

Reawakening: The Art of an Ecofeminist

ESSAY ON THE ART OF SHEA GORDON

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ECOFEMINISM |*ekō'feme, nizəm; ēkō-*|

noun: a philosophical and political movement that applies
feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues

Derivatives: ecofeminist noun

Shea Gordon is a force of nature: a whirlwind of energy, intellect, talent and mission. Her ambitions connect art and science as a means of reawakening the spirit of the natural world and preserving our existence. For Gordon, this is not only a theoretical pursuit, but one that guides her every creation. She is driven by purpose, fully anticipating a fruitful outcome.

Spend an hour with Gordon in her Kansas City studio on any given day and you may leave with your head spinning—from talk of numerical systems, archetypes, synchronicity, scientific theorems, coordinates of coincidence and a myriad of other ideas. The longer one spends with the artist and her work, however, understanding germinates and blossoms. It is beautiful; it is wonderful; and one quickly wants to join Gordon on her improbable yet fantastic adventure.

Born in 1946, Shea Gordon was the third of four girls. Her father was the mayor of Dade County in Miami, Florida. Of her mother, Gordon says, “She was the first ecofeminist I knew. She was the president of the Miami Beach Garden

Club. She taught me yoga when I was four and was one of the most enlightened people I ever met.” Of the four daughters, Gordon was the vivacious one. A natural born entertainer, she could dance, sing, and crack jokes. She developed a lifelong appreciation for the humanities: great poetry, literature, visual art, dance and music. A child of the atomic age, Gordon was also of the first generation aware of man’s ability to destroy the planet.

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After first enrolling in art at the University of Miami in 1964, Gordon moved on to Finch College in New York City in 1965. Circulating through the art scene of the time, Gordon experienced works of abstract expressionism, pop art and minimalism. In 1967, she became the assistant for the kinetic sculptor Takis Vassilakis in his studio at the Chelsea Hotel. In her 2014 exhibition brochure, “Under the Influence,” Gordon writes, “Takis used magnets and electricity, which made invisible forces of nature visible. His work inspired me to use my own magnetic and electrical powers to create art. After my stint working for him, I had an awakening of spiritual strength.” During this time, Gordon began creating her own stream-of-consciousness “nature line” paintings. The largest of these, “The Rusty Royal Whale,” foreshadowed her interest in the health of the planet, as she later became aware of the plight of endangered mammals.

In 1976, Gordon and her husband, Barry Festoff, moved from Washington, D.C., where she had worked with

conceptual gallerist Max Protetch, to Kansas City, Missouri. By that time, Gordon had become involved in interpreting numerical systems, creating works such as “The Numerical Interpretation of the Declaration of Independence,” along with creating original artist books and exhibiting her paintings, most notably the *Walking the Line* series. Notions of coincidence and synchronicity, as well as Jungian philosophy, specifically “elective affinities,” also began to play a role in her artistic development.

In 1982, while looking through a Bible atlas, the book fell open to a double-page spread of the Dead Sea. Gordon observed that the ancient landlocked body of salt water was shaped like an embryo. Significantly, her daughter had been born in 1982, and Gordon’s mother died within the year. The life cycle was foremost and prominent in Gordon’s psyche. She was transfixed. Her discovery of the map and awareness of the Dead Sea brought Gordon great solace while grieving the loss of her mother, and provided Gordon hope for the future of her daughter. “I was very grateful for finding the Dead Sea when I did,” Gordon says. “It is a symbol of love and hope for the entire species.” She had found her feminist archetype—a shape, a place, and a spiritual center that sustains her artistic output to the present.

The Dead Sea, itself, is located between the West Bank and Israel on the left and Jordan on the right, amidst the birthplace of Judaeo, Christian and Islamic traditions. Fluctuating at roughly 1,300 feet below sea level, it is the lowest place on the surface of the planet. Gordon’s fascination with the theme of water as an ecological force culminates in works such “Chronology,” 1985. The small pastel drawing is divided into six sections subtitled: Floating Mummies, Spirals Spiralatics, Pierced Embryos, Pasmore Pool, Lily Pierced Pool, and lastly, Dead Sea. Some of her masterworks from this period include “The Dead Sea: A

Theory of Everything," 1987, and "The Gates of Paradise 1 & 2," 1988–89.

In 1985, Gordon realized that the Dead Sea was in a state of crisis. At times receiving less than four inches of rainfall a year and threatened by environmental abuse in the region since the 1960s, the Dead Sea was shrinking. Gordon perceived this as a metaphor for ill effects of human impact on the planet. Her beautiful embryo was dying, along with the minute animal life and sparse flora sustained by the holy waters. In works such as "Gold Dead Sea with Manatees," 1995–2001, the southern basin of the fetus form has diminished in size, with tears running down from its upper regions. Two smaller drawings of manatees, an endangered species residing along the southern Atlantic coast, accompany the painting and complete this grouping.

A timely series of coincidences reinforced Gordon's belief in the power of art to heal the planet. Gordon says:

The lilies from my painting "Lily Pierced Pool" grew up around the Dead Sea in my drawings. I was focused on the need for it to rain on the Dead Sea to replenish its source. Validation came in 1987 while I was flying from London to Paris. I sat next to a man who had just been staying at a monastery above the Dead Sea. He said, "I do not know if it will make you feel any better, but while I was there the most significant rainfall of the last 30 years occurred and all the pools filled up. That was what I would call a synchronistic performance."

She tested this theory again in 1992 on a trip to Belém, Pará, Brazil. "I went to Belém to work with a native dance troop on a rain forest island without running water or electricity," Gordon recounts. "We were going to build an adobe Dead Sea sculpture, quietly dance and pray for the Dead Sea." The silence of the event was to be in juxtaposition to the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development being held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. When Gordon arrived in Belém, she learned that the dance troop

had gone to Rio, so within two weeks, with help from another group, Partners of the Americas, she had built a Dead Sea sculpture in the rain forest on the island of Outeiro, Pará, Brazil. A procession of school children brought the water of the Amazon River to anoint the sculpture. When she flew back to Miami, then to France, to meet Barry at a scientific conference, a man from Israel at the same conference told her that it was “flooding” at the Dead Sea while Gordon was in Brazil.

On her third trip to the Dead Sea, in 1994, Gordon and her daughter, Marasan, walked hand in hand into the sacred waters, a gesture Gordon describes as a means of reconnecting with the spirit of their mother and grandmother, respectively.

The Dead Sea is an ongoing theme in Gordon’s work. Her series *Alphabetical Order*, begun in 2007, presents three ancient texts inscribed on the Dead Sea Scrolls in mandala form: Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek, with the addition of Arabic. *The Timeline Series: A Stitch in Time*, begun in 2010, charts the rise and fall of the Dead Sea waters from 7,000 B.C. to 2,000 A.D. “The waters have dried before, only to return,” Gordon says, “so there is hope for the future.” Inspired by Captain William Lynch’s 1848 expedition of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea, Gordon has also constructed multiple Dead Sea boat models in materials ranging from metals to parchment and vellum. Presently Gordon is working on plans for a new model, “Dead Sea Launch: Clear Sailing into the 21st Century.”

Concurrently, the Dead Sea series has evolved into *The Gold Standard*, a series of paintings and other works from 2003 to the present. “The life process is miraculous,” Gordon says, “and at the top of the evolutionary chain are humans, the ‘gold standard’ of animate life. The gold standard of man is science. We need solutions to the tremendous environmental problems throughout the world.” In such works as “Dead Sea Microorganisms,” 2003 and

"DNA/RNA," 2014, Gordon explores the evolution of the natural world, biology and the delicate balance, or "Golden Mean" of Aristotle, which makes life possible. Gordon's 2012 print "SOS Earth, Sepia" sends out an almost elegiac cry for help. Metaphorically speaking, can we transform sand into gold, or will it simply run through our fingers, as in the alchemy of the ancients?

Shea Gordon's career spans nearly 50 years. She has exhibited nationally in New York City, Washington, D.C., Miami, Fla., Kansas City, Mo., among other locales, and internationally in England, Paris, South America, Israel, Australia and New Zealand. Her art is in the permanent collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, The Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art, The Nerman Museum at Johnson County Community College, The Performing Arts Center at the University of Missouri and many corporate and private collections.

With its various mediums, including drawing, painting, print making, sculpture, digital imaging and music, all of Shea Gordon's art is, in essence, a performance: a series of actions designed to create change in the universe. Gordon aims to reawaken both the natural world and our reverence toward the continuation of life on this planet, our home.