Birth: An Interpretation

Gail Vick

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
Birth: An Interpretation

Printmaking
May, 1973

Gail Vick
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE END WAS IN THE BEGINNING</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLUID WEB OF HER OWN CREATION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MY BODY LIKE GLASS INSIDE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIRTH, COUNTERBIRTH</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALKING HOMeward THROUGH THIS WILDERNESS OF WATER</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUCH A NARROW SPACE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NINE</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIRST, THIS CRY</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Birth: an interpretation is precisely what this paper and these prints are about. I am interpreting in this narrative and in these prints both a universal and a highly personal experience. These prints represent my birth experience from the idea of conception and the onset of labor to the conclusion of delivery: the latter encompassing a period of twelve hours in my life. The product of that half-day has had a profound impact on my life. It turned me around and made me feel the amazement that together, my husband and I had created a new little person. The physical and emotional demands of labor and delivery were unexpected, exciting and frightening. Out of these few hours came a flood of images wanting to be recorded and interpreted. Looking at the finished etchings, I can honestly say that they capture the essence of the moment and are really what I felt as I went through my daughter's birth. These interpretive prints are based on my intimate and first-hand knowledge of an experience. I am saying something the way I think best.

Three primary considerations run throughout my print series on birth. These are symbols and their meaning and use, the concept of whole/separate and the idea of interior/exterior. In dealing with symbols I dealt with the problem of whether to employ universal symbols or to develop my own personal symbols. I decided to develop a personal, intuitive, interpretive method of symbolism. Since the title of this series is "Birth: An Interpretation," this approach seemed most apt. The ideal is that within a personal symbol some
universal qualities are inherent. They have to exist therein as a statement of my being a part of the human species, a part of all that has gone before. What I have known, others have known, although without the same frame of reference or degree of experience.

In dealing with symbolism, the most important factor is to have it accurately capture those physical and emotional feelings that form the basis of why that symbol is neccessary. These symbols must be implicit, not explicit, in keeping with my idea of understatement in all my work; of revealing my ideas in a simplistic and subtle manner to produce an end result of understatement.

Certainly the fact of repetition is a symbol in itself. The merging of a repeated shape into another identical shape is representative of one muscular contraction building and flowing into another. The shape is simply an adaptation of a dilitation chart used to show the strength and effort of a contraction. A circle represents wholeness, unity and completion. I think that the concentric frame of reference, (a shape having a common center) is a good indicator of a contraction as well as an allusion to a thing as yet incomplete and still in the process of becoming. Concentric circles or rectangles are used to represent a sense of growth or progression, as in rippling outward, beating one upon the other. The unclosed image is a positive indicator of the thing incomplete.

Symbolism is embodied in the use of progressions. I believe birth to be an ultimate progression.

The triple image or a multiple thereof is employed as a symbol. Pregnancy is divided into three stages of growth,
all marked by distinct physical and emotional feelings. These are the first, second and third trimesters. I feel that the triple image is a successful way to emphasize an idea and to further implant that idea in the viewer's mind. For these divisions, one can become involved in a whole numerological game. Nine is divided into three parts or trimesters, therefore three and nine have to play an important role in a series of things or objects within the print, in repeated images or growing, progressive images. The problem here was whether to select consciously or randomly, a three, six or nine series in any combination to create the intention of randomness, or whether to select a system solidly based on a preconceived, preselected, predetermined system or chosen method. Underlying this method of working is this idea: Do you choose the time at which your child is conceived, or does he choose you? Do you choose the time at which he is born, or is that controlled by him? Your child will not emerge, enter the universe, until he is complete; or is it when he is as big as he can grow and still small enough to fit through the birth canal? This symbolism became involved with a sense of system, rhythm and repetition.

Another symbol used throughout this series is the line of division. This line is used as an indicator of space division. The line emphasizes an ending and a beginning. It creates a separation in space which is used to suggest that this separation leads to a new potential. It suggests future events and holds a promise of growth. It symbolizes a thing in the process of becoming.

My search was for symbols that would let others see and feel an especially personal part of me.
By other two major themes are involved with the concept of duality. These are whole/separate and interior/exterior or mental/physical. Both present the problem of dealing with opposites and of representing the dichotomy of the experience which I felt. I felt myself playing both the role of actor and of audience; of active participant and of onlooker; of one involved and one removed. This separation of self was a moving factor I tried to interpret into my prints. I had to search for shapes and forces which would express these diametrically opposed ideas.

I had to find indicators of the idea of breaking out of the whole and and link those with the idea of being joined and then being progressively and forcefully physically separated forever. Played into this had to be a feeling of emptiness coupled with a sensation of relief, joy and excitement.

In terms of whole/separate, I felt the wholeness of being one with my child and concurrently the desire to give birth, to see what had been growing within me. At the same time, I was reluctant to give up the close physical dependency to which I had grown accustomed. So it was with a duality of feeling that I approached my child's birth. I as a whole person (as a closed circle) was to produce a separate being (opening the contained circle). I had to find images which would indicate this duality. I had to express my child as being a part of the whole and at the same time, containing the potential of being a separate, complete being unto himself.

In dealing with interior/exterior or mental/physical, I found myself involved in both a physical and an emotional
experience. I was exerting a great amount of force involved in a physical act, while being mentally removed from that physical act. I mentally removed myself from the physical demands of my body, from the situation of labor. By concentrating on my mentally learned physical exercises, I removed my conscious mind from the physical activities of my body.

I felt caught up in the process of something that was not real. It isn't real because you cannot touch it, you cannot see it. You know what you should expect as the end product of your labors: a small, squirming, slimy, squalling thing, but the means to that unknown end is suspenseful and fatiguing. Boy, girl; half; whole; pushing, pushing to be born, to be in the world, to be. Everything is an antithesis: push, relax; relax, concentrate; pant, blow; inhale, exhale; push, push and WHOOSH! All of a sudden, WHOOSH and your stomach isn't there anymore. The work, the energy is expended and you can touch and feel and experience the wholeness of this great effort. It becomes a very real, serious, complex, important thing. Your thing, your it, your he (now a she), your parasite is now a free being. You are no longer involved with giving your total self to it, but now she can give to you.

I am still amazed, overwhelmed, an unbeliever when I see and touch my daughter, Jennifer. I wonder at how this well shaped child could have come from almost nothing. I am amazed that we have a part in every cell of this tiny human being. To think that one single cell, waiting silently in the body, could suddenly give rise to a new human being with every feature that human beings have in common and yet
be unique is overwhelming. Everything has formed, grown and developed in its own time. From an unborn child which no one knows, indicating its existence only by small external signs, has come a person waiting to be known. Seeing and feeling this child's birth is an amazing thing. It is a thing that could only be hinted in words and had to be visually interpreted.

In this series I have included eight prints, 4 of which I consider to be primary prints and four secondary prints. This seems to have a size division as well as a division in terms of the meaning behind the print. The primary prints are large and graphically striking and the secondary prints are smaller and more whimsical in nature.

I will now discuss each print individually, noting the events which I am interpreting and describing my use of symbols in each print. A photograph of each print will precede this discussion.
The end was in the beginning
My first print, "The end was in the beginning," represents the moment at which Jennifer's head crowned and the experiences that led up to that moment. Embodied here is the moment just before birth, the moment at which one phase in time was ending and another about to begin. This plate can be seen as a main body out of which emerges two separate images. The main plate is horizontally divided into three parts: the center section and two side panels.

I was concerned with progressions and employed a mathematical progression (e.g., \(3.6\), \(3.2\), \(2.8\), \(2.4\), \(2.0\), \(1.6\), \(1.2\), \(0.8\), \(0.4\)) in the central shaft to determine the size of the nine rectangles contained therein. These nine rectangular areas are used to symbolize the nine months of pregnancy or three trimesters of growth. Contained within these rectangles is a wave-like shape taken from a dilatation chart used to show the strength of a contraction.

As the progression climaxes, the circle (on which is scribbled a drawing of Jennifer) is thrust out into space, into separateness. This round area is protected by a halo which is divided into three sections. These three lines welded together to form an arc is an interpretation of a line of division and notes the idea of end and beginning. It suggests that Jennifer is contained in the process of becoming. The being contained within the circle is finished, complete. This is re-affirmed by the semi-halo noting the completion of one thing and the process of becoming of another.

Many images are embedded within the main body of the print. One image is laid over another, so that each
image loses its importance as a separate image, but gains importance when perceived as the whole. One can start from the central shaft and work out. This is the area from which the circle or separate being is thrust. This is flanked by two long narrow areas teeming with imagery. These images include straight horizontal lines deeply etched to simultaneously produce a rich black and to come and go across the plate surface: to ebb into it, to flow out of it. This sets up a contrast in motions which flickers across the surface. A squiggly waving line (\(\sim\)) is dashed across the plate, which occasionally crawls into the central strip. This represents the coming of the contraction and is taken from the same pattern as the imagery within the central section. The primary focus of the plate is an embodiment of those hard working contractions and the product of that labor.

Color, as in the total series, is thought of in terms of paper tone and its relationship to the printed image. The black is liberally mixed with red to achieve the warmest possible black without losing a quality in the black which produces a precise and bold effect. A dull purple is rolled onto the bottom horizontal edge of the central strip to emphasize a line of division and a point of completion.
Fluid web of her own creation
The idea of breaking out of the whole or whole as opposed to separate is boldly represented in this print, "Fluid web of her own creation." The idea involved in image shape was of prime importance to me. I started with that and worked inward. The top portion or rectangular section of the image is a container for three rectangles, each of which contains a flowing and squeezed-out image. This image represents the emission of the male component. I chose to incorporate three rectangles to be my symbol of the repeated image: an image repeated in three stages.

The dominant inner image in the plate is the dimensional umbilical cord waving wildly through the bottom portion of the plate, attached to one of the rectangles. This cord shape represents a life-line. It is an indicator of a physical dependency and interaction. A more subtle image is etched deeply throughout the background of the plate in the form of x shapes and y shapes or chromosome shapes tumbled about on the surface. The edges of the plate grow dark to spotlight the central image of the umbilical cord.

The bold, breaking out shape of the bottom portion of the plate is centrally illuminated to give it dimension and importance. I have a distinct image of this form. You begin with a rectangular or square shape (a whole, contained shape) and out of it emerges, explodes a blobby, wiggly shape peculiar unto itself. To me, this shape-force captures the moment of expulsion, of giving birth: a thing forcefully thrusting itself out from the whole.

The color is a cold, deep blue. Blue was chosen to
emphasize the mysterious quality of a thing unknown. The umbilical cord is rolled in a transparent pink to give it a more dimensional appearance and a more realistic quality. Red is pushed into the outer edges of the flowing areas in the top three rectangles to give an effervescent quality to those areas.
My body like glass inside
In "My body like glass inside" I was attempting to interpret several interacting forces. This plate represents my mental photograph of the chemical process of conception. This was created as a second thought to the birth series, but plays an important part in that series. The wonder of creation, of one single cell holding the potential for a new human being, is still a dominant idea in my mind. The basic image out of which this print grew is the idea that in spite of civilization and millions of years on land, human life is still created in, and in a sense is spent in, the waters of the sea. The child develops in the uterus, in the fetal waters, in the primeval sea. This imagery is liberally sprinkled with images and symbols seen throughout the birth series.

The main body of the linear plate is flanked by a pair of flanges. This main body is cut into by a linear shape which cuts across the top of the plate three times. Thus the plate is basically separated into three parts. The top third appears placid, the middle shows signs of some development, with hints for future activity, or of what appears in the bottom third of the plate. This bottom portion is the most heavily worked and graphically involved area of the plate. Here are found the keys to unlock the contents of the total plate.

A glowing rectangular shape dominates the inner area of the bottom section. Growing within this is a circle composed in turn of nine concentric circles. Beating into the circle are several sperm-type shapes. Several blobby, distorted circular shapes impinge upon the area of the circle, interacting with the sperm shapes. They act
almost as a barrier against the attackers; of a protective front to the closed circles. A broad line dissects this bottom portion and penetrates the circles, acting as a line of division.

Some areas are highly burnished to create a feeling of glow and light. Others are deeply etched to emphasize blackness and depth of areas not reachable within the limits of the mind. Light areas spot their way across the plate, darting in and out between the dark masses. This playfulness between light and dark represents the male and female cycles. The balance and constant readiness of the male cycle as opposed to the continuous swing between preparation and destruction of the female cycle is depicted here.

In the central division, a band of cold purple-blue spills outward and downward onto its bolstering flanges. The line of division is doubly emphasized, first by the jump white where the flanges and central plate almost meet and then in the vertical lines cutting through both flanges.

The basic plate color is deep blue-green over which is rolled in the central section and the flanges a cold purple-blue. Color suggests the deepness of the sea and its unfathomable depths.
Birth, counterbirth
"Birth, Counterbirth" is the final print of the primary series and represents a strong and frank graphic image. For my final image I sought to interpret elemental ideas in a dual play of a hard edge linear shape superimposed over a highly organic shape. The basic outer organic shape came to me through the idea of the unfolding of a butterfly: growing out, developing, enlarging, coming into being. As a newborn, Jennifer reminded me of a butterfly folding into herself, reclaiming the fetal position as a source of comfort and security, and then in turn opening herself up to others as she became accustomed to her world. This unfolding image became a dominant one and I felt it should have a place in a print. Over this organic image I wanted to superimpose a hard edge structure to emphasize my removal from the action (birth) taking place.

This hard edge shape is a series of nine concentric open-ended rectangles. These open skyward. The lines fade into the background at their open ends.

I wanted to centrally locate an organic area beneath this graphic shape and attempted to develop a shape which embodied the ideas of growth and opening-up. Unconsciously out of this came a distinct vaginal shape which I feel complements the idea which I was attempting to interpret.

At the top of the print, pushed to either outward edge, are two flying lines of division which symbolize the potential of the action taking place below to be repeated in due time.

The color is a blue-black to emphasize the hard edge linear quality of the linear components and to offset the soft quality of the organic imagery.
Walking homeward through this wilderness of water
"Walking homeward through this wilderness of water" is the beginning of my secondary series which was developed concurrently with the primary series. This print was an outgrowth of an idea I was pursuing in "Fluid web of her own creation." The importance is in the umbilical shape in which I attempted to manually create a three-dimensional feeling on a two-dimensional surface. The umbilical shape represents a life-line. It is an indicator of giving and taking. Shape is important to me and I attempted to create a shape interaction in a variety of ways. I finally chose the circular shape to rest above the umbilical shape.

Contained within the border of the circle are drawings interpreting the flutterings and small external signs I felt as Jennifer began to move about inside of me. These motions are hard to define and they hold a promise of future happenings within. The fuzziness of the image re-emphasizes the soft feelings of a remembered moment in time. Putting these two images together expresses a placid interaction.

The circle is a soft blue, to underscore its softness. The umbilical shape is printed in lavander to give it a semi-realistic tone.
Such a narrow space
Another secondary print, "Such a narrow space," began as a fun experiment starting with the idea of the mechanical-electrical machines seen in hospital rooms. A triple image, these vertically placed rectangles are located at the bottom of the image surface in a set of three. These rectangles are forever gazing out at the world, placid little refrigerator doors, revealing stories of their contents.

Each rectangle is divided into two parts. The bottom portion is occupied by an incomplete square: a thing begun, but as yet unfinished. Passing through this square is the suggestion of an emission spreading over its surface, bulging out at either edge, but trapped by the outer edge acting as a container. A mirror image butts against this, but is held outside the square.

The soft squiggles within the top half of the plates take off from the point of departure of a cardiograph machine measuring beats flopped across its surface and from the remembered moments of Jennifer's first flopping movements within.

The ever present line of division is placed at the center bottom, a supporting frame upon which the rest of the image rests. Printed in a soft blue, the color offsets the mechanical nature of the print image, while underlining the idea of softly felt motions.
Nine
This small print, "Nine," is a footnote to some of my ideas of conception and growth within the womb. Here is a capsule in which float nine closed circles, holding little moonscapes which flutter with the potential of future growth. The image patterns twist and move and grow until they almost fill their enclosed spaces. These contained images grow from a liquid quiet to a soft quiet, encased within closed circles. They merely sit there, asleep, waiting.

This image represents the idea of the moon's phases and its possible effect on conception. This is tied into the idea of do you choose your child, or does your child choose you. The other idea in this print is that of the still, growing embryo waiting in its nine months of enclosure. The lavender color is simply a re-emphasis of the softness of the print.
First, this cry
In dealing with the idea of whole/separate I had to depict the breaking out of the whole and the becoming of a separate new being. In "First, this cry," this point is well elucidated. The whole is represented by the circular shape. This image is derived from the chorion sac in which the embryo grows. One can see the wormy-squiggly shape of the umbilical cord breaking out into space. In turn, it acts as a life line reaching out of the sac, as well as taking into the sac.

The little balloon-satellite is attached to the sac only by a diagrammatic dotted line. That represents the potential of the part to become a whole being in itself.

I see this print as a precious, whimsical look at the breaking out of one part to become a separate entity, to be similar to the whole, but unique in itself. Color is muted and subtle, in tones of silvery lavander and silvery blue, to suggest a soft, dream-like state.
In interpreting the experience of my daughter's birth, I was attempting to relate an experience that happens to a woman (if it happens at all) only once or perhaps only several times in her lifetime. I believe that this should be a meaningful and shared time in her life. This should be a time for celebration. These prints run the gamut of my idea of birth—from conception to labor and delivery and finally to the significance of Jennifer herself. I feel that these prints capture and forever hold a remembered moment in time. I hope that in interpreting birth I have shared some of this meaningful experience with others.