

# **Maternal Bodies in Visual Culture**

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Simultaneously one and two, intimate and public, hidden and on display, the maternal body occupies a site of multiple interest and investments for the individual and for the collective. As a process that occurs within a woman's body, pregnancy is structurally located in the personal and private sphere, but is always also public property, signified and signifying through social and cultural discourses and subject to legal and medical constraint. Studying the maternal thus engages with the ways in which the maternal body is experienced both as a material site of somatic and psychic identity and produced as a discursive category in language and representation. My interest in studying the maternal was born of my pregnancy at the age of forty, which surprised, enchanted and terrified me in equal parts and radically transformed my own sense of identity and embodiment. This coincided with my writing an essay on the female nude in German women's art, which during the course of my pregnancy morphed into a fascination with the unfamiliar figure of the maternal nude (Betterton 1992). I start with this personal anecdote because, like many feminist academics, my experience reframed my research and in my case has led to a continuing preoccupation with the maternal body in visual culture. Over the past two decades, representations of maternal bodies, foetal imagery and pregnant embodiment have become the subject of feminist critical investigation across fields as diverse as philosophy, literature, art, science studies and cultural studies. From the disciplinary perspective of art history, I am particularly interested in the power of visual imagery to frame our understanding of maternal bodies in ways that may affirm, disrupt or contest prevailing maternal ideals.

In western visual traditions, the maternal body has been conceptualised primarily as a container for the unborn child and its central modes of representation are the Christian maternal ideal, enshrined as the sacred vessel of divinity and the scientific concept of the pregnant body as a receptacle for new biological life. While the maternal body has been continuously visible within visual culture, it has thus been discursively produced in historically different modes and sites. Marina Warner's groundbreaking

study of the Virgin Mary opened up the question of religious investment in the maternal body (Warner 1978) and Julia Kristeva has since argued that Christianity provided the 'most refined symbolic construct' for the representation of maternity, identifying the figure of Mary as 'privileged object' in European culture (Kristeva 1986, pp.161, 174). Feminist studies have mapped the representation of maternal bodies in science and medicine from the Enlightenment to new reproductive technologies and the visual status of fetal personhood within abortion politics. Other recent analyses have focused on the maternal subject in contemporary media, for example Ann Kaplan's study of cinema (1992), Sandra Mathews and Laura Wexler's survey of pregnant photography (2000), and Imogen Tyler's analysis of the increased visibility of celebrity pregnancy (2001). The practice and theories of artists such as Mary Kelly and Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger on maternity has been the subject of feminist debate and a small number of art exhibitions in the UK have also explored the themes of motherhood and (in)fertility. My work on maternal embodiment has addressed the pregnant nude in the work of modernist women artists, the representation of new reproductive technologies, and the monstrous maternal in contemporary art and media (Betterton 1996, 2006). This field of visual studies has begun to explore the ways in which diverse images of the maternal can be strategically read and represented from a feminist perspective, and to demonstrate how it is possible to trouble the maternal ideal and expose what it works so strenuously to deny - the agency and potential power of women as maternal subjects.

By examining images of the maternal produced in women's contemporary art, I suggest that we can find one site of possibility for reconfiguring maternal embodiment from the point of view of maternal subjects and in ways that value the body differently. As imaginative practices of materialising bodies in space, artworks can explore tensions and contradictions in maternal representation and, potentially, offer new figurations of what Rosi Braidotti has called a 'materialist theory of becoming' (Braidotti 2002). Susan Hiller, Catherine Elwes and Tracey Emin have explored their 'maternal ambivalence' through a range of different material and visual strategies that re-map the topography of pregnancy and the maternal psyche (Parker 1995). Marc Quinn and Alison Lapper's depictions of her pregnant body in relation to disability open up a space for re-imagining somatic norms and socio-maternal identities. Helen Chadwick, Christine Borland,

Elizabeth Mackenzie and Anna Furse have used embryonic imaging, genetic and *in vitro* technologies to explore new maternal environments, while Louise Bourgeois' recent works made an old age figure the maternal subject as a powerful agent of fertility, marking a return to the birth scene as a central topic of her work. Many works by women artists ranging from Monica Sjoo's early *God Giving Birth*, 1970, to Paula Rego's *Abortion* series, 1997-8, represent pregnancy as a rupturing of feminine and maternal norms rather than as a natural state, and all displace earlier maternal ideals in favour of a hybrid production of differences that suggest alternative visual genealogies for the maternal body.

Why study the maternal now? Maternal bodies are currently under reconfiguration from within, and without, in ways that interrogate the status of nature and human identity. What do these new figurations of the techno-maternal and the embryonic signify? Do new representations of becoming human offer different kinds of maternal and social attachments? What are the ethics and aesthetics of the twenty first century maternal body? And, so long as the young, heterosexual, white, able, middle-class body remains privileged in contemporary maternal imagery, it seems imperative to continue to explore other bodies and concepts of maternal embodiment that are constituted in diverse historical, cultural and political formations: a flesh that is imbued with sociality.

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