

Absence

Adoption in Art

While the prolific 'Madonna and child' painterly motif, and recent MIRCI publications attest to the existence of representations of mothering in fine art through the ages, as well as contemporary art and photography, notably absent are images of a different kind of maternity, and non-normative family formation unreliant on biogenetic kinship or childbirth: the adoptive experience. Cover art for publications, usually from small press, or children's book illustrations, saccharine posters and calligraphic proclamations available on the Internet appear to form this canon. What accounts for the historical absence of true artistic depictions of the social, cultural, psychological, physiological, and political complexity of adoption? What does the privileging of the 'biological imperative' communicate? Finding art and artists who represent the adoptee, birthmother or adoptive mother was a challenge I took up, as a member of the adoption triad, familiar with some of its lingering pressures and stigmas despite growing openness in definitions of family and motherhood. Leading to slim offerings of multimedia, installation art, and limited edition artist's books, of the few contemporary images that do exist, I investigate what happens when we deconstruct them.

Mothering or motherhood, as depicted in art, might conjure images of prehistoric fecund goddess icons like Huastecan, Goddess of Fertility from Pre-Columbian South America, mother archetypes such as Egyptian Bast, Goddess of childbirth and pregnancy, myriad paintings of Madonna and child, Auguste Renoir's or Alexandre Charpentier's studies of breastfeeding, or Gustav Klimt's "Hope 1" of a heavily pregnant female nude, just to name a few.

And yet, in all of these historical examples, and extending into contemporary art, it appears the connection of mother and child is emphasized only through

biology and genetics, the maternal body idealized as the primal and perhaps sole form of mothering. As noted by Sarah-Vaughan Brakman and Sally J. Scholz:

among the different elements of a maternity grounded in the biologic paradigm, one might find a claim for the existence of a natural connection or bond between mother and child, a plea for the inherent beauty of the pregnancy experience, an appeal to the creative power of the maternal body, or even an assertion regarding the necessity of a genetic connection. When taken individually as descriptive elements to a particular situation, each of these might provide valuable narrative detail that conveys a mother's personal experience. When the elements are universalized, however, they lose their status as mere personal description and become normative values of the maternal experience. (57)

What does this emphasis on bio-essentialism mean? Certainly it translates into the zeitgeist, and the cultural representations of what a 'real' family constitutes, despite revisions by the U.S. Census Bureau, and Statistics Canada's most recent 2011 census defining family as any two people living under the same roof. Thus, notable by its apparent absence in art is the depiction of the adoptive condition, whether it is birthmothering, adoptive mothering or the experience of an adopted person, particularly in the post World War Two to *Roe versus Wade* period from 1945 to 1973, with effects continuing to this day. Although there are many beautiful illustrations for journals and children's books, I consider here those pieces that are intended as separate entities, standing on their own artistic merit. What might be considered truly adoption *art* and why is it not found as part of the mainstream? Searching artistic databases with a variety of search terms—'adoption,' 'adopted,' 'adoptive' and 'depiction*' or 'portrayal*' or 'representation*' in art or painting or photography—retrieves nothing. Frustrated, I posed the question to the art research librarian at my university: she also tried, unsuccessfully, to retrieve much of value, and the Art Societies of North America listserv garnered few responses either. There is an absence that is definitely a presence, and one that drew me into more intense searching, as this is part of my own lived experience. As an educator, artist, and adoptee, one who herself was adopted in the early 1960s, a product of a system infused with secrecy and shame, without access to information about my own original family (exacerbated by my being adopted privately), I wondered why no one was depicting these stories, why there was such a dearth of adoption art, in a field with such potential for making visible an experience largely ignored by the general public, for expanding dialogue surrounding adoption, family and motherhood, and for theorizing new approaches to adoption studies. Thus I

began my own research into what I believe is a new field of inquiry, searching for art about adoptive families, adoptees, birthmothers and adoptive mothers: art that helps to unsilence the previously silenced.

If motherhood is “a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors” and “there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood” (O’Reilly 37), why are birthmothers and adoptive mothers viewed as suspect? Adoption, and adoptive mothering, troubles the concept of kinship because it suggests that blood ties can be superseded with artificially constructed ones, a social contract replacing genetics, a ‘fictive’ relationship, as defined by adoption researcher H. David Kirk, given the strength of a biological one. Although more recent sensibilities have opened definitions of family from a nuclear, biologically conceived one, there is nonetheless the underlying adage of ‘blood is thicker than water.’ Adoption practices, past and present, also reveal this cultural anxiety. At one point of the ‘adoption triangle,’ and thus far the most under-represented artistically, is the adoptive mother, her disappointing infertility combined with self or societal determination to become a mother; to freely opt to be childless is somehow not an option. She is often viewed as a version of a failed mother, with an absence of procreative potential, immature and unfulfilled, until she can be identified through her relationship to a child: even then, because of the romanticized notion that real maternal attachment can only take place at birth, to construct a family through other means is somehow artificial and dubious.

The practice of ‘mirroring’ in the placement of adoptive children is another example of the drive to imitate ‘natural’ kinship and family structures: adoptive parents and social workers did their best to minimize difference between the adoptive parents and the child’s physical, and even mental characteristics, believing this would be in the child’s best interests, and, of course, allow parents to maintain the fiction that the child was conceived biologically. Trans-racial, trans-national and open adoption may suggest that sensibilities have changed, and yet the huge influx of would-be parents rushing to adopt children during the Romanian revolution who could ‘pass’ as their own offspring, indicates a continuance of this ‘as if’ desire. Perhaps this is also why the emphasis, even up to recently, on secret records and closed adoption (a system adoptive rights groups such as ALMA (1971), CUB (1976) and AAC (1978) agitated against beginning in the 1970s), and which has been replaced largely with open arrangements; however uniform legal reform still languishes, and many adult adoptees continue to have no access to original birth documents).

Adoptive families are modelled on the normative ideal of a traditional biological family. The giving of a new name, as Judith Modell’s 1994 study found, thus establishing patrilineal ties and erasing any evidence of the original identity, is a symbol of this ideal, and of the unease by which a family not created

through genetics is regarded. Adoptive mothers, considered on the fringes of motherhood, with a child, but not one they have themselves conceived, sometimes even lay claim to mutually shared aptitudes and predispositions in their adoptive offspring, mimicking the supposed maternal bond and genetic tie to a child whom they love 'like their very own.' This, despite the observation from feminist scholars such as Sara Ruddick (qtd. in Daly), that all mothers are adoptive in their choice to nurture a child, biological or not. Adoption as a family building method used to be a kind of 'second best' alternative to infertility or other biological failures: now, the availability of many assisted reproductive technologies, where the child can claim at least partial biological connection to the parent, re-emphasizes the seeming importance of genetics and pushes adoption even further down the list of preferred alternatives.

The perception and representation of birthmothers also bears examination. Merry Bloch Jones notes, "For birthmothers relinquishment was more than merely a life-altering turning point. For most, it was an invisible barrier separating them from the bulk of humanity" (xiii). In the dominant birthmother narrative of the past, especially in the 1950s, 1960s and early '70s, a young unmarried girl, often in her teens or early twenties, living at home or going to school and taking first steps to independence, finds herself pregnant by her boyfriend or fiancé. She is blamed, expelled and stigmatized: ostracized by her community, abandoned by social institutions of church and state, shamed by her family. If the boy does not marry her to 'make an honest woman of her' because the girl is deemed unsuitable or the boy too young to have *his* life 'ruined,' or if she is not disinherited by her parents, she becomes one of the 'girls who went away,' who temporarily drops out of school or work and is sequestered at home, with distant relatives in other cities, or in varying institutions for unwed mothers. Her child is removed, often sight unseen, and all legal rights are surrendered quickly in a bizarre take on the prevailing glorified trope of maternal sacrifice, so that she may 'do the right thing,' being given little or no information about her baby's subsequent fate. Then she can return to ordinary life and 'forget' all about her ordeal, working to redeem her lost societal and familial status, and her obligations to motherhood and femininity within the moral and fiscal contract of marriage, adoption arrangements functioning as a kind of social rehabilitation for the fallen woman. The child is typically placed in temporary foster care until a suitable young married, reasonably affluent, Anglo Saxon, infertile couple is found. The social ill and moral reprehensibility of the unmarried sexual female is assuaged by the alleviation of the plight of more 'deserving' partners, and the re-creation of a traditional nuclear family is matched to guarantee a new unit that will function as it should. Even if inclined to keep the child, opposing enormous pressure, most women were ill-informed about options such as financial support or social assistance. "Contemporary

polices on adoption, prochoice discussions and welfare still carry the implicit message if you are married, and have a reasonable level of income, you are a more worthy parent than someone who is young, single or impoverished. These things are not said outright...with our illusion that things are different now” (Pietsch 67).

The veils of secrecy imposed on the process by law, family and community, and intensified with the pejorative language surrounding birthmothers, aggravate these pressures. Popular categorizations of the unwed mother included ‘neurotic’ in 1940s, ‘moral lawbreaker’ in the 1950s, and ‘social or mental problem’ in the 1960s (Lynn). These attitudes may have eased, yet social condemnation lingers. Birthmothers may feel guilt or shame at placing their child up for adoption, or they fear, in many cases rightly, the rejection of others, for they had violated the normative boundaries of sexuality and motherhood. Their fertility, deeply entwined with ideas of female destiny and duty, self-esteem and social recognition, had been experienced without the ‘legitimizing’ force of marriage. And, as in my own case, where my search led to a birthmother then in her mid-seventies, “a person searching now must [also] realize they are searching in an environment totally different from that of the birthparents. Bearing a child out of wedlock evoked such incredible shame that denial of the whole experience became a way of survival for the birthmother. The shame and guilt followed many into their seventies and eighties” (Schooler and Norris 219). Whereas birthmothers were generally treated with suspicion if wanting to keep their babies prior to the sexual revolution, by the 1980s that same suspicion was transferred to the idea that they might consider giving it away, shattering the conception of motherhood as an innate and inviolable desire for every woman. And, as Frances Latchford notes, “what of birthmothers who neither experience themselves as victims, nor grieve the choice to relinquish?” (82). How are we to assimilate this into our understanding of natural or normative?

Here I would like to examine some of those artworks and artists that I have encountered who endeavor to depict the experience of birthmothers, adoptees, and a type of family creating that is by no means novel, for adoption itself is an ancient practice, and yet it has remained somehow at the margins of historical, and certainly artistic, consciousness. Of these few artistic works that portray non-biological family forming, and the complicated intersections and influences of politics, law, church, and culture, among others, there seems a kind of cohesion. Most take the form of artist books, photomontage or multi-media pieces combining archival material, documentary, and personal diary. Most reveal the troubling effects of mandatory non-disclosure laws and sealed records, lifted in Ontario in 2009, but still a mish-mash of active and passive registries, contact and disclosure vetoes, confidential intermediaries and court orders in various states and provinces. The lingering effects of legally

sanctioned, enforced secrecy and obliteration of birth origins certainly accounts for some of the artistic absence: with no information to work with, and an aura of institutionalized shame, how does one begin to reclaim voice? Add to this the tendency to pathologize those adoptees who wished to search, and, like relinquishment for the birthmother, to treat the moment of adoption or, if achieved, the moment of reunion, as the only two significant points in an adoptee's life experience. Further, consider the pop psychology notion promoted by the media that in reunion "adoptees find their true identities and home," a romantic plot similar to the marriage plot (Novy 28): yet the search process in reality is often fraught with more distress.

The few artworks I have discovered are constructed by adult adoptees, either in their imaginative projections about their birthmother, or their interrogations into how their adoptive circumstances affect identity, self-image and societal interaction. Images are often partial, incomplete or out of focus. This manipulation of reality, both 'true' and not 'true,' worlds we can see but not exist in, images that we have to piece together intuitively, represent for me an appropriate metaphor for the investigation of a similar kind of un/reality felt by adoptees and birthmothers, teetering on concepts of what constitutes an il/legitimate family.

One series of work comes from Joanna Fisher, a graduate of the Philadelphia Institute of Art, who was adopted, and finds the trauma of that knowledge very close to the forefront of her psyche. Joanna writes in her multiple blog posts on the subject, such as this in 2010:

Throughout my childhood, I produced many drawings, collages, paintings, and other attempts at creativity. Consciously and unconsciously I would sneak the other woman [my birth mother] into those creations. She was the princess in the tower, awaiting her rescue. She was the Queen who rode upon a white horse, searching for her long lost daughter, so that they might rule together in happiness. She was the sorceress, the flower, the eye, the heart, the anything I could possibly make her so that she was a presence in my life.

Joanna Fisher's college thesis was adoption themed. Called "Familiar Strangers," she presented a collection of black and white photos of 'family' that evoke an earlier era, and also her sense of things being just out of vision, just beyond her grasp, unclear and yet discernible. In her present work, which clearly stems and evolves from this, Joanna combines photography and photo montage of women's and children's faces in stark black and white, with words and phrases that represent her own adoptive experience, and seem almost like ransom notes cut from the text of newspapers, perhaps not so far off an analogy. The text is

less hyperbolic, with the force of the matter of fact carrying more weight than first appears. In one, (Figure 1) on a strip that partially obscures a section of a woman's face in recline, her gaze somewhere off in distance or time, the text reads, "I will long for my mother my entire life." "Until nine months of age the newborn's experience is a oneness with her mother, a symbiotic experience during which the newborn doesn't even know she is a separate entity," reads another (Figure 2). These words fall over a collage of young children's faces in close up, none of them fully complete.

She writes in a later blog post,

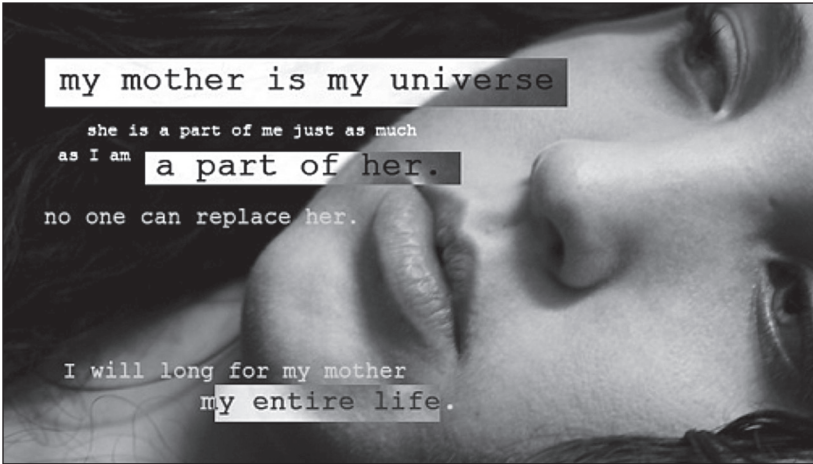


Figure 1: Fisher, Joanna. Photo Collage. © Joanna Fisher Photography, Connecticut, <www.ehbabes.com>.

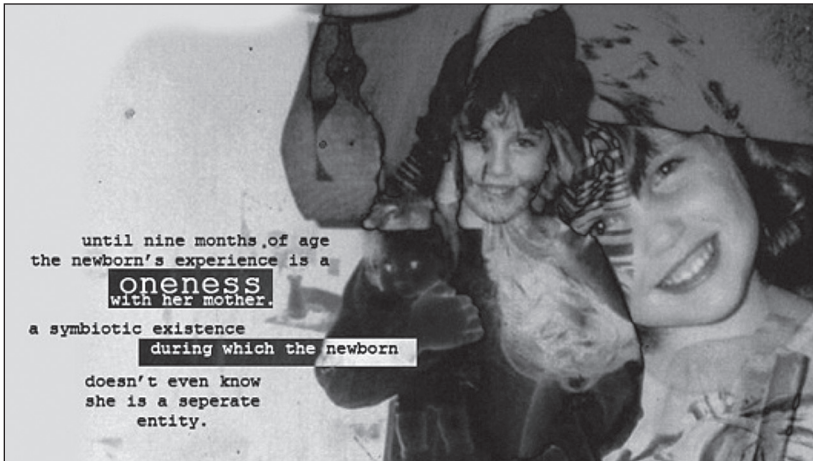


Figure 2: Fisher, Joanna. Photo Collage. © Joanna Fisher Photography, Connecticut, <www.ehbabes.com>.

Friend 'B', who has known me since middle school, asked me 'what I thought about being adopted.' My response was probably not as friendly as it could have been. And I'm sure she wasn't ready for it. I told her it was the worst thing that could ever happen to someone. I told her—as if it wasn't difficult enough to be separated from your mother, you are then expected to call another woman by that name, and more often than not, expected never to speak of that first woman again.

Joanna knew that her birthmother conceived at fourteen, a child herself, but little else. The angst of Joanna's blog contrasts sharply with the lovely portraits of children found in her professional life, a dark/light split that does not appear resolved. Her images are troubled, and she returns over and over to the phrase "own child," internalizing the idea that being adopted is second best. Her artwork captures in words and pictures part of the emotional and psychological trauma that can occur in adoptive circumstances, belying perceptions of adoption as always a neat and convenient solution for all parties.

Some limited edition artist's books provide another consideration of adoption, and the book as aesthetic object allows a deeper engagement with the topic in the very construction of the object itself. For example, printed accordion-style on cloth covered boards, textile artist Sandra Turley produced a fourteen-page accordion book in 2001 called *This Original Self* (Figure 3). As an adult she learned of her adoption and her art book is an exploration of this sudden new identity. Words frame a series of almost translucent cloth cut outs created by

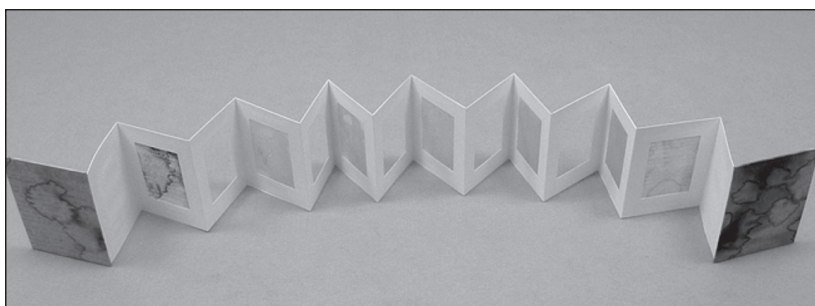


Figure 3. Turley, Sandra. "This Original Self." Jaffe Center for Book Arts, Florida Atlantic University Libraries. Bruggman at INK-A! Press Artists' Book, 2001.

devore printing, a method developed in the seventeenth century to create faux lace, involving the burning away of natural fibres through the use of caustic chemicals to create images or leave patterns. On the covers (Figure 4) is a close up section of a foxed, watermarked document with discontinuous words suggesting some kind of legal agreement, perhaps the order of adoption or

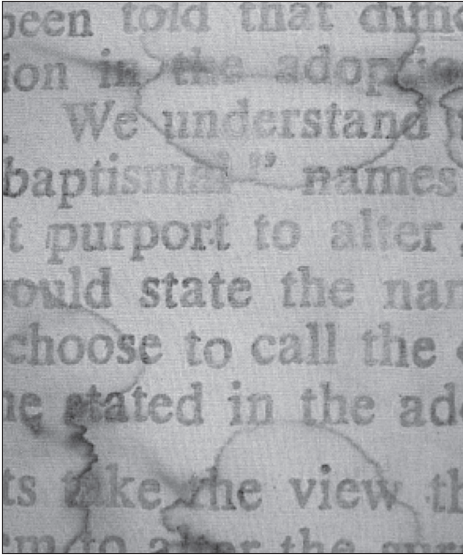


Figure 4. Turley, Sandra. "This Original Self." Cover. Jaffe Center for Book Arts, Florida Atlantic University Libraries. Bruggman at INK-A! Press Artists' Book, 2001.

speaking of the nothingness she feels, the nothingness that has been left to her, or the method of construction of the art object, the devouring printing contributing to the feeling of delicacy, incompleteness and impermanence. The bottom reads, "It is compelling for me to create something out of an absence," a paradoxical reference to her artistic process of eating away at or burning excess, and the process of coming to terms with her absent mother or lost origins. The accordion style construction means a viewer must flip back and forth to try to connect the

the official statement of relinquishment. The blotches on the text simultaneously suggest age and significance, like an artifact rescued from obscurity and now brought to light, yet also disregard for the importance of the document, looking damaged or improperly stored. Metaphorically, they suggest tears fallen from a birthmother or lost child. In subsequent pages lines of text scroll across the top and bottom margins, with breaks and gaps, and it is not clear how the sentences, if they are indeed such, are meant to be constructed. "By eating into cloth and creating a nothingness," reads one line (Figure 5), causing the viewer to question whether she is

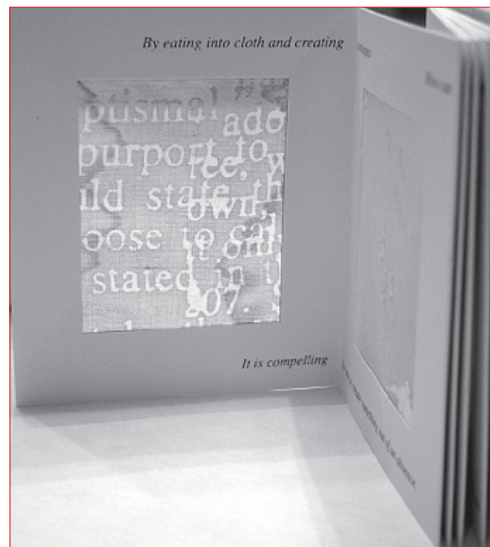


Figure 5. Turley, Sandra. "This Original Self." Detail. Jaffe Center for Book Arts, Florida Atlantic University Libraries. Bruggman at INK-A! Press Artists' Book, 2001.

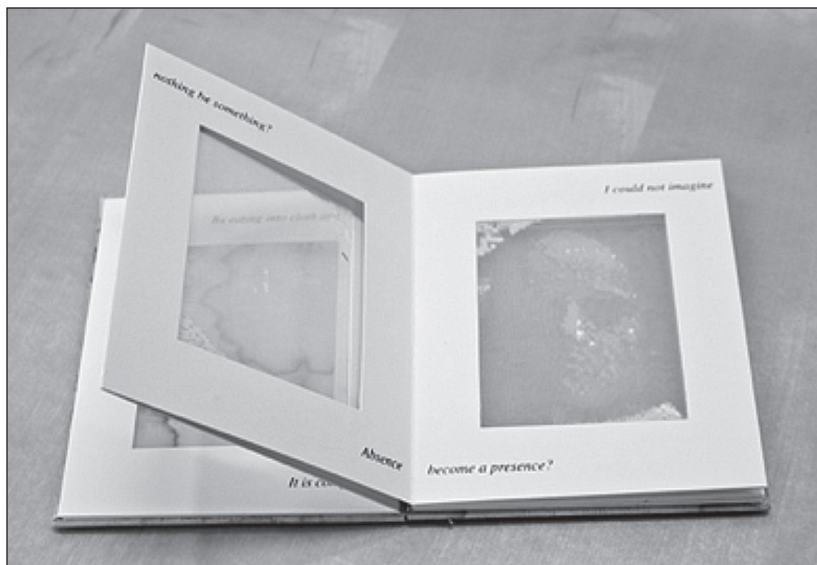


Figure 6. Turley, Sandra. "This Original Self." Detail. Jaffe Center for Book Arts, Florida Atlantic University Libraries. Bruggman at INK-A! Press Artists' Book, 2001.

fragments into some kind of sentence, yet the sentence is never fully formed. Another section (Figure 6) begins to expose a self-portrait, in pixelated and partial configuration that is never completely revealed, accompanied by words such as "in the mirror I was a stranger" and "even to myself..." Another page reads in questioning fragments "nothing be something?" and "absence become a presence?" suggesting the never-ending and hard to formulate questions that haunt some adoptees. The final pages of the book contain no fabric, but only an empty framed rectangular space, the emptiness, nothingness, absence, that is ever-present in her missing connection to absent family.

Carol Flax probes her adoptive circumstances in her artist book called *Some (M)other Stories: A Parent (hetic) al Tale* (1995) (Figure 7), with her tale of reunion, and the difficulty of integrating new understandings of self-history, identity and family in middle age. Flax was adopted at three months, and this slim volume tells of her sudden contact, initiated by her birthparents, forty years later. Flax uses old photographs from her now double families, images of herself as a child and her mothers in the time period of her birth, and manipulates them in a kind of collaged family album, with the repeated motif of her birth certificate layered into many of the images. The colours are muted, like old newspaper and faded photographs. Her opening cover pages have a series of grayed cutouts in profile of a figure which could be either or neither mother, with superimposed text stating, "with no genetic history I had no preconceived notions of who I should be so I was free to invent and re-invent myself."

Flax, in the beginning of her personal story accompanying the exhibition, states,

I was born in 1952. A time when one didn't do things like get pregnant 'out of wedlock.' These were mean times for single unwed women. Perhaps they were mean times for all women. Women going to hospitals to have babies without the sanctity of marriage often gave false names, possibly pretending somebody else had committed this sin of becoming pregnant and even worse the unholy act of giving the baby away. Now these babies have grown up. They are no longer mistakes. They are adult people. They search for mothers who never existed, whose names are nowhere on the record. Sometimes these women forget what *nom de sin* they used and can't even trace themselves.



Figure 7. Flax, Carol. "Some (M)other Stories: a Parent(hetic)al Tale." Cover. Daytona Beach, Florida: Southeast Museum of Photography, 1995

While she acknowledges the trauma of the birthmother experience of the period, and perhaps the freedom of constructing herself as a blank slate, she also indicates her feelings of alienation and rejection. Repetition of key phrases is one of her techniques. In one piece “she never knew who I was she never knew what became of me” forms a wallpaper background to her childhood photo. Some images stand out, such as a sepia toned little girl, presumably Flax, in a white frock facing the viewer with no discernible expression. She appears of another time, suggesting the era of her mothers. The photograph is not grounded—there is no background and the white space makes the almost forlorn or defiant figure all the more central. The face is partially scratched off. Text across her body reads, “I was born to a woman who thought and thought and then signed a paper relinquishing all rights to be my mother.” In a fold of what appears to be newsprint cuts outs, are fragments of two words: nature

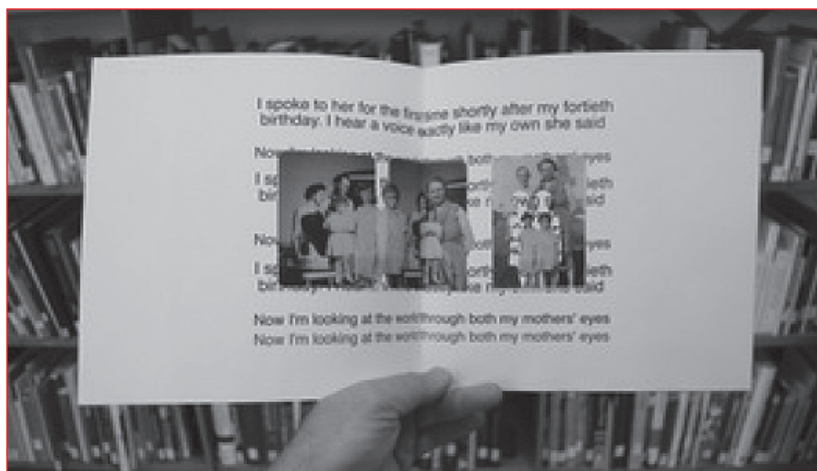


Figure 8. Flax, Carol. “Some (M)other Stories: a Parent(hetic)al Tale.” *Inside*. Daytona Beach, Florida: Southeast Museum of Photography, 1995.

and nature. Clearly, Flax is interrogating the essence of the maternal.

One of the final pieces (Figure 8) has a strip of photographs interwoven and cut out of both sets of parents and children who turn out to be full siblings. Across the background reads “I spoke to her for the first time shortly after my fortieth birthday. I hear a voice exactly like my own she said” and then the text is hidden behind the photographs, as if too personal to share with the viewer. At the bottom is repeated, “Now I’m looking at the world through both my mothers’ eyes,” as she tries to reconcile this double motherhood.

A related print work entitled “My Mother’s Eyes” (1998) (Figure 9) further explores this notion through a collage of black and white photos, this time with newspaper print seemingly taken from the 1950s, combined with sections of



Figure 9. Flax, Carol. "My Mother's Eyes." Collage Print Work. 2003. <www.carolflax.net>.

colour, such as the bright fuchsia of the women's lips, and their canary yellow outlines. Although Flax provides no explanation for this piece, it is evident that she is conflicted about who she is supposed to emulate or look to as "mother," and just what it means to be a mother. The little girl in the picture is not even completely present, literally marginalized, as if overlooked or unimportant to the larger female figures in alike poses, in roles that range from the beautiful and unattainable movie star, a figure of sexuality and mystery, to the drudgery or duty of motherhood, as represented by the mother pushing a pram, to the professional woman who might be self-reliant and regarded for her capabilities rather than her duties, yet still limited in her career options. Are any of these figures admirable? Do they represent real or imagined choices of the birth and adoptive mother in Carol Flax's eyes?

She writes in her artist's statement,

For years I've been looking at the spaces between ... particularly the border between knowledge and ignorance, and metaphorically ... between life and death. Not knowing is akin to a death. Being deprived of the very essential information of one's genetic code is to lack a piece of life. As an adoptee, I've spent most of my life without. And hence I've looked at what we know and don't know, how we slip between the spaces of knowing.

Carol Flax continued to explore adoption through video installation, where she centres on the story of an adoptee now in her fifties, called “2 mothers, 2 daughters, 2 sisters, 2 brothers, 1 father” (2002). Flax assembled the woman’s biological and adoptive family members, and filmed an extreme close up of their lips moving as they address a variety of issues surrounding adoption, especially the role of genetics versus environment. They read selections from a book by David S. Moore called *The Dependent Gene* in which he tries to eradicate binary views on genetic determinism, postulating that both nature and nurture contribute in equal unknowing measure to the process of identity. Each member is projected on a separate flat screen, and their voices overlap to the point where discerning the text is difficult, except at moments when they read in unison. Through the use of digital technology, Carol Flax explores a meta-physical realm, a place without embodiment that nonetheless exists, and performs as a metaphor for her work.

Another artist, and the sole male work encountered thus far, is that of David Schulz in “Non-Identifying Social, Genetic Report” (1998), who produced a large wall installation, later published as an artist’s book in 1999 (Figure 10). He received such a report from his mother at age 26, which prompted a search for his birthparents that ultimately failed. The artist uses verbatim quotations from the adoption report provided his mother by Lutheran Social Services. Handwritten across photographs, maps, and advertisements that stand in for what he might imagine, are accompanying details of the report, which he says, “contained a confusing mixture of objective information: ‘[David’s birthparents] ... met at a drive in and dated steadily’ and subjective observation: ‘[David’s birthfather] ... seemed immature for his age.’” There are also entries that document his reaction to the report and subsequent actions (Figure 11), such as one dated “12.1.97. Just got off the phone with Judy Raney at L.S.S. She said she just spoke with my birthmother and said she got really upset when she found out I was looking for her.” David Schultz is, of course, reduced to merely hypothesizing and substitution in his imagery, as he possesses no artifacts of his birth or family history other than the stark words of the ‘official report.’ One can see how precious every scrap of information is, no matter how trivial, each to be pondered and re-examined and re-imagined without ever having a confirmation or end point. There is a sense of documentary in his work despite his forced imaginative stance, yet also a feeling of frustration and tension in the juxtaposition of the sterile and disembodied words with the very personal tidbits of information gleaned, and his own handwritten logging of personal journey and interaction with the ‘report.’ Here we see an artist complicating the search for birth family narratives, an antidote to the entrenched assumption that finding biological relatives will necessarily provide a happy ending, as well as exploring the

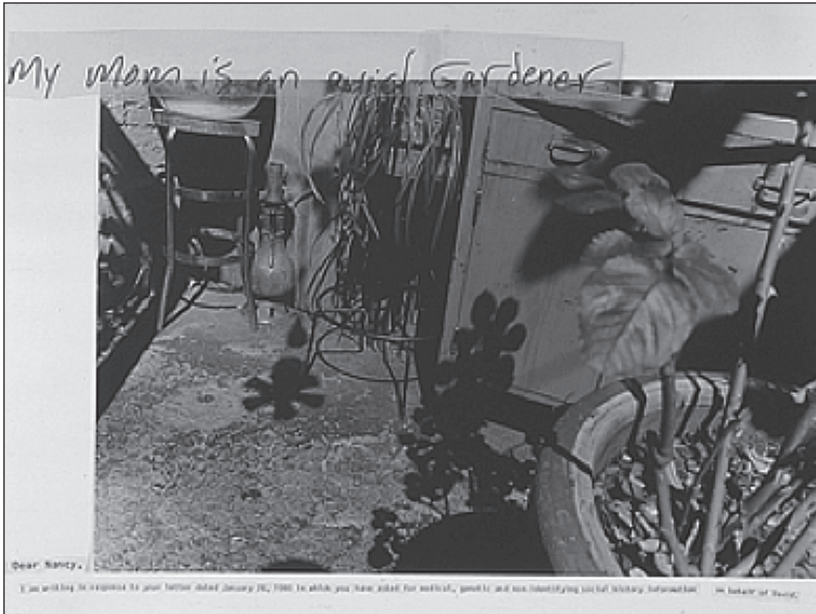


Figure 10. Shultz, David. "Non-Identifying Social Genetic Report." Photo-Bookwork. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Armand Hammer Productions, 1999.

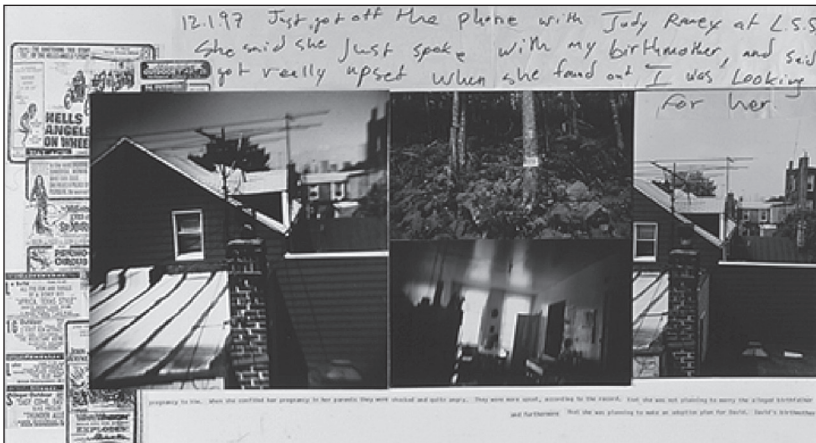


Figure 11. Shultz, David. "Non-Identifying Social Genetic Report." Wall Installation. Brooklyn, N.Y., 1998.

indignities of having an inaccessible life history, facts withheld, obscured or lost about a self that are a basic human right.

Perhaps the strongest and most prolific examples of adoption art, art that exposes injustices, bridges gaps, profiles multiple voices, and theorizes family life from outside normative forces, is from Ann Fessler, whose work has always



Figure 12. Fessler, Ann. "Genetics Lesson." Photo of Installation.
Rhode Island School of Design. 1990. <www.risd.edu>.

centered on feminist issues. Fessler is a third generation adoptee: neither her mother nor grandmother conceived a child. As her biography explains, adoption became a central feature in her own work when she was approached by a woman who thought Ms. Fessler might have been the daughter she gave up for adoption forty years previous. She was not, but the strength of this encounter, one Fessler says she actually dreamt about the night previous, prompted a new direction in her work. In 1990 'Genetics Lesson' (Figure 12) was her first installation piece after the chance encounter, a reflection of her life as an adoptee. In 1997 a collaboration with Carol Flax entitled 'Ex/Changing Families: Two Stories of Adoption' examined psychological aspects of adoption. While Fessler focused on understanding her adoptive family, Flax focused on pre-adoption fantasies: both look at the social implications for children. In both installations, video, image, co-opted historical footage, and, in some cases, sound, complete the piece. 'Ex/Changing Families' is divided into 'rooms,' two co-created: the 'Waiting Room,' filled with text fragments like "waiting with hope" and "never knowing," and 'The Mail Room,' an interactive space for community collaboration, allowing people to tell their own stories about adoption, another important window to combat the 'othering' of many adoptive experiences. The "Nursery/Orphanage," created solely by Carol Flax, is a stark place for unwanted children, filled with rows of institutional cribs, paintings on the walls of scary animals, and the text and sound track of societal disapproval and emotional cost for the children and the women. "Bastard bastard bastard" shouts one voice; "She isn't one of us," proclaims another, while neglected babies' cries are heard. In one



Figure 13. "Ex/Changing Families: Two Stories of Adoption." Photo of the "Cliff and Hazel" Installation by Ann Fessler. California Museum of Photography, 1997. www.cmp.ucr.edu.

of Fessler's rooms, the 'Cliff and Hazel' installation, she presents life with her adoptive parents (Figure 13). Included are pictures facing away from the viewer and hung away from the wall, suggesting the gap in her biological history, as she struggles to understand the meaning of 'family' for her.

In installation art, one is immersed in experience: it is difficult to merely view or keep at a distance what is being absorbed, creating a more elemental and visceral interaction. "Close to Home" (2001) consists of image, sound and even smells of Fessler's upbringing in the rural Midwest and her eventual journey to find her birthmother's hometown (Figure 14). Three large altered corncribs and literally tons of feed corn provide tactile repre-



Figure 14. Fessler, Ann. "Close to Home." Photo detail of Installation. Rhode Island School of Design. 2001. <www.risd.edu>.

sentations of her childhood, against multiple video projections that portray fragments of images of farm life, which fade in and out, memory-like, against ambient audio. The accompanying film *Along the Pale Blue River* depicts a double journey: that of the young pregnant woman who leaves the farm to become invisible in the city and give birth, and the parallel journey along the same river Fessler makes to find some connection to her unknown mother.

With this and her other earlier work she explored adoption from the perspective of the child, the uncertainties and psychological upheaval. In 'Everlasting' (2003) Ann Fessler flips her viewpoint, allowing the voices of the birthmother to take the fore. 'Everlasting' is an audio composition of oral history which collates clips from interviews with birthmothers in the Baltimore area who gave newborn children up for adoption between World War Two and Roe versus Wade, and combines them with looped archival video footage of images such as nurses pushing rows of babies in strollers. 'Close to Home,' remounted from two years previous, served as a companion and as an entryway to the latter, a bridge between Ann Fessler's personal story and those of other women. The exhibition is entered through a passageway, which seems appropriate, perhaps an allusion to the birth passage, where educational and newsreel footage from the 1940 to 1960s demonstrate some of the misinformation about sex and gender roles given to young people of the period. 'Everlasting' is installed in a theatre-like setting with comfortable and elegant Queen Anne style chairs placed in a circle that invite viewers to sit and listen to the voices of the taped interviews of women's private experiences (Figure 15). The number of chairs, seven, is significant, as it stands for each of the women whose voices are represented. When a viewer/participant sits in a chair she is literally putting herself in the place of one of the women who is speaking. Fessler weaves the voices together in a tapestry, allowing varying bits of the tracks to overlap, crescendo and diminish, creating from fragments a kind of whole narrative. She states that her intention was to show this piece of missing women's history, which, because it was so secret and shameful for so many women for so long, was not told, or even when told, was narrated by others. She wanted to give their own stories back to the women participating in the creation of this oral history installation and, by extension, those who view and participate in the experience.

I want women's voices to override/overwrite the authoritative voice-overs of the educational films and newsreels of the time that had an agenda other than to entertain. I hope to educate more people, reach a wider audience, and also implicate film in the dissemination of negative stereotypes of 'unwed mothers' at that time.

(Fessler in Hultberg)



Figure 15. Fessler, Ann. Photo detail of "Everlasting: A Multimedia Sound + Video Installation." Decker Gallery: Maryland Institute College of Art, 2003.

A form of art therapy appears to have emerged in the process of creating and mounting the installation. Birthmothers told their stories and, in so doing, a kind of symbolic exchange happened between the mothers who, for the first time, had the chance to explain their decisions and the circumstances of surrender to Fessler, a 'daughter' who might have been theirs, and who might have had similar questions. Many of the stories had never been uttered aloud before, let alone be taped for public broadcast, thus this was a significant step in reclaiming voice.

Artistic works contribute to our way of understanding the world and ourselves, and are cultural influences that affect our very perceptions of reality. Yet those without representation are relegated to the margins of social consciousness. It is important that those that have experienced adoption, and shifting conceptions of normative and il/legitimate family, see themselves reflected; younger generations may also need help in confronting their own issues about adoption. The few examples discovered of adoption art begin to unsilence the silenced, bring more into the open depictions of a different kind of family building, and of societal injustices historically wrought by those in power over women who had dared to be sexual beings. They invite the viewer to interrogate some of the prevalent discourses surrounding adoption: the assumed bio-essentialism of motherhood, the pathologization of the participants in the process, the romanticization of reunion, and also the potential lasting psycho-social effects of non-disclosure practices now discontinued. What distinguishes these works as significant is not only artistic merit, technical skill, or attention to historical

details, but intent and effect: this is art meant as an agent of social change. It pushes the boundaries of interdisciplinary media, but above all, it advances our culture, engaging with voices until now absent, overlooked and unheard, asking its audience to be more than passive observers, who, by understanding a past, can also look to revising the present and future.

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