

# MONICA SJÖÖ

## THE GREAT COSMIC MOTHER

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# Monica Sjöö    The Great Cosmic Mother

Monica Sjöö: *The Great Cosmic Mother* is the first major survey exhibition of the Swedish artist, activist, writer and eco-feminist Monica Sjöö (1938-2005). An unwavering advocate of freedom from oppression in all its forms, Sjöö came to be an influential figure in both the Women's Liberation Movement and the international Goddess Movement. Tracing the artist's deep commitment to feminism and environmental justice, this retrospective exhibition considers Monica Sjöö's artistic and activist practice – a practice that also chimes with many challenges today.

**“The oppression of women in societies for the past few thousand years has nothing to do with our biology as women, but all to do with patriarchal culture and economic structures.” – Monica Sjöö**

Sjöö's works were made to be in this world as agents for change – political and spiritual. Her mantra was 'no spirituality without politics'. Her political consciousness was awakened in Stockholm by the anti-Vietnam war protests, the independent art scene, and early feminist movements. These experiences made up the foundation of her radical life as an artist and activist and she became a central figure in the British Women's Liberation Movement. Paintings installed in the first gallery chart Sjöö's prolific artistic output during this energetic period of feminist activism. At this early juncture, the women's liberation activism in the UK comprised campaigns around material conditions in the workplace and at home, which shaped a series of demands such as ending violence against women, protesting women's right to abortion and sexual autonomy, and campaigning for wages for housework, all visualised in Sjöö's paintings.

Sjöö's personal experience of motherhood was also deeply influential, as it was through her transformative experience of childbirth that her politics and spirituality became inseparable. During the natural home birth of her second child she experienced a profound connection between the power of her body and the divine force of the Great Mother/Goddess. The Great Mother or Goddess is the creative energy of the universe, whose divine force provided feminists with an image of woman as a powerful, protective and destructive originator of life. Images and symbols of the goddess have been uncovered and documented in most ancient cultures throughout the world. The Great Mother, or Goddess, offers an empowering model for overcoming patriarchal structures that oppressed women and dominated nature. Following this intensely spiritual birth experience, Sjöö created the painting *God*

*Giving Birth* (1968) and continued to channel the Goddess in her paintings.

In 1978, Sjöö continued connecting with the Great Mother by travelling to sacred sites surrounding Bristol, such as the Neolithic monuments at Avebury in Wiltshire. Here, Sjöö had a psychedelic and profoundly spiritual experience where she accessed deep ancestral knowledge through the ritual act of ingesting psilocybin mushrooms on Silbury Hill. The experience inspired her to paint *The Goddess at Avebury and Silbury* (1978), a vista of an ancient landscape that bleeds menstrual blood. After this encounter with the Great Mother, Sjöö's spiritual, eco-feminist, and artistic practices became increasingly intertwined.

**“By trying to dominate nature we are killing ourselves and only by cooperating with nature will we survive.”  
– Monica Sjöö**

The multiple, parallel forms of oppression Sjöö witnessed or experienced in her lifetime led her to believe that only a total radical feminist revolution would create meaningful change. This would not solely be a revolution of human social relations, but also in our relationship to nature. Her growing environmental consciousness took on renewed energy in the 1980s through her involvement in anti-nuclear protests and the growing women's peace movement in the UK. During a heightened period of Cold War tensions, the British Government agreed to house 'first-strike' nuclear weapons at a US Air force base at Greenham Common in Berkshire in 1980, as well as mobilising a US naval presence at Brawdy in Wales, close to Sjöö's home. Sjöö responded by setting up a branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in

Fishguard, taking part in a march from Cardiff to Greenham Common and making a banner for the emerging women's group 'Women For Life on Earth'. Sjöö also travelled to Greenham Common in December 1982, joining the Embrace the Base action in which 30,000 women linked hands around the perimeter fence, singing, chanting, and decorating the grid of chain links.

The 1980s was a period also marked by personal tragedy. The death of her two sons within a short space of time left Sjöö in a deep depression, losing her desire and ability to paint. One of the few works she made during this time was the painting *Rebirth from the Motherpot* (1986) displayed in the final gallery.

**“I had felt that I was mystically in communication with and guided in my painting by ancient women who perhaps in fact co-exist with us still, in a different dimension of reality.” – Monica Sjöö**

During her lifetime Sjöö felt excluded from the art world and was exhibiting primarily within alternative, feminist and political communities. She toured internationally, giving talks and slide lectures as part of her artistic practice with the intention that the politics were never lost. Sjöö also spent many years of her life travelling to sacred sites across the world connecting with the Goddess and gaining a better understanding of how knowledge from the prehistoric past might inform the future. A selection of artworks displayed in the end gallery depict these travels. Recurring motifs of standing stones, mythological figures and abstract symbols are set in sacred landscapes indicating the presence of The Great Mother in different incarnations and cultures across history. Sjöö published her knowledge of Goddess cultures in her highly influential book *The Great Cosmic Mother:*

*Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (1987), co-authored with Barbara Mor. She subsequently received invitations from a wide range of alternative groups and communities, including Goddess festivals and radical bookshops, to narrate the Herstory of the Great Mother to audiences by giving lectures using photographs from her research, some which are included in the exhibition.





Sjöö believed the spirit and energy of the Goddess or The Great Mother to be present in all of life's phases, an essence that saturated both nature and being. Sjöö viewed the oppression of women and minorities, as well as the exploitation of the land and the ravaging of the environment, as akin to violence exerted on the Great Mother.

Her lifelong research into ancient, matriarchal cultures shaped her thinking and art. She used this knowledge to sketch the contours of a different future, bringing together spirituality and political change. Sjöö looked back in time to find voices and contexts whose echoes could sound loudly in her present day in order to bring about total revolution. Her political involvement in the women's and environmental movements were inextricably linked to her spiritual conviction. Her politics always included action. Her actions included her art and she believed that her art was her activism.

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Monica Sjöö: *The Great Cosmic Mother* is curated by Amy Budd, Modern Art Oxford and Jo Widoff, Moderna Museet, in partnership with Moderna Museet, Sweden.

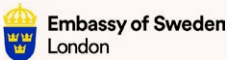
A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue of 'Monica Sjöö: *The Great Cosmic Mother*' is available for £22, published by Modern Art Oxford, Moderna Museet and Koenig Books.

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