5-7-2007

The other mother: an artist's conception

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THE OTHER MOTHER:
AN ARTIST’S CONCEPTION

BY

DEAN SCHMIEDEL

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Elliott Rubenstein, Chair

Alex Miokovic, Committee Advisor

Therese Mulligan, Committee Advisor

May 7, 2007
DEDICATION

The art doesn’t reside in the object, the art in the object or the art in the set of circumstances is in a sense the opportunity for you to have this moment of awareness, this moment of really, in a sense, touching something special that human beings can touch. So that what you walk out of the room with somehow is what’s of value.

—Robert Irwin

To my children, one born and the other on its way.

1 Robert Irwin: The Beauty of Questions, VHS, produced by Leonard Feinstein, Robert Irwin, Alicia Sams, and the University of California (System) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 1997).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express great thanks to faculty past and present who supported me in achieving this project, Ron Talbott, Jeff Weiss, Elliott Rubenstein, Alex Miokovic, and Therese Mulligan.

A great number of professionals tutored me in various disciplines, from auto body work to upholstery. Thanks especially to Eric Ross and Ron Derrick who gave immense time and energy. Also, thanks to Darryl Pierce and everyone else at Vesa's Custom Auto Shop. Thanks to John at the Recovery Center, Mike at Niagara Custom Plating, Jason at Rochester Vibratory, and Bob at PS&I. And I'm grateful for the help of Jamie Callan, Chris Hartman, Scott Oliver, and Adam Francey.

It couldn't have happened without my great friend Paul "Chim Chim" Chaplin and my wife Sue Bay.
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ABSTRACT

_The Other Mother_ represents the act of human conception, birth, and nurturing from an artist/man/father’s perspective. The work attempts to reconcile the divide between this ultimate creation and the creative process that we confront through art. The result is a masculinized nursery composed of a chopperized pram, a crib and rocker with hard edges and superhero symbols, and walls decorated with oversized, graphic images. To create the pieces in this installation, I worked closely with men in the traditional masculine trades of automobile customizing, welding, woodcraft, and upholstering. The resulting work is flashy and clean, without the hominess and earthy sensuality that come with the traditional feminine idea of motherhood. This difference between _The Other Mother_, my creation, and the child created by a true mother touches on the essence of what motherhood is.

This paper examines the process of discovering motherhood by exploring _The Other Mother_ from a symbolist perspective. It considers symbolism as developed by the Freemasons, Structuralists, and the Symbolist Movement. It compares aspects of _The Other Mother_ to works by Constantin Brancusi, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georgia O’Keefe, Joseph Beuys, Robert Irwin, Matthew Barney, and Liz Cohen. Freemasons and Structuralists believe that symbols don’t merely represent, but they also create something new. Examining _The Other Mother_ from a symbolist perspective may help the work to achieve its purpose.
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THE OTHER MOTHER: AN ARTIST’S CONCEPTION

As a man, I can be ignored, I can be destroyed. But as a symbol … as a symbol, I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting.

—Bruce Wayne, Batman Begins

Chapter 1 Introduction: A Brief Philosophical Background of Symbolism

In The Other Mother: An Artist’s Conception, I attempted to create an aesthetic representation of the act of creation, the act of growing and nurturing, of bearing and delivering a life into the world. I do not presume to have created anything that comes close to a child. I do not presume that the process of creating this work succeeds as even an approximation of pregnancy. But as I planned for my final graduate project at the same time as my wife and I conceived a child, at the same time as I read about its fingernails growing as it lived in her womb, as I watched my wife nourish it by carefully arranging her diet and activities, I wondered what on earth an artist could create that would equal this ultimate and visceral context of “creation.”

At that time, I had just attended Matthew Barney’s exhibition of The Cremaster at the Guggenheim in New York City. I had already been considering the significance of symbolism in my art (see Section III below), and Barney’s work led me to a study of the use of symbols in Freemasonry. The Freemasons use symbols as tools to convey meaning, but for them the act of using symbols also has greater significance: “The symbol is the overcoming of dead matter by the human mind and the bringing of that matter into vital life, by-passing mere scholarly conceptualization with artistic imagery, replacing [mere] knowledge with feeling for life and the possibilities of forming it, and external, utilitarian evaluation with inner evaluation, appreciation.”

Freemasons were more than mere substitutions for written records, rather they made “things of the intellect perceptible to the senses and [transformed] real life into meaningful imagery…. A symbol comes into being whenever we give a fact, a number, a word, a sign, a plant, a picture, a building—in a word, a thing—a deeper meaning than it possesses simply as is; when we give these things and their forms a greater value and meaning than would ordinarily be theirs; when we give the purely external thing a deeper intellectual or moral significance and thus make it an image for mental or spiritual events that could otherwise never have been expressed.”

The Freemasons believe that only the “most important should be invested with the rank of symbol. … In the symbol, the concept itself enters the corporeal world and becomes, itself, immediately visible.” If I followed the Freemasons in this perspective, I needed symbols to create art about conception, creation, and birth.

The Masonic view that all symbols are themselves symbols of creation, that the very act of discovering or devising and using a symbol creates a quality that did not exist before parallels certain tenets of structuralism. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure argued things or concepts are “signified” by sounds and/or images. Saussure calls these “sound images” “signifiers.” The combination of signified and signifier is a linguistic “sign.” A word is an example of a sign. Importantly, Saussure noted that “our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a

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5 According to Saussure, “sound images” are not the physical sound made by vocal cords, mouth, and tongue, but rather the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression the sound makes. Thus, even when there is no sound, such as when you talk to yourself, there is still a sound image, an idea of the words you’re saying.
shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Thus words create a quality that did not exist before. They complete the concept so that we can think about, develop, and share that concept.

For Saussure, one basic and essential characteristic of the sign is that the bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. There is no natural, intrinsic, or logical relation between a sound image and the thing it signifies. Saussure chose the term “sign” over “symbol” because a symbol generally has a rational relationship with the thing or concept it signifies. Nonetheless, Saussure acknowledged that linguistics is only one branch of semiology, or “science which studies the role of signs as part of social life.”

Analyzing the use of symbols in the visual arts, as I am doing here, is a branch of semiology. In fact, many contemporary commentators use the term “symbol” to refer to the linguistic sign, despite Saussure’s avoidance of the term.

Further, “most semioticians [other than Saussure] stress that signs differ in how arbitrary/conventional (or by contrast ‘transparent’) they are. Symbolism reflects only one form of relationship between signifiers and their signifieds.” Semiologist Charles Peirce divided signs into three fundamental “modes of relationship” between the signifier and the signified. First, the sign as “symbol” is “a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional—so

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9 Ibid.
that the relationship must be learnt: e.g. language in general."\[^{10}\] Second, the sign as “icon” is “a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it)—being similar in possessing some of its qualities: e.g. a portrait."\[^{11}\] Finally, the sign as “index” is “a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified—this link can be observed or inferred: e.g. ‘natural signs’ (smoke, thunder, footprints …), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate),… or ‘signals’ (a knock on a door, a phone ringing)….“ The symbols I used in *The Other Mother* arguably fit into all three of these categories. For example, The XY emblem in *The Manger* and *The Rocker* as signifier for the concept of “other mother” uses the “sign as symbol” mode. *The Pram* as signifier for a womb uses the “sign as icon” mode and the electrocardiogram-like wallpaper border as signifier for a baby’s heartbeat uses the “sign as index” mode.\[^{12}\]

Another very relevant thing to note about structuralism: Saussure argued that each sign is described entirely in terms of its “difference” from other signs. “Thus the spaces between words so to speak become more important than words in themselves.”\[^{13}\] I find this space between signs interesting: how should it be valued? When interpreting any work of art that incorporates symbols, we must discuss the spaces between as well as the symbols themselves. In installation art this is most apparent—we must look at the space between the objects as important to the entire work.

\[^{10}\] Ibid.
\[^{11}\] Ibid.
\[^{12}\] See Chapter 4 for more discussion of these and other symbols used in *The Other Mother*.
As I considered all of this in the context of the fetus in my wife’s belly, my final graduate work was conceived: I would use symbols to create an artist’s birth. In doing so, I would play the role of “mother” and my work would be the “child.” By playing the role of mother, I do not purport that I am a symbol for motherhood. The work is a symbol of various aspects of creation, and I am a supplemental “mother,” the other mother. Referring back to Saussure’s concept of language as a “differential system without positive terms,”14 “mother” is that which is different from me. The symbol of motherhood in my work develops from the space or difference between me, an artist who attempts to create, and a mother.

This basic discussion of “otherness” in the context of gender requires at least a brief mention of Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of woman as other in relation to man. For Beauvoir, women are “other” because the patriarchal world sees itself from a man’s point of view—men represent human beings in general (“mankind”), thus women are what is left, other than men, not subjects in their own light.15 While I continued the work for this exhibition, my son was born and I took on the role of a “stay at home father.” As my son grew (he is 3 years old at the time of this writing) I became part of the world of daytime stay-at-home parents, which in my experience, consists primarily of women. I am and have been in playgroups with mothers, I spend time with mothers when we drop our children off at preschool, when we go the grocery store, or when we go to the playground. In this role, I soon realized my role as the “other” stay-at-home parent. As I continued to make this work about the creation of a human being, I incorporated my newly found identification with otherness.

15 Adams, Critical Theory since Plato, p. 993.
In summary, I set out in this work to show through the use of symbolism what an artist-man-father could create to represent, experience, and honor the creative role of motherhood.

Chapter 2 The Symbolist Movement

Perhaps because of their creative power, the use of symbols in historical and contemporary art is unquantifiable. Arguably, every art work has some representational value that contributes to or defines its meaning. An analysis of The Other Mother would be incomplete without at least a very brief examination of the historical and contemporary use of symbolism in art. To provide a foundation for this context, this section sets forth the principal features of the Symbolist Movement in art.16

The Symbolist Movement, which began in the 1880s and lasted for thirty or forty years,17 attempted to synthesize expressive design and subjective emotion, to convert art into a soulful, introverted vehicle for personal emotions.18 Through symbolism, artists objectified the subjective, externalized the Idea.19

The three major features of the Symbolist Movement are (1) the element of subjectivity (Baudelaire established the poetic imagination as a repertory of symbols of a transcendental reality to which the artist has special access); (2) the ability to suggest things rather than state them directly; and (3) the focus on exploring the ultimate truths

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16 See Chapters 3 and 4 for an application to my own work of the philosophical principals described above and the foundational principals set forth here, as well as comparisons between aspects of The Other Mother and works by Constantin Brancusi, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georgia O’Keefe, Joseph Beuys, Robert Irwin, Matthew Barney, and Liz Cohen.
that lay behind the visible world.²⁰ The symbolists attempted to make myths of modern life.

Important to symbolism were the plastic, spiritual, and psychological components of an artistic work. Arguably more important was the relationship between form and content, with form and color being the most important elements in a work of art because the artist made use of them to create or display the symbol.²¹

With this in mind, I will examine The Other Mother and the work that preceded it with a focus on my personal intent and emotions in creating the work, the quest for finding an honest answer to the question of what is motherhood?, and the forms that I used in my thesis work to draw a connection between my intent, the work’s essence, and the viewer’s perception.

Chapter 3 Conceptual, Aesthetic, and Historical Context of The Other Mother

The Other Mother draws from the history of the use of symbolism in art, but its true conception, or perhaps the thoughts of its conception, took place a few years before, as I planned and prepared for my final graduate critique in the spring of 2004. That exhibition consisted of a series of digital prints and paintings composed of characters in a geometrical arrangement, most of them abstract, one following the format of a standard western letter, with salutation, paragraphs of text, closing, and signature. The characters were digitally enhanced photographs of a model, my wife, standing behind and pressing her body in various arrangements on a lycra screen.

The various parts of my wife’s body pressed on the screen created strokes like hieroglyphs or letters of an alphabet. As I arranged and enhanced these symbols, I

²⁰ Ibid., p. 35.
²¹ Ibid., p. 37.
considered the field of semiotics. Was I merely creating a new font or was I creating a whole new language? Is there a difference between the two? In other words, if a “reader” sees the same text in a different font, might his or her understanding of the meaning behind that text change? If so, meaning would exist, at least in part, in the aesthetic perception of the object, as well as in the translatable quality of the words. The form of the symbol would become the essence of the meaning. Structuralism confirms this. There is no meaning without form, and the essence of a form is its difference from other forms.

*The Letter* (figure 3.1) was an attempt to introduce these thoughts to my audience. I chose not to provide a primer for the letter because I wanted each viewer to find his or her own meaning in the piece. Would they see it for the love letter that it was? It was, after all, composed of lyrical brush-like strokes (figure 3.2) that, to me, convey notions of love.

Ultimately, the letter was too constrained. Many cultures follow different conventions for reading and writing, and if my goal was to allow for meaning-making separate from language, then I wanted to leave these cultural limitations behind. I attempted to do so by painting the characters with large, flowing brushstrokes on raggedly edged, unstretched canvas. The result resembled East Asian script and created limitations of its own. So I moved to geometrical patterns (figure 3.3), as if the world of mathematics and computers would enable me to convey the intended meaning. But this seemed too cold.

As I moved away from that work and began thinking about my final graduate exhibition, I considered more thoroughly this concept of creating meaning through forms.
A few months later my wife and I conceived our son.

From this mixture of event and thought came the idea that the only “language” that held no cultural constraints is DNA, the nucleic acid that carries our genetic information and determines individual hereditary characteristics. It is the one characteristic that all humans share, transcending all other boundaries that we might construct. I began to contemplate DNA from a conceptual and aesthetic perspective: how could its symbolic long chains twisted into a double helix form the basis of my thesis work?

At that time, I began to read descriptions of the developing fetus in my wife’s belly. At two months gestation it was the size of a sesame seed, a raspberry, a lima bean. At three months a grape. At four months a jumbo shrimp, a plum. I was in awe as its webbed fingers developed fingerprints, its rubbery skeleton turned to bone. This was the greatest artistic creation I could imagine. And my wife was the chief creator as her body changed to nourish and grow the embryo into a baby. She needed to eat and breathe and move in ways that would form this work. What could a man and artist do that was so extraordinary?

My early thoughts of DNA were inseparable from those of this new DNA that would become my son. And my thoughts of creating art were shadowed by this ultimate creation. I set out to come as close as I could: to be the other mother. I could symbolically represent this transcendental reality that was my unborn son.

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Chapter 4 Visual Realization of *The Other Mother*

As I began to think about how to do this, the pregnancy progressed and I was confronted with the information and objects of birth. My wife and I read books and websites to learn how the fetus was developing. We learned when its heart began beating, and weeks later we were able to hear the heartbeat with the help of a Doppler device. My wife felt what she described as bubbles swirling in her belly, likely the baby moving for the first time. An ultrasound revealed that it was a boy, and with this gender-knowledge I began to really know my son. His senses, eyebrows, and eyelids developed. He was able to open and close his eyes and follow light. He could dream.

The individual components of *The Other Mother* are like these first glimpses of my son: they represent my growing understanding of how I, as artist and father, fit in the birth world of mother and child. The following descriptions of these components include, as context, examples of relevant historical and contemporary work, work that bears a relationship to the pieces in *The Other Mother* either in essence or in form. Note that there are likely dozens of other works that would serve this purpose equally well. I have chosen these because of their relative significance in the field of art history and criticism and/or their close relationship to the symbols in *The Other Mother*.

*The Pram*

You’d fix the car up and make it look just a particular way, because it was an extension of your identity. This is your first esthetic lesson: sanding, polishing, changing something, adding something, in a sense, stylize that car so it’s a reflection of who you are.

—Robert Irwin

To celebrate the pregnancy, my wife and I decided to make a “belly cast.” We started by covering her belly in petroleum jelly, then with cotton strips dipped in plaster.

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23 Robert Irwin: *The Beauty of Questions*, VHS.
Later, as the cast dried in the middle of our kitchen, I studied it. If I were to create a symbol for birth, I would need a womb. Nothing that I could think of could come close to achieving the purpose of complete nurturing and protecting. Evolution had worked here: the physics and chemistry of her body was perfect, and it changed throughout the pregnancy to accommodate the changing creature within. Since I could not do better than what existed in nature, I would start from there and make it my own.

As a stay-at-home father in the Rochester, New York summer, the stroller had become the main source of transportation for my son and me. As my son faced me in it on our daily walks, I pushed and protected him. It was my womb. In constructing *The Pram* (figures 4.1 through 4.3), I would make this womb the father’s, masculinize the ride by tricking it out, as if I had walked onto the set of the TV show *American Chopper* and handed them a design to chop-out a stroller. But I would do much of the work myself.

Because I had never constructed a chopper before, I walked into a custom auto body shop and asked for help. The men in the shop, many of them artists of sorts who were building their own rides, were intrigued. They offered me a bit of instruction, the use of some tools, and a corner of their shop. This began an intimate collaboration among the most “manly” of men that enabled *The Pram*’s creation.

I first made a mold out of a belly cast and from that made another cast, this time of fiberglass. Eventually, I added some plush upholstering and a jeweled paint job, and what was my wife’s body became the body of my stroller. I made the frame by twisting and welding steel. I chromed it and put on wheels and tires. I detailed the piece by designing a fur bumper, adding handlebar grips, spitting and shining.
The finished product is somewhat ridiculous in its uselessness, but it is visually stunning. A few pillows and blankets might allow a small baby riding in it to be somewhat comfortable, but the “driver” wouldn’t be, as the high, wide handlebars would soon cause a back, neck, and arm ache. But choppers don’t need to be practical. Many men have cruised across the country straddling a Harley cramped in this position. Man has betrayed function and taken to extravagance in at least one area—his *ride*.

The spectacle of it, the shine, the glittering red, the white grips and tires all suggest an impractical but potential energy. As if it sits in the middle of its showroom waiting for someone to take it for a ride. And if the fact that it is a stroller is not enough to connect this piece to creation in the babymaking context, the phallic rise of the handlebars, the DNA twist of the steel umbilical cord that connects the body to the frame, the subtle X and Y incorporated into the base of the frame and the handlebars all help to bring this piece closer to that essence. The form/essence duality plays out in *The Pram*, one an everyday parent-child tool made anything but everyday, and the other an artist-father’s devotion for his son. As stated above, since *The Pram* represents a womb and contains the forms of both a pregnant belly and a stroller, it fits Peirce’s mode of “sign as icon,” a mode in which the signifier is possesses some of the signified’s qualities.

In *The Newborn*, Constantin Brancusi sculpted birth in a different way. Relative to *The Pram*, *The Newborn* is a small egg-shaped sculpture in marble (or bronze) with simple carvings that suggest the face of a howling baby. Brancusi’s womb is separate from the mother. Perhaps this is the cause of the infant’s distress.

Both *The Newborn* and *The Pram* are polished, rounded, and hardened versions of natural wombs. But *The Newborn* seems to represent the child, whereas *The Pram*
represents the idea of nurturing the child. Instead of reflecting detachment, I chose to make my womb more like that place in which the child knew no hunger or cold. Because I am implicitly attached to my creation, I didn’t want to leave it to its own devices. *The Pram* provides protection and comfort, while still conveying the masculine aesthetic of the “chopper.”

**The Manger and The Rocker**

For all clear thoughts there exists a plastic equivalent… A work of art emanates from a kind of confused emotion…. I meditate upon the thought buried in this emotion until it appears lucidly and as distinctly as possible before my eyes, then I search for an image which translates it with exactitude…. This is symbolism, if you like.

—Puvis

*The Pram* needed context. I didn’t think it could realize its full symbolic value as a stand-alone piece. So I decided to move toward an installation, a room focused on a child—a nursery. The nursery would need a crib (figure 4.4). And a rocker would complete the major furniture (figure 4.4).

To help make the work cohesive from the perspective of design and content, I decided to create a symbol that would represent *The Other Mother*. Matthew Barney used such a unifying symbol to the extreme in his *Cremaster* cycle. The “Field Emblem,” an ellipse with a horizontal line bisecting it, “represents the artist’s notion of self-imposed restraint over an organic system” and appears as a kind of logo in all five films. With this in mind, I looked back at some of the individual letters in the “alphabet” I created in my previous work, and I kept coming back to that universal alphabet—DNA. Since my son had just been born, I was more than aware of that last

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chromosome on the human DNA strand that differentiates between males and females. Females have two of the same kind of sex chromosome, XX, and males have two distinct sex chromosomes, XY. Y is the other chromosome, essential to becoming male, that is passed only along the direct male line. It can be used to trace paternal lineage.26

Since I was the “other,” making this my nursery, the XY seemed to be an appropriate symbol. From there, the decision of how to arrange and display the letters was based on aesthetics that in turn held symbolic value. I wanted something visually strong, simple, clean, and clear, like Barney’s “Field Emblem.” Something a superhero would wear on his chest. At the same time, the meaning of the XY symbol remains obscure, also like Barney’s “Field Emblem” and thus fits within Peirce’s mode of “sign as symbol,” where the signifier XY does not resemble the signified “other mother.” I would use this image to shape the wooden frame of the crib as well as adorn the mattress. And it would decorate the backrest of the rocker (figure 4.5), making it the rocker of a superhero.

Rather than construct The Rocker from scratch (as I did The Manger), I decided to use a rocker that had been crafted many years ago by my wife’s grandfather and then upholstered and reupholstered by her father, first for his “family room” and then for my wife’s first solo apartment. In this way, this piece would draw on that patrilineage to further symbolize the XY differentiation. And by doing so from my wife’s side of the family, it would maintain the essential connection to the maternal force.

**The Painting and The Rug**

Now that my nursery had the essentials, it needed decoration. My wife had had a 4D ultrasound when she was about 18 weeks pregnant, and I watched a video of the images often, appreciating it obviously for its emotional content, but also for its aesthetic value. The abstract shapes were sometimes hard to attribute to the corresponding parts of the baby’s body, and so they, as well as the spaces between them, would often become something else, some *other* thing. I decided to use and emphasize this visual play by recreating a still from the ultrasound video in bold colors and on a fairly large scale. I chose purple, partly because it fit well from a design perspective with the deep red I had chosen for the paint on the stroller and the cushions of the manger and the rocker. Purple was also significant for its ties to “kingliness.” And I found it appropriate that one source explained the significance of the color purple by examining its components: “made from equal parts of the primary colors blue and red, and thus symbolically combines wisdom and love.”

The resulting painting and rug are graphic and bold (figure 4.4). The human form outlined in them is similar to the forms depicted in Henri Matisse’s *Blue Nude* cutouts—works of pure shape, flatness, and color. *The Painting’s* simplicity of form would likely work well as a découpage. I chose instead to duplicate the image by hooking a rug because I wanted to add texture and warmth to the installation.

The image in *The Painting* and *The Rug* is also similar to the *Blue Nudes* in that it conveys sensuality. Matisse’s languorous blue ladies express voluptuousness clearly because of their subject matter. Furthermore, they reflect that Matisse paid close

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attention to their composition and arrangement. By lengthening and tangling the limbs, he drew attention to the outlines with stark shapes and strong colors. Although the baby in *The Painting* is much more delicate than the women in the *Blue Nudes*, its intimate gesture evokes its own sensuality. Although I did not arrange the tilt of the head or angle of the arms, the natural position of the fetus is emphasized in its “decisive moment.” Since nurseries are often decorated around themes as well as filled with photos of the baby, repeating this image seemed to work here. These are my photos, worked through my hands.

*The Pee Stick*

The first physical manifestation of my son’s existence came in the form of a plastic wand covered in my wife’s urine. The wand had a window through which one could determine pregnancy: + meant yes and – meant no. I saved the wand, scanned it on a flatbed scanner, enlarged it significantly and printed it (figures 4.6 and 4.7). Seeing this object that is so common to couples trying to conceive so clearly and on such a large scale reflected the grandeur of the moment when my wife and I first looked at it for that essential information. The large scale also made it into something else, in much the same way that the ultrasound painting transformed the fetal position. If nothing else, they became something more masculine with the simple conversion of scale.

But the symbols + and – did not adequately convey what they needed to in this context. I saw that window where they would appear as a kind of mini-canvas on which I could paint my own symbols, information of conception (figure 4.8). The ribbons of stretched and rewound DNA that resulted are meant to convey more than a straightforward meaning of yes or no. Instead they are meant to evoke the complex
emotions that are conjured when peering into that space to find the answer of whether conception has occurred. Like the XY emblem, these are “symbols” in Peirce terminology, in that they do not directly resemble the emotions they signify.

**The Heartbeat**

We heard my son’s heartbeat for the first time when my wife was about 12 weeks pregnant. I recorded the heartbeat and digitally graphed it, creating an image that resembles an electrocardiogram. The installation needed a connector, a semi-functional piece that would define the gallery space, without drawing too much focus from the more central pieces. Wallpaper borders have become the kitsch décor of the standard middle-class suburban nursery and my son’s heartbeat as a border, visually tying the room together, intrigued me. I chose duct tape as the medium because it is a practical and masculine substance with the bold esthetic that I wanted. The resulting electrocardiogram-like wallpaper border (figure 4.4) uses Peirce’s “sign as index” mode to represent my son’s heartbeat.

**The Onesies**

Since the conception of this project, I had been playing with a handful of graphic images of conception, birth, and motherhood. I chose one to embellish an essential clothing item for a new child—the onesie. The image is a line drawing of a uterus that morphs into a bull’s head. To match the masculine stereotypes in the room, I silk-screened rock-concert black onesies with silver ink bulls (figures 4.9 through 4.11).

Pablo Picasso made frequent use of the bull in his work, indicating masculinity, power, war, and/or the artist himself. His bulls have been interpreted to symbolize Picasso, the Nationalist party, the male gender, Spain, the enemy, the victim, virtue,
aggression, the good guy, or the bad guy, among other things.\textsuperscript{28} Yet when pressed to explain the symbolic value of the bull, Picasso said, “This bull is a bull … If you give a meaning to certain things in my paintings it may be very true, but it is not my idea to give this meaning. What ideas and conclusions you have got I obtained too, but instinctively, unconsciously. I make the painting for the painting. I paint the objects for what they are.”\textsuperscript{29}

In \textit{Tête de taureau}, Picasso formed two common objects, an old bicycle seat and handlebars into a bull's face and horns that resemble the bull on my onesies. Does this bicycle-as-bull say something about the aggressive nature of junk? About the playfulness of the artist? Similarly what does my uterus-as-bull say about the relationship between this female organ in which a fertilized egg implants and develops and an adult male bovine? Both speak to the purpose of symbolism in art: Anything can become a sign for something else, especially when using Peirce’s “sign as symbol” mode of relationship, “in which the signifier does not resemble the signified.”\textsuperscript{30} Art is transformational.\textsuperscript{31}

In one final treatment of the bull here, Georgia O’Keefe depicted the cow’s skull frequently in her work, such as in \textit{Cow's Skull with Calico Roses}, \textit{Ram's Head and Hollyhock}, and \textit{Cow’s Skull: Red, White, & Blue}. This last is perhaps most relevant to my work, with its bold, graphic background and the white cow’s skull in the foreground appearing both somewhat fierce in its expression and gentle in its natural, weathered

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
state. This painting, with its colors of the United States of America, has been characterized as “a quintessential icon of the American West”\textsuperscript{32} Although the line-drawing simplicity of my bull is distinct from O’Keefe’s realistic skull depiction, the face and horns on the black onesies retains some of that cowboy-quality that evokes at least modern mechanical bull riders.

\textit{The Fridge Door}

My simple nursery was now filled with a few things to comfort, hold, and carry a baby, but it was missing a direct symbol for nurturing. Since the refrigerator was a tool I used daily to care for my son, it made sense to include one in \textit{The Other Mother} (again creating a “sign as icon,” since \textit{The Fridge Door} resembles or imitates the concept of nurturing) (figure 4.12). And, of course, any refrigerator in the house of a toddler would be covered with magnetic letters of the alphabet (figure 4.13). I found the antique door to continue the theme of “tricking out” a classic model. I painted it red to match the stroller, crib, and rocker.

\textit{The Quickening}

The nursery seemed complete, fully furnished and decorated. But this installation was missing one essential element of parenthood: touch. I wanted those who visited my installation to have the opportunity to take something visceral away from it. At the time, I was reading of Joseph Beuys and his extensive use of the vitrine. Beuys made deliberate and expansive use of symbolism throughout his work. He was, in fact, criticized for his frequent use of obscure symbols with the perhaps intended result of

restricting critical interpretation of his work. In his vitrines, he arranged found objects, small sculptures, and props from his performance pieces in glass cases similar to those found in natural history museums. The vitrines suggest “a collection of archaeological relics or scientific samples. Each case comprises a mini-environment, bringing out connections between the disparate objects.” The result is clinical, but also intimate and precious and lends physical presence and visceral energy to the objects. Beuys’ vitrines force the viewer to focus on the ordinary, resulting in the ordinary becoming poetic. After the viewer acknowledges the objects inside the vitrine and appreciates them for what they are, he or she wonders why these objects and why in this combination and arrangement? The objects then become the things they symbolize.

I wanted to make my vitrine even more personal—an interaction between the viewer and the work. An incubator seemed the perfect vehicle. It would define the space in a clinical way, but create intimacy, both because it would allow the audience to touch what was inside and because of what it was (figure 4.14). I imagine that anyone who has ever been in the presence of a live baby in an incubator found the experience incredibly moving due to the tinyness of the creature inside the chamber and the circumstances that required him or her to be there.

Inside the incubator/vitrine, I decided to put a symbol of what seemed to me to be the most intense single moment of the pregnancy in which I could not share. As mentioned above, at about 18 weeks of gestation, my wife felt our son move for the first time, “the quickening.” She described it as many pregnancy books do: bubbles of gas or

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fluttering in her belly. How did she know it wasn’t gas? She knew. (In the same way five months later, she knew the baby was about to arrive.) I was fascinated by this—what the experience was like and how she knew what it was. At that time, the fetus was about five and a half inches long, the length of a large sweet potato. My placement of a sweet potato (figure 4.15) inside the vitrine symbolizes my effort to connect to the “quickening.” My audience will be able to touch the sweet potato, but only through thick rubber gloves attached to large holes in the side of the box (figure 4.16), much as I was able to experience the quickening only from a distance.

In Sweeping Up, Beuys filled a vitrine with the sand, stone, paper, and garbage gathered after a sweeping up of his studio (as well as the broom itself). The contents of this vitrine is garbage, but as one visually sorts through it to read words on crumpled paper, notice the relatively bright color on what might be a juice can, and even examine the dust strewn throughout it all, it no longer looks like junk, for no one would put junk in a clean glass case. In another vitrine, Encounter with Beuys, he placed a copper pipe, covered in fat, and wrapped in cord in front of a stretch of grey felt lain over a wooden board. Again, one notices the detail: the color and feel of the fabric, the rhythm of the cord, the nature of the fat. And the symbolism: these are frequent motifs of a myth Beuys created about being saved by Tartars who wrapped him in fat and felt to keep him warm after his plane crashed World War II. Objects that are at first clinical, cold, and strange become personally revealing. It is my intention that the sweet potato in The Quickening will have the same effect. The audience will be able to examine the details of the potato, its small size relative to the big plexiglass encasement, its squirmly shape, its wrinkled bumpy exterior, its rough orange color. Through this examination, will it
remain a sweet potato? Then, in light of the title of the piece, the sweet potato will convey the duality of distance and intimacy that a father experiences in pregnancy.

*The Quickening* incorporates each of Peirce’s “modes of relationship” between the signifiers used and the concepts or things they represent. The incubator serves as an “index” in that there is a direct connection between it and what it represents: a divider between a parent and a tiny infant. The sweet potato serves as an “icon” in that it resembles a fetus at 18 weeks gestation. And the gloves serve as a “symbol” for the physical distance between a father and his unborn child.

**The Nursery**

I love things that are absurd, useless, impossible, frantic, excessive, and intense, because they provoke me, because I feel them like thorns in my flesh.

—Symbolist Poet Emile Verhaeren

And there is my nursery: a kind of large, unglassed vitrine in its own right, filled with altered artifacts from my wife’s pregnancy (figures 4.17 and 4.18). Many of these objects were constructed with my ideas and my hands. Some were adapted from found objects. Others are the result of warm collaboration between new male friends in various garages. Here are symbols of creation, masculinization, sex, birth, sensuality, males, America, superheroes, movement, value, transformation, love. One ubiquitous symbol that has yet to be examined is the color red. Like the bull, red stands for many things, all of which help to further the meaning of *The Other Mother*: danger, heat, stop, blood, war, virility, passion, romance, and sex.

Of course, this is not a “real” nursery. It is an installation, an exhibition that is contrived, its pieces perfectly placed and spot lit. The space between the works further highlights the “difference” between this installation and a child’s nursery, the difference
between *The Other Mother* and a real mother. I created each of the pieces conscious of this corner of this gallery. I precisely tested and selected the placement of each work to evoke a real child’s room, yes, but also to allow space for the audience to experience each piece. I hung the painting to create a false wall both to separate this “room” from the rest of the gallery, but to do so in a way that did not really divide it. *The Other Mother* remains a gallery space. Installed in a different venue, it would take on different characteristics for which I would need to account to ensure that it maintained its symbolic and aesthetic integrity. When installation artist Robert Irwin created a series of retrospective exhibitions in four European cities, he explained that the process entailed at least four visits to each site: “go back and begin to kick a few ideas around in my head, then go back again and see whether they made any sense in the actual space, then I went back and began to make a real set of plans, and now the visit for the installation.”

Reconstruction of *The Other Mother* would require the same exactitude.

In his *Cremaster* films, Matthew Barney makes extensive use of mythological, historical, and personal symbols to create “an intensely private universe” that is complex and bizarre, yet beautiful.\(^3^6\) The related installation in the Guggenheim (which is also the location of a sequence in one of the films) displayed film stills and props like “luxurious anthropological artifacts.”\(^3^7\) The installation allowed an opportunity to examine the works closely, to attempt to uncover their meaning. The connection between the pieces was established by the narrative of the films and the arrangement of the installation to convey that narrative. His frequent use of signature materials like petroleum jelly,

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tapioca, beeswax, and “self-lubricating plastic,” also connects the work, and contributes to the cryptic, personal nature of the symbolism.

_The Other Mother_ resembles Barney’s installation in its attempt to create a private male world that relies heavily on the female form. The pieces stand in place in the nursery, lit somewhat hauntingly, too still and sterile to belong to any real child. But whose nursery is this? Is it my son’s? It certainly is a celebration of my son, an after-the-fact effort to play a greater role in his prenatal development. At the exhibition’s opening, I heard my step-mother say, “If he could have birthed his son, he would have.” This statement perhaps most succinctly summarizes _The Other Mother_. The work is my effort, as an artist, to do just that.

In her work-in-progress _Auto-Metamorphosis_, artist Liz Cohen is transforming an East German vehicle called the Trabant into a Chevrolet El Camino. Cohen is doing all of the work involved in this metamorphosis herself, learning in the process the technical and practical skills involved in automobile customizing. Cohen is documenting the process with photography, and in many of the prints, Cohen models atop the vehicle in pin-up poses wearing stilettos and lingerie. In others, she adopts the more traditional look of a mechanic: knit cap, baseball shirt, and sneakers. The metamorphosis involves the car and the artist, as she reflects the role of photographer, mechanic, and show model, with all the gender and class identity issues that these roles evoke.

_The Other Mother_ entails a similar kind of metamorphosis, in which I am photographer, graphic designer, printer, painter, interior designer, welder, carpenter, auto-body mechanic, child, father, lover, man. The feeling of sterility that is present in the

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installation, in its quiet lighting, in the space between the objects, in the shiny, commercial surfaces, may reflect the inadequacy of man’s role in the whole process of birth. Rather than illustrating my metamorphosis from artist to mother, this work is more of an admission of my inability to be a mother. At the same time, it commemorates the work that I have done as an artist/man/father.

**Chapter 5 Conclusion**

In this imperfect realm we can intuit the elemental feeling that sometimes, just by making or looking at art, we might glimpse the full range of human possibilities.

Jerry Saltz

In this work, I have attempted to objectify my notion of motherhood from an artist/man/father’s perspective. I have taken some of what was inside me and pulled it out for the world to see. Perhaps in doing so, I have created a kind of myth of a different “motherhood.”

The problem, of course, with using symbolism to do this is that the audience might not see the same representation that I intend. But is this a problem? Or does it allow the creative process of art to continue past the “finished” work and into the interpretation? If I give my audience the authority to create meaning in my work, then the work will continue to create long after my last brushstroke, latchhook, or driven-nail. And is not this how life works? We create life through our children, then they continue on, creating themselves. If my work can be a metaphor for this, then I will have succeeded.

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Bibliography


figure 4.12

THE OTHER MOTHER
an artist’s conception

figure 4.13

THE OTHER MOTHER
an artist’s conception