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Earth Our Body: 
Expanding Ecofeminism with the Divine

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Abstract

If the Earth is Divine, then is harming Her not sacrosanct? If She is a god, or rather goddess, then is pollution, deforestation, climate change, and environmental degradation not blasphemy? Divinity and sacredness can be used to define societal values and ethics. In this body of work, I bring my experiences and beliefs as a practicing Pagan to the concepts of ecofeminism, a social and academic movement started in the 1970’s that sees a connection between environmental degradation and the oppression of women. I call my work Divine Ecofeminist Art. It attempts to utilize goddess imagery and nature worship as tools to raise awareness for environmental issues and create an attitude of respect for the feminine. Through living sculpture, video, and performance I create art featuring my own body and religious expression with the goal of bringing awareness to environmental and gender equality issues.
By regarding the divinity of women, hierarchical & dualistic power structures are not only critiqued but also confronted by an alternative. An alternative that supports & honors traditionally feminine gendered needs & methods, such as collaboration, empathy, & nurturing, which can be used in environmental activism. Activism which is given more weight & respect because 'woman' & 'Earth' are gendered the same.

Figure 1. Divine Ecofeminism Diagram
On March 13th 2021, I stood, arms extended to the sky, around a ritual fire and listened to this chant reverberate into the cool night air. Charged by the new moon, our ritual expressed mutual bonding, respect, reverence and autonomy for this group of five women. This type of ritual is not unique; especially considering the growth Goddess worship and Paganism have had in the past few decades. It is, however, deeply personal, spiritual and empowering and has an important place in the discussion of both feminism and environmentalism. In our patriarchal, progress-oriented and profit-obsessed world, the systemic oppression of “the weaker sex” and the degradation of our environment are inextricably linked. Both are portrayed as wild entities whose ignorant, primal natures must be guided by the reasoning and logic of men; however, this narrative supports the manipulation, exploitation, and abuse of both women and the environment. This perception is formed by deeply ingrained and pervasive symbolism but confronting this symbolism and offering new narratives could encourage a paradigm shift towards gender equality and environmental restoration. If womanhood is depicted as divine in the same way that
Abrahamic religions express manhood in the representations of God, Jesus and Muhammad, the framework for equality between genders is established and validated. Additionally, feminine gendered moods and methods, such as collaboration, empathy, and nurturing, can be used in environmental activism – activism which is given more weight and respect because of the gendering of the Earth. In essence, when gender equality is supported Mother Nature will benefit too. I seek to add to the catalogue of women-empowering symbolism, while simultaneously sparking a discussion of the interrelated oppression both women and the Earth face. Through the power of ritual, Goddess iconography, and activism, my artwork embodies Divine Ecofeminist Art. In this paper, I will contextualize Divine Ecofeminist Art and explain how it can be a tool to shift cultural understandings of gender and power for the betterment of the planet’s health.

I. POWERS AT PLAY

Divine Ecofeminism\(^1\) reacts against patriarchal norms that are supported by male dominated religions. As the global religious majority,\(^2\) Abrahamic religions set the standards and norms of mainstream society and the overarching symbolism of these heavily structured, monotheistic religions is a hierarchical power structure in which a male gendered god rules in omniscience over all “his” children.\(^3\) The continuous exposure and normalization of iconography and symbols of a dominant male force, “keeps women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same legitimating the political and social authority of

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\(^1\) The term “ecofeminism” was coined in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in her book “Feminism or Death” and is a social and academic movement that sees a connection between the degradation of the environment and the oppression of women.

\(^2\) 87% of the world’s land area falls under majority Christian or Islamic following, and approximately 60% of the global population identifies as Christian or Muslim; Flesher, “UW Religion Today”.

\(^3\) Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 13.
fathers and sons in the institutions of society.”

Symbol systems as integrated as these cannot simply be rejected, they must be contended or replaced. The goddess worship of Paganism provides this alternative iconography. Goddess symbolism offers legitimacy to gender equality, supports women’s autonomy, and recognizes the profound significance of the Earth.

This connection of the Earth to the feminine is integral to the focus of Divine Ecofeminism. It reshapes these ancient associations which have commonly been used as tools of oppression into symbols of power. The world is understood as a living being and it is personified, both as a “nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe” and as “wild and uncontrollable.” Both aspects of nature “were identified with the female sex” and used to justify the exploitation of women and the Earth. The modern day return to Goddess worship supports both feminist and environmentalist activism, because “common to both is an egalitarian perspective.” Beginning in the 1980’s, ecofeminist artists began recognizing the power that the symbol of the Earth Mother holds, and it became a tool to heal the planet “through direct, hands-on, aesthetic and scientific collaborations with the earth herself.” I am following in the footsteps of these ecofeminist pioneers, seeking to create work that both empowers women and offers reverence to the Earth.

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5 Religious symbol systems fulfill deep psychological needs to find meaning, especially in crisis or transition situations such as death, suffering, birth, or sexuality. Because these symbols are so ingrained in the values of our society and inner conditions, and because “the mind abhors a vacuum,” when there is no replacement the mind will revert to familiar structures during times of stress or the unknown; Christ, 2.


7 Merchant, 2.

8 Merchant, 29.

II. BODY AS SACRED

To find something sacred is to see it as worthy of respect, reverence and worship. In Divine Ecofeminist Art, the female body is deemed sacred through ritual practice and iconography. Declaring women’s bodies as sanctified is an act of feminist reclamation of our bodily autonomy. Because of the historical associations with women’s bodies and the earth, it strengthens the divinity of the earth as well. This relationship is reciprocal; the practice of empowering the body and reclaiming autonomy can become a sacred and ritualistic act. In my eight-hour long performance piece, *In Her Gaze (we are safe)* (fig. 2), I tattooed myself with an image of Medusa and live-streamed it to Youtube. While I tattooed, I listened to an audiobook of Soraya Chemaly’s *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger*, a feminist text that analyses emotional expression within the gendered binary and the struggles and dangers of womanhood in a patriarchy. Pink light illuminated the room and mirrors, representing vanity, gaze, and the myth of Medusa, stood in the corners. Above the tiled over and unusable hearth – commonly associated with traditional, domestic gender roles – a television played the first films to depict Hollywood tropes of women, such as the gold digger, femme fatale, and bombshell.

![Figure 2. film still from In Her Gaze (we are safe)](image)

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10 View at: [https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/in-her-gaze](https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/in-her-gaze)
I initially developed this piece as a declaration of independence and autonomy through a rejection of the male gaze. With the mirrors, the films, the cameras live-streaming, and the image of Medusa I allude to ‘gaze’. However, the films’ sexist representations of women were silent, drowned out by descriptions of the painful realities of womanhood, while I permanently marked myself with a mythical creature who turned men to stone with her own gaze. Medusa has recently been reclaimed as a symbol of empowerment by modern feminists and her narrative has been explored further. This modern analysis of Medusa’s legend argues against the portrayal of her as a hideous monster, cursed for defiling Athena’s temple by having sex with Poseidon and instead regards her as the victim of a sexual assault. Poseidon raped her either because her beauty was “irresistible” or as an act of vengeance against Athena. Either way, Athena, pressured by the other Gods to punish Medusa for her transgression, placed a curse upon her favorite high priestess. However, Medusa’s gaze was a blessing in disguise as it gave her the ability to live in peace, protected from her abuser. This reading is not simply a modern adaptation but is founded in historical evidence. Medusa’s snake covered head was a Gorgoneion: a protective symbol placed on an amulet to ward off evil magics. Gorgoneions were often associated with Mother Goddess cults and used specifically to protect women.

As I permanently marked myself with Medusa’s image, the strength of this symbol and the potency of Chemaly’s narration affected me with an unexpected intensity. What I originally viewed as a political piece became something deeper, something emotional, and spiritual. I experienced a cathartic pain; my physical aches were overshadowed by true heartbreak for the horrors that women face. I honored my emotions, allowing grief, dread, and rage to crash

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11It is key to note the language of this retelling exemplifies the concept of an abuser being driven by uncontrollable, primal needs which were stimulated by the victim’s appearance or mannerisms. It is an unfortunately common expression of victim blaming emerging from misogyny.
through me in waves. The specificity and intention of my hyper-feminized domestic environment was an unintentional ritual space, and my deeply emotional experience of tattooing was spiritual in nature. This live art piece and performative rejection of the male gaze became a ritual where I marked my body as sacred and protected. It is with this same understanding of the sacred female body that Divine Ecofeminist Art declares the Earth to be sacrosanct.

III. WOMAN AS EARTH IN RITUAL

Ritual is the performance of sacredness; it is time, space, and action removed from the mundane and secular, and honored. In my piece Goddess Ritual – 3.13.21 (fig. 4), I use ritual as both symbol and practice of female power in a similar fashion to many iconic feminist artists from the 1970’s. For Goddess Ritual I wrote a women’s empowerment ritual and performed it with a group of women on the new moon. I filmed this event and collected natural materials from our ritual site, including grass, leaves, and charcoal from our fire, which I used to craft handmade
paper (fig. 5). I then presented these ritual artifacts as an immersive, living drawing by projecting the video onto the paper. Each piece of paper held a different part of the ritual – casting the ritual circle, our communal act of sharing feelings of gratitude and empowerment, raising energy, and finally directing the energy. An audio recording of the chants sung during the ritual played in the room. After a few minutes of looping, the ritual videos faded to white and the text spoken during the rite was revealed on the paper: a poem about communal sisterhood and connection to the Earth Mother, the lyrics of the chant, and the empowerment spell.

Mary Beth Edelson has used Goddess imagery and ritual practice in her work for decades, tapping into its history and connection to the Earth to express the strength of women. Her piece *Woman Rising / Sky* (fig 6.) documents a solo ritual she performed and, through drawings on top of the photographs, reveals the energy of the ritual. My *Goddess Ritual* piece expands this concept, acting as both a living artifact of the ritual, and in real time as the piece is presented, calling forth the power of community within womanhood and personal empowerment. The digital format shows that this practice is contemporary, while the handmade natural paper

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12 View at: [https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/goddess-ritual](https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/goddess-ritual)
grounds it in the source of the power; the enduring strength of the earth. By overlaying the ritual onto this symbol of the Earth, I connect the empowerment of women to the divinity of the Earth Goddess. The ritual text also highlights this connection: “in this moment I remember who my soul is. She is part and parcel of The Great Earth Mother, She is the Divinity within and without...She is Me and I am Her, and We are Strong.”

The connection between femininity and the Earth is expressed even more directly in Blood Piece: As Above (violence), So Below (nourish) (fig. 8). This performance, similar to Isa Sanz’s work Circulo de Poder (fig. 7) from her photography series I Bleed, But Do Not Die, uses imagery of menstrual blood and plant life to confront the taboo of menstruation by utilizing its symbolism of life which connects it to the Goddess herself. In Blood Piece I kneel in the center of a circle of living plants and soil, using the form of the circle to invoke a ritual space. From beneath me, blood pools out into the earthen surface, carving small tributaries and nourishing the plants. However, another source of blood adds a layer of complexity to the piece. From above, blood drips out of a gnarled, rusted ball of metal and hits my body in a slow, but persistent

13 A recent trend has revealed this connection between blood and life even further as many women water their house plants with their menstrual blood because it has nutrients that benefit the plants.
rhythm reminiscent of the Chinese water torture method. While the blood from my body encourages life and growth, the blood from the external, industrial source acts as a slow violence against me and the Earth. This comparison highlights the two connotations of blood. One stands as a symbol of violence, which is readily accepted in media, while the other represents a person’s ability to create life but is generally too taboo to be shown on screen. This piece attempts to confront the view that women’s bodies are inherently disgusting and asks the viewer to consider the looming presence of slow violence that constantly threatens women and the environment.

IV. DIVINE ECOFEMINIST ART AS ACTIVISM

Divine Ecofeminism seeks to work beyond the art sphere and engage in direct activism for the repair of the Earth while using goddess imagery to support an attitude of respect towards the feminine. In my performance piece And to Her We Shall Mourn (fig. 10) I don characters of the natural environment in an act of mourning just as Cherie Sampson did in her work Purificacion (fig. 9). Her series of performances expresses intense human emotions which

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14 View at: [https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/blood-piece](https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/blood-piece)

15 Ads for menstrual products consistently use blue liquid to show their absorbency because using the more accurate red liquid is seen as disgusting and not appropriate for t.v.
personify the Earth Goddess and the environmental issues devastating her health\textsuperscript{16}, and I utilize the same tactic in my piece. I embody the four sacred elements of earth, air, fire, and water and perform their devastation and collapse to the environmental catastrophes they face. A projected video piece shows a montage of running water and rain with audio of the same to accompany it. I then enter the piece, my body acting as a canvas as the projection plays across it. My face is fully covered in a paper mache mask that represents water through its form and color. By covering my face but revealing my body I am personifying the elements and gendering them as feminine, once again connecting the earth to femininity. I slowly bow, then extend my arms to the sky\textsuperscript{17}. Suddenly, the video changes from beautiful representations of water in its natural setting, to images of plastic pollution in the ocean, oil spills, and dying aquatic life. In shock and horror, I slowly sink to the ground until I am motionless. The light fades to darkness. This same sequence of motions occurs with air, earth and fire, each falling to environmental pollution and disaster, and each leaving their mask on the ground as a reminder of their demise.

\textsuperscript{16} It is also important to note that Sampson developed these characters through a workshop with other women as it shows both the community engagement of activist work, and the collaboration of women so present in rituals.

\textsuperscript{17} This motion of worship and reverence is not only recognizable as such, but it is my own personal expression that I use in rituals.
As the videos play, my body blends in and out of the landscapes, at times fully disappearing and at others merging to become an ethereal giant in the mountains. This blurring of body and nature alludes to immanence or self-actualization. Immanence is the theory that divinity is manifested in the material world, rather than on a separate plane of existence such as Heaven. Self-realization\textsuperscript{19} is the concept of broadening and deepening one’s sense of self beyond the ego to find a connection to all other living beings which will inevitably instill empathy and a natural inclination to protect the Earth. Whichever term is applied, the deep spiritual connection to nature that is found through identifying oneself as a part of it, aids in environmental activism because it creates a foundation of care and passion for the planet’s health. This project utilizes existing associations of women and nature to develop new symbolism of an earth that feels pain and is in peril. The comparison between the violence against the earth and violence against women should not go unnoticed.

My piece Offering Shrine (fig. 12) utilizes the same biodegradable, seed planting, goddess sculpture tactic as Jenny Kendler’s Sculpture $\rightarrow$ Garden (fig. 11), but engages more directly with the viewer and encourages them to participate in environmental activism. While

\textsuperscript{18} View at: https://isoldejune.wixsite.com/fineart/to-her-we-shall-mourn

\textsuperscript{19} This definition comes from the theory of Deep Ecology.
Kendler’s piece lasts through the years, being replaced on major Pagan holidays.\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Offering Shrine} stood only briefly in a one day exhibition in Forest Park. In a grove directly off a path, sits a hulking, yet gentle Earth Mother. Covered in moss and small plant sprouts, this living sculpture forms the figure of a sitting woman, a common depiction of Gaia.\textsuperscript{21} Viewers who approach her find a container placed at her feet in which they may leave an offering of a piece of litter they pick up from the grounds of Forest Park. This expression of caring for the land will be returned in kind with a small goddess idol, based on the Venus of Willendorf, crafted from soil and compost and filled with wildflower seeds that support pollinator populations. When the totem is planted, The Goddess returns to and nourishes the land. Again, the image of a woman is shown as a creator of life and one with the earth. This piece engages its audience in direct environmental activism and emphasizes the reciprocal relationship we need to strive for through the use of goddess imagery.

\textsuperscript{20} This piece is worn away by the weather which disperses the seeds. On the spring and autumn equinoxes and winter and summer solstices which are recognized Pagan holidays, Kendler replaces the statue with another one implanted with the new season’s seeds.

\textsuperscript{21} Gaia is another name for the Earth Mother Goddess.
V. CONCLUSION

Divine Ecofeminism relies on the gendering of the Earth as feminine to establish attitudes of respect and reverence towards women in tandem with environmental activism. Divinity and sacredness can be powerful tools in redefining social values and ethics. The work I make attempts to question the dominant patriarchal standards which have been supported by divine symbolism of their own through Abrahamic religions. However, my work only represents a small portion of this larger discussion of gender and power and should face critique itself for leaning into the harsh male / female binary as it is exclusionary to nonbinary gender expressions and other cultural methods and modes. As I continue to make work in this Divine Feminist framework, I will continue to express my own identity and empower those around me but I aim move into more distinctly ecological and direct activist work that engages broader communities. My goal for my art is that, through the expression of my own passion and care for our Earth, it acts as a catalyst for someone else to reconsider their impact on the plant and their ingrained biases and care just a little bit more about leaving our world a better place than it is now.
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