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Judy Chicago: "How Artists Are Breaking the Taboos Around Depicting Birth"

By Julia Halperin

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Judy Chicago's "Birth Trinity: Needlepoint 1," from the "Birth Project" (1983), which is currently on view as part of the show "Judy Chicago: Herstory" at the New Museum in New York. Credit...© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. The Gusford Collection. Photo: Donald Woodman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

For centuries, labor was deemed too messy a subject for gallery walls. A growing canon of feminist work is challenging that perception.

Not long after completing "The Dinner Party" (1974-79), her monumental installation dedicated to historical women, the artist Judy Chicago began researching depictions of birth in Western art — only to discover there were almost none. "If men had babies, there would be thousands of images of the crowning," she said. In an effort to fill this void, she went straight to the source. She witnessed a live birth — the San Francisco-based designer Karin Hibma agreed to let Chicago sketch in the delivery room — and sent detailed questionnaires to more than 100 mothers. (Sample questions: Why did you want to have a baby? What physical changes have become permanent?) Part of her resulting work, "The Birth Project" series (1980-85), made up of painted, woven and embroidered images of women in labor, is currently on view at Chicago's retrospective at the New Museum in New York. Many of the images are epic in tone and size: Breasts become mountains and rivers flow from between open legs. Chicago was, as she later wrote, "building a form language almost 'from scratch,'" one that linked the act of birth to divine creation. But to this day, according to Massimiliano Gioni, one of the show's curators, the series has never been shown in full.

Birth is an experience shared, in one way or another, by every person who has ever lived. But beyond pictures of the Virgin Mary, images of pregnancy are largely absent from the Western canon; images of labor, practically nonexistent. Historically, birth was so dangerous — the fatality rate in the 16th and 17th centuries has been estimated to be as high as 1.5 percent — that depicting a pregnant person was seen as inauspicious. Delivery was widely considered far too bloody for public consumption. And, of course, most artists and gallerists were men and therefore at least one degree removed from the process. As a result, perhaps the earliest known modern image of a birth in visual art is Frida Kahlo's "My Birth," painted in 1932.

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But over the past decade, a mass of images has begun to emerge and institutions have become more willing to show them. "There is a younger generation of curators — male and female — who have developed an interest in the subject," Chicago, now 84, says. Just as motherhood has, in recent years, become a fashionable topic for exhibitions (including "Mother!" at Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2021) and art books (among them "The Baby on the Fire Escape" by Julie Phillips, published in 2022), so too have discussions about birth entered museums and galleries. In the years directly before and after the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to revoke the constitutional right to abortion, this has proved especially true: Early last year, the Scottish painter Caroline Walker exhibited monumental delivery scenes in London informed by her residency at the city's University College Hospital maternity ward; the Polish artist Agata Stowak's solo show at Fortnight Institute in New York this spring included a painting of a naked figure birthing a red demonlike creature; and at Pace Geneva this fall, the American artist Loie Hollowell showed new paintings from her "Splitting Orbs" series, which depict an abstracted dilating cervix. These images, presented at a time when women's bodies and lives are under threat, register as a form of protest, even if they weren't conceived that way. How, they seem to ask, could anyone be forced to go through the experience of being broken open against their will?



A detail view of Carmen Winant's "My Birth" (2018), from "Being: New Photography 2018" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Credit: © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Kurt Heumiller

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Despite the recent attacks on reproductive rights, institutions' increasing engagement with birth imagery does suggest that the radical openness about bodies that defined the consciousness-raising groups of Chicago's era has taken root in the broader culture. The '70s feminist movement deemed the exchange of practical information about women's bodies as key to empowerment, paving the way for the generation of female artists that followed. There's the Columbus, Ohio-based artist Carmen Winant, 40, who has made several works that explore narratives around birth, including the installation "My Birth" (2018), for which she covered two full walls in the Museum of Modern Art's 2018 "New Photography" exhibition with more than 3,000 images of women in labor pulled from family photos, books and magazines. Until recently, she points out, most popular depictions of childbearing — particularly in film and on television — could be reduced to two archetypes: the raving monster and the martyr who dies to save her baby. "We are made to feel so embarrassed," Winant says. "Those were the images in my head when I gave birth. I had to learn how to see the range of pictures that were possible."



Heji Shin's "Baby 3" (2016). Credit... © Heji Shin, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Buchholz

Breaking another taboo, the New York-based photographer Heji Shin is drawn to birth as a subject in part because of its inextricable link to death. She told the German magazine *Frauelein* she wanted her 2016-17 series "Baby" — which captures infants' alien-looking heads as they emerge from their mothers — to convey "death, pain, the original, and the unknown." Given pride of place at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, it has become her most famous series. A similar interest animated the work of the painter Juanita McNeely, one of the few artists making images of birth around the same time as Chicago. (McNeely died last month at 87.) She began painting visceral images of babies coming out of women's bodies after she fought to receive a life-saving abortion in 1967, before *Roe v. Wade*. In "The Tearing," from the late 1960s, a skeletal figure whose flesh is pulled from its rib cage seems to both give birth and be delivered at once. In a conversation ahead of her exhibition at James Fuentes in Los Angeles this fall, McNeely noted that she was frequently asked why her work is so bloody. "To me, that's the beginning of life, if you're lucky," she said, referring to birth. "And if you're not, it's your end — it's death."

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Juanita McNeely's "The Tearing" (late 1960s).Credit...© Juanita McNeely, courtesy of James Fuentes LLC. Photo: Jason Mandella

But even as a new wave of artists and institutions seek to be more honest about birth, exclusions and omissions remain. The couples pictured are almost always heterosexual, and the birthing parent is almost always white. This issue was top of mind for Winant, who recalled asking herself while working on "My Birth," "Would I do harm in sharing these pictures, even if I centered the problem inside of them?" Of course, these disparities reflect the reality of America, where, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black women are three to four times more likely than their white counterparts to die from pregnancy-related causes. Tellingly, one of the few works of contemporary birth art by a nonwhite artist is the photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier's suite of photographs commissioned for a 2018 New York Times Magazine story on the Black maternal health crisis. The black-and-white images of a mother, her newborn son and her doula are gentle, tender and angelically lit. There is no blood or gore, as if to suggest the subjects have been through enough.

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These works by Frazier, Chicago, Shin and others require an unusually intimate collaboration between artist and subject: Mothers must allow the artist to witness them in a profoundly transformative moment. In exchange, Shin offered each birthing parent their own photograph to keep (different from those she ended up using in her art). To create the ongoing series "Labour," which she began a week before Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017, the South African artist Candice Breitz, 51, had to persuade women to allow her to record footage of their births, which she then played in reverse as part of an imagined universe in which heroic women volunteer their wombs to extract particularly violent men — among them Trump and Vladimir Putin — from the world. Breitz said she asked as many as 200 pregnant people to participate before finding six who agreed. "I see the women who I represent as being allies," Breitz says. "I want to imagine us almost as a matriarchy." Much of the contemporary art about birth, then, is a communal practice — women trusting one another and working together to produce something new.

Notably, artists from earlier generations who made prominent work about birth — including Kahlo, Chicago and McNeeley — were not mothers themselves, whether by choice or otherwise. The current generation is more of a mix. Winant, Walker and Hollowell are mothers; Breitz and Frazier are not. This development suggests that, in many ways, female artists today have more options available to them both socially and professionally than their predecessors — even if, as of last summer, the right to forgo motherhood is, once again, no longer legally guaranteed.

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