

# *Tossing and Turning*

*John Haber  
in New York City*

## **Kathy Ruttenberg and Elizabeth Glaessner**

### **Siobhan Liddell and Linda Matalon**

Have you ever tossed, turned, and paced through a sleepless night only to greet with dismay the dawn? **Kathy Ruttenberg** could have anyone afraid of the sun.

A wild and wooly exhibition may put on display her fantasies or her fears, assuming that one can tell them apart. Ruttenberg works in ceramics, a medium long associated more with craft than art, while refusing almost anything resembling craft. She takes on gender roles as well, with a woman's body just barely under a woman's control, and she is hardly alone. **Elizabeth Glaessner** is only the latest to place it front and center in painting, while **Siobhan Liddell** and **Linda Matalon** in works on paper and assemblage offer a reminder of how the gender and the body became pressing issues in the first place. As they say in politics, sunlight is the best disinfectant. Just take care to step out of the shadows without standing in its way.

### ***Good day sunshine***

Dawn for Kathy Ruttenberg comes sooner than you ever dreamed, with "Sunshine at Midnight." It brings with it, though, an out-of-control cast of characters and a whole new day. They may stop just sort of cheap entertainment, but temptation of every kind is part of the show. Trees stand tall, while animals with human faces circle them in an infinite or futile dance. Autumn leaves and spring flowers spread outward from the branches. Besides, if sunshine begins at midnight, you may yet get in a few hours sleep.



Already in 2018, Ruttenberg had some of the liveliest **New York summer sculpture**, along Broadway on the Upper West Side, but with its share of anxiety, too. With *In Dreams Awake*, a woman sprang from or was swallowed up by a tree, before finding herself upside down on the ground with the world on her feet. Atlas may bear the world on his shoulders, in the Art Deco landmark by Lee Lawrie in **Rockefeller Center**, but Ruttenberg handles it deftly, if only for the summer or the night. She may have been celebrating the power of dreams or just making the best of insomnia. Her title could have been a shout-out to Delmore Schwartz and his famed short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibility," or just to folk tales with their own moral demands. Now she is wide awake and on her feet.

The real threat may be to men, if only in her wildest dreams. A young woman holds the sun, proudly, between her hands and above her head. In other works, it stands in for the head of a slippery swimmer and crowns her overgrowth of brown hair. She has it bad, with a tree perched on her head, like an ill-fitting hat, but a young man has it worse. The

moon shines down from the treetops without piercing the darkness, but only on him. At least she has an abundance of rocks, earth, animals, and vegetation at her feet.

That includes the yellow flowers growing from his back while she waves a hand in scorn or belated blessing. Scarier still, he lies on his back in a bed of flowers, sliced open with two broad cuts. Who knows what to call his blood-red stuffing in place of functioning organs, other than art? Still, he is a decent enough companion and a formidable adversary. He gets a stag's head and a muscular stance now and then, while holding a cord embedded in her back. I hesitate to call it a leash.

Craft is everywhere, with **tapestry** and **quilting** as well as ceramics, with particular acclaim for the messiest clay firing. Like Ruttenberg, **Arlene Shechet** celebrates gender parity and diversity, while bridging the gap between porcelain and a woman's life. I cringed a bit when I heard that the opening would feature more of the same. Still, **an adventurous gallery** makes the most of a decent trend with a sprawling exhibition. It extends to the backyard, where one can finally get to know a plainly human cast. Yet the mythic wins out even here with, at last, some relief.

The woman does not look all that much like the artist, but is she an alter ego nonetheless? The couple face one another on the garden wall, drawn rather than sculpted, with a tree between them and 3D apples on the ground. They could stand for temptation in Eden or just the distance in a dysfunctional relationship. Still, a rug with its own floral drawing leads to a fountain—a life-size tree from which water lands in the woman's mouth. Back inside, a cut into her chest reveals a darker woods, and never mind if one cannot see the forest for the trees. Ruttenberg is a busy artist, and one advantage of being awake at night is not having to quit.