Margaret Kissel Gohn

Snakes Alive!
Discovering and Exploring the Mother Goddess Archetype

Female Figure from predynastic Egypt
Naqada IIa Period c. 3500 BCE

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Advisor:
Professor Nancy Nichols-Pethick

Additional Committee Members:
Professor Fran Lattanzio
Professor Alden Cavanaugh
The way in which people see themselves relative to nature is central to my art creation. We can see ourselves as a part of the cycle of life – an animal with exceptional adaptational abilities living in an awesome world. Or we can see ourselves as separate from nature, with nature as a nuisance and an obstacle to overcome. While some may create some sort of combination theology, I prefer the first way – I do not see nature as a chaotic mess as some may think. “Complexity is not chaos,” is what Elinor Ostrom likes to say. [1]

One of the findings of chaos theory in the last part of the 20th century was that not only does order exist within chaos but that order comes from chaotic conditions. Something may seem chaotic when it is merely complex or misunderstood. As people reevaluate their understanding of the nature of being, matter and chaos, one can hope there will be an improved understanding of nature and women. It is interesting that the Feminism of the 1970s was taking place along with a better understanding of the importance of chaos. Ancient ideas of Goddesses and Gods provided different examples of being to consider and emulate. They also provided examples of domination and control. With the philosophic concepts of the Western world being dominated by misogyny for 4000-5000 years, it has become important to have a history that can supersede that.

In Botswana, there is a snake image that was carved into the natural rock formation. It is the oldest known religious artifact and dates from 70,000 years ago. The snake was associated with the Mother Goddess for a long time in the distant past, though later some of the snake imagery was co-opted for other purposes (i.e. male archetypes). Snakes represented various positive concepts including wisdom, creation, life, and healing. Some would reduce the snake to a phallic symbol, but if anything, snakes represented both the male and the female – the inner
cavity and the outer form. Often, one sees two snakes entwined, suggesting male and female, and reproduction and life. Snakes’ ability to cast off their skins makes snakes symbolic of rebirth or regeneration. There are other old ideas such as that a snake held up the world.

Areas of the world which did not abandon ancient mythologies are where one finds Goddesses and snake imagery. It is a rare culture that did not incorporate snakes into their iconography. There are indications that the Milky Way possibly along with other star formations suggested snakes to ancient peoples. The idea was that there were waters in the heavens and/or below earth. Snakes are often associated with primordial waters. Water, snakes, and Mother Goddesses have all been associated with Wisdom.

The name Eve in Hebrew, Hawwah, means “mother of all living” and is also associated with the word clan (which suggests a former matriarchal time) as well as with the words for serpent and wisdom. “The identification of Eve with the serpent depends on the serpent’s embodiment of the life force. Eve is the heiress of the Great Mother, herself capable of assuming serpent form.” [2] The Genesis Adam and Eve story suppressed the mother goddess religion and reordered women as subservient to men, which women had not generally been in the millennia preceding that era.

Feminist artists, including Ana Mendieta, helped to bring the goddess / earth connection as a positive concept into present day awareness.

“I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette)... I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body...”

Ana Mendieta

Silueta Works by Mendieta done in Mexico 1973-1978
Image inspired by Yemayá, a Mother Goddess figure from Cuba
Every day I take a walk outside and notice the colors of the plants and of the sky, which birds are singing, and the feel of the air. I become reconnected to waking life and the newness of the day. I often find a subject to photograph or just contemplate – such as dew or frost on flowers or the patterns in the clouds.

The pull of one responsibility or another often takes me away from the uniqueness of the day. Breakfast to eat, books to read, classes to teach, paintings to paint.

I live in a place rich in wildlife and growing things. There is the woods, the creek, the field, the orchard. I plant wildflowers so that I have an abundance of them. I plant them for myself and for wildlife. I have milkweed for monarch larvae and other flowering plants for a variety of insects. I have reclaimed much of the lawn to maintain a wildlife habitat for a variety of creatures and am blessed with their sounds, color and movement.

“When I look closely at the water’s edge, an order of light, color and structure seems to emerge. I weave together in paint this emerging order.”

Ilana Manolson

I enjoy studying nature through the process of painting. I began painting outside over thirty years ago. The first time that I took a canvas out to a nearby park to paint, returning over the course of a couple of weeks, I discovered how fast plants change during the spring. Later, as I took up plein air painting in earnest, I began and finished a painting in a morning or an afternoon. For more complicated subjects I would take an entire day - choosing at what point I would record the shadows and the light.

I developed my style of oil painting outside by adapting the way I had painted with ink and watercolor - in a somewhat Asian style (I have also studied Chinese and Japanese calligraphy). I paint directly and spontaneously – with thick paint. I like the idea of painting simply with expression – to not use more brushstrokes than necessary. While I cover the canvas, I see extra brushstrokes as taking away from the sensibility of liveliness. Plus, thick paint over thick paint can easily get muddy. When I paint on-site, I do almost all of my
painting on the spot - rarely adding to them once they have started to dry. The experience of painting over a span of hours provides the time and stillness to notice various aspects of nature that could easily be missed through more casual encounters. Most of the experiences are positive such as butterflies and dragonflies, the subtle breezes, and sounds of water and birds. Ticks can be a problem.

As much as I like painting directly from nature, I am aware that certain concepts related to my connection to the earth, and issues of ecology and feminism are not expressed through that imagery alone.

The painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1810 - Der Mönch am Meer) by German Romanticist, Caspar David Friedrich, was significant (for European painting) for making the landscape the predominant image – with a small figure. The painting has a sense about it more like traditional Chinese paintings where people are portrayed as having a small place in the grand scheme of things. This painting by Friedrich has been considered radical for its relative flatness – for its time.

Frida Kahlo included nature to add drama to her psychological scenes, as in her painting *Roots*. Her painting suggests a profound connection to the earth – the plants analogous to veins and arteries. The depth that is shown is mostly by the size of the elements rather than by atmospheric values and hues.

I have been drawn to artists who incorporate a lot of texture into their more or less two-dimensional creations. Generally, this art needs to be experienced in person because one cannot get the sense of it from a small photo. Jackson Pollock’s large action paintings are like that. Pollock is said to have felt a strong affinity to nature through his painting process. I also like the textures that Jean Dubuffet achieved with plaster, oil, tar and sand.
Anselm Kiefer’s *Bohemia Lies by the Sea* (1996 - Oil, emulsion, shellac, charcoal, and powdered paint on burlap), on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, has had a big impact on me. I like the way it is a landscape and yet it includes many aspects of Abstract Expressionism. The paths indicate perspective but like Kahlo’s, there is a flatness in the way color is used. The abstract plant forms diminish in size toward the distance. Kiefer’s paintings are being included in a genre called NeoExpressionism. Some critics have given Kiefer credit for reviving painting, after painting was starting to seem obsolete in the midst of Conceptual Art and New Media. His primary subject has been the aftermath of WWII in Germany.

I like art that straddles Eastern and Western sensibilities. Zeng Fanzhi is from China and studied German Expressionism in China but then discovered art from the Song dynasty and uses that for inspiration. I see his paintings, such as this one, *Untitled* (right) as being a good example of abstract expressionist strokes turned into a landscape. While older Chinese paintings typically used expressionist strokes, the difference with this is that the painting fills in more of the landscape instead of leaving a lot to the imagination. The part with weeds is similar to a Jackson Pollock action painting.

Water, trees, plants, snakes and women have all come together in my paintings — along with an occasional skeleton or three. I began taking the sense of life and complex forms that I have painted on-site and combining that with skeletons and skulls. The added human elements provide an extra layer of complexity. Since I am interested in humanity’s impact on nature, issues of vulnerability, mortality and loss of habitat, the human presence can suggest those concepts.
In Vanitas paintings, various clues such as skulls helped illuminate the transient quality of life. Vanitas paintings have traditionally been done as still lifes, inside, but I placed the entire skeleton among the dried milkweed pods and other plants in the mixed-media piece I named *(Happy) Skeleton*. Part of my idea was simply that people are a part of nature, we die and return to the earth, just like plants. Actual seeds are also part of the work, with the idea that regeneration is part of the cycle of life and death. The background is made from old jeans that were transformed into paper pulp with the help of a Hollander Beater.

Meanwhile I was experimenting with mixing wax medium and sand with oil paint. The wax medium extends the oil and adds luminosity and texture. The sand adds dimension and texture. I created some paintings that were expressionistic landscapes with minimal depth before starting a large painting on three doors, each door with a skeleton. In my painting, *Three Fates and a Snake*, the colors of the standing skeletons merge with the colors of the trees and plants behind and around them. These more lively skeletons were partly inspired by Frida Kahlo and the role skeletons play in Mexican Art. My skeletons have moss growing on them as if they have been in their damp environment for a long time. A snake weaves around the plants and ‘feet’. The sense is that the Goddesses or *Fates* are dead, but not dead. They still have something to tell us if we wish to listen. The snake lives on.

Around this time, I created a video of myself creating a painting, *Women Are (Treated) Like Flowers (Sometimes)*. I planned the movie so that flowers grow, only to be
wiped out and partially covered with a concrete sidewalk—eventually covering the entire space. A crack develops in the concrete and a flower grows and blooms.

One thing about the video is being able to see the process of painting. Mostly only the painting hand/arm is shown—sometimes from one side, sometimes from the other, or from the top or the bottom. This is symbolic of much of the work that women have historically done—the invisibility of women. There are many cultural contributions by women: regional cooking, clothing and traditions that are developed, etc. But in our “heroic” society, what women have done is often taken for granted. And even when women have done exceptional things, they are often written out of the history books. I dedicated this to Hypatia, an exceptional example of this, who as one of the last of the Pagan philosophers in Alexandria was killed by Christians for her teachings.

Beginning with the painting Ethel Liked To Contemplate Infinity, a painting which includes a skull in a dried up field with a starry sky, I began a series of paintings of girls and women that I know. The various females represent different ages and stages of life (and death). Ethel is the ancestress. Then there is Amaya—Curious By Nature of a great-niece shown at nine months among the roots of a toppled tree—set in March with a large green snake in the foreground. This is followed by a young Lydia, another great-niece, shown watering some bluebells in April in Lydia Among the Wildflowers. In this painting there is a bluish snake hidden from Lydia—climbing up a dead log.

Amelia At the Edge of the Storm is a painting of my daughter in her teen years standing next to the road with a red-orange sunset sky peaking out through the bottom of large, imposing storm
clouds. Amelia is glancing obliquely at the green snake in the road. This painting is followed by *Monica By the Sea* of a friend of Amelia. This shows a pregnant women, mostly in silhouette, looking out at the water. Not completely unlike Friedrich’s *Monk By the Sea*, what with a sense of aloneness. In these two paintings, there is a sense of foreboding, of pressures weighing on one’s mind. While the ideas and emotions could relate to the subjects involved, it could also apply to myself at the time or others going through the drastically changing events of young adulthood.

The next painting in the series is *Alexandra and Feminine Wisdom*. This painting represents the idea of the Mother Goddess – talking / communicating with a snake at eye level. The snake in the painting of Alexandra plays a larger role than in the other paintings. Where in the previous paintings, the girls / women are fairly small in the landscape, Alexandra is much larger and so is the snake. A couple of deer are standing by the pond, watching. A bird is seen soaring in the distance, through the branches. The painting harkens back to the concept of the Goddess as positive, wise, and connected with nature.

It is not meant to portray the *perfect* Eden, but the world as it is, flawed and beautiful.

The next painting features three older women – *Stream of Memory*. The women are in a rocky, canyon like area with a waterfall, a forest, and one large,
mossy tree. The large tree is another type of Tree of Life — more of an oak. The leaves are turning red — red traditionally being the color of life, and yet it is autumn, so they are falling to the ground. The women have become more comfortable with wisdom, nature, and life in general — as they are shown holding onto snakes.

In general, with my recent paintings, I have been creating aesthetically pleasing images, utilizing natural settings with women and snakes. Snakes, which have come to represent evil, Satan, and fear in Western culture could seem to threaten the girls and women. But the meaning is a matter of perception — based on one’s cultural understanding. One of my objectives was to give image to the positive ancient Mother Goddess archetype and bring it into the world in which I live.

I embrace nature, even as it seems chaotic. In real life, snakes rarely harm anyone, unless a person is bothering the snake. They mostly hide, stay still and try to escape. In the course of my painting, a few months ago, I was moving some things around in my basement studio. I went into another room and when I came back, to my surprise there was a long, black snake. It was sort of dark where it was, so I stood looking, to make sure what I was seeing was a snake and not a piece of black felt that I had around. It moved its tail ever so slightly. I have never seen it again. I have learned to live with the knowledge that there is probably a snake in my studio. It doesn’t bother me, and I don’t bother it.
NOTES

[1] Elinor Ostrom is 2009 Nobel Prize winner in economics. From Ostrom’s perspective, “Polycentric (many-centered) arrangements can work well and even perform better than centralized hierarchies or atomistic markets.” “Complexity is not chaos” is one of her favorite way of summing those ideas up. http://liberalarts.iupui.edu/index.php/deans_blog/december_8_2009


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List of works in my Digital Portfolio

1. (Happy) Skeleton 2009
   *Ink collage, plants & handmade paper* 24" x 60"

2. Unmowed 2009
   *Oil Paint, Wax, Sand* 36" x 48"

3. Three Fates & A Snake 2010
   *Oil Paint, Wax, Sand* 80" x 90"

4. Women Are (Treated) Like Flowers (Sometimes) 2010
   *Oil Paint, Wax, Sand* 32" x 48"

5. Ethel Liked To Contemplate Infinity 2010
   *Oil Paint, Wax, Sand* 48" x 32"
6. Amaya – Curious By Nature
Oil Paint, Wax, Sand
2010
32”x 48”

7. Lydia Among The Wildflowers
Oil Paint, Wax, Sand
2010
32”x 48”

8. Amelia At The Edge the Storm
Oil Paint, Wax, Sand
2010
48”x 64”

9. Monica By the Sea
Oil Paint, Wax, Sand
2010
32”x 48”

10. Alexandra and Feminine Wisdom
Oil Paint, Wax, Sand
2010
60”x 40”
11. Stream of Memory  
*Oil Paint, Wax, Sand*  
2011  
60" x 40"

12. Connections  
*Ink collage with marble dust*  
2020  
32" x 48"

13. Ancient Rituals  
*Ink*  
2010  
32" x 48"

14. (Meditations) Herstory  
*Ink collage with marble dust*  
2010  
32" x 48"

15. Women Are (Treated) Like Flowers (Sometimes)  
*Video*  
2010
Images from Margaret Gohn's MFA exhibit
The ISU University Art Gallery – Media Room
April 4- April 15, 2011