

1-1-2010

Mom Tested

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MOM, TESTED

Leaf through an issue of a parenting magazine and you will be inundated by page after page of bright, colorful products. These products reassure you that they are safe and reliable, often bearing labels such as "Mom Tested" or "Pediatrician Approved." The person shown is usually a smiling, physically fit Caucasian woman clad in a stylish outfit playing with her clean, happy children in a sunny and well-organized home. She is the Mythic Mom: buy these products and you too may attain her state of charming, if sometimes unruly, bliss.

In contrast, the works in *Visible M(Others): Images of Parenting in Visual Culture*, test the idea of the Mythic Mom and the dominant place she occupies in popular culture, media, and lived experience. The presence (and absence) of dads, life partners, grandparents, babysitters and other caregivers in raising children is made visible through works that explore and question the idea of the mother as the dominant parental figure. Modes of parenting that do not conform to those of the "traditional nuclear family" are another central concern, as is the way the Mythic Mom can infiltrate the consciousness and self-image of both men and women as they confront the pressure to be (or not to be) a parent.

Several artists investigate parenting work. Budde's *Cry Baby* is a somewhat unpleasant reminder that putting baby to sleep is not all lullabies and sweet dreams. The everyday miracle of succeeding at such a task is recalled by Isley's work, while Paterson's and Pence-Brown's blogs chronicle the complexities of life as stay at home moms and work at home moms, and the place of their professional careers within these identities. VanDeGrift's paintings and Proksa's installation treat traditional ideas of women's work. Proksa's ironing board recalls a now almost obsolete but previously ubiquitous women's activity and VanDeGrift examines parental role reversals and how labels such as "Helper Mom" fail to describe her family's experience. The collaborative artwork by Burton and Apel incorporates the work of parenting directly; Apel provided childcare for Burton's daughter (and his own son) to provide time for Burton's work of artmaking.

Parenting raises more questions than answers for many people, and a number of works highlight the complex issues that arise when we grapple with the question of what it means to be a parent. Feast's

Where's the mommy? poses a series of difficult questions faced by, and imposed upon, women of child-bearing age, and concludes by asking "What if she isn't a mommy?" This interweaving of the female body with cultural expectations and fears about pregnancy and childrearing is also treated by Lawley and Sloan. Lawley's bottles measure the hormone levels of different women, and Sloan interjects her own personal narrative into a classic feminist text. Scott invites us to ponder aspects of love and family as a collection of precious, curious objects, asking the viewer to consider the poignant question, "How shall he be married without e'er a wife?"

What does it mean to be a parent? How do you do it, and what forms can the parent-child relationship take if you wish to look beyond the figure of the Mythic Mom and her perfect, unattainable world? Benjamin and Alma Love's castle seeks to actively engage with the image of the princess, a pervasive figure encountered by young girls and their parents, and here they scrutinize it and question it together. The difficult emotions that arise when the roles of parent and child are reversed are the subject of Fitterer's *To Dementia*, its pages unfolding to reveal feelings of anger, sadness, fear and desperation she had caring for her grandparents. The tenderness that lies at the root of these feelings is evoked by Olsen's work, which shows the love, kindness and warmth of the parent-child relationship, in this case through an example of interspecies parenting. Mitchell's triptych examines the evolution of the parent-child relationship through the passage of time, a theme also touched on by New Catalogue. Here we glimpse strange scenes of children on the verge of adulthood, who may wish to sever the parent-child relationship but may not yet be ready to abandon it entirely.

The Mythic Mom is difficult to avoid when considering one's relationship to parenting, and her invasive presence forces us to think about how, whether, when, and why we pursue, or wish to pursue, parenting. The artists offer a welcome relief from the narrow definition of parenting implied by the Mythic Mom, and an opportunity to contemplate a set of much more interesting questions.

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