



GODDESSENCE

Imaging The Elemental Connexions

Debbie Mathew

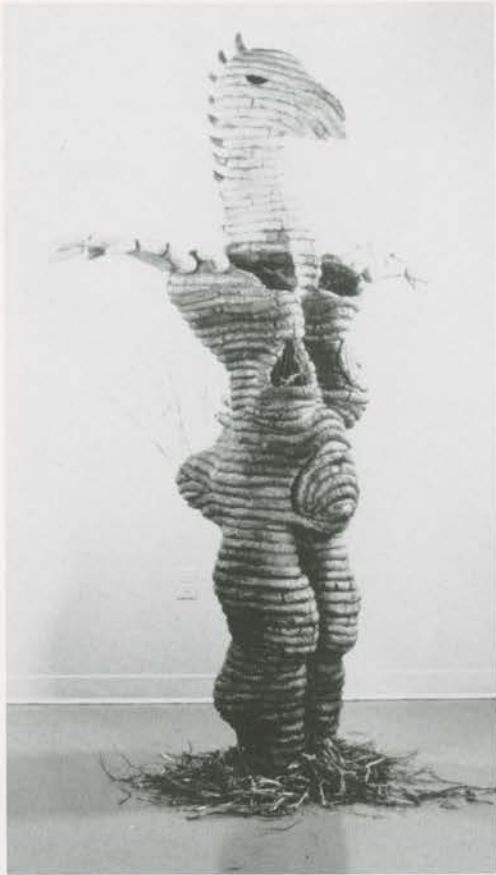
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Beauty and the Beasties 1987

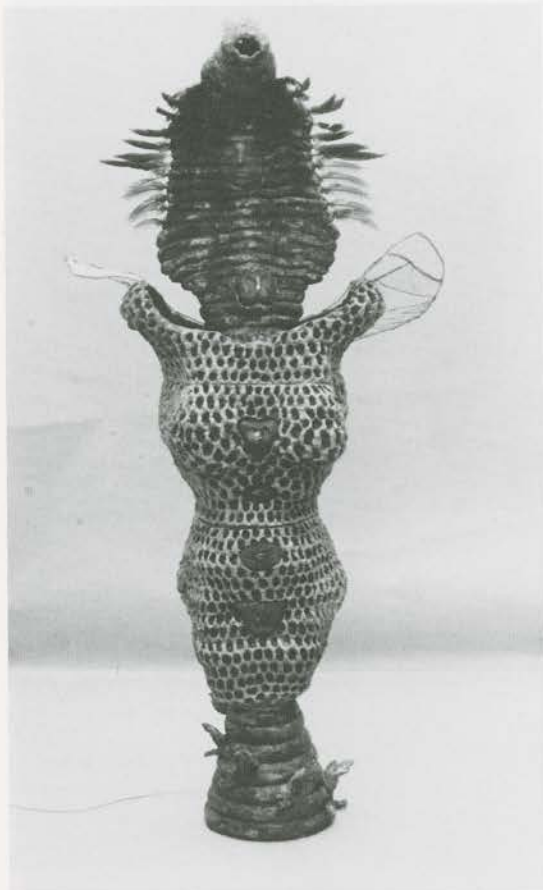
*Manifestations of our inner fears, protect us
at the Gateway to our inner unity.*



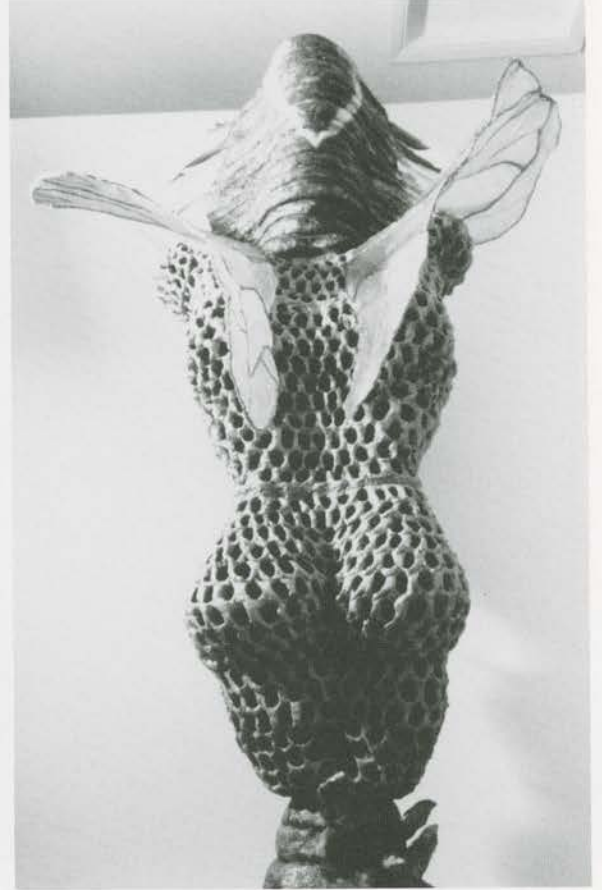
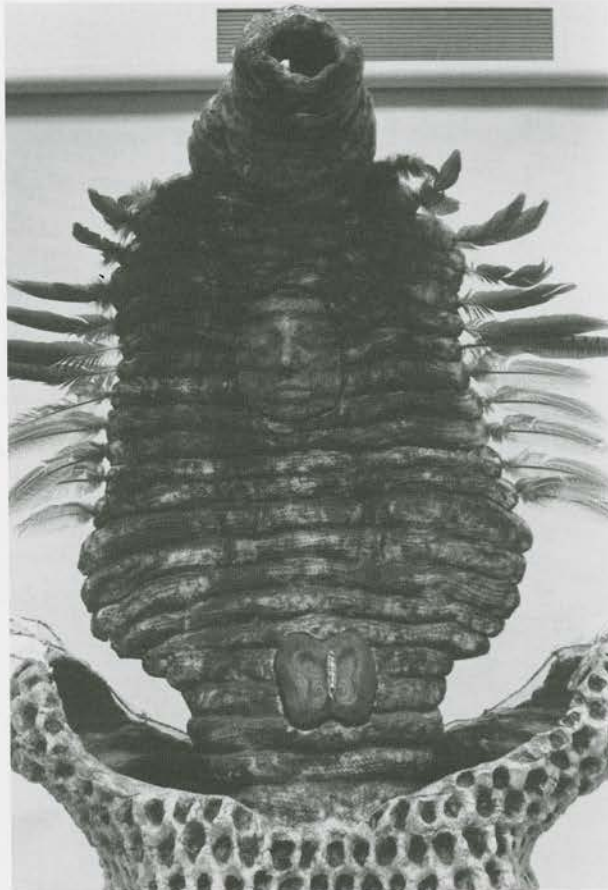
Bird Goddess 1987-88



So we Fly into our Bodies, into the Earth.



Snake Goddess 1987-88



*Humming as we heal ourselves,
opening Doors to the Centres.*



Dancing Goddess of Regeneration and Altar Table 1988



*Dancing the Dance of Life, Death, Birth,
we re-envision the cycles:
our Minds, our Bodies our Souls.*



*We re-member the fauna of the waters,
sacrificed
to the reigns of technology.*



Cruising Cornucopia 1987

*We acknowledge our aggressive nature
reversing the natural abundance of evolution.*

*We commit to transforming ourselves
and our surroundings,
sloughing our worn skins,
rebirthing the Essence of Oneness.*



GODDESSENCE: Imaging The Elemental Connexions

It is a source of cynical amusement for us that in the tenth century, the Christian world lived in mortal fear of the apocalyptic vision of the Last Judgement, and in greeting the new millennia, rejoiced that it did not come to pass.

On the contrary, it is hardly amusing for us that in nearing the end of this millennia, we are facing a new apocalyptic vision, not supernatural or fated but of our own making, in which "we may be shuddering our way to the end of the world."¹

There are many scientists, social critics, feminists and religious thinkers variously indicating a need for a new direction: "inventing the future,"² "reenchantment of the world,"³ "a new morality,"⁴ or "a theology."⁵ The artist, Debbie Mathew, through examination of the "endangered species," "the interconnected nature of the planet through myths," and "the Goddess" exposes "the myths which allow people to destroy and misuse the earth and her human representative, woman."⁶ The sculptural objects are installed dialectically to arrive at a synthesis for a new consciousness.

The precariousness of the ecosystem is symbolized by the process of forming the *Acidified Shrimp*. It is made of fragile porcelain with a delicate light oxide glaze for colour. The piece, accidentally (and symbolically) broken in firing, was strung together with wires. Normally only three millimeters long, it is enlarged to three feet and hung like a museum specimen. Fossil-like drawings emboss the surfaces to record its ecological history.

Another "endangered species," the *Wailing Walrus* carries attributes of the wrongs visited upon it—a close look at the beads of the decorative necklace reveals miniature barrels with toxic signs and harpoons. Its tactile body is ravaged by bullet wounds and cuts.

Scientists say that the diversity of organic species increases when the environment remains stable for long periods of time. However, even a small disturbance in the physical environment could result in mass extinction.

Every microorganism, animal and plant contains on the order of from one million to 10 billion bits of information in its genetic code, hammered into existence by an astronomical number of mutations and episodes of natural selection over the course of thousands or millions of years of evolution...without diversity there can be no selection...for organisms adapted to a particular habitat that then undergoes change. Species diversity—the world's available gene pool—is one of our planet's most important irreplaceable resources.... As species are exterminated...the capacity for natural genetic regeneration is greatly reduced....⁷

And, we are told that "we are causing the death of birth."⁸

Mathew says

Myths and archetypes have been such powerful conscious formers, making us what we are in terms of how we act in the world and how we make decisions.⁹

The series of sculptures called "earthshrines" are ideal images of the planet as a temple. In regarding earth as a sacred place we may treat it deferentially. Made of stoneware and porcelain, each shrine has as its basic structure a global shape. Each has within its central hollow some creatures, largely mythological, or imaginary, inhabiting the cosmos without hierarchal concerns. A delightful sense of humour pervades these pieces.

The three triangularly shaped legs of *Earthshrine IV—Return to the Spiritual Centre* are influenced by the Early Bronze Age Chinese ritual vessel, the *ding*. Occupying this planet-cum-temple are several creatures most notably the serpent/dragon.

Earthshrine V—Intercontinental Animal

contains an animal constructed with the porcelain shapes of the continents, reinforcing the concepts of interdependence and of a "living" earth, while *Earthshrine V—Devolving Cosmos*, shaped like a carousel, is inhabited by fantastic creatures, both beautiful and ugly, that question the state of evolution (is it now devolution?) as the balance in the ecosystem is disturbed.

Many archetypes carry myths about the planet that are shared by different cultures. The image of the cornucopia is from ancient times that of a horn of plenty, with fruit and vegetation, overflowing. Misuse of the planet is rendering obsolete this imagery of abundance. The *Cruising Cornucopia* moves through space and time; its unhappy state is expressed in the spikes which stick out of its wheels. Through the piercings along the side, one can observe the passengers in this vehicle, the various organisms, sharing equal space and scale, who seem to suggest a need for changed perceptions.

The ark (root, Latin *arca* box) is associated in some mythologies with the dark or crescent phase of the moon and as "a boat symbolizing the Goddess's spirit dancing on her primordial uterine Ocean of Blood, whose "clots" would form the lands and creatures of a new universe."¹⁰

The external form of the *State of the Arc* is like the whale of the sea and the bird of the sky, while the interior is treated symbolically as a human body, containing within it various human organs, suspended or positioned appropriately. Towards the stern, or what the artist refers to as the subconscious part of the ark body, the three faces of the moon, representing the eternal Great Mother, are placed, while the sun, usually a male symbol in Western iconography, is placed at the bow end.

In discussing both the environment and women's issues, feminists and many other social critics and religious writers find the roots of many

problems in the attitudes of a patriarchal society which aims to dominate and control nature (including women) chiefly for the purposes of economic return. The history of patriarchal civilization has been one of cumulative efforts to break down the bonds between spirit and flesh, culture and nature, man and woman. In Western societies this domination is particularly legitimized by a monotheistic religion which has at its head, a male, white, transcendent God.

Mathew says "we need a new type of religious orientation" and calls for a return to a more wholistic culture which values the natural world, "and an earth community which has a biocentric, not a homocentric, orientation."¹¹

In the third group of works, titled *The Thinness of Matter...*, she presents the *Four Elements of Air, Water, Earth and Fire*, which in ancient times constituted the basic principles of the universe, as well as *Ether, Moon, and Regeneration*, all images symbolic of and associated with the ancient Goddess. The Goddess, before she appeared as a comprehensive human figure, was long identified with nature in its various forms.

Representations of the Elements, in relief form, are placed on the gallery walls to accord with the cardinal directions of North, South, East and West. *Earth* is an animal, the anatomy of which becomes its topography. Tiny microcosmic creatures hang from this and interact with the piece. Human forms are introduced here for the first time in Mathew's work: the eternal Mother Goddess and the Horned God, associated in some mythologies as her consort, son, and lover who is born in the spring, dies at the Winter Solstice, to be reborn again through her.

Water is represented as a plant, but with a vertebrae-like stem relating to the human body and also to horny coral. Embossed fossil-like drawings indicate the species-rich environment of the coral reef. Little bubbles of glaze (produced

by salt firing) give the effect of water drops. *Air* (not included in this exhibition) is a bird-like shape with feathered wings and rooster tails with appendages of tiny organisms. The legs float as though in half-flight. It is glazed in a high gloss of blues and greens. *Fire*, in a low fire glaze of bright reds and oranges on a bright pinkish surface is also shaped like an animal, dancing in transformation.

Ether, called "heavenly" by the Greeks, is sometimes known as the fifth element. The skin-shedding snake or serpent is, of course, the powerful symbol for *Regeneration*, reclaiming the ancient and revered metaphors for transformation and immortality which it held prior to its denigration by Judaic/Christian theology. It is juxtapositioned with flower-like forms which relate to elements or attributes of the early Goddess having to do with imageries for living, growing, transforming, dying and rebirthing.

The artist includes the *Moon* as one of the primary aspects of the Great Mother/Goddess. She is influenced by the 21,000 year old Great Mother, the *Venus of Laussel*,¹² a bas relief from a cave in the Dordogne Valley in France, who stands holding a bison horn, a lunar crescent, on which are markings of thirteen slashes, representing the thirteen lunar months.¹³ It is painted with red ochre, the colour of menstruation and birth.

In the centre of an energy-filled "magic" circle with the configuration of the sign of Woman/Venus, drawn in stone is the *Trinity of Goddesses*: the *Snake Goddess*, the *Bird Goddess*, and the *Dancing Goddess of Regeneration*.

A trinity of goddesses have been worshipped since the 7th Millennium, B.C.E. in the three aspects of the Virgin, Mother and Crone. Figurine goddesses dating back to this period and earlier have been found throughout the world.

Imageries contained within the Trinity of

Goddesses re-affirm the artist's underlying thesis that animal spirit and human spirit are one and the same, without hierarchical classification. The goddesses are composites of animal and human attributes as well as the stars and the moon.

The artist re-members, acknowledges and represents the historical and mythological Goddess in *all her essences*, which takes into consideration "the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations so as not to homogenize 'woman'..."¹⁴ Women experience differently in particular societies and in particular social groups. Patriarchal monotheism assumes an abstract ideal, in the one figure of a male God, which promotes male competition, domination and colonialism.

A table is placed before the three Goddesses on which are ritualistic objects: attributes of the Four Elements, Air, Water, Earth and Fire, containing in them the basic principles of the universe. These sacred objects carry hints of the rituals and ceremonies of mysticism, magic and witchcraft in a time when life was in accordance with nature, and women were respected.

Guarding the entrance to the circle is the *Beauty and the Beasties*, a protector deity, with supernatural attributes, a composite creature with wings on its back, feet that can manoeuvre on both land and sea, a reptilian head with the capacity to breathe out fire and a body textured like earth. The Guardian, according to Starhawk, is the healer, an aspect of the deep self, which is built upon integrity, not guilt, so that we may make our own choice and control our own feelings and may ourselves become the guardians of ourselves, of each other, and of the community of life."¹⁵

Debbie Mathew is aware that we cannot go back totally to the earth and mother religions of the past and this is indicated in her use of contemporary technological materials in many of the

pieces. Through a dialectical approach to the presentation of the thesis and through her wonderfully textured and detailed images, the artist examines the values associated with woman and nature. She uses art to record and to articulate her (feminist) point of view about the world and challenges the ideological patterns of domination and subordination which leads to destruction of the earth and of women.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Marilyn French. *Beyond Power. On Women, Men and Morals*. New York: Ballatyne Books, 1985. p. 15.
2. David Suzuki. *Inventing the Future. Reflections on Science, Technology and Nature*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1989.
3. Morris Berman. *The Reenchantment of the World*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984.
4. op. cit. French.
5. Naomi R. Goldenberg. *Changing of the Gods. Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
6. Debbie Mathew. Interview with writer, December 1989.
7. Edward O. Wilson. "Threats to Biodiversity." *Scientific American*. September 1989. p. 114.
8. ibid.
9. op. cit. Mathew.
10. Barbara G. Walker. *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983. pp. 57-8.
11. op. cit. Mathew.
12. Monica Sjo & Barbara Mor. *The Great Cosmic Mother. Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987. p. 84.
13. Marija Gimbutas. *The Language of the Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989. p. 142.
14. J. Kristeva. "Women's Time," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. p. 188.
15. Starhawk. *Dreaming the Dark. Magic, Sex and Politics*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982. pp. 70-71.

LIST OF WORKS

1. *Acidified Shrimp* 1986 Porcelain, oxides, feathers, wire 21" x 10" x 21" Collection of the artist
2. *Wailing Walrus* 1986 Stoneware, porcelain, oxides, lusters, Nikor wire 15" x 22" x 20" Private Collection
3. *Earthshrine IV—Return to the Spiritual Centre* 1986 Stoneware, porcelain, glazes, monofilament, wire 39" x 20" x 20" Collection of the artist
4. *Earthshrine V—Intercontinental Animal* 1986 Stoneware, glazes, wire 24" x 20" x 20" Collection of Marianne Steggles
5. *Earthshrine VI—Devolving Cosmos* 1986 Stoneware, porcelain, glazes, monofilament, wire 30" x 24" x 24" Collection of the artist
6. *State of the Arc* 1987 Stoneware, porcelain, high and low fire slips and glazes, monofilament, hooks 35" x 39" x 14" Collection of the artist
7. *Cruising Cornucopia* 1987 Stoneware, porcelain, terra-sig, high and low fire glazes, monofilament, wire 24" x 30" x 18" Collection of the artist
8. *The Thinness of Matter* 1987 *Moon* 15" x 19" x 1"; *Air/Ether* 20" x 30" x 2"; *Fire* 33" x 43" x 2"; *Earth* 25" x 30" x 2"; *Water* 96" x 60" x 2"; *Regeneration* 84" x 84" x 4" Stoneware, porcelain, oxides, glazes, monofilament, wire, velcro Collection of the artist
9. *Bird Goddess* 1987-88 Stoneware, porcelain, mixed media 99" x 48" x 54" Collection of the artist
10. *Snake Goddess* 1987-88 Stoneware, porcelain, mixed media 96" x 48" x 54" Collection of the artist
11. *Dancing Goddess of Regeneration* 1988 Mixed media 38" x 25" x 6" Collection of the artist
12. *Altar Table* 1988-89 Porcelain, fir, grass, brass rod 27" x 28" x 28" Collection of the artist

BIOGRAPHY

Debbie Mathew was born in South Porcupine, Ontario (no joke!). Having survived the rigours of small town habits, she went south to the city of Guelph, Ontario to study marine biology after which she worked at biological research. After several years of this, she registered at the University of Manitoba School of Art where she graduated with a degree in Fine Arts in 1987, majoring in Ceramics. After graduation she attended a ten month session at the Fine Arts division of The Banff Centre, where many of the ideas for the pieces in this exhibition were conceived. During 1988-89 Mathew spent a year travelling throughout Europe and Asia. She is currently living in Winnipeg, continuing research and making art.



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