

THE MOTHERHOOD IMPERATIVE

Fertility, Feminism, Art

By Miriam Schaer, Independent Artist and Educator

I have no children. And I'm an artist.

Writing this makes me feel as if I've outed myself from some odd closet standing in plain sight. Though I've paid no extraordinary penalty for either reality, the facts seem to compel explanation. Neither condition surfaced early. One of four siblings, I assumed, like most girls, I would one day have a child (or more) of my own. Art, meanwhile, was only a possible future toward which I leant without any degree of understanding. But as I grew into adulthood, both the assumption and the aspiration became manifest, and, eventually, as intertwined as the double helix of the DNA by which I felt my fertility had been double-crossed.

Biologically, children were not ordained. Despite trying, I was infertile. *In vitro* fertilisation proved equally unproductive, and adoption held little appeal. Nor, as a godmother, did I inherit the offspring of a deceased relation. 'If you don't have children,' said a gynaecologist I was seeing at the time, 'consider living a life you cannot live if you do have children.'

It was good advice, and, having taken her words to heart, I enjoy the benefits of a life less constrained. A big part of this life is art. At the start, armed only with desire and a BFA, I chiefly made books, one of a kind and in very small editions. The form fascinated me, and the compact dimensions of books made them easier to work on within a small Manhattan apartment, half of which was a smaller studio. I thought of the books I made as mixed-media artworks. The spines were hand-stitched. The covers were three-dimensional, painted, often collaged, sometimes embroidered. I formed the interiors around short poems or offbeat subjects, with and without texts, and often included small items, fabrics or designs hand-cut with X-Acto knives.

Gradually, the books became larger, more ambitious, more sculptural. Turning to garments, I developed a glue-based treatment that rendered fabrics as rigid as stiff paper and as malleable as

clay. Initially, I used corsets and basques (modern equivalents, I naively thought, of medieval girdle books), then broadened into hand and opera gloves, children's dresses, full-scale wedding gowns and other wearable items. Stiffening and cutting them open, I filled the interiors with small versions of the books I had earlier been making as well as found objects secreted in small alcoves and recesses. More and more, the garments became the covers for what I still called books.

'What? No children?'

The artworks led to exhibits, teaching, residencies and travel in the US and abroad. An actual career. My husband likes to say, 'Make books and see the world. Who knew?' So I'm not complaining. For one thing, I'm in fine company. The ranks of childless women artists, performers and writers include Rosa Bonheur, Mary Cassatt, Judy Chicago, Georgia O'Keefe, Frida Kahlo, Lee Krasner, Coco Chanel, Maria Callas, Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Julia Child, Condoleezza Rice, Oprah Winfrey, Gloria Steinem, Tallulah Bankhead, Katharine Hepburn and, among many others more accomplished than myself, the great Helen Mirren, who once said 'Motherhood holds no interest for me', and that 'whenever "boring old men" would say "What? No children? Well, you'd better get on with it, old girl," I'd say "No! Fuck off!"' (Raine, 2013).

So, again, I'm not complaining. However, others do, not so much about the art (although one dealer called my work 'greedy, expressive and crude') as about the absence in my life of children.

In the mid-1990s, I moved from the East Village in Manhattan to Park Slope, Brooklyn – a neighbourhood of baby strollers and helicopter parents. Settling in, I was surprised by the responses I received when I said I had no children. One woman, visibly repelled, moved to a different corner of a room in which we were both exercising.

At a memorial for an old school friend who died from a rare cancer, I was reprimanded for not having children. My friend was an observant Jew, and mother of five. While *she* was non-judgmental, her Long Island community was not. The community believed that every Jewish couple should have at least three children, two to replace the parents, and one to make up for those lost in the Holocaust. (A belief shared, it's worth noting, by white supremacists: 'If nationalists have *at least* three children [preferably more] we can ensure that a large portion of

the whites who are left after the coming turbulent decades are our descendants, and...instilled with our values and our traditions' (Lane, 2016).) Given that both my husband and I are Jews, our childlessness was seen as horrifying, even traitorous.

Gradually, I became aware of how the non-maternal body, as represented by childless or childfree women, has been disrespected throughout history and across cultures, an attitude sustained even within some feminist circles. Societies far and near, including our Western one, resent, censure and even demonise women without children. The barren, infertile, can't-have-a-kid, don't-want-a-kid woman is everywhere perceived as a failure, treated contemptuously, shunned and, in some societies, actively discriminated against. Non-maternity, whether by circumstance or choice, is nowhere considered normative, leaving childless women to face a spectrum of disdain, insensitivity and guilt.

In Chad, I might be called 'a tree without leaves'. In Cameroon, 'a man in a woman's body'. Studying infertility in tribal communities, the anthropologists Bruce Whitehouse and Marida Hollos note that women in sub-Saharan Africa 'primarily bear the social consequences of infertility', that among the Bangangte in Cameroon, 'infertility is grounds for divorce, depriving a woman of access to her husband's land', and that the Ekiti Yoruba of Nigeria treat infertile women 'as outcasts, and their bodies are buried on the outskirts of the town'. They also cite a survey in Nigeria in which respondents agreed that 'a woman who has not given birth to a child may as well never have been born' (Whitehouse and Hollos, 2014).

When I was travelling in Serbia and the Republic of Georgia, the first question strangers or new acquaintances almost always asked was 'Are you married?' The second: 'Do you have children?' That I was married met with approval. Looks of scorn and pity struck me like lasers when I admitted I had no children.

Even where I am, in the US, it has been observed that '[w]omen who do not become mothers are aberrant at best, tragic at worst' (Morell, 1994). The poet Sylvia Plath once described childless women as '[n]un-hearted and blind to the world', a threat to mothers, motherhood and maternity (Plath, 1965).

In extreme cases, childless women are driven to suicide. Three examples: Shilpa Shivanand Kudiker, a 32-year-old wife in Karwar, India, distressed over her inability to conceive after ten years of marriage, hanged herself from the ceiling of her house (Sahil Online, 2013). Lovina Odo, a 38-year-old trader in Nigeria, hanged herself from a ceiling fan after eight years of marriage without a child (Punch, 2017). Sudha Karigar, 29, a housewife in Karnataka, India, set herself on fire after finding her husband, Basavaraj, had committed suicide by hanging himself. Relatives insisted the cause was their inability to bear the pain of not having children (The Hindu, 2015).

The great threat

Our bias against the childless is no secret, just infrequently acknowledged. Way back in 1976, the poet Adrienne Rich wrote that the childless woman, '[t]hroughout recorded history...has been regarded...as a failed woman, unable to speak for the rest of her sex. Childless women,' she continued, 'have been burned as witches, persecuted as lesbians [and] refused the right to adopt children because they were unmarried. They have been seen as the great threat to male hegemony, the woman who is not tied to the family, who is disloyal to the law of heterosexual pairing and bearing' (Rich, 1976).

Rich was exceptional in her clarity. More typical is the attitude of Carol Sarler, a columnist who wrote in the *Daily Mail* that '[m]uch as I like to trumpet the importance of a woman's right to choose all things at all times, there's one choice I simply cannot understand: the choice of an otherwise sane and healthy woman not to have children' (Sarler, 2009).

Childless women have forever had to contend with the contempt and expectations of judgmental cultures. Reach a certain age, and a woman is culturally required to have a child. If not, she better have a good explanation. If she doesn't want children, well, that's unforgivable, and a taboo rarely acknowledged.

Even in the US, where I think most recoil at the idea of shunning childless women, a significant part of the population has spent decades actually attempting to outlaw one type of childlessness.

I'm referring, of course, to what should be labelled the 'No Choice' movement, the relentless effort to make abortion – which, after all, is a form of childlessness – unavailable. And a crime.

Anti-abortionists have murdered doctors, firebombed health clinics, lied, litigated and legislated against a woman's right to end unwanted pregnancies. They have denied abortion's legality, intimidated pregnant women, especially the youngest and least educated, and imposed phony, punitive requirements on doctors and health clinics providing legal abortions. They have even used legislation to deny funds and insurance coverage for birth control services and treatments, ensuring more unwanted pregnancies for their fanaticism to prey upon.

There are many ways to characterise the no-choicers. But they certainly define a chapter in the long, sad history of hostility toward childless women, and the effort to impose one concept of motherhood on everyone. That the assault against women and girls who desire to be childless due to unwanted conception is grounded in religious belief only makes its intolerance uglier. Today, in my own land, domestic terrorism has become part of the price of deciding not to have a child.

Another aspect of the bias against childlessness lies in the rise of the so-called alt-right. The alt-right, short for alternative right, is the agglomeration of racist/neo-Nazi/white nationalist/white supremacist hate groups that Trump's White House and the GOP's worst elements have provided with mainstream visibility and a queasy legitimacy. While racism is the alt-right's face, an extreme contempt toward women is also part of its persona.

The August 2017 'Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, for example, climaxed when James Alex Fields Jr., a racist participant, rammed his car into a crowd of bystanders, injuring several people and killing Heather Heyer. A couple of days later, *The Daily Stormer*, online chronicle of the alt-right, characterised Heyer as a 'fat 32-year old childless slut...a drain on society...the definition of uselessness', adding that a 'woman without children is a burden on society and has no value' (CNN, 2017).

Misogynistic gibberish runs like a river of slime through the wasteland of alt-right publications.

Their especial obsessions are feminism, which the alt-right loathes, and a desire for white women to shut up and breed, as women are generally thought useless unless they produce new white people. 'Feminism has served to decimate the reproductive rate of White countries,' wrote Vincent Law, a so-called alt-right theorist, on Alt-Right.com, a principal alt-right website. 'This is the sole reason for which the ideology was devised,' he explained. 'Institutionalized Feminism has led to broken families, millions of aborted White babies and the opening of our borders. Churches, men's groups and any conservative group that gives a damn about the reproductive health of their people need to start aggressively lobbying to end No-Fault Divorce' (Law, 2017).

The tyranny of maternity is sometimes called pronatalism, signifying the policy or practice of encouraging the bearing of children, and it's almost as controversial now as when Shulamith Firestone discussed it in 1970. 'Women will not be fully emancipated,' she wrote, 'until they are free from the demands of biology' (Firestone, 2003). Firestone saw emancipation's tools in concepts like artificial insemination and surrogate motherhood that, back then, were little better than science fiction. Today, these and other maternal technologies are widespread. Yet rather than emancipate women by releasing us from maternity's grip, they have added new pressures on women pursuing biological childbearing, a campaign often undertaken at great cost in terms of health and finances.

But I digress...

Babies (Not)

My awakening to the bias against childlessness coincided with a realisation that I, also, would not have children. This inspired a more conceptual turn in my art, and led to a series of projects that dealt with both elements. In the first, called *Babies (Not) On Board: The Last Prejudice?*, I embroidered negative comments about childlessness onto baby dresses in bright red thread, giving shape, as it were, to a free-floating unease, while using scarlet letters to recall the famous scarlet 'A' worn by Hester Prynne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's adulterous heroine.

I started with seven baby dresses. They were included in an online exhibition, *MAMA: Motherhood Around the Globe*, curated by the International Museum of Women, and at Nanomajority.com, an

art gallery site not currently active. To my surprise, the dresses drew a good deal of attention. Encouraged, I added rompers so the work would not seem so gendered, and continued until I had embroidered 18 garments. The comments I embroidered, gathered from things I'd read and been told, included:

- 'You're married, but without kids you are not a family. So no one really knows what to make of you and your spouse.' (Dubovsky, 2010).
- 'It is the childless woman who is regarded as cold and odd.' (Sarler, 2009).
- 'Your child is the best artwork you have ever made, you don't need to make any other art.' (personal comment to me by a fellow artist).
- 'You are not a real parent if you only have one child.' (personal comment to me by a fellow artist).
- 'Childless women lack an essential humanity.' (Sarler, 2009).

Babies (Not) was my first project addressing the cultural hostility toward childless women. This part was deliberate. Unconsciously, I later realised, it also helped me better accept the childfree life I was living.

I took the project a step further by dressing a group of realistic dolls ('re-born babies' in toy industry lingo) in the embroidered garments and photographing them. I shot them twice, individually first in a studio setting for an editioned portfolio, *The Presence of Their Absence: Portraits*. Then, working with photographer Chelsea Shilling, I photographed myself interacting with the dolls. We began in the safety of the studio at Columbia College Chicago, where I was on the faculty, then moved outdoors for location shoots around Chicago, including the South Loop Elementary School playground and American Girl's flagship store on Michigan Avenue. I incorporated the photographs from these shoots with text describing the cultural bias against

childlessness in a print-on-demand book, *The Presence of Their Absence: Society's Bias Against Women Without Children*.

Around this time, I was also becoming preoccupied with my own mother, Ida, then 88 years old. After having lived independently for a couple decades following the death of her husband, Ida had moved to an assisted living facility. One day, I showed Ida some of my dressed doll photographs. She responded so strongly I got her a doll of her own, a very realistic one.

Ida was captivated. She had been a maternity nurse and acted as if the doll, which she named Tabitha, was a real infant. I shot another series of photographs – of Ida, Tabitha and myself with the both of them. I housed the series in a limited-edition portfolio fitted with a keyhole-shaped opening mechanism viewers needed to pry apart. I called the portfolio *The Key is in the Window*, borrowing a phrase from *Kaddish*, Alan Ginsberg's epic poem both lamenting and exorcising the ghost of Naomi, his mad, dying mother (Ginsberg, 1969).

Reverse mothering

Kaddish, a Hebrew word meaning holy, is also a daily prayer in Jewish religious services. It is best known as a prayer for the dead, though it does not mention death or even refer to loss. I was trying, through my photographs, to address an increasingly common conundrum I've come to think of as Reverse Mothering – by which I mean the relationships many of us are entering into as our aging parents live beyond the point at which they can care for themselves and, like small children, must be cared for by us, their own children, now adults.

Nearly a third of American families are coping with the needs of very elderly parents. More will do so as the country's post-World War II baby boom continues to age. Unlike earlier generations, today's elderly live longer. Those over 90 are the fastest-growing demographic group in the US. Diseases that once killed quickly now kill slowly, while advanced medical care has enabled multiple illnesses to inhabit bodies that earlier would have tolerated only one or two.

Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, increasingly common as we age, can persist for years. And while modern healthcare helps the aging to live longer, the system also demands that the

very elderly's grown children manage their medical crises and care. It is as if the elderly had reverted to a final, incapacitating childhood. We can only surmise how many grown children – usually a family's women – are finding themselves involved in such necessary role reversals which, even though compelled by circumstance, are difficult and distressing.

I was thinking about my *Babies (Not) on Board* project when it occurred to me that people often refer to their passion as their 'baby', meaning perhaps a garden, a home, one's art, one's love of cooking, almost anything really. Working with the Fountains Foundation 916, I used adjustable metal armatures to suspend several embroidered garments from the *Babies (Not)* series in a hallway exhibition at Columbia College Chicago. Round mirrors on short stalks rested where the heads would normally have been.

We called the small show *What's Your Baby?* It included a sign asking passers-by to tell us about their own 'babies' by dropping short notes in a nearby box. And they did. The responses – serious, funny, moving – showed us that, metaphorically at least, everyone can have a baby, even the childless. *What's Your Baby?* still lives on through Tumblr (<http://whatsyourbaby.tumblr.com/>), allowing people to continue to describe their babies.

Caring for Ida before she passed away led me to consider what it means to be a mother and to have a mother, and more deeply explore my relationship with Ida as she faded before my eyes. I saw *The Key Is in the Window* in this light, as an effort to represent complicated mother-child bonds that cannot easily be decoded. Shortly before her death, I completed a series of three-by-four-foot works called *Ida Transformations* based on photo collages of Ida set into large picture frames.

I also made small versions of the collages for an installation in which the collages rested atop a dresser whose drawers held items and collages recalling Ida's presence. The installation, called *(w)hole*, has been shown in two versions: first, in 2014 at the Linder Project Space in Berlin; then, in 2015, after Ida's death, as part of the 'Motherhood and Creative Practice' conference at the School of Arts and Creative Industries in London South Bank University. The first installation used a white, dream-like dresser. For the second, I added shattered glass to some of the small,

framed collages and used a smaller, plain pine dresser as a reference to the simple pine coffins used in traditional Jewish burials.

Generations

After Ida's death, I composed another print-on-demand book, *(w)hole: A life in Parts*, that impressionistically chronicles Ida's final days in a way that allowed me to examine my relationship with her alongside my own childlessness. Today, children, especially women, who start life in the incoherency of infancy, increasingly function as parents for mothers, fathers and other close relations who have lost the ability to remember, act and even speak, leaving them as helpless as the babies they once raised. This is a relationship pattern common to no other species, and rare even in historical terms.

Fascinated by this transition, I found myself drawn to other works exploring the mother/child bond, works like Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*, Sophie Calle's *Rachel Monique*, Richard Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* photographs chronicling his complicated family dynamics and LaToya Ruby Frazier's photo series *The Notion of Family*, especially *Grandma Ruby Holding Her Babies*. The photographs of Paul Graham and Wolfgang Tillmans led me to rethink how mother-and-child art could be presented, as did works like Anna Opperman's *Autumn Ensemble* installation, Sam Jinks' realistic *Woman and Child* sculpture and Elia Alba's photographic soft sculptures. All of them have had an impact on my own work.

Moving on, I made several series of prints and collages prompted by my memory of Ida's dementia. The *Empty Robe* series used multiple impressions of a sleeping robe Ida wore to evoke loss, memory and melancholy through a diaphanous, free-floating image. For the *Shroud Series*, I printed the robe over large ink-jet images of Ida's face so that she seems to peer through veiled frames. In truth, age was her real veil, darkening as it increased.

In the *Memory Broken* series, I hand-cut digital prints of Ida's robe and face, added strips of black paper and translucent vellum and wove them all together. The glossy black strips reflect image fragments, while the vellum reveals parts of the image that would otherwise be concealed. Only

by moving a few feet away from the prints does the full face come into focus. Working on the prints after Ida's death got me back into the print shop after a long absence.

For a *Memory Fading* series, I placed an old lace robe atop an inked Plexiglas plate, then layered a sheet of Arnhem 1618 Rag printmaking paper on top of the robe. After running the sandwich through the press, I removed the sheet and peeled back the robe. The image remaining on the Plexiglas was acutely detailed and showed the intricacies of the lacework and the skin-like folds of the overlapping fabric, leaving a palimpsest of the garment. Next, I ran a second sheet of paper to transfer the ghostly image onto the new sheet. I employed this layering process for all the *Empty Robe* and *Shroud Series* prints.

I've often thought I was done with this body of work, only to have another thought or memory enter my mind. Immediately after my mother's death, my sister gave me a battered school notebook. 'I think you're going to want this,' she said. Ida had filled several pages in a shaky black script trying to remember who she was. It was not unlike a second grader repeating her name, individual letters or a date, over and over, struggling to get control of the language. The notebook was mostly just an indecipherable syllable salad, evidence of a mind gone missing, like a Benjamin Button, aged in reverse to a final, fatal infancy.

But the remnants of her old handwriting, sad and moving, reminded me of a line by Norman Maclean: 'We can love completely what we cannot completely understand' (Maclean, 2001). So I am transferring some of Ida's scrawled pages to pieces of fine *habotai* silk, and considering whether to paint or embroider them. Her meaningless words, like a baby's babble or graffiti from the recesses of her faded mind, continue to haunt me in a way that, alive, she could never have imagined.

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