

Michelle Stuart and Mary Beth Edelson:

Returning to the Root

Submitted by

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Artists with ostensibly different aims or points of view often turn to similar themes as sources of inspiration for their personal expression. Michelle Stuart and Mary Beth Edelson are two such artists. They both are exploring deep within their own (and their collective) psyche in search of the inner, ancient secrets of humanity and the earth. In the process, they draw upon a marvelously complex and interwoven mesh of themes and sources as guides to their own uniquely personal artistic expression.

This group of themes consists of looking within ourselves to prehistory as a source of understanding who we are at our most basic level--that of our ultimate, intimate connection (both physical and spiritual) to the earth. A related theme is the female view of and relationship with the earth as a co-life-giver. Finally, both artists explore ritual as the integrator of life and art, and of time--past, present, and future.

The ways in which Michelle Stuart and Mary Beth Edelson have dealt with these themes, rather than a comprehensive study of all of their work, is the subject of this paper. I will begin, however, with a brief description of their art.

Michelle Stuart has worked with large sheets of rag paper mounted on muslin. She often works outdoors at the site she chose for personal, historical, or spiritual reasons. Her process is her own invention. She gathers rocks and earth from the site, piles them on the paper, and proceeds to grind, pound and pulverize the rocks and earth into the paper, leaving a low relief impression of her actions. She continues until the surface is permeated with the pigment from the

earth and then polished to a warm glow with her bare hands (Fig. 1). Her finished sheets, which she calls scrolls, are being, sometimes singly, sometimes one on top of another, in tiered fashion so that the different layers, like the strata of the earth, can be seen one on top of the other. Stuart has also made books of these delicate, warmly colored papers. Some of them are tied shut with handmade twine, not meant to be opened. Sometimes books and scrolls are presented together with photographs of the sites they came from, creating more multidimensional installations (Figs. 2,3).

Mary Beth Edelson's work incorporates many different media. The basis for all of her work are rituals, usually private, involving only Edelson and sometimes one or two other people, or public, involving many other women and viewers. Photographs which Edelson frequently draws or paints on, are the material embodiment of the private rituals which often take place at some remote, spiritually important place. Often the photographs are incorporated into the installations which Edelson sometimes constructs as the sites for public rituals. Edelson also creates installations that function without rituals, although they sometimes include the ongoing collection of written contributions of personal stories or insights from viewers.

Michelle Stuart's involvement with art began with her involvement with the earth. As a child she traveled with her engineer father across the deserts of California mapping rights-of-way for water lines. Her parents were avid travelers, and she remembers listening to their stories and then pouring over maps, experiences she calls "sensuous," to locate the places they described.¹ These early

experiences with the vast, uninhabited stretches of land in America and with the signs and symbols of the land and humanity's marks on it (reinforced by her later experiences working as a topographical draughtsperson) have had a lasting effect on Stuart and her art.

As a child, Stuart also became enthralled with the processes of nature. She writes, "The grunion danced above the tides at full moon each spring on the sand shores of the California coast. The grunion laid its eggs by instinct. But the small fish also spawned part of my imagination. That was the start of my romance with the patterns of nature and time."² When she was seventeen or eighteen, Stuart lived for a time in Mexico where she gathered other themes and ideas that have played a major role in her art ever since. Again she writes, "Close associations among Indians and Chicanos led to an interest in their culture and the records of their ancestors. And the passages through space and time that link us all in our cultural evolution."³

Stuart's art grew out of these early experiences, and the themes that she has concentrated on in her art are closely tied to them. Her work is very much concerned with the essence and spirit of places, and the real history of the earth. Yet nothing is enumerated. Both the processes she employs and the works themselves are indicators, pointing the direction to the real meanings of the works.

More than anything else, Stuart is interested in the earth--the actual substance of it, our relationship to it, and the changes wrought in it by time and the elements. She thinks of the earth as a living entity, a whole unto itself, with a history that is both

ancient--that can be read far below the surface, and recent--evidenced by daily visible changes on the land. Stuart began grinding rocks and earth into paper as a way of actually dealing with the very substance of what interested her. What she discovered is that her process is a reenactment of the natural processes that mean so much to her--erosion, the gradual change of rocks to sand and soil. The completed scrolls are both an evocation of that process, and the visualization of the process of change frozen in time.

By giving the names of the working sites as the titles for the scrolls, Stuart emphasizes the importance of place. The scrolls do function as metaphores for earth and the Earth in general, yet they also retain a specificity (Figs. 4, 5). This gives one the feeling even more strongly of the dynamic aliveness of the earth, every part of which has undergone its own unique changes, its own personal history. Furthermore, each part or area of the earth has a spirit unique unto that particular place, and simultaneously participating in the larger spirit and history of the earth as a whole.

As Stuart pounds the rocks and soil into the paper, she reenacts that history. Individual rocks lose their identity as they are crushed. Finally only silt is left, and when that is polished into the paper only an image remains. With Stuart herself as the medium, all the elements of the earth: minerals, soil, color, time, and natural processes, have lost their selfhood, have fused and become one. Pure spirit (the image) is left.

In this sense and in others, Stuart's own relationship to the earth can be seen as characteristically female. That is, she does not

seek to conquer or subdue nature. Rather, she identifies it (that is, she tries to show its true being), and she identifies with it. Her actions mimic nature, and they also speak of humanity's fundamental relationship with nature.

Squatting on the ground, pounding and grinding rock, Stuart recalls the peoples of prehistoric cultures using stone tools in the daily, repetitious chores of sustenance. Her methods particularly bring to mind women's work, which traditionally is extremely repetitive, ritualistic, and symbolically, if not actually, "down to earth."

In this sense Stuart's process speaks of our all-important, irrevocable connection to the earth. It is our mother--we take our life from it. Yet Stuart's art as a whole speaks more of the geological history of the earth, with our cultures functioning as minor elements--that is, as mark makers on the surface of the earth. These marks are our cultural responses to the earth and nature. The piece, "Records, Capan, Quirigua, Mesa Verde" (Fig. 6), which incorporates photographs and stacks of earth-imprinted papers from each prehistoric site, speaks of these responses and the parallels of these responses to the phenomena of nature.

Perhaps we are more like our earth than we realize. Geologically, the earth is a map of time showing the strata. Fossils. Remains of animals and man. The earth leaves traces of time. Man leaves traces of what he created.... As the burial mounds from Chillicothe to Avebury to Copan layer upon layer. One culture building upon another leaving tracks in a path as the stratum hold dinosaur remains. And on. In spiraling profusion. Like the moon and the tide and the seed it is a primordial unity. A cyclical recurrence. An eternal return.⁴

In a sense, we also lose our identity as Stuart grinds the rocks into the paper. Rocks have long been symbols for souls. Symbolically, we as individuals and as cultures are fused with the elements of the earth, and we, also, become part of that all-encompassing spirit which is embodied in the scroll.

Stuart's reference to our relationship to the history of the earth is especially bitter-sweet in her "rock books." They are made with the same process and have "titles" such as Seyerville Quarry History Book and Nesting History Book. The books, perhaps even more eloquently than the scrolls, embody the interwoven themes with which Stuart is so concerned. Visually, they mirror the compacted layers of the earth, and like exposed stratum that we can see in a canyon, only the edges of the pages are visible. We know that each page is a slightly different color and that each page contains a different record of the events that took place on it. This kind of a history, which we were not present for and cannot completely view and relive now, parallels so beautifully our actual relationship to geological history. How fitting, also, that these works are "books," for aren't we a culture obsessed by words and the written records of events? And yet these books contain no words. They are about the earth and they are made of earth--the real contents. And the knowledge they impart is another, "sensuous" knowledge, more "real" and less filtered and warped by the human brain.

Interestingly, Stuart herself is a writer. She keeps lengthy journals and scrapbooks of places and history, invented and real. In her book The Fall, Stuart tells her legend of the Giant History Book.

This is the story of how men became so obsessed with recording absolutely everything that they wrote a history of the earth so huge that it covered the entire surface of the earth. In fact, it was so complete that it duplicated the earth. Subsequent generations finally realized that a copy of the earth was of no use, so the book was left to disintegrate. According to Stuart, tattered fragments of the book can still be found blowing around in the deserts. At the end of the story she says, "depending on one's view fragments of time have dimension."⁵

The role of ritual in Stuart's art is fairly subtle. The scrolls and books do stand alone as meaningful, whole art works with the process that occasioned their creation only implied by their rich relief surfaces and materials. Yet, it seems to me that Stuart's work more than most visual artists' work, needs to be seen as the perfect wedding of process and "product." The work truly is a continuum of idea, ritual action, creation, and resulting image.

When creating art, Stuart sees herself as functioning on many different levels. She is making an object which she has a conscious intention to make, and she is also integrating life, art and time. She does so, first of all, in the obvious sense of her own life's integration with art during the art-making process. Symbolically she is also integrating (or reinforcing) art-making in general, as one of the basic elements that makes us human, with the most basic statement of who we really are and what our fundamental relationship to the earth consists of. Her repetitive pounding and grinding of stone encapsulates man/woman the tool-maker, the food-maker, the art-maker,

the ritual-performer, the maker of marks on the earth. In this sense, Stuart is invoking, through ritual action, the entire history of humanity on earth, and is restating that on the most fundamental level we are the same people we were when we lived in caves and pounded stones together to make fire and art.

The very nature of ritual action implies the reenacting of past rituals and the expectation for the repetition of the ritual in the future. Stuart's ritual processes certainly integrate human time in the sense that we are reminded of our whole history, we know that Stuart will repeat the rituals in the future, and that our fundamental, imprinted relationship to the earth, symbolized by her rituals, will also continue. On another level, which I have mentioned previously, Stuart's ritual/process also symbolizes and reenacts the geological history of the earth. So here again geological time--past, present, and future--is integrated. An anthropologist has written, "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level...men express in ritual what moves them most."⁶ This is certainly true for Stuart personally and for us as viewers/understanders of her art. Stuart speaks of the integration of art, life, time (human and geological), and the earth itself:

Rubbing and polishing stones is like an ancient activity of human kind...dreamers innermost being...true personality. Stones hidden in caves, wrapped in bark...containers of divine powers...rub stones...power increases (charged with electricity)...vibrations from the place (site) send them back with others. Shape the stone...stone is self...return stone to land... part of soul remains. We are all part of the whole, no good/bad facile dualisms...all one pulsating force.⁷

The simplicity of Stuart's ritual action/art process and the resulting permanent art works, stripped of all that is not essential, is the heart of her eloquent art. She says, "Move the body repeatedly, and you will start knowing yourself because you no longer know anything at all,"⁸ and "When we return to the root we gain the meaning."⁹

For Mary Beth Edelson, returning to the root is essentially a political act. She looks to prehistory in an effort to revivify contemporary culture by reminding women of a time when our vision of ourselves was not polluted and diluted by the overwhelming patriarchy which has ruled for at least 5,000 years. Her art addresses the earth in the context of our forgotten relationship with her (so alive in prehistoric times, which, when realized, can restore to women some of our lost power and identity.

Edelson's primary source of inspiration is the Goddess. There is evidence of Goddess worship in the Near and Middle East dating back as early as 25,000 B.C.¹⁰ Theories of the origins of Goddess worship are "founded on the juxtaposition of mother-kinship customs to ancestor worship."¹¹ It is believed that Paleolithic people probably did not understand the relationship of intercourse to reproduction, and so they saw women as the life-givers. Since most early religions probably took the form of ancestor worship, the most ancient, primal ancestor would have been a woman--the "Divine Ancestress."¹² Female figurines, some as old as 25,000 B.C., have been found all over Europe. Many of them look pregnant, and many are remarkably similar stylistically. These were probably idols of the

Goddess, further evidence of the breadth and longevity of the Goddess religion. As kinship customs shifted from matrilineal to patrilineal lineages, the religion was accordingly changed. The Goddess's son/lover gradually took precedence all over the Near and Middle East. This was "accomplished by violent aggression, brutal massacres, and territorial conquests."¹³ The last Goddess temples were closed down around 500 A.D.¹⁴ Since then the Goddess religion in the western world has gone underground (expressing itself in such forms as witchcraft, women's social societies--secret and public, and even in midwifery), and has been incorporated into mainstream religion as the "cult" of the Virgin Mary.

The feminist movement has, in a sense, resurrected the Goddess. Through her art, Mary Beth Edelson is doing just this in order to help us to take back our collective identity as women, and to really see and feel again "who 'we are' and not who 'I am.'"¹⁵

Like so many women artists, the real starting point for Edelson's feminist work was the need to incorporate other people into her work, to encourage the communal, empowering aspects of art. In 1977 she invited twenty-two friends to come to her studio and discuss her work with her and then to each suggest a concept from which they wanted her to create an art work. The result was the exhibition, *22 Others*, which involved remarkably diverse works including Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper, a photocollage of Da Vinci's Last Supper with women artists' faces substituting for the original faces.

22 Others was a transitional project for Edelson. The incorporation of other individuals' desires for expression into her

work was encouragement to find more profound ways of expressing our deepest collective psyche. Ritual became for Edelson the purest way to "return to the root" of who we are.

In her essay, "Contemporary Feminist Rituals," Kay Turner says that the function of feminist ritual is to "connect the individual with the group...to achieve shared meanings, shared resolutions, shared emotions, not to promote private images or dreams."¹⁶ Interestingly, Edelson manages to promote all of these things in her public and even in her private rituals. Her private "images and dreams" are of our collective beginnings, our prehistory. Therefore, while they are extremely personal to Edelson, they also speak to us through the time lapse photographs which she takes as she performs her rituals. In an effort to communicate to us and communicate with her deepest self, Edelson's private rituals are kept free from the artificiality of complicated settings, liturgies, or accoutrements. Her only "props" are often fire and stone, which have been "at the heart of rebirth myths from all times and places" (Fig. 7).¹⁷ She often performs the rituals at a site "where collective energies have been important in the past,"¹⁸ such as at a Neolithic cave in Yugoslavia, or simply outdoors, in nature (Fig. 8). She is often naked, her body painted, which she uses along with "ritual position" to "set [herself] apart...to move toward a physical and psychological state of receptiveness."¹⁹

Edelson describes her private ritual, Woman Rising, in which she lay on a beach, her breasts and stomach painted with circular signs to represent "centroversion or the striving for wholeness: balancing the

intellect...sexual signification...and the body itself,"²⁰ and gradually rose up to standing. "I was summoning the Goddess to make house calls, talking to Goddess with my body, and ending the dialogue with being."²¹ It is clear that Edelson actually believes in the Goddess as a vital force, and the sincerity of her intentions is conveyed through her photographs. In the case of Woman Rising (Fig. 9), Edelson drew on the prints to show the flow of energy that she experienced during the ritual. She says, "These images were presented aggressively as sexuality, mind and spirit comfortable in one body... photographic evidence of the manifestations and recognition of a powerful feminine force: Everywoman."²²

The intensity of Edelson's convictions about her private rituals are again evident when she speaks of her experience at a Neolithic Goddess cave at Grapceva, Yugoslavia (Fig. 10). She says:

The black crust of clay on the "kiln" loft wall was thin; scratching through it I came to a bright white, and I began to make the impresso patterns common to the area in Neolithic times. In a few strokes I felt one long hand extending across time, sending a jolt of energy into my body. I began my rituals. --

The energy of the rituals seemed to pulsate from the vaulted ceiling to me and back again... I felt like the center of the universe. My mouth was actually inhaling the cave, all of it, and breathing it out again... I made a pact with the cave: it would tell me some of its secrets in exchange for my rituals, rituals that it had not seen for millennea.²³

Edelson's rituals--private and public--and her installations, almost always address the issue of humanity's relationship with the earth, and especially the female relationship with the earth as

co-life-givers. Her art serves as a reminder of this relationship which has been suppressed over time (just as the Goddess has been suppressed) but which, when realized and accepted, can be an empowering force for women. As Mary Daly has said, "In the rising consciousness of women, power is experienced as power of presence to ourselves and to each other, as we affirm our own being against and beyond the alienated identity bestowed upon us within the patriarchy."²⁴ Edelson's art reaffirms and reassures us that our need to identify with nature--"to be a cave, a rounded hill, a pod, a blossom..."²⁵ is legitimate. In her installation Blood Mysteries, Edelson addresses aspects of our true identity--the female connection to the cycles of the moon--and to nature, and the cultural taboos or denials of these connections. As in many of her installations, Edelson includes story gathering boxes to which viewers can contribute their own Blood Mysteries, giving them an opportunity to realize their own connections to the earth and to add to the collective awareness. Of our relationship with the earth and our roots in prehistory, Edelson says:

The search for self today seems to include understanding those very first human stirrings, those very first basic human gestures, food gathering, relationship to the moon and sun...to the ground, to planting, harvesting, to the sea from which all living things come--the salt water in our veins--our boundless curiosity for all our earliest beginnings.²⁶

Clearly, Edelson's art is female, or feminist in many ways and on many levels. Her work embodies Jack Burnham's definition of good feminist art which, he says:

...reveals a degree of social largess and freedom which is the antithesis of what [he] consider[s] female, historical High art. It invites interaction and shares in the making with its audience; it breaks down the distinction between the purely aesthetic, the functional, and the decorative; and finally, it seeks the archetypal through the spontaneity of ritual and everyday acts. It does not "define" as much as it "embraces" the living. In this way, the feminine in art may represent those values which are less ego-bound and more ecologically stable.²⁷

The complexity of the issues that good feminist art addresses sometimes requires the kind of formal and conceptual multiplicity of which Edelson is a master. As opposed to the simplicity of her private rituals, Edelson's public rituals are usually quite elaborate. Her installation/ritual Memorial to 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era, 1977, took place in a gallery that was "set apart as sacred space"²⁸ by a constructed portal Gate of Horn/Fig of Triumph, which was lined with photographs of women's hands making the "sign of the horned bull and of female magic and power, and in the back side mano in fica the fig, sacred fruit of the Goddess reclaimed as a symbol of Her body/Our body."²⁹ Passing through the gate, one was confronted by a burning ladder surrounded by a circular table on which handmade books were left for visitors to look through. The books contained information about the "witch"-burnings. One book, called the Bamburg Book, had stones piled on top of it which had to be ritually lifted off for the contents to be perused. The stones referred to stones piled on accused women to suffocate them, and their ritual removal signified the uncovering of our lost history (or "herstory," as Edelson might say). The burning ladder also had both

positive and negative meanings. Many women were tied to ladders when they were burned, and the ladder is also "a universal mystical sign of leaving behind, of being able to transcend."³⁰ On the walls were photographs of Edelson's private ritual at the Grapceva cave in Yugoslavia, accompanied by rocks and shells from the cave and a narrative incised with pencil in white paint (recalling Edelson's incised lines on the cave walls).

Edleson describes the ritual performed around the fire ladder on Halloween Eve by nine women and a large audience:

As the audience entered each person was given a card with the name of an actual woman or man accused of witchcraft--most had been burned at the stake. The ritual began with a reading that documented some of the history surrounding witch hunts. The performers and the audience read aloud the names on their cards and then chanted those names. The ritual ended with a procession through the streets of SoHo to Washington Square where 200 people from the park joined us, as we danced back to back and chanted "The Goddess is Here, the Goddess is Us," in the round fountain.³¹

This ritual/installation exemplifies so much of Edelson's art, in its ability to integrate life, art and time. The performers and participants' lives are integrated with art as they perform the ritual, and they are also integrated with each other as they realize their common ties as humans and as women. The past is invoked and brought to life, and given new, personal meaning in the lives of the participants. Even the future is involved, since part of the aim of the rituals is the encouragement to change the way women and all of society view women, and the way society views its connection to the earth.

Mary Beth Edelson's art, like Michelle Stuart's, "embraces" life more than it "defines" life. Their arts are not only about life's intangible aspects--time, history, changes, and our relationship to the earth--but their art forms also embody these aspects. For both artists (and especially for Edelson), the process is as much the art as the "product." In fact, they are often one and the same. Perhaps for both artists, the real product is the effect their art has on our lives--in Stuart's case, the reaffirmation of who we are in relation to the earth and its history, and in Edelson's case, the reaffirmation of who we are in relation to the earth and our history.



Fig. 1. Michelle Stuart. The artist at work.

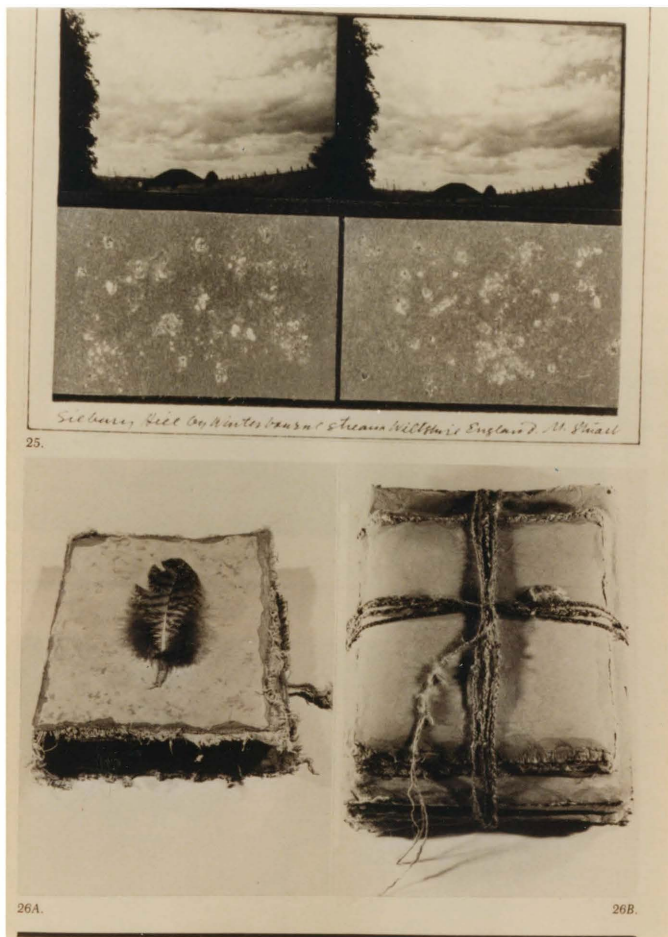


Fig. 2a. Michelle Stuart. Silbury Hill by Winterbourne Stream, Wiltshire, England.

Fig. 2b. Michelle Stuart. Rock Books.



Fig. 3. Michelle
Stuart. Mesa
Verde, Colorado.



Fig. 4. Michelle
Stuart. Sayerville
Strata.

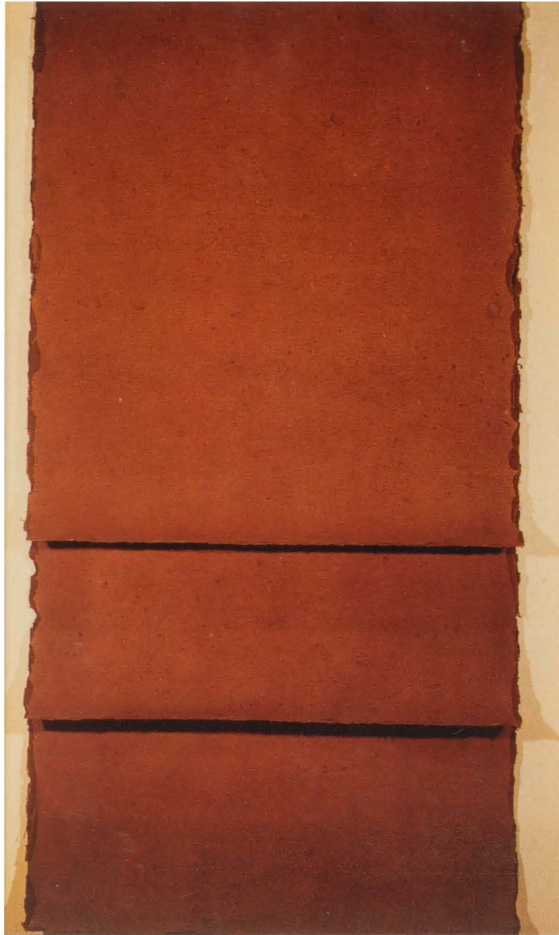


Fig. 5. Michelle
Stuart. Breezy
Point, New York.



Fig. 6. Michelle
Stuart. Copan/
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Fig. 7. Mary Beth Edelson. Fire Flights in Deep Space.



Fig. 8. Mary Beth Edelson. Centering; Ritual With My Daughter.



Fig. 9. Mary Beth Edelson. Woman Rising.



Fig. 10. Mary Beth Edelson. See For Yourself, Pilgrimage to Neolithic Cave.

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4. Michelle Stuart. Sayerville Strata. 1976. Each panel 144" x 62". Earth and rock indentations on rag paper, muslim mounted. Source: Originals: American Women Artists.
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7. Mary Beth Edelson. Fire Flights in Deep Space. 1977. Private ritual in Indian cave, Chico Mountains, California, with grinding stones. Black and white photograph. Source: Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory.
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10. Mary Beth Edelson. See for Yourself: Pilgrimage to a Neolithic Cave. 1977. Private ritual in Grapceva Cave, Hvar Island, Yugoslavia. Source: Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory.

All prints by the Colorado State University Slide Library.

Notes

¹Robert Hobbs, "Michelle Stuart; Atavism, Geomythology and Zen," Womenart, Sp-Sum, 1977, p. 6.

²Michelle Stuart, From the Silent Garden (Williams College Artist in Residence Program, 1979).

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Michelle Stuart, The Fall (Michelle Stuart, 1976).

⁶Victor Turner, The Ritual Process; Structure and Anti-Structure (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), p. 6.

⁷Hobbs, p. 7.

⁸Michelle Stuart, From the Silent Garden.

⁹Hobbs, p. 20.

¹⁰Merlin Stone, "The Great Goddess: Who Wash She?" in The Politics of Women's Spirituality, ed. Charlene Spretnak (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 7.

¹¹Ibid., p. 8.

¹²Ibid., p. 10.

¹³Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵Mary Beth Edelson, Seven Cycles: Public Rituals (110 Mercer Street, NY, NY 10012, 1980), p. 6.

¹⁶Kay Turner, "Contemporary Feminist Rituals," in The Politics of Women's Spirituality, ed. Charlene Spretnak (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 226.

¹⁷Lucy Lippard, "Forward," Seven Cycles: Public Rituals, by Mary Beth Edelson (110 Mercer Street, NY, NY 10012, 1980), p. 8.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Jack Burnham, "Mary Beth Edelson's Great Goddess," Arts Magazine, Nov. 1977, p. 78.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Edelson, p. 17.

²²Ibid.

²³Mary Beth Edelson, "Pilgrimage/See For Yourself: A Journey to a Neolithic Goddess Cave, 1977, Grapceva, Hvar Island, Yugoslavia," p. 98.

²⁴Turner, p. 225.

²⁵Edelson, p. 7.

²⁶Burnham, p. 78.

²⁷Ibid., p. 75.

²⁸Edelson, p. 33.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 34.

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