

# Parental Aesthetics or How to Make Art and Have Children, Too

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Do artist parents make parent art? This question isn't meant to be a sloppy palindrome or to have a quick answer, although time is short when there are kids around or else time doesn't even exist at all. Right now my five-month-old baby is sleeping in his stroller next to me at a library table. The only professional work I agreed to do during Jude's first few months of life was this essay about artists whose work integrates with their family lives and vice versa. This is my own version of that situation.

Having kids may be the greatest common denominator after death. But that's for the world in general, not the art world, where the art of children was once prized by the avant-garde but children themselves have mostly been left at home or out of the picture entirely. Art historically speaking, the good mother has been a symbol of patriarchy and law since the first portrait of Mary, Mother and Child, while youngsters have been the subject of *schmaltzy*, popular scenes since the invention of childhood.<sup>1</sup> Then there's the cliché of the artwork as the artist's true child. And, I suppose, kids aren't always great at keeping their hands to themselves. With the brunt of childrearing burdens placed on female shoulders, women artists have generally avoided being seen as mothers in their own person and in their work for much of the 1970s and 1980s, and even into the present.<sup>2</sup>

While all of this hasn't exactly changed, neither has it remained the same. For one, men now participate in parenting far more than in the past, leading to what one culture critic has termed "a genderless motherhood."<sup>3</sup> For another, artists no longer make art quite like they used to. The

modernist separation of art and life has been dissolving since Duchamp turned a urinal upside down and called it art, since Fluxus determined that cleaning the sidewalk could be art. This merging has most recently resulted in social and relational practices that encompass everything from cooking dinner or running a shop to providing abortions—or parenting, if the artist’s life involves the raising of kids. Some women have even begun to professionalize their positions as mother-artists: in 2014 not one but two symposiums were planned on the subject in Chicago; meanwhile, Christa Donner’s webzine “Cultural Reproducers” began organizing family-friendly art events complete with free childcare activities.

Most parental art practices don’t look like social practice, despite how deeply they are based in the life of parenting. But parenting arguably socializes what would otherwise be considered practices grounded in other art traditions. Practices like representation, environmental observation, performance, and assemblage become experiences of parenting in addition to being art practices through their immersion in the messy, needy, extraordinariness of raising children. So when Selina Trepp includes the reflection of herself nursing her young daughter Maxine in *Rainbow* (2011), one in a series of montages that feature the artist performing her own paintings amid an arrangement of mirrors, sculptures, and studio residue, the facts of parenting socialize an artwork whose primary intent is to explore painting. But hungry babies need to be fed, and little rainbow tights are really pretty. When Heather Mekkelson casts her daughter Zia’s raisins in white metal alloy and repackages them in a handmade box of plain gray archival cardstock, the heft of metal makes palpable the weight of being a mom.

For those artists who take the life around them as raw material, having children significantly increases supplies. It’s as simple as paying attention, which artists in a post-Cageian world are well prepared to do. Hence Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam film their son Oli having his diaper changed, taking flying leaps from bathroom transom to hall carpet, slipping and sliding in a backyard kiddie pool, being restrained by his parents as he fights sleep. Depending on angle and speed, these shorts from the mid-1990s use the quotidian sights of parenting to reference a history of film and video, from Muybridge motion studies to Buster Keaton slapstick to endurance performance art videos. Similarly, Christa Donner tapes her daughter Stella’s emergent speech then layers and edits it into audio compositions like *Souvenirs from the Tower of Babel* (2013) and *If I Had Triplets and They Made a Sound Poem* (2013). Child babble is not all Donner records, but as it forms a large part of what she hears in the world right now, it takes its place beside other environmental sounds.

Some artist parents go as far as collaborating directly with their children. In a video from 2011, Brittany Southworth-LaFlamme and her five-



Selina Trepp, *Rainbow*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

year-old son Etienne demonstrate just how serious play can be when mom solemnly sucks the pigment off a pile of Skittles, spits it out into color-coded jars, and shares the sticky, bleached remnants with her inquisitive boy. Now eight, Etienne no longer wants to be part of her art making, but when he was younger they also worked on *Corner Detective*, a photo series showing Etienne's small finger pointing to bent edges everywhere he found them: hydrant bolt, concrete planter, brick building, large stone, cardboard box. His are the revelations of a literal, focused mind taken in all its profundity—by his mother-artist-collaborator, as well as any open-minded viewer. Learning goes both ways.

In these artworks, Southworth-LaFlamme exemplifies a kind of radical parent, like the one described by Susan Rubin Suleiman as “the playful mother.”<sup>4</sup> So, too, does Alberto Aguilar, whose studio is everywhere

he is, which is mostly surrounded by his four children and their trappings. Accordingly, he sculpts *Domestic Monuments*, witty, colorful assemblages made out of their household objects. When this involves a metal laundry tree of damp garments tangled with a real potted tree, a surrealistic word game reinvents a tiresome domestic chore.



Alberto Aguilar, *New Routine (Madrid)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Ultimately, each of the artists mentioned here models a new and honest way of working, one that accepts and values children's contributions to both life and art, while also being true to the challenges of being an artist who is simultaneously a parent. They make art while being with their kids.

When I get home, I'll ask my four year old what she thinks about all this. Renée recently told me she wants to be an art critic, so I expect she'll have an opinion.

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**1** Art historians have paid a lot of attention to the life of the Virgin Mary but very little to childhood. One excellent volume that treats both is Anne Higonnet's *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998).

**2** In November 1992, the editors of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, Susan Bee and Mira Schor, published a special issue on motherhood in which they asked a diverse, intergenerational cross-section of women about their experiences being both mothers and artists. The answers range but generally reveal a profound appreciation for motherhood contrasted with steep difficulties in finding studio time, keeping careers going, and facing prejudiced attitudes.

**3** Nick Johnstone, "Mothering Fathers," in *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* (London: Art/ Books/ Photographer's Gallery, 2013), 99.

**4** Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Playing and Motherhood; or, How to Get the Most Out of the Avant-Garde," in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin et. al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).