

Part 1: 'Matrescence'

Curated by Catherine McCormack

15 November – 21 December 2019

Private view: Thursday 14 November, 6–8pm

Performance : Liv PENNINGTON's *Private View* on Thursday 14 November from 6pm

The first in a two-part exhibition on maternal politics, identity and embodiment, '**Matrescence**' will bring together an international range of works from immediately contemporary artists with an older generation of artists to address the unresolved issues around maternal subjectivity, embodiment and politics; issues that remain as pertinent today as when they were first explored in the 1970s. The group show explores the idea of 'Matrescence,' a term developed by anthropologist Dana Raphael in 1973 in an attempt to theorise the transformational processes of becoming a mother – one that is never really fully resolved.

Curated by Catherine McCormack, the core themes for this exhibition include 'public and private reproductive bodies', 'maternity and obscenity', as well as a rethinking of the eponymous archetype of the silent, suffering and idealised mother represented in Christian iconography.

Works such as **Hermione WILTSHIRE**'s 2008 appropriated image *Therese in Ecstatic Childbirth* – taken from the radical midwife Ina May Gaskin's guide to spiritual midwifery – will feature, disrupting the stereotypical image of clinical and painful childbirth with an image of a woman experiencing orgasmic birth (an image that has repeatedly been censored). This image, vital to the discussions surrounding the visual depictions of birth, will be shown in contrast with **Eve ARNOLD**'s *Birth* (1952); a dominant and visual archetype of birth with the mother's identity rendered anonymous, focusing instead on an obstetrician cloaked in the sacramental garments of the 'clinic' holding the baby up as a trophy.

Elzbieta JABLONSKA's series *Supermother* (2002) strikes another note on the theme. Already adopted by recent feminist art histories, this series is on show for the first time in London. *Supermother* reimagines the mother as 'superhero' in contrast to the iconic image of the enthroned 'Madonna and Child' – exploring its influence on gender stereotypes in her native Poland as a role model for Polish women devoted to religion and to the domestic sphere of chores and child-care.

Concurrently, **Leni DOTHAN**'s looped film *Sleeping Madonna* (2011) animates the same iconic 'Madonna and Child' devotional image, lifting the mask on the mother as a static vessel to reveal the everyday realities of breastfeeding and the exhaustion of reproductive labour, bonding mother and child. **Jo SPENCE**'s *Remodelling Photo History: Revisualisation*' (1981-82) continues the revisionist theme by presenting an alternative view of the iconographic mother child dyad in the shape of a monumental mother body in middle age, with pendulous natural breasts and an adult male on her lap. This view of maternal identity contrasts with both archetypal Christian imagery of the Eurocentric beautiful and ageless virgin mother, and more contemporary idealised images of the post-partum body – one that is encouraged to transcend the physical effects of pregnancy and birth.

Additional themes in this first exhibition probe the territory of loss, obsolescence and negation of 'mothering,' whether through abortion, or maternal death and obstetric violence, both areas that have come under increased political scrutiny. The exhibition also draws attention to the notion of the public and private reproductive body, with work that asks questions about the state versus the individual's right to decide on contested practices such as abortion or access to fertility treatments, and the visibility of pregnant mothers in the public arena.

For example, a selection from **Laia ABRIL**'s 2018 installation *On Abortion* (shortlisted for the 2019 Deutsche Börse Photography prize) visualises the personal stories and mapped routes, both psychological and geographical, that women in Poland have had to negotiate in seeking a termination to their pregnancies. A black and white image

of a drone that carried abortion pills across the border into Poland also reflects on the methods used to negotiate the control of reproductive bodies with echoes of the visual language of espionage and warfare.

XIAO Lu's work *Sperm* (2006), shown for the first time in the UK, is a performance installation comprising a video and archival photograph from the artist's performance-installation at the Kanga Hotel in Yang'an, China in 2006. This work was made during a period in which state-issued birth permission certificates were necessary for all Chinese births, whether through intercourse or IVF (and which were issued only to married couples). As an unmarried woman the artist was not only unable to obtain a birth certificate, but was also not eligible for IVF treatment. During the performance, Xiao Lu held a discussion about reproduction before inviting members of the audience to donate sperm samples for her to use in an attempt to impregnate herself through in-vitro fertilisation, a process that—had it been successful—would have resulted in conception as the culmination of the performance.

On the opening night of 'Matrescence' (14 November), Folkestone-based artist **Liv PENNINGTON** will restage her pivotal 2006 performance *Private View*, where forty women were invited to take a pregnancy test when visiting the bathroom of the private view of an art exhibition. The artist publicly broadcast the anonymous results of each test in public on a screen above the bar at the event, and collected quotes from the participants once they had performed the test. Accompanying the performance will be the original photographs of the tests, along with the recorded responses, which were put together to make a composite print with the ubiquitous circle, square and thin blue lines of the standard home pregnancy kit arranged in a grid formation.

This two-part show aims to showcase a different understanding of maternal embodiment and subjectivity, as something open to transformation beyond the persistent archetypes that have dominated our collective cultural understanding and expectations, something that can also bring a refreshed political awareness of the category of mother in our current feminist wave. Remaining artists in this exhibition include **Helen KNOWLES**, **Renate BERTLMANN**, **Annegret SOLTAU**, and **Helen CHADWICK**.

'Matrescence' forms part of Richard Saltoun Gallery's 12-month programme dedicated to supporting the work of female artists. Titled *100% Women*, the programme aims to remedy the gender inequality that persists in the art world and encourage wider industry action through debate, dialogue and collaboration. *100% Women* will pursue its mission through a combination of gallery exhibitions, art fair presentations, artist talks, a film and lecture series, external collaborations and digital exhibitions hosted on the gallery's new online platform.

Gallery information

Opening hours:
Tuesday to Friday, 10am–6pm
Saturday, 11am–5pm
Or by appointment

E: info@richardsaltoun.com
T: +44 (0) 207 637 1225

Instagram: @richardsaltoungallery
Twitter: @RSaltounGallery
Facebook: @RichardSaltounGallery

For press enquiries, please contact

Camille Regli, Pickles PR
E: camille@picklespr.com
T: +44 (0)7835 237 292