ABSTRACT

Panel: Historical Perspectives on Representing the Maternal

Chair: Denise Amy Baxter, University of North Texas

Building upon burgeoning scholarship such as Rachel Epp Buller’s anthology Reconciling Art and Mothering, Myrel Chernick’s and Jennie Klein’s The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art, and the work of the MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics) network, this panel presents historical perspectives on maternal subject positions and the depiction of maternal imagery.

Papers

Heather Belnap Jensen, Associate Professor of Art History & Curatorial Studies, Brigham Young University

Fashionable Maternity, or, The Emergence of ‘The New Mother’ in Post-Revolutionary Visual Culture

The institution of motherhood and production of the maternal body were critical and contested components of post-Revolutionary French culture. From political, medical, and philosophical discourses surrounding maternity emerged a new and progressive maternal ideal, one that posited the bourgeois woman’s ability to be both happy mother and active socio-public subject. This “New Mother” embodied bourgeois values. She was culturally literate and well acquainted with philosophical rationales and political rhetoric regarding the virtues of motherhood—and was committed to its public enactment. She was also invested in conspicuous consumption, and thus wore the latest couture and frequented the chicest urban spaces. Moreover, she did not view sexual desirability and maternity as mutually exclusive. Stylish, urbane, educated, confident, and decidedly public, this figure challenged notions of maternity promulgated by the ancien régime. The emergence of “The New Mother,” which was facilitated by the industries of art, publishing and fashion, is registered in the proliferation of representations in which women performed motherhood in distinctly modern ways c1800. Indeed, visual media articulated this progressive ideal of maternity. From iconic history paintings and portraits of high-profile socialites foregrounding the maternal subject to genre scenes and fashion plates representing the refined bourgeoisie as mother, the significance of this subject position was highlighted. This material reads as surprisingly modern in its positing of an expansive ideal for women as mothers. I argue that the study of these early visual strategies of representation is productive for understanding later developments of the maternal aesthetic.

Laura Larson, Chair and Associate Professor, Photography and Integrated Media Program Honors Tutorial College Director of Studies, Studio Art Program Ohio University

Hidden Mother

Hidden Mother emerges from my research on the widespread but little-known practice in 19th-century portrait photography known as the “hidden mother.” The term refers to the strategy of concealing a mother's body as she supported and stilled her infant during the lengthy exposures demanded by early photographic technology. In the final portrait of the child, the mother—typically covered from head-to-toe in a black drop cloth—appears as an uncanny figure, emphatically
present in her "absence." These melancholic and disturbing images speak to the fragile balance a mother must maintain in raising a child—cultivating both attachment and autonomy. The book enlists hidden mother photographs as a critical and lyrical frame for an account of the adoption of my daughter, considering how photography itself is a maternal medium. *Hidden Mother* encompasses two complementary but distinct projects, an exhibition and a book of experimental non-fiction, which will be the subject of my talk.

**Paula Birnbaum**, Associate Professor and Academic Director, Art History/Arts Management and Museum Studies, University of San Francisco

**Chana Orloff (1888-1968) and the Maternal Body**

Chana Orloff was one of the best-known sculptors of the School of Paris and a pioneering woman in the early Israeli art world, yet her story has been marginalized. Born in 1888 in the Ukraine, Orloff left her native country at 16-years-old when her Jewish family escaped the pogroms and relocated to Palestine. Soon afterward she moved to Paris and established a reputation as a portraitist and sculptor of powerful female nudes and maternities. Her friends and sitters included an international cast of now famous artists and writers, many of them modern women and Jewish émigrés. In this paper I explore Orloff’s sculpted images of motherhood produced throughout her career in light of changing attitudes about gender and Jewish identity in European modernism as well as in early Israeli art.

Orloff regularly created classically inspired sculptures of anonymous mothers and children, as well as portraits of her own son. Some of these works vividly express the embodied experiences of pregnancy, nursing and the physicality of the maternal body. Such imagery appealed to French critics who supported a widespread interest in representations of the maternal body as a site of cultural rejuvenation in the wake of World War I. Orloff’s Parisian maternal imagery influenced her later Zionist public monuments honoring Jewish women, created in Israel after World War II. I conclude by examining Orloff’s deep commitment to representing motherhood in light of her Jewish diasporic background as well as at her own experiences as a single mother across continents.

**Dr. Andrea Liss**, Professor of Contemporary Visual Culture and Cultural Theory, Visual and Performing Arts Department, California State University San Marcos

**Maternal Self-Portraits: Revolutionary Promises of Justice**

*Maternal Self-Portraits: Revolutionary Promises of Justice* addresses the sophisticated evolution of the concept of mother-and-child portraits taken by the mother produced from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary moment. My presentation reconceives these maternal self-portraits from the recent past and the present as vital new forms of feminist knowledge. This knowledge holds the potential for articulating new strategies of respect for the concept of the maternal and for the real mother, in other words for thinking m(o)therwise.


Concepts of intersubjectivity deeply inform the construction and power of maternal self-portraits. Furthermore, images made by mothers distinguish themselves from media images of mother and child that relentlessly attempt to control maternal images and continue the hateful denigration of women/mothers. Artists’ maternal self-portraits strategically revalue traditional characteristics of the maternal such as care, empathy and passion, and project these supposedly "sentimental" maternal traits outside of their previously limited range. They can be seen anew as loving and political actions. Thus reconceiving maternal self-portraits as new bodies of knowledge offers revolutionary ways for rethinking compassionate forms of justice and human relationships.