

## **Evolution of Motherhood**

Exhibition Essay

By Tonya Vernooy, New York based writer and curator

The definition of the word mother is a complex one, yet at its heart a simple concept: one who gives birth and/or nourishes and protects. This conjures images of Mary Cassatt's women and children caught in emotional embraces or birthing class videos of women screaming as encouraging cheers of "push, push, push" are being chanted alongside. But where are these meanings and images headed when scientists are genetically engineering human embryos, performing womb transplants, cultivating human embryos in animal eggs, and cloning human embryos using adult skin cells and donated human eggs?<sup>1</sup> That seems to be the vital question that resonates throughout Adrienne Outlaw's *Fecund* series: What does it mean to be a mother in the age of biotechnology?



As embryos are created, manipulated, and perfected in Petri dishes and transferred into transplanted wombs; will we fail to remember what a mother truly is...or was?

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<sup>1</sup> See related articles: Rabin, Roni, "Prospect of Womb Transplant Raises Hopes and Red Flags," *The New York Times*, January 30, 2007: Pg. F5; Pollack, Andrew, "Engineering by Scientists on Embryo Stirs Criticism," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2008: Pg. A14; Jordan, Mary, "Hybrid Emryo Research Endorsed," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2008: Pg. A07;

In the *Fecund* installation, Outlaw has placed protruding breasts on adjoining walls. On one wall the breasts are fragile, elaborate and unique while the opposing wall contains carbon copies of solid metal connected together with electrical wire, differing from each other only in color. By reducing the concept of woman to a repeated erotic body part the artist is borrowing the powerful vernacular of 1970s feminist art. Similar to Vicki Hodgett's fried eggs, which slowly transformed into breasts covering the walls in *Nurturant Kitchen*, an installation within Womanhouse in 1972, Outlaw has again reclaimed the breast as more than just an aesthetic object. It is a form that provides an important function: nurturing human life. Unlike the reassertion of a new definition of woman that is implied in the struggle of Hodgett's breast vs. eggs between woman as giver of nourishment and woman as defined by the home, Outlaw's breasts seek to define motherhood. How soft and delicate is a mother, how hard and protective? To what lengths should she go to provide the best for her child; what exactly does she owe him/her? Are the possibilities of perfection that can be afforded through biotechnology a necessity; are the risks worth it?



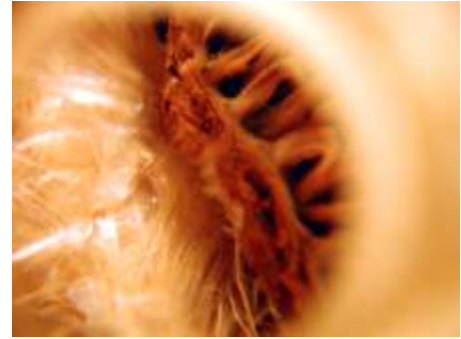
There is a subtle sensuality as the viewer is expected to interact with each piece, pressing their eyes to every nipple, catching a momentary glance into what secret lies inside. The surrealism invoked is suggestive of Hans Bellmer's 1936 linocut plan for a doll torso that allowed a viewer to glimpse a rotating peep show by looking into the figurine's belly as they pressed its left nipple.<sup>2</sup> While Bellmer's idea was never realized, the fundamental question at its heart – where do we come

from? – is incorporated into Outlaw's work: How responsible should a woman be for what she creates and the ramifications it produces? The viewer is drawn into this debate through the voyeuristic act of peering inside and simultaneously being reminded by mirrors contained in each work, that they are not simple bystanders but willing participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Bellmer, Hans. *La Poupée (The Doll)*. Paris, Editions GLM, 1936. Translated from the German by Robert Valençay.

The materials used by Outlaw to create the wall of complex handcrafted breasts are reminiscent of the crafts popular in the late 1800s, where Victorians often used common items, such as shells, seeds, and human hair, to construct ornate objects that fulfilled their empirical interests in science and nature. Outlaw's *Hive*, *Hatch*, and *Ma'am*, all from 2005, are excellent examples of the artist's treatment of organic materials to examine, in a heuristic way, themes of rebirth and maternal connection.



The cicadas included in each of these works may symbolize, as they do in ancient Chinese thought, the idea of rebirth. Outlaw incorporates only the shells – the protective left behind – just the fetus has been carried similar its parents so that reborn anew. How change as human manipulation will be no shell to covering the insects have like an empty womb after born; an infant who now genetic material to that of both mother and father are will this idea of rebirth cloning and genetic become customary? There leave behind.



The concept of maternal connection is significant in both *Hive* and *Ma'am*, where the artist has incorporated such bonding agents as sinew, a connective tissue that attaches muscle to bone, and collagen, a key ingredient in glue.



Here the maternal attachment will live on even after the child has left its mother's care; a connection that may cease to exist should we automate and dehumanize the maternal process.



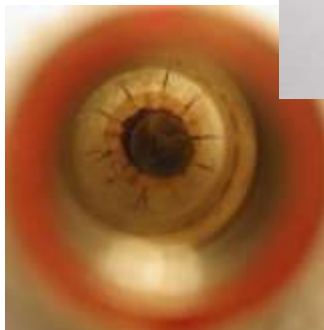


In works such as *Matrix* and *Nerve*, of 2005, Outlaw considers the question of protection. In both works the delicate outer shells of tating and crochet contrast heavily to that of the spiny, sharp interior suggesting a mother's need to protect her child.



Inside each breast the viewer is confronted with a spherical organic form, similar to an embryo, which is then protected by barbs protruding from its body. In *Matrix* that round form is a sea urchin, an echinoid currently used in important genomic research.

As developmental biologist, Eric H. Davidson, points out, "The sea urchin genome will directly contribute to solving the principles of design of gene regulatory networks for embryonic development...We will, in the future, be able to account for the course, and hence the outcome, of development—the body plan of each species."<sup>3</sup> So is it, *Outlaw* seems to be asking, the duty of the mother to choose the genetics of her child so that her offspring have the best chance of survival, and even success, in this world? Is this the proper protective mother in the Technorganic Age?



<sup>3</sup> Davidson, Eric H., "The Sea Urchin Genome: Where Will It Lead Us?" *Science*, 10 November 2006: Vol. 314. no. 5801, pp. 939 – 940.

The concept of security is reiterated in her *Fecund* video series on the opposing wall – work she did in collaboration with biophysicist Dr. David W. Piston of Vanderbilt University. The breasts are now 21<sup>st</sup> century ready, made of resistant metal and no longer standing alone but connected to each other through artificial life-giving electricity, they are the ultimate in mommy security.



But where has the tenderness and fragility gone? Outlaw posits: To what length should a mother go to protect her child? Is a laboratory a better option than a natural mother?



Each futuristic breast contains, in equal number, a video, which either demonstrates the latest in biophysics technology or tender, intimate moments between mother and child. GFP (Green Fluorescent Protein) biosensors are used to track beta cell proximity to blood vessels in *Slice*, 2007 and apoptosis in *Scat*, 2007, while calcium waves in *Wave*, 2007, show

actions of certain drugs. They are interspersed with those touching, human moments like a pregnant belly moving to the rhythm of the fetus in *Track*, 2009, or an engorged breast, *Breathe*, 2009, so full



of breast milk it is beyond ready to be expressed, and a child feeding at its mother's breast, *Suckle*, 2009. Like Patricia Piccinini's *The Breathing Room*, 1999, the combination of both biotechnology and nature seek to comprise the most extreme issues in the genetic debate. Piccinini declares in her artist statement, "Like the little animal in the breathing room, we live within a space both expanded and contained by technology." At what point will one interfere, rather than enhance, the other? Will genetic manipulation or embryonic engineering be imperative to a child's well being? As Professor Jonathan Glover indicates in his series of lectures on practical ethics, these new possibilities can be defined as "procreative perfectionism: the view that we *should* aim to have children who will have the best chance of a good human life."<sup>4</sup> Is this the duty of every mother in the biotechnological age?

Outlaw has created an intense confrontation between the handmade pieces and the industrial hard-shelled metal breasts, where the Victorian Era comes face to face with the Biotechnological Age. This is an extremely apt collision



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<sup>4</sup> Glover, Jonathan, *Choosing Children: Genes, Disability, and Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 53. Italics are mine.

given that Sir Francis Galton first coined the term "eugenics," meaning "of good birth," in 1883. The artist's pieces rapidly evolve from fragile, organic breasts to strong breasts with solid metal nipples that allow unlimited access without the possibility of becoming sore from overuse. The defense system is now located on the outside, proactively, so that the organism's development can take place in a preordained manner; everything is being carefully examined and controlled. Jürgen Habermas, German philosopher and sociologist, describes this new type of control: "For as soon as adults treat the desirable genetic traits of their descendents as a product they can shape according to a design of their own liking, they are exercising a kind of control over their genetically manipulated offspring that intervenes in the somatic bases of another person's spontaneous relation-to-self and ethical freedom."<sup>5</sup> Is it within this new concept of mother that it becomes her responsibility, her duty, to do everything within her power, even if that includes genetic alteration, to provide for the ultimate health and happiness for her those modifications moral and ethical



In her artist Outlaw writes, "My human desire for possibility of horrors." The artist to confront the motherhood that will take place as a result of advances in biotechnology. Even through her fear of what may come to be – possible hybrid human animal monsters or lost human contact – Outlaw reveals her faith in the maternal instinct to protect, love, and nurture her offspring.

offspring; even if infringe on certain considerations?

statement Adrienne work speaks to the progress and the Frankensteinian wants her audience rapid evolution of

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), p. 13