

## Mothers and Others

### Catalogue Essay (extract) : Bringing Up Baby

**Terry Kurgan, Published by Bringing Up Baby Project,  
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The background to my own focus upon and heightened interest in the reproductive body and maternal subjectivity is a personal history of rape, pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, birth, and after that, the rearing of children. All of these experiences have been definitive in shaping my life and have led me to a shifting and questioning of my sense of identity and gender.

When I was pregnant with the child who first made me a mother, I remember being completely overwhelmed by the extraordinary public interest in my condition, and the equally extraordinary range of expert opinion and advice offered on subjects ranging from the gender of my unborn child (it was usually a boy) to the best in bum creams. This interest came from everywhere. Work, supermarkets, the street. Now, I was happily, deliriously pregnant but after a while this surfeit of attention began to annoy me. Firstly, I felt as though certain people regarded me as an eroticised spectacle. After all, everybody knows how one usually becomes pregnant. And then, even though I already had a tenant with a nine month lease, I now had to share this body with the rest of the world! And so, alongside the great curiosity and pleasure that characterised my first pregnancy, I began to think about how the pregnant woman is divested of the ownership of her body, regarded as though she is doing exactly what SHE ought, (in fulfilling her functional service to the species) which, in spite of my own great desire and longing to have a child, is a notion that has always irked me! As it turned out I should have enjoyed this attention and affirmation while it lasted because paradoxically, and by contrast, when it comes to the public realm, mothers and maternal subjectivity are completely invisible. They seem to fall off the social map of the world.

While idealised versions of motherhood and childbirth have served as strong metaphors for political and ideological shifts in South Africa, these representations seem to have very little to do with the raw, commonplace and everyday stuff of the experience. There are very few images of maternity in our society outside of the religious, the idealised and the sentimental. Representations of motherhood are largely built around a Christian symbolic construct. Mother and child, a cosy, mutually fulfilled and fulfilling couple. The flip side of this mythology is a taboo domain: the acknowledgment of ambivalence and the critical representation of the lived experience of the maternal. The coexistence of such experiences, for instance, as joy and rage, desire and loss, pleasure and frustration, malaise and happiness are screened from us by culture's stereotyped and popularised images. But also by women themselves who unavoidably, and at great cost, try to live up to the impossible expectations of these cultural fantasies, and hide or obscure their failure. Important public and social issues particular to the maternal are unconsciously avoided. Perhaps this has something to do with the potential of the maternal voice to disrupt deeply held views of women, motherhood, and, most importantly, maternal omnipotence. We are reluctant to part with our own infantile associations with our mothers, who are tied to our earliest, most primitive experiences. Growing up involves confronting the mother's separateness, and the loss of a seamless,

unified world. Culture complicates this process by supporting and perpetuating our infantile longing. My own children provide the intimate, deep and often ambiguous ties which bind me to this topic. Representing them in my work over the last few years has been a tunnel back to certain of my own formative childhood experiences, and has also helped me to acknowledge some of the inherent contradictions between the image of motherhood and the reality.

In South Africa today, hitherto private experience has made powerful incursions into the public arena with gender related issues staking a powerful claim. This is evidenced for example, by the media foregrounding of issues such as public health and reproductive rights, domestic violence, rape, child abuse and sexual harassment. Women are present in unusual numbers in parliament, cabinet and other political bodies. Provision of free health care for pregnant women was amongst the first acts of the new government, and more recently, freedom of choice was enshrined within the reformed Termination of Pregnancy Bill.

The impulse to curate this exhibition was stimulated by my attendance at the abortion hearings which were held in parliament in October 1996, to debate and reform the law. During extensive, emotionally charged public hearings, women's bodies and their reproductive capacities came under the spotlight. The tensions and controversial publicity that were generated by the abortion debate bore witness to the extent to which issues around the reproductive body have repercussion in broader social, economic and moral spheres.

The hearings were of enormous significance. Fore-most, in confronting current reality head on, the new act overturned the laws governing abortion policy which saw the vast majority of South African women discriminated against in terms of access to safe and legal abortions. It also affirmed the constitutional rights of women to make their own choices about their own lives. Secondly, and of importance to the thoughts and ideas threading through this exhibition, the parliamentary process facilitated a public display which transgressed taboos surrounding sexuality and the private domain. Through comprehensive media coverage, society was forced to confront sex, rape, incest, pregnancy, birth, single parenting and a host of other usually silenced and personal issues related to the complexities of individual lived experience. For once, issues which are usually thought of as strictly private were being talked about outside kitchens, bedrooms and other domestic spaces, carrying in their wake a host of related public, social and gender issues.

Artists were invited to participate in this challenge to the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the personal, which is at the heart of this exhibition. We know since Freud about the powerful impact of the events, feelings and experiences of the early years of our lives. Several artists on this exhibition explore the terrain of childhood. Fátima Mendonça in her installation of drawings, "The Circus: Studies for a Great Love", focuses on its terrors, and pursues her ghosts. She evokes, through the eyes of an adult, the tragedy of the little girl who can never quite please her parents enough. In a series of works entitled "Knowing, or just about", Clive van den Berg looks back at the relationship between desire and the forbidden, mapped out in childhood, which shaped and set limits to his evolving adult sexuality. In a group of five large paintings, Mandla Mabila, disabled as a result of childhood illness, attempts to

understand and come to terms with his adult life by retrieving certain early experiences. He focuses particularly on his physical dependence upon the bodies of his mother and grandmother, his relationships within his family and community, and the effect of his disability on these relationships. Penny Siopis, in her video projection "Breasts", idiosyncratically explores the way that breasts are figured in cultural representations. These are woven into personal memories of adolescence and girlhood. Jane Alexander's work "Street cadets with harbinger - wish, walk/ Loop, Long" begins with her observations of the street children in her environment, but refers more broadly to ideas about childhood, gang culture, violence, aggression, allegiance, protection and survival. Claudette Schreuders exhibits a group of carved and painted wooden sculptures collectively entitled "Family Tree". Although her specific sources are personal experience and memories of childhood, the work refers to the broader context of the South African society in which she grew up. Her "Mother and Child", with its white infant held in the arms of a black woman, alludes to that ubiquitous relationship between the personal and the economic/political within apartheid race relations.

This interrelationship and its vestiges, has of course, been a central theme in South Africa over many years. In 'Bringing Up Baby', it is also explored from the subject positions of the black woman and her son who are separated while she is caring for that "white infant", in a documentary produced by Msizi Kuhlane for the Mail and Guardian Television series, "Ghetto Diaries". Doris Nkosi, using a video camera, records aspects of her life as a domestic worker in a Johannesburg suburb. Her son, Mfeli, films his life without her in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal. Their footage is woven together in the form of a visual letter which speaks of their mutual longing.

In addition to this, several other artists explore the maternal and/or paternal. Antoinette Murdoch's installation "Regenerasie (Regeneration)" deals with her experience of the psychological and physical changes of pregnancy, against the background of her ongoing exploration of Christian ritual and Afrikaner womanhood. Robyn Alexander's text "Reading Pregnancy" is an important contribution to the exhibition in its analysis of the ways in which pregnancy is figured, represented and articulated. Veronique Malherbe's work, "Preserving Purity" is a suspended installation, a chandelier made of steel, light and glass bottles containing photobooth photographs which document mother and child through their first year together. The obsessive recording, witnessing, and laying claim are evidence of a need (and the impossibility of the realisation of this need) to hold onto the transience, the ephemerality of the moment, as the child grows. This act of preservation is one of loss, love and memorialisation. Hema Galal-Chunilal's glass and mixed media installation "Nurturing the Soul" deals with the tensions between spiritual and material values which are for her, equally, part of nurturing and raising her baby daughter. My own work, "Maternal Exposures", is an installation of photographs with a soundtrack. I have attempted to represent the experiences of pregnancy and birth, stripped of their myths and rituals, and to portray them at their most everyday, commonplace and mundane. Colin Richards work, "Can't you see I'm burning?" is an installation dealing with the contradictions of paternal experience as one that is, necessarily, stuck in the symbolic order. In opposition to the physical and hence representational contiguity of mothers, fathers are always relegated to a more distant, symbolic position. The man's purchase on paternity is always more tenuous than the woman's intimate relationship with maternity. How does a man claim his progeny? How does a man, in short, become a father? Warrick

Sony takes up the theme of paternity with a sound piece entitled "A Good Many Hours" in which he tames and transforms the "kids' noise", that fills his home. He composes a work using his children's toys, instruments, and various other cultural sounds, but this time, to a soothing, soaring end.

Ruth Rosengarten's block of 33 works on this exhibition, "Secrets and Lies" combines images and text that deal with the desire to have a child and the failure of that project. The sense of waiting and watching, over months or maybe years, of women who are unable to become pregnant, is evoked by repetition of words and images. For women, the decision to have or not to have children, whether by choice, circumstance or reason of infertility, is inevitably complex and shaped by representations of what motherhood means in our culture.

And finally, Daina Mabunda and Bronwen Findlay exhibit "Bed-Spread", an installation which comprises a painted and embroidered bedspread made up on a bed in the gallery. Beds in most contexts are metaphorically associated with birth, sex, illness, and death. The bed is also usually an intimate, private space, a space of dreams. The iconography of the bedspread, which is tied to the personal and cultural memories of these two artists, might be seen as the mapping of these dreams.

One of the effects on the visual arts of our new political and social order, has been the increased subtlety and complexity forged in the relationship between the public and private domains, between the political and the personal. Dramatic changes in our social and political context have created the necessary public space for this exhibition, and the space for artists to represent issues related to the intimate complexities of lived experience. We hope it will raise questions, foster debate, and contribute to the exploration of some of the private functions, pleasures and capacities of the parental body as well as that of the child, which are inextricably linked to issues of both personal and social transformation.