

Rebecca Baillie

'Modern Madonnas' – 13 Artists respond to the 'Mother and Child' theme

St. George's Arts, St. George's Church, Esher, Surrey, UK

26 May – 17 June, 2012

'Modern Madonnas'*¹, an exhibition that featured the work of thirteen British 'mother artists' from May-June this year, was memorable in many ways. Not only was the artwork itself strong and revealing, but the actual location and experience of viewing the exhibition in a sixteenth century church added an at once sacred and humbling quality that I found fittingly comparable to the experience of being a mother.

The location, St. George's Church in Surrey, formerly the parish church of Esher, is constructed from chequered stone with a shingled wood bell tower. The building materials are noticeably unusual and the church is said to have been one of only a few built during the Tudor era, described in the history books as 'England's first Protestant church'.¹

Upon entering the church, it is clear that the structure is protective and built to last for an eternity. There are small drawings of circles within circles that remain to this day on the wall by the main door – these exist as appropriate reminders of the mark-marking (or could we say art) made by the medieval folks who long ago inhabited the building that now provides home to contemporary art and modern day visitors. Indeed, the overall impression of being in this church is one that I compare in my imagination to the feeling of being in the womb; there is a sense exuded that as an individual you are supported by an intricately designed and bounded space, while at the same time, you are made clearly aware of your role – within a world much larger, beyond these walls and shared – as only one tiny element passing through the ever running continuum of time.

In true support of the exhibition's theme, I travelled to Esher, from London, with my two-year-old daughter, along with two friends and their two-year-old daughters. The trip was a pleasure for us all. We were awe-inspired by both the place and the work, while the girls felt safe and had fun playing in the church grounds. The work featured in the exhibition was curated in a way equally as organic as our experience of viewing it. Art hung from the ceiling as well as the walls, was placed on the floor, as well as within the church pulpit, by the altar,

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and even under pews. Adding to the underlying sense of ‘universality’ at work in the show, contemporary sculpture stood comfortably next to already existing stone carvings and other original artistic features with more permanent homes at St. George’s.

Debi Retallick’s *Mother and Child* sculpture, for example, hung with an elegant and looming presence next to an antique-style panel carved in detailed stone relief – the panel features actual figures of women and children while Retallick represents the ‘maternal’ bond through the creation of a large pear, one larger fruit that bears smaller fruits from a womb void of space within. Both pieces of art – despite the fact that Retallick’s appears cool in its whiteness, and that the stone panel is literally cold to the touch – are incredibly tactile. I remember noticing that one of the women in the stone relief procession looked pregnant; equally, Retallick’s sculpture recalls the state of pregnancy and the female body’s ability to recreate miniature versions of the self. Perhaps it is the subject of pregnancy important in both of these works, new and old alike, that makes you just want to touch them – like the urge to caress a swollen pregnant belly, my hands were magnetized to make contact.



Debi Retallick, *Mother and Child*, 2012, Papier-mâché

A feeling of repulsion, as opposed to the attraction that I mention here was experienced when watching the video piece *Eating Eggs*, by artist Maggie Rose. In this work, the artist sits as a lone figure at the kitchen table, constantly and repeatedly eating a large bowl of already peeled hard-boiled eggs. Sickness is induced upon watching the action and a desire to

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intervene and tell the artist to stop. The sense of the work, for me, is that there is too strong an emphasis and import placed on a woman's fertility. It makes the viewer ask questions such as: what if a woman does not want to reproduce? What if she can't? What if she is forced to? Indeed, the message is one of ambiguity, one that importantly reveals the notion of motherhood as a repressive test of endurance, as well as a feat of empowerment (as in the traditional image of the Madonna). A second work by Rose, also featured, is called *A Nest of 40 Eggs*. This piece also considers a woman's fertility and her potential to grow and create life. Here, as eggs transformed into orange light bulbs represent ova, and their surrounding nest is constructed using deer antlers, the feeling is that the artist understands that a 'maternal' relationship may not always be born, as is tradition, between a mother and child. Perhaps the child is the act of creation itself, signified by the light of the bulbs. Also, and interestingly, the woman potentially establishes a connective union with a powerful deer, rather than a fellow human, in order to build her nest and to feel secure.



Maggie Rose, *A Nest of 40 Eggs*, fallen red deer antlers and eggs

Ambiguity, and the idea that conception, pregnancy and birth are potentially metaphors for the act of creation (i.e. making art), rather than simply stages of an actual experience always and only tied directly to becoming a mother, are continued in the abstract sculptures of Kasia Depta-Garapich. Depta-Garapich creates pillar-like sculptures, which although seemingly strong on first appearance, are in fact constructed only of paper and are thus inherently fragile. The curator of 'Modern Madonnas', Rebecca Price, has suggested that the structures act as a metaphor for the precarious nature of a mother's role in holding together the family. I

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view the works, however, as altogether more abstract. As the artist cuts through layers of paper to extract a series of circles that become detached from the main body, both the detached parts and the remaining 'whole' exude the need to be at once united and separate. Thus, the work speaks of the tragic make up of the human condition: that we all exist alone, but always in need of, as well as in acknowledgement of the plethora of relationships that surround, create and sustain us. Indeed, the circular cut outs recall the sun and the full moon, and the very same notion that even the greatest of individual sources need connectivity and the mass of the world around them, in order to shine and to be creative.



Kasia Depta-Garapich, *Hold*, 2010, Paper

The mystery of moonshine and a quality of dreamlike abstraction is also present in the dark, monochrome, although in actual fact, entirely figurative etchings of Jean Thompson. Thompson, unlike Depta-Garapich, illustrates people in full bodily form. However, there is always a sense of the otherworldly, and of scenes created to highlight emotions felt, rather than actions actually happening in the illusive drawings of Thompson. There are often both adult and baby figures present in this artist's work, although we remain unsure who bears the emotions of a foetus, and who signifies responsibility, and to a certain degree, knowing. It seems in the end, that all who are present in the scene are somehow lost. Perhaps the adults are more lost than the children, for in an interesting role reversal, one of the etchings is called *Mother in Pram*, in which a mother sits withered and forlorn as her little girl pushes her along.

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In another etching from the same pram series, *The Priest in the Pram*, the adult depicted bears a mask-like face that could be either male or female, and appears to be clinging to a smaller baby self. It seems that the adult clings to a dependent connectivity bound tightly within one's own self. Thus the separate baby must stand (even before it appears able to stand) alone and alienated, independent from the start.



Jean Thompson, *Mother in Pram (Pram Series)*, 2011, Etching with aquatint

By contrast, the final two artists whose work I will discuss in detail make the dependence and sharing that they experience together with their children visible and clear. Tracey Kershaw included photographs in the exhibition of herself, 'the mother artist', performing everyday rituals that make her child's life seem valued and supported. For example, she cuts her child's fingernails and picks up peas from the dinner table, and pays attention to the details of a mothering reality, rather than perhaps more of an imaginative fantasy as observed in the work of Thompson. Which of these two approaches, we may ask, is ultimately more revealing of the question, what does it mean to be 'maternal'? If to be maternal is fundamentally defined by connectivity to all people and things, it seems that perhaps Kershaw, although a good mother, is trapped within an everyday role, and thus fails on another level, to be 'maternal'?



Tracey Kershaw, detail from *Cutting his nails (I)*, 2011, Photographic print

Sophie Morgan, for me, somehow bridges the gulf between Thompson and Kershaw. Morgan draws 'blind' (with her eyes closed and without removing pencil from the paper) embraces with her child. As we see an actual embrace, we are aware of a parent-child relationship that does exist. However, we are not tied to reality in a way that can be debilitating; the artist's simple technique, that of closing her eyes, assures the viewer that the unconscious still flows strong, and that a world of imagination has married a moment in reality to create meaning beyond what is actually being depicted. The drawings by Morgan are exquisite as well as intimate; they remind the viewer that there is always a serene, spiritual 'otherness' attached to the, at times, frenzied, physical 'realities' of mothering.



Sophie Morgan, *Mother and Child*, Pen on paper

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I have discussed the work of only a selection of the 13 artists featured in ‘Modern Madonnas’. The other artists involved include Peggy Cozzi, Susan Francis, Wendy MacMillilian, Zita Saffrette, Sonja Benskin Mesher, June Gillert and Lulu MacDonald, if you so wish to do further research following this review.

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1 Howkins, Chris, *Hidden Surrey: Town and Country* (Newbury: Countryside), 1990, p.65.

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