

Curated by: Diletta D'Antoni, Inês Mourato and Junwei Chen

Once upon a time, and Now!

Egyptian mythology from a modern feminist perspective

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Studio 3 Gallery Publications

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Introduction



“I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, Queen of death, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. . . though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me. . . and they Egyptians excel in ancient learning and worship me with ceremonies proper to my godhead, call me by my true name, namely, Queen Isis.”

Once upon a time, and Now! Invites you to rediscover the history of Women with the influence of the Goddess Isis, an Ancient Egyptian deity.

Exalting the female image as the protagonist, contemporary artists propose new visions that contradict the misconceptions of a patriarchal society. Exploring the belief that gender equality is an integral order of the divine, a visual discourse about motherhood and womanhood is explored to open contemporary debate, encompassing the importance of Women's role in society, arts and politics.

Isis was an omniscient deity endowed with magical powers. Her supremacy over all the gods reflected the recognised status of Egyptian women. 'Wiser than a million gods', Isis had a complete knowledge of the heavens and the earth. She was the daughter, wife and mother of Egypt's most powerful gods: Geb, Osiris and Horus respectively. Yet she also incorporated human qualities – a natural balance of good and evil – that ordinary women could relate to.

This exhibition combines and juxtaposes different historical cultures and beliefs in order to rethink Women's liberation by listening to their glories and sufferings throughout history.

Inês Mourato

Goddess Isis

The original Egyptian name for Isis is Aset. She was represented with the hieroglyphic sign of the throne:

𓆎𓅓𓏏𓏏. Her name was also connected with her husband's name Usir (Osiris) 𓆎𓅓𓏏𓏏.

Isis was the living throne. She was commonly represented in Ancient Egyptian art with a throne on her head. When her cult was connected with the goddess Hathor, Isis adopted the crown of a solar disc between two cow horns.

Isis's maternal embrace of her son Horus symbolized her role as protector of the living king of Egypt. The seated pose of Isis, holding her infant son on her knee, prefigures images of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus. Isis has a 'double face'.

She is the deity that taught the women of Egypt feminine skills of weaving, baking, and brewing as she is also the warrior woman, the most powerful goddess of the pantheon.

This belief shows that women and men were equal before the law in the ancient Egyptian culture. Egyptian women could live alone, bring cases before

law courts, purchase lands, work outside the house and even rule a kingdom. Hatshepsut, for instances, was the most important female queen ruling Egypt without a male king by her side. She was commonly depicted with the pharaoh's adornments, which made her appear male. In some of her statues she would be a female figure with a beard and a Pharaoh's wig. This is not to say the queen was trying to assimilate herself with the male figure. Instead she was representing herself being as powerful as a man. She reigned a kingdom that was wealthy and great under her power for almost twenty-two years.

Isis was described as cleverer than her husband and worthy of reigning over Egypt during the absence of Osiris. This was reflected in the real Egyptian world where the queen was, in some cases, called to rule Egypt.

According to the myth of Isis and Ra, she was known to possess extraordinary magical powers. The story explained how Isis discovered Re's secret name to her own advantage. The Egyptians believed that by knowing the god's real name, hegemonic powers would be conferred over him/her. Isis was the only deity to discover the secret name of Re, something that wasn't even mentioned in the written myth.

105] 3rd n. div. Isis

Goddess Isis

The story began with Isis creating a snake from the saliva of the god Re mixed with mud. The snake bit the god and made him suffer terrible pains from the venom. Ra, in agony, asked the great magician Isis to help him, the only person that could cure him from the curse. Isis agreed but on one condition, the one of knowing his real name. After debating the offer, Ra accepted. Satisfied, Isis administered the cure to the god, casting the fiery poison out of Ra's body. Her knowledge of the name of the god of the sun gave her immense wisdom: she knew everything that could be known.

Isis absorbed over time the attributes of other goddesses: Hathor, Mut, Maat and during the late period she was also assimilated with the greek goddesses Demeter, Persephone, Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite. She was both Queen of the heavens and mistress of the sea in this period. Her cult survived even in Roman times until the emperor Justinian in AD 535-7.

This exhibition provides a journey through a world that respected the role of women, ensuring their full equality with men. Women could manage their legacy, participate in worship, and practice professions, such as, medicine that were long considered a male monopoly. This is an exhibition that considers feminism in the

light of Isis, one of the most important figures in the Egyptian pantheon, taken as an emblem of the female condition past and present. It is a reminder that perhaps we must look to the past to overcome social boundaries rooted in our minds.

Diletta D'Antoni



© Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze
Busto della dea iside, 16 x 22 cm.

Su concessione del Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze (Direzione Regionale Musei della Toscana). / Courtesy of the National Archaeological Museum of Florence (Tuscany Museums Regional Directorate).

The Dance is a limited edition print of two hundred. This impression, signed by the artist, is numbered 175. The artwork represents Nut, the Ancient Egyptian sky Goddess, arcing over four dildo dancers, female figures found in Greek vases of the 5th century BC. This deity is pictured in her common position — a youthful naked woman, usually bridging over earth. Her elongated arms and legs symbolise an empowering energy over what is found within the female body. Nut was the mother of Isis and Spero's interest on this deity derived from her capacities of birth and rebirth as a metaphor to the recreation of the anew history of Women.

Spero's referencing of Ancient Egyptian culture - as well as Greek, Etruscan, Roman, and Asian cultures — places the 'ongoing story of women' in a large temporal framework. Through drawing historical parallels with contemporary feminist struggles, Spero aims to recover the power of the female voice.

Spero's 'feelings of exclusion and alienation as a woman artist' were used to produce fascinating and argumentative works of art that questioned humankind and its political morals. Thus, mainly focused on a

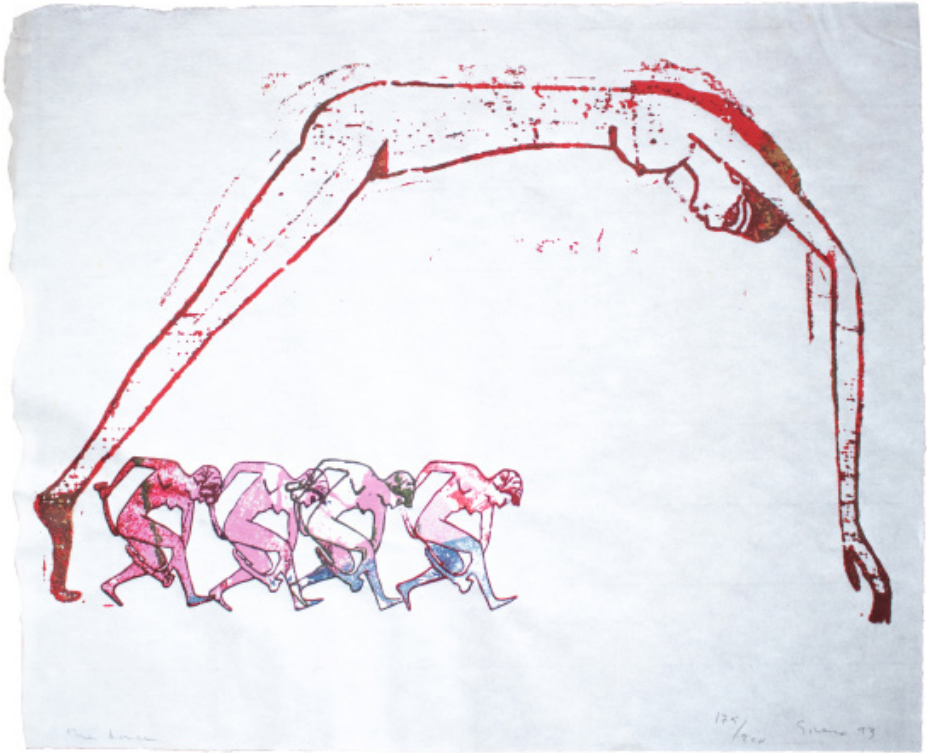


Plate 1

The Dance

1993
33 x 41 cm
Print on rice paper
Signed by the artist

Nancy Spero

feminist perspective, Spero explored the view of Women — the unheard and the unseen. The artist mentioned that ‘up to now men and the term “man” have been used to symbolise both women and men. I decided to view women and men by representing women, not just to reverse history but to see what it means to view all this through the description of women’.

For these reasons, the artist decided to follow different connotations material and thematic-wise. Contradicting traditional painting methods — oil paint on a canvas of large dimensions — Spero adopted the fragility of the paper as a comparison to the patriarchal misconceptions that portrayed the female figure as innocent and “fragile”. Arguing the inaccurate characterisations of Women, and by the linear and lateralised figures, Spero portrayed relevant and powerful Women that didn’t fall into such characterisations. Instead, Women that have by their achievements influenced contemporary feminism to-day.

Lastly, the use of a semiotic language — a junction of prints, collages, references from books, images, etc. — create a pattern about women as the ‘protagonist’. Spero was interested in the use of quotes in correlation with

images in order to analyse the completion created by such. She described it as ‘a natural symbiosis, the one an extension of the other’.

The ‘radical image/text conjunctions’ and ‘her groundbreaking aesthetic approach’ have explored a silenced topic — the capacities of the female sex to be as equal as the man. Indeed, Spero’s work has an ability to shock and to open discussions around difficulties that women have been facing throughout the history of time.

Inês Mourato



"I have a dialogue within the art world, and sometimes beyond. And this is utopian too, the hope that the work might generate a discussion of sorts." (Nancy Spero)

Geb and Nut is a painting of intense forms and patterns that portrays two human figures and their intricate relationship. The bodies' positions and the anatomical references invite the viewer to understand the feelings and emotions within each character. The predominance of reds, blacks and purples mimic the representation of human flesh, and the curvilinear lines allows the viewer to navigate through the inside of the depicted person. Likewise, the depicted charcoal lines, found underlining the bones of the body, are an indication that the work, just like the human body, works itself up in layers.

Deweedt's painting illustrates a naked female body arching over a contracted man, that painfully holds his head. Contrarily, the woman is occupying a comforting position imposed on the crouching body which references the image of Nut, 'the female goddess of heavenly bodies' known for her great protecting and re-birth symbolisms.

Thus, the contrast between the lightness of the women towards the body that lays underneath references the idea of a protecting capacity in Women. In fact, Ancient Egyptian goddesses were commonly represented with one arm around the husband's



Plate 2

Geb and Nut

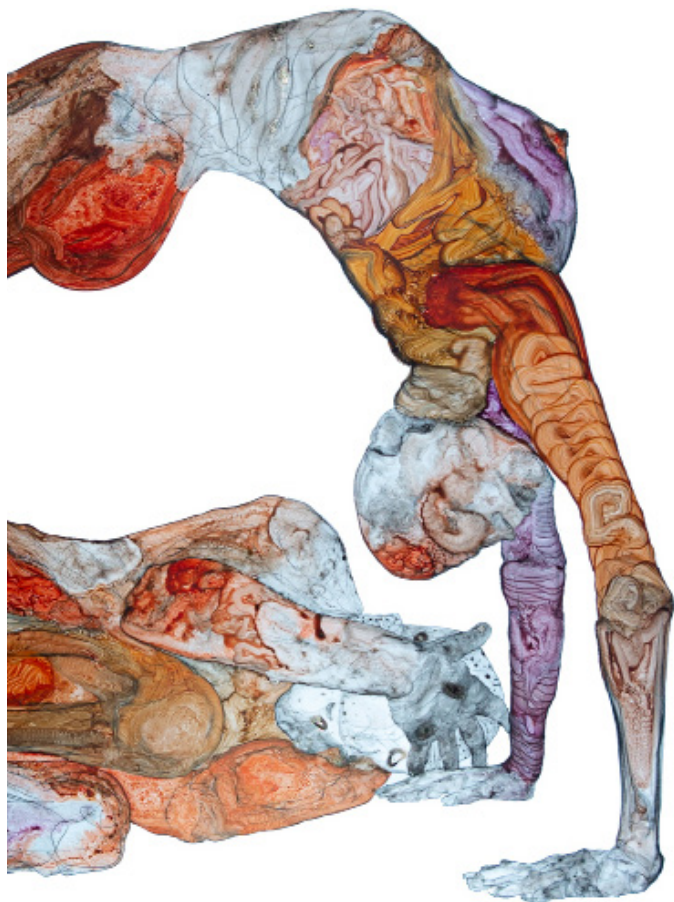
2019
70 x 100 cm
Acrylic paint and ink in
plastic support

David Deweerdt

waist to symbolise physical support. This pictorial description allowed historians to rediscover the importance that queens and goddesses of Ancient Egypt possessed over the kingdom. Moreover, this theory is undertaken in the artwork. The artist affirms that when painting *Women* ‘she is dream-like, tenebrous and her body becomes the envelope that shelters our most primitive fears and fantasies’.

Deweerdt’s worked most of his life as a mental health educator. His art, on the other hand, has only been discovered in recent years. Deweerdt explains that his interest in painting grew from his fascination with ‘the human being, on the body, on the soul, and on the sensations that awaken something in the viewer.’ Exposing a very intimate view to the artists mind, the energetic patterns demonstrate his ability to see through the mind and to capture its inner senses.

Thus his artwork evokes a visual representation of feelings, dreams and nightmares that confer it a magical and mysterious language of expression. Isis herself was the Goddess of great magic; the deity that controlled all the Gods and all lands. Isis’ body, like the body of her mother Nut, was seen as the protecting womb of Egypt as well as the place of creation.





'Brooch is a series of works themed by women. Breast is the central language of this series. We want to express our love and respect for women. We hope everyone can identify with the female gender from the concept, and they don't have to be shy, not to mention afraid.'

Nooji Studio, 2020



Plate 3

Brooch

2015
3,5* cm
Ceramics and metals

Nooji Studio

'The painting is inspired by the ancient symbolism of Nut, pronounced 'Noot.' Nut represents the aspect of nature that is connected to the cosmos and the constellations. The composition is influenced by the zodiac of Cleopatra located on the ceiling in Hathor's Temple and this piece captures the imagination and deep understanding of the ancient Egyptian symbolism of the sky, the stars and the zodiac.'

Alaa Awad, 2020



Plate 4

Nut

2020
90 x 105 cm
Oil on canvas

Alaa Awad

'The beauty and power of Egyptian women are the focus of this painting. They are accompanied by the Borak, a modern Egyptian symbol of strength in the form of a horse with a female face and wings. The women are marching forward, gliding ahead towards the future and together they stand in solidarity with peace and pride.'



Plate 5

Egyptian Women

2020
100 x 105 cm
Oil on canvas

Alaa Awad

Queen with Sistrum and Lotus is an acrylic painting that depicts one of the most important queens of Ancient Egypt, Nefertari Meritmut (ca. 1303 — 1213 BC). Putnam has represented this queen holding a sistrum, an object mainly related with the female figure — music, dance and joy. In addition papyrus and lotus flowers are emerging from the sistrum, plants that were immensely relevant in Ancient Egypt. The papyrus flower was associated with joy and youth and used as a type of paper in the well known papyrus scrolls. The lotus was, in its turn, the most depicted flower in Egyptian art. Its symbolism was related to the sun as they closed and sank underwater every night, reopening every morning to reproduce the ‘natural symbol of the sun and of creation’. Thus, symbolising birth and rebirth, many Pharaohs and Queens were represented holding these flowers, or emerging from them.

Nefertari’s name, like the flowers and the sistrum, also had its meaning. Nefertari, was translated to ‘beautiful companion’; and Meritmut meant ‘beloved of the goddess Mut’, the mother deity. Her headdress replicated the wings of a vulture also shown in some representations of Mut.



Plate 6

***Queen with Sistrum and
Lotus - Queen Nefertari
wife of Ramses II***

45,72 x 60,96 cm
Acrylic on canvas

James Putnam

The relevance of this queen was enhanced by her husband, Pharaoh Ramses II. He dedicated, to his favourite wife, one of the richest and most colourful tombs in the Valley of the Queens. In addition, the queen's statue was constructed with the same scale as his; a privilege not many other queens had had before. Commonly, the Egyptian woman is represented in the husband's or in the father's tomb and her body scale is reduced in comparison to the male.

Nefertari's significance to her king emphasizes the importance of women in society and their great power of authority when ruling a kingdom. The 'Great Royal Wife' was the companion of the men and her role in politics was just as relevant. Nefertari, for instances, played an active role in foreign politics.

There is not a lot of information about this queen as her tomb, when discovered, had already been robbed. Through investigation, they could however find two pairs of mummified legs that belonged to a fully developed female body of forty-fifty years of age. Nefertari had around eight children in total, four daughters and four sons. Her ancestry, however, is unknown.

A queen in ancient Egypt was considered to have similar powers to a deity, as she was born from a god (the father) and married to another god (the husband). Yet, even though married to a Pharaoh, Nefertari didn't carry the title of 'Daughter of a King', which suggests she was not from the main royal line. Nevertheless, Nefertari played an important role in Ramses II's kingdom that lasted around twenty years.

The queen was depicted by many names, such as, 'lady of charm', 'sweet of love', 'beautiful of face', 'for whom the sun shines', which may explain the king's preference for Nefertari, among all his queens. However, her beauty was not her only attribute. She was also able to read and write hieroglyphics, a talent that was not common for women. Thus, the importance of Nefertari alongside many other queens, such as, Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and Hatshepsut, inspired contemporary culture to believe in equality between sexes as the natural order of divine — to understand the differences between genders and their complementing attributes.

Inês Mourato



Queen with Sistrum and Lotus - Queen Nefertari wife of Ramses II, James Putnam, Watercolour on paper

Burak

Pacheco takes her cue from the mythological animals of Greek and Roman culture which in turn had drawn on the continuous connection with Mesopotamian and Egyptian populations. This work provides an example of the Chimera that owes its popularity to the mythic accounts in Homer and Hesiod. The Chimera is not the only legendary creature she adopts here, as the image of the Sphinx is also invoked: an Egyptian god with the role of guarding access to temples or tombs. In the Greek myth, the Sphinx is defeated by Oedipus, who, answering an enigma, frees Thebes from the presence of the monster and becomes king of the city. Moreover, Pacheco connected these creatures with a modern message in Burak: the Koran records that Mohammed was the third and final prophet of the true faith of God, following Moses and Jesus. Legend relates that Mohammed was carried from Mecca to Jerusalem on his milk-white steed Burak, who is sometimes described as having a human face, the body of a horse with wings and the tail of a peacock. Pacheco's beautiful Burak flies above ideological conflicts.

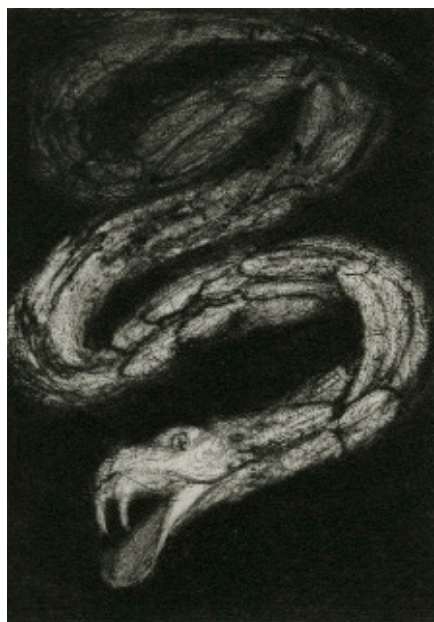
Quetzalcoatl

Although Quetzalcoatl is known by his Aztec name, he is a god of such importance that he played a role in the pantheon of virtually all the other Mesoamerican deities. He is the god of sustenance, self-sacrifice, and rebirth. The snake that we find in countless depictions of various ancient cultures, not only the latter Christian one but also as we have seen Mesopotamian (the Ishtar Gate with the goddess holding the snake in her hand) or in the Cretan statuettes called Potnia Theron, the Goddess of snakes is often seen as the Cretan Mother Goddess, a female deity revered since at least 3000 BC up to 1200 BC linked to fertility and life, but also to death (Otto, 2004). The snake was an ambivalent figure in Egyptian culture. It was seen as an evil force: the god Apophis was represented as a snake, the god who tries to kill Ra (the sun god) and bring darkness into the world. But the snake likewise was a representation of the goddess Isis. In ancient times the snake was the totemic animal of goddesses since their constant changing of skin was interpreted as the ability to die and be reborn and therefore to generate life, just as women do.



Plate 7 **Burak**

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2020/ Bridgeman Images. Repro courtesy of
Pratt Contemporary









Quetzalcoatl Plate 8

2000
11,8 x 9 cm
From 'Beasts', a series of
ten drypoints printed on
Somerset Textured 300gsm
Edition of 25

Ana Maria Pacheco

That's why in every ancient myth the female deities are always associated with reptiles. In Egyptian mythology, moreover, the cobra hieroglyph really means 'Goddess'. From Gardiners' book:

13  cobra  I 12 on the Det. goddesses, exx.  ¹ *Wid(y)t* 'Edjō';  ² *nrt*
 basket  V 30 'goddess'. As an element in the royal title  see G 16.
¹ *Urk. iv. 246, 15.* ² *Urk. iv. 308, 6.*

Diletta D'Antoni



Plate 9

©Ana Maria Pacheco. All Rights Reserved
2020/ Bridgeman Images. Repro courtesy of
Pratt Contemporary

Hades II

2004
145 x 168,5 cm cm
Oil pastel on paper

Ana Maria Pacheco

The Transformation depicted in this scene results from a painful search, joining what has been separated by force and brutality. In this work, Pacheco showed the power of life and regeneration.

The starting point for this work came from ancient Egyptian religion, with the story of the gods Osiris and Isis. The most complete version of this story was recorded by Plutarch: Seth was jealous of his brother Osiris because he held the throne of Egypt and had the most beautiful wife, Isis. So Seth came up with a plan to kill his brother. During a dinner, Seth deceives Osiris into entering a coffin specially created for the occasion. Once the god enters the coffin his brother Seth tears him apart into fourteen pieces and scatters the parts of the body into the Nile. Seth becomes king of Egypt, but Isis hearing of the tragedy, searches for the scattered parts together with her sister Nephthys, finding them one by one until only the penis was missing. This was never found because a fish had eaten it. Isis with her magical power was able to equip her husband with a replica organ. She then bandaged him and sang a spell to resurrect Osiris. During this moment, Isis hovered over Osiris in the form of a bird, conceiving their son Horus. Osiris

was alive but he was no longer a living king. He abandoned his family and retreated into the underworld where he becomes the king of the dead. Pacheco drew Isis in the form of a white hawk, while Osiris is not depicted as a mummy but as a naked body.

Diletta D'Antoni



'In this self-portrait, I depict myself as Isis. I have used my own body as a tool that can have many meanings. On one side I connect myself with Isis, my body is strong, in full force and ready to fly and fight for my love, Osiris. On the other side, I'm still a human being, I will probably get sick and old until I die. The hands covered by gloves remind me of my human condition. In the background there are some couples having sex, a tribute to the mother goddess and generator of life. You can also see the Oxyrhynchus fish who ate the penis of Osiris. The painting is questioning the female role in our society, the female strength and the power of her body but also her condition as a human being.'

Silvia Paci, 2020



Plate 10

Self-portrait as Isis

2020
150 x 120 cm
Oil on canvas

Silvia Paci

The artist depicts *Hapi* as an androgynous figure, male and female at the same time with drooping breasts as in the original Egyptian iconography. Indeed, Hapi was often seen as an androgynous and hermaphrodite deity, according to these aspects in Egyptian myth. In reality, Hapi is a male divinity who in the processions alternated with female figures and is obese because he symbolized prosperity.

In the modern era, some people claim androgyny as gender identity, that is, for a person who feels neither totally male nor female, but something between the two, with a mixture of traditionally male or female characteristics. Virginia Woolf maintains that a male and a female part coexist in every human being. In men, the male predominates, in women the female, but only a total androgynous mind can analyze the world in all its aspects.

Diletta D'Antoni

'This painting depicts my interpretation of Hapi. Hapi was the god of the annual flooding of the Nile. He was the divinity representing the Nile. It is not about the deified river, but rather about its spirit, its dynamic essence. He was represented as a man with heavy breasts and a prominent belly, symbolizing abundance; the deity always carried gifts, flowers, and plants.'

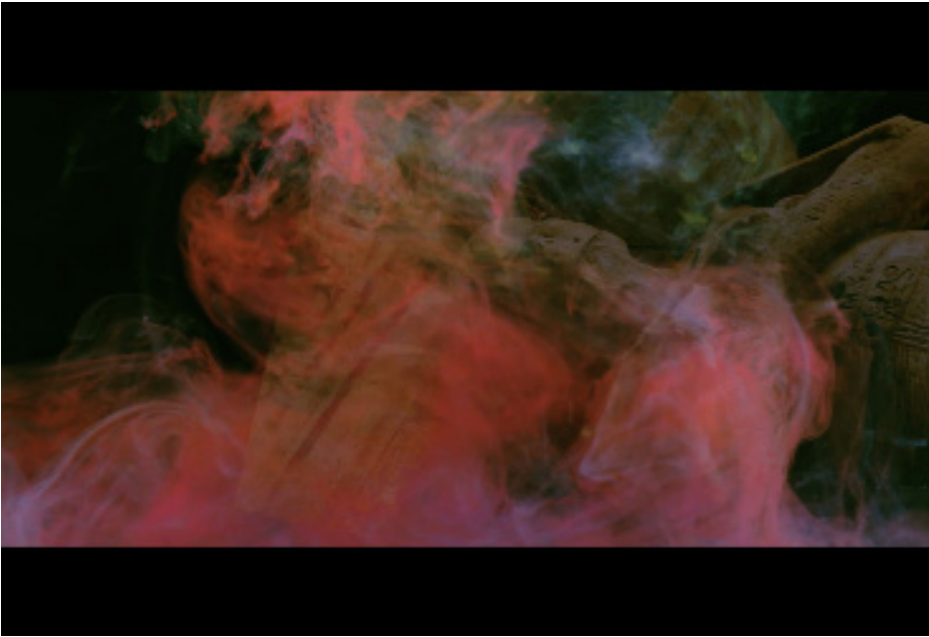


Plate 11

Hapi

2020
150 x 120 cm
Oil on canvas

Silvia Paci



'I like to experiment, searching for new path and new meanings on my videos. I am passionate about the complexity of visual communication as a language of dissent, a vehicle to express one's ideologies, philosophies, and politics and how it has still the power to touch people.'

Claudia Niarni, 2020

Aset

2019
Video with the recording voice
of Greta Thunberg from the
speech to world leaders at UN
Climate Action Summit.

Claudia Niarni



Plate 12

Blue Body takes the female body as its theme setting it against a blue background. It tries to use the free and easy temperament and lasting appeal in the lines to express the silky feeling and broad vitality of the ocean. Lines, like warp and weft, separate and connect spaces, showing different worlds. The human body is wonderful, but there are still scientific and aesthetic rules to be broken. Breath flows through the lines of the body, awakening our intuition and thinking

Bin Luo, 2020



Plate 13

Blue Body

2019
10* - 20* cm each
Porcelain, clay molding,
colour painting in the
glaze.

Bin Luo

And somehow we're meant to be perfect is a gold mirror sculptural piece that allows the viewer to visually and cognitively reflect over her own image. The artwork is constituted of three golden icon boards, 'that reference the traditional spirit of the saint' which is present in icon paintings, they are displayed vertically next to each other and incorporated in a gilded box frame.

Yet, this sculpture shows an interesting aspect in its composition — the three icon boards find themselves situated towards the left side of the frame, leaving an empty space perfectly disposed for another board. Here the placement is obviously intentional in order to arouse deeper thinking. In Wassall's book, *The law of unplanned consequence*, she demonstrates her specific interest in Felix Gonzales-Torres' *Perfect Lovers* and the positioning of the two clocks touching each other at one single point. The artist affirms that 'he used ordinary tangible wall clocks to comment on intangible emotions'. In this piece, the concept is no different. The lacking component raises feminist arguments on the deprivation of women's liberation and image, a concept also explored in works such as *Thank you* and *Equality*.

Through these pieces, we comment

on themes put in place by second wave feminists. They reflect on how patterns of exclusion between genders developed 'impossible ideals for women' and the way they look. Susan Brownmiller explains that women are 'never quite satisfied, and never secure, for desperate, unending absorption in the drive for a perfect appearance — call it feminine vanity — is the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind'.

Thus the question is: How are we meant to be perfect...?

Wassall explains how Isis is reflected in her work as a power image of womanhood. Isis was herself merged with classical goddesses — Demeter and Aphrodite — and the influence of pagan artistic representations on the Madonna and Child (so often the theme in icon paintings) can be compared to representations of Isis and Horus. Thus, the 'feminine vanity' is interestingly connected with the mirror object, and the dynamic gold reflections reference the living spirit of the saint represented in the icon, or in this instance the reflection looking back at you.

These elements were highly symbolic in Ancient Egypt — the mirror a symbol of beauty, and gold a reflection on



Plate 14

***And somehow we're meant
to be perfect***

2019
40 x 85 x 2.5 cm
Icon boards with 24ct gold,
mounted on gesso board
with text under each icon
in gilded box frame.

Nicole Wassall

the power of brightness and brilliance. However, if seen from a feminist point of view the mirror has lost its compelling symbolisms. The mirror has now become a reflection of Women's feelings of inadequacy towards the way they look, as it highlights the feeling that trying to be perfect is impossible.

In the process of making this piece the perfect imperfections are explored. The icon boards were individually glazed in 24ct gold using the technique of water gilding, also used for religious purposes in Ancient Egypt. The technique is complex and requires immense precision, taking a 'lifetime to master'. Ironically, in attempts to create the perfect mirror, Wassall found interest in the imperfections and incoherent results, as seen in *Plate 15*. Nicole explains the 'key dialogue within the piece is that, as the technique improves life lessons can be taken from the process and (...) despite the attempt at perfection, each board is unique and it is the imperfections that are enticing.'

Furthermore, the art of curating also presents an important part in Wassall's practice. One of her main interests lies in neuroscience and the activation of different parts of the brain through art and sensation. The

artist showed preference in exhibiting the piece lit with candles as 'Gold is particularly beautiful when dimly lit' and it brought to life the idea of 'the spirit of the saint' depicted in them. In presenting the piece she also made the decision to add scent with a mix of benzoin oil and fennel, the former of which is traditionally used to clear out evil spirits.

In conclusion, the three mirrors are, in a sense, a self-reflective notion of individual beauty that she invites the viewer to experience. One always has a reaction when perceiving themselves and others in a mirror. The consequence of this is that the art-work manifests a performance value when you interact with it. The viewer is aware of the sculpture as an object, as well as themselves with the object. The interesting connection of the day-to-day, presented differently in an exhibition context, creates different emotions and feelings evoked by the uncomfortable explosion of such personal aspects of our life. *And somehow we're meant to be perfect* reflects on the history of Women, the insecurities and uncertainties when believing in their own capacities.

Inès Mourato



Plate 15

Detail (And somehow we're meant to be perfect), 2019



Shining new light, from an ancient sun

Nature and Nurture caught a glimpse of themselves in the mirror and adjusted their hair and makeup. Their characters were not as straightforward as they'd been described. They were dressed for a night on the town, adorned with fashionable enhancements, not exactly misrepresentations of their true selves, but not entirely representational either. Here the impact of fashion, in its broadest sense, can be unpicked in the context of history to explore social and cultural illusions relevant to feminist debate.

What I am alluding to is the implicit understandings of nature and nurture as problematic, because socially constructed assumptions are mistaken for truths. So, by looking at things from a cross cultural and multi-time coded perspective confined mindsets can be opened up.

In this context art is useful as its value is social and cultural (beyond market terms), yet it is inter-discursive, formative and agenda setting or at least self-exposing. Therefore it becomes relevant for a female artist to ask, 'Can I just make art, like a man can just make art?'

Context does not leave us alone; we are still the 'other'. So, I call a metronome *Equality* and gild it with 24carat gold. My reflection stands witness as I wind the key on the side. Its shape sits comfortably with ancient pyramids and artefacts and yet its simple lines and conceptual undertones are relevant today and I ask, 'Aren't we there yet?' The answer is of course 'No' and the piece, through sound and movement, swings between past and future. Neither the question nor the answer is that simple, or that complicated.

And somehow we're meant to be perfect stands alone as an art object of three golden mirrors with a gap for a fourth, and yet it is also process art. The process takes the act of learning the ancient technique of water gilding and compares it to the process of learning to become, or trying to become, perfect at life. To start with I researched many (often contradictory) methods for mastering the technique, in the end I found my own way. I then realised as I improved in one area, weaknesses in others became more apparent. However, in working on the third board, I came across an unexpected dynamic, the base layer of gesso started to bubble when I was applying the bole (the soft clay

you apply before you add the gold). I had no idea what I was doing wrong.

After a flurry of research and calls with master gilders I understood that the problem was fairly common. The bubbles were in the gesso on the board, there is no technique to get around this and it was not my fault – I had not applied the gesso. The process took over and I made the best of it. Looking at the boards now, the third is my favourite. The gilding is indeed better than the other two boards and the imperfect surface created by the bubbles is the most interesting. The bubbles rose to the surface opening the unexpected depth of the piece, an insight into life and the feminine journey.

Nicole Wassall, 2020

Equality is a piece that resonates in the context of disasters like the London Grenfell Tower fire that disastrously killed seventy-two people in 2017. The metronome is exhibited playing a long and slow rhythm as a metaphor for the painful wait for justice, as Wassall describes the wait for equality as being ‘as old as time, whether it be feminism, slavery, etc...’.

This triangular shaped object references Ancient Egyptian pyramids and, like *And somehow we’re meant to be perfect*, the water gilding technique is used to apply gold over wood. The reflective characteristics allow the viewer ‘to see themselves in the piece and in history’. This perspective is extremely important to understand the artwork. The aim is to stimulate our brain to think beyond what we see and to demonstrate the nature of change, which seems unreasonably slow. It makes the point that the feminist fight against inequalities between gender and characterisations of simply the ‘Other’ in society is not new. A perspective also shared in Christine Battersby’s *Gender and Genius* book.

Nevertheless, the fascinating aspect of the piece lies in the music or, in the sound of the metronome that becomes hypnotising. It is for us to

navigate through the history of society, and our place in it, as the sound quickly dissolves into the background noise. The metronome relates to dance, music, rhythm, movement and time which, consequently allows us to see it from a different perspective — how to learn about the history of Women throughout time.

Wassall’s works have an intriguing magic to them. They make you reflect and wonder. They arouse various questions about us as people, us as society, and what changes we could be doing. Female equality still has a long “dance” of adjustments, and works of art like these two pieces are here to question, think, and question again. As Wassall explains, her work is not looking for answers but rather a conversation.

Inês Mourato



Plate 16

Equality

2019
12 w x 23 l x 12 d cm
Wooden metronome,
water gilded with gesso
& Ligurian Yellow bole
and 24ct gold leaf.

Nicole Wassall

The women delineated in Menlibayeva's photographs are resilient, mystical and often nomadic, in empty landscapes with abandoned buildings as a background. The photographs offer a privileged glimpse into the cultural and social change of Kazakhstan, and her subjects, often with the glamour of fashion models, lend their expressions to history. Her works extend our limits and knowledge and she always adopts subjects about her country. Her work is populated by the people of the Steppes in Central Asia, and focused on women and the costumes and sensuality that characterizes their being.

The photographs open onto backgrounds that represent her origins, including the ruins of former empires that have imposed their dominion over the population. She presents architecture seen as oppression which frames figures that represented Kazakh life (present and past). Through her photographs, we have a window on a world of which we know nothing or little. Moreover, a picture about a world that remains untouched by modernity and at the same time it is a 'nostalgic elegy to a disappearing age'. Menlibayeva displays a place where myths are an integral part of the culture as a part of memory, history, and culture. She dressed her models in the nation's



Plate 17

© Almagul Menlibayeva

Architecture as the Fabric I

2017
71 x 107 cm
C-Print Ed. 5 + 2 A.P

Almagul Menlibayeva

cultural and religious wardrobe, including Islamic veils, nomadic costumes, and soviet military uniforms.

‘The female figures in my work, are in some ways feministic. Control is a force that permeates everything. We felt oppression under the Soviets. But any ideology we choose, whether religious or cultural, might also control us, and control is an issue for the struggle of women socially. After the ideology fell, there was a fresh start. This is represented by the empty landscapes of my work. Different ideologies, whether communist, religious or political, can be worn and then shed like clothes, but I felt there was common ground with nomadic culture that the Soviets had tragically wiped out and eliminated’.

In this image, the artist displayed her models in front of the mausoleum of Aisha Bibi. Aisha was an 11th-century Kazakh princess who was killed by snakebite on the way to meeting her fiancé, a nobleman. After her death, the nobleman built a mausoleum for her and, he was said to have never married. The mausoleum has become a monument to love and faithfulness, Menlibayeva embraces this building as a monument to religious unity and local cultural values.

The building is a symbol of love for a woman that overcame adversity, as her father did not approve of her lover. This is reminiscent of the story of Isis who fought against her brother Seth for her lover Osiris. Or, indeed of the story of another powerful queen, Cleopatra a smart and intelligent woman. Plutarch explained how, defeated by Octavian, Mark Anthony chose suicide, leaving his lover Cleopatra and the twins she had at the mercy of the Roman army. Her fate would have been to end up in chains in Rome as a prisoner of war, so she preferred suicide. The historian Plutarch had collected several accounts of the death of the Queen, but the most plausible was that of the snakebite by a cobra whose powerful poison paralyzes the victim's nervous system and gives a quick and painless death.

Diletta D'Antoni

'The overall shape of Survival and fantasy is similar to the shape of a pineapple, ornamented with floating female buttocks, symbolizing the interweaving of reality and fantasy, affecting and changing people's lives.'

Bin Zhao, 2020



Plate 18

Survival and fantasy

2019
110 l x 110 w x 130 h cm
Grounding molding bone
China

Bin Zhao



Plate 19





Plate 20

Riddle

2019
Ceramic

Lu Han

THIS IS MY LETTER TO YOU
I BEGAN WRITING

IT IS THE WOMB OF A WOMAN WHO DIDN'T KNOW
I WAS IN THERE

I WROTE IT DEEP IN THE TISSUE
FOR MY SKIN NOT TO BETRAY IT
I'VE LEARN'T IT BY HEART AFTERWARDS

EVERY SEVEN YEARS THEY SAY
BECAUSE EVERY CELL CHANGES

I WROTE IT WITH THE HOPE
AND PRECISION
THAT YOU
WOULD
EXIST

Plate 21

This is my letter to you. I began writing it in the womb of a woman who didn't know I was in there.

I wrote it deep in the tissue for my skin not to betray it.

I've learnt it by heart afterwards 'cause every cell changes every seven years, they say.

(I wrote it with the hope, suspicion and fear that you exist.)

.exist uoy taht raef dna noicipsus ,epoh eht htiw ti etorw I

Letter to you

2020
30 x 80 cm each
Clay on canvas

Crisia Constantine

To any poem there are multiple interpretations, thus, it is for the reader to discover her own. In *Letter to you* Constantine looks for this conceived message that interconnects the artist, the work and the public. Through an autobiographical narrative, the artist challenges and contradicts idealised rules of society, more specifically, the mother-child relationships.

In Ancient Egypt, poems were considered to express the ‘word of God’. Nonetheless, these didn’t necessarily seek a religious view. On the other hand, poems would mostly talk about love, humans and their relations within. The British Egyptologist, Richard Parkinson, describes it as being one of the greatest insights for the reality of ‘human nature and its imperfections’, in which Constantine’s poem is no stranger.

Doll (Plate 22) is the beginning of *Letter to you*. Constantine’s thought process have developed from a message that was written on a doll — ‘the little, dirty doll was the paper for my letter’. This was the message of the artist to us, to ‘you’. A message that urged to be sent away. Thus, it’s intricate complexity is based on a story of universal stories — the reality of an unwanted child.

The artist’s mother didn’t wish to have children and for five months the pregnancy was unknown — ‘I began writing it in the womb of a woman who didn’t know I was in there.’ In this part of the verse the use of the noun ‘woman’ instead of ‘mother’ outdo and enhances the distance of the mother from the foetus. To understand this relation Mo Yan explains the difference between ‘motherhood’ - the institution, and ‘mothering’ - the experience; and their dissimilar characteristics. Thus, to be a mother is not necessarily to go through the experience of mothering.

In a challenging disorder of letters and words, this installation piece presents a vision upon a connection between nature (the body) with culture (the object). Clay, as mentioned by the artist, was ‘the most evocative medium ... as it investigates the symbolism of creation, responds to the making of our own bodies (to the tissues and cells that are ‘woven’ in mothers’ wombs) and explores intersections between biological and organic’. Constantine is interested in the physicality of the letter-object as it suggests different perspectives depending on the beholder’s point of view. Thus, the connection between object-culture and nature-body is formulated

— ‘The word becomes a tool to stimulate unsettling meanings’. The audience is the artist’s viewer, reader and lover; and by the use of the pronoun ‘you’, the artist physically and psychologically engages the public with the poem — to ‘you’ that is reading and to whom understands the poem. The whizomatic arrangement of the verses — wonky, unlined, distorted and wavy — abandons the traditional order of writing acting as a metaphor for the subjective beliefs about motherhood and Women that are far from strait, coherent and objective.

Feelings and emotions evoked by this poem provoke the sense of wonder and unknown. The wonder of being a Woman pressured by society labels — “fear”. The wonder of everything around us and its psychological impacts—“suspicion”. And nevertheless, the wonder of ‘becoming’ — “hope”.

This poem opens unspoken complexities of motherhood and issues in a contemporary society. Arousing to feminist discussions abortion, postpartum depression, unwanted childhood, etc., it is understood that the mother has not always performed the act of mothering in a state of unquestionable joy. The womb is it self unique and complex; a powerful force that

self unique and complex; a powerful force that women posses. Nevertheless, a difficult topic to position within idealised characterisations. Constantine was mostly raised by her grandparents. This letter experiences the life of many children in the same position. The insightful feelings give the poem its captivation and intensity; and the viewer is what makes it real.

Inês Mourato



Plate 22
Doll, Crisia Constantine.

KELLY
KELLY BTP1
KELLY
KELLY BTP1
KELLY
BTP1

(age 3.5) X IS FOR X. He calls it "a cross". He substitutes different letter names for the same marks. It seems to mean writing in general rather than any particular letter. X IS FOR ALLIGATORS X-ING X'S. X IS FOR A XENURUS PLAYING A XYLOPHONE, GOOD NIGHT LITTLE X.

January 25, 1977. Parents (i.e, mothers) are required to help supervise children at the playgroup once fortnight. How I read it I don't really want to know what he's like at school. I will only worry about it if he doesn't get along with the supervisors or the other children. Today, I noticed they blamed one by constantly for starting trouble and I felt sorry for him. Two little girls (twins) seem to need special attention back the supervisors usually became impatient with them, no wonder, that were just too many children. Another little girl (barely 3 yrs old) was trying to write her name. I was amazed. I told her how clever she was and made quite a fuss over her. Kelly watched very intently and that evening he asked Pauline to show him how to write.

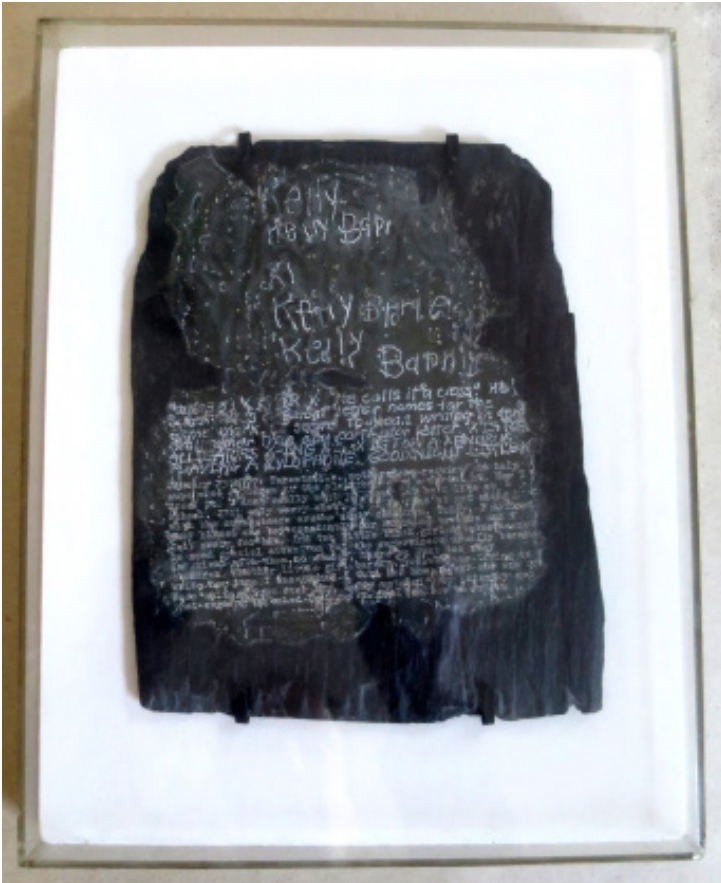


Plate 23

©Elizabeth Cowie

©Mary Kelly

Prototype (Post-partum document — Documentation VI)

1973-1979
25.4 x 20.3 cm

Perspex units, white card,
and letter inscription on
slates (Experimental unit)

Mary Kelly

Prototype is a unique slate unit used as a preparatory test for the five year project: *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1978). This artwork resulted in six consecutive sections that present an intimate view of Mary Kelly's son, in the first five years of life and his development as a child. This slate is part of the last section (Documentation VI) and presents an intersubjective view of women as a mother and her place in an idealised patriarchy.

Its visual aesthetic references the Ancient Egyptian Rosetta stone that likewise contains three scripts — Egyptian hieroglyphics at the top, Demotic script in the middle, and Ancient Greek writings at the bottom. In Kelly's Slates her son's letters are in the place of the hieroglyphics, followed by the mother's commentary 'identifying the letter as material support of a concrete discourse', as the Demotic script. The 'diary', in the place of the Greek writing, 'inserts the intersubjective discourse of the letter into a complex of institutional practices and systems of representation which produce the social subordination of the mother.'

To achieve the illusion of these inscriptions, the artist's process followed various steps. Firstly the artist transferred by hand her son's marks (hiero-

glyphics) and her own 'Exerque' to a piece of foil. Then by adding a piece of card behind the foil for support, the artist composed the 'Diary' on a typewriter. The foil was then cast with resin and filler and transferred to the slate.

Out of a group of fifteen, this unit joints the 'Alphabet' of the last slate with the 'Exerque' and the 'Diary' of the first section. Named as the 'formative phase', it corresponds to Kelly's alphabet learning that he developed throughout eighteen months. The process had its end after his full name was fully completed.

In this slate, Kelly learns how to write his last name for the first time — the father's last name, Barrie. Here the role of the paternal is foregrounded, and thus the interrelations between mother-father, woman-man, womb-phallus in the context of patriarchal dominance that gives the father's name precedence over the mother's name. Even the son's first name, Kelly, is a paternal name - the artist's father's name.

In the 'Exerque' Kelly comments on the letter arrangements of her child. It starts with the symbol followed by its combination — 'X IS FOR X' — and then a imaginary discourse

is developed around the chosen letter — ‘X IS FOR ALLIGATORS (...) X IS FOR A XENURUS PLAYING A XYLOPHONE’. The middle part of the documentation, not only allows the son and the artist to connect letters but to explore imaginary combinations of symbols and images, also used in Ancient Egyptian art.

Lastly, the ‘Diary’ relates an autobiographical description of the artist-mother-woman’s thoughts, fetishes, wishes and desires. The traditional connotations of mother-child relationship are here exposed by its ‘scandalous accuracy’. The problems and difficulties of being a mother and the ‘lack of discourse of the maternal subject’ is indeed portrayed both inaccurately and insensitively against women. Thus, *Prototype* and its autobiographical discourse expresses ‘an interplay of voices – the mother’s experience, feminist analysis, academic discussion, political debate’.

Yet, even though presenting a self-reflective thinking, the artist’s body is never visually shown. Instead, Kelly is present, and thus ‘seen’, through her words, sayings, and her feelings. In my opinion, the exclusion of the artist’s body metaphorically presents the negative signification

of the female figure that was objectified into its physical appearance rather than the woman’s intelligence.

Kelly’s work, is also political in its exposure of the hidden realities of femininity, motherhood and womanhood. By an ‘autonomous individual’ project, a ‘universalising life story’ is projected. The phenomenon of being a mother falls away from the classical idealised conceptions of the Virgin and the child. The goddess Isis, on the other hand, was a powerful influence on women due to her relatable human characteristics — the balance between the good and the evil, a natural aspect of human mentality.

Inês Mourato

Nancy Spero (1926 - 2009) was born in Ohio where she graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1949. The following year was spent at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris to study painting. In 1964, Spero decided to move to New York where she took part of movements such as the 'Women Artists in Revolution' (WAR) and the 'Art Workers Coalition'. In 1972 she opened A.I.R. Gallery, the first space restrict to women artists in the U.S. As one of the major feminist influences of her time, Nancy Spero has been featured in many exhibitions throughout her life in which her most recent one consisted in a retrospective of her work — 'Paper Mirror', at MoMA. The exhibition shown more than 100 works of the artist demonstrating the artist's progressing and inspiring fight for Women in History.

David Deweerdt (1967-) was born in Belgium where he still currently lives. He graduated in the Academy of Braine l'Alleud, and it is working now as a plastic artist and animator of workshops of artistic expressions around psychiatry and carrying mental disability organisations. His work has only recently been shown as he kept his paintings on his studio for years. His thematic explores the figure of the human body by the feelings and emotions kept within, which consequently are emphasise by the artist's anew pictorial representation of forms and colours.

Dr. Alaa Awad (1981-) is an Egyptian painter and muralist, a Ph.D. student at the South Valley University (SVU), Faculty of Fine Arts. Inspired by ancient Egyptian heritage and contemporary society, some of Awad's most popular work includes scenes of celebration, victory, Sufism, Egyptian social life and culture. 'It is important to me to convey and express a modern message in ancient Egypt, all of which are part of my values of respect.'

James Putnam is a well known curator and writer that have produced exhibitions relat-

ted to Ancient Egyptian culture in the past, naming the most relevant, 'Time Machine' (1994). Putnam's studies on Art History (London University), and his general interest on art, allowed him to accomplish many curated exhibitions that took a start when working in the British Museum in London, both independent projects or for the museum. Putnam's interest in the Ancient Egypt developed when exploring the British Museum's collection of Egyptian antiquities that allowed him to be in close contact with this culture. In 1999, he founded the British Museum's Contemporary Arts and Cultures Programme, a project that aimed the examination of 'history, art and artefacts in the light of current cultural-related issues'. Furthermore, Putnam has also published 'Art and Artifact - the Museum as Medium' (2001), a book that develops a survey around the relationship within artist and museum, and the critical interventions created by such. Putnam has been involved in many other projects with the New York University; Bowes Museum and he was Senior Lecturer of Criticism, Communication & Curation at the University of London. He is currently Senior Research Fellow at the University of the Arts in London.

Ana Maria Pacheco is a Brazilian artist (born 1943) who works in the United Kingdom. Following degrees in both Sculpture and Music in Goiás and Rio de Janeiro, she taught and lectured for several years at universities in Goiás before she moved to London in 1973 to study at the Slade School of Art. From 1985 to 1989, she was Head of Fine Art at the Norwich School of Art. At the Slade School of Art, Pacheco studied printmaking under Bartolomeu dos Santos, in particular the intaglio processes of etching, aquatint and drypoint. Moreover, painting in oil and tempera has enabled her to experiment with pictorial space and color. Her work is recognized as a remarkable cohesion of histo-

ry, myth, folklore, 'high culture' and humor. Typical of her work are the compact bodies and the expressive face of the characters that populate her engravings, sculptures, and paintings. Pacheco's works reflect the rich diversity of cultures modern but above all ancient, in fact, we can appreciate references to Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Assyrian or Akkadian) Roman, Greek and Egyptian cultures.

Silvia Paci (1990) studied in the Academy of Fine Art in Florence. She works between Florence and Berlin. Paci is an artist who engages with social problems, particularly from a feminist perspective. Her paintings evoke elements of destruction alternating with pleasing elements. She contrasts positive and negative forces. She creates ambiguous images where everybody can create their own stories. The female figures are imperfect in response to the classic canons of perfection. In her paintings, bodies and faces are consumed by life and emotions. Paci wrote on her website: 'In general, I believe that art communicates emotions not for the object represented but for the feelings that are activated through the viewer. Painting makes the invisible visible by reminding us that what we see does not arrive already full of meaning'. Her first sources of inspiration are Jenny Saville, Adrian Ghenie, Lars Elling, Otto Dix, Daniel Pittin and the photographer James Nachtwey. Paci explores the following subjects: the image of women in society, how women see themselves as a reflection of modern society, the loss of innocence, and self-discovery in the sexual sphere. Paci's works explore cultural difference, group spirit, and attention to the problems of others as a social theme. She is an artist who tries to break down the barriers between cultures and prejudices.

Claudia Niarni is an Italian video editor based in Florence, working with photography and video art. Born and raised in Florence, she

has traveled to many different countries. She spends most of her time editing videos for musicians and for her Vimeo Channel. In her newest body of work, she is exploring the connection between ancient Egyptians and nature. Hieroglyphic characters explain the rhythm of the Nile as its annual flood contributes greatly to the fertility of the land.

Bin Luo is a young artist who is now studying for a master's degree at the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute in China. She graduated from China's Hubei Institute of Fine Arts with a bachelor's degree. She is proficient in making various kinds of ceramic sculpture works and has participated in many competitions and exhibitions. For example, in 2017, she participated in the "White Night" of the fifth Hubei province modern ceramics exhibition.

Nicole Wassall is a contemporary artist that works and lives in London. Her interest in Neuroscience has taken her to explore different art media, such as, photography, sculpture, film, installations, etc. She affirms that her interest on Neuroscience doesn't rely in its answers but rather in the means to alert different parts of the brain through emotions and feelings that art releases in us. Wassall graduated with an MA in Fine Art (Central Saint Martin, London) and since has been featured in various solo and group exhibitions, as well as, been awarded with many prizes. Her most recent exhibition took part at London gallery Fiumano Case and it was named 'Precious Mettle' (2019). She has also published her own book, 'The law of unplanned consequence' and taken part on 'What is an Artbook?', a book published by The Modern Language Experiment.

Almagul Menlibayeva is a Kazakhstan-born artist and curator who lives and works in Kazakhstan and Berlin. Her educational background came from the Soviet Russian, avant-garde school of Futurism, which she combines with the

nomadic aesthetic of post-Soviet, contemporary Kazakhstan, explored through photography and video work. Menlibayeva uses photographs and videos as a vehicle to investigate her 'personal archaic atomism as a certain mystical anthropomorphism'. She said in an interview 'In other words, I explore the nature of a specific Egregore, a shared cultural psychic experience, which manifests itself as a specific thought-form among the people(s) of the ancient, arid and dusty Steppes between the Caspian Sea, Baidonur and Altai in today's Kazakhstan'. Menlibayeva's works discuss issues such as critical explorations of Soviet modernity (social and economic), political transformations in post-Soviet Central Asia, decolonial reimaginings of gender, environmental degradation, Eurasian nomadic, indigenous cosmologies and mythologies economic), political transformations in post-Soviet Central Asia, decolonial reimaginings of gender, environmental degradation, Eurasian nomadic, indigenous cosmologies and mythologies.

Bin Zhao is a lecturer in the Department of Traditional Arts and Crafts at the School of Design and Art of Beijing University of Technology. He has a very enviable educational background. From 1996 to 2000, he completed his undergraduate study of ceramic art design at the Academy of Fine Arts at Tsinghua University. From 2001 to 2005, he went abroad to study as a visiting student in the Department of Ceramic and Glass Art Design, at the Kering Institute of Design in Denmark, and he also studied for a master's degree in the Department of Manual Art, in the College of Design and Technology at Gothenburg University in Sweden.

Lu Han is a young artist who graduated from the Department of Ceramic Sculpture at Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts in China in 2017. She now runs a studio in Jingdezhen, Chi-

na's ceramics capital. Her works are mainly ceramic sculptures. Her conceptual approach to pottery has proved very popular.

Crisia Constantine (1991-) was born in Romania but is recently living and working in Australia where she graduated in Media and Communication in the University of Sydney. Constantine has been awarded in many artistic residencies and awards in Australia, Slovakia and France. Constantine's most recent award consisted as the winner of 'Patricia Piccinini Writing Competition' in 2018. Constantine's 'I turn myself into a picture...' solo exhibition, in 2019, contained the artwork 'Letter to you,' derived from the project 'un/body me'. The artist has throughout been participating in a various range of solo and group exhibitions around the world, as well as, been selected the many art publications. At the moment, Constantine is a Doctoral Researcher at the Griffith University, in Queensland College of Art.

Mary Kelly (1941-) was born in Iowa and her undergraduate studies were based in Painting, which she completed in Italy. After graduating Kelly taught art in Beirut until 1968, when she moved to London to complete her postgraduate studies at St. Martin's School of Art. After, Kelly became a member of the Berwick Street Film Collective and the founder of the Artists' Union and throughout this time, she started developing one of her most notable works, 'Post-partum document'. In 1989 Kelly joined the faculty of the independent Study Program at Whitney Museum of American Art when moved to New York. Mary Kelly has received many Honorary Doctorates by the University of Wolverhampton, Lunds University of Southern California, and University of the Arts Helsinki. From 1996 until 2017, the artist was Distinguished Professor of Art at the School of the Arts and Architecture, at the University of California, in Los Angeles. Currently, Kelly is Judge Widney Professor at the Roski School of Art and Design, at the University of Southern California.

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