



BOOK REVIEW

Reger, S., & Hauk, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Vibrant voices: Women, myth, and the arts*. Brooklyn, NY: Women and Myth Press. ISBN: 9780996961783

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Herstory of Women in the Arts

The suppressed histories¹ of the Divine Feminine and women artists are revealed in a vivid, colorful and regenerative way in this important art historical resource for a troubling time of resurging extremist backlash against women. Extremely disturbing unethical and death rallying anti-abortion legislation currently being championed by a terrified patriarchal culture in the USA is but one surge. Possibly in response to the dark times we are in, politically and ecologically, co-editor Marna Hauk passes sacred blessings forward in the books' closing poem, and poetically places the preceding pages in the realm of prayers for (s)healing the Matrilineal line within the dominant patriarchy.

This is not a traditional art history book, but one that has emerged from a circle of scholars involved with the Association of the Study of Women and Mythology; and who study, practice art, and teach in the areas of women and myth, women's spirituality and Goddess scholarship. I find the compilation compelling and encouraging of learning and teaching the rich lineage of art history of women from the ancient to the present.

As an artist educator interested in the repressed history of women and the arts, I find myself delighted to be reviewing a book that is written entirely by

¹ I have taken this phrasing from the independent scholar Max Dashu who calls her on-line archives <https://www.suppressedhistories.net/>.

women who have refused to not heed the crafted call of their foremothers. My initial impression upon opening and leafing through the pages and seeing the many color images was gratification. The significance the editors and publisher granted to the art in this book, with color photos augmenting most chapters, is commendable and rare in the world of academic publishing.

Iconic feminist poet, Judy Grahn, opens the book with a Foreword that immediately sets the larger context, acknowledging the historic wisdom teachings brought forward in this book. Grahn's poignant words lead the reader into the Introduction by Reger, Hauk and Biaggi, who frame the book within a matriarchal and Indigenous economy based on the gift. They poetically open the chapter with words that traverse the stretch of time that the art in the book spans, from Paleolithic and Neolithic eras to the present Anthropocene era. They write, "These sentinels—wisdom carriers, path blazers, summoners, stokers of powers, old friends, world makers, heart tenders and catalysts of gifts—turn to welcome us and crown the bridge from their realm to ours" (p. iii). The gifts contained in this book take the form of historical, mythological, spiritual, goddess-based and contemporary art; poetry, artist's writing about their art practices, art historical and arts-based theses, and artist scholar memorial-writings.

Each section of the book begins with a poem. Judy Grahn's poetry opens section Section 1 of the book, entitled *From The Beginning: Research into Images of the Female Divine*. Arisika Razak contributes an in-depth overview of the book's content as past, present, and future transformative and empowering dialogues with Spirit. She shares, "The art discussed in this book represents a diversity of liberatory, spiritual, artistic and cultural expression that have survived five thousand years of patriarchal marginalization, denigration and attempted genocidal erasure of those who seek to continue the practices of spiritual traditions and artistic endeavors in which women are at the center or a least deeply involved" (p. 8). Miriam Robbins Dexter begins the empowered dialogue by taking the reader on an art historical journey across Eurasia, France, Germany, Britain and

Ireland, Anatolia, Serbia, Romania, and Greece, to Western China, and the Indus Valley of historic India, to many cultures in the Pacific and South America and finally to the northwest coast of America. The journey ends at a coffee shop, sourcing the origins of the current day Starbucks mermaid logo in Seattle, back to the “womb of the Great Mother” and the ancient sacred and magical display of the female vulva in figures engraved in walls and floors. These figures she concludes, “represent apotropaia, protection, birth, death and regeneration” (p. 45).

The next few chapters challenge colonizing practices that have led to the loss and denigration of Indigenous rituals, stories, and deities. Artist, Aprina Murwanti invokes the Goddess Sri from Javanese culture through her own embodiment, in a practice-led research project undertaken during her pregnancy. In this project she creates a ritual-infused textile art installation drawing from the traditional *Mitoni* ritual with the “lurik cloth [that] was believed to protect and save both the mother and the baby in her womb” (p. 63). Yuria Celidwen then leads us into “the shadow side of the Catholic faith” (p. 78) in Latin America where the “foundational symbol in the history of Mexico, the image of Guadalupe was used as the insignia of empowerment and unity in the nation’s two most important fights for social justice” (p. 81). Forced conversion to Catholicism (often ending in death for those refusing conversion) in the first 100 years of contact with the Spanish found the Indigenous pantheon hidden inside the statues of the Lady of Guadalupe to enable traditional worship to continue. Celidwen takes us through the ancient symbols still present in the Catholic Lady of Guadalupe today.

Section 2, *Inquiry into the Art of Experiencing the Goddess* begins with a poem by poet, writer, and Goddess activist *Patricia Monaghan*. This is followed by a chapter that assists the reader to understand how the “traditional Yoruba religions, their diasporic descendent Santeria and the contemporary Yoruba priestly artist’s depiction of the goddess Osun” is experienced (p. 106). Mei-Mei Sanford unfolds how Osun’s messengers can appear as “human, animal, geographical, elemental, meteorological, numerical, chromatic, temperamental or gastronomical” (p. 113). Her chapter clearly shows that in the Yoruba religion, there is no waiting for a God to arrive; as Osun is already present. Toni Truesdale then takes us into the center of our homes to experience the Goddess—to our kitchen. She depicts through her paintings how “within households, from mother to daughter” (p. 116)

we pass on traditions to the next generation through household shrines, feminine spaces and women’s alters. She closes her chapter with a poem written about how women’s prayers to their children are passed on.

The dreamworld is entered for incubation at the close of Section 2 as Marna Hauk shares through her arts-based dream research how an invited group of women from across the globe enter “dreams of the earth” in a virtual “Hygeian Dream Temple” (p. 133). In this way she invited and found personal and planetary healing through “depth/ecotherapeutic earth dreaming” (p. 133). This healing was further made visible through the understandings that emerged in the making of art as oracular portals in response to the dream sharing of the women. She closes this section with the enticing possibility of “the entire Earth becom[ing] a shared dreaming temple for incubating earth dreams, regenerative capacities and embodying expanded, planetary-curative states” (p. 141).

Section 3, *Honoring our Artist-Mother Foremothers* begins with a poem by Gina Belton that brings forward questions and guidance from the ancestors. This section contains a deep honoring of women artists whose lives have directly touched and impacted future artists scholars of the Goddess. Joan M. Chichon extends the lineage of women in myth that Lydia Ruyle (1935-2016) dedicated her life labor to, and offers the reader a glimpse into the contagiously enthusiastic and much-loved woman, Lydia. Mary B. Kelly (1936-2016) and her “tireless research on ancient textiles and the sacred imagery they transmit” is next given reverence by Joan Marler. Kelly’s paintings are a beautiful embodiment of the symbolic language she spent her life studying in textiles from around the world. Kelly’s words eloquently end the chapter to remind us to engage with the gift of our histories, “throughout the world, folk textiles shine with lustrous threads, speaking a symbolic language, using this gift, we will continue to weave our wishes, embroider our prayers” (p. 169).

“Artists, their work and their words” fill the pages of Section 4. Annie Finch’s poem “A Blessing of the Poets” fittingly begins this section (p. 174). Laura Fragua-Cota, a Pueblo Native American artist creates “through the use of words, movement, or two-or three-dimensional forms” (p. 175). Through her art she takes the reader on a journey with her from creation stories, to embodiment of spirit in

stone, to a painted remembrance of the 300-year anniversary of the Pueblo Indian revolt, to touching what cannot be seen and making seen, what is too painful to remember. She invites us into the village with its unceasing prayers symbolized in the bowl of cornmeal always available in the home for offerings. The journey is brought to completion with the “Mother Earth’s Blessing,” a painting deeply rich in symbols of care, maintenance and wellness for all that share this world. Cristina Biaggi casts her creative gaze on the ancient primordial dark goddess, Medusa. In sharing her sculptures of Medusa she invites us to “live with the contradictions, with extremes, to live in a state of suspended animation while what is happening inside mirrors what is happening outside” (p. 188). In these chapters we are called to look directly at the world crisis, that is, also, a personal crisis—terrifying to look at directly and fully see.

As a less confronting read, the next chapter continues to honor the work of Lydia Ruyle as the editors of the book contribute lecture notes and art images from a 2012 presentation given by Lydia. They do this as a way to share “elder notes [that] might inspire other artists to engage with the rich topic” of mermaids as researched by Lydia. The lecture ends with Lydia’s playful words: “May you encounter only friendly mermaids and please avoid the dangerous ones” (p. 207). The last part of this section offers large images and short artist statements from 12 contemporary artists for the reader to dwell with and admire: Rae Atira-Soncea, Denise Kester, Helen Klebesadel, Louis Laskowski, Lisa Levart, Barb Lutz, Lisa Noble, Merry Grant Norris, Lauren Raine, Sid Reger, Cristina Rose Smith, and Carmen R. Sonnes.

“Herstories and Solidarities” is the last and fifth section of the book. “Calling You-Who” is the playful opening poem by Ann Filemyr that proceeds the chapter by Simone Clunie, which is an overview of the converging histories of Marija Gimbutas’s goddess culture research in *Old Europe*, the feminist spirituality movement, the eco-feminist movement and feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically the art of Monica Sjoo, Mary Beth Edelson, and Mayumi Oda. Next Nancy Vedder-Shults offers narrative scholarship in the study of women and mythology in her chapter on “Storytelling and Goddess Scholarship,” inviting us all to embody the technique of storytelling given to us by our ancestors. *La mestiza*, in Cristina Rose Smith’s writing takes us into the “multiplicity of ancestral

locations, ethnicities and cultures” (p. 275). Here she encourages the reader to approach creative texts from a place of integrative solidarity and acknowledgment of Indigenous roots. In this way moving toward decolonizing ourselves through griefwork and further embracing our darkness.

Kathryn Henderson’s closing chapter brings three spiritual leaders’ voices forward through interviews as the author inquires into the troubling territory of “respectful engagement with living traditions” (p. 289). She conducts these interviews from her own location as a hybrid spiritual practitioner. In this chapter she offers general guidelines for those wanting to “practice with honor living traditions” (p. 304). Marna Hauk offers the final closing poem of the book in her action filled prayer for “shealing the Matrilineal line” that acknowledges the “sacred blessing from the foremothers onward” (p. 308). Blessings have been brought forward and their presence made known through the art and writing of the contributing artists and scholars in the 309 pages of this book. The art of women has been shared as a gift and shown to be generous and provocative with criticality and discernment that is embodied and honoring of all. May this book inspire others to follow ancient ancestral lines and teach the rich herstory of women in the arts to future generations for the (s)healing of a world that has tragically forgotten the gift of connection to the m/otherline.

About the Author

Barbara Bickel is an artist, researcher, teacher and Emerita Faculty of Art Education, Southern Illinois University. She co-founded and co-directs *Studio M*: A Research Creation Lab Intersecting Arts, Culture & Healing* in Calgary Alberta, Canada where she teaches art as an inquiry process and engages social art practices with the human and the more than human world. A co-founder and active member of the *Gestare Art Collective* (2009-) her art and performances have been exhibited internationally. She is co-editor of the book *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence*, book series editor of *Studies in Arts-Based Educational Research*, and co-editor of *Artizein: Arts and Teaching Journal*. To learn more about her art and writing go to www.barbarabickel.ca and www.studiom.space.