

**Intimacy's Agents, a Review of
Reconciling Art and Mothering,
Rachel Epp Buller, editor, Routledge, 2013**

By Miriam Schaer

Artists have been increasingly producing work on the subject of motherhood. Recent standouts include Lise Haller Baggeson's *Mothernisms*, 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.

Conferences featuring motherhood-related content 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 participated in some of these as the non-mom at the mom party, as my studio practice and research into childlessness has led me to speak about 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.

As I write, Hillary Clinton is the first woman running as a major party candidate for the U.S. presidency and, while she is more qualified than most other candidates in recent history, she is being viciously attacked in a way male candidates are not. Her rival, Donald Trump, has no experience politically or diplomatically, yet raises few eyebrows among his large base of supporters despite his racism, dishonesty, and predatory character.

Meanwhile in the U.K., the Brexit debacle left two women — Andrea Leadsom and Theresa May — as the final candidates for David Cameron’s abandoned Prime Ministership. Leadsom quickly shot herself in the foot (and blamed the media for inflicting the wound) by asserting her motherhood made her better qualified than her childless rival. The ensuing foofaraw led Leadsom to step down, leaving May, it’s implied, undistracted by the raising of children, as Britain’s second female PM.

Which brings me back to Buller’s book, which strikes me as 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 practices and filial responsibilities. Motherhood’s discontents as well as joys often become the focus of their artistic practices. Other subjects many of 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, and worked around this limitation.

But not all women did. 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 Gérard remained single, she 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 an ideal and a discomfiting concept are themes that continue to stir controversies as women's bodies still preoccupy and unnerve Western society.

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 attitudes toward parenting, including breastfeeding.

Opie's photographs, which directly confront idealized notions of motherhood, make us realize that even today breastfeeding is usually only acceptable if discreetly hidden so as to not offend PG-rated public sensibilities. To many, feeding a small child is like peeing or shitting in public, a shameful necessity best conducted behind closed doors (and, say some, only in the bathroom, 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 Betye's response to 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 artists 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 the content of their lives in their work.

The body and its reclamation, in pregnancy and after, is illustrated by Renée Cox's provocative photographs in pregnancy and after the birth of her son. 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 produced them or they fulfilled an idealized notion of 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 aspects of 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.

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 Berezicka, 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 passion.

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.

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