

Rejecting Traditional Representations of Gender:
Mary Beth Edelson's *Goddess Head/Soft* in Reference to Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*

At first glance, Mary Beth Edelson's *Goddess Head/Soft* included in *Femfolio*, a portfolio of prints by artists whose work was essential to the feminist movement in the 1970s is, at first glance, nothing more than an edited photograph of a female body. However, when attention is given to the image for an extended amount of time, those who are familiar with Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* are likely to form connections between the two works. Similar imagery is present in the placement of a nude female body, as well as references to a shoreline with shells and a rocky landscape. On the other hand, there are obvious differences between the two images, but even the most subtle of gestures in *Goddess Head/Soft* suggest an opposition to the formalities of *The Birth of Venus*. From this perspective, Edelson's choice of formal qualities seem to comment on the traditional views of gender represented in *The Birth of Venus*, purposefully rejecting an opportunity for the act of the gaze to occur. As a result, this rejection of the gaze informs a notion of female empowerment that is also expressed through the position of the figure's body.

In the composition of *Goddess Head/Soft*, a black and white digital print, the central figure is, presumably, a nude female body. However, rather than presenting a fully human body, the figure's head has been replaced by that of a shell or fossil-like object. The arms of the figure are outstretched in such a way that they form a sort of framing to the shell. A shadow, formed by the figure's left hand, extends over the top half of her left breast leaving the nipple exposed. Although exposed, a circular form that resembles a sand dollar surrounds each nipple drawing attention to this location on the breasts. The figure is situated behind a boulder which shrouds the lower half of the body, beginning at the navel. Behind the figure, a partially shadowed and rocky

landscape is visible. Stark contrasts, exaggerated through the use of a black and white medium, are present between the light and dark areas of the image which prominently outline the torso and shell “head” of the central figure.

In comparison to *The Birth of Venus*, the composition of *Goddess Head/Soft* seems to exaggerate some of the foundational characteristics of representing the female form. For example, in *The Birth of Venus*, the central female figure aimlessly makes a gesture of covering her breasts and vaginal area. On the contrary, the central female figure in *Goddess Head/Soft* appears to purposefully expose her breasts, even creating a shadow and additional focal points that draw attention to them. A major formal element in *The Birth of Venus* is a sense of movement, caused by a metaphorical interpretation of wind, neither of which is present in *Goddess Head/Soft*. In contrast, the female figure of *Goddess Head/Soft* is situated behind a stationary boulder, leaving no potential for the figure’s lower body to become exposed as there is in *The Birth of Venus*. Likewise, the fact that the figure’s head in *Goddess Head/Soft* has been replaced by a shell creates a sense of mystery and confusion towards the figure’s identity that is not present in *The Birth of Venus*.

In traditional Western representations of the female nude, such as *The Birth of Venus*, the female figure is depicted as being in a vulnerable state. This vulnerability is often expressed through a timid positioning of the body that includes depicting the figure’s eyes in such a way that they appear to casually acknowledge, yet dismiss, the gaze of the viewer. Whether shown as being in direct contact with the viewer or appearing to look off in another direction, it is generally assumed that the figure is still aware that they are being observed. In *Goddess Head/Soft*, these notions of a traditional female form are clearly hinted at, but Edelson’s presentation of them provides agency to the female body, allowing the figure the ability to reject

the gaze of the viewer completely. Along with a rejection of the gaze, Edelson has purposefully chosen which areas of her body are to remain visible, proudly exposing her breasts while, at the same time, denying the viewer any access to the lower half of her body. Because no facial features are visible, there is no opportunity for the viewer to make eye-contact with, or witness any sense of expression from the female figure. From this obstructed view and the positioning of the body, it appears as though the figure is purposefully acknowledging that they are in a vulnerable state, but choosing to view this situation as an opportunity for empowerment.

As a feminist artist, Edelson's development of *Goddess Head/Soft* suggests representations which acknowledge an empowerment of the female body. Concerning the traditional status of the female nude in Western art forms, it is appears as though Edelson's intentions of *Goddess Head/Soft* are to reconstruct these notions by obstructing the reception of the image by a potential male viewer. With her hands outstretched and posed as they are, the female figure exudes a presence of strength that counteracts the more typical "feminine" gestures, such as those represented by Botticelli's Venus figure. Similarly, where the Venus figure is surrounded by others, including men, all of whom are assisting her in some way, the figure in Edelson's piece is depicted alone. This solitary representation then further enhances the implication of a powerful female figure that has complete control over her own body, her own inner "goddess," and how it is interpreted by viewers.