

DIVISION OF LABOR: CHICAGO ARTIST PARENTS

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What consequences does an artist face if they choose to raise a child? The issue of parenthood, biological and otherwise, opens up many lateral conversations about class and discrimination, economics, and social norms and expectations. Changes that come with parenthood can indeed alter the course of an artist's practice and professional identity, and yet this profound and fundamental human experience remains largely absent from critical dialogue even as it continues to influence the work artists make. *Division of Labor: Chicago Artist Parents* is an exploration of the specialized and multilayered work created by artist parents. This constellation of creative approaches allows us to examine how parenthood manifests in artists' work, impacts their practice and affects their career.

The intersection of art-making and family life has long been a taboo subject in an art world where motherhood in particular is often seen as the endpoint of a serious career. Artists in the exhibition range from emergent to internationally recognized, and each created these works while actively raising kid(s). Although very few of the works in the exhibition here depict children, several are made in collaboration with them. Some employ a particular use of materials and aesthetics as a byproduct of an artist's exposure to their kids' creative play, while others pose difficult questions about power dynamics and the role of children in collaborative practice. The linkage of studio work and family life reveals uncomfortable truths about our own deeply gendered parental expectations: artists are often celebrated for merging the two, while artist mothers are accused of everything from manipulation to sentimentality. With a focus on new and recent work from across media that includes painting, sculpture, installation, comics, sound, performance and moving image, *Division of Labor* reveals a diversity of perspectives with special attention paid to a balanced roster of both women and men. By virtue of the remarkable work they make, the artists presented here challenge the commonly-held notion that having children will deplete an artist's creativity or destroy their professional life: if anything, it has enriched them.

As the stigmas that surround artists raising kids slowly start to dissolve, a richer context for their work begins to materialize. The artworks in *Division of Labor* can easily be positioned in relation to integrative projects such as Palle Nielsen's *Model for a Quasi*

Society installation for children at Stockholm's Moderna Museet (1968); Mary Kelly *Postpartum Document* (1973-79) recording the personal and theoretical ephemera of working motherhood; Sally Mann's controversial *Immediate Family* series (1992) which touched on related themes of loneliness, injury, childhood sexuality and death; and recent video work Guy Ben-Ner creates with his children (1999-present), which has

a lightning rod for discussion around the ethics of depicting and working with your children and how those artistic choices affect the careers of men and women differently. *Division of Labor* also exists within the broader continuum of art made by parents who were always so explicit about it, including Nancy Spero, Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Dennis Oppenheim, Lygia Clarke and Abelardo Morell.

Chicago's strong history of social engagement and a working-class approach to studio practice have fostered generations of multifaceted makers, and access to space, time, and a dispassionate gender parity are built into the city's artistic DNA. *Division of Labor* focus on Chicago artists stemmed from an interest in revealing hidden lines of connection within the city's diverse community of cultural producers, as well as re-contextualizing work by local artists.

Of the many possible configurations that *Division of Labor* could have taken, the theme that emerged organically from conversations with exhibiting artists was that of time. Children create temporal wormholes through which vivid moments from our own childhoods reappear, and into which we look toward the unknowable future. Parenting itself is alternately unpredictable and then repetitive, busy and then lonely, inspiring and draining. For many artists raising children, the primary concern is just how to find time to create work. There is an urgency and focus that comes from art making in concentrated windows of time.

The artists in *Division of Labor* offer a range of creative strategies for combining art making with the realities of family life, many of which are radically different from the long-dominant template of the autonomous artist working in isolation. Whether you have children or not, it is well worth considering how an art world that prioritizes professional demands over personal responsibilities, relationships, and general well-being has something for everyone. *Division of Labor* raises issues that contribute to the larger question of what constitutes a sustainable artistic practice. This array of mutually viable approaches to making work presents a public forum through which to build commu-

and advocate for change.

ARTISTS

Necessity is the mother of invention for many artists suddenly faced with the limits of early parenthood. **Selina Trepp**'s clever and concise animations are fantastical, also framed by the everyday realities of making creative work while raising a small child. The intermittent and unpredictable spaces of her young daughter's daytime sleep pattern is the main creative constraint for an ongoing series of vibrant *Nap Animations*, hand drawn, looped animations Trepp creates using their shared set of felt-tipped markers. Creative problem solving is Trepp's forte, and she applies this logic to the editing and pacing of her work, creating an economy of gesture in her shorts as well as to the financial constraints that come with

adding a third person to the household budget. Sparking a very intentional process of 'non-consumption,' she positions her making due and zero-waste approach as one of empowerment. Whatever Trepp needs she can create: limited resources and lack of sophisticated tools don't impede her imagination or her artistic output. Although laid out in a hidden way in the finished work, these self-imposed and external limitations are productive ones, transforming the financial and temporal restrictions of parenthood into creative assets.

After the recent closing of fifty Chicago Public Schools (CPS) made nationwide headlines, **John Preus** was invited to salvage material from one of them. The upended and reconfigured CPS desks and chairs he sourced there form the material and conceptual basis for his biting title *Proposal for Charter School Swingset*. The son of missionaries, Preus grew up "running around barefoot outside all day every day" in Tanzania. Those formative experiences shaped his relationship to the use and value of materials, his understanding of public space and his appreciation for open, un-programmed forms of learning and community. He recently completed a massive site-responsive installation at the Hyde Park Art Center entitled *The Beast*. A strong believer in the agency of kids, one of his proudest moments was the organic evolution of his artwork into a hangout spot for neighborhood teens; it was a, "...temporary respite from the de facto criminalization of adolescence by virtue of the fact that there are so few places to go where they are considered a nuisance, a danger, or a liability." In his piece for *Division of Labor*, the swing also acts as a liberating force, as well as a catalyst for play, all the while bearing the weight of its constituent parts' history.

Cándida Alvarez is a painter best known for her brightly colored, layered abstract that dismantles and remixes an array of influences cutting across pop culture, modern world news and personal memory. When Alvarez first became a mother and could not go to the studio, she began working on dinner napkins at home. Though her son is now grown into adulthood and her large-scale paintings dominate the gallery scene, the intimate nature of these napkin paintings continues to recur in her practice, offering a flexible substrate for experimentation. Describing the broader impact of parenthood on her work, she states; "I learned to multi-task, as time and exhaustion competed for prominent roles... Bright colors seemed to follow me from the baby shower through school. Slowly they seeped into the studio and became important to the paintings."

Claire Ashley's interest in inflatables was inspired by children's bouncy castles, combined with the desire to make work that was safe to keep around a home studio. The figure basis of her sculptural paintings manifests itself in both form and content— *Sleepovers and Playdates* has a skin, it bulges when inflated and lies limp when flaccid. Pressed against and restricted by the gallery's exterior "glass curtain" window wall, it also squeezes around the corner and into the exhibition space, buoyant and freely flapping.

Sleepovers and Playdates is simultaneously harmless and smothering. It's a soft, squishy plaything and a suffocating, monumental self-portrait. Glowing outside and in, Ashley's signature patterned surfaces are bound and spray-painted in a Day-Glo adolescent palette, and fabricated with interior lights that literally glow-in-the-dark. Its daytime presence and nighttime personality is one of many markers of the passage of time throughout *Division of Labor*.

Paul Nudd's drawings, sculptures, videos and zines speak a visceral cartoon language that both adults and children instinctually understand. *Moon Mutt*, *Lil' Pea Mutt* and *Pea* are juvenile versions of his larger figure drawings, scaled to the size of his daughter's dolls. They depict festering humanoid amoebas bristling with hairy pimples and teeming with bacteria. Of course, nobody spreads germs around quite like kids do, but these dish-like portraits were part of Nudd's visual vocabulary long before he became a parent. Currently, his children spend a lot of time in his studio, helping him paint lumpy film dioramas, being traced as models for his larger bacteria-body drawings, or just keeping him company while he works. "They're not in the content, but in the process," he explains, "It's not that I need their help in the studio, but I want to normalize the i

creative work for them.”

Michelle Grabner and **Brad Killam** are partners and artistic collaborators, perhaps known for The Suburban, an acclaimed artist project space they co-founded in 1999. Located in their suburban backyard, it operates “within the economy of (their) house” and amidst the trappings of family life, an endeavor born out of an artist-parent imperative to “invent structures where the outside world would come to us.” Its projects, print projects and satellite summer residency space, The Great Poor Farm Experiment in rural Wisconsin, all demonstrate Grabner and Killam’s espousal of pedagogy as an extension of parenthood itself. They began working together and alongside their two sons in the early 1990’s, with a project entitled *Conceptual Art Research (CAR)* that included Super-8 documentation of diaper changes (*Oli/Wipe*, 1994), experiments in publicly judging parental effectiveness, and a composite installation featuring pre-school report cards and a tessellation of toothpicks and marshmallows (*Title Unknown*, 1997). For *Division of Labor*, they present *Oyster M*, a recent sculptural collage of elements taken from both of their respective practices. Grabner’s celebrated silverpoint tondos, selectively un-woven canvas works and appropriated textile pattern paintings are layered over a classic Killam beaten garb pail lid. Suspended from a thin cord to create a makeshift mobile, the work is anchored to the wall by a shelf apparatus that holds a copy of *Can I Come Over to Your House?* chronicling The Suburban’s first fifteen years, and a DVD of Killam hammering. The resulting kinetic sculpture is a portable shrine to the balancing act of art and family.

Like modernist painting made from the discards of his college-age son’s dorm room

mini-fridge, **Tony Tasset’s** *Baby Muscle* is a surreal pop collage of cheap household cleaning products, personal hygiene items, and grocery store aisle dips, drinks, sprays and sauces. Continuing the conversation he began in the late 1980’s with his “domestic sculptures”, Tasset’s spill paintings examine the formal techniques and aesthetic tropes of post-painterly abstraction through these domestically-engineered, store-bought items cast in resin. Tasset has a history of creating pointedly parental work, including the *I AM U R Me* (1998), which morphs the faces of his wife, his son and himself as they sit around the kitchen table eating breakfast, and *Pieta* (2007) a sculpture depicting Tasset cradling his collapsed teenage son in a pose provocatively referencing Virgin and Christ in the Nativity. More recent sculptures of melting, grime-tinged snowmen and smashed and rotting jack-o-lanterns loop back to *Baby Muscle* in their imaging of childhood traditions.

with an edge of filth, sleaze and violence. *Baby Muscle* has a sense of humor, but it challenges the excesses of consumerism. By conflating “high art” with brand name Tasset takes a conceptual swipe at the artistic masterpiece versus the mass-produced inquiry not unlike the appropriative gestures and serialization of Grabner and Killar *Oyster Multiple*.

After the birth of her daughter, **Heather Mekkelson’s** studio practice shifted dramatically. She went from producing complex debris field installations, to an “anti-pessimistic” body of work centered around an ongoing interest in the cosmos. Seeking solace and pleasure from her studio practice, she also no longer had the luxury of research time. Drawing inspiration from observing her daughter at play, Mekkelson incorporated material exploration into her working methods and embraced the use of whatever was at hand. *Box of Raisins* is a minimalist replica of a Sunmaid box of raisins found crushed at the bottom of her “mom bag”. She cast the piece out of a heavy metal alloy, evoking the weight of the bag, stating, “If a mom bag is the universe, the raisins are the meteoroids.” Also contained within this cumbersome cosmology are literal rocks: the small gifts her daughter hands her when they’re out on walks. *Val Time* is fabricated from these rocks, which Mekkelson has silver leafed and balanced the infinite plane of a first surface mirror.

If Mekkelson’s trajectory is outer space, **Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford’s** interests are non-linear time travel. The underlying structure of *Sketch for an Anachronic Object* envisions the remnants of historic Italian buildings in combination with his old Star Wars toys, which were stored and passed on to his kids. Cast in resin and laid like a skin on an arsenal of unexpected materials, such as Great Stuff and foam insulation, the mix of past, present and future seems an apt metaphor for parenthood itself, which creates its own strange compression and expansion of time through suspended moments in contrast to years that speed by. “Parenthood opens you up to take more risks,” says Hulsebos-Spofford as he recounts imagery from a sculpture inspired by his son’s repetitive requests for a pet cat, and a video work-in-progress about the Bay of Pigs

Invasion sparked by his son’s literal misinterpretation of that historic event (a misunderstanding he remembers having with his own mother when he was a kid). *for an Anachronic Object* anchors Hulsebos-Spofford’s sculptural forms to a skeletal platform, building a bridge between them. He invites visitors to step aboard and experience the living history combined with speculative sci-fi futures in this rubber

of jumbled time and place.

Four Sisters depicts the re-imagined childhood bedroom of **Ann Toebe's** children babysitter Hortencia, who grew up in Veracruz, Mexico. Toebe's disorienting domestic interiors are often created based on sketches and descriptions of the remembered of others. *Four Sisters* was produced through a collaboration with Hortencia that in interviews and sketches she shared with Toebe. A mixture of painting and collage Toebe's inventory of the room's sparse objects contrasts with its overwhelming array of patterned brickwork. Through flattening, folding and cropping, she depicts multiple perspectival dimensions, as well as layered emotional states. Toebe's labor-intensive work was made about Hortencia, and was also made possible through the work Hortencia provides: like many artist parents, Toebe's studio time is thanks in part to childcare.

Brittany Southworth LaFlamme started art school as the newly-single mother of a four-year-old. Studio and parenting time were rarely separate. "My studio's in my head," she says of her efficient and pragmatic approach to making art. As a student her young son's actions and impressions permeated LaFlamme's practice. She blended the roles of artist and parent, making a photographic series from his experiments with corners, recording the sounds he made, and filming staged collaborative performances at the dinner table. Now eight years old, her son is less interested in participating in his mother's creative work. LaFlamme captures the diverging identities of mother and son in *Illuminate Each Other*, a new video work commissioned for the exhibition. A split screen reveals each of their perspectives simultaneously as they take one of their daily walks through the neighborhood, cameras strapped to their heads. Complicating this affectionate gesture is the formalized system of remuneration LaFlamme has devised, using Pokemon cards as a sort of kid-currency to compensate her son for his creative labor. Is he a willing collaborator? A paid studio assistant? Or a performer? *Illuminate Each Other* is a complex examination of the ever-evolving intimacies of parent-child relationships wrapped around an experiment in the artist economy. By acknowledging the agency of her son and recognizing his contribution as co-author of this work, LaFlamme documents the maturing relationship between mother and child, each from their own point of view.

Alberto Aguilar records the gestures, rituals and personal discoveries that comprise everyday life, transforming them through repetition, reconfiguration and re-presentation. As the father of four children, family often plays a central role in this exploration.

Aguilar's dedication to making art that is accessible and participatory has led to a practice that encompasses the invention of synesthetic children's games, sculptural rearrangements of household objects, and a collaborative performance with his daughter's class at school. In the face of an art world that generally dismisses the presence of children, Aguilar showcases their abilities as artists in their own right. In his sound piece *Family Move* brings together all six members of his household through creation of Enya's *The Celts*. Wearing headphones playing the song, the family is recorded humming, tongue-clicking, oohing and aahing along with it. Reinterpreting Enya's ethereal multi-tracked vocals, Aguilar captures his family's small virtual choir as they approximate the song's Celtic lyrics, which translate to "Life of Lives, Beginning and End." Unlike the original version, this rendition contains the sporadic and unrefined elements that lend family life its texture — sometimes charmingly off-key, sometimes mumbled — and with the occasional sonic outbursts from its youngest participant. Aguilar records the "life of lives" as a sonic family portrait.

Art world taboos about childrearing are rich territory for **Lise Haller Baggesen**, who "aims to locate the mother-shaped hole in contemporary art and discourse" through drawing, writing, and socially activated installation. Haller Baggesen found conceptual inspiration and collaborative potential in her children's narrative play early on, openly addressing the art world's discomfort with kids as agents of culture. As her children have grown older she's turned her lens on motherhood itself, creating a futuristic disco film named *Liba* who serves as heroine and alter ego for a dissertation cum installation entitled *Mothernism*. For *Division of Labor*, she reconfigures her psychedelic tent space to house print materials made by other artists in a reading room / womb. Its streamers, banners, glowing walls and spinning disco ball invite visitors to re-imagine the maternal body as a site for growth through radical pedagogy.

Originally trained as a chemist and biologist, **Andrew Yang**'s work engages issues of authenticity and wonder rooted in the natural sciences. *Stella's Stoichiometry*, an arrangement of liquids and solids alongside a mathematical chart, is in fact a precise portrait of his young daughter on the day of her birth. Yang employs the discipline of stoichiometry to translate the exact chemical equation of his newborn's matter into appropriate amounts of common household materials such as water, sugar, canola oil, and baking powder. In so doing he emphasizes the absurdity of the gesture and the importance of the immaterial: "If you are invested in the relation of substance to form, look at the things you love most, that are made both by your body and by themselves and whose alchemy of arrangement might find its own way to love you too, someday." Yang's work engages affection through the language of science and images the human figure through minimalist sculptural form.

Known for his unconventional approach to filmmaking, which began early on in his

with animated shorts such as *The Bats* and *The Moschops*, **Jim Trainor** once stated, "If my films were live-action, I'd probably be jailed." His forthcoming feature length *The Egg* uses costumed actors and actresses to portray the life cycles of insects and the evolution of their societies. On view is a looped excerpt from this work-in-progress featuring a single actress (Julia Zinn) playing both a mother and daughter insect soaring over the titular pink eggs. Instead of anthropomorphizing insects, Trainor is involved in the much more complex and perverse task of blurring the line between dark human emotions and instinctually-driven insect behavior. He takes an unsentimental view of nature and culture in this excerpt's macabre mother-daughter relationship, which is echoed elsewhere throughout the film, even as it applies to the brief cameo of his pregnant wife, cast as an expectant parasitic fly.

READING ROOM & AUXILIARY PROGRAMMING

Parents and children are often left out of the dialogue of the art world because of how institutions structure the possibility for participation. *Division of Labor* embodies an oblique form of institutional critique, while focusing most of its energy on how to reframe these self-same institutions to better reflect a sustainable art world. Housed within Haller Baggesen's *Motherism* installation on view, and addressing issues of accessibility for parental labor within the arts, the *Division of Labor* Reading Room provides another layer of critical context to the work on view through the inclusion of relevant artist books, exhibition catalogues, zines and comics. Viewable both in-situ and online, works include Melissa Potter's adoptive family tree soft-book and Baggesen's, Paul Nudd's, Michelle Grabner's and Brad Killam's translation of their creative visions into texts. Chicago-based comics artists Chris Ware, Jeffrey Brown and Keiler Roberts communicate complex — and often darkly funny — aspects of parenthood through space and time of graphic narrative. *Original Plumbing's* family issue shares perspectives from a cohort of transgender parents, and a multitude of cultural workers with kids growing up through Andrea Francke's *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood*, as well as *Future Plans* by Cultural ReProducers.

Inside the exhibition, experimental installation strategies developed in conversation with exhibiting artists include low-lying plinths to display works on paper parallel to the ground, and flat screen monitors that lean against walls. These invite close investigation and interaction by viewers of all ages. Our curatorial approach also extends to a se

trans-generational events aimed to include those often isolated by the structure and timing of typical arts programming. A Saturday morning, family-friendly soft-opening offers an alternative to the traditional evening reception. This event offers a chance for participation during hours that young children are often most active, accompanied by the Tiny Cover Band performing their unique brand of pop on toy instruments. Childcare is often a major issue for artists, who are the most underpaid/unpaid workers in the arts economy. Artist-parent collective Cultural ReProducers leads "Making It What We Need."

a workshop and conversation hosted in collaboration with arts administrators, students, and exhibiting artists that examines how to create a more inclusive art world. The event includes free on-site childcare while also providing a model for institutions to better support artists and audiences. "The Day After Groundhog Day Might Still be Groundhog Day" offers an all-ages evening event at the Nightingale Theater for an artist-curated selection of short films by artists who also happen to be parents, doubling as a fundraiser for parent Kyle Schlie's conceptual project S.A.C.K. (Supporting Artists and their Child Kids), which raises money to purchase artwork from artists raising kids.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Christa Donner is an artist, writer and curator whose multimedia projects are exhibited internationally. She is a founding member of Cultural ReProducers, a creative platform supporting cultural workers who are also working it out as parents.

Thea Liberty Nichols is a curator, writer and arts administrator from Chicago.

SPECIAL THANKS

As cultural producers and parents ourselves, this show is very personally meaningful to us. We also feel its incredibly timely and broadly relevant; conferences and fairs have begun to offer onsite childcare; art institutions are looking beyond traditional forms of museum education that typically segregate non-parents from family events; residence programs are responding to the needs of a growing cohort of artist parents that require flexible scheduling and family friendly accommodations; and artists' practices have expanded to include a focus on collaboration and the weaving together of various roles. We've found supportive colleagues in Justin Witte and Neysa Page-Lieberman and a gracious host site in Columbia College Chicago's Glass Curtain Gallery. Several friends

and colleagues offered early encouragement and acted as informal mentors along the way; Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Lorelei Stewart and Selina Trepp. And of course our biggest thank you goes to all the artists we've had the pleasure of working with in together this exhibition.