

Susan & Gerald

Eckert Art Gallery

MILLERSVILLE ART & DESIGN

For immediate release



Betsy Damon Passages: Rites and Rituals

curated by Monika Fabijanska

February 29 – May 2, 2024

Tuesday – Saturday from noon – 5 p.m.
Thursdays from noon – 8 p.m.

**Public program: Betsy Damon, in conversation with Dr. Christine Filippone
Thursday February 29 from 4:15 – 5:15 p.m.**

Free and open to the public, doors open at 4 p.m.
Biemesderfer Hall, Winter Visual & Performing Arts Center

Opening reception: Thursday February 29 from 5:15 – 7 p.m.

**Address: Eckert Art Gallery at Millersville University, Winter Visual & Performing
Arts Center, 60 W. Cottage Ave, Millersville, PA 17551**

Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, performance on Prince Street,
New York, May 21, 1977. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1977/2021.
Courtesy of the artist and Monika Fabijanska Contemporary Art Projects

Millersville, PA, July 2023 – Eckert Art Gallery at Millersville University of Pennsylvania is honored to present **Betsy Damon. *Passages: Rites and Rituals***. The exhibition will be on view at Winter Visual & Performing Arts Center, 60 W. Cottage Ave, Millersville, PA 17551, from February 29 to May 2, 2024, Tuesday – Saturdays from noon – 5 p.m. and Thursdays from noon – 8 p.m. The **opening reception** will be held **Thursday February 29 from 5:15 – 7 p.m.** The exhibition will be accompanied by a Conversation with Betsy Damon and Dr. Christine Filippone, with audience Q&A on Thursday February 29 at 4:15 p.m., doors open at 4 p.m.

Passages: Rites and Rituals is the first exhibition of Betsy Damon's radical outdoor performance practice (1976-1986). It features the documentation of eight public performances, as well as *Body Masks* – erotic photographs from a 1976 private performative session. Curated by Monika Fabijanska, the exhibition was originally presented at La MaMa Galleria in New York, and listed by *The New York Times* among the best art shows of 2021.

"...what comes through is [Damon's] embrace of vulnerability and commitment to community. She opened herself up and challenged others to as well — and the photos suggest that she succeeded." – Jillian Steinhauer, *The New York Times*

"Betsy Damon's current solo show in New York successfully frames her as a pioneer of such a healing practice, and as a key artist through which to consider the relationship between art and activism." – Alex A. Jones, *The Brooklyn Rail*

"...the exhibition is an impressive historical record of an artist whose work exposed that the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature are done through the same structures. Ultimately, Damon's feminist performance practice lay the groundwork for a greater goal: environmental activism." – Ksenia M. Soboleva, *Hyperallergic*

Betsy Damon (American, b. 1940) began doing performance art with the Feminist Art Studio, which she founded at

Cornell University in 1972. Activism and community-building have been central to her feminist practice since the 1970s. A leader among lesbian activists in New York, she co-edited the third issue of *Heresies, Lesbian Art and Artists* (1977), and participated in the first lesbian art show in the U.S. (1978), curated by Harmony Hammond at 112 Workshop Inc., and *The Great American Lesbian Art Show* at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles (1980).

Damon's early performances addressed the erasure of women's narrative from history (*Blind Beggarwoman*, 1979-80, alluding to Homer), and their unspeakable subjects: mutilation and other gender-based violence (*7,000 Old Year Woman*, 1977-78; *Rape Memory*, 1978-79; *What Do You Think About Knives?*, 1980-81). The non-conformist courage of these performances consists not just in their subjects but – strikingly – also taking them out to the streets of New York and other cities, often without institutional umbrella. All of them placed woman's agency in the center of the public space. Some of the localizations chosen by the artists, like Wall Street or the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, were epitomes of patriarchal power.

Damon's performances as healing rituals soon grew to include concern for the environment (*A Shrine for Everywoman*, 1980-88 and *Meditations with Stones for the Survival of the Planet*, 1982-late 1980s), and she devoted her later practice to public space projects focused on preserving living water.

The distinctive vocabulary of Damon's performance practice – performing outdoors in city streets, inviting audience and other artists' collaboration, employing archetypes and elements of ritual, and her engagement with transnational feminism – at *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* at Amsterdam's de Appel, 1978, and the UN World Conferences on Women in Copenhagen, 1980, and Nairobi, 1985 – informed the development of Damon's later practice.

In 1995 and 1996, Damon organized *Keepers of the Waters*, two outdoor performance and installation art events with local artists, focused on water pollution, in Chengdu, China, and Lhasa in Tibet that fundamentally changed Chinese government's and public's understanding of performance art. An early example of transcultural socially engaged art, it left an indelible mark on avant-garde art of South-West China and led to Damon's award-winning eco-art project *Living Water Garden* in Chengdu, a six-acre city park demonstrating water purification through natural processes (1998). Today, Damon is among the most relevant pioneer ecofeminist artists, her social practice attracting growing interest globally.

Betsy Damon. Passages: Rites and Rituals features *Body Masks* (1976), *7,000 Year Old Woman* (1977-78), *Rape Memory* (1978-79), *Blind Beggarwoman* (1979-80), *What Do You Think About Knives?* (1980-81), *Meditations on Knives* (1981), *A Shrine for Everywoman* (1980-88), *Meditation with Stones for the Survival of the Planet* (1982–late 1980s), and *Listen, Respect, Revere* (1986). The exhibition comprises of photographs, videos, documents, and contemporaneous descriptions of these performances by artists who participated in them, such as Su Friedrich, Amy Sillman, Marcia Grubb, Harmony Hammond, and Betsy Damon herself.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Monika Fabijanska is a NYC-based independent art historian and curator who specializes in women's and feminist art. Her exhibition of Ukrainian artists *Women at War* (Fridman Gallery, 2022), listed among ten best art exhibitions of 2022 by both *The Washington Post* and *Frieze*, is currently touring nationally. *Betsy Damon. Passages: Rites and Rituals* (La MaMa Galleria, 2021) was among *The New York Times'* best shows of 2021, following *ecofeminism(s)* (Thomas Erben Gallery, 2020) and groundbreaking *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the U.S.* (John Jay College CUNY, 2018). Fabijanska provided the initiative and curatorial consulting for The Museum of Modern Art retrospective exhibition of Alina Szapocznikow (2012). Her writing has been published in edited volumes, exhibition catalogs, and art magazines. She teaches Curatorial Practice at New York University. www.monikafabijanska.com

For press inquiries, images and interview requests, please contact Heidi Leitzke, Eckert Art Gallery Director at

Heidi.leitzke@millersville.edu

Full documentation: www.monikafabijanska.com