

THE SISTER CHAPEL



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AN ESSENTIAL FEMINIST COLLABORATION

The Sister Chapel was conceived in 1974 by Ilise Greenstein, who envisioned a monumental “hall of fame” in which women’s achievements would be presented from a female perspective. Greenstein’s participation in several feminist consciousness-raising groups and all-women activist organizations prompted her to question the enduring androcentric view of history. Using a nominal pun on the Sistine Chapel, she proposed a secular, nonhierarchical alternative to the patriarchal system embodied in Michelangelo’s renowned ceiling fresco.

In the spirit of feminist solidarity, Greenstein collaborated with twelve other women, whose individual contributions shaped the character and appearance of *The Sister Chapel*. The artists collectively established uniform dimensions for the figure paintings and agreed that each canvas would depict a standing female “role model.” The particular subject and manner of execution were left entirely to the creator of each painting. As a result, the canvases form a visually cohesive group without diminishing the individuality of any artist. A diverse group of historical figures, deities, and conceptual women populate the all-female pantheon of *The Sister Chapel*. Above them, Greenstein’s enormous abstract ceiling features a mirrored center to remind visitors that there is no limit to women’s potential.

The Sister Chapel premiered in January 1978 at P.S.1, an experimental exhibition space in Long Island City, New York. The installation traveled to three other venues between 1978 and 1980, but its presentation was hindered by spatial and architectural limitations. Displayed near the circle of monumental paintings was the model for an unrealized fabric structure, which was designed by Maureen Connor to house the abstract ceiling and figural canvases. When this important feminist collaboration was reconstituted at Rowan University in 2016, the fabric pavilion was finally constructed. For the first time, *The Sister Chapel* could be experienced as its creators intended. Three years later, with a generous gift from the Shirley Gorelick Foundation, *The Sister Chapel* became a permanent installation at the Center for Art and Social Engagement.

Andrew D. Hottle, Ph.D.



Ilise Greenstein (1928–1985)

Ceiling of "The Sister Chapel," 1976

Acrylic on canvas, 216 × 208¼ in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of the Greenstein Family Partnership, 2013

Ilise Greenstein initially envisioned an umbrella-like ceiling, which she described as a “dome to depict the act of creation with Eve in it.” She briefly contemplated an abstraction of “the seasons” with a figure of “Eve from Black to White thru all shades of color,” but eventually chose a fully nonrepresentational allusion to “the seasons in a woman’s life from birth to death; sunrise to sunset expressed metaphorically.” To create her abstract ceiling, Greenstein used the soak-stain method, in which diluted acrylics are applied to unprimed canvas. The “sunrise” half of the ceiling is dominated by yellow, blue, and green, while “sunset” features blue, orange, and violet. Four triangular canvas fragments are collaged around the center to form a square. The arcs of their inner sides circumscribe a yellow and silver circle, which surrounds a mirrored disc. Greenstein originally used Mylar for the reflective surface because a glass or metal mirror would have been too heavy to mount. The Mylar has been replaced by similarly lightweight mirrored acrylic, which reflects the paintings and viewers with less distortion.



Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010)

Lilith, 1976

Acrylic on canvas, 108 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Sylvia Sleigh Collection, 2011

For *The Sister Chapel*, Sylvia Sleigh chose to depict Lilith, who had recently been championed as a proto-feminist subject. According to *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a parodic medieval text, God created Lilith as the companion of Adam, but she was expelled from paradise after renouncing her subordinate role. Lilith audaciously insisted that she and her husband were equals. To emphasize the similarities of male and female, Sleigh superimposed the genders in a single towering figure. Behind her is a similarly dualistic nocturnal–diurnal sky in which the constellation Cassiopeia is visible. Lilith stands in a primeval garden with her feet resting on the flared petals of an oversized parrot tulip. Behind her shoulders is an enormous flame-like daylily. The paradisiacal environment of giant leaves and blossoms is reminiscent of Victorian flower symbolism and wallpaper designs, which particularly interested Sleigh, who was born and raised in Great Britain.

Alice Neel (1900–1984)

Bella Abzug—the Candidate, 1976

Oil on canvas, 108 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Anonymous gift, 2010

Bella Abzug (1920–1998) was a progressive politician, social reformer, and U.S. Congresswoman from New York City. When Alice Neel created this portrait, for which she used photographs as source material, Abzug was campaigning for a seat in the U.S. Senate. She was ultimately defeated in the Democratic primary by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927–2003). At the premiere of *The Sister Chapel* in 1978, Neel explained that Abzug’s breasts were meant to show that “she would nurture the electorate.” She also remarked, “I think the hat is great—it’s like a cowboy—oh, I should have said cowgirl.” With her hands at her sides, as if ready for a duel, Bella Abzug seems to be a synthesis of political activist and Wild West gunslinger. Instead of weapons, she is armed with a wide smile, an inviting open hand, a matronly floral-print skirt, and high-heeled shoes. Abzug is painted in Alice Neel’s distinctive, almost caricatured style.

Shirley Gorelick (1924–2000)

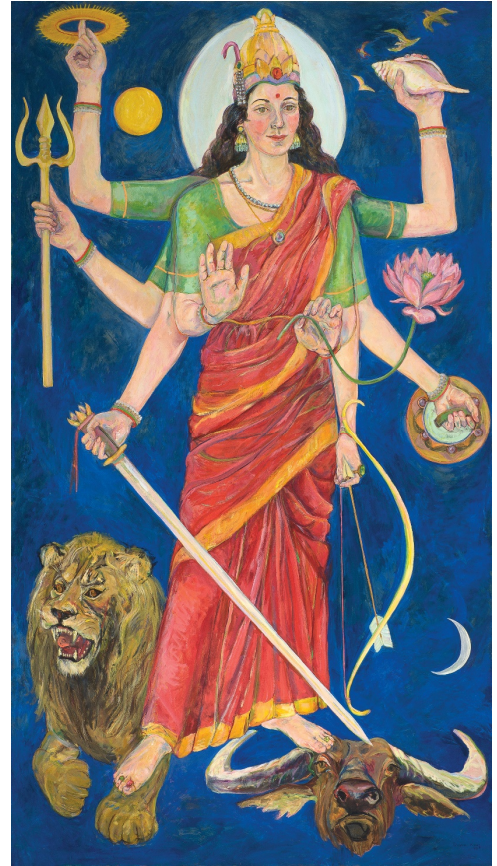
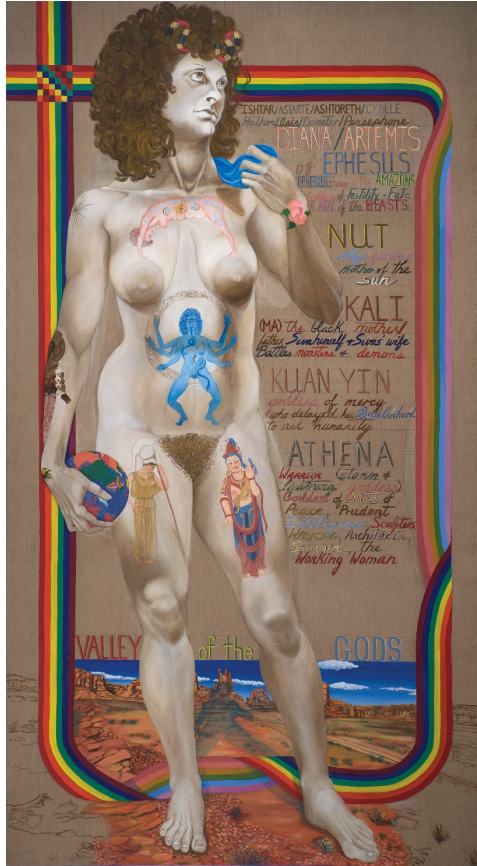
Frida Kahlo, 1976

Acrylic on canvas, 108 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of Jamie S. Gorelick, 2011

Shirley Gorelick was exposed to the art and life of Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) in 1970, when she and her family visited the painter’s former home and studio, Casa Azul, in Mexico City. At the time, Kahlo was largely unknown outside her native country. Gorelick relied heavily on Kahlo’s self-portraits when portraying her for *The Sister Chapel*. The upper body of the large Frida, dressed in a Tehuana costume, was based on Kahlo’s *Diego on My Mind* (1943) and the balloons were inspired by the tethered motifs in Kahlo’s *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). The balloons in Gorelick’s painting contain the head of Kahlo’s famous artist–husband, Diego Rivera (1886–1957), and a fetus that alludes to Kahlo’s miscarriages. Her suffering, caused by a bus accident when Kahlo was eighteen, is further emphasized by a dangling bracelet in the form of an orthopedic corset. The leafy background was appropriated directly from Kahlo’s *Flower of Life* (1944).



June Blum (1929–2017)

Betty Friedan as the Prophet, 1976

Oil on canvas, 108¼ × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of the artist, 2012

Like Moses after descending Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, Betty Friedan (1921–2006) delivers *The Feminine Mystique*, tucked under her arm, to future generations. Friedan's book, published in 1963, overtly acknowledged the needs of middle-class American women to find fulfillment outside the traditional role of homemaker. The success of *The Feminine Mystique* propelled Friedan to international fame as an activist for women's rights and she subsequently co-founded the National Organization for Women (est. 1966). Blum's monumental portrait was based on drawn and painted studies that were executed in Friedan's apartment in New York City. Friedan chose to be depicted in a flowing red dress with a ruffled décolleté, which Blum regarded as a symbol of the "vibrancy of women." Although Friedan was relatively short, the artist portrayed her as a towering, semi-divine figure who seems to float toward the viewer.

Martha Edelheit (b. 1931)

Womanhero, 1977

Acrylic on linen, 108 × 59⅞ in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of the artist, 2011

Martha Edelheit invented a "woman-hero" whose pose is based on *David* (1501–04), Michelangelo's celebrated "man-hero." Tattooed on her body are powerful mythological and religious figures "who endow this contemporary woman (us) with all their attributes," according to the artist. On *Womanhero*'s torso are Nut, the Egyptian sky goddess, and Kali, the fierce Hindu deity. Her legs contain images of Athena, the Greek warrior goddess, and Kuanyin, the bodhisattva of mercy, as portrayed in China. On the figure's right arm is Artemis of Ephesus, a multi-breasted incarnation of the Greek goddess. Edelheit became interested in tattoos after reading *Tristes tropiques* (1955) by the French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), from whom she learned that the body was the first painting surface. *Womanhero* towers over the Valley of the Gods, located in the American southwest. In her hair are coral snakes, which allude to Medusa.

Diana Kurz (b. 1936)

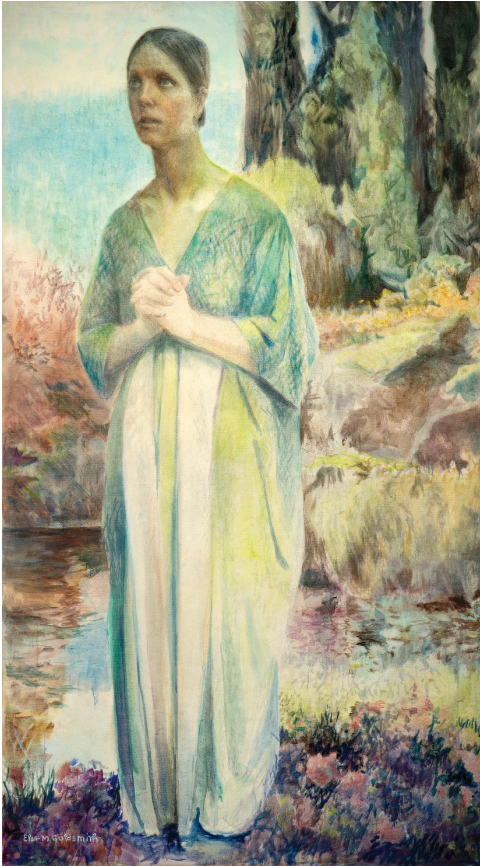
Durga, 1977

Oil on canvas, 108 × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of the artist, 2013

Durga, an important Hindu goddess, is worshipped in many incarnations. Diana Kurz chose to portray Durga because she is more powerful than any male deity. According to one legend, the male gods were unable to overcome the buffalo demon who threatened to destroy the earth. Together they created Durga, whose superior power enabled her to conquer the demon. Kurz based the garments and accoutrements on authentic sources, including an actual Durga devotee and numerous works of Indian art. In seven of the figure's hands are her customary symbolic attributes: the conch (wards off demons), lotus (purity and eternal renewal), shield (protection), bow and arrow (female and male energy), sword (wisdom), trident (creation, protection, destruction), and wheel (cycle of life and death). Her other hand displays the *abhaya mudra*, a gesture of reassurance. Her traditional vehicle, the lion, rests at her feet with the head of the vanquished buffalo demon.



Elsa M. Goldsmith (1920–2005)

Joan of Arc, 1976

Oil on canvas, 108 × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of Jo Ann Goldsmith and Cris

Goldsmith, 2009

Elsa Goldsmith unhesitatingly chose to depict Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431) for *The Sister Chapel*. To Goldsmith, who was Jewish, the celebrated Catholic saint was “a simple country girl that was a little bit frightened, and hopeful, and spiritual.” Despite Joan’s legendary role as the leader of an army, the artist was disinclined to portray her in armor. She regarded the fifteenth-century Maid of Orléans as a universal symbol for the struggles of women. According to Goldsmith, “I see Joan as having the same fears, confusion and doubts we all have as we strive to achieve the unknown and possibly unattainable goals.” True to her artistic vision, she depicted Joan as a humble, prayerful young woman who exemplifies inner strength. She is enveloped by a thriving and uncontrolled natural environment. Gloria Feman Orenstein, the first scholar to write seriously about *The Sister Chapel*, described *Joan of Arc* as “a child of nature; intuitive and untutored.”

Cynthia Mailman (b. 1942)

God, 1977

Acrylic on canvas, 108 × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of Cynthia Mailman and Silver

Sullivan, 2013

When choosing her “role model,” Cynthia Mailman reasoned that “a Sister Chapel should have a sister God.” She rejected the idea of depicting the archetypal Great Goddess, a generalized and collective entity. Instead, Mailman portrayed the supreme deity in the form of a woman. Since there were few antecedents for a female image of God, the artist executed a series of small studies in which she experimented with the figure’s posture, attributes, and environment. She ultimately positioned God astride the universe with the Sun as her halo, orbited by Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars. Seen from below, God has a commanding posture. She is nude because God needs no clothing. She lacks a navel because God was not born. Following the biblical notion that humans are made in God’s image, Mailman used her own face as a model. Although often described as a self-portrait, *God* was intended to transcend personal references.

Sharon Wybrants (b. 1943)

Self-Portrait as Superwoman (Woman as Culture Hero), 1977–78/2010–16

Oil on canvas, 108 × 60 in.

Rowan University Art Gallery

Gift of the artist, 2013

Sharon Wybrants portrayed herself in a costume that consisted of silver platform shoes, red nylon stockings, purple shorts, and a tight-fitting collarless shirt emblazoned with a star. She initially wore the Superwoman shirt when using her children’s nursery as a studio because she “needed some sense of separation, of empowerment,” in the male-dominated art scene of the 1970s. Unlike the heroines in comic books, who have impossible abilities and magical accoutrements, Wybrants’ Superwoman is invigorated by her inner strength and determination, yet her face conveys some lingering uncertainties. She emblemizes the uneasy balance of domestic and career aspirations, with which a number of second-wave feminists struggled. Wybrants’ painting disappeared in the mid-1980s and was likely destroyed. Prompted by a desire to see *The Sister Chapel* reconstituted, Wybrants executed a new version of her iconic painting.



May Stevens (1924–2019)

Artemisia Gentileschi, 1976

Acrylic on canvas, 108 × 60 in.

Estate of May Stevens

Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery

After recognizing her failure to teach students about female artists, May Stevens began to research the art and life of the sixteenth-century Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–after 1653). At the time, the lengthiest study of Gentileschi was a fifteen-page article, published in the *Art Bulletin* in 1968. Stevens based the figure's face on presumed self-portraits and derived the raised right hand from a drawing (1625) by Pierre Dumonstier le Neveu (c. 1585–1656). Stevens adapted the figure's costume from Gentileschi's *Esther before Ahasuerus* (c. 1630–35), which she saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Behind the figure is an inscription, written in Latin and painted with gold lettering, which records the artist's parentage and date of birth. This is followed by an excerpt of the transcript, in Italian, from the trial of Agostino Tassi (1578–1644), who was accused of raping Gentileschi. Her aggressive depictions of strong women are often linked to the rape and tribunal.

Betty Holliday (1925–2011)

Marianne Moore, 1977

Acrylic, charcoal, and collage on canvas,
108 × 60 in.

Collection of Anne and Vincent Mai

Betty Holliday enjoyed the poems of Marianne Moore (1887–1972) and had the opportunity to see her at panel discussions and poetry readings. Consistent with Holliday’s near-obsessive tendency to explore many aspects of a single subject, she executed numerous drawn and painted studies of Marianne Moore—including no fewer than four nine-foot canvases—over a period of two years. For the face, Holliday used a photograph taken in 1951 by Rollie McKenna (1918–2003) because it showed the American poet at her intellectual apogee. Moore’s dowdy dress and signature tricorn hat belie her “steel-sharp wit,” as described by Holliday, who explained, “I’ve made her whimsical and faintly Mary Poppins-ish, but if you will read the white gloves as gauntlets, the umbrella as a sword and the extravagant hat as a laurel wreath, you will have my evaluation of Marianne Moore.” Holliday later transformed the umbrella into a cane, leaving vestiges of its triangular shape and expressive lines.



Maureen Connor (b. 1947)

Chapel Structure, designed 1976, fabricated 2015–16
Nylon and velour over PVC framework, 25 ft. diameter
Rowan University Art Gallery

In 1974, Elsa M. Goldsmith’s husband, Robert H. Goldsmith (1915–1988), designed a portable structure to house *The Sister Chapel*, which was still in a formative stage. After seeing his designs in January 1975, Sylvia Sleigh criticized the structure as “servicable [*sic*]” but “rather pedestrian” and “graceless in its proportions.” She later proposed “a chapel by light alone, holding the panels and ceiling painting on a light metal frame.” Sleigh discussed this idea with Maureen Connor, who suggested a pavilion made of white fabric. Connor subsequently designed a nylon enclosure that would form a twelve-pointed star at its base. Draping over the exterior triangular projections would be a tapering cover of crimson velvet. When *The Sister Chapel* premiered at P.S.1 in January 1978, Connor’s maquette and three drawings for the unrealized structure were exhibited. Based on her designs, Patrick Ahearn constructed the full-scale fabric enclosure in 2015–16.

The installation of *The Sister Chapel* includes full-scale photographic facsimiles of Betty Holliday's *Marianne Moore* and May Stevens' *Artemisia Gentileschi*. The replica of *Marianne Moore* is displayed with the kind permission of Anne and Vincent Mai. The facsimile of *Artemisia Gentileschi* was generously provided by RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.



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