

HONG KONG

AXEL VERVOORDT

Ann Leda Shapiro *Body is Landscape*

ANN LEDA SHAPIRO, *Confusion*, 2025, watercolor on paper, 90 × 70 cm. Courtesy the artist and Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong.

Effervescent terrain, willowy figures, and meandering plants—Ann Leda Shapiro's paintings ripple with life, conjuring a cosmically sublime universe. Stepping into her recent exhibition at Axel Vervoordt Gallery in Hong Kong felt like entering a quietly lush dreamscape filled with mystical beings; and yet, despite the dazzling, transcendental imagery, her oeuvre is firmly grounded in the flaws and fissures of our earthly domain.

Marking the American artist-activist's solo debut in Asia, "Body is Landscape" brought together vibrant watercolor-on-paper works that explore the fragile, reciprocal relationship between human physicality and the natural world. A recurring motif that conceptually anchored the show was the tree, which, for Shapiro, serves as a "refracted self-portrait." Visitors first encountered this vegetal imagery in a small-scale painting by the entrance, titled *Mountain Made of Sunshine* (2025),



which features a leafless, towering tree whose flesh-toned branches coil and extend outward like reactive appendages. The intricately detailed piece is set against a dusky background strewn with stars—infinitesimal pinpricks of light that hint at Shapiro's studies of acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine, which she learned about in the 1980s while volunteering at an AIDS clinic in Texas.

Her interest in Eastern holistic philosophy—ideas of balance, renewal, and the interconnectedness of all species—emerges in various works. In *Confusion* and *Protection/No Protection* (both 2025), for example, Shapiro fulfills these principles through the visual equilibrium of warm and cool tones, and the clusters of orbs and spirals resembling microbes or DNA strands, which envelop the countless humanoid silhouettes floating across the panels. By dissecting, deconstructing,

and melding anthropic forms with organic elements—roots and stems, light and darkness, water and fire—she sublimates our biological reality and emotional experience into a vast expanse of psychosomatic entanglements.

Amid the celestial flora and ambiguous corporeality, *Transformation* (2021)—a petite canvas featuring a fiery blaze subtly shaped like a vulva—was the sole work in the exhibition harboring affective traces of Shapiro's long-running inquest into gender and sexuality. Unlike her earlier iconic paintings of hermaphrodite mermaids and female astronauts with protruding male genitals, many of which were censored during her 1973 solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, *Transformation* appears markedly restrained. A pioneering figure in the feminist art movement of the 1960s and '70s in the US, and a member of the

Guerrilla Girls collective founded in 1985, Shapiro is known for challenging patriarchal norms through vivid, unabashedly carnal depictions of desire and hybrid identities. This intimate piece, while more subdued, stands as a poetic snapshot of her evolution over the past five-plus decades: its glowing inferno channeling her lifelong, cathartic embrace of gender diversity and sexual liberation, yet also signaling a shift away from the "big and brash," as she once put it, toward a gentler, more introspective engagement with corpus and nature.

Although Shapiro has softened her approach, deviating from more graphic illustrations of human anatomy, her newer tableaux have not lessened in political verve. Scenes of disaster—both manmade and geological—permeated the exhibition: the *Tsunami* series (2019–25) limns giant, undulating waves in turquoise hues, while *Holding Back Nuclear Bomb* (2025) presents an atomic blast wrenching shadowy specters upward into the sky. The latter hung beside the only historical work on view, *Still Life with Atom Bomb* (1980), amplifying the horrors of war and its human and environmental toll, themes that Shapiro has been vocal about throughout her career.

Can we replenish our planet by healing ourselves first? In our current conditions of global climate anxiety and sociopolitical upheaval, "Body is Landscape" offered a gentle chamber for those weary of the chaos—not a reprieve or escape from our material context, but a space for rehabilitation in which to contemplate and recalibrate our fraught, enmeshed existence within an increasingly fractured reality.

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