THERE was Eden

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In Mark Twain's satirical short story "Eve's Diary" (1905), the poet imagines the interior life of the biblical Eve as she cavorts around the Garden of Eden.[1] She befriends a host of real and mythical creatures. She accidentally invents fire, for which she sees no purpose other than beauty. And she revels, sometimes with manic excitement, at the wondrousness of the natural world. Eventually, Eve runs into Adam, whom she finds grumpy and endearingly useless—more pet project than future patriarch. Despite its simplicity, the text performs a radical revision of the foundational story of Abrahamic religion, absent any mention of "Original Sin"—that small gesture of curiosity that would condemn womankind for all eternity. The couple do eventually leave the Garden, but when Eve passes, Adam stands at her grave and realizes, all too late: "Wheresoever she was, THERE was Eden."

Elizabeth Chapin's series *Banishment of Solitude*—an installation of paintings outfitted with neon fringe, string lights, plush emojis, and no shortage of sequins—likewise offers a joyful reclamation of Eve, alongside other Western archetypes of femininity that, for millennia, have laid the groundwork for society to restrict and punish women for exercising independent thought. As with Twain's story, Chapin doesn't stray far from canonical precedents. Instead, she appropriates and infuses the

masterworks of Art History with a renewed sense of relevance and complexity, using family, friends, pop stars, and social media celebrities as models who lend a contemporary edge to religious icons.

Despite this liberatory gesture, the series also tackles the issue of social media as a modern source of banishment and social disconnection. Chapin posits whether our "crafted selves" on digital platforms have merely replaced such archetypal identities, and whether social media addiction is just a new form of self-imposed exile. Glued to our screens during concerts and plays, social functions, and family dinners, are we now unknowingly isolating ourselves from one another? In some works, the artist adorns her figures with actual comments culled from the Instagram feeds of her real-life muses; the likes of Venus and the Virgin Mary continue to be subjected to the external projections of their followers.

The figure of Eve is represented in two of this exhibition's paintings. In *Prototype*, she stands within a circle of candles and pincushions, and members of the public are invited to affix handwritten notes to her body (which is formed, like all of the included works, from cut canvas paintings that are stuffed and sewn into sculptures). The encounter has all the trappings of spiritual ritual—the setting of sacred space, symbolic objects, the adornment of an idol, and even our own circumambulation. But the historical Eve, condemned as she was for her disobedience, would never be worshipped in this way. With her broad hips, curving spine, and raised arms-bearing fruit (Eve's quintessential "attribute"), *Prototype* is reminiscent of South Asian religious sculpture more so than any model from Christian art. This is no accident; *Banishment of Solitude* originated, for Chapin, in the process of scouring a range of spiritual systems for archetypes that more holistically embrace the contradictions and inherent fallibility of humanity, or which acknowledge the coexistence of creation and destruction, comfort and chaos—themes that are abundant in Hindu scripture.

Likewise, *Apple Eater* shows Eve within an Edenic mise-en-scène. Her nude body is draped with a glowing neon serpent, á la Britney Spears, and she stands within a garden of sunflowers, thistle, amaranth, and foxglove. The fruits on the tree behind her are gloriously illuminated with LED tape. This figure's posture is derived from representations of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who is ambitiously associated with love and lust, war and justice, beauty and power (and why shouldn't such concepts be coupled)? Feminist biblical scholar Ilana Pardes writes that Eve's radicality—

her unabashed hubris, her sense of proximity to God as co-creator of Man—is legible in Genesis, but common interpretations suppress these traits.[2] Even so, as Kate Millet pointed out in one of the foundational texts of feminist theory, the story is clear in its punitive stance towards female sexuality. The "Hebrew verb for 'eat' can also mean coitus," Millet explains, and "everywhere in the Bible, 'knowing' is synonymous with sexuality, [...] clearly a product of contact with the phallus, here in the fable objectified as a snake."[3] Chapin's *Apple Eater* proposes a connection between Eve and Inanna, imagining the original Mother as properly celebrated for her "knowledge" (in whatever sense you like).

Chapin's desire to liberate female archetypes from the restrictiveness of Western binaries extends beyond the story of Eve. Indeed, the history of European art since Christendom is abundant with 'masterworks' wherein Man is associated with action and strength, Woman with passivity and weakness, as feminist scholars have pointed out for decades.[4] Especially damaging is the Virgin/Whore duality so inherent to patriarchal societies; both sides are taken up in *Banishment of Solitude*.

Among the most touching works are those that humanize the Virgin Mary. In *P1eta*™, Chapin collaborated with Austin-based pop singer and trans activist P1nkstar, who poses as both the mourning Virgin and the body of Christ, lowered from the cross into his mother's lap. The model appears queenly, in a tinsel halo, as metallic-plush tears emanate gracefully from her face. More than a simple act of queering this story of sacrifice and the redemption of humankind, the work speaks to a kind of radical self-love, affirming that, at times, we all need to mourn or tenderly nurture parts of ourselves. This theme is also present in *Immaculate Conception*, a maternal portrait that presents new parenting models and motherhood in the queer community as analogous to this most divine of births.

Cathedral of Hands presents a stunning re-interpretation of the Annunciation. Aja Monet models for Gabriel—a poignant affirmation of the contemporary poet-as-messenger—while the Virgin (here, an Austin-based artist and activist) sits within her tent, wearing gold hoops and a silk pantsuit. The barriers of secular and sacred space appear more liminal here, as fabric swells across and beyond the bodies and architectural settings into our space. This presentation of communion between women seems to reorient the story just slightly, calling focus to how women's activism, both earthly and divine, can (and indeed often does) save the world.

Even though the female "nude" was considered an indecent artistic subject, it was conveniently permitted in the representations of goddesses like Venus, whose nakedness was assumed to be a "natural state." In *Froth*, Chapin offers a riff on the Venus Anadyomene, as painted by Botticelli in the fifteenth-century. She is modeled by a friend of Chapin's daughter who, as it were, has forged a successful career in the modeling industry (in no small part due to her self-advocacy). A pair of pearlescent clouds rendered from plasticized gauze hovers behind Venus as strings of "comments" cut in metallic blue letters flank her on either side. For the most part, these are supportive phrases, but their presence nonetheless conveys that familiar dopamine hit that fuels social media addiction and the desire for validation. (Venus famously pushed another woman in front of a bus, so to speak, and started the Trojan War to win a beauty contest judged by Paris. The prize, coincidentally, was an apple). In *Ecstacy*, Bernini's seductive representation of Saint Theresa (1647-1652) is newly outfitted with a glowing iPhone, which her left-hand clutches as she collapses in exultation.

*@_fake_nudes_*, among the most ambitious installations, shows the artist's daughter and two of her friends as the Three Graces posing in a shower, their heads turned toward the viewer. This motif's mythological import is relatively minor (a personification of feminine charm and beauty. It was most often deployed as an artistic device that allowed the Renaissance sculptor or painter to show his skill in rendering the human body from all angles. (They are most often represented in a circular embrace so that their bodies can be glimpsed from the front, back, and side at once). Proposing a contemporary foil to the male gaze that is so ubiquitous in Western art, *@_fake_nudes_* addresses the proliferation of shower selfies amongst iPhone-wielding teenagers, an act of self-exposure which can be understood as alternately empowering and troublingly objectifying. The girls hold their phones up as blue rope sprays down over their bodies from a showerhead above them; their confrontational gaze towards the viewer seems to signify not just an awareness of our presence but their agency before us.

Banishment of Solitude (and the related series, *Social Media Cowboys*) is inspired in part by the artist's reading of Cal Newport's *Digital Minimalism*—a guidebook to more intentional relationships to technology and social media.[5] While so many of the figures in this exhibition are pictured clutching digital devices, they are nonetheless presented as fully

controlling their relationship to these tools. Freed from the judgment of themselves or others, they are empowered by the ability to self-fashion and through networks of supportive connections gained online.

This theme brings to mind another high-profile appropriation of Botticelli: Beyoncé's now-iconic maternity photographs, released in 2017 when she was pregnant with the twins. Taken by Awol Erizku, this luscious suite of images features the star as both Venus and Madonna, surrounded by flower blossoms and draped in dreamy veils of pastel-hued chiffon and satin. As art historian Andrianna Campbell ventured, such images attest to the "contemporary moment where the model, as both patron and matriarch, can control the dissemination of her likeness to a broad audience via social media."[6] In another era, Campbell reminds us, "these photographs would have been commissioned by Jay Z and kept for his own pleasure."

While *Banishment of Solitude* similarly appropriates a range of female archetypes, this body of work offers something slightly different from the unitary power of Beyoncé, whose cult following is an all-too-easy analog for the goddess worship of the ancient world. Chapin draws inspiration from her own network, portraying individuals whose impact is felt at the grassroots level, across a community of everyday people. The message, for me, is that the most divine archetypes, role models, and sacred beings are to be found everywhere among us.

This accessibility is reiterated in Chapin's painterly style: the faces of her portraits are given special attention to detail, despite the loose and more performative brushwork observed in the renderings of bodies, clothing, and other details. We understand quite easily that these are real people, who we could easily recognize—if not literally, then in some version of our own friends and loved ones. Further, the works are unpolished and daringly maximalist. In Pinkstar's gold-tinsel halo or the metallic blue fabrics from which Froth's aquatic throne is constructed, we find allusions to the relatable kitsch of holiday decorations and children's costumes. In a recent interview, the artist mentions the "hidden treasures" that add sensory appeal to what is already a visually delicious exhibition: "a satin banner in one of the three grace's vagina 'pockets' is embroidered with a secret message, or the silk iridescent lame tears of *Pieta*™, or Venus's Instagram rain comments that slowly leak glitter. The column bases of *Cathedral of Hands* are filled with frankincense and myrrh. And *Pieta*™'s shoes are filled with lavender buds, so they smell."[7] There is an undeniable emphasis on

the work's excessive materiality and relationship to forms of play and craft, made more salient by the artist's process of transforming two-dimensional paintings into sculptures as if bringing paper dolls to life.

The Latin mater is the linguistic root of both 'mother' and 'material': it denotes (as Judith Butler puts it) "the stuff out of which things are made, not only the timber for houses and ships but whatever serves as nourishment for infants—extensions of the mother's body."[8] In Western binary logics that separate body and mind, this association distances femininity from the more transcendent sphere of knowledge. However, *Banishment of Solitude* imagines a world in which Eve's body, her motherhood, and her capacity to both 'know' and 'make' are jubilantly reclaimed.

So what do the artist, also a mother, and her models make? They make the world—then destroy it, and remake it anew. They make love, and they make mistakes. They make peace with their demons, and they make safe and sacred spaces. For her part, the artist desires to find a way to "make that banishment story work." Wheresoever we all are, together, the show affirms, here is Eden.

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1. Mark Twain, "Eve's Diary," first published in the 1905 Christmas issue of *Harper's Bazaar,* and as a book in 1906 by Harper and Brother's.
2. See Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach by Ilana Pardes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
3. Kate Millet, "Theory of Sexual Politics" in *Sexual Politics* (Granada Publishing, 1970).
4. This is explored in abundance throughout feminist art historical scholarship; A perfect starting point is Linda Nochlin, *Woman, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), especially the author's discussion of Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* and other works in the titular essay.
5. Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (Portfolio, 2019)
6. Andrianna Campbell, "An art historian's take on those Beyoncé Pregnancy Photos," *Pitchfork Magazine*, February 3, 2017 [https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1433-an-art-historians-take-on-those-beyonce-pregnancy-photos/]
7. As quoted in Katerina Papathanasiou, "Banishment of Solitude: An Interview with Elizabeth Chapin," *Vale Magazine*, March 5, 2021. [https://thevalemagazine.com/2021/03/05/banishment-of-solitude-elizabeth-chapin/]
8. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 32.