

Rebecca Baillie

Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood The Photographers' Gallery and The Foundling Museum, London, UK, 10 October 2013 – 5 January 2014

In the same way that the parent and child are distinct and separate whilst remaining undeniably connected, so too are the parallel shows curated by Susan Bright on photography and motherhood at The Photographers' Gallery and The Foundling Museum. Although part of the same story, the atmosphere of the two exhibitions is completely contradictory. As you enter the Foundling Museum, you are immediately greeted by loss. Originally a home for abandoned children, perhaps sadness and longing has somehow seeped into the walls. However it has happened, loss overwhelms as you enter the museum; it then follows behind as you walk down a grand staircase and arrive inside the hidden basement space, home, for the time being, to the work of Miyako Ishiuchi, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Ann Fessler and Tierney Gearon.

This work, exhibited together, left me somewhat speechless, breathless, and wanting to get away. As the eye moved between the intricately photographed possessions of Ishiuchi's dead mother, the melding of past and present in a digital family album created by Palakunnathu Matthew, and the fraught insanity at once observed and stimulated by Gearon, the ear listened to the depressed, echoing voice that guides Fessler's searching journey to a place where her mother no longer lives. There is nothing to hold in this space; by this I mean, all bodies have been taken over by emotion that is deep and intangible. The mothers are dead or absent, and the present becomes insignificant as individuals fade into a background that speaks more of continuum, of our brief appearances in the world and then, more forcefully, of their decline and disappearance. Being in this space was a 'womb-like' experience as one felt as though he or she was reverting to an earlier state of things, becoming uneasy owing to the confrontation with Freud's notion of the 'death drive'. As a mother of young children, the weight of the nostalgia, and the urge to look back rather than forward to the future, seemed to trouble me more than it would have done in the past. I felt an urge to see pictures of a life at the start, abound with carefree energy and limitless potential.

The selection of work at The Photographers' Gallery re-aligned my balance and helped me to breathe again. On the night of the private view, the space was alive in dialogue with the work. The Katie Murray piece made me laugh out loud, and for all of the pain witnessed in other

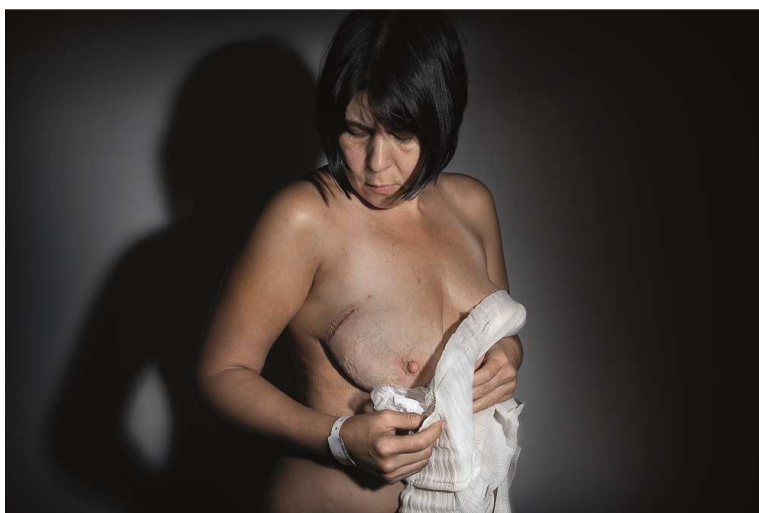
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surrounding images - the blood, cuts and bruises - this gave the work immediacy and a place in the everyday. And thus the video brought the viewer back to earth from the realm of the spirit world (found at The Foundling Museum), ready to make connections and to be a relevant and active spectator.

After initial thoughts stored from the private view evening, I returned to The Photographers' Gallery with a notebook one morning. Typically, the page that I opened up to start making notes was covered with drawings of people, done by my 3 year old daughter, using yellow highlighter pen. They are beautiful pictures – big heads, big eyes, and lines everywhere for arms, legs, even for ears I think. Opening my notebook on this page reminded me of such an important point made by this exhibition: that once a mother/parent, one's life is fully invaded, in all of its aspects, by one's children. It seems only wise to integrate your children into your work, as perhaps this is the only way to give both the full attention that they deserve?

You go up the stairs to The Photographer's Gallery exhibition, right to the top of the building; there is a slither of glass on one of the walls that gives an amazing view of the far off horizon and suddenly, all journeys seem possible. Having said that, the view also makes clear that death is never far away either, just one step if you so desired. The work of all of the photographers in this part of the exhibition very successfully marries boundless potential with the sharpness of death, not in a depressive way as in the work housed by The Foundling Gallery, but more in a straight to the point, matter of fact way. Perhaps the experience of giving birth does this to a mother: as likely the closest that she has come to dying, suddenly flesh torn, wounds and blood split, become more common place.



Ana Casas Broda, *Scar*, January 14, 2011
From the book *Kindervunsch*, 2006-2011 © Ana Casas Broda

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The work of Ana Casas Broda unites many of the reoccurring themes that we see throughout the show. Her work presents a family portrait. Interestingly though, in the images hung in the gallery – for there are more in the artist’s book of the same title, *Kindervunsch* - her husband appears only once. Father of the artist’s two sons, he holds the mirror as one of his boys shaves his head in a kind of ritualistic male rite of passage. In the work of Murray, the father figure seems baffled and wants to remove himself from the scene, whilst Fred Hüning and Leigh Ledare, although the artists, illuminate not themselves, but the women with whom they are obsessed. In this sense, what is happening in this exhibition is very complex. It acknowledges the necessity to challenge and subvert tradition, but at the same time does not eliminate long-standing ways of looking or of making art. In the same vein, despite the fact that some artists in this exhibition have suggested that their work moves away from the traditional Madonna and Child depiction of motherhood, it is interesting that some of them re-stage the pieta (Broda and Hüning), some veil their heads (Hüning) and that in general, the iconic mother and child image remains strong throughout, in particular in the work of Broda and Elinor Carucci. What is interesting no doubt is that the woman in the picture is now active artist as well as mother, model, muse, and furthermore, that imagery considered ‘feminine’ is taken to be a profound subject matter for male and female artists alike.

The bathtub is a good example of a motif that has long since been depicted in the history of art - from *The Death of Marat* of 1793 by Jacques-Louis David, to more recent depictions by Frida Kahlo and Francesca Woodman – and that will continue to haunt the imagination and recur in contemporary work. Tellingly, not only in the recent series *Annonciation*, but also in the artist’s oeuvre as a whole, Elina Brotherus explores the significance of the bathtub. When Brotherus takes self-portraits in the bath, we also see the cord that links her to her camera; and as she longs for and imagines a new child, it is reasonable to suggest that the cord that links her body to the camera is reminiscent of the umbilical cord that could, potentially, connect her and a new life (although the cord could also of course make reference to her own past and to the umbilical connection shared with her mother). Interpreted at once as a self-preserving and life-giving womb space, as well as a potential watery tomb, it is also interesting to return to the work of Broda using these terms. Her portraits in the bath, making use not only of water, but also of milk and mud, conjure at once elements of Eros and Thanatos. Some photographs in the *Kindervunsch* series illustrate this idea particularly well; there is one in which Broda’s son lovingly washes her hair (in the bathtub), while there are two others, in which, along with his brother, he

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covers her mouth with his hand, and in another with bandages and plaster. On the one hand such images arouse feelings of self-preservation, self-love and sometimes sexuality, but on the other, they unearth a tendency to undo connections and to move toward, what Anton Ehrenzweig has referred to as ‘entropy, a leveling down of the difference between inside and outside and a diminution of internal tension through externalization.’¹ As already suggested, Broda works with this idea beyond the motif of the bathtub, who by involving her children as collaborators, reveals how the wonder and life force of play (in drawing and making things) can also incorporate ideas of death, as toilet tissue renders her mummified, and felt tip pens transform her into a zombie.



Ana Casas Broda, *Bathroom III*, August 10, 2010, Small actions series,
From the book *Kindervunsch*, 2006-2011 © Ana Casas Broda

In the same way that Broda becomes a blank canvas for her children’s imagination, or added material for their developmental play, the works of Hannah Putz render the mother and infant as bodies transformed into sculpture. It seems that there is an element to birthing a child that marries so well to the process of making art, as though the experience or observation of such a profoundly physical experience best links to the other most profoundly physical experience, that of making art. Here, we are dealing with photography, but the works in ‘Home Truths’ constantly reference all other techniques of making an emotional life visible, that of painting, performance, and sculpture. Hüning’s depictions of his wife are intrinsically linked to Renaissance portraiture of the Virgin Mary. Like Putz, he makes use of the same pastel palette and soft, illuminating light. Like Brotherus and Broda, he too employs the motif of the bathtub;

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he does so as a portrait of his naked wife's body submerged, with their young son's head appearing between her legs to once again present a marriage of Eros and Thanos. Hüning's version of the repeated motif acts as reminder of the beginning of the child's life, but also of the potentially suffocating role of the mother. Although in a different way, Carucci also re-visits the bathtub, and often sits with her children in 'typical' mother and child poses. Whilst Hüning's virgin wife is clothed not in fine ultramarine robes, but rather in either a head towel or a hoodie, Carruci presents the iconic mother figure sitting on the toilet with her knickers pulled down; both, in their own ways, showing clearly that there is always an awareness, if not a total subversion of what has gone before.

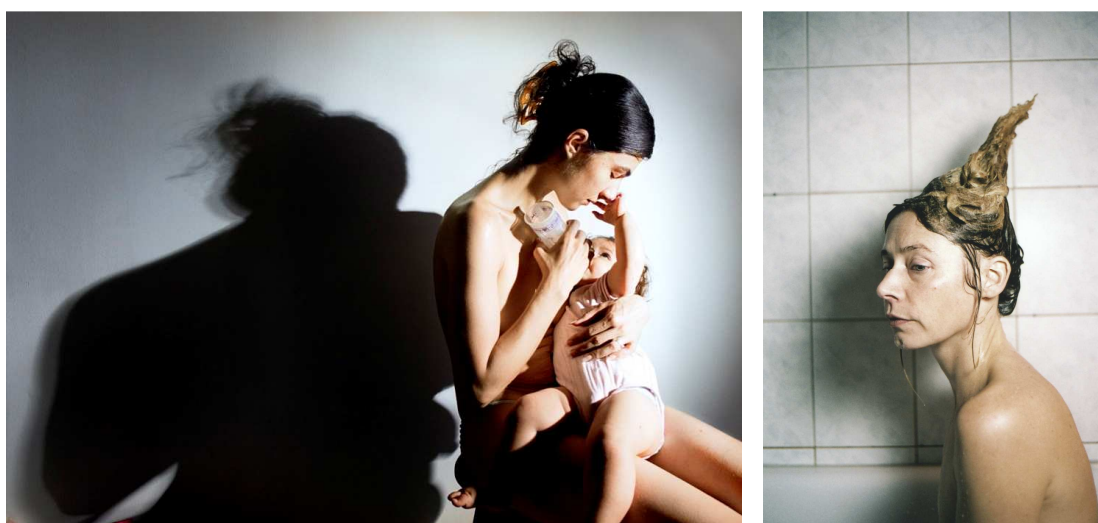


Fred Hüning, Untitled (Bathtub II), from the book one circle, 2011 © Fred Hüning

There is a beautiful shadow in a photograph by Broda that depicts her examining a recent scar on the side of her breast. Carucci also presents a revealing shadow in the portrait titled *Feeding Emmanuelle*. The shadow is a very affective way to illustrate questions surrounding the depiction of self; it introduces the idea of doubling and of both splitting and connectivity between the inward

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and outer self, as well as between the mother and child. The shadow at once integrates and presents the individual as separate and elsewhere; indeed, there is a strong feeling of the otherworldly that comes with the use of shadows. The poetics of self is also touched upon by many artists in the exhibition through their representation of hair. In one of his images, Hüning shows his wife with an empowering foamy pyramid towering from her head. It is as though her hair, like her shadow, helps to emphasise the strength and power of her passion and energy stored within. Carucci very successfully links the poetic and the physical in her self-portrait after giving birth to twins and having had a c-section. To date, this is the only image that I can recall in the history of art that depicts a caesarean scar; like miscarriage and abortion, this is very unfrequented subject matter. Carucci clearly shows the pain that her body has experienced, with butterfly stitches still helping to re-seal her abdomen, but she also includes a strand of her own hair in the picture. This helps to restore feelings of connectivity, whilst the wound suggests severance. The single strand of hair could be associated with the umbilical cord, and well reveal Carucci's exploration, not only of her relationship with her own children, but also the life line that she still extends to and from her parents.



Left: Elinor Carucci, *Feeding Emanuelle From a Plastic Bottle after I Stopped Breast-feeding Her*, 2005 © Elinor Carucci/INSTITUTE Courtesy of the artist

Right: Fred Hüning, *Untitled (Hair Tower)*, 2009 © Fred Hüning

Ledare focuses his body of work for the show entirely on his relationship with his mother. The relationship is very confusing; in the video piece titled *Shoulder*, the viewer/listener has no idea if the woman/mother is crying, laughing, or having an orgasm. Whatever is happening, it seems that fiction and staging are most sophisticated in the work of Ledare. And interestingly, by including himself and other family members in the scenes, he shows that it is through a plethora

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of relationships that his mother has been elevated to icon. The obvious presence of sex in this oeuvre combined with the theme of motherhood is troubling. Why is this though, when it is through sex that mothers are made? The viewer feels more comfortable with the subtle eroticism of Carucci, a smearing of pink lipstick to remind us that mothers also have love lives, but that these do not fit into the same frame as scenes of attending to their children.

Returning to the *Annonciation* series by Brotherus, she too combines pain and poetry. Her abdomen is presented as bruised after numerous failed attempts at fertility treatment. However scenes are bathed in warm golden light, and the artist is revealed through a Fra Angelico archway as she sits accompanied by symbolic white lilies. Brotherus is very aware of the progression of art history, as well as the particular significance of the medium of photography taken in this context. Below her photographs are annual calendars. By including these obvious markers of time, it is made clear that the traumatic relationship that artist experiences with her diminishing fertility is comparable to the special considerations of photography. Roland Barthes wrote of photography, that the medium depicts life gone forever, and acts as a sort of ‘mini-death’, while Margaret Iversen deduced that photography results in ‘a collapse of time that seals one’s own fate’.² We certainly feel that Brotherus mourns the missed experience of becoming a parent each time she makes image. Particularly poignant to Brotherus’s work, Barthes links photography to birthing and to the mother, when he writes in *Camera Lucida*; ‘a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze’.³ This considered, could we say that it is Brotherus’s photographs that become her children? Is her maternity – if this is an abstract concept basically based on making powerful connections within life, thought and art – even more wide-reaching having never experienced the distracting day-to-day demands of bringing up young children?



Elina Brotherus, *Annonciation 2*, Helsinki 18.03.2009 part 3 © Elina Brotherus
Elina Brotherus, *Annonciation 5*, Avallon 19.12.2010 © Elina Brotherus

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To conclude, the work of Janine Antoni well recalls another great art mother who never in fact gave birth: Frida Kahlo. Antoni's piece, *Inhabit*, like much of the artist's other work, is rich in art historical association. It clearly references Kahlo's iconic work *The Broken Column*, and like this work, successfully makes visible what had previously only been considered as invisible pain. Antoni wears a body brace similar to that worn by Frida Kahlo in the 1944 painting, while her lower body - from her waist to just below her knees - is encased in an open doll's house. The notion of the woman as house reminds the viewer of Louise Bourgeois's versions of the *Femme Maison*, as well as of photographs by Francesca Woodman on the same theme. Across all of these works, the house is recognised as a habitable site, which like the womb, bears a degree of strain to provide support and nurture. Scholar Elizabeth Bronfen writes that 'the dwelling house was a substitute for the mother's womb, the first lodging, for which in all likelihood man still longs, and which he was safe and felt at ease.'⁷⁴ Whilst Kahlo depicts the pain of an absence of children, the small bruises that Antoni develops during the enduring performance of *Inhabit* consider the everyday pains of looking after a child. The presence of the spider also recalls the work of Bourgeois, and in general, as Antoni has also repetitively depicted the bathtub, and shares further subject matter with Woodman, that of women as living caryatids, it is reasonable to suggest that she is interested in a 'feminine' contribution to discussions surrounding pain and maternity. Womblike and umbilical motifs breathe new life into old 'home truths' throughout this exhibition. And it was Frida Kahlo, as the first active mother figure artist, who successfully articulated (in pictures) such concerns. Even Murray's video piece *Gazelle* could be linked to Kahlo's 1946 painting, *The Wounded Deer*. Decades later, it is now not only women who use the new visual language to dissect our most complex emotional states; men too explore the new metaphors recognized as necessary to thoroughly explore the human condition.

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Janine Antoni, *Inhabit*, 2009 © Janine Antoni,
 Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

¹ Ehrenzweig, p.296.

² Iversen, p.451.

³ Barthes, p.81.

⁴ Bronfen, p.57.

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