

Take Care? Take Care!

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Motherhood is on trial. It is being tested by a dedicated and well-meaning corps of inventors, engineers, scientists, and doctors. Their technological achievements are designed to create and prolong life, but they are weighing upon "mother love," challenging "mother wit," and surpassing "mother instincts." Mutually loving relationships between mother and child are relegated to the background of the works of art in this exhibition. The emotional tenor that occupies their foregrounds is trepidation, anxiety, effort, and frustration.

The triple meaning of the phrase that serves as this exhibition's title reveals the nature of today's disputed definitions of motherhood. Spoken softly, "take care" is an affectionate parting expression that conveys the desire to protect a loved one from harm. Uttered sternly, "take care" conveys the foreboding of danger. To actually "take care" of something or someone can either be burdensome or gratifying. The nine female artists in this exhibition apply the unresolved implications of this phrase to their personal experiences. Together they catalog a plethora of contemporary concerns.



Studio Installation Image

Annette Gates, Adrienne Outlaw, Sadie Ruben, and Jeanette May acknowledge the medical breakthroughs that offer women unprecedented options for fertility, prenatal screening, diagnostic testing, and extend fetal and infant survival. But they concentrate on the inadvertent and inevitable opportunities for anguish these technological advancements introduce. The ethical dilemmas they express in their works of art were unknown to previous generations of mothers.



Annette Gates returns to the instant of conception that has been occurring since the first multi-celled organisms arose on planet Earth. But her installation is a riveting reminder that unleashing this generative force may not be an occasion for celebration. Such concerns can be products of sophisticated technologies that make improbable outcomes appear like looming certainties. The harmless crocheting and knitting techniques that Gates employs to form her porcelain molecular sculptures are jarring contrasts to the dangers of tampering with life on the microscopic scale. Each component in her wall relief suggests irregularities in cell

differentiation and unchecked multiplication during fetal development.

Adrienne Outlaw's "Fecund Videos" require that the viewer peer into breast-like conical forms arranged across the wall in order to discover what fecund processes are referred to by the title. Alternative answers are presented in the form of tiny videos installed within each form. Some videos capture intimate scenes of babies suckling, fetal kicking, fingers fluttering, and a nursing mother's breast draining. Others apply the word 'fecund' to state-of-the-art microscopic imaging that probes the miniscule realms where new life stirs and takes form. The videos convey the complexity of reconciling advanced technological discoveries with the traditional role of mother as incubator, feeder, and nurturer of infants.

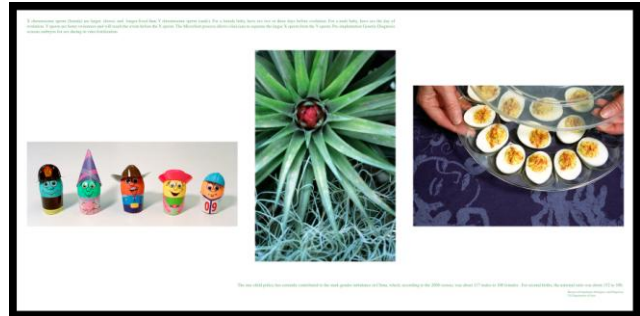


Sadie Ruben's "Alien Fetus Series" presents a line-up of specimen jars containing in-uteri forms that resist objective scrutiny despite their sterile laboratory appearance. These curiosities elicit



the squeamish apprehension that might accompany a collection of extraterrestrial creatures, not the research of an Earth-bound scientist. None of the sculptured fetus forms appear normal. They are either humanoid, mammaloid, reptile-oid, fungoid, or some other bizarre deviation from norms of life on Earth. The work confronts views with the strange and unsettling frontier of contemporary genetic manipulations.

Jeanette May practices art, however she introduces an alternative meaning for the letters 'a', 'r', and 't'. In her work "Fertility in the Age of A.R.T.," these letters stand for Assisted Reproductive Technology. May explores this theme by creating complex assemblages of found images paired with borrowed texts. The visual world she constructs is shiny, colorful, but disturbingly engineered. While viewers observe a pregnant woman proudly displaying her protruding torso, a healthy cow, and infant toys, they also observe eggs that have been forced to assume the shapes of squares. The accompanying quotations track evidence of such intrusive procreative manipulations to health books, government reports, and advertisements.



Kristina Arnold, Sher Fick, Lindsay Obermeyer, Monica Bock, and Libby Rowe present full disclosure of the emotional toll of high-tech, commercially-supported, media-sponsored motherhood. They articulate the dread of bearing a malformed or malfunctioning infant, the concern of adopting a child damaged by a harsh life experience, and the anxiety of being loved by a child that is not a biological offspring. They present these forms of adversity as opportunities to honor motherly courage, resolve and achievement.



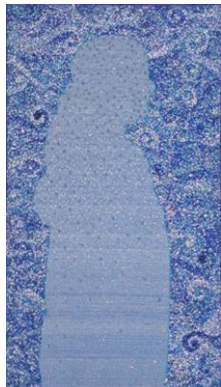
Kristina Arnold's "Fragile" series includes a relief comprised of individual dark red droplets of molten glass that appear to have cooled so abruptly that they congealed mid-way as they fell. Dozens of these hardened glass drips protrude precariously from the wall. Protection is feeble. It takes the form of clear plastic coverlets hastily stitched around their bases. The drips that cluster into units seem no less fragile. A brittle material presented in a threatened position is a poignant manifestation of motherhood at the breaking point. Arnold places her work within the context of the guilt associated with a mother's yearning to reclaim her independence, the destructive effects of custody battles, the futility of providing protection, but also the persistent hope for resolution.

Sher Fick's "Coping Skills" discloses the dismantling of her pre and post partum psyche. The focus, however, is not on mental unraveling. Fick's work celebrates the success of her determined efforts to stitch the fractured parts of her personality into a coherent persona. This internal struggle is conveyed through the use of prescription drug bottles that are encased in soft flannel fabrics, the kind that are used for baby clothes. Idealized and sentimentalized images of childhood are printed on these tiny swatches of fabric. Hastily stitched together, they suggest the disorderly spontaneity of crazy suturing of emotional ruptures. One means of overcoming such mental anguish comes packaged in pill bottles. In this work, Fick defies the stigma against the use of prescription drugs to assist women in becoming responsible and loving mothers.



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Lindsay Obermeyer chooses a sumptuous medium associated with wealth and celebration. She uses it to address the challenge of bonding with a child whose short life was devoid of



opportunities to develop trust in others and confidence in self. Obermeyer portrays her daughter's silhouette as an impenetrable barricade dividing flat empty fields of color from dense patterns that are meticulously stitched with beads, sequins, and embroidery. The care and patience required of mothers is embodied in the stitching process that formed this artwork. In "Blues," the surrounding swirls and stars appear to assault the figure. In "Red Hot," searing flames surge within the figure. Both works evoke the psychological blockade built of scars from a child's damaging upbringing, and the adoptive mother's determination to breach this divide.



Monica Bock removes procreation from the two contexts where it is usually situated. On the one hand she reclaims procreation probe the development of a fetus origins. By preserving bits of the and the amniotic fluid that her daughter, she reaffirms the At the same time, she removes sacred context that shrouds them visceral remnants into the handles joined to mundane tasks of in glycerin, a sweet-tasting fat mothering: as an ointment it



from advanced technologies that from its single-cell, microscopic umbilical cord, the amniotic sac, body created to give life to her body's primacy over technology. these relics of birth from the in mystery. By inserting these of dust pans, the birth of a child is cleaning. Bock cast the dust pans that conveys the twin sides of soothes; as a solvent it bonds.



Libby Rowe's "Womb Worries" takes the form of stuffed monkeys that cannot be purchased. They are only available for adoption. In this manner Rowe teases out the difference between three forms of money exchange - purchasing a commodity, paying to induce fertility, and adopting a child. She then intensifies the emotional stress of deciding among these alternatives by rejecting the cherub-like perfection of Gerber and Gap babies. Rowe's handmade dolls are afflicted with abnormal quantities of limbs, misaligned backbones, and distorted faces. Yet they are endearing, not grotesque. An official decree of adoption accompanies each adoptee. The temptation to sign a certificate is instructive. It reveals that opportunities to delight in mother love can be attained by caring for a mal-formed child.

The artists participating in "Take Care" confirm a distressing truth – today's mothers do not appear to be bolstered by the collective wisdom of our species. Despite the fact that *Homo sapiens* have been bearing and raising children for over 100,000 years, motherhood in the 21st century remains a lonely experiment racing to keep up with procreative advances at the outposts of human accomplishment.