

Arlene Raven, "Women in Command", The Village Voice, January 23, 1990

Deborah Masters. Gracie Mansion Gallery, 532 Broadway, through January 27;
LedisFlam, 108 North 6th Street, Brooklyn, through February 3.

The people of Gozo still tell of a legendary ruler who, baby at her breast, built their great temples in a single day. That these earliest-known temples were called Ggantija (the Giant) makes sense, because on Malta, in 3000 B.C.E., the Goddess Herself was visioned as a colossus. Deborah Masters' rough and sturdy larger-than-life female figures standing in Gracie Mansion' front gallery, modeled after herself and her friends, seem to participate in this prehistoric matriarchy and its Earth-bound spirituality.

Some of the nine seven-foot-tall hydrocal plaster sculptures held together with burlap and steel rods were exhibited together as Circle in the "Urban Figures" show last year at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris. Regrouped, the bare-breasted, broad-shouldered circle figures are no longer symmetrically positioned and facing front like bridestones around a henge (a ritual gathering, Masters explains, that emulated a spontaneous real-life congregation of female friends after the death of a child). They are instead placed in proximity to each other, but without a recognizable overall configuration. Each, in this more random grouping, remains encircled in a doleful emotional sphere, and keeps her own counsel.

Masters uses mental objects and wood blocks to create an intricate surface of imprinted lines and textures, and graphite to give them a concrete-grey tone. Her surfaces are, she says, geographical maps, "so that when you come close to them, they change into a different landscape, something Earthlike."

In the past six years, Masters has developed the features now exclusive to her style and at the same time has woven in her works the visual web of allusions and kinships that contextualize her art. Masters is allied with Anna Mendieta in incising clay and rubbing dry natural pigments, drawing upon pre-Christian prototypes as well as folklore and mythology and conceptually merging Earth and Woman (emblemized in herself, her contemporaries, and her present-day concerns). These "circle figures" share affinities, as well, with artists as diverse as Margo Machida, who has employed ancient symbols to tempt out historical pain and catalyze self-discovery, and Carolee Schneeman, when snakes slithered over her nude body in ceremonies similar to those of the Minoan priestesses; Faith Ringgold, whose "Weeping Witches" are inspired by tribal masks for African female initiation ceremonies, and Marisol, whose wooden sculpture groups represent mythic and historical personas but often contain her own face.

Masters studied art history at Bryn Mawr. She sought out native works when she traveled in Mexico and Greece, and was captivated by the art and architecture of Rome, where she lived and worked for two years in the late 197s. The designing details of her mainly female assemblies and tableaux are thus drawn from a wide range of art-historical precedents. Although these references don't dictate appearance or meaning, they are crucial as visual "documents" and representations of feeling-states that Masters must

literally lay eyes on as a part of her working process. The circle figures are, for instance, as rigid and frontal as Egyptian reliefs, their costumes and headdresses reminiscent of Minoan terra-cotta figurines, their fixed stares like the empty eye sockets of Archaic Greek statues without paint, their heroic stances and defining draperies recalling fourth century B.C.E. marble architectural ornaments.

Masters' freewheeling syntheses of these diverse influences were probably encouraged by the permissive atmosphere of recent postmodernism. But the cultural "soup" that may have suggested the particulars of these stylistic syntheses originated in two 19th century developments—the new political and spiritual connections between women that historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg calls "the female world of love and ritual," and the Romantic Movement's neopagan "return of the Goddess."

These affirmations of actual and mythological female strength nourished the metaphysical ground for the work of the work of an entire community, even an evolving history, of 20th century artists from Georgia O'Keeffe and Louise Bourgeois to Nancy Spero, Cindy Sherman, and Betye Saar. They also nourish Masters' tribe.

Francine (1990), a single figure seated on a mahogany base between a column and the wall at Gracie Mansion, is even larger than any of the 1988 standing women. Masters' art historical references have changed, and consistent in part with that change, the temper of the new works has altered. Whereas the earlier bereaved healers stand straight, alert yet relaxed, this figure, her chest collapsed, seems folded into draperies that cover her from head to toe like a shroud or nun's habit. But her face is tense with concentration. In the circle figures, each transparent skirt wrapped from waist to calf become part of the body. The works are, in a sense, all body, "about" physicality. Francine's body, despite its voluminous size and scale, merges into her drapery, recalling the intention of Christian art of the Gothic period to transform corporeality in the ethereal.

But Francine unchristianly snubs viewers on her corner and contemplates the wall. A female representation resisting anyone's gaze, Francine is an internationally energized subject whose stature and intensity cast an ironic shadow on the lumpish 100 pounds of clay of traditional femininity. She is an exemplar of self-contained alienation that seems especially appropriate to the turn of the decade. As even Time magazine admitted, women may have tried to have it all in the '80s, but now they've just plain had it.

The temper of these times is even more evident in Masters' installation at LedisFlam. Pietá and Three Backs were sparked by a 1305-06 Giotto fresco in the Arena Chapel in Padua. Giotto's Lamentation is a somber scene, frozen in grief and set way below the horizon, where hunched, robed mourners surround the dead Christ.

At LedisFlam, this view downward is three-dimensional, provided by the two-leveled architecture of the gallery. Three enormous shrouded women are seated together on a balcony. But instead of looking over the metal railing at the naked male languishing on the floor below, leaning beside a seated woman, these three give the two their backs.

The nude woman of the Pietá, who shows no sign of virginity or pity, sits on a very large specially made wooden chair. She leans over slightly, impassively regarding her companion as if wondering how he got there. He is not Christ or how he got there. He is not Christ or wounded, neither conclusively alive nor dead. His arm hangs limply, bordering her leg in a rare point of contact. But this touch is without intention, ending in an awkward conjunction of hand and foot on the floor. Her right arm cradles his head while clamping his neck. And in her left hand, she shows a sharp silver sword.

Photographs:

Deborah Masters: left, Francine (1990); circle figure (1988), at Gracie Mansion

Circle figures (1988) at Gracie Mansion