

# Goddess



*The Goddess is fuelling a new culture of feminist spirituality. Tatiana Pentes looks at the proliferation of Goddess imagery in current ceramic art and charts debate about the origins of the Goddess myth.*

The unearthing of an ancient Mother Goddess has been the preoccupation of countless artists, writers, poets, theologians and academics over the past three decades. Now, an abundance of Goddess literature is jostling on bookstore shelves alongside philosophies, histories and political theories under the rubric 'women's studies' or more specifically, 'feminist spirituality'. And in esoteric bookstores amidst Tarot decks, Runes, American Indian Medicine Bags and other occult accoutrements one finds *Amulets of the Goddess: Oracle of Ancient Wisdom*. Based on archaeologist Marija Gimbutas' interpretation of prehistoric sculptures, inscriptions and symbols, *Amulets of the Goddess* is a divination set of ritual tablets developed by Californian ceramist Nancy Blair.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the ruins of an Old European pantheon have provided a wealth of ancient symbology from which has evolved a new matristic vocabulary.

The polemic of the Goddess pivots around the existence of a lost golden age when the Mother Goddess was worshiped during the Palaeolithic era. However, the archeological validity of a prehistoric goddess culture has been critically questioned by a number of key thinkers addressing an archaeology of gender. But the utopic aim of such a search<sup>2</sup> appears to have shed more light on the politics of contemporary gender struggles than the ancient societies at the centre of these debates. The confusion arises when there is an attempt to authenticate subjective and imaginative spiritual expression with analytical interpretations of material history. The need for critical discussion surrounding the goddess and her polymorphous identity emerges when the conceptual framework of artists' imagery imposes recent concepts upon the distant past; for instance, use of the modern idea of 'nature' to analyse diverse cultural, temporal and geographic moments.

Ceramic artist Gudrun Klix's re-inscription of the spiritual in art hinges on the philosophical connections between the medium of clay and its direct link with the earth and the body. The evocations of the organic and ecological in clay works become metaphors for female artistic fecundity and creation. For Klix the celebration of earth as mother in ceramic works is a reclamation of a reverence for the earth that she believes is absent in the fragmented urban landscape. She attributes this imbalance to the destructive forces of patriarchy resulting in female disempowerment and the violation of the environment. Klix believes that "...it is the female who, through her body, is closer to nature. Through her fecundity and sensuality, she represents the spiritual essence of nature. And it is only when we restore the feminine within society and ourselves to its rightful place, and when both the masculine and the feminine are accorded respect and status, that there is any hope for the future world."<sup>3</sup> The hope that is being referred to signals the positive intentions of this world view. However this scenario provides no challenge to the conventional mind/body split<sup>4</sup>, a dualism perpetuating biological determinist

arguments. If this vision is extended, the intuitive and the feminine are aligned with the body and excluded from the intellect of masculine reason. Another way of putting this is attributing the light side to the feminine and the dark side to the masculine. Perhaps a more fruitful way of understanding this dynamic might be with the aid of Jungian archetypes. In Jungian psychology the feminine resides in man (Anima) and the masculine resides in woman (Animus). This relationship is explored in the malignant tale of 'Bluebeard'<sup>5</sup> where an important part of individuation for women is developing a relationship with their dark side and predator instincts within. The harmonious self is a dialectic relationship where man is feminised and woman is masculinized. Proposing that divinity resides in the fertile female form, an emblem of nature is problematic in view of prehistoric religions where feminine deities represented both creative and destructive aspects. Klix's work might be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, although the meanings in her work exceed the framework she offers. Her large vulvic shaped boat forms (lips that are open/lips that are sealed) redolent with feminine permutations beg a morphological<sup>6</sup> psycho-social reading. The multi-sensory aspects of her installations privilege fragrant, tactile and sonic experiences of the audience.

The concept of an all-bountiful Goddess might be counterbalanced by the living antiquity of divine Vedic images of fluid maternity. Fragmentary feminine symbolisms are synthesised into one integrated supreme deity, the Great Goddess Maha-Devi. Assuming the power of the holy triumvirate (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) as suggested in the canonical Hindu theological texts, *Devi-Bhagavata Purana*<sup>7</sup> and *Devi-Mahatmya*<sup>8</sup>, the 'mother' as she is referred to in sects of the Hindu faith is the ultimate force behind everything—for example, 'All this universe indeed is just I myself; there is nothing else eternal'. The transvestism in the choreography of male dancer Nirmal Jena, Sydney-based proponent of the Odissi devotional Hindu dance form, articulates Shakti as a manifestation of the mother goddess source of life (in *Kali Tandev* and *Amba*). In contrast to contemporary interpretations of the European goddess, the dancer portrays the different aspects of the great goddess Maha-Devi as the *giver, sustainer and destroyer*. The powerful theological force of the great mother remains contained within the theological realm, although society remains fundamentally patrilineal and patriarchal.



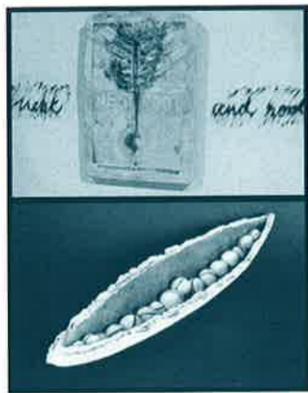
This contradiction is highlighted in the continued practice of Sati<sup>9</sup>. If indeed there was a culture in Old Europe that worshiped a mother deity this may not have translated into social or political organisation.

1 Gudrun Klix, *Vessel for the Earth Goddess*, 1994. Earthenware with oxides and slips.  
 2 Trudy Golley, 1994. Work from the *Goddesses* exhibition made at the Red Deer residency.  
 3 Trudy Golley, *The Uterus is a Pear-shaped Organ*, 1994. Mid-range fired with slips, oxides and glaze.

From within the sexual liberationist movement of the 1970's a central figure in the matristic art movement was Judy Chicago. Chicago provided a founding moment for the Goddess vision with her installation, *The Dinner Party*. This installation was claimed to be a culminating point in the quest for a lost women's culture, connecting contemporary women with their great matristic matrilineage. Gloria Feman Orenstein in *The Reflowering of the Goddess* distinguishes 'feminist art' as distinct from 'matristic art' whose central concern is with the re-emergence of the Great Mother Goddess

Creatress of all life<sup>10</sup>. It is from within this matristic earth focussed framework that Gudrun Klix has produced her ceramic based installations *Sanctuary for Gaia* (1988)<sup>11</sup>, *Path-edge/Mind-edge* (1984-89) and *Terra R'Ossa: A Meditation on the Earth*, (1994). *Terra R'Ossa*, created by Klix during a residency in Red Deer, Alberta, Canada, for the *The Works* festival, constructs the gallery space as a site nostalgic for a mythological pre-patriarchal state. Klix writes: "The installation speaks of the earth, its connection to the feminine principle of caring and nurturing...The mother/child relationship is signalled as we enter the space through the narrow slit-like passage... Like the earth itself, this place is sacred."<sup>12</sup> One enters the womb-like space through a narrow threshold; a terracotta pointed arch. The centrifocal point is a glowing almond shaped beeswax form and opposing walls are covered with negative (restful)/positive (active) hand prints, resonating with an archetypal sonic clicking rhythm like the chipping of stone.<sup>13</sup> Visitors are invited to interact with *Terra R'Ossa* by dipping their own hands in bowls of red clay slip and making their own mark, by re-positioning the bundles of white sticks with red ochre and bees wax tips or by writing their thoughts on paper provided and pinning them to the walls.

During the Red Deer residency Klix also produced work for the controversial *Goddesses* show, initially shown in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 1994 and later travelling to Victoria BC for the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival. The negative tabloid sensationalism surrounding the works voiced the moral outrage the exhibition produced in the more conservative elements of society, and especially one Tory member for Rocky Mountain House in Alberta, Ty Lund. This may have been



4 Gudrun Klix, *Path Edge/Mind Edge*, 1984-89. Installation of clay, bark chips, paper, wood.  
5 Ann Roberts, *Revival, Regeneration and Rebirth* (installation detail), 1994.  
6 Gudrun Klix, *Semele's Pod*, 1994. Earthenware with oxides, slips and glaze.

attributed to descriptions of the show reporting "porcelain sculptures of open vaginas, females having sex with animals and male figures with erections."<sup>14</sup> Such was the level of debate over the 'pornographic' nature of the show that its initial venue was cancelled. All this moralising diverts attention away from a critical reading of the show as a group of artworks or an investigation of questions raised by the whole notion of Goddess representation.

The foundation of the Goddess works, however spiritual, is enmeshed within a political program of reclaiming a great past and relies upon an acceptance (celebration) of the continuity of a feminine fertility deity. For the *Goddesses* show Canadian ceramist Ann Roberts produced work relating to the notion of Mother Earth as the essence of fertility and procreativity. Her artistic statement accompanying the show reads: "...For more than 30,000 years, the Goddess, in her many representations, has watched over shifting populations, eternal migrations, brave escapes and personal traumas..."<sup>15</sup> Such a belief can be traced to a reading of prehistory, the legacy of feminist archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, whose picture of the physical world has been popularised outside her academic discipline. While the valuable contribution Gimbutas has provided to interpretations of material history (prehistory) shouldn't be underestimated, it is a generally held view within contemporary archaeology that her theory of a universal Goddess culture is highly problematic.

This 'archaeo-mythology' is represented most significantly in Gimbutas' text, *The Language of the Goddess*. A diverse range of sculptures (Venuses)—from the Gravettian culture of the Upper Palaeolithic era to the emblems and inscriptions of Western Asia, the Indus Valley, the Aegean and Crete between 5th and 3rd millennium BC—has been unified into a class of sacred objects and symbols operating within ritualistic 'Fertility Cults' with a supreme feminine deity as creatrix.<sup>16</sup> The text reconstructs the prehistoric scene proposing a grammar and syntax of pictorial script, representing a metalanguage of the Old European Great Goddess. Drawing heavily upon comparative mythology, early history, linguistics, folklore and

historical ethnography in the analysis of tombs, temples, frescoes, reliefs, sculptures, figurines, pictorial paintings, Gimbutas' interdisciplinary approach explicitly seeks "...to identify the Old European patterns that cross the boundaries of time and space...[indicating] the extension of the same Goddess religion to all of these regions as a cohesive and persistent ideological system".<sup>17</sup>

The methodological rigours of Gimbutas' theories have been challenged by a number of archaeologists and in particular by Bill Hayden. He describes her work as excessively subjective and inconsistent with ethnological data. Where Gimbutas relegates Sky God/Earth Mother duality to Indo-European patriarchies, Hayden shows this to be relatively common throughout the world. He claims there is no evidence that the goddesses were androgynous or that they were the primary cult of importance, although Goddess statues obviously did function in a very public, domestic context and he suggests there are probably just as many phalli in the Palaeolithic as there are Venuses.<sup>18</sup> Arguing for a complementary interaction of *masculine* and *feminine* forces, in both the sacred and profane realms, he maintains that the *earth* was important in early agricultural religious ideology as reflected in the sacred sphere of Neolithic cultures, but he stresses this does not indicate sacred matriarchal or matrifocal political and social organisation. The movement away from sacred matriarchy concepts is evidenced in the research of Lauren Talalay, where the figurines from Greece traditionally identified with an ancient cult of a Great Mother Goddess are not considered a uni-functional class of objects at all but may have served a variety of purposes. She proposes that the similar and unusual clay fragments excavated from Neolithic sites in Greece, appearing to represent individual female legs, were useful devices marking regional ties, identifying tokens symbolising social and economic bonds.<sup>19</sup> The interpretation of every figure as a religious object has been disproved. Lynn Meskell argues that the study of figurines is usually integrated within regional culture studies, although the notion of the Goddess has assumed larger proportions to the wider community. "As a result, the literature of the Goddess lies at the interface where academic scholarship meets New Age gynocentric, mythologised interpretations of the past."<sup>20</sup>

A formative source material for this kind of work is Merlin Stone's *When God was a Woman* which discusses the development of patriarchal sexual taboos, conceived as a device to control the means of reproduction. In contrast, the holy activity of sacred sex performed in the temples of the ancient goddess cults (to invoke fertility) is beyond morality.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately contemporary sensibilities are not, as the reception of the *Goddesses* exhibition in Canada highlighted. The extreme conservatism that labels this kind of work 'pornography' is another stumbling block preventing the opening up of a critical dialogue that discusses the various philosophical standpoints in relation to this exhibition and the wider sphere of the production of this genre of object. Trudy Golley's *The Uterus is a Pear-shaped Organ* (1994) and Ann Robert's *Revival, Regeneration and Rebirth* (1994)—a large elevated sculptural vulva—do not avoid playing nature to patriarchal culture, or in mimicking the biological structure of female anatomy. The spirit has been brought back into the equation, but the mind is being obscured by the body.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Californian ceramist Nancy Blair has produced *Amulets of the Goddess: Oracle of Ancient Wisdom—A complete divination set*, Wingbow Press, U.S.A., 1993.
- 2 Frederick Engels classic Marxist text *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* links the emergence of social stratification based on private property to the domination of man over woman (further linking the shift from matriliney to patriliney with the development of copper and bronze metallurgy) in Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, Harper Collins, 1988, p45.
- 3 Janet Mansfield, 'Fuelled by a Social Responsibility', in *Contemporary Ceramic Art in Australia and New Zealand*, Craftsman House, 1995, pp136-139.
- 4 See 'Extracts from Principles of Philosophy', in E. Ancombe and PT. Geach trans., *Descartes Philosophical Writings*, Nelson Philosophical Texts, 1970, pp183-238.
- 5 In Clarissa Pinolka Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Random House, U.K., 1992, pp39-73.
- 6 The philosophical image of the 'two lips', both inside and outside, one and two, genital and oral, a metaphor of feminine pleasure developed by Luce Irigaray, stresses the multiplicity, ambiguity, fluidity and excessiveness of female sexuality. "It does not designate a female essence or anatomy but subverts the dominant male conceptions of women's essence...", in Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, Allen & Unwin, 1989, p116.
- 7 Trans. Swami Vijnananda, *Devi-Bhagavata Purana*, Allahabad: Panini Office, 1921-23. Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol.26. Reprint, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1977.
- 8 Trans. Jagadisvarananda, *The Devi-Mahatmyam or Sri Durga-Saptasati*, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1969.
- 9 Hindu widows sacrificing themselves on their husbands funeral pyres.
- 10 Gloria Feman Orenstein, *The Reflowering of the Goddess*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1990, pp78-97.
- 11 Gaia the mythological Greek Earth-Mother deity who brought forth the world from the gaping void is praised as the oldest of divinities in the Homeric epic *Hymn to Ge*. Worship of Gaia's oracular function is recorded at Delphi as preceding that of Poseidon, Dionysos or Apollo (see Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A collection of pre-Hellenic myths*, Beacon Press, California, 1984, pp43-49).
- 12 Gudrun Klix, 'Residency in Red Deer' in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, No. 20 1995, pp86-88.
- 13 Gudrun Klix, 'Residency in Red Deer'.
- 14 Trudy Ellen Golley, 'The Goddess: Rebirth and Revival', in *Ceramics: Art and Perception* No.19 1995, p94.
- 15 Trudy Ellen Golley, 'The Goddess: Rebirth and Revival'.
- 16 Lynn Meskell, 'Goddesses, Gimbutas and "New Age" Archaeology' in *Antiquity*, Vol 69, No. 262, March 1995, pp74-86.
- 17 Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilisation*, Thames & Hudson, UK, 1989, ppxv.
- 18 Brian Hayden, 'Old Europe: Sacred Matriarchy or Complimentary Opposition?' in A. Bonanno (ed.), *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Mediterranean*, Amsterdam, 1986, pp17-41.
- 19 Lauren E. Talalay, 'Rethinking the Function of Clay Figurine Legs from Neolithic Greece: An Argument by Analogy', in *American Journal of Archaeology* 91, pp161-169.
- 20 Lynn Meskell, 'Goddesses, Gimbutas and "New Age" Archaeology', p74.
- 21 Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, New York, The Dial Press, 1976.

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