

Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood

The Photographers' Gallery and The Foundling Museum, London, October 11, 2013–January 5, 2014; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, April 25–July 13, 2014; and Belfast Exposed, Belfast, October 24–December 20, 2014

Reviewed by Ruth Rosengarten

Since our private lives—the desires and attachments occurring in our homes—are where ideology most insidiously nestles, representations of mothers in Western culture have always spoken about the broader cultural value of maternity. It is easy to see how, at the level of contemporary vernacular culture, images of celebrity women who “have it all” (career and family) and “yummy mummies” alike reinforce notions of photogenic, heterosexual, middle-class motherhood embedded in the symbolic (and real) economy of consumerism. But the work of ideology is also in evidence historically in fine art practice, where countless representations of the Madonna and Child and, later, their secular reiterations testify to an idea of maternity as proximity and nurture, all the while affirming “the maternal” as the idealized incubator of patriarchal—and spiritual—transmission. In short, motherhood is so corporeal and so intimately linked to our very existence that, while we may be conscious of the conceptual underpinnings of its representations, we are not automatically aware of its ideological moorings in our very lives: mediations to which we rarely remember having consented.

Curated by Susan Bright, the exhibition *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* addresses such notions, at once dearly held, ideologically freighted and largely unconscious, and, through the work of twelve artists, explores the parameters of maternal representation in photographic fine art practice today. The gestation of the project followed the birth of Bright's own daughter in 2008 and the plethora of “celebrity mum” media images that she found herself confronting at this time. However, the accompanying book, granting the exhibition the afterlife it deserves, moves away from this personal investment to a broader account and theoretical examination of the cultural foundations

(and political implications) of maternity, both historically and currently. The work of all twelve artists is profoundly personal, partaking of the “autobiographic turn” that is so abundantly in evidence today in the visual arts, and in the humanities in general. Scrutinizing particularities has always been the remit of photography and, in this sense, exploring autobiographic specificities is one possible branch of that which photography does best. Nevertheless, at the same time, such immersion in *this life*, the photographer’s own reality, exposes a raw nerve in all of these works. Therein lies their power; since that rawness is always in excess of the ideological burden borne by the motif of the maternal. At the same time, each work exposes something of our culturally honed expectations with regard to maternity.

In its London showing, the exhibition took place at two venues: the work of the eight artists at The Photographers’ Gallery probed and vexed stereotypes of motherhood, while that of the four artists at The Foundling Museum chimed with the melancholy and loss that the permanent exhibits of that museum overwhelmingly convey. However, binding the work of all twelve artists are themes of attachment and separation, and an exploration of the material conditions and effects of motherhood, sometimes across generations. These include the conditions of its inception and its disruption of life as previously known, but also the failure to make it happen; the messy realities of tending daily to an infant and the many predicaments of breach and absence that hinder the continuity of motherhood as a life-project, such as stillbirth, adoption, physical or mental illness, and finally death.

While several of the bodies of work are unsettling, and not one provides an entirely reassuring take, none is so unnerving as Leigh Ledare’s *Pretend You’re Actually Alive* (2002–12). This brings together photographs of his mother taken in a snapshot or archival style (both equidistant from any form of aestheticization), alongside other archival ephemera, tracking her

life from beautiful ballet prodigy to ageing porn actress having sex with young men. Aware of the incestuous, erotic electricity that charges not only the images but the very scene of photography—Ledare pointing the camera at his needy, narcissistic mother—these works undermine all dearly held notions of family, of boundaries, and of maternity as provision.

At the opposite extreme, Elinor Carucci’s work tests the borders of the Madonna motif, cradling her newborn twins Eden and Emmanuelle to her swollen, naked breasts, or bottle feeding Emmanuelle, her elegant neck stooped to allow the child’s hand to brush her face. Carucci employs the camera in its traditional mnemonic capacity, “since the passing of time is so apparent in the children’s lives.” Always consummately composed and exquisitely lit, these works focus on the relationship between beauty and the abrasive or sticky realities of birth and child-care (stitches, stretch marks, snot, tears, bruises).

An overlapping terrain is excavated by Ana Casas Broda, whose *Kinderwunsch* is a vast, multilayered project tracing her long-unrealized desire for a second child, through much medical consultation, experiments with reproduction technologies, and the birth of that child, and onto her own postnatal depression, the activation of memories of her own childhood, of her young mother, and the central part played by her Austrian grandmother. With color and lighting heightened through the use of digital editing tools, Casas Broda’s images pay close attention to her own naked body (bearing the marks of weight gain, weight loss, and childbirth), sometimes lying down or in a bath, often playing with her young children. Frankly contemporary—the stark baroque lighting seems to emanate from a console or screen—the images of naked bodies slippery with milk or soap, or of maternal skin in contact with delicate child skin, touch on a ubiquitous if buried vein of maternal desire. Using milk, modeling clay, foam, crayons, and toilet paper, the children’s games with their mother



Fig 1 Ana Casas Broda, "Action III," 2011. From *Kinderwunsch*. Madrid: La Fábrica, 2013.

are innately corporeal, invoking with candor the enveloping and visceral voluptuousness of these early relationships at their best, yet touched with the melancholy of their inevitable eventual loss.

Hanna Putz's photographs of her friends as they became mothers (2012) similarly focus on the physical bond, the skin-on-skin of mother and child, but in a purposefully reticent fashion. (In this way, they counter the saccharine connotations that such proximity is enlisted to communicate in the media). Eschewing the confrontational gaze common in portrait photography, and often preferring back views and hidden faces in bare settings, Putz's photographs address the notion of passing time by staging a link between the "pose" as temporal arrest and the embalmed stillness of photographic capture. A more stylized physicality is tapped in Janine Antoni's photographs (2009). Antoni's work has always mined a rich seam of sensuality at the body's orifices and physical boundaries (hair, skin, teeth), and her photographs draw on both sculpture and performance. *Inhabit* entailed Antoni being suspended in a harness while a spider spun a web through the interior of a doll's house. Solid form contrasts with the delicate but firm structures secreted by the spider; a home within a home.

In opposition to the elegant, composed quality of Antoni's images, Katie Murray's convey a sense of disorganized happenstance associated with documentary photography, whose genre specifications her work explores. Everyday activities noisily crowd into the film *Gazelle* (2012), splicing images of Murray's two infants clamoring endlessly for attention as she staunchly exercises on her *Gazelle* cross trainer to work off her "mummy fat," with wildlife footage of a gazelle set upon by cheetah cubs and finally sprinting to freedom. It remains marginally, outrageously possible that Murray, at once nurturing and flustered, will similarly bolt.

Fred Hüning's project (2007–12) is a trilogy of exquisitely produced, intimate books following the photographer and his wife through the stillbirth of a first child, through coping with death and grief, sex and coupling, to the conception and birth of a treasured living child. The portrayals of both his wife and the surviving infant are tender, adoring even, but delicate and reserved. Loss and grief are also explored in the bleaker five-year project of Elina Brotherus, tracking her attempt to conceive by IVF, and speaking directly to the different outcome of Ana Casas Broda's desire for a child. The ironically chosen title, *Annonciation*

(2008–13), sets off a chain of associations with waiting for something miraculous to happen, a link in particular to Quattrocento paintings, to which the diffuse lighting, the stillness, and the geometrically balanced compositions of these photographs seem to allude. The series charts the isolation and devastation of coping with the inability to conceive when everyone around her seems to have no trouble in doing so.

Moving on to the Foundling Museum, the note of desolation and loss is amplified in all but Annu Palakunnathu Matthews' work, which grapples with the flow of time with greater acceptance and equanimity. Focusing especially on the women in the families shown, Matthews' *Re-Generation* (2010–12) brings together digitized archives and contemporary found photographs. These are vernacular images tracing several generations of a family, collapsing them into films shown on digital tablets simulating family albums. The editing and the transitions from one image to the next collate in spectral superimpositions generations that would not know each other, passing through time and linking history to the present.

The remaining works deal with motherhood from the point of view of the child, the daughter. As an adopted child, for years Ann Fessler has devoted herself to working on the subject of adoption. Her experimental film *Along the Pale Blue River* (2001), consisting of video and archival footage, tells the story of her search for her birth mother, who had run away when pregnant as a teenager: the journey brings Fessler to the symbolically resonant realization that the river flowing through her childhood home town had its source in her mother's town. A different kind of loss is registered in Tierney Gearon's *The Mother Project* (2006), where the brilliant color and stark contrasts of light and shade throw into relief the unsettling images. Both posed and spontaneous photographs show her interaction, and that of her children, with an aged, but still

beautiful mother afflicted with deteriorating mental health; in one haunting image, bathed in golden light, the younger woman sits astride her mother in an open field, their mouths poised for what could be mistaken for a lover's kiss.

Miyako Ishiuchi's delicate, melancholy photographs (2001) show close details of the ageing body of a mother with whom she never really got on, the scarred and puckered skin a remainder and reminder of an earlier accident. After her mother's sudden death in 2001, Ishiuchi photographed the objects that had enjoyed contingency with her mother's body—hair-tangled brushes, lace-trimmed underwear, and tubes of lipstick all convey a doleful sense of loss. These magnified objects at once reverberate with their own quiddity and act as bodily metonyms.

Susan Bright is too discerning a curator and too thoughtful a writer to suggest that there is any kind of unmediated or universal truth that these images of motherhood convey. Rather, their orchestration drives home the sense that motherhood is not a single, monolithic entity, but is as multiple as its diverse subjects. Together, the works bring to light variegated and nuanced representations of engagement and alienation, holding and loss that define specific contemporary experiences and representations of motherhood.

Note

Ruth Rosengarten is an artist and independent researcher. Born in Israel, she lived in South Africa and Portugal before settling in the UK, where she completed her PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She has taught on various under- and post-graduated courses, curated several exhibitions, and published and exhibited diversely. Current research and practice revolves around photography and the archive. She is currently Research Associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg.