

Press Release

MONICA SJÖÖ

1 February – 9 March 2024

Preview: Wednesday 31 January, 6-8pm



Monica Sjöö, *Nordic Symphony*, 1994 © Monica Sjöö Estate

'Witches cast spells, not to do evil, but to promote changes of consciousness. Witches cast spells as acts of redefinition. To respell the world means to redefine the root of our being. It means to redefine us and therefore change us by returning us to our original consciousness of magical-evolutionary processes.'

Monica Sjöö, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, 1987

Alison Jacques is proud to announce a solo exhibition by the late pioneering artist, activist and writer Monica Sjöö (b.1938 Västernorrland, Sweden - d.2005 Bristol, UK). This exhibition coincides with Monica Sjöö's first retrospective *The Great Cosmic Mother* on view at Modern Art Oxford until 25 February 2024; touring from Moderna Museet, Stockholm and travelling to Moderna Museet, Malmö from 23 March – 1 September 2024. The exhibition also coincides with Sjöö's inclusion in *Women in Revolt!* at Tate Britain, on view until 7 April 2024.

Monica Sjöö was a co-founder of the Goddess movement and this exhibition traces her deep commitment to gender and environmental justice. The artist, self-described as a 'radical anarcho/eco-feminist and Goddess artist, writer and thinker involved in Earth spirituality', and as an activist, co-founded Bristol's Women's Liberation. Sjöö protested against the Vietnam war and the US missile base at Greenham Common, among numerous other causes she embraced. Sjöö was also a prolific writer, her most well-known book *The Great Cosmic Mother*, written with Barbara Mor, was published in 1987.

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As an artist and writer, Monica Sjöö's focus on feminism, peace activism, goddess worship and ecology was unwavering. In her work, she combined her personal symbology with archetypes, references to pre-patriarchal societies and the power of nature. A self-taught artist, she was a firm believer that creativity was a conduit to the wisdom of the past and to possibilities for the future.

This exhibition spans over 30 years of Sjöö's practice from 1976 up to 2003, showcasing both her paintings on canvas and paper. It reveals the artist's sources of inspiration including pre-Aztec and monumental Aztec sculptures, Catholic art and the vibrant revolutionary paintings by artists including Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. The titles of Sjöö's work in the exhibition – including *Women Becoming* (1976), *Child of the Mother-tree* (1984) and *Priestess at Tarxien Temple on Malta* (2003) – indicate the consistency and range of her concerns: feminism and spiritualism. *Cornwall, Ancient Land of the Goddess* (1993) depicts a landscape populated with stones and enigmatic characters amidst green fields, tempered with colours that evoke the sea and that possibly allude to the blood spilled for deeply held beliefs. In *Sun Goddess at Stonehenge* (1992) the famous giant stones are pictured beneath a floating mask, a gateway to a glowing, labyrinthine womb that shelters an embryo. Continuing the theme of the countryside as a place of profound mystery, Sjöö explained that her chosen landscapes are 'full of spirits and the haunt of the powerful and most ancient...'

Sjöö moved to the UK in her 20s, living mainly in Bristol, where she dedicated her life 'to creating paintings that speak of women's lives, our history and sacredness'. Some of the work in the exhibition references Sjöö's years spent travelling to ancient sites in Malta, Sweden, Wales and to Neolithic centres of the ancient Great Mother, pilgrimages to the sacred land in England, Ireland, Scotland and Brittany, 'communing with the spirits and connecting with other women... involved in Earth Mysteries'. She communicated with what she called 'the ancient sisterhood' of pre-patriarchal Goddess societies and portrayed women as strong and life-giving. When Sjöö suffered from postnatal depression following the birth of her first child, she restored herself by drawing visionary pastels while listening to sacred Hebrew music. Many of her paintings and drawings are also evocations of grief. Having been devastated by the deaths of two of her sons in 1985 and 1987.

For Sjöö, who died in 2005 aged 66, the land was never simply an arrangement of earth and sky; rather, it pulsed with memories and otherworldly beings. She immersed herself in its symbolic, as well as its life-giving properties, and it inspired both her visions and activism. By digging deep into the history of cultural communion with the natural world, she believed she could release long-repressed energies back into the ether and so begin the necessary process of human healing. Rejecting abstraction because she felt it was impossible to represent the complexities of a woman's life 'in stripes and triangles', Sjöö's imagery evolved in a combination of symbols, both universal and personal, and through stories that fuse mythology and autobiography. Her palette ranges from the earthy to the psychedelic; she drew in swift, bold strokes. She loved making physically big pictures, statements that couldn't be ignored. Despite a life scarred by poverty and personal tragedy, Sjöö's art is one of hope.

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In addition to the current travelling retrospective at Modern Art Oxford, past solo exhibitions include *Monica Sjöö: The Time is NOW and it is Overdue!*, Beaconsfield Contemporary Art, London (2022); *Blessed Be*, Konstrnärshuset, Stockholm, Sweden (2006); *Through Space and Time the Ancient Sisterhoods Spoke to me: A Monica Sjöö Retrospective*, Hotbath Gallery, Bath (2004).

Selected group exhibitions include *Women in Revolt!*, Tate Britain, London (2023); *Radical Landscapes*, Tate Liverpool (2022); *A Batalla dos Xeneros*, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain (2007); *Art Feminism: An exhibition of Swedish feminist art from the 1960s until today*, Dunkers Kulturhus, Helsingborg, Sweden (2006).

To coincide with the exhibition, Linsey Young (Curator of Contemporary British Art at Tate) and Annie Johnston (Chief Archivist and Manager of the Monica Sjöö Estate) will lead a walkthrough of the exhibition on Saturday 17 February at 12pm. Spaces are free but limited – click here to RSVP.

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