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BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

Review of *Reconciling Art and Mothering*

Reconciling Art and Mothering, by Dr. Rachel Epp Buller (Ed.), Routledge, 2012, 332 pages, \$149.95/£75.99; Paperback, 2016, \$54.95, ISBN-13: 978-1409426134, ISBN-10: 1409426130

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Artists are increasingly working the subject of motherhood. Recent standouts include Lise Haller Baggeson's *Motherisms*, Jess Dobkin's *Lactation Station Milk Bar*, Christa Donner's *Cultural ReProducers*, and Lena Simic's *Institute for the Art and Practice for Descent at Home*. All have become vital resources for seekers of process and community, and all are available on the Internet.

Motherhood-related conferences have also been flowering. Among them, London's South Bank University Conference on Motherhood and Creative Practice, the Mothernists Conference in Rotterdam, both in 2015; the College Art Association's 2014 conference in Chicago, Illinois, which featured *The M Word* panel organized by Myrel Chernick, Jennie Klein and the Feminist Art Project; plus others in Canada, Ireland and India.

I have spoken at some of these as the non-mom at the mom party as my studio practice has led me to the unloved issue of women without children. So when I read Rachel Epp Buller's *Reconciling Art and Mothering*, an extraordinary collection of essays about and by women artists, I was struck by its relevance not just to the child-smitten, but to everyone. Now in paperback, and more affordable, the book deserves a wider reach.

I write this in the glum shadow of two clouds – the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the Brexit vote. In the former, Hillary Clinton, the first woman running as a major party candidate for the presidency, was unexpectedly defeated. Her rival,

Donald Trump, a thuggish businessman with no experience politically or diplomatically, raised whoops of joy among his large base of supporters despite (or because of) his racism, misogyny and evident dishonesty. It seems no woman, mother or otherwise, is yet qualified to lead the free world, regardless of her clear qualifications. That Clinton could win the popular vote, but not the election is an idiosyncrasy of the American voting process. She won the game, but lost the prize.

The U.K.'s Brexit debacle left two women contending for David Cameron's abandoned Prime Ministership. One candidate, Andrea Leadsom, quickly shot herself in the foot by asserting her motherhood made her better qualified than her childless rival. The ensuing outrage crippled Leadsom, leaving her rival, Theresa May, undistracted – it was implied – by the raising of children to serve as Britain's second female PM.

Politically and culturally, gender and maternity still count. Which brings me back to Buller's book, an important read for everyone, regardless of parental status. *Reconciling Art and Mothering* collects 24 illustrated essays by art historians and artists. The historians open the conversation with essays about artists working from the 17th century through the present. The second part of the book gathers essays by artists who are mothers along with examples of their work.

They write frankly about the difficulties of balancing their expressive compulsions and filial duties, and how motherhood's discontents, as well as its joys, shape their artistic practices. Other subjects the essays share are breastfeeding, mother/daughter legacies, the body and its reclamation, motherhood and creative practice, and intimacy.

Buller's introduction cites Lucy Lippard's 1976 complaint about the scarcity of exhibitions about childbirth, women's bodies and childrearing, and her admission that she kept her own motherhood a secret. Lippard, Buller writes, noted that women artists, especially in older eras, typically kept their status as mothers hidden for fear of male criticism.

But in *Modern Motherhood and Female Sociability*, Heather Belnap Jensen illuminates one who did not – Marguerite Gérard, an 18th-century French painter, now largely forgotten, whose career was overshadowed by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, the famous brother-in-law under whom she studied. While remaining single, Gérard managed the Fragonard household. Her paintings highlighted (and romanticized)

women caring for children and showcased female bonds, making her work a window into women's lives.

One painting, Gérard's 1802 *Mother Nursing her Child* was renamed *Family Mother Watching the Breastfeeding of her Child by a Wet Nurse*, then *Mother Nursing her Child, Watched by a Friend*. The changes reflect cultural discomfort with the act of breastfeeding and the idea of wet nurses. Breastfeeding, as both a motherly ideal and a discomfiting concept, continue to stir controversies as women's bodies still preoccupy and unnerve Western society.

I

Breastfeeding and Beyond

Breastfeeding is a frequent subject among the book's essays — from Deborah Wilk's *Of Milk and Homeland* and Denise Ferris' *Spoilt Milk to Lesbian, Pervert, Mother*, Erin Barnett's piece about Catherine Opie. Opie's disruptive self-portraits — featuring her tattooed, pierced and scarred body breastfeeding her son — reveal a hidden female world. And placed Opie at the forefront of conversations about relationships, gender roles and parenting attitudes.

Opie's photographs directly confront idealized notions of motherhood and make us realize that even today breastfeeding is usually only acceptable if discreetly hidden so as to not offend. To many feeding an infant is like peeing in public, a shameful necessity best conducted behind closed doors (and, say some, only in bathrooms, the domain of bodily waste).

Buller chronicles her own breastfeeding in *The Food Landscape*, a visual diary of her youngest's weaning, recounting the color and smell of everything the child ate, printed from ink made from the eaten foods. The diary is reminiscent of Mary Kelly's and Margaret Morgan's breastfeeding drawings, while the materials of Buller's landscape are as fleeting as the aspect of childrearing they document.

Dealing with mother/daughter legacies, Jessica Dallow's *Departures and Returns* focuses on Betye Saar and her daughters — Lesley, Alison and Tracye. It starts with an interview question: What was it like to be a single mother of three and a professional artist? "What's the difference?" Betye replied. Dallow describes the influence of the Saars on each other as well as their connection to the informal, extended families of

artist collectives. Citing African American artists and writers, like Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker, who draw strongly on their maternal relationships, Dallow also shows how women artists use their lives in their work.

Renée Cox's provocative photographs of her pregnancy and after the birth of her son illustrate the pregnant body and its reclamation. Andrea Liss's *Making the Black Maternal Visible* shows how Cox toys with the Madonna/whore dichotomy by displaying her nude body in attitudes of grace and pride. Historically, Madonna images were rarely questioned as long as male artists made them or they portrayed an idealized motherhood.

Cecily Cheo's *Participatory Practices Between Mother and Daughter* discusses the artists Amanda Heng (Singapore) and Shia Yi Yiing (Chinese Malaysian) by describing the complicated paths non-Western women artists who are also mothers must navigate in their own cultures. Heng's series of large photographic prints, *Another Woman*, is especially powerful as she employed her practice to build a relationship with her mother where none had existed. Heng's mother, like other women of her generation, did not escape her era's traditional gender roles. She married young and had 11 children, while Heng had the opportunity to get an art education in Singapore, work within the art world, and later study art further in the United Kingdom. This introduced Heng to ideas, like feminist theory, that led her to incorporate nudity into the portraits with her mother and in her performance work.

Shia Yih Yiing uses her extraordinary skills as a painter to transform images of her children and family into exemplars of social action in allegorical scenes that comment on political issues, the Malaysian family structure, globalization and the need for Malays to travel abroad for work and remittances.

II

Madonnas by the Bushel

In *I've Got It From My Mother*, Elżbieta Korolczuk focuses on the central role motherhood plays in creative practice in Poland, where madonnas lurk on virtually every street corner. Her focus is on a group of artists who are pushing the boundaries of motherhood's representation. In particular, she cites Anna Baumgart, whose idealized images of herself and her daughter incorporate myths, fairy tales and religious

symbols in sculptures and photographs that play with the stresses of raising a daughter in a culture that she feels overemphasizes female appearance.

Korolczuk also describes the 2005 photographic series *Mothers*, a project of Monika Redzisz and Monika Bereżecka, a.k.a. the Zorka Project. *Mothers* captures unretouched nude and semi-nude women from multiple generations. The women do not meet ideal standards of beauty. We see the women – middle class, wealthy and homeless – in their real lives, their images raising questions about beauty, power, representation and responsibility. In doing this, *Mothers* seeks to reclaim authority for women over presentations of the female body.

Charles Reeve's *Jess Dobkin* focuses on Jess Dobkin, a radical performance artist exploring the ideal of the nurturing dyke. Dobkin fearlessly challenges ideas of proper behavior, while incorporating aspects of play and childhood. In *It's Not Easy Being Green*, Dobkin lip-syncs the eponymous song while covered in green body paint and being fist-fucked by a fellow performer. In *Lactation Station Milk Bar*, Dobkin serves breast milk to the patrons of a bar.

Additional essays introduce artists working with the themes of motherhood and creative practice through first-person accounts about the impact of motherhood on their lives. Many have incorporated the stuff of their parenting routines, giving us a front-row seat on the messy minutiae of their lives – the annoyances, the hi-jinks, the joys, and the passions.

Elizabeth MacKenzie's large graphic self-portraits, drawn in 1989, anticipate selfies by showing the artist holding a camera and facing the audience. Erika Swinson's installations feel like an imploded baby's room. Gail Rebhan's video collages of her adult children's rooms play with the idea of voyeurism, while the text-based works of Meryl Chernick and Joan Linder confront the ever-changing roles they have assumed. Nané Jordan's photographs of her masked children sitting at the breakfast table, Mimi Smith's knitted dead baby, and Maru Ituarte's video projections of her nude pregnant self all speak frankly about the difficulty of balancing art and other responsibilities.

Intimacy is a recurring theme throughout. Diana Quimby, whose work features her very pregnant body from vantage points emphasizing the discomfort of the

experience, notes the enthusiastic responses she received from other artists, and the less-than-enthusiastic ones from curators who felt the work was “too intimate.”

Too intimate for what? Modesty and shame died back in the 20th century, along with VHS tapes and street corner phone booths. Today, we live in a sexting, Snapchatting world where murders are live-streamed, dick pics arrive unsolicited, and tell-all memoirs are publishing’s bread and butter. If the granular stuff of women’s art and lives is considered too intimate to be taken seriously, then the subject and the artists themselves become irrelevant. The honesty and intimacy Buller’s artists share is the lens that allows us to see ourselves more clearly.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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