

“Sun Moon Stars” — Rochelle Goldberg

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by Jacquelyn Zong-Li Ross



Rochelle Goldberg, *Obstructed View* (detail), 2023, installation view from “Sun Moon Stars,” 2024, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

There’s an electric charge in the room. A metallic energy, intensity. Silver-coated wands, vanity mirrors, and blunt-tipped baguettes—objects that might, in some other time and place, appear whimsical or fairytale-like—are balanced and strung along metal wires that run in rows over my head like power lines. On the floor, *Partial View* and *Obstructed View* (both 2023) take the form of twinned busts of a broken and suggestively pregnant Marilyn Monroe. The busts are cast crudely in fragmented slabs of bronze and rest atop aluminum-cast tin cans, the icon’s skin and eyes violently imprinted with the diamond-barbed exteriors of crystal punch bowls.

I wonder if it's these figures or the total absence of shadows that most unnerves me. The whole room is bathed in an even, fluorescent light, lending the space and its mirrored and silver-encrusted objects a wondrous but disturbing stillness. One has the impression one has stumbled upon a hidden theatrical set—some parallel, hypothetical environment in which both actor and prop have the overwhelming capacity to change the course of the play. “Sun Moon Stars” draws its narrative symbolism from the artist’s ongoing fascination with Mary of Egypt, a lesser-known Mary and patron saint of penitents, whose remorse for a lifetime of sexual deviation results in her fabled disappearance into the desert with only three loaves of bread. The installation’s sculptural motifs, figures, and forms imaginatively extend from this parable, recasting Mary of Egypt as a kind of model transgressor and heroic minor character whose speculative subtext, for Goldberg, proves as artistically generative as it is productively withholding. For despite the illusion of a lesson to be had here, just beyond it, there’s only a feeling.

Of energy and exile. Of bodies and decay. Of sex and predation. Of desert and corpse. These things, while not all monstrous, become so in their stillness, grouping, and sterile arrangements. There is a deep material language at work in the exhibition’s charged compositions of weighted and weightless leaden objects and casts: the deliberate sharpening of a certain aesthetic vocabulary and effect. Goldberg’s language is one of implied violence, of morbidity, of grief. It is a language of aftershocks, of alienation and estrangement. It is a language of apocalypse—microscopic or totalizing, singular or synchronous, here or approaching—and of the creeping recognition and even banality that has accumulated around these new shared conditions. To experience this sculptural language and its intricate networks of power and powerlessness at work is therefore to quite literally spend time inside its dark logic. I do so in a kind of spell, uncomfortable with my own complicity.

It is said that Mary of Egypt subsisted ferally in the desert for a year and subsequently perished, her corpse later found perfectly preserved in the sand. I still don’t know what to make of this ending—her miraculous embalmment; her suspended, but no less real, death. In the gallery, I witness Mary’s refragmentation, mutilation, and (attempt at) reconstitution, and struggle with the secondary violence of these symbolic deployments. If the function of this art is to shock and disorient us into another kind of awakesness and corporality, what are we to do with the toxic by-products of this transformation?

In a 2016 conversation with Elena Tavecchia published in *Mousse*, Goldberg describes her interest in nature as “a confusing of what is alive or not.” “I am a living corpse,” Goldberg says, highlighting the sterile essence of this contradiction. I think of her 2016 exhibition *The Plastic Thirsty* and its oversized steel fish skeletons breaking apart into exaggerated modernist armatures, or of the uncanny, oil slick–like pelican sculptures sitting atop a carpet of sprouting chia seeds in *No Where, Now Here* (2016). There has always been something falsely illustrative about Goldberg’s use of metaphor that I instinctively distrust, and yet it is this straightforwardness that also most disarms me. Out of place against the ambiguity so present in her sculptural language, I have only to wonder whether this didactic function has something to do with the totalizing pursuit of ugliness—as tactlessness, as moral project, as value, as aesthetic. Throughout Goldberg’s oeuvre, life and death collide with an attitude of apparent indifference, and yet it is not the artist’s indifference, but the visceral wonderment that the viewer experiences in response to it, that raises the most alarming and morally ambiguous stakes. It is possible, I suppose, that the artist is just telling us an ugly parable about ourselves.

I am drawn to the work of Goldberg not because I like what I see, but because I recognize in it the very real conditions of our abjection and perversion. If art is a mirror, then these objects are not just objects, and these symbols are not just symbols, but rather, manipulated evidence of a society’s innermost values, fears, and sensibilities. In summoning Mary of Egypt’s transgressive corporality within the exhibition space, Goldberg exposes the affective charge of implied, rather than enacted, violence—what is actually a very frightening but real form of magic.

“Sun Moon Stars” ran from 7 June to 8 September 2024 at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.