

Ann Leda Shapiro

Light Within Darkness

February 22 – March 30, 2024



Ann Leda Shapiro: Light Within Darkness introduces Los Angeles to an artist who has spent decades exploring the ways that life, death, the body, and the landscape intertwine. The exhibition gathers eighteen paintings ranging from 1976 through 2023, tracking the evolutions and continuities of Shapiro's work. By taking the body apart and reconstructing it with elements from nature, she reflects the environment through the inner worlds of her figures.

Born in New York City in 1946, Shapiro was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1973, a show that was censored for imagery that challenged norms around the depiction of gender non-conforming bodies. An activist in the women's movement, her works at this time questioned the division between maleness and femaleness, pointing toward a unity that surfaces throughout her works. In the 1980s she became an early member of the feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls, using statistics, data and humor to underscore the imbalances in the institutions of the art world. After living and teaching around the country, she settled on Vashon Island, a ferry ride from Seattle, where she has maintained an acupuncture clinic and an art studio.

For Shapiro, healing and artmaking inform each other and have become a unified practice. *Out of the Web*, created in 1976 and the earliest work in the exhibition, embodies Shapiro's scientific, psychological and spiritual vision. The painting depicts a cosmic feminine figure, ringed in light and set inside a spiral with structures reminiscent of DNA. The product of many hours of repetitive and meditative focus, the piece is an early example of the ways Shapiro often bridges the microscopic and the macrocosmic. *Falling*, a notable work from 1980, is also influenced by biological diagrams. An energetic folding line recalling cellular structures demarcates a central area in which wispy stick figures are animated with saturated colors and a confetti-like spray. "I could apply all the principles I use in my healing practice looking at this painting," she noted, pointing to the mutualism between stillness and motion that is a hallmark of her work.

Interconnectivity is another theme that runs throughout the practice. Shapiro often depicts figures with nesting structures and a focus on certain anatomical elements. In *Containment* from 1991, a glowing seated figure with a chest full of alveoli-like clusters is surrounded by plumes of red, orange, and

François Ghebaly

Los Angeles

New York

Hollywood

Ann Leda Shapiro

Light Within Darkness

February 22 – March 30, 2024

yellow. Shapiro often leaves motion ambiguous in her work. Are these clouds intruding on the figure or emanating from it? Elsewhere small figures are shown either pushing into a body or pulling against it. These both-and relationships highlight the idea of unity—the yin and yang not as oppositional forces but as complements to one another.

In more recent work, Shapiro shifts her attention more overtly to the landscape, portraying trees, water, and celestial objects as bodies interrelating. Shapiro has described the trees in the landscape *Dream Bodies* (2021) as kinds of refracted self-portraits. One is gnarled and bent over a body of water as if seeking sustenance; the other is firmly rooted and reaching skyward toward an ovate sun. For Shapiro, who works with layered visual references, these trees become lungs at the same time they stand for stability and rootedness in the face of chaos.

"I want to do intimate paintings, slow art, vulnerable art," Shapiro has stated. "I want to do the opposite of big and brash." *Light Within Darkness* reveals an artist who has committed herself to the vulnerability of the body and the earth and to extending a particular sense of tenderness and care across her decades of painting and healing.

Ann Leda Shapiro (b. 1946, New York City) is currently included in the exhibition *Green Snake: Women-Centered Ecologies* at Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong. She has shown extensively in university and community exhibition spaces, as well as in exhibitions at Banff Art Center, Banff; Frye Museum, Seattle; Manetti Shrem Museum, Davis; Seattle Art Museum; Autry Museum, Los Angeles; the Boulder Museum of Art; and De Cordova Museum, Lincoln. She is the recipient of a MAC Fellowship from the McMillen Foundation, a Pollock-Krasner Grant, and a Twining Humber Award. Her works are held in the public collections of the Seattle Art Museum and the Frye Museum, Seattle. Shapiro lives and works on Vashon Island, Washington.