

The Sister Chapel:
Towards A Feminist Iconography,
with Commentary by Ilise Greenstein

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Since the rise of the women's movement much activity has been directed toward feminist consciousness, criticism, and scholarship. Certainly the notion of an emerging feminist perspective has been much discussed, although very little of what that perspective might constitute visually has been defined.¹ In 1977, Adrienne Rich addressed herself to the topic of "Women and Honor" and spoke of "the possibilities of truth between us."² The question of how such possibilities might be pursued has been explored by women artists in two unique and separate instances: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, which is now underway on the West Coast, and Ilise Greenstein's *Sister Chapel* (1974-78), which had its first showing at Public School No. 1 (a former New York school now used by artists) in conjunction with the Women's Caucus for Art and College Art Association's annual meeting in January 1978. It is to the latter exhibition that this paper is addressed.

The "herstory" of the *Sister Chapel* represents a personal and artistic odyssey initiated by the vision and dedication of Ilise Greenstein, an artist and feminist. Rejecting prevailing sexist interpretations of female art and artists, the most ranking of which is the myth that females have contributed little to explorations and discoveries in the fine arts, Greenstein has created *Sister Chapel*. With it she shows that a woman's experience—physiologically, biologically, psychologically, and sociologically—is different from that of men and therefore produces other, equally valuable, individual and collective experiences.

¹ See Lise Vogel, "Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness," *Feminist Studies*, 2 (1974), 5-37.

² Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," *Heresies*, 1 (January 1977), 26.

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sertively feminist environment ideally structured to support the art it contains.

Ilise Greenstein's circular ceiling (Fig. 1) is an extension of this iconography. Her mirrored dome is a metaphor for the experiences of the creative woman. Viewing her own activities as a reflection of all women's creativity, her mirror attempts to make all women participants in this "sisters universe." The eleven paintings which form the pillars that support the dome are expressions of the diverse aspects of feminist consciousness. All thirteen artists chose to deal with images that extended their own dissenting theories concerning both women's liberation and the freedom of women artists to define themselves through their art.

In essence, the project is one of the first such collaborations originating in the Southeast. It is an endeavor to discover through mutual explorations the intellectual possibilities raised by such feminist writers as Mary Daly, Carol Duncan, Mary Garrard, Lucy Lippard, Gloria Orenstein and Lise Vogel, to name a few.⁶ It expresses the creative woman's energy as a state of consciousness and inner reality, higher and deeper than that which the male-dominated world now offers. It is visionary in its intention to create the icons of a "herstory" to embody the forces which give women their birth. Thus women gain a sense of who they are or at least who they might or should be.

Artists Marsha Edelheit (*Female/ David*), Diana Kurz (*Self-portrait as Durga*), Cynthia Mailman (*Self-portrait as God*), Sylvia Sleigh (*Lilith*), Sharon Wybrant (*Self-portrait as Superwoman*) and Ilise Greenstein (*Mirror/Ceiling*) have chosen to create new entities in order to evolve a new mythology capable of presenting the female principle as the highest source of creativity.⁷ Others, June Blum (*Betty Friedan*), Alice Neel (*Bella Abzug*), Betty Holi-

⁶ Mary Daly, *Beyond God The Father: Towards a Theory of Woman's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Carol Duncan, "The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," *Heresies*, 1 (January 1977), 46-50; Mary Garrard, "Of Men, Women and Art: Some Historical Reflections," *Art Journal*, XXXV (Summer 1976), 324-329; Lippard, pp. 80-88; Gloria Orenstein, "Sister Chapel," *Womanart*, 1 (Winter/Spring 1977), 12-21; Lise Vogel, "Erotica, the Academy, and Art Publishing: A Review of Woman as Sex Object," *Art Journal*, XXXV (Summer 1976), 378-385. These resources are only a fraction of what is now available in feminist studies.

⁷ Orenstein, pp. 14-15.

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day (*Marianne Moore*), Elsa Goldsmith (*Joan of Arc*), Shirley Gorelick (*Frida Kahlo*) and May Stevens (*Artemisia Gentileschi*) have given women in history and in contemporary affairs new attributes and thematic associations that demand a rigorously feminist interpretation in order to be fully comprehended.

Mailman's desire to depict God as a woman is a direct outgrowth of her convictions concerning origin and creation.⁸ She rejects the Man/God assumption which has shaped the content of religious art and life throughout history, and she has spent considerable time researching the concept of God/deity as universal energy. Portraying God as a woman is an attempt to restore sacred power to the female as "the" source of life. As Gloria Orenstein has pointed out, "In some of her other Goddess-related works [Mailman] explores the meaning of the symbol of the pyramid as an inversion of the original triangular fertility symbol, showing how the sacredness of the vagina has been debased in patriarchal iconography."⁹ Mailman confirms this interpretation and, although at the inception of the *Sister Chapel* she considered herself a firm atheist, she has since entertained the possibility of belief in her redefined God. Such a definition of God could never have emerged from the traditional framework offered by the Judeo-Christian Bible.

The explorations of Diana Kurz likewise echo an insistence upon the return of the great goddesses to their proper spheres. Kurz's *Self-portrait as Durga* becomes a mantra for the future. As a personification of the divine Hindu deity, she has imbued herself with the feminist icon's strength, energy, autonomy, and harmony. Durga is given the aspect of the buffalo-demon slayer, a fearsome evocation of supernatural justice and violence. The objective of such destructive power is to bring peace and harmony to the universe, rather than the wanton display of power so frequently reflected by masculine symbols. Moreover, Durga is a mother goddess whose charge is the protection of the world at large. Though following traditional Hindu iconography, Kurz chooses to em-

⁸ Cynthia Mailman, "Artist's Statement," *Sister Chapel, PS. I* (New York: n.p., January 1978).

⁹ Gloria Orenstein, "Additional Information," *Sister Chapel, PS. I* (New York: n.p., January 1978).

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phasize certain factors which support her own liberated view of Durga. The deity is shown eight armed, each hand holding a weapon bestowed upon her by a male god. Her body is an amalgam created from the bodies of male gods. By identifying with this frighteningly sublime manifestation, Kurz endows herself with the same mythic powers, thus creating an image which effectively coopts the traditional goddess and presents a self that can overcome all the demons of a sexist universe.

Martha Edelheit treats the dualistic aspects of courage and honor in her *Female/ David: Womanhero*, a deliberate slap at a masculine art history. The painting is narrative, allegorical and conspicuously feminist. The pose is sarcastically based upon Michelangelo's David, but it is a cancellation of all former male associations with this patriarchal prototype. She augments her woman warrior/savior with a panoply of tattooed goddesses of antiquity. Her womanhero finds her strength through symbols that represent ancient female wisdom, courage, and power. Nut, Kali, Medusa, Athena, Diana of Ephesus, Kuan Yin, and such signifiers as the Bee, the Rose and the Muses arm this amazon with formidable weapons for the battle ahead.¹⁰ In her purest essence this womanhero can be viewed as a daughter of the great female principle, imbued with the power, cunning and skill required to kill any male Goliath. Edelheit makes it clear that this is an allegory and that there are modern monsters to be slain. The artist has succeeded in creating a feminist paradigm, expressing a multiplicity of political ideals with the necessary confidence and fortitude to carry them through.

Sylvia Sleigh explores the concept of androgyny through her bisexual *Lilith*, who in biblical legend is identified with un-

¹⁰ Martha Edelheit, "Artist's Printout," *Sister Chapel, PS. I* (New York: n.p., January 1978); "WOMANHERO stands in the valley of the Gods (badlands adjacent to Monument Valley in Utah) and her shadow, cast across the desert and up the monumental buttes, is the Colossus of Rhodes."

¹¹ "A rainbow ribbon (Iyre of the Muses ERATO and TERPSICHOE, the bow of DIANA) twists from primary to earth colors, encircling her."

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controllable evil. According to Jewish lore, she was Adam's first wife (and an unacceptable one at that), a witch who begat devils. Sleigh's interpretation deals with an extremely controversial issue raised recently by feminist intellectuals concerning the notion of androgyny itself: the possibility of androgyny as a convenient substitute proffered by male apologists who wish to see the successful autonomous woman as eunuch. Sleigh's *Lilith* becomes a symbol of transcendence and the integration of male and female, black and white, in one being. It is a contemporary feminist's assessment of an idea as old as the Socratic dialogues on love. Moreover, it may be seen as representing the artist's effort to argue that creativity defies definitions as simplistic as gender and color and remains fundamental energy.

June Blum and Alice Neel draw upon the contemporary women's movement for their subjects. Blum's portrait of Betty Friedan shows her standing on a super highway in the middle of America holding a book under her arm. It is no happenstance that this image immediately conjures visions of Moses returning from the mountain with the ten commandments. Blum's admiration for Friedan culminated in a bizarre metamorphosis which took place during the many sittings, and hours in the studio devoted to capturing Friedan's personality in paint. June Blum became Betty Friedan, dressing in the gaudy gown, using gestures characteristic of Friedan, and even going so far as to have herself photographed as Betty Friedan. In recording this phenomenon, June Blum was made more conscious of her own feminism and the commitment it entailed.¹¹

Alice Neel's documentary portraits of the leaders of the feminist art movement are already notorious. Her shocking and shattering descriptive characterizations and caricatures have met mixed reviews. Among feminists she is known for her Rabelaisian humor and admired for her politics and persistence. Neel's portrayal of Bella Abzug is quintessentially indicative of her style. It is irreverent, insightful, and banteringly. Bella is shown in brash, bright colors that are expressions of her volcanic personality. She is

¹¹ Personal interview with June Blum, 25 January 1977.

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autobiography. The poet becomes a mist of tantalizing faded flowers behind an attic door. It is a vision that reveals a painful sensitivity, a lesser life made infinitely richer by creative gifts singularly female, gifts that conjure apparitions from a woman's daily life.

Artist Shirley Gorelick identifies strongly with the Mexican surrealist Frida Kahlo, a painter indisputably worthy of inclusion in a woman's hall of fame. As an artist she was persistently original and independent, identifying herself with the dual aspects of her European and Mexican heritage. More often than not, she depicted the fierce competition between the two Fridas, one a product of generations of conditioning the other a throwback to the proud primitivism of the ancient Mexican Indians. Gorelick, while sticking to the facts of Kahlo's life, is consciously selective in her treatment of them (Fig. 2). Kahlo's main output was a chronicle of her experiences as a woman. An excruciating record of pain, suffering, and a joyous, triumphant lust for life, her work gives us paintings that have no equal in the "herstory" of art. Gorelick pays tribute to Kahlo's uniqueness by using the same direct primitivist style, unusual colors, and static formal compositional devices. During the completion of the portrait, Gorelick had an accident which resulted in a back injury, forcing her to paint in a prone position. This ironic twist of fate gave the artist a strong sense of magically relieving the dead Kahlo's suffering. Whatever the explanation, it is one of those experiences that takes on metaphysical overtones for the person who undergoes it. Gorelick was convinced that she experienced a spiritual transformation through her identification with Frida Kahlo's life and work that ceased only with the completion of her portrait.

May Stevens's choice of heroic painter Artemisia Gentileschi is in some ways predictable. Her Artemisia is a hieratic, imperious, magisterial personage, an icon for future generations. It is no simple tribute to a great woman artist but a feminist statement meant to correct any doubts about the significance of women in art. Moreover, the artist clearly identifies with Gentileschi's abilities as a painter and with her courage as a person. Stevens is well known for the revolutionary fervor of her art. She has created a series of imaginary portraits of a character she labels "Big Daddy," who serves as

¹² Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists* (New York: Two Continents Publishing Group, 1973), pp. 58-60.

¹³ Mary Garrard, "Sono Io La Pittura," *Art History Session*, College Art Association Convention, Los Angeles, 27 January 1977.

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on the Origins of Sister Chapel

I was born a woman into this culture and my experiences are quite different from those of a male born into the same culture. I examine these experiences and make art out of them. I think of my life as an art form and everything that has happened in my life has brought me here to this place and time.

I'm from New York. In 1973 a family crisis brought me to Miami, Florida. I moved into a 14th floor condominium in a place called "Happy Village" that was absolutely exquisite, divine and charming. The sun came up every day. There was a swimming pool, two golf courses and fourteen tennis courts—and I never felt so isolated in my life. All the 70 and 80 year olds were beautifully preserved. I saw long life; I saw the fountain of youth; but there was no one to talk art to. My neighbors did not know what an artist was—most had never seen one. I tried to connect with a women's consciousness-raising group but there was none around. Even in the women artists group everyone was isolated. I tried some of the college art faculties, but the faculty members didn't have any kind of dialogue going either. I thought I would go mad.

I now identify with the problems of the woman artist living in the South. A general condition of frustration, anxiety and isolation exists. In Florida the seductive lush environment and good weather mitigates against working too hard. There is little peer group dialogue. There is difficulty in finding art-related jobs. Substitute teachers are low paid and calls to work infrequent. The museum hires teachers on an independent contractual basis so they don't have to pay employee benefits. There is a seasonal business market: when the northern visitors come, so do dollars to buy artworks. There are nine professional galleries (members of the Art Dealers Association) between Miami and Palm Beach, and I am fortunate to be connected with one (Gloria Luria Gallery). That, however, is not the general case, as very few Florida artists are represented locally. Most shows are New York imports. There are very fine artists in this state who are forced to leave for more lucrative art centers. Artists participate in street shows and fairs that pander to

Greenstein considers herself a Southern feminist who shares the problems of women artists living in the South. Although born in New York, since her move to Miami six years ago she has become an advocate for women in their demands for equal treatment from the local art establishment. Knowing their situation, she has been quick to point out the isolation, anxiety, and frustration experienced by these women. One of their most pressing problems concerned the question, "With what and whom were they to identify themselves as artists?" In part seeking an answer to this question, Greenstein drafted a letter to her women artist friends inviting them to revolutionize "his-story."³

Her efforts culminated in a pictorial program showing women's state in society, history and art. Each of the thirteen women who chose to participate committed herself to a spiritual journey that took her further than she could have imagined when she first began.⁴ In undertaking the work, each in effect reasserted her faith in women's liberation, and thus the project took on added political and sociological significance.

The *Sister Chapel* is a circular unit designed by Maureen Connor. It contains Greenstein's 18' round ceiling piece and eleven 9' x 5' paintings depicting various images of woman originated by these feminists. Meant as a hall of fame for women, the structure itself is in keeping with feminist concepts of vaginal imagery.⁵ It is portable, circular, and multilayered, its multiplex arches forming flowing scarlet membranes. The intention is clearly an architectural statement of personal identification, and the use of traditional women's art (i.e., quilting, sewing, and stuffing) reinforces the female aspects of this temple's shape, color, and texture. It is an as-

³ Letter (ALS) received from Ilise Greenstein, May 1976.

⁴ Dear Artists: I've selected you—Now—would you be interested in doing a painting . . . of the woman candidate, "role model," or nominee you would choose (on speculation).

⁵ The United Nations is considering the Sister Chapel as an art project for 1975—The Year of the Woman . . . Think about it and let me know.

⁶ Ilise Greenstein, Maureen Connor, June Blum, Alice Neel, Cynthia Mailman, May Stevens, Shirley Gorelick, Sylvia Sleigh, Sharon Wybrants, Martha Edelheit, Elsa Goldsmith, Betty Holiday, Diana Kurz.

⁷ Lucy Lippard, "What is Feminist Imagery?" in *From the Center* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), pp. 80-89.

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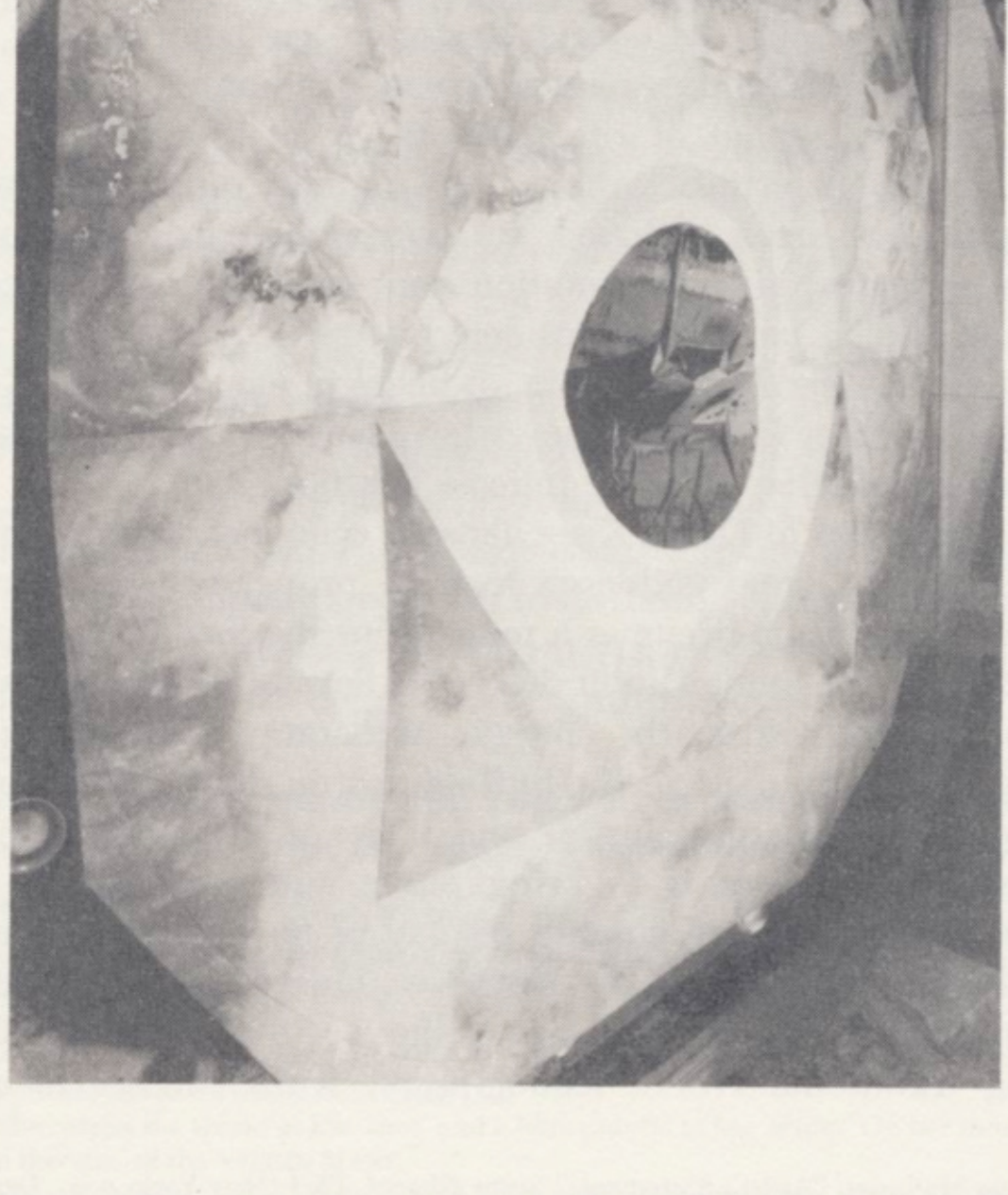


Fig. 1. Ilise Greenstein, *Sister Chapel Ceiling*. Photograph: Eric Pollitzer

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phazise certain factors which support her own liberated view of Durga. The deity is shown eight armed, each hand holding a weapon bestowed upon her by a male god. Her body is an amalgam created from the bodies of male gods. By identifying with this frighteningly sublime manifestation, Kurz endows herself with the same mythic powers, thus creating an image which effectively coopts the traditional goddess and presents a self that can overcome all the demons of a sexist universe.

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presented as unconventional, energetic, and liberated. She rejects all imposed ideals concerning women's behavior and fashions. Her one nod to stereotypic femininity is, idiosyncratically, the floppy oversized hat that has become a trademark of the world over. Neel has exploited it as a symbol indicative of Abzug's exuberance and zest for life. The artist captures the political activism for which this liberationist has been made to pay such a high price by a repressive male hierarchy. It is a price Neel herself has paid as well, and perhaps this fact lends her portrait even more impact.

Sharon Wybrants likewise attempts to confront a contemporary manifestation which takes the form of *Superwoman*. The emerging personage represents the mass media's "model" woman. Doubtless the ambivalence expressed in Wybrant's *Self-portrait as Superwoman* is an expression of the suspicion with which aware feminists greet the new arrival. The reason for the hostility devolves from the theory that this creature is a creation of male reactionaries who are attempting to subvert the women's movement by once more forcing the real female to conform to a manufactured image. Although she presents us with an autobiographical personalization, Wybrants confronts this new role with a ferocious directness. This artificial woman, defined and supported by a media blitz, emerges as a larger than life homemaker-careerwoman-wife-mother-sex symbol. The new ideal which women are encouraged to emulate is viewed simply as another of those imprisoning roles that cancel any chance for self-realization. Wybrants adds a certain frightening hostility to her concept that is conspicuously absent in the magazine and television commercials presented by the advertising establishment. The artist is not taken in by this current effort to shape woman to man's desires and needs; instead, she insists upon her own interpretation and calls into question any endeavor to be a "superwoman."

Poets have always been considered artists, so it is not surprising that Betty Holiday should choose as model Marianne Moore. Witty, whimsical and possessed of a microscopic vision edged like a razor, Moore represents the feminine lyric. Holiday's choice has more than a little to do with self-identification and clarification. Provocatively confessional, her lavender tinted fantasy is full of details of her own life, which mingle with those of Moore's, confusing biography with

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Fig. 2. Shirley Gorelick, *Frida Kahlo*

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which have prevented women's art from getting the kind of viewing and public attention men's art has enjoyed for centuries.¹⁴

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commercial tastes, and they stagnate as artists. They lack an educated audience, and art needs a dialogue with an audience.

It was at this point in my life—on the 14th floor of a Miami condominium, surrounded by sunshine, lushness, and isolation—that I began the intense period of self-exploration that resulted in the *Sister Chapel*. And in an attempt to define art for myself, I wrote a small book called *Art is a Language*.

As a creative artist I was able to deal with the culture shock of leaving the art center of the world—New York—and survive and produce some of my best work. By using all the stored information and experience I had accumulated and sharing it with others, I began to build a support system. I was active in the early stages of the New York and the national women artists' movements and helped to found a program Women's Caucus for Art. I enjoy meeting people who have never interacted with an artist before, and I conduct a Sunday "salon" in which I invite the interesting people I've met during the week.

The challenge in the South to all artists can be met by coming together and talking to one another. After all, artists are the most creative people I know, and one of their primary attributes is a problem solving ability. If you are a good artist you surface quickly, however small the audience.