



Mother Art Prize

Representation, Sexuality, Stereotype

Essay

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'Maybe I don't have a pretty smile, good teeth, nice tits, long legs, a cheeky arse, a sexy voice. Maybe I don't know how to handle men and increase my market value, so that the rewards due to the feminine will accrue to me. Then again, maybe I'm sick of the masquerade. I'm sick of pretending eternal youth. I'm sick of belying my own intelligence, my own will, my own sex.'^[1]

Although Germaine Greer published her mould-breaking book *The Female Eunuch* in 1970, the performance of femininity that she describes is still to a certain extent expected of women by society. While women have made some advances in the workplace and there is greater freedom in how we dress, the fact of living in a heavily male-dominated culture means that male-bias remains written into every area of life, from politics to business to media to culture. As the writer Caroline Criado Perez notes, '...because women aren't seen and aren't remembered, because male data makes up the majority of what we know, what is male comes to be seen as universal. It leads to the positioning of women, half the global population, as a minority.'^[2] In the supposedly liberal art world too, the gender imbalance remains alive and well. Women make up just over one third of all artists represented by London's commercial galleries; just 28 of the National Gallery's total 2,624 works are by female artists and 80% of the ten highest-grossing sales by Sotheby's in 2019 were works by men.^[3] This inequity is exacerbated in the treatment of artists who are mothers. In the home they are expected to take on the bulk of childcare responsibilities and exhibition openings - essential for networking - are almost always held at the exact time young children need to be bathed and fed.^[4] Residencies almost never accommodate children, therefore often precluding the participa-

tion of artist mothers. Cyril Conolly's famous declaration 'There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall,' has been a self-perpetuating prophecy.^[5] In the art world motherhood has been a taboo and mention of children cause for eyes to glaze over. Only recently has the mother artist started to become less invisible and welcome.

We can and should be angry about the gender imbalance, the unequal treatment of women, the stereotyping. But where rage often closes ears, humour can be an extremely powerful tool to open them. The artists I will be discussing here, all finalists for The Mother Art Prize 2020, explore with wry humour different facets of being a mother and a woman. Sadie Hennessy stages a '*Boyfriend Audition*' in photographs; Emmeline de Mooij uses the tactility of slime to reflect on emotional labour and the female body; Lauren Pisano's photographic series *Packaging Yourself* rips apart female stereotypes, taking as her starting point John T. Molloy's breathtakingly sexist 1977 bestseller *The Woman's Dress for Success Book*; and Holly Stevenson makes delicious curvaceous ceramic pots abounding in orifices, nipples and phallic forms that embody the fluidity of being female. Lastly, I will be looking at Emma Wilson's tender 2017 photographic work *Janet Dressing as a Bride* which, while not overtly humorous, is an uplifting celebration of gender freedom.

These artists have benefited from feminist forebears who challenged representation of the female, taking on 'hardcore' subjects such as child rearing and menstruation. One example, Catherine Elwes's 1979 performance *Menstruation II*, involved shutting herself in a room with a glass door for the duration of her period, wearing white to allow her blood stains to become evident. In thus rejecting male-imposed

1 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008, p. 70.

2 Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women*, New York: Abrams Press, 2019, p.162.

3 Dr Kate McMillan, *Freelands Foundation Report: Representation of female artists in Britain during 2019*, <https://freelandsfoundation.imgix.net/documents/Representation-of-female-artists-2019-Clickable.pdf> pp. 6-7.

4 For a fuller discussion of the challenges for artist mothers see Hettie Judah, 'Full, Messy and Beautiful!' in the *Freelands Foundation Report Representation of Female Artists in Britain During 2019*, pp. 14-20.

5 Cyril Conolly, *Enemies of Promise*, Chapter 14: 'The Charlock's Shade', Routledge & Sons, 1938, p.116.

social 'norms' and the stigmatisation of natural female bodily processes, second wave feminist artists paved the way for subsequent generations to take a more playful, if no less heartfelt, approach to representing women's experience.

Holly Stevenson's pots are conceptually built on ideas of psychoanalysis, especially around sexuality and the uncanny. *Mary (ma-ma)* in her white flowing dress and flouncy bow, might exemplify clichés of femininity - except for the fact that phallic worms (or teats) protrude from the flowers festooning her dress and her slender neck ends in two hooks rather than a head. *The Charmer* amalgamates the figure of the snake charmer with the male member, yet gender signifiers are kept ambiguous; the thrusting phallus is bedecked with a charm chain hung with grimacing Medusa-like heads and descends into an armchair/ballsack form, decorated with kitsch red hearts on the back. The third pot in the show, *The Arrangement*, is a riot of swollen flowering forms and sausage-like protuberances that threaten to overflow their base. On a ribbon around the base is a set of bared teeth whose function is unclear: are they there to protect the female treasure like a medieval chastity belt or to partake in erotic delectation? In either case, this arrangement of bulging corporeal forms seems to refuse containment. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion comes to mind that one was not born but becomes a woman.^[6]

Gender theorist Judith Butler takes this claim further to argue, "it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end."^[7] In muddling archetypes of gender, Stevenson's works convey the complexity of woman and the multiplicity of identities we inhabit simultaneously.

Like Stevenson's clay creations, Emmeline de Mooij's shortlisted work for the Mother Art Prize shares a corporeal sensuality, employing slime, another tactile, succulent material. But where Stevenson's sexpots exude confidence, de Mooij's work is threaded with a sense of ma-

ternal vulnerability, perhaps heightened by the smear-like marks on the fabric, some of which recall menstrual and nappy stains. *Fluffy Slime* is best understood by considering the context of de Mooij's 2018 show #satisfying slime at Andriess Eyck gallery in Amsterdam, where it was originally presented. The show's centrepiece was a participatory installation called *Attempting a Nap*, in which the visitor received a massage in an electric massage chair while a screen opposite played ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) videos found on Instagram of fingers caressing slime. A voiceover by the artist spoke in calmative tones about the myths around motherhood, the luxuriating feeling of squeezing a baby's chubby legs, as well as the bodily alienation and loneliness that drives people to seek physical connection in ASMR videos. This installation together with a series of accompanying mixed-media drawings with titles like that's where postpartum depression lurks, sleep mode and don't forget to put wipes on the shopping list underscored the enormous mental and physical toll of motherhood and the rarely recognised need for recuperative care.

In contrast with the idea of domestic labour, Lauren Pisano's photographic series *Packaging Yourself* humorously lays bare the rigid stereotyping to which women have long been subjected in the workplace, as seen in John T. Molloy's book of instructions under the guise of scientific research to help women achieve success in business. Pisano focuses on parts of her body to create subversive images in response to Molloy's "Don'ts" that are displayed beneath the photographs. Molloy's authoritarian language reveals both an innate fear of female power and the systematic suppression of women's identity by the patriarchy. Too sexy and the woman will not be taken seriously, too serious and she's a threat. Molloy's instructions, however, belie the supposed professionalism of his stated goals: if he is 'helping' woman to dress for business, why are sex appeal and the question of turning men off or on even relevant?

6 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage Books, 2011, p. 283.

7 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*; New York, London: Routledge, 2006, p.162.

Emma Wilson's intimate photograph *Janet Dressing as a Bride*, part of the series *Dammit Janet I Love You*, offers us an alternative, inclusive representation of womanhood, supporting Butler's claim of gender as a construct in flux. Janet is a paragon of self-fulfilment, having finally fashioned her desired identity after years performing archetypal male roles as a trucker, a soldier and a husband. Wilson does not gloss over the challenges for Janet in living her dream; we see her grey haired, ageing and vulnerable in her bra and are reminded that society is a dangerous place for people who don't conform to its gender stereotypes. Nonetheless Janet's expression of care and pride as she puts on the bridal gown, her neatly painted nails and glam wigs - accoutrements of her own personal femininity - attest to her contentment and resolve. It is a portrait of empowerment.

Sadie Hennessy disregards social coding around packaging herself. In her whimsical photographic series *The Boyfriend Auditions* she appears dressed for comfort rather than seduction, waiting for candidates at a makeshift booth on a deserted shingle beach. The four photographs narrate the failure of her quest, reflected in her shift in posture; from sitting smiling, pen in hand, to slumping steadily lower onto the table until, in the final shot she lies sprawled on the pebbles. The empty beach can be seen as a metaphor for the absence of adequate boyfriend contenders for a mature single mother, but there is also a delightful sense of absurdity in holding the audition in such a desolate location, the idea of setting oneself up to fail being key to the British tradition of dark humour.

These five artists Holly Stevenson, Emmeline de Mooij, Lauren Pisano, Emma Wilson and Sadie Hennessy refuse the neat social parameters that for years have sought to confine and define women. Their recognition by the Mother Art Prize rewards their creativity and their mothering as valued and compatible activities. In their joyfully multifarious representations of womanhood, we are invited to accept women on their own terms, unmediated by men. We find in their work the messiness of mothering, emotional contradictions, unbounded female sexuality and the convergence of genders and identities. It's an unruly vision of the female - and it's just what we need.



'The Charmer'



'The Arrangement'







