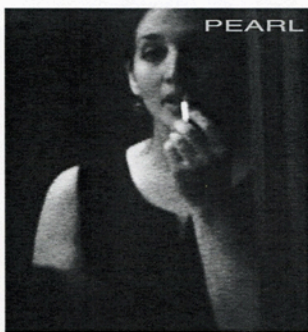


NICOLE COLLINS JANIETA EYRE RAE JOHNSON Lyla RYE



PEARL VAN GEEST

CURATED BY
GRETCHEN SANKEYESSAY BY
VIRGINIA EICHHORN
WARC Gallery
 WOMEN'S ART RESOURCE CENTRE

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MOTHERLODE

 Nicole Collins, Janieta Eyre, Rae Johnson, Lyla Rye, Pearl Van Geest
 Curated by Gretchen Sankey
 Essay by Virginia M. Eichhorn

The birth experience alone is so dramatic/traumatic that we discover extraordinarily powerful things about ourselves. I believe that these experiences make us stronger and give us access to a deeper, more powerful perception of life. From conception on, they are our motherlode.
 - Gretchen Sankey

In the late 1970s, a number of established female artists in Toronto got together and made a pact. They agreed not to have children ever. They felt that making this pact demonstrated their commitment to art-making and would ensure that they and their work were treated seriously and professionally. For women artists of that generation it seemed a sadly ironic thing to do. While the 1970s were supposedly a celebration of equality and choice, these artists obviously believed that had they chosen motherhood, they would lose their standing as professionals. Even during that golden period of "liberation", motherhood and art practice were seen as an either/or proposition. Some choice.

Within the visual arts community thirty years later motherhood is still spoken of in terms of something that holds one back or will keep one from becoming a successful artist. Any artist contemplating motherhood - even from a distance - wonders how, not if her art practice will change. Yet this change isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is the positive power of this transformation into being a "mother" and its effects on artistic practice that is explored in *Motherlode*.

One cannot deny that motherhood is indeed a life-changing experience. However, this incontrovertible fact is often hidden or dismissed. Motherhood itself becomes part of the artist's experience and it does affect why and how works of art are created. Yet frequently that part of the artist's experience is negated or ignored. Women - mothers - have been complicit in this. To express the influence of motherhood on artistic practice, frequently even now, leaves the artist open to a kind of critical dismissal. Work by artist-mothers, if that fact comes to the forefront, is often politely dismissed and treated as if it is all of the same type and genre, regardless of the diversity, complexity and innovativeness of technique and subject matter.

It is important to acknowledge this inherent critical chauvinism in order to dispute and demonstrate that it is a fallacious and prejudicial supposition. When Henri Matisse was in his 80s and no longer able to hold a paint brush, he responded by creating collages made from torn paper. He reacted to his life's circumstances and created a body of work which is respected as having aesthetic integrity. His ability to adapt to his physical limitations is regarded with admiration. Why, in this instance, is the ability to adapt seen as something powerful and positive, yet an artist who must adapt her practice to the time constraints and physical demands of pregnancy and raising children is denigrated? This is a challenge that every artist-mother does indeed face.

The artists in *Motherlode* demonstrate great diversity in their practices, the only commonality being their shared experience of motherhood. But it is from being mothers that their work became what it is - in both style and content.

Nicole Collins' practice, as she describes it, has been deeply attached to honoring the moment of mark making. Collins became a mother shortly after the death of her brother - *"I thought of life energy, always in motion, disintegrating, blowing apart as it was with my brother, and accreting, gathering together, particle by particle inside my own body to create new life."* In essence, Collins' work, abstract paintings with encaustic, illustrates this phenomenon.

Self-portraits have made up a significant body of **Janieta Eyre's** photographic work but the birth of her daughter provided the stimulus for deeper self-evaluation and understanding. Since becoming a mother, Eyre's work has been interested in voice and how as a photo-based artist, she had previously avoided using voice. She explains that motherhood has forced a different kind of knowing and from that has come a different kind of art.

Rae Johnson became a mother in 1976. In 1977, she returned to studies at OCA but didn't tell anyone that she had a child. Johnson explained, *"It was not a time to be a mother - it was the era of Margaret Trudeau, Studio 54, bath houses, wild parties, punk rock. I felt that no one would take me seriously if they knew I had a baby."* Despite her apprehensions, Johnson has had a successful artistic career and two more babies. Each birth, she has said, invoked a major shift in her work. Johnson states unequivocally that having children has enhanced her creativity and that the love of her children has given her almost "superhuman powers" which find expression in the paintings that she continues to create.

Since her birth four years ago, daughter Lena has become both model and muse for mum **Lyla Rye**. Rye's work explores and expresses the complexities of a mother/parent - child relationship and private/public space. Her recent work places the viewer in the midst of her mother-child relationship. Yet as her daughter has become more aware of the camera, Rye states that she cannot ever be fully aware of how the act of documenting Lena's behavior changes it.
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Pearl Van Geest uses the lip print as a mark and a particularly loaded, yet mutable symbol. The mother of two, Van Geest's work explores the themes of hope, loss of innocence and the futility of a mother protecting her daughter from the terrible/wonderful adult world. Her work is a subtle and elegiac suggestion of the timelessness, hence perpetuity, of the mother/daughter interaction and the inevitability of a child leaving the mother's protection.

Art-practice and motherhood have a complicated but nonetheless symbiotic relationship that should be acknowledged and respected. Having a child may mean less time in the studio physically but it also assures one of being sometimes surprisingly inspired. Simply put, the works in this exhibition were produced by the artists, not in spite of being mums, but *because* of it.

Virginia M. Eichhorn

Nicole Collins is a painter. Since graduating from the University of Guelph in 1988, she has exhibited in Canada, USA, UK, France, Australia and Japan. In October 2003 she will have her fourth solo show entitled branch with Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto. She lives and works with her husband, artist Michael Davidson and their daughter in Toronto.

Janieta Eyre is a multi-media artist based in Toronto. Recent solo shows include *Natural History Museum*, Dazibao, Montreal; *Motherhood & Natural History Museum*, Cristineros Gallery, New York, NY; *Staging*, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; *Motherhood & Natural History Museum*, Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto. Recent group shows include *How Human: Life in the Post-Genome Era*, International Centre for Photography, New York; *In faccia al Mondo*, Museo di villa Croce, curated by Matte Focessati, Italy; *Confluence: Contemporary Canadian Photography*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ont.

Rae Johnson has exhibited her paintings nationally and internationally in solo and group exhibitions since 1978. She has exhibited outside of Canada in New York, Zurich, West Berlin, and Rome. In 1981, she co-founded the ChromaZone collective and participated as a board member and curator until its conclusion in 1986. She was represented by the influential Carmen Lamanna Gallery from 1982 until his death in 1991. Rae Johnson is an Associate Professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design and continues to live and work in Toronto.

Lyla Rye is an installation artist and art educator based in Toronto. She received her BFA from York University and her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She was a founding member of the Toronto sculptor's collective *Neither Mind* 1991-95. She has exhibited her work across Canada and in the US including solo exhibitions at Gallery Connexion, Fredericton; Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco; Robert Birch Gallery, Toronto and the WARC Gallery, Toronto. Group exhibitions include *Comfort Zones*, The Textile Museum, Toronto; *Little Worlds*, The Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina and The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; *Threshold*, The Power Plant, Toronto, and *YYZ*, Toronto.

Pearl Van Geest's numerous exhibitions, since graduating from OCAD in 1996, include a two-person show with Michelle Johnson, *Ah, Um, Oh*, WARC Gallery, 1999. Recent solo exhibitions include *Fool for Love*, BUSGallery, and *This Pale Mouth*, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph. She is represented by Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects, Toronto.