



Rochelle Goldberg

Sun Moon Stars

The desert is a place we tend to think of as a nothingness—an environment so unpleasant and inhospitable, so devoid of the basic tools for survival, that it cannot possibly sustain (human) life. There are, of course, dozens of species of plants, reptiles, birds, insects, and other animals that call the desert home. In Elizabeth Povinelli’s philosophy of “geontopower,” the Desert constitutes one of three figures of late liberal capitalist governance. Geontopower describes the logic of liberal colonialism and its tendency to determine sites of domination: what is considered to be life or non-life; what is worthy of being incorporated and what can be eradicated. The Desert contains the figures, discourses, and strategies for determining life and non-life. Within it, all things are vulnerable to being made, unmade, and remade.

In the work of Rochelle Goldberg, we are encouraged to question the supposed borders between living things and objects through the logic of “intraaction,” her own term for destabilizing the complex sets of relations among entities. For *Sun Moon Stars*, her recent solo exhibition at Mercer Union, Goldberg initiated a renewed reading of the myth of Mary of Egypt (known as the Desert Mother in Eastern Orthodox religions). Cast in bronze from the head of a Marilyn Monroe pin-up doll and her own pregnant body, Goldberg’s Mary of Egypt is an emblem of how to reconfigure agency and to reconsider value as it relates to life and materials of monumentality. Making use of the distinct but elusive figure of the desert, she situates this exploration within a space of chance and opportunity.

Mary of Egypt is, in Goldberg’s words, “the final appendage of the composite Mary,” a trope originated by Pope Gregory I in 600 CE, as “there was not enough space for multiple Marys.”¹ As such, all biblical Marys (aside from the Virgin) were converged under the name and narrative

of Mary Magdalene, thus originating the infamous virgin/whore dichotomy. As the story goes, she was a prostitute in Alexandria who retired to the desert to repent as an ascetic hermit, bringing with her three loaves of bread and otherwise surviving on what she found. Meeting Zosimas of Palestine by chance, she related her life story and asked to meet in one year to receive Holy Communion. Another year after this second meeting, Zosimas returned to find her corpse in the same spot where he had last seen her. Rather than dry remains, her body was completely preserved—a sign of her holiness in Christian tradition.

Based on the mythology of Mary of Egypt, which maintains that after so many years in the desert she appeared as almost animal and indistinguishable from her environment, artistic depictions such as Donatello’s sculpture *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1455) show her as an emaciated woman covered in long, coarse hair. Goldberg describes this sort of animal-environmental transformation as “a microbial event; somehow the border of self has expanded.”² The desert itself facilitates thinking through the value of a body in life, in death, or as something that has extended into its environment over a lifetime. This idea that the desert, normally an ecosystem hostile to life, is really a space of possibility for making and unmaking resonates with Goldberg, in terms of its potential for a miraculous event. Working against a Christian understanding that relies on the immaculate, unchanged state of a corpse, what if the immaculate is life giving life to even more life?

Bronze casting is a significant and intentional choice for Goldberg, whose sculptural ethos rests on subverting the monumentality of certain materials. To her, a bronze sculpture is unstable and impermanent because it can be cut up and melted down. She starts in the wax state, building up from the interstitial period during which it is extremely

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Sun Moon Stars, exhibition views, 2023.

Photos : Vuk Dragojevic, courtesy of the artist



sensitive to surface treatment. In the end, the physicality of the bronze sculpture walks a line between coming together and falling apart. Her Mary of Egypt figures demonstrate this in their loose forms, not fully seamed or attached where one might expect them to be, their skin impressed with motifs from crystal serving dishes.

Deliberately questioning what is valued, devalued, or has the potential to be valued, Goldberg acts this out literally and materially through sculptural analogues alongside their “real” representations. Symbolizing the loaves that Mary of Egypt brought into the desert, Goldberg’s two figures are surrounded by aluminum-coated baguettes next to their aluminum casts, with little indication of which is which without close inspection. Also, juxtaposing solid cast-aluminum cans and silver-painted cans dressed up as sculptural elements marks how easily either could be mistaken as a food commodity. Around the gallery, connecting these elements with suspended cables and wires, are partial frames of light-up vanity mirrors, which act as physical portals as well as analogues for the identification of Marilyn Monroe as a pin-up celebrity.

Goldberg’s aim in this body of work is to uproot the Mary of Egypt narrative from its conventional unfolding and give the subject agency. Although Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalene* depicts Mary of Egypt in a literal sense, his representation collapses the narrative of all of the Marys, as the Church had collapsed their subjectivities long before. Such removal of the representations of real lives from a historical record extends to restricting their participation as lived subjects. Creating a shared experience of asking these questions about an under-studied mode of historical revisionism within Christianity, Goldberg puts pressure on the matrix of iconography, worth, meaning, agency, and memory as we might normally expect it to function.

Goldberg’s intention is not to create tidy adjacencies with which to metaphorically work things out; rather, she creates tension within certain compositions in order to ask these questions in the first place. The desert is ultimately about mythology and agency, sparking the narrative potential of transitional states. Through their conceptions of the desert, Povinelli and Goldberg are asking the same question: What counts as life and to whom? In *Sun Moon Stars*, Goldberg challenged the criteria that we so often use to determine modes of relating with humans, objects, and environments, extending this inquiry into a subversion of the Christian tradition that bestows value on exalted death over embodied life. Accentuating the theme of transformation, this body of work privileges the miraculous and the elusive as they converge upon questions about human life. Even the barren desert makes room to suspend disbelief for magic.

Angel Callander

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1 — Mercer Union, “Video Walkthrough | Rochelle Goldberg: Sun Moon Stars,” YouTube video, 5:24, 1 Nov. 2023, accessible online.

2 — Mercer Union, “Video Walkthrough.”