

Schwartz, Alexandra and Woolfalk, Saya. "Goddesses and *The Empathic Universe*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, 28 January 2025.

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE · INDEPENDENT AND FREE
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Goddesses and *The Empathic Universe*

By Saya Woolfalk and Alexandra Schwartz

Alexandra Schwartz: We are collaborating on your first retrospective, *Saya Woolfalk: The Empathic Universe*, opening at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) on April 12. The exhibition brings together two decades of your site-specific installations, including garment-based sculptures, video, works on paper, and performance. The story-world of the *Empathic Universe* is a parable of how cultures mix, clash, and ultimately transform through shared understanding. Do you think about the concept of the goddess in relation to the *Empathic Universe*?

Saya Woolfalk: In some ways all my work thinks through femme-centric spaces and patriarchy. What the implications are for social organization, communication, nature, and humans' relationship to nature. Also, about collectives and collaboration.

I'm excited that the MAD show will allow people to experience the entire story-world at once. The show will span the fourth and fifth floors of the museum.

The fourth floor will introduce the first part of the story world. *No Place* (2006-08) is a fictional future utopia populated by a part-human and part-plant species called No Placeans. They can change gender and color, turn back into the landscape when they die, and transform refuse into usable technologies. The Empathics are people in the present who believe No Place is a utopia worth inhabiting and choose to metamorphose both physically and culturally to become hybrid plant-humans.

I hope when people come to the fifth-floor space, they will have a more dislocating experience, almost like going into some sort of temple to an omnipresent patriarchy. This floor introduces ChimaTEK (2013-15), the Empathics' technology company, and their Life Products, including the ChimaCloud. This floor will be immersive and includes work from my "Woods Women" series.

Schwartz: Are these characters—the No Placeans, the Empathics, the Woods Women—goddesses?

Woolfalk: I don't really make goddesses, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about them. But in my story-worlds, my characters are people. Maybe the "Woods Women" are more like goddesses, because in my recent work I am thinking more cosmologically.

Schwartz: You have always been thinking cosmologically, though: *The Empathic Universe* is a whole belief, or spiritual, system.

Woolfalk: Yes, but with the "Woods Women," I want audience members to experience the exhibition space as a cosmological space. Somewhere where they can reimagine their bodies' relationships to nature. Whereas in my earlier work audience members are introduced as outsiders to a spiritual system that exists but they cannot necessarily enter.

In my current work, I'm creating all this material—works on paper, monuments, large-scale installation, glass pieces—to make the viewer feel as if they're embedded in *The Empathic Universe*, instead of outside of it. Embedded in rather than outside of nature, because

patriarchal speculations are so much about being outside of nature, looking at it as an object, and owning it.

Schwartz: Could you tell me more about the “Woods Women”?

Woolfalk: The “Woods Women” came out of my looking at Hudson River School paintings and reflecting on Eurocentric patriarchal speculations on landscape. They are a thought experiment, which is why they might be the most like goddesses. Goddesses are archetypes; they're not really people. They do have human characteristics, and you can flesh those out, but when you're in a space with a goddess sculpture you're simply in the presence of whatever those characteristics are.

This work evolved from *Cosmic Cartographies* (2019), one of my collaborations with Aimee Meredith Cox. That was probably the first project where I thought to myself, “The people who are inhabiting the space are being transformed by it, and the space itself is distributing cosmological information, a symbolic system, transforming something inside of your body.”

Schwartz: Are you talking about what spaces articulate through their design, which is done by humans? Or are you talking about actual cosmology? Let's say that you're in the temple of Athena. Are you talking about how some Greek people decided to portray Athena? Or are you talking about an actual spiritual encounter, or cosmology, that includes Athena?

Woolfalk: Both. I had a wonderful conversation with Daniel Alexander Jones and Aimee Cox. The three of us described ourselves as “affect technicians.” It's a way of describing our efforts to create immersive experiences that stimulate the emergence of prelinguistic experiences. In the case of my collaboration with Cox, the affect was based on her ethnographic research into Black women activists seeking out utopian pathways for social justice in Cincinnati. In my work I am creating particular spaces that can hold that affect. I want those spaces to feel like they've always been there. But they're portraying different affect, and different sets of relationships and ideologies, than what would have traditionally been placed in that space. But the ideologies I'm thinking about now are the same ones I've always been thinking about. How can we dislodge colonial categorization systems that create hierarchical relationships among humans? How can we think as if we're embedded in nature? How can we think more as if we have fluid gender identities that are both male and female? With the “Woods Women”, I try to *create* these spaces and move away from thinking of them as fictional representations.

Schwartz: When you say you're moving away from the story-world, what does that mean exactly? Are you talking about your creative process?

Woolfalk: I think so, but I think it's also about process for the viewer. The issues my work addresses are things that we're constantly dealing with, and we need new symbologies to deal with these things. When I was first developing *The Empathic Universe* a lot of explanation was necessary for a general museum audience regarding empathy across gender and racial difference, cross-cultural hybridity, and climate change. That is less the case in 2025. Today we have climate disasters constantly, our reproductive rights are very much at stake. There's more urgency.

I like your example of the temple of Athena: going to the temple, having that experience, and understanding what the “affect technologist” of that moment was trying to distribute through the iconography and symbolic system that's surrounding the sculpture and the viewer. Then as they look, viewers learn more about the specificities of that character in that temple. Going back to the role of the goddess in *The Empathic Universe*: I think the goddess informs everything.

Schwartz: So the goddess is the possibility of a non-patriarchal society?

Woolfalk: The goddess is the possibility of a non-Eurocentric, non-patriarchal cosmology. I try to find that goddess everywhere. In my family life, friendships, teaching, and in my art.