

# Mary Beth Edelson

## *Re-scripting the Story: 1970 – 2000*

BLUE STAR ART SPACE

SAN ANTONIO

by John Ewing

In the privacy of our minds, we tell ourselves stories. Stories are how we talk to each other, how groups of people communicate with other groups, and how we understand the differences that make us distinct. In their collective form, stories are how societies construct history and imagine the future. If stories are the central component of human life, then Mary Beth Edelson has made her life's work with the most essential tool available to the artist. *Re-scripting the Story* is a thirty-year survey of Edelson's engagement with one of the most important stories of the twentieth century, feminism.

The traveling exhibition, organized by The Central Pennsylvania Consortium and curated by Alissa Friedman, begins with the artist's groundbreaking poster art and continues with an exploration of the many forms stories manifest, including myth, popular cinema, and kitchen wisdom. Feminism

is the point of departure for most of the work, but the stories Edelson tells are neither exclusive nor restricted. They instruct both sexes, addressing the body, gender, spirit, history, and family. By focusing on fundamentals, Edelson emphasizes the power of stories to shape a society's beliefs for better or worse, and the influence individual storytellers have in shaping the larger, social script.

Begun in 1972, Edelson's poster art is the earliest and most incisive work in the survey. Distributed to women's organizations and feminist publications such as *Heresies* and *Chrysalis*, the posters critiqued the art world's male-dominated bias against professional women artists of the day. The original paste-up for *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* shows Edelson taking on art history, the white male establishment, and the Roman Catholic Church in one confrontational masterstroke. Leonardo da

Vinci's *Last Supper* is the iconographic base for this revisionist photocollage, which substitutes an image of Georgia O'Keeffe for the face of Christ. Flanked on either side, the faces of the apostles are replaced with the visages of Nancy Spero, Judy Chicago, and Faith Ringgold, as well as other feminist artists active in the movement. Linking art with religion, and picturing women in a male context, Edelson challenged the historical hierarchies of two powerful narratives. *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* has lost none of its power or disturbing relevance, and offered a point of departure for younger feminist artists in the 1980s, such as the collaborative group the Guerrilla Girls.

**Mary Beth Edelson**  
**Get It? 1992**  
 from "Re-scripting the Story," 1970-2000  
 Cotton sheets, pillow cases and bed  
 Courtesy of the artist and Blue Star



Other posters feature the faces of feminist contemporaries inserted into classic paintings to point out historical biases privileging the patriarchy. Made decades before Photoshop's "cut-n-paste" technology, Edelson's posters painstakingly match the scale and perspective of her cropped photographs to the size and direction of painted, historical poses. In *Happy Birthday America*, critics Linda Nochlin and Lucy Lippard repopulate *The Turkish Bath* (1859-62) by Ingres; numerous artists stand "in solidarity with their harem sisters." The poster text describes the painting as "female coin passed from man to man" and critiques its exclusive delectation of female sensuality as "portrayed by a male artist for a male audience."

*Bringing Home the Evolution* is based on Gustaf Cederström's *Bringing Home the Body of Charles XII* (1878) and shows a grinning Louise Bourgeois in military garb. She leads a column of feminist soldiers who carry placards for progressive causes, while bearing the dead monarch on a stretcher. This revolutionary humor is also directed at hierarchies within feminist ranks in a hilarious work entitled *O'Kevelson*. Beating Cindy Sherman to the punch, Edelson pays homage to Louise Nevelson and Georgia O'Keefe, the grandes dames of art history, by making herself up in their image and then altering these masquerade images with painting and drawing.

While the posters communicate large historical narratives from one collective sensibility to another, opposing one, Edelson's photographic series shot in secluded natural settings are personal stories that position a solitary woman within the framework of an inherited myth. In one series, a naked Edelson strikes the raised-arm pose of the Minoan Snake Goddess. This image is repeated four times, serving as a base reference for drawings and collage. Edelson's body is a host for Sheela-nagigs, Baubo, Kali and other ancient goddesses, as well as "eye breasts" and a "TV

head." Feminist artists of the seventies chose goddess iconography as archetypal symbols of female empowerment. The TV and eyes suggest a heightened scrutiny of media manipulation and "the male gaze," issues newly voiced in the 1970s. By photographing herself and then drawing on the images, Edelson conflates media with a host of mythic and contemporary issues, always using her own body as interlocutor.

Other, more ritualistic works are staged for or documented by the camera. The *Trans-formation* series employed a "ring of fire," a device constructed by the artist with copper tubing and natural gas. Staged in Edelson's New York City studio, the series focused on personalized ritual Edelson developed from the artist's broad mandate to "visualize women in ways that our culture did not encourage." Photographs of Edelson's artistic rituals were again elaborated with collage, and marked by hand to compose symbolic images of internal, spiritual transformation.

The *Body Performance* series moves beyond documentation and symbolic rendering to postulate a stunning evocation of spirit caught in dense, visual form. *The Sacred Manic Goddess Makes Tracks*, *Cliff Hanger*, and *Shaking the Grass* catch the evanescent shimmer of moving objects that only the slow eye of a long exposure can see. These series tell simple stories over three or four successive images; their uncanny gaze is always fixated on a sexless, netherworldly figure, partially obscured by shadow and a swirling cape. In *Bifurcation Point*, two feet are squarely planted on the sloping edge of a river rock. Legs rise up into nothing, into mist, while the dangerous water, photographed to appear as flowing dust, rushes past. Like the process that made them, these photographs are stories about the points where the passing of time intersects with the physical world.

Also included in the exhibition are the *Story Gathering Boxes*, Edelson's ongoing project that invites gallery visi-

tors to contribute their own personal narratives. On note cards, participants respond to such questions as "What did your mother teach you about men? What did your father teach you about women?" The responses range from parental platitudes and "old wives' tales" to bitter anecdotes. Whether reading the stories of others or writing one's own, this piece provokes a jarring encounter with collective notions about gendered sex roles.

Through the eighties and nineties, Edelson concentrated on towering chifon panels and smaller collaged drawings featuring women from popular cinema. Barbara Stanwyck, Sigourney Weaver, and Mae West are a few of the many actresses the artist has repositioned from role-playing actor into symbols of female empowerment. Judy Garland plays basketball and boxes; Marilyn Monroe is a poster-carrying activist. A gun-toting Peggy Castle offers a stinging psychoanalytic response to Freud's question, "What does woman want?" Though unstated, thoughts of Jung linger here, too, particularly his soul-image theory of the male "anima." Though compelling for women, Edelson's bed sculpture with an appropriated image of Gena Rowlands is perhaps even stronger for men. Aligning a pointed gun with Rowlands' magnetic gaze, the stylized image speaks directly to the male unconscious, as do all great cinematic actresses. The ultimate power of Edelson's carefully layered feminist stories is their knowing inclusiveness. ①