

**Rochelle
Goldberg**
Sun Moon Stars

Jackson Leung

112 - Dreams

Young Critic

Finalist

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Rochelle Goldberg

Sun Moon Stars, exhibition view, Mercer Union, Toronto, 2023.

Photo: Vuk Dragojevic, courtesy of the artist

The blindingly bright lights of seven hollowed-out vanity frames hang suspended by thin metal wires, compelling the viewer to walk farther toward the centre of the space, where two bronze sculptures sit facing one another, fragmented and eerily similar in appearance. Berlin-based Canadian artist Rochelle Goldberg's *Sun Moon Stars*, on view at Mercer Union, is a compelling exhibition; addressing Mary of Egypt in her post-decay state through the larger themes of transformation and rebirth, Goldberg reframes societal understanding of the mythological canon in the ruinous forms present.

Surrounded by various ancillary objects, the sculptures bear a matte, textured quality upon closer examination—rendering visages whose surfaces seem to be constructed more from clay than from metal alloys. Each resting atop four metal cans, the effigies oppose one another in a semblance of conversation. The seven vanity frames, which face inward to illuminate the bronzes,

are also anchored by metal cans. A myriad of sculptural motifs related to nourishment and decay surround the statues. This flotsam strewn around the gallery, coloured silver, serves to create a liminal space between sentience and inanimacy. Three bowls containing metal-cast celeriac bulbs rest in one corner, star wands float in the air, and wires above one of the two sculptures compose a tent-like shell bounded by grounded and airborne baguettes and cans.

Here, Goldberg returns to several themes from her previous works, extrapolating them to further question established boundaries and challenge conventional beliefs of animacy. In *Intralocator: can you trigger the switch?* (2018), she reflected on cycles of organic growth and death and stories about consumption and expiration, and she has repurposed the dehydrated and dormant celery roots from that work to represent varying stages of vitality and decay in *Sun Moon Stars*. Her integration and placement of artificial and organic elements together in *The Plastic Thirsty* (2016) are further developed to tell a psychological tale detailing the post-industrial age, emphasizing the concepts of transformation and shapeshifting. With the silver baguettes, tin cans, and celeriac bulbs, she further explores previous ideas of sustenance, decomposition, and energy; the incomplete bodies of the effigies extend the motifs of transmutation and decrepitude. However, it was in *Soiled [Resurrected]* (2017–20), from her New York exhibition *Psychomachia* at Miguel Abreu Gallery, that she introduced the most crucial theme later recycled: Mary of Egypt's enigmatic story serves as the focal point for *Sun Moon Stars*, imbuing the bronze figurative sculptures with allegorical narratives. The multitudinous stories tied to Mary make her an ideal agent for reflecting the duality of the materials; these concepts were woven together to form the multi-faceted installation, showcasing notions of permanence and change, states of decay and transformation, and mystical sentiment.



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Photos: Vuk Dragojevic, courtesy of the artist

Mary of Egypt remains a pivotal metaphoric symbol—in *Sun Moon Stars* and in Goldberg’s previous works—as a proxy, conveying whatever message suits the storyteller. At one moment she may be lauded for her “holiness”; at another, she’s condemned for being a “whore.” Inherently paradoxical, Mary of Egypt’s enlightenment and subsequent seclusion in the wilderness to achieve penance for her lustful past constitutes a tale both complex and nuanced. The content portrayed may be societal commentary: the continuous evolution of her story across generations has only cemented her iconicity; with the metamorphosis she has undergone to fit into pop culture, she has become a figure lost to time. The ambiguity and striking similarities between the two effigies allow for more subjective interpretation. The heads of the statues originated from ceramic

models of pin-ups, and the rest of the figures were moulded with wax from Goldberg's body, then cast in bronze. Mary's divergent persona perpetually reinvented across time—awash in the brilliance of the vanities—is captured in the statues; the plural identities under her encompassing character invite dialogue and create preternatural allure.

Silver is omnipresent throughout the installation: the baguettes, star wands, and cans all bear the colour. The unifying hue seems to evoke the concept of permanence; each object has multiple indistinguishable facsimiles mixed with its "real" counterparts—some of the detritus are spray-painted versions whilst others are aluminum-cast. The intention, however, is to see past their discrepancies: this projection of what is real and what is not confuses viewers through the mirrored mimicry—how would they know which star wand is spray-painted silver, and which is papier mâché? These objects are intended to blur the line between the living and nonliving, representing remains alongside a shattered Mary.



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There is also an interplay between the Mary of Egypt statues and the silver miscellany: their significance derives from their plethoric relations to sustenance. The cans that the bronzes sit upon could be interpreted as upholding Mary through the act of alimentation; the groups of three baguettes could be emblematic of the final foods she brought to her purifying hermitage in the desert; and the silver foodstuffs produce a contrast between organic and static, highlighting an idea of inedible transformation. The cast celeriac bulbs further develop this concept: Goldberg contemplates disintegration and decay by implanting coins into them—the idea deriving from a pre-medieval tradition in which people were buried with coins in their mouths—as a way to dually render them into indigestible forms of sustenance. *Sun Moon Stars* ultimately embodies complex symbolic motifs that suffuse layers of meaning into the work, culminating in rich political and historical dialogue, and an effulgent exhibition.

Currently pursuing an interdisciplinary HBA in architectural studies at the University of Toronto, Jackson Leung is researching the importance of culturally sensitive third spaces in serving the local Chinatown community, as well as the destigmatization of food banks.