

Shari Mendelson: *Animals, Idols, and Us*

By Ann McCoy



Installation view: *Shari Mendelson: Animals, Idols, and Us*, Tibor de Nagy, New York, 2020. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy.

Shari Mendelson's hauntingly beautiful sculptures—some part human, part animal, part divine—transport the viewer down the timeline into other worlds and dimensions. Their fragility and translucent luster are reminiscent of glass from antiquity and make us forget their humble origins. They are made from the discarded plastic bottles one associates with landfills and rubbish. To discuss them, we must excavate older concepts rubbished by a lot of critical theory such as animism, archetypes, numinosum, religious rituals, and the importance of votive and totemic objects. Mendelson's work makes us contemplate what we have lost in our secular age when many no longer acknowledge the importance of sacred objects and ritual practices, especially those linking us to the animal world. Perhaps if we had preserved this link, we would not be facing such a profound spiritual and ecological crisis.

Mendelson's rams transported me back to the nineteen-twenties when Sir Charles Leonard Woolley unearthed "the Great Death Pit" at Ur. Agatha Christie's second husband Max Mallowan had helped develop a delicate method using wax to remove soil from treasures like *Ram in the Thicket* (2600–2400 BCE). Mendelson's work represents a restoration of another sort and makes us long to reclaim things that our culture and art world in particular have discarded. During a walk-through I asked the artist what inspired her to make this work. She said going to the Metropolitan Museum and looking at antiquities from places like Egypt, Greece, Babylon, China, and Persia was a form of devotion, like attending a religious service: they sustained her spiritually. Objects may carry a numinous charge which does not diminish when seen in different cultures, even centuries later. We do not have

to be Isis worshipers or priests from Mesopotamia to be profoundly moved and instructed by votive objects. In *Living with the Gods* (2017), Neil MacGregor tells how the cleaning staff at the British Museum often find flowers and offerings placed before statuary of mostly Hindu gods. Some of my Native American friends worry about the Zuni fetishes and masks in museums not being fed with sacred corn meal, because for the Zuni they are not inert but alive. Human and animal deities represent archetypes which have an energetic component within the psyche. Bulls and rams appear across many cultures and ages, and are part of our collective memory and dream world, which is why Mendelson's works resonate.



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Tibor de Nagy, New York, 2020. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy.

It is interesting, in terms of a zeitgeist, that we are seeing women artists making new household gods. Leilah Babirye's latest exhibition, *Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda)* at Gordon Robichaux, interestingly, also features ancestral votive figurines made from discarded materials. In a time of economic hardship, when many are relying on food pantries to eat, it is touching to see these women working from humble materials and modeling the works with their own hands in loving detail. This is a departure from many big-ticket art market items that may tick off all of the boxes but can feel disappointingly like expensive products fabricated by an atelier of assistants and craftsmen.



Shari Mendelson, *Kneeling Powerade Goat Man*, 2020.
Repurposed plastic and mixed media, 10 1/2 x 5 x 10 1/2 inches.
Courtesy Tibor de Nagy, New York.

Shari Mendelson is not merely replicating objects from antiquity. *Greetings and Offerings* (2019) features an Anubis with a flowing cape rather than the heavy rear buttressing usually found on Egyptian statuary. The Sumerian *Vessel stand with ibex support* (c. 2600–2350 BCE) from the Metropolitan which inspired *Blue Ibex on Stand* (2020) has a much different stand and no topper, and the bronze original is remade by the artist in plastic with a bit of metal to stabilize the base. It is important to see how her works differ from their museum sources. *Kneeling Powerade Goat Man* (2020) is a departure from the Metropolitan's *Vessel terminating in the forepart of a fantastic leonine creature* (c. 5th century BCE, Achaemenid). The drinking cups of these nomadic Persians who roamed from Babylon and Persepolis are transformed by Mendelson into objects of wonder that survive the translation from hammered gold and silver to recycled plastic. Her overlays of hot glue and resins transform them into translucent vessels of another sort. Part of Mendelson's craft is her ability to take objects that once existed in a variety of materials such as ceramic, silver, glass, and faience, and transform them using modern materials. In antiquity, the spirit of the gods entered the craftsman and passed into the object. In many ancient cultures, the artisan was also a hierophant and practitioner of sacred mysteries. Mendelson's translucent figurines breathe with a life force all their own and are permeated with light. The procession of 25 vessels, dancing women, deities, and animals around the gallery acts as a congregational quorum for our age so starved for belief.

Excavations at Pompeii uncovered altars with household gods in situ. Gods made in terra cotta with molds made it possible to stock home altars from Babylonia to Egypt—the Phoenicians traded votive objects across the known world. Mendelson's magical figurines and vessels make us feel that this is a practice worth reviving. I saw this exhibition on election night as store fronts nearby were being boarded up with plywood. Leaving the gallery, I said a prayer for the survival and wellbeing of her assembled host, so needed in our chaotic world.

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