

# The Likeness Of A Mother

by Silvia Bombardini



Mother Nature, the motherland, our mother tongue: before becoming a symbol, the mother is a parent, before that, a woman – or else a human with a womb. The iconography of motherhood, its myth, the parable of her virtue, all build upon the physicality of a body swelling to host another, whose very own DNA changes in the process. This process, what anthropologists call *matrescence*, which also concerns the tectonic shifts it causes or can cause in the psyche of the mother-to-be – and of the mother who is and was, for it never truly ends – is often still today as invisible in cultural depictions of doting, idealized mothers, as the pregnant belly was in 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century royalty portraits. In the following interviews, six female curators who are or have recently been working on exhibitions which either introduce or rediscover the work of mostly female artists who've dealt with this theme – with either their own motherhood, the mother as an archetype or their own mothers – in ways both brutally honest and brutally tender, speak of their thought-provoking shows and the motivations behind them. Together, and together with the artworks on display, they present against or alongside traditional representations a layered, multi-faceted, perhaps kaleidoscopic and yet at the same time by no means comprehensive, likeness of what a mother is or might be.

## MOTHER!

Marie Laurberg

Opening in September and running until February 28, 2021, *MOTHER!* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, promises to be a highlight of the winter to come. The figure of the mother, major in most people's lives, will be explored in philosophical, psychological and physiological depth by artists who are either mothers themselves or at least, the sons or daughters of one. Featuring artworks by the likes of David Hockney and Yayoi Kusama, alongside custom-made contributions by upcoming

**talents, curator Marie Laurberg talks us through an exhibition which sets out to investigate a topic as rarely dealt with in art as it is fundamental to the lives of all.**

**S.B.: Throughout art history, for the longest time, male artists have portrayed motherhood as miraculous – elevating and reducing at once, the labour of women to that of God. How did the representation of mothers change, from the early avant-garde movements onwards? Would you say that it changed in art or society first?**

M.L.: In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the role of women – and successively the role of the mother – in society radically changed. This also affected the art world, because a great amount of ground-breaking female artists were part of the early avant-garde movements, even though most were not granted significant shows in museums until very recently. But when we started researching for the show, we realised that the artworks investigating motherhood don't reflect the surrounding culture necessarily. Many of the artworks in the show deal with general existential questions: they explore themes of life and death, love, the act of caring for someone, significant life-choices, the idea of fertility and the body. However, when looking at the show in general, I find that in contrast to the idyllic depictions of motherhood you refer to, painted by male artists in previous centuries, the modern period opens a completely new range of artistic questions. And women actively negotiate their own image and life experiences in the public realm.

**S.B.: Gestation can be violent, it can be gruesome. Last year I went to see the Bill Viola show at London's Royal Academy, and the organisers had put a warning sign before a room with a video of a woman giving birth. Did any of the artworks featured in MOTHER!, at the time when they were made, deliberately set out to provoke?**

M.L.: Birth is one of the fundamental human experiences – we have all been born in some way or another, and a huge part of the world's population will experience giving birth. In that perspective it's startling how rarely birth has been depicted or described in art and literature, from the perspective of the person giving birth at least. In Western culture birth has decidedly been a visual taboo. This fact prompted the idea of the show, we wanted to investigate which artworks dealt with this overlooked theme. How does it feel? Which thoughts, emotions, doubts and insights shape themselves when giving life? From the 1970s onwards feminist currents affected the art world, and female artists started dealing with birth, pregnancy and motherhood. The Danish artist Kirsten Justesen cast a beautiful series of sculptures from her pregnant belly, and American Mary Kelly produced the artwork *Post-Partum Document* which investigates the acts of caring for a small child and helping him to enter language and culture. At the time, these works were provoking

because such 'womanly' subjects did not seem suited for serious art. Both artists were very brave and radical in insisting on the value of such questions.

**S.B.: Could you talk us through a couple of examples from the artworks on show, which are sure to draw our eye when we enter the museum?**

M.L.: We have been lucky to include wonderful artworks in the show, for instance two paintings by Alice Neel who depicts young mothers with their newborn babies in a very intimate and moving way. And a startling painting by Rene Magritte which shows a mother holding a baby, their heads being swapped to a disturbing effect. One of the really spectacular works in the show is by a younger artist – Kaari Upson, who is based in Los Angeles. She shows a large installation of supermarket shelves stacked with a huge supply of life-size dolls depicting her mother, whilst several Idiot's Guides on all imaginable subjects are supplied as a substitute for a mother's life-advice. It is at once unsettling and fascinating. Another young artist, Laure Prouvost, whose work drew great crowds at the Venice Biennale last year, will create a brand-new installation for the exhibition.

## **Portraying Pregnancy**

**Karen Hearn**

**A new exhibition at London's Foundling Museum, *Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media* looks back at over 500 years of mostly British art, to trace a timeline of how mothers-to-be have been depicted, or haven't, for posterity or satire, throughout time. Karen Hearn, a historian and honorary professor at UCL, curated the show by selecting some of the suspiciously few portraits of pregnant women dating back from before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as many of those whose subject's belly is either airbrushed or otherwise concealed. Below, she tells us when and why this came to be the norm, and of how everything changed when it was women themselves who took up the brush – or the camera.**

**S.B.: *Portraying Pregnancy* chronicles five centuries of gestational labour, in British art. How has the representation of mothers-to-be changed over the course of history – but perhaps more interesting still, in which ways, if any, has it stayed the same?**

K.H.: The exhibition focuses on British art; only at the end of the show, for the last 30 years – specifically since the Vanity Fair August 1991 cover that depicted a visibly pregnant and naked Demi Moore, photographed by Annie Leibowitz, and commissioned by editor Tina Brown – does it include internationally disseminated American examples, because these images then became part of the culture not only in Britain but throughout the world.

In Britain, painted portraits of unambiguously, visibly pregnant women can be found from the period c.1560-c.1630. But then pregnancy gradually stops being included clearly in commissioned portraits. It is not made visible in the 18th and 19th centuries – except, perhaps, for satirical reasons in caricatures. Visibly depicted pregnancy only reappears in the early 20th century, and even then only in private, personal portraits, generally made by male artists of their own pregnant partners. Thus for a number of centuries, the default position was not to make a pregnancy visible in a portrait.

**S.B.: The show features a number of portraits of women we now know to have been pregnant at the time of posing – whose pregnancy, and the risk it posed to their lives in centuries past, was perhaps the very reason why their portrait was being painted – yet whose pregnancy was also concealed, as you say, it wasn't made visible. Were the artists' reasons to edit it out purely aesthetic? Was the pregnant body considered ugly to look at, or was perhaps there something indecent, sacrilegious even, precisely in the act of reproducing on canvas the reproducing woman**

K.H.: No, the reasons were probably not at all aesthetic. They were to do with decorum and appropriateness. Both in reality and in art, a pregnant female body is evidence that a woman is sexually active and, even when that pregnancy was within marriage, and was entirely appropriate and socially approved, that idea could still be an uncomfortable one for society at certain periods in history. Moreover, pregnancy was a temporary condition, and many historical portraits were intended to be 'timeless'.

**S.B.: Moving on to more recent examples, when artistic talent comes to be more equally distributed in society, have you noticed in your research any real differences in the portraits of pregnant women when they are done by female artists – perhaps pregnant women themselves – as opposed to when they are done by men?**

K.H.: Once portraits of pregnant women start to be made by women artists – and especially when they are self-portraits, such as Ghislaine Howard's 1984 example, or the one by Chantal Joffe – they explore what

it *feels* like to be pregnant, rather than just what it looks like. They explore sensations such as discomfort and weariness and uncertainty...

**S.B.: Could you describe a few of your favourites among the artworks on show, and why are these the ones that draw your eye the most?**

K.H.: One of the most beautiful works in the show is Hans Holbein II's drawing, sketched from life, of Sir Thomas More's visibly pregnant daughter, Cecily Heron. We are very grateful to Her Majesty The Queen and The Royal Collection Trust for lending this exceptionally important and delicate drawing. It seems to bring us into direct contact with a pregnant elite woman – with her intelligent and slightly humorous expression – across 500 years.

## **Louise Bourgeois in Focus**

### **Tamar Hemmes**

**Running from August 2020 to May 2021, as part of Tate Liverpool's *in Focus* series – displays of the Tate collection dedicated to significant modern and contemporary artists or movements – *Louise Bourgeois in Focus* will revisit major moments in the Spiderwoman's seventy-years career. Tamar Hemmes, who curated the show, explains below how motherhood in all its stages – from fertility and pregnancy to feeding and protecting, but also anxiety and loss – recurs as a theme throughout the life and creative practice of the artist who perhaps more than any other can be credited to have brought the mother as a serious subject into galleries and museums worldwide.**

**S.B.: At the age of 98, Louise Bourgeois died 10 years ago. What, in your eyes, makes her art particularly timely – what's its relevance today, for the visitors who will encounter it for the first time? And no less, what is it that makes it, and forever will make it, timeless?**

T.H.: Bourgeois did not see her work as being bound by a chronological narrative. She recreated the past, reliving emotions that she experienced many years before and weaving memories into her work. This helped her to stay balanced. Her sculptures, works on paper and fabric pieces are all deeply personal, reflecting her

mental state and views on topics such as childhood, motherhood, gender and loss in a raw and immediate way. These feelings and emotions are not tied to a certain time period. The artist also constantly reinvented herself, experimenting with different techniques, materials and modes of presentation due to which her practice is multi-layered and cannot be classified as being of one movement or one time.

**S.B.: The motif of the spider is so recurrent in her art, that Bourgeois came to be nicknamed Spiderwoman. She said that her spider was an ode to her own mother, clever, protective, and a weaver: still to her eight-legged sculptures, especially the one that's over nine meters high, there's something menacing as well, a dangerous aura. How would you describe Bourgeois' relationship with her mother, and the way it informed her work?**

T.H.: One of the main forces behind Bourgeois' practice was the memory of her troubled childhood, of her relationship with her mother in particular. The struggle between mother and child can be seen in many pieces. Bourgeois considered her mother to be strong, intelligent and patient, her best friend. But she also felt that she could not live up to her mother's competence. As such the spider symbolises both the protector and the predator. Her mother passed away when Bourgeois was just 22 – this affected her significantly and led to a suicide attempt. Caring and being cared for are themes that reoccur in Bourgeois' work.

**S.B.: Louise Bourgeois was herself a mother. How did her own motherhood, if it did at all, reflect on her work? Did she ever identify with the spider herself?**

T.H.: The spider seems to have symbolised Bourgeois' relationship to her mother more than her own motherhood. While she had three sons, Bourgeois did not speak much of her personal experience. Her feelings of motherhood in general were conflicting and complicated, and her works about family, childhood and the good and bad mother often reflect a sense of fear and uncertainty. Her fear of abandonment also meant that she did not want to be separated from those she loved. At the same time she said that she would break everything that she touched, including her children, through fear. Following the birth of her third son Bourgeois suffered from depression. Her work expresses these complex feelings around motherhood, of love and protection but also of maternal aggression.

**S.B.: There's an artwork that will be featured in the show, that I'm particularly interested in. Could you talk our readers through *Femme*, from 2007?**

*Femme* is an incredible work, a red gouache that is part of a range of similar works on paper that Bourgeois created later in life, that reflect on femininity and parenthood. It shows the outline of a female body, with single brushstrokes indicating the shape of her breasts, navel, vulva. The title, along with the fact that there are no facial features, suggests that the work represents womankind as a whole. Red is a striking colour that Bourgeois used often throughout her practice to refer to the extremes and intensity of emotion, and may signify violence and danger but also shame and jealousy.

## **Tala Madani: Shit Moms**

**Jeanette Pacher**

**At the Secession exhibition hall in Vienna, Tala Madani's show, *Shit Moms*, has recently drawn to a close – for anyone who might have missed it, an eponymous catalogue has launched, on sale now on their website. Throughout the show, and now the book, the maternal figure appears blob-like: grotesque and made of excrement, as the title implies, but also vulnerable, undergoing a process as if of metamorphosis. Madani's paintings and video works dispel the myth of motherhood at the same time as they express a fascination of sorts with what the possible outcome of this transformation might be. Jeanette Pacher, who curated the exhibition, tells us more about the Iranian-born, LA-based artist and her provocative, but joyful, new body of work.**

**S.B.: Perhaps the most difficult job of all, being a mother is sold to women, by ads and by churches, as the most natural of vocations. One could almost argue that we're set up to become *Shit Moms*, the colloquial term used to describe mothers who've failed to devote themselves, as selflessly as they should, to the care of children – and the title of your show. The fact that as a society we hold mothers, as we hold most women, against a set of unattainable ideals, has been a focal point of feminist thought for decades: how does Tala Madani's new body of work contribute to the debate, and why was it important to show it now?**

**J.P.:** With *Shit Moms* Tala Madani is kind of saying 'I'm not taking this crap' to the mainstream, overly idealized concept of the mother and of the perfect female who functions smoothly and frictionless in her streamlined, trained body. At the same time, these portraits of mother-and-child relationships show many more facets of domestic life: the toddlers' joy and glee, curiosity, intimacy, devotedness, love, as well as fatigue and exhaustion, loneliness, abandonment. I guess by presenting this more true-to-life picture of the female self

and the mother figure, with their ups and downs, the artist is showing her appreciation, and acknowledging women who face and tackle these challenges.

As a response to the great challenges humankind is currently facing – climate change and ecological crisis, social inequalities, increasing political and religious extremism – a conservative shift in societies can be observed. As a result, women are encouraged and expected to occupy more traditional positions: that of the housewife and mother, for instance. By sketching out a wide range of situations, showing ‘shitty’ moments in the daily life of a mother as well as peaceful ones, Tala Madani’s works underline the efforts and energy this takes. They highlight that the task of bringing up kids is still mostly done by women, while critically questioning precisely this circumstance.

**S.B.: Can you give us some background on the artist and on how this new chapter – her first solo show in Austria, no less – fits within her practice? What drew you to her work initially?**

J.P.: Tala Madani was born in Tehran in 1981 and studied visual art and political science in the United States. She lives in Los Angeles. Both her paintings and her animated films address social and political themes such as group dynamics, power structures, role models, domestic life, and the crisis of masculinity, pictured often grotesquely exaggerated, drastic and tender, obscene and funny alike.

While in earlier works the artist focused on ‘a man’s world’ and how this works, and masculinity –attempting to understand this realm not necessarily accessible to women, one could say she’s ‘all at home’ in this new chapter. In Vienna, Tala showed works that open up new pages, formats that she’s been experimenting with for a while – the *Corner Projection* paintings, for instance – and in the exhibition we aimed at creating visual links, playing with variations, rhythm, density and isolation – picking up on topics that are in the paintings themselves, and treating the hanging like a spatial score.

Secession’s board of directors are all artists themselves. So basically, artists invite artist colleagues whose work they find interesting, challenging, inspiring, to do a show here. I was intrigued by Tala’s work: her boldness and the directness of the images she creates, which at the same time are somehow magically lit up, bringing something to appear out of the dark – it’s so joyful!

## **Labor: Motherhood & Art in 2020**

**Marisa Sage, Laurel Nakadate**



Co-curated by the new University Art Museum's director Marisa Sage and artist Laurel Nakadate, *Labor* is opening soon in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Featuring internationally-celebrated artworks – such as Yoko Ono's interactive art installation, *My Mommy Is Beautiful*, or Mary Kelly's *Antepartum*, a 1973 prologue to her famous *Post-Partum Document* – alongside local contributions by New Mexico-based artists – such as *Let Them Bloom*, a papel picado series on the complexities of pregnancy, by Las Cruces-born Bryana Corinne Valdez in collaboration with Bold Futures, a regional reproductive justice organization – the show aims to present as wide a scope of perspectives as possible, on what motherhood meant, means or will mean, for women in the arts and the community at large. We've spoken with both curators for a preview on what to expect.

**S.B.: Everything, one could say, begins with a mother. The University Art Museum too – *Labor: Motherhood & Art in 2020* will be your inaugural exhibition. Why did you decide that this was the best way for a new museum to set off, and how did you go about selecting the artists who will be featured in the exhibition?**

M.S.: When New Mexico approved a bond to build a state-of-the-art facility to house the University Art Museum (UAM) and the Department of Art for New Mexico State University, I started thinking: how do you 'birth' a new institution, where does everything begin? And, as you expressed in your question, I concluded that every living being starts at the mother. I started off by asking artists that we have worked with in the past, to recommend artists working with the concept of motherhood who inspired them. I also flew to New York to visit artist studios, and walked into *Mother*, an exhibition of photography and video co-curated by Laurel Nakadate and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. I was floored by the show and contacted Laurel to see if she would co-curate a new iteration with me. Building off *Mother* we added painters, sculptors, installation artists, and performances.

**S.B.: I've always found it interesting how in the English language *Labor* can refer to both one's job and to childbirth. How do some of the artworks in the show address this issue that its title raises?**

L.N.: Kate Gilmore's piece, *Top Shelf*, for example, speaks to the uncertainty, humour, but also to the physical struggles, the sheer exertion of motherhood. I find myself thinking about this piece a lot. With each box she opens, we wait to see what the choice to open the box will bring. With motherhood, so much is uncertain, as it is also with performance. Kate's piece speaks so clearly about the many challenges mothers who are also artists take on.

**S.B.: I understand that the exhibition will be structured around different themes, which we could also call different feelings. Some – like selflessness and intimacy – we’re more comfortable associating with the experience of motherhood, than others – like failure and anxiety. Would you describe a few of the artworks which explore this scarier or more painful side of being or becoming a mother?**

L.N.: Amy Cutler's artwork focuses on many of the darker or more transformative aspects of motherhood. I also love Tierney Gearon's photographs of her own mother, who struggles with mental illness. The portraits really speak to the incredible weight that caring for a child in the face of illness brings. And of course, Patty Chang's video work in which a woman speaks about her fears, as she pumps breast milk, so wholly embodies many of the fears that mothers are faced with, when they find themselves suddenly caring for a life in this complicated world.

**S.B.: Could you talk us through some of the supporting events I know you’ve planned, like the film nights?**

M.S.: In honour of International Women's Day, the fifth annual *Feminist Border Arts Film Festival* will take place on March 5 and 6, 2020. The two-day festival features short films by US and international filmmakers who use cinema as a creative tool to grapple with urgent social issues and questions of identity and representation. The shorts include *The Mother Project*, *A Girl Like Her*, and *Artist and Mother*, an Emmy-nominated documentary that explores how four California artists dare to make motherhood a part of their art. All of our programming is free and open to the public, because we always hope to serve and welcome as many community members in the gallery as possible.