

When Women Artists Choose Mothering Over Making Work

Why does the act of stepping away from a creative vocation still have the power to shock?

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Accompanying this essay is a self-portrait, “Six Weeks Old” (2023), contributed exclusively to T by the London-based artist Caroline Walker. “I wanted to document this fleeting time in my life, and it was also a way of getting my head back into working,” she says. “Ink drawings were a very manageable medium for me in the early months with a new baby, as they can be started and finished in the short snippets of available studio time. If the baby starts crying, it only takes a minute to wash the brushes up and return to the job of motherhood.” Courtesy of the artist and Grimm. Photo: John McKenzie

By Ligaya Mishan
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HERE IS THE myth of how the punk singer and poet Patti Smith vanished for 16 years: In 1979, at the age of 32, she said goodbye to her band, the public and New York for a life with the man who would soon be her husband, the guitarist Fred “Sonic” Smith, in his hometown of Detroit. Soon after, they moved to the suburbs — the very place punks were supposed to be trying to escape, the turf of those enemies, Mom and Dad — and bought a three-bedroom Tudor house in St. Clair Shores, where they raised two children; where they became Mom and Dad. This idyll didn’t last. Fred Smith died young, of heart failure, in 1994 and, after a period of mourning, Patti Smith returned to New York and the music scene. Of her time away from her career, she [told The Times](#) in 1995, “There’s no job harder than being a wife and a mother.”

This was hardly a provocative statement. If anything, it belonged to the language of platitudes and affirmations, far removed from punk’s mutinous liturgy. Some took issue with such sentiments coming from an iconoclast like Smith. The American journalist and punk archivist Legs McNeil, [writing in Vice](#) in 2016, reported that, after her husband’s death, Smith rebuffed his request for an interview with similar words, saying, “I’m a wife and a mother.” Two decades later, the phrase still haunted him: “She liberated millions of women around the world, she did whatever she wanted — spit, cursed, [had sex]. ... And then she turned her back on all of that, ‘cause now she’s a ‘wife and a mother!’”

How we cling to our binaries, these eternal either/ors. That there might be a connection between liberated sex and getting pregnant seems not to have occurred to McNeil. (In the United States, access to contraception became legal nationwide only in 1965, after the Supreme Court ruling *Griswold v. Connecticut* — for unmarried

people, only in 1972, after *Eisenstadt v. Baird* — and abortion in 1973, after *Roe v. Wade*; when *Roe* was overturned last year, legal scholars [warned](#) that *Griswold* and *Eisenstadt*, similarly based on the contested idea of a constitutional right to privacy, could also be under threat.) McNeil’s piece ends on a conciliatory, self-deprecating note: “I began to get over myself,” he writes. But this accusation, equating the embrace of motherhood with not just a rejection of art but a betrayal of it, will be grimly familiar to women artists who grapple with how to sustain their creative lives after having children and to justify the choices and compromises they make — because whatever those choices are, they are wrong.

Certainly it’s a sign of progress that society no longer presumes a woman will or should give up her career when she has a child. Nevertheless, for women artists, motherhood — venerated in theory, belittled in practice — is still seen, by others and often themselves, as an obstacle, if not the end. When the Bajan pop star Rihanna revealed that she was pregnant in early 2022, she was immediately asked whether this would derail plans for her next album. Never mind that she hadn’t released an album since 2016 and was busy running her beauty and lingerie empires, the profits of which have made her a billionaire. Yes, there would be more music, she insisted to “Entertainment Tonight,” adding, “My fans would kill me if they waited this long for a lullaby,” as if to dispel fears that she might lose her edge and become just another starry-eyed, baby-addled mom. Her child was born that spring; no album dropped. This year, as the mother of a 9-month-old, she revealed that she was pregnant again. Her second child was born in August. Her fans wait still.

“She turned her back on all that”: The accusation stings precisely because we fear in it the pang of truth. In the 1971 essay “[Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](#),” the American art historian Linda Nochlin argued that a woman artist must “have a good strong streak of rebellion in her” to avoid “submitting to the socially approved role of wife and mother, the only role to which every social institution consigns her automatically.” If artists are defined in part as refusers — insurrectionists against received notions of how a person should be — what happens when a woman artist takes on this most traditional and idealized of roles, the one that, historically, you’ve been expected to devote yourself to entirely? What if you find that’s what you want?

MUCH HAS BEEN written on the conflict between making art and raising a child. (At least in the past century: It’s no coincidence that in the same time period that women gained more freedom to pursue work outside of the home, motherhood — believed to be imperiled by that pursuit — became the subject of intense scrutiny and began to be treated as a profession in itself, complete with manuals and compendiums of rules whose authors were typically men.) In almost every book or essay on this theme, inevitably, the mid-20th-century British literary critic Cyril Connolly pops up with his knife thrust of an axiom from the 1938 cultural survey “Enemies of Promise”: “There is no more somber enemy of good art than the pram in the hall.” The context is his imagining of a dreamily compliant wife who, in supporting her artist husband, “will know at what point domestic happiness begins to cloy.” Apparently it’s poison enough to be adjacent to child rearing, not even directly responsible for it; the most admirable of wives would be sure never to show her artist husband the labor that requires.



The New York-based artist Sharon Madanes also completed an original work for T, “On Zoom (Three Handed)” (2023). “I made this painting based on the experience of sitting in a Zoom meeting while breastfeeding my newborn,” she says. “This felt like an apt analogy for modern mothering, and one I wanted to question: I was invested in hiding the emotional and physical conflicts of a working parent. As an artist, I mine these experiences and also feel guilt when I miss bedtime to finish a painting.” Courtesy of the artist

But why is this kind of labor more corrosive to the creative mind than, say, the drudgery of the factory or a dead-end desk job to pay the bills, aside from the fact that you never clock out? Here, too, a binary persists, embedded in male and female consciousness alike: For although we are long past the cliché of the father as a doting outsider, we are still in thrall to the idea that in motherhood there’s a quality apart, an essence of the animal, a call to the blood; that when a woman has a child, she finally understands her reason for being on earth. That this can be true makes it no less of a burden. In her 2022 epistolary memoir-biography, “[Letters to Gwen John](#),” the British painter Celia Paul writes, “When I was with my son I could only think about him” — and so, within a few weeks of his birth in 1984, she left him in the care of her mother in Cambridge and returned to London to be able to think about work instead. (He grew up to become an artist himself, so apparently this didn’t turn him against the discipline.)

The problem, then, is not just one of logistics and lack of time and financial resources (although these are urgent concerns, particularly in a system designed to extract maximum labor for minimal return). It’s a matter of vocation, that exalted notion of work as a totalizing force, not a quotidian trade but a way of life. Art and mothering, in the romantic imagination, are each cast as the kind of labor that consumes wholly, that is worth being consumed by. The British sculptor Reg Butler, in a lecture in 1962, infamously chalked up the “vitality” of female art students to “frustrated maternity” and suggested that once they had children, they would “no longer experience the passionate discontent sufficient to drive them constantly toward the labors of creation in other ways.” One wonders if he envisioned motherhood as an endlessly beatific state, every moment of exhaustion, isolation and boredom redeemed by the memory of having given birth, or as a process of ongoing creation in which the children are the equivalent of artworks, conscientiously shaped by the mother, rather than her being run roughshod over by little strangers.

It’s as if there were only one way to be an artist and only one way to be a mother: all in. During an interview with the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel* in 2016, the Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović, when asked if she ever wanted children, explained that she had had three abortions: “One only has limited energy in the body, and I would have had to divide it.” The British artist and former enfant terrible Tracey Emin, whose show “Lovers Grave” runs through January at the White Cube gallery in New York, told *Red* magazine in 2014 that she chose to remain childless because “I would have been either 100 percent mother or 100 percent artist. I’m not flaky and I don’t compromise.” Eighty-five years after Connolly’s axiom, and more than 60 years after Butler’s lecture, women artists are still grappling with an essentialist argument. “There are good artists that have children,” Emin said to *Red*, matching Connolly with her own knife thrust. “They are called men.” The intimation is that, to succeed as an artist, a woman must deny or defeat the mother within.

IN 2001, WHEN the British Canadian writer Rachel Cusk published “A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother,” her visceral chronicle of early motherhood (or “prison diary,” as the American critic Judith Thurman described it in *The New Yorker*), she was excoriated in the press, to the point of being called the “most hated” writer in England. (She now lives in Paris.) Readers likewise rushed to judgment in 2005 when the American writer Ayelet Waldman [declared](#) in *The New York Times* that she loved her husband more than her children. But of late it has become more acceptable, even mainstream, to express ambivalence and fury. By the time the California-based writer Minna Dubin’s *Times* essay on maternal martyrdom went viral in 2019 — leading to a book, “[Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood](#),” released in September — it was merely the latest entry in a recognized and applauded genre.

Most of the literature on artists as mothers has focused on women who try to be both at once, a struggle chronicled recently and rigorously by the American biographer Julie Phillips in “[The Baby on the Fire Escape: Creativity, Motherhood and the Mind-Baby Problem](#)” (2022) — many of whose subjects, including the painter Alice Neel and the writers Susan Sontag and Audre Lorde, had unplanned pregnancies, owing to a lack or failure of birth control, and frightening, illegal and painful abortions. Then there’s the British art critic Hettie Judah’s “[How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers \(and Other Parents\)](#)” (2022), in which she notes, “This story — of brilliant talents quashed by domestic cares — might be repeated endlessly.” More rarely do we hear of women like Smith, who choose to take a pause from their creative work when they

became mothers. This may be because any discussion of a particular choice runs the risk of being mistaken for an endorsement and thus, implicitly, a condemnation of other choices. Yet surely to think of artist-mothers as only suffering or silenced simply reinforces self-sacrifice as the measure of motherhood.

The Canadian American actress Meg Tilly took no roles between 1995 and 2010, and has said that she wanted to focus on raising her children — and that this wasn’t a loss. The Swedish British singer Neneh Cherry released her third solo album, “Man,” in 1996, the same year that her third child was born, then waited 18 years to release another. What should we label that period of time: hiatus, sabbatical? “Unless there’s some sort of product to show for it, it’s as though the life doesn’t exist,” Cherry told *The Guardian* in 2014. This returns us to the concept of vocation, which the American theologian Gilbert Meilaender has cautioned “may reinforce the dubious idea that the human being is essentially and primarily a worker.” Perhaps there’s something radical in choosing — if, that is, you have the financial stability to do so — to be primarily a mother for a period of time. It means setting aside art as a mode of production, while allowing the possibility of it in other forms.

In the 2016 essay collection “[Little Labors](#),” the Canadian American writer Rivka Galchen muses of early motherhood, “The world seemed ludicrously, suspiciously, adverbially sodden with meaning.” In this way, her newborn makes her “more like a writer ... precisely as she was making me into someone who was, enduringly, not writing.” The process of creation is not always visible to outsiders, nor does it always have tangible yields. When the American author Rachel Yoder’s son was born, she didn’t write for two years, then started what would become the novel “[Nightbitch](#)” (published in 2021 and adapted into a forthcoming film), in which the narrator, an artist ensconced at home caring for her young son, finds herself incapable of coming up with a coherent idea for a new project. Instead, she sprouts bristly hairs along the back of her neck; the metallic scent of blood in raw meat provokes in her a “depthless hunger.” She turns into a dog. Is this fable or performance art? In the physicality of mothering, Yoder finds a parallel to the making of art, in which your borders grow porous and there’s little to no separation between work and self.

As for Smith, during those mythically quiet 16 years in the suburbs, she recorded an album in 1987, while pregnant with her second child, and published a slender book about her childhood, “Woolgathering,” in 1992. She was writing, as daily practice rather than a race to a finish. She wrote early in the morning, when everyone was sleeping — the way that the American-born Canadian writer Carol Shields, long before she was a writer in the eyes of the world, stole an hour to work before her children came home from school, expecting no more of herself than a couple of pages, of which she would later say in a 2002 interview on NPR, “It’s funny because now I have the whole day, and my output is no more than it was then.” And Smith’s children, born in 1982 and 1987, were still children when, as a widow and single mother, she resumed her music career in 1995. She never stopped being an artist. She never stopped being a mother.