

Sun Moon Stars

Rochelle Goldberg

Extended text
Kristian Vistrup Madsen
“Enter Mary”

Perhaps the collective feeling of this swarm is structured by a habitual logic of desire, a desire that plays out through a will to possess. The act of possession.

Your ~~demon~~ is ravaged because of a human instinct? A drive towards survival? The survival? A search for love? Happiness?

Even this ravaging or would be destruction leads to an act of possession. As is we know that she will live forever through a material dispersion as endless image. That is adoration? Do we deny her an agency in this self-preservation? And then instruct the terms through which she might live forever?

The "Mary who is not" (your words) escapes because she never arrives. Reluctance, hesitancy, a newly timed entry/exit via a pixelated resurrection? Where ever if we will not possess her, or she will not possess us, desire will re-constitute its pursuit of form, endlessly.

the act of possession is a search for love
the act of possession is a search for happiness

There are feelings we share between us as humans. Powerful and ancient, they include love – as a manifestation of both the will to live and the drive towards death – and possessiveness, a survival instinct; each stems from mortally ambivalent relations to abjection, transgression and destruction. These are feelings that drift through the ages like swarms of insects buzzing furiously, looking for places to land. We see how, across known history, such swarms descend time and again upon the same gallery of archetypes – mothers, fools, warriors, and tricksters – to deify or ravage, turn into saints or demons, elect as scapegoats or sacrificial lambs. Religion is one way to organize these swarms of affect; art, regardless, submits as material.

At the centre of Christian iconography, of course, is Jesus – singular, as man also is. Desire for Christ happens in one fell swoop, the blink of an eye, a stir too quick for consciousness. His image relies on the maintenance of this singularity, which, in its turn, relies on the multiplication of another's body. Watch the swarm lift from the holy cadaver of Jesus as it moves on in search of more subjects, demanding further sacrifice.

Enter Mary, multiplied into several homologous figures: wife, whore, outcast, mother of Jesus, mother even to herself. Here, there is the mystery of childbirth, lust and its punishment, devotion, self-sacrifice – the whole pantheon of emotion. Through Mary, the allure of female sexuality plays out at a glacial pace and across wide expanses, projected onto vast landscapes: woman as forest, sea, desert.

We could say that she is many so that he can be one. Or that, where Jesus remains in the world through resurrection, the women around him do so rather by replication. Looking at Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (c. 1501–19), Camille Paglia remarks that the figures – almost identical – are like: “photographic superimpositions, two images seen simultaneously, eerie and hallucinatory. [...] These divine twin sisters are one archaic personality that has parthenogenetically cloned itself. Life is an endless series of self-replicating females.”¹ Paglia names the image's doubling as an instance of “allegorical repletion,” an oxymoron, since allegory – a palimpsest, one text read through another – is always already in excess. Simply, the image of woman cannot be depleted. Woman is always plural and she resurrects not by miracle but by popular demand, hives droning impatiently in the sky.

Mary of Egypt was the bombshell whose path was rerouted into the desert. Upon encountering

¹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 1991), 156.

Also her strength as many
and many and many
more



- reproduction/replication
on and on and on
forever and ever forever

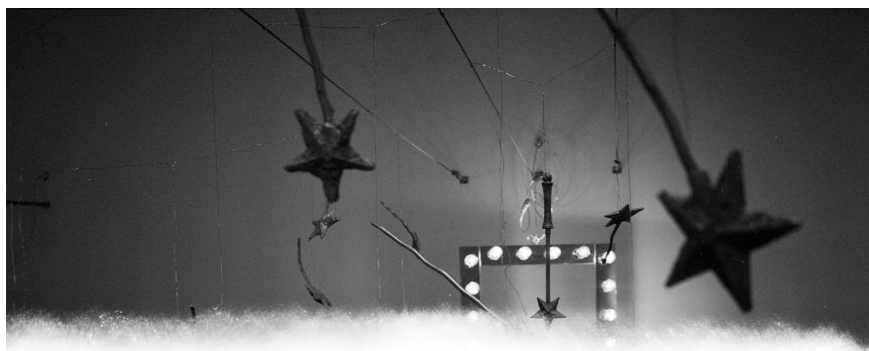
An object fecundity

"her small rebellion"
as an impossible passage
between material states



an icon of her virgin namesake in Jerusalem, this nymphomaniac Mary was struck by remorse and decided to repent. Through living ascetically for forty-seven years, she transcended out of her sex, even out of humanity – when she died, her body did not decay, and with that she achieved a special recalcitrance, perhaps even a kind of singularity. As was common in the hagiography of the time, Donatello's *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1440) is a composite of several Marys, though, unusually, he hewed closest in spirit to Mary of Egypt. His haunting and intricate wood sculpture established a visual language of deprivation and survival that has become archetypical for this Mary: she appears feral, more repulsive than Jesus even at his most torn and bloody. Her entity is compressed against his subjectivity, the essence of her form dispersed. It is a sculpture to which Goldberg returns again and again. Donatello's Mary has become one with the landscape. Like the desert, she is infertile. And still, in her transcendence, how her body floats and remains, we witness her small rebellion.

In the twentieth century, the swarm has made repeated visitations on the blond bombshell, endlessly self-replicating versions of Mary, sexed-up, in Egypt. But the contemporary desert is capitalism: heaven and hell, faith and despair all folded into one. Secular modernity would stake Mary on a bonfire of camera flashes, bestowing upon her the ecstatic, horrific redemption of becoming one with that landscape – she disappeared, turned into pure light; no longer a body, but a million simultaneous images.





Take Jean Harlow, clothes stitched directly onto her body, dead at 26; Marilyn Monroe, in Joyce Carol Oates' mammoth novel *Blonde*, haunted by childlessness, denied reproduction, doomed to replication; Princess Diana, the troubled mother-saint who shared her funeral song with Norma Jean, killed by a swarm of paparazzi; and, most recently, Britney Spears, her teenage image frozen in time, her child-rearing body having only narrowly escaped. And the people applauded; the people adored these women in the same instance as they took their life. Their crime was that of faith, of wanting for meaning, for life – like Mary in the desert, who believed in the story of Jesus' sacrifice, they believed in capitalism's glittering promise of love. And like Mary, they remain with us, their images etched into the backs of our eyelids.

Madonna – starting with her name – attracted the swarm wilfully, and in doing so forged a witch-like iconicity that circumvented her own sacrifice. She dressed up as Marilyn, she kissed Britney. She managed, at certain high-pitched moments, to control that ancient surge of collective feeling. The price, perhaps, is her current ostracization into monstrosity; so thin is the line between saint and demon. For the poor demon who hosts an invasion, there are two outcomes: to submit or to remain a monster. And the demon who wants to live must choose the latter.

But perhaps there is another way. In Goldberg's installation we find two bronze pin-ups: Marilyn



So you arrive at this point
where mutation or the grand
microbial event of her decomposition
evades the otherwise doomed
bimanic state.



Her multiple "I" is more
than any "I" ever
and ever

playing Mary, or Mary playing herself. They are fragmented and hollow, as if returned from the bottom of the sea; like figureheads, survived by apotropaic magic, they float. They are also, it would seem, pregnant, and with that the story has contorted, twisted off its own path. In any story, there is a line that is crossed. In Mary's it was the border out of Egypt, out of Jerusalem, into the desert. But Goldberg's exhibition is made up not of narrative, but its flotsam – the parts of it, like Mary's body, that will not sink. This repudiation of narrative is also an erasure of self, or the creation of a floating, multiple "I." Here, almost everything has gone through a transformation, been melted and recast: aluminum, bronze, bread. The result is an image that cannot be depleted, cannot be redeemed, because it constantly exceeds its own boundaries, changes its shape. This is the Mary who is *not* – might she also be, for that reason, the Mary who survives?

Louise Glück writes:

Machine of the family: dark fur, forests of the mother's body.
*Machine of the mother: white city inside her.*²

Maybe Goldberg has conjured the machine room of iconicity; a place in which the constituent parts of the self and its image are atomized and refigured, made to catch the light. Bodies making parts of bodies, dissolving into allegorical infinity. It is a

² Louise Glück, "Mother and Child" in *The Seven Ages* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 8.

thesis on the materiality of being nothing, or an open structure for non-selfhood. Suspended from the wires are several vanity lights framing this absence of self, and yet providing a scaffold for it. The allure of female sexuality demands wide expanses. “It takes a village,” they say, but what of a forest, a white city? Imagine the force, the furious buzz, of a swarm descending. Imagine capturing that force and turning it back on the world. The ecstasy. The relief.



Kristian Vistrup Madsen is a writer based in Berlin. His book *Doing Time: Essays on Using People*, about prison correspondence and the ethics of using other people to make art, was published in 2021; *Chains or Whips?*, a portrait of the aughts as the decade of cruelty, was published in The White Review and Harpers in 2023; forthcoming is a book about the reception history of Vermeer. His writing has further been published in magazines such as Artforum, Spike and Mousse, and in catalogues by Kunsthalle Basel, Vienna Secession, Hamburger Bahnhof, and others.

“Enter Mary” is adapted from a text previously published by Mercer Union, Toronto.

Written notes: Rochelle Goldberg

Inside back cover: Artist’s documentation of Donatello, *Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1440, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence.

All other images: Artist’s documentation of *Sun Moon Stars*, Mercer Union, Toronto, 2023.

At the Contemporary Art Gallery, we carry out our work on the ancestral and unceded lands of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. As a predominantly settler-led organization, we acknowledge our responsibility to each of these nations, who have stewarded this land, water and air for thousands of years. We are committed to building sustained, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities and supporting the work of reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignty.

The Contemporary Art Gallery is generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council and the BC Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch. We are also grateful for the support of Vancouver Foundation and our members, donors and volunteers.

CAG