

**Spirit
Meet My Uterus**
Ceres Gallery, New York

By Joel Simpson

In 1968 Margaret Meade spoke on the campus of Brown University, where I was attending my first year of graduate school. She spoke among other things, of the power of post-menopausal women. In my rather confused young male brain this was at best an abstract concept. But at the Ceres gallery in Chelsea at the opening of one group show and one duo show this past January 10, that power was absolutely palpable. It is the power that derives from having overpaid one's dues in child-rearing, householding, and even wifing, leaving the person full of energy to pursue self-fulfillment for the rest of her life. The artists have put precisely that power to very effective use, and the gallery that opening night was filled mostly with women in the same stage of life, full of verve and dressed with flare, celebrating the work on display.

The main gallery featured the highly colored encaustic, acrylic and mixed-media paintings of Judith Greenwald and the solemn, iconic female sculptures of Tania Kravath, the larger ones featuring water jets. It was a striking juxtaposition. Kravath's non-individuated wood-fired stoneware sculptures evoke mother- and earth-goddess statues of an indefinite antiquity, adorned with semi-effaced and completely enigmatic cuneiform-like writing scored in the clay. The way she has fired

them has created a rich interplay of colors ranging from brick red through deep brown to tan to light green, which creates an alluring ambiguity between their virtual age—at least five millenia—and the techniques of her craft. And the scored writing lends weight to their virtual antiquity. The words seem to repeat, as if they represented some sort of chant or magical incantation. But the antiquity is clearly a fantasy one. The masterwork of the collection, *Miriam*, for example, eyes closed and head raised as if to address her deity, is dressed in a simple shawl with bare midriff (where the inscription is) and a segmented skirt—emphatically not the attire of 5000 years ago! (judging from the statuettes we have). But Kravath is not aiming for authenticity. She is projecting her own consciousness back to a mytho-historical time when women were charged with spiritual power very much like her own. The virtual historicity gives roots to her statement, as it binds 5000 years of female spirituality together into a single sculpture that transfixes the viewer with its attitude, its solemnity, its elongated stylization, its inscriptions, and the fascinating color and textural artifacts of the ceramicist's craft.

Judith Greenwald's encaustic enhanced paintings, in contrast, are an effervescent celebration of color, form and texture, drawing the eye in with their exuberance, and keeping us there with their energy. Each one is inspired by a poem, but they are far from illustrations; rather, they are translations of emotion into form, synesthetic acts. They may be appreciated with or without their poetic source, since they all display a very active formal and coloristic imagination, but if one takes the time to read the poem, one discovers that the paintings are marvels of concretions of the inner experience of transcendence.

The most pictorially evocative of the lot, *I Shall Sing to the Lord a New Song*, is based on a poem by Rabbi Ruth Sohn, who, after doing extensive research on the Biblical figure of Miriam, wrote a poem by that name, imagining Moses's



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sister’s soliloquy as she at first anxiously confronts the unknowns of freedom, redemption from Egypt, the Promised Land, and a new relation to her God. She mediates her fears through a song that arises spontaneously from within her, finding firm ground and “friendly” waters, as she realizes that the song has been silent in her heart until that moment. Greenwald translates this very inner experience into two headless red figures with handleless arms raised, one of them bending as in a dance. Behind them flows a forking river, and surrounding all this appears to be a desolate environment overlaid with hallucinatory touches. The headlessness of the semi-abstract figures prevents the viewer from seeing Miriam as Other, as a woman on the riverbank. Instead, the artist places us inside her, watching avatars of her spirit dance with the joy of discovering and releasing her song in an environment visited by her fear, relief, and joy. Greenwald has achieved a delicate balance between the abstract and the figurative, managing to represent visually an inner spiritual experience.

In *For Freedom*, on the other hand, Greenwald translates a three-strophe poem of the same name by John O’Donohue, that blesses and exhorts the reader to follow the examples of a bird, the ocean, and the earth in transcending limitations and realizing a deeper sense of inner freedom, into an expanding blue rectilinear form, with three variously textured boxes inside against an orange background. Each box contains an arrangement of elements drawn from the same palette, the whole opening on the right into what looks like a series of parallel drips emanating from a row of little abstract bird heads, which more randomly populate the rest of the painting. The encaustic textures in the first two boxes are palpable. If you interrogate the whole under the sign of “inner freedom within limitations” you can begin to see dynamic interplays of the various visual elements—boxes within boxes, textures, bird heads, shadows, pieces of corrugation—that give a sense of a brewing of inner forces, a catalysis, as the consciousness in question musters its resources.

On one wall Greenwald has arranged twelve foot-square paintings in a 4x3 grid, that are remarkable in their heterogeneity. They appear to be whimsical though acute exercises in Greenwald’s art of formal and coloristic exploration, and at the very least, they’re great fun.

The overall title of this duo show, *Spirit*, seems to have a different meaning for each artist. Kravath’s sculptures are depicted in the act of communing with a (higher) spirit, and one gets the sense that Kravath herself communes with the same one. Greenwald’s spirit is closer to the French sense of

esprit in its meaning as “wit.” This is high play, and we can be glad she has invited us onto her fascinating playground.

The side room at Ceres features a group show with an overt political theme: *Meet My Uterus*, billed as a response to the current right-wing War on Women. But whatever the provocation, this fanciful but serious excursion into uterus imagery is extremely welcome, if not long overdue. Of all the sex organs, primary and secondary, the uterus is the most hidden, the most private, the most complex, and arguably the most powerful, since it initiates reproduction by accepting the eggs from the ovaries and nurturing the fertilized egg through gestation until birth. It also regulates blood flow to the external sex organs thereby regulating its owner’s sexual response. But of all the sex organs, it’s the one that has not been (or least been) appropriated by the dominant male culture—as breasts and vulvae have! This may be a scandalous situation, since women should own their bodies as much as men own theirs. But in our sexually “liberated” culture the tilt is still towards the male erotic imagination, which is why an art show that celebrates the uterus, a sex organ that only turns on women, not men, is so salutary. The relegating of women to secondary status in our culture for about the past 5000 years (again) has come at a high price in human and environmental destruction, one that may eventually kill off the species. Feminists, both women and men, know this; but the discredited but tenacious right wing remains wilfully oblivious to it, and our media continue to take them seriously.

The 24 works by 24 artists range in style, genre and degree of humor. Space prevents review of all of them, but here is a sampling of their range.

The whole premise of introducing one’s uterus as separate being invites a tongue-in-cheek treatment, and Lynne Mayocole’s piece, *Gilded with Accoutrements*, delivers it in style: in an appropriately oval frame studded with tiny roses alternating with little cups that could stand for eggs, a sexless uterus with appliquéd bug eyes and inverted deltoïd mouth holds a cane and a rose by her (?) two fallopian tubes. If only it had feet, it would do a little soft shoe.

Francine Perlman’s piece *By Invitation Only: Please Knock Before Entering* emphasizes the privacy issue in its title, as in “Keep your probes out of our wombs!” It is a delightful piece of bricolage in which the uterine mass, made of layers of corrugated cardboard shaped into a sphere, sits on a cubical mass of corrugated cardboard, plastered with a barely legible page that recounts the story of Todd Aiken’s all-too-revealing gaffe about “legitimate rape.” The sphere supports two fallopian tubes made of wire, one terminating in a

plastic ear, the other in a plastic eye. So she turns the uterus into an organ of perception, possibly guarding its integrity and privacy.

Christine Mottau's *The Martyrdom of Elizabeth MacDougal* is a conventional oil painting on wood with highly ironic imagery. She depicts a uterus as a bleeding Sacred Heart, cinched by two strands of thorns (or barbed wire), surmounted by flames, flanked by arm-like ovaries, and terminating in a rose, where the birth canal would normally be. The style is simple, almost naïve, with a certain roughness, as if this were a rural icon, and the message is clear: Elizabeth MacDougal (whoever she is) suffered greatly for her femaleness. She apparently paid dearly for her capacity to bear children, and Mottau bestows sainthood on her for her sacrifice. The Crown of Thorns adds the additional connotation that her martyrdom turns her into a "savior" of others in her situation, namely motherhood, which is quite a statement.

In contrast to Mottau's intensely iconographic piece, Phyllis Rosser's 46x26-inch uterus-shaped

composition of found wood, *Rivers of Silence*, draws a parallel between the external natural world and the internal physical one. It is an impressive piece even without the uterine reference. With it, however, it seems to be viewing the uterus as a vessel of connection, a highway of liquid communications, made of strong sinews with rich grain. Communication with what? To pose the question is to answer it: with past and future generations as well as with one's procreational partner. So Rosser offers us the uterus as the implicit and silent point of convergence of generational time and sexual desire, which makes it the central command post of human existence—not bad for a bunch of sticks, artfully arranged.

Katherine Dolgy Ludwig's frankly post-modernist piece *This Is My Uterus*, in watercolor, ink, paper and a speculum, is an explicit gesture of honoring her own organ. She repeats the message three times, "This is my uterus. There are many like it but this one is mine. My uterus is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. Without me, my uterus is useless. Without my

uterus, I am useless. Huhh?" She spreads it out across several dozen sheets of paper arranged in a funnel or uterine shape on the wall, all with crude drawings of sexual parts in thick paint in spectral colors from yellow to dark red. Then she presents it twice on single sheets at the bottom where she has placed a shoe box that supports a CD player with ear buds, while a metal speculum is attached to the wall, appropriate at the level of her vaginal opening, if the paper arrangement is her uterus. The whole work amounts to a declaration of deep connection and commitment to her self, her body and her uterus as its most essential element.

Finally, on an explicitly humorous note, Jenny Tango's cartoon *Used but Not Abused* depicts an older uterus with dangling ovaries, wearing running shoes marked "NB," and whose jagged "hands" hold up a sign that says, "ANTIQUÉ UTERUS (with empty ovaries)/SLIGHTLY USED not available/ DON'T TOUCH OR HANDLE/PRIVATE PROPERTY/NFS" and signed ANONYMOUS with a female symbol. Tango is an independent

and highly productive artist originally from Brooklyn, enjoying her "golden" years in Staten Island. Her piece provides a fitting post-menopausal coda to both shows at Ceres (although not all the artists in the uterus show are post-menopausal by any means).

I don't make a distinction between women's or feminist art and "mainstream" art, only, to paraphrase Duke Ellington, between good and bad art. Galleries like Ceres and art institutions like the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art deliberately risk stroking the canard that women's art is somehow of a different order of importance or quality than men's. An actual visit to such places, however, not only dispels this nonsense, but by allowing everyone, men and women, deep into female views of the world, we—and especially men—are enabled richly to experience that part of our human nature that we don't personally own, and to realize (as women have had to accept for millennia in the opposite direction) that women are US. **M**



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