately are we intertwined with each other's life and fate.