

Why does the art world hate mothers?

In our supposedly enlightened times, the myth that mothers cannot be great artists still persists

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Artemisia Gentileschi, Madonna and Child (c. 1613) | CREDIT: Alburn / Alamy Stock Photo

Some of the most regressive people I've ever met have been from the art world. Whatever shocking stuff is hung on the walls, this is a milieu that is like something from the 1950s. The hierarchy of artists and their power brokers – curators, collectors, dealers, “taste-makers” – is propped up by a gaggle of wives and gallerinas who lubricate this world because they have a reverential love for “the work”. That work often declares its radical politics, but I have yet to see this reflected in how the business around it is conducted. And art is, above all, big business.

Our belief in artistic genius remains when that artist is female. A recent show at Tate Modern celebrates [Yoko Ono](#) as a major artist in her own right. But [Ono](#) is now 91. Why did it take so long?

Women outnumber men at art school – yet this is effectively reversed in later professional life: 67 per cent of artists represented at major commercial galleries in London are men. The art world pays lip service to every notion of equality and diversity yet seems reluctant to actually change anything to make it possible for mothers to thrive. Private views that stretch into the late evening, rowdy gallery dinners, and other faux bohemian lifestyles don't sit well with bath and bedtime routines. Tales of artists' uncompromising dedication do not recognise the reality of being up all night with a vomiting child. Pregnant women are advised not to go near toxic materials like turpentine. Just stick to the watercolours, dear! The question still remains: can you be a great artist and a mother?

It's a question that has inspired the curator and critic Hettie Judah to stage a new exhibition, Acts of Creation, at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol, which makes the case for “the artist mother as an important – if rarely visible – cultural figure”.

The blind spot in art history is exactly this, isn't it? The show's artists (which include [Tracey Emin](#), Celia Paul and Paula Rego) have made films, paintings and sculptures which delve into the experience of pregnancy, and the day-to-day work of caring for a family – as well as miscarriage and childlessness.

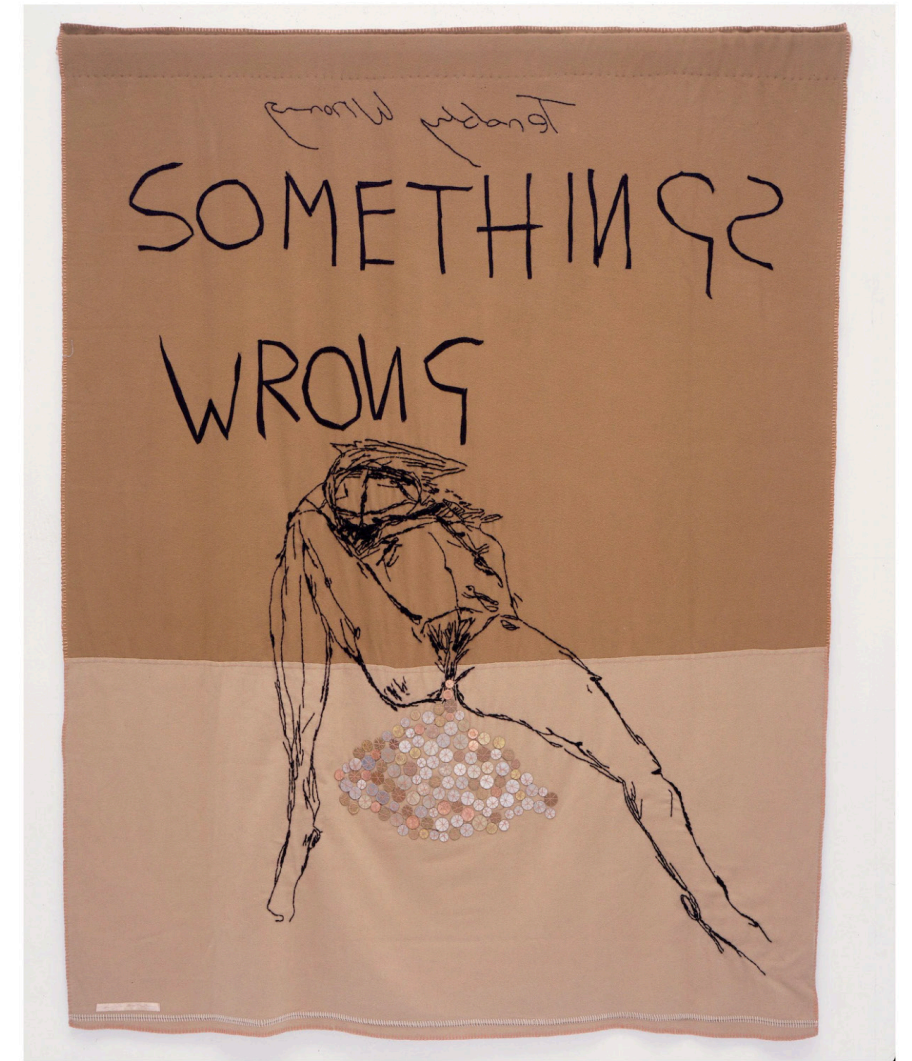


Paula Rego, Untitled 2 (1999) | CREDIT: Paula Rego/ Cristea Roberts Gallery

Judah herself has spoken about what the art world needs to change to help artist mothers, and has even written a manifesto. This includes a lot of practical steps, from galleries holding private views in the daytime to providing budget for childcare. An artist should not have to “confess” to being a parent. Do not ask about the gaps in a CV or place age limits on prizes and residencies.

Such demands are welcome – yet undermining them all are deeply held myths about who gets to be an artist. It is as hard to imagine a female Warhol as it is a female Van Gogh. We allow a few women to step through the portal of greatness, but they tend to embody an idea of greatness that is so unbending, children could never be part of it. No one would bother talking about children holding back the careers of men, yet female artists have often publicly struggled with following their passion, and the demands of parenthood.

Emin, who's never had children, is a great artist. At the centre of her work are complicated feelings about abortion, motherhood, and recently, illness. Her drawings are like embodied screams and the bodies in them are resolutely female, never feminine. This is blood and guts stuff. “I start early, at about eight, and I work until 11.30 at night,” she's said of her routine. “I hate being interrupted.” It's why she's no longer invited to baby showers. “I don't know anything about that world.” She once proclaimed: “There are good artists that have children. Of course, there are. They are called men.” Emin would know. The Young British Artists scene from which she emerged was unrelentingly laddish.



Tracey Emin, Something's Wrong (2002) | CREDIT: Stephen White Courtesy White Cube

Marina Abramović is another of the greats, who sees motherhood as an impossible distraction – so much so that she's revealed she's had three abortions because children “would be a disaster” for her work. “One only has limited energy in the body, and I would have had to divide it,” she said. “That's the reason why women aren't as successful as men in the art world.” You can see themes of self-sacrifice, even masochism, in Abramović's performances, but the sacrifice is always to a higher god – not to a small, vulnerable being.

Does it have to be this way? You can either put Emin and Abramović's arguments down to wearied realism, or a conservatism that refuses to see motherhood as anything other than the death of creativity.

And it is certainly possible to write another kind of art history: of women artists who produced amazing work and were mothers. Louise Bourgeois, who raised three sons, would always be at the top of that list for me, with her huge maternal spider Maman (1999). “The spider is an ode to my mother; she was my best friend,” she said. “Like a spider my mother was a weaver... like spiders, my mother was very clever.”



Bottles and Pumps (2022) by Caroline Walker | CREDIT: Caroline Walker

But art history is also full of stories of the “bad mothers”. The American painter Alice Neel was accused by her in-laws of leaving her baby on a fire escape while she finished a painting. And when the sculptor Barbara Hepworth gave birth to triplets in 1934, their father, the painter Ben Nicholson, who was then in an open marriage, fled back to his wife in Paris. Hepworth was left all alone with three tiny babies and a four-year-old. When she was offered full-time day care she took it, and was regularly criticised for “abandoning” her children for her art. Nicholson was never criticised in this way.

Meanwhile the idealised Madonna and Child and the passive female nude are staples of the canon. And when women introduce their own perspectives, often their art is seen as somehow less universal – as if the “universal” only belongs to men. Often these pictures are condemned as vulgar and unpretty. Paula Rego’s powerful etchings shown in *Acts of Creation* – of muscular women with their legs splayed – are not invitations to sex but the result of sex: depictions of backstreet abortions. These are not bodies asking for male approval, these are desiring women who know the agony of where desire can lead. Rego, manic-depressive, in thrall to her unfaithful husband, would lock herself in her studio and not answer the door to her children. “Although she loved her children, she mostly found motherhood boring,” her son later wrote.

None of this is easy. Nor is it confined to the art world. Doris Lessing famously left her kids; and Sylvia Plath did, too, in the most extreme way imaginable.



Mummy issues: detail from Mary Cassatt’s *Baby in Dark Blue Suit, Looking Over His Mother’s Shoulder* (1889) | CREDIT: IanDagnall Computing / Alamy Stock Photo

Do today’s artists still have to see their children as something to be embarrassed about, something to be hidden away? The artist Anna Perach, who was born in 1985, recently told Judah that “motherhood is considered a bit taboo in the art world. It is accepted as if the artist ‘sold out’ or joined the bourgeoisie. It’s often met by others in the art community with a mix of underlying feelings of rejection, jealousy, or both.” Now replay this with the word fatherhood instead of motherhood and see how that feels.

A young friend of mine at a prestigious art school with a small baby found that there was no accommodation made for breastfeeding until she made a fuss about it. Her tutors told her that it was not something they had ever had to think about before – which in 2024, is faintly astonishing. In 1938, Cyril Connolly declared that “there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall.” These days, the pram in the hall may be an overpriced buggy, but the conditions in which women make art of any kind depend on class and finance as they always have.

In my experience, though, having a baby while I was at college meant a structure was imposed on me that I probably never would have imposed on myself. I am not claiming to be an artist, but merely observing that one also learns how to make the most of snatches of time. Giving birth catapults you away from any notion that time is endless. Caring for a small child can be tedious, but it can allow the mind to drift and the imagination to take off – between feeds, wheeling them round the park, while they nap. If I had not been a mother, I may not have worked so hard nor would I know as much about the world. Even now, I maintain that I’ve found out more about which way the wind is blowing from the school gate than I’ve ever done from visiting Westminster.

Mothers are always pushing against constraints, but that can make them focus more. The tortured writer scribbling in her garret gives way to something much more prosaic, when getting through the long nights of feeding and colic and stitching oneself into a tapestry of reciprocal childcare arrangements with other women. Alice Munro began writing short stories because as a young mother she no longer had the long stretches of time needed to write a novel. And Shirley Jackson got the idea for *The Lottery* while out grocery shopping with her two-year-old.



Janine Antoni, 2038 (2000) exhibited in *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood* at the Arnolfini, Bristol | CREDIT: Janine Antoni/ Luhring Augustine

The unnamed narrator of Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* (2018), an autobiographical novel which blends fiction and non-fiction, wonders whether having a child – she decides not to – would make her a mediocre writer. Would the books she produced be enough in themselves? No one else should decide that of course and more women are choosing to remain childfree, whether they are artists or not.

Motherhood is messy and expensive, that’s for sure. But while some applauded Heti’s ambivalence, I found her level of self-absorption irritating. I may not be a 30-something novelist. But I do think we should resist the idea that one is opting out of a creative life simply by creating life.

There is an inherent sadness here, not because all women must have children, but because this fiction of creativity versus motherhood has such a strong cultural hold. We internalise it. Of course mothers can make great art. And while the circumstances that stop them still exist in every part of society, the art world should be challenging them, not shoring them up.

Motherhood is not incompatible with the creative process nor a substitute for it. Motherhood is not only about sacrifice and selflessness nor is art merely a selfish and solitary activity. Great female artists have often been able to transcend these divisions, building a creative life in which perhaps nothing is so simple and so single-minded.

It is difficult to imagine a wilder and more creative state than that.

Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood is at the Arnolfini, Bristol (arnolfini.org.uk), from today until May 26