

Press release

Monica Sjöö

The Great Cosmic Mother

13 May – 18 October 2023

Monica Sjöö (1938–2005) was a Swedish-British artist, activist, writer and eco-feminist. Art, politics and spirituality are inseparable in her oeuvre, and Sjöö became a key figure in the British women's liberation movement. With a deep commitment to women's rights and environmentalism, she fought uncompromisingly for freedom from any form of oppression. This retrospective exhibition introduces visitors to works that were all created to promote social change, causing controversy and cries for censorship at the time. Their subject matter and messages are just as relevant today.

"The Great Cosmic Mother" is the first retrospective museum exhibition of Monica Sjöö's oeuvre. Presenting some fifty works from Sjöö's entire practice, it spans from monumental paintings to political posters and banners, drawings, and archival material. Several of these artworks have never been shown to the public, and have now been restored by the Moderna Museet conservators so that this groundbreaking Swedish artist can be introduced to a new audience. The first-ever monograph over Monica Sjöö will be published in conjunction with the exhibition.

From Härnösand to Bristol

Monica Sjöö was born in Härnösand in 1938 but spent most of her adult life in Bristol. Her political consciousness was formed early on by the Vietnam War protests, the anarchist movement and the independent art scene in Stockholm. Here, in the 1960s, she met the artist Siri Derkert (1888–1973), who had a formative influence on her. Derkert's involvement in the women's movement and her work with early environmental activists such as Elin Wägner and Rachel Carson, strengthened Sjöö in her convictions and led her to eco-feminism.

In the UK, Monica Sjöö became an active spokesperson for women's issues and organised several political campaigns and action groups. Her manifesto "Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art" (1971) and collectively-organised exhibitions of women artists laid the foundations for the British feminist art movement and contributed to the development of the international women's movement at the time.

Censorship and women's experiences in art

Monica Sjöö was controversial throughout her life, and her works are challenging to this day. In raw and bold imagery, she was an early advocate of women's right to sexual self-determination and abortion. Today, her painting "God Giving Birth"

(1968) is a feminist icon, but at the time it was considered both blasphemous and vulgar. When it was shown in the UK in the 1970s, it repeatedly provoked strong reactions, and Sjöo was prosecuted for obscenity. Another iconic painting from the same year is "Back Street Abortion – Women Seeking Freedom from Oppression", which was acquired by Moderna Museet in 2012.

The many attempts to censor Monica Sjöo merely strengthened her resolve to portray women's experiences in her art. Against prevailing artistic ideals, she created figurative and representational art to show the real situation of women – their lives, work and struggles. Sjöo rejected abstract art as empty play with words and form and a Western male privilege:

"How does one communicate women's strength, struggle, rising up from oppression, blood, childbirth, and sexuality in stripes and triangles?"

Monica Sjöo, "Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art" (1971)

A cosmic world view and political change

Monica Sjöo's commitment to women's liberation and environmentalism were inseparable from her spiritual belief that everything was connected – a cosmic world view, expressed in "The Great Mother", whose essence permeated both nature and being, according to Sjöo. Sjöo viewed the oppression of women and minorities, along with the exploitation of land and the ravishing of nature, as an unforgivable violation of "The Great Mother".

Monica Sjöo's writings and publications on "The Great Mother" were the result of lifelong research on prehistoric female figures in various cultures and religions. She co-authored "The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth" (1987), a publication that became seminal to radical Goddess feminism circles, especially in the UK and on the US west coast.

In the 1980s arms race, the peace movement was revitalised, and Monica Sjöo organised several political grassroots campaigns. With women's groups such as "Women for Life on Earth", she also participated in peace marches and anti-nuclear arms camps, including the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, where peace activism, eco-feminism and spirituality were interwoven with women's community, dance and singing.

The curator Jo Widoff explains:

"Monica Sjöo outlined a different future, bringing together spirituality and political change. She looked back through time to find contexts and voices whose echoes could sound loudly in the present".

About the exhibition catalogue and events for the public

Visitors can take part in an extensive programme linked to the exhibition. The programme and activities are organised in collaboration with, among others, Fridays for Future, the youth reception in Skärholmen and Sättra Youth Center, and Kvinnohistoriska. Visit modernamuseet.se for details.

An extensive catalogue will be published for the exhibition, with essays by Jennie Klein, Amy Tobin and Annika Öhrner, texts by the artists Olivia Plender, Jill Smith and Lucy Stein, and reprints of texts by Monica Sjöo.

Facts about the exhibition

“Monica Sjöö – The Great Cosmic Mother” is organised in close collaboration with Modern Art Oxford, where the exhibition will be on view 18 November 2023 – 25 February 2024. During 2024 the exhibition will also travel to Moderna Museet Malmö.

Curators: Jo Widoff, Moderna Museet, and Amy Budd, Modern Art Oxford.

For further information, please contact

Annika Hansson Wretman,

Press and PR Officer, Moderna Museet Stockholm.

press@modernamuseet.se

+46 (0)8 5202 35 65

+46 (0)70 952 23 62