



Motherlode: Photography, Motherhood and Representation

Janine Antoni
Elina Brotherus
Elinor Carucci

Ana Casas Broda
Ann Fessler
Tierney Gearon

Fred Hüning
Katie Murray
Hanna Putz

Hanna Putz
Untitled, (Nave 2), 2012
Courtesy of the artist

Two works gave birth to this exhibition. One is *Primapara* (*Bathing series*) from 1974 by Mary Kelly (American, b. 1941); the other is an anonymous nineteenth-century tintype of a 'hidden mother'. The piece by Kelly marks a moment when the representation of the mother figure in art started to shift. Until this point, fine-art photographs of mothers generally took their lead from the long-established conventions of depicting the Madonna and Child in painting, sculpture and mosaic. *Primapara* showed, however, through a series of gridded close-ups of a child, that the mother figure could be present in ways that went beyond traditional (male) depictions, and also that it could exist in the space of critical and conceptual practice. Put simply, it changed the way the mother-and-child motif

was employed and understood. Alongside the rise of second-wave feminism, motherhood became an area of investigation for critically engaged artists. Kelly herself famously mined the subject with expanded conceptual rigor in *Post-Partum Document* (1973–9). My second starting point, the Victorian tintype, suggests an alternative history of the mother in photography, however—one that is not dominated by canonical representations in art and their association with the male gaze. Here the mother is draped with a cloth or carpet in order to be hidden from the final image. She will later be cropped out of the frame—she becomes, both literally and figuratively, a piece of the furniture. These two pictures from the past—one from art photography, the other a vernacular photograph—offer me

a gateway through which to consider contemporary photographic images of the mother.

Needless to say, both photography and society have changed radically since these pictures were taken. In the age of the smartphone, the internet, social media and rolling twenty-four-hour news, the photograph is at the center of our visual culture as never before. At the same time, the various phases of maternity, from pregnancy to the raising of children—stages of a woman's life that were once hidden away or left unacknowledged—are now very much out in the open. For many, not least those in the public eye, from movie stars to royalty, the state of motherhood is worn as a conspicuous badge of pride.

The 'mummy blogging' community is vibrant; sites such as Twitter, Flickr, Facebook and Instagram are outlets for celebrity bumps and babies; literature and film regularly take mothering as their main storyline; and in politics, debates around women's work-life balance and childcare are high up the agenda.¹ As a result, the mother has an unprecedented visibility and influence in both the cultural and political spheres.

It is no surprise, therefore, that artists working with photography are engaged with the subject in a way that reflects this new set of circumstances responding to a complex twenty-first-century backdrop of less-defined gender roles and less certainty when it comes to meaning and interpretation. And they do so at a time when we understand the polysemic nature of photography itself more than ever—indeed, when our concept of what the medium may be is at its very broadest. Fully aware of photography's expectations but also of its limitations, these artists revel in contradiction and ambiguity, embrace the performative aspect of their practice, and, crucially, foreground the role of subjectivity and self-referentiality. They work not only with the medium, but *within* it, with an acute understanding of its changing place, identity, definitions, attitudes and approaches.

The work in *Home Truths* reflects this relationship to photography and although often layered, discursive and



Tierney Gearon
Untitled, from The Mother Project, 2006
Courtesy of the artist

confusing, can be roughly divided into that which deals with excess and that which deals with loss. These two themes dominate photography theory today. On one hand, we have the 'networked image', drip-feeding our daily lives through our computer screens, where everything and anything can be—and is—photographed; and on the other, we have the disappearance of physical photographs—whether they be in albums, tucked into our purses, or in slide carousels. Or to put it another way, the changing relationship between the virtual space and the space of objects is at the heart of photography's evolving identity.² Excess and loss, abundance and void: photography and motherhood are intertwined in more ways that one may initially expect.

What all of the artists in *Home Truths* also have in common is an exploration of the complex and demanding experience of motherhood and of the transitions that occur to a woman's identity when she is becoming or being a mother. Such shifts in maternal identity are expressed eloquently in **Janine Antoni's** (Bahamian, b. 1964) *Inhabit*. In this spell-binding image, the artist is suspended in the centre of her small daughter's bedroom, hovering above the floor with her legs 'wearing' a doll's house like a skirt. Inside this miniature building, a spider spins its web around the tiny furniture, while the artist herself seems caught in the middle of a large-scale web. The work shows Antoni's love of process and use of performance in her practice. Making

the dress/house, directing the spider and enacting the feat of suspension all demanded an excruciating amount of time and energy. *Host*, *Lattice* and *Up Against*, a series of close-up details of the same scene, are idiosyncratic, urgent documents of a performance in which the spider stands in for Antoni's daughter and the mother is the supporting structure. Art-historical references abound: the work resembles at once a painting of the Madonna della Misericordia, or Virgin of Mercy, who envelops the poor and needy within her protective robes; a version of the *Vierge Ouvrante*³ the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo; and, more recently, Louise Bourgeois's renderings of the mother spider.

Maternal endurance is also tested in the video *Gazelle*, (2012) by **Katie Murray** (American, b.1974). In an attempt to lose her 'baby weight', Murray exercises on a secondhand workout machine called the Gazelle. But her efforts are constantly interrupted by her family and inadvertently scorned by the

instructor, who throws sexist taunts and supposed words of encouragement as she glides, carries and pushes on the machine while simultaneously attending to the needs of her two children. Her attempts to do something for 'herself' ingeniously becomes her art, and so in turn a multi-layered metaphor of her efforts to be an artist, a mother and a partner all at the same time—a knotty triumvirate of positions that has long been problematic for women. The roles of good mother and successful artist (or writer for that matter) are often seen as polar opposites.⁴ Motherhood is considered to be a precious, almost sacrosanct state, and as a result the mother-artist figure generates anxiety—especially when she involves her own children in her work—because she is assumed to have abrogated her parental responsibility. Murray's *Gazelle* turns this idea in on itself and shows that chance would be a fine thing.



Fred Hüning
Untitled, (2 photographers), 2008
Courtesy of the artist

The effects of loss are particularly apparent in the work of **Ann Fessler** (American, b. 1950). In the autobiographical *Along the Pale Blue River* (2001/2013) Fessler combines her own video footage with vintage film to create collaged images of farms and rivers in the rural Midwest of America. The narrative that unfolds is of a young woman who, when finding out she is pregnant, flees her rural community for anonymity in a city where she can give up her baby for adoption. Forty years later, the adopted daughter searches for her birth mother, having identified her picture in a school yearbook. Seeking the family farm, she realizes that the river that flowed by her childhood home had its source in this rural place. Via this metaphorical umbilical cord with

the past, Fessler—an adopted child raised by a woman who was herself adopted—traces the tales of tragedy and loss that run through every single case of adoption, but also establishes a poetic connection of strange coincidence and chance with her own biological mother in an effort to reconstruct her life story.

Loss also characterizes the work of **Elina Brotherus** (Finish, b. 1972), **Fred Hüning** (German, b. 1966) and **Tierney Gearon** (American, b. 1963), yet in each case it is paralleled with a form of abundance: an excess of content. In the clichéd world of 'we are all photographers now', and where it is acceptable to photograph anything and everything, these three artists repeatedly, almost obsessively, and with both fervor and rigor, photograph things not normally put before a camera, let alone in front of an audience. In a culture where people regularly photograph their selves, food, beds, friends and everyday activities, their compulsion (albeit with artistic intent) records years of failed IVF attempts, the mourning of a stillborn baby, and an aging mother with worsening mental health problems.



Elinor Carucci

Feeding Emanuelle from a Plastic Bottle, 2005
Courtesy of the artist

Gearon's *The Mother Project* (2006) is an autobiographical work that documents the artist's intergenerational position between her mother and her young children. Shot in upstate New York, it is an eloquent and idiosyncratic portrayal of her attempts to connect with her declining mother. The older woman's character crackles through the images. Confident, comfortable in her skin, beautiful and self-absorbed, she appears in photographs that are both artfully orchestrated and intuitively shot. The project allowed Gearon to come to terms with her own childhood, to test out maternal boundaries, and to understand her changing identity as a mother of four children. These are not simply pictures of her mother but images of a relationship between mothers, of the processing of that relationship by an adult daughter, of her coming to terms with established maternal expectations, and of assuming and then reversing accepted familial roles.

Similarly, the photographs from the trilogy of three small books entitled *Einer*, *Zwei* and *Drei* by Fred Hüning show a journey of love and loss photographed in diary form to

capture the everyday moments and extraordinary instances of family life—in this case, the death of a baby, the birth of a new one, and two wounded and fragile people finding each other in an existence most amplified. Each book takes the viewer on a roller-coaster of emotions experienced by both father and mother as they come to terms with their loss, support one another through their grief, and then revel in their luck and love of their newborn son. Like the work of Gearon, this is photography that acts as a tool to heal the past and to cope with the future. It aids and it helps. To reach for a camera to photograph a simultaneous birth and death may not seem to us an 'appropriate' reaction at such a traumatic moment, but who are we to judge? Photography offers a translation of the world like no other medium. Hüning shows us what motherhood without a child looks like; and with the help of his photographs we can perhaps understand a little of what that void must feel like.

For her *Annonciation* series, Brotherus turned to the history of art for her inspiration, as she has so often done in the past. Like those in *Einer*, *Zwei* and *Drei*, the photographs



Elina Brotherus
Annonciation, 2009
 Courtesy of the artist

expose a tragedy at the heart of the artist's life. The work records, methodically and precisely, her emotionally, physically and mentally shattering efforts to become pregnant with the aid of IVF treatment. With each month's failure, however, the images build up to form a moving testament to one woman's determination to become a mother and the lengths she will put her body through to achieve her objective. But unlike Hüning's work, this story has no happy ending. It is just a sad journey that shows that the state of being a 'mother' does not necessarily begin with conception or birth, but is something more complicated with roots deep within one's intentions.

This desire—or need, in fact—to photograph 'everything' can also be seen in the photographs of **Ana Casas Broda** (Spanish, b. 1965, lives in Mexico and USA) and **Elinor Carucci** (Israeli, b. 1971, lives in USA). Both artists have produced large bodies of work that focused on their own families, and both have extended these enquiries in the direction of motherhood since becoming mothers themselves. Casas Broda feels both blessed and bound by being a mother. She describes her wish to become pregnant as having been overpowering, but at the same time she felt a simultaneous necessity to escape from that very impulse. Photography helped her through dark periods of depression, confusion and fear as a new mother, and she produced hundreds of images of the experience. Carucci, too, photographs compulsively to present her own version of motherhood. She expresses the fear that her generation

feels most acutely: that becoming a mother would sap all her professional identity out of her. But what she found was in fact the opposite: 'Instead it became a window onto so much of what I feel life is really about. It distilled everything to its essence, allowing me to go as deeply as I could with another person and with myself, enriching me both as an individual and as an artist.'⁵

Hanna Putz's (Austrian, b. 1987) work is a reaction to the abundance of photographs today. She comes from a generation that is always 'on show', that uploads a vast quantity of images of itself to social-networking sites seemingly without much filtering, editing or control. Putz attempts to cut through this and ask what it really means to photograph somebody now. The women she shoots—many of which are former or current fashion models, and so acutely aware of the effects of posing and the power invested in their bodies—are not the gleaming, beaming mothers who show off their prodigy in celebrity magazines, or the vernacular equivalents being liked, commented upon or shared by hundreds of 'friends'. Instead, these pictures are intimate, expressing a desire for closeness between photographer and subject, rather than a sense of bragging or show. Despite their very formal composition, they attempt to question the notion of posing and performance in an age of photographic excess.

The mothers represented here are resolutely subject rather than object. They are neither idealized nor marginalized. The work in this exhibition is at times subtle, at times bold. Highly subjective, it can also be contradictory. It displays a sense of seriousness and intense reflection, often with a haunting quality. It has the ability to move, but also to question and disrupt assumptions about power, gender, domesticity and the body without being judgmental. Like photography itself, the expectations and demands of motherhood are in flux; both subject and medium grapple for new meaning in a changing world. My hope is that the work featured here will open up debates about the continued representation and place of the mother figure, while raising questions about the identity and display of photography at this pivotal moment in which we find ourselves—at a crossroads between the singular photographic object and the sprawling networked image.

— Susan Bright, Curator

1. Issues of work–life balance and childcare can be seen in recent books by high-profile businesswomen, including *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, *Knowing Your Value* by Mika Brzezinski, *I Shouldn't Be Telling You This* by Kate White and *Basic Black* by Cathie Black.
2. For a fuller outline of the literature surrounding these two elements of contemporary scholarship—excess and loss—see Robin Kelsey, 'Our Lady of Perpetual Help: Thoughts on recent scholarship on photography', *Aperture*, No. 210, Spring 2013, pp. 50–5. The phrase 'networked image' was first used in Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, 'The life more photographic: Mapping the networked image', *Photographies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2008, pp. 9–28.
- 3 The *Vierge Ouvrante*, or shrine Madonna, is a sculpture of the Virgin Mary that opens to reveal either scenes from the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, episodes from Mary's life or representations of the Holy Trinity.
- 4 See, for instance, the recent row between Zadie Smith and Lauren Sandler following Sandler's article for *The Atlantic* arguing that the secret of being both a successful writer and a mother is to have only one child, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/06/the-secret-to-being-both-a-successful-writer-and-a-mother-have-just-one-kid/276642/>>, accessed 10 July 2013.
5. Elinor Carucci, *Mother*, New York and London: Prestel, 2013.