

## MUM

In 2013 I became pregnant and my focus predictably sharpened on a groundswell of artists embracing the rich creative fodder of motherhood. When my daughter was six months old, I joined an 'Art Mum's Group'; a loosely formed collective of artists endeavouring to reconcile the competing responsibilities of motherhood with a desire to maintain their creative practice in an art world not always geared toward supporting the realities of parenting. While a space to vent, the group, and others like it across the world, is underpinned by an inspiring sense of personal and collective agency.

The simple idea of women coming together to share personal experiences to build awareness and mutual capacity was of course the backbone of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, a time when social perception was shifting and the personal became political. Consciousness-raising groups multiplied across America and beyond, facilitating a deeper understanding of women's oppression and motivating collective action to bring about change. Subjects like childbirth and parenting began to make their way into the discourse and politics of representation.

The iconography of motherhood in art and visual culture was examined in the recent encyclopedic exhibition *The Great Mother*, (Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2015). Through the work of over 100 international artists, writers and film-makers, curator Massimiliano Gioni traced a history of sexual politics, women's empowerment and the breadth of female representation from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. From the epic to the pointed, international to local, other recent exhibitions have also offered perspectives on this multi-faceted subject indicating a continued relevance and current mobilisation.<sup>1</sup> This is unsurprising given recent speculation that current birth rates in the Western world are rivalling those of the 1950s 'baby boom'.

The exhibition *MUM* sits within this broad context, invoking the lineage of art exploring motherhood, parenting and the lived female experience. Each artist draws upon the joy, grief, anxiety and chaos of motherhood to unpack the primal exchange of raising another life and the physical and psychological evolution this entails. Sidestepping and in some cases entirely subverting common tropes and traditional classifications, their responses are raw, sincere, playful, often absurd and at times confronting. There is no sappy Hallmark sentiment here, nor clichés or stereotypes.

Clare Rae's photographic series *20+9+5* explores a self in transition. Using the expansion and contraction of her body and the growth of her baby as markers, Clare charts her physical and psychological passage into motherhood. In *Post Baby Belly* and *Untitled #1, Pregnancy*, Nina Ross interrogates the validity of old wives tales and the public response to her pregnant and post-partum body. These works highlight the artist's personal anxieties as well as the absurdity of cultural rituals and social attitudes surrounding motherhood.

In her video work *Hands*, Hanna Tai draws attention to the charm of simple gestures as she observes her daughter's tactile investigation of the world during her first year. Objects large and small and the pet cat are equally scrutinised as Mei's awareness of and relationship to her surroundings evolves. Applying a similar observational approach, Meredith Turnbull examines the process of introducing art-making to her now 19 month old daughter Roma, through collaborative durational drawings created on their kitchen floor in the immediacy of their domestic environment. Like maps, the resulting *Kitchen Drawing* series record Roma's development and the pair's shared daily experiences.

The sometimes-overwhelming daily experience of parenting is writ large in the photographic portraits of Ilona Nelson's *thisplace.* series; each informed by the real-life experience of a mother. Much like the 'hidden mother' of nineteenth century child portraiture, each subject poses in an everyday setting effaced by the detritus of child-rearing which renders the identity of the parent subordinate to the needs of the child. Shrewdly articulating the complexities and anxieties of parenting, Erika Gofton's *Liminal* works depict angelic children shrouded in plastic. These hauntingly real paintings are at once beautiful and confronting; much like the desire to protect children from danger and corruption, which, borne out of love can become suffocating.

In Kate Just's *Armour of Hope*, her adopted daughter Hope appears battle-ready in hand-knitted armour, which promises to keep her safe. Kate has also knitted a pair of reversible gloves for herself, embellished with



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the words *Hope* and *Mother*, complete with embroidered scars. In *Skin of Hope*, Hope has drawn a smiling child on her mother's back. Through the devotional process of making and documenting, Kate weaves an account of the pair's resilience and capacity to love and the ways they connect and imprint on each other through the intimacy of skin; both at its surface and its depths.

Probing the boundaries of biological conceptions of motherhood, Catherine Bell investigates interspecies relationships and the primal instinct to nurture, turning her attention to the maternal bond she shares with her dog Archie. In *Mother and Son* their relationship is memorialized in an embroidered snapshot. Through her profound love of Archie, Catherine has found a kindred spirit in glamorous art patron Peggy Guggenheim who had many dogs throughout her life. Her deep affection for her 'beloved babies' was enshrined on a tombstone mounted next to hers.

*MUM* brings together a collection of diverse personal experiences and direct responses to motherhood, providing insights into what contemporary mothers think about themselves, parenting and its place in society. It endeavours to challenge the limitations of stereotypes like the hallowed mother of religious allegory and the 'pin-up' mother of lifestyle magazines and examine what it really is to be a mother. *MUM* embraces the complexity of lived female experience and its representation and offers a range of perspectives that compose an image of the mother that is tender, powerful and complex.

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2016

<sup>1</sup> Recent exhibitions of note include *Re-Raising Consciousness* (TCB, Melbourne, 2014), *Parenting is Political* (BUS Projects, Melbourne, 2016), *The Let Down Reflex* (Foundation for the Arts Project Space, New York, 2016) as well as *Artist-residency in Parenthood* (107 Projects, Sydney, 2016) inspired by the work of Lenka Clayton who in 2013, entered a self-initiated *Artist Residency in Motherhood*, a conceptual artist residency undertaken over a period of 227 days in the artist's home and within her life as a mother.