

“BROODWORK: Creative Practice and Family Life”

The exhibit “BROODWORK: Creative Practice and Family Life” was mounted at the Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock from May 23 to June 21, 2009. The show was presented by artist Rebecca Niederlander (RN) and architect Iris Anna Regn (IR), longtime friends who had frequently discussed how parenting changed their perspectives and creative processes. Niederlander and Regn, mothers of 4-year-old and 7-year-old daughters, respectively, decided to draw out the discussion by creating an exhibit that included work from a diverse group of artists, architects and designers, all pressed to consider the effect of parenting on their work. All of the participants have young children, under the age of 10. Includes works from Hadley & Peter Arnold, Juliette Bellocq, Barbara Bestor, Lauren Bon & The Metabolic Studio, Jemima Brown, Rebecca Campbell, Jamison Carter, Kim Colin/Industrial Facility, David Fletcher, Seonna Hong, Soo Kim, Brandon Lattu, Rebecca Niederlander, Laura Owens & Edgar Bryan, Michael Pierzynski, Eli Pulsinelli & Allen Compton, Iris Anna Regn and Tim Durfee, Lucas Reiner, Linda Taalman & Alan Koch, Denise Uyehara & Natalie Nguyen, Alexis Weidig, Patty Wickman, Patrick Wilson.

Rebecca Niederlander and Iris Anna Regn interviewed by Karen Klabin

How did the concept for BROODWORK develop?

RN: It’s something Iris and I had been thinking about specifically for over two years. The minute any creative person even begins to think of having children, there are all these clichéd ideas out there about whether family life can be integrated into a work life and what that means. We both knew creative people who had kids before we each became parents. We’d seen them try to figure it all out. They were either exhausted all the time, or they had basically stopped making work. We thought maybe a solution could be found in having reasonable examples of parents open to how such life-changing events *will* change one’s work and one’s interests. Because if creative people create out of their life experience, then anything that is experientially profound will change the work.

How did you select the contributing artists, architects and designers for the show?

RN: We knew a lot of artists we thought had successfully found their way and were making exciting work.

IR: Many of them were people we had worked with in the past, people we had collaborated with, or people whose work we liked. None of the participants had actually framed their work this way before. We chose them to represent different aspects of creativity in a non-hierarchical way; we wanted the work to be extremely varied.

BROODWORK is all about integration. We also wanted that reflected in the viewer’s experience of the show—they’d walk into the space, see work that didn’t seem connected, and slowly come to understand how everything was similar in an underlying way.

RN: We felt it was a dynamic endeavor. And when we made some phone calls and explained our idea, it was fabulous how everyone was really eager to participate.

IR: Yes, the participants understood immediately, really felt the concept. The previously unspoken community formed very quickly and the show came together

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Detail from Linda Taalman and Alan Koch, *Sand Box*, 2009.
Image by Matt Schodorf

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in about a three-month period.

You have explained that the concept for BROODWORK is not a feminist statement.

RN: It's not. It's more about the idea of remarking on what true pluralism is. If anything can be art, then why is it that people are still so hesitant to own up to humility? I think it's because we're still so caught up in notions of "the heroic" in art.

IR: It's not a feminist statement, but it is generational. It is reflecting on the transition from the heroic scale to making meaningful work not so much despite of, but because of, the irregularities of parenthood.

There's an irony in the use of the term "brood." Chicken keepers use the word "broody" to describe the unwanted behavior of a hen with an overwhelming desire

to sit on and attempt incubation of unfertilized eggs, often to the neglect of her own wellbeing. And then there's the verb "to brood: to think anxiously or gloomily." But you see the attempt to combine art-making and parenting as an "inherently hopeful" endeavor?

RN: It's a complicated thing, but I do think it's inherently hopeful. It's kind of a "no pain, no gain." Parent-

ing is the hardest thing in the world—and the most rewarding. Which describes the creative process as well. People talk about their creative output as their child. Both are extracting something from one's inner core and putting it out there. It's ultimately hopeful because we have to believe that the world we're leaving our kids is not going to combust. So I believe I have to be optimistic.



Overall exhibition image showing Iris Anna Regn & Tim Durfee. *Growth Table*, 2009. Marine Plywood, Douglas Fir. 4' × 10' × 30". Juliette Bellocq. *I Love You*, 2009. Cardboard, ink, tissue paper. multiples of 4 × 4 × 4 inches. Jemima Brown. *Profile Pictures*, 2009. Pencil and watercolour on paper. 29.7cm × 29.7cm each. Courtesy Jemima Brown and The Agency Contemporary, London. Rebecca Niederlander. *Family tree: Satellites and Eclipses*, 2009. Plastic insulated electrical copper wire. 36" × 36" × 36". Alexis Weidig. *Metis-Medusa*, 2009. Mylar tape. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Overtones Gallery. Image by Matt Schodorf

IR: Also, this isn't a show that gives pat answers. We are all "brooding" together in this open-ended process.

Beyond the participant statements, it's difficult not to long for context—a "before and after"—for those artists and designers who submitted work not executed thematically for the show. One wonders: How has their work changed materially as a result of becoming a parent? Was that something you considered in conceiving of the exhibit?

IR: We did talk about this a lot. BROODWORK is not defined by gender, content or medium. The concept seems to break down into several defining characteristics. There are changes in methodology. Work gets produced in small increments of time, the projects are conceived as an accumulation of parts, and work is made collaboratively. There is also an increased so-

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cial consciousness, where ethical and environmental issues came to the forefront. And then there is work that navigates the landscape of the child and childhood from the regard of a creative person who is a parent.

These themes were not always apparent. It isn't a clear-cut "before and after," so early on we realized that we would use descriptive paragraphs from the participants on the labels to inform the viewer of the links to parenting and the personal process.

RN: The labels were designed by Juliette Bellocq, who did all of the amazing graphics for the show.

You didn't want art that consciously spoke to the theme, but then the thread stitching the work together can become somewhat frayed.

RN: By including art, design and architecture, the show is really an overview. Looking broadly, it's a wide net that we cast.

IR: Yes, I specifically think it is really exciting that BROODWORK doesn't have a singular look.

When you're a parent, your world becomes more sharply defined and yet somehow more chaotic. You're continually

setting up and reassembling guideposts for your child. Is this similar or dissimilar to the act of creating, and does that change after you become a parent?

RN: Very similar. That's one of the things we really were keen on. Creative questions that were asked anew. New questions that rose to the surface or became more predominant or were suddenly important.

Creativity requires discipline, and yet parenting can be the ultimate distraction. How do you think that's reflected in creative practice?

RN: Creativity happens in shorter bursts. Before children, you can be much more chaotic with production. You can spend time exploring any avenue that comes into your mind. You can use whatever toxic stuff seems exciting.

IR: In some ways I work more now than I ever did before. Because I know that I can't fritter away the time. I collaborate a lot. A lot of things happen in my head, and—thanks to modern technology—in the car, in

distributed moments anywhere. That was consistently something most of the BROODWORK participants expressed. They don't have the time to do as many endless drawings or to just sort of meander when they are

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Detail from **Lauren Bon and The Metabolic Studio**. PSQ.2/Eagle Rock Arts Center, 2009. material: corn fodder, hydro seed, water. Dimensions: 8 feet, 4 feet, 4 feet. The remainder of one process—the growing of corn—is the material for this sculptural form. That form once bundled and shaped is impregnated with seeds. This sculptural object's very form will change as a process of growing another life on it. Catabolism is the term that refers to the break down of metabolic form. It is the process by which ground is made which allows new things to emerge. The connection to pregnancy and mothering is there; as is the idea of generations. *Image by Edie Kahula Pereira*



Detail of **Brandon Lattu, Prior to Birth** (Maquette), 2009 · Foamcore, cardboard, polypropylene, ink, photographs of obstetrician's waiting room magazine table. Dimensions variable, arrangement of truncated asymmetric pyramids, ranging from 30" × 19" × 15" to 38" × 25" × 31". *Prior to Birth* is a group sculpture composed of pyramids whose form was determined by photographic recording of the projection from the station point of the camera to the rectangular surface of a magazine table in the waiting room of the obstetrician who delivered our second child, Julian. /and **Hadley & Peter Arnold. Stone Shrine at a Northern New Mexican Pueblo Ruin**, 2007. Photographic print. 23¾" × 49¾" **Peter, Hadley, and Josie Arnold**. When we contemplate the landscape of the future, it is often with children in mind. But the unspeakable future, for a parent, is not an unlivable landscape, however much we may decry it. For a parent, the unspeakable future is landscape absent of child. *Image by Matt Schodorf*

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in front of the drawing board. Their practice becomes more disciplined. So instead of finding that parenting distracts, we found it can help focus, help tighten up concepts.

RN: And I'm constantly looking at what my kid is doing in any given moment and am informed by the kinds of things she's interested in. I've always been interested in the innocent view, and now here's this 4-year-old who comes into my studio with her completely fresh perspective of the work. My young assistant.

Do the mundane necessities of supporting and raising a child diminish creativity?

RN: No, not for me. But I can't answer for other people.

IR: It's part of the whole package.

Do you think that most of the participants represented in BROODWORK were conscious of a change in their perceptions or methods after becoming parents?

RN: About half. Some were even resistant to the idea. There were people we approached and they said that they didn't really see any difference. It was only through conversation they said, "Oh, yeah." Even they weren't conscious of what the shift was. Because art-making shifts over time, and if you're involved in the day-to-day of it, you're not thinking or don't want to think that your personal life is affecting your creative outlook.

By the same token, we were extremely conscious of perception and experience in designing the show.

IR: Yes, we were deliberate in designing and curating

a show for adults, but a show that would naturally include children and families. We consciously hung work slightly lower, and we included several works in key locations in which children could actively participate. The space of the show was also purposefully laid out to encourage meandering and conversation. We held related events that accommodated families so that parents could come together and spend time in



Detail of one wall from **Patty Wickman. 40 Days**, 2009. Oil on canvas, each painting is 6"× 8". In the Judeo-Christian tradition 40 days is a symbolic period of time that speaks of trial and testing—rain that falls for 40 days and nights, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, 40 days of fasting in the desert. These 40 paintings likewise represent a period of scrutiny. *Image by Matt Schodorf*

the exhibit and realize their membership in this community . . . I think not only the artists and designers in the show became newly aware of the changes in their work, we definitely heard some viewers talking about their own BROODWORK!

RN: That was a glorious bonus. Additionally, all of the business sponsors were tied in by the theme. The

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Left: L-to-R: Rebecca Niederlander, Iris Anna Regn, Juliette Bellocq. Right: Exhibition image showing Juliette Bellocq. *I Love You*, 2009. Cardboard, ink, tissue paper. multiples of 4 × 4 × 4 inches. Conceived to engage even very young children, *I Love You* teaches by making and sharing a creative experience. It re-appropriates the strategies of branding to open an avenue for communication, activity with children and joy. Rebecca Niederlander. *Family tree: Satellites and Eclipses*, 2009. Plastic insulated electrical copper wire. 36" × 36" × 36". Starting from a place of equilibrium, suspended works are constantly capable of becoming something else entirely, something not planned for. As such, they are a straightforward placeholder for the experience of parenthood. Images by Matt Schodorf



whole thing was a holistic endeavor that reached out beyond the scope of this one show.

What do you think an artist gains by caring for children?

RN: Art-making is the most selfish endeavor in the world. I think that being an artist is a profoundly egotistical endeavor and that it's dangerous. It's a place where one can become somewhat monomaniacal. And having a child to care for is a very grounding experience. It is a reminder of the future. It reminds people that they are the responsible generation. Creativity can require of us a connection to a place inside of us that sometimes is immature, that's pure energy. And I think that having a kid helped to place me, for example, in life's continuum in this amazing way. I'm suddenly part of the process and not the end result.

To some people it's a little bit scary to think that your personal life so profoundly affects what you're making. They don't think of the two as intertwined because that's not a notion that we elevate in contemporary art.

IR: Absolutely. Architecture and design has not traditionally allowed for messiness and fragility.

Do you think it helps artists to have their narcissism deflated?

RN: Totally.

IR: Maybe we can be the post-narcissism generation.

What's next?

RN: The show will absolutely travel. We're looking into shows in different cities that are fertile ground for some of the issues we're interested in, where these kinds of issues seem a natural fit.

IR: I just got back from Berlin, which is so ripe for this concept. We're looking at other artists and other cities, like New York and London.

RN: We're designing an interactive website and a book with Juliette Bellocq. And possibly in subsequent years we'll look at certain artists over time and see how their work evolves. How things change. It would be really interesting to pick up certain people over time to see how things are playing out. ♦