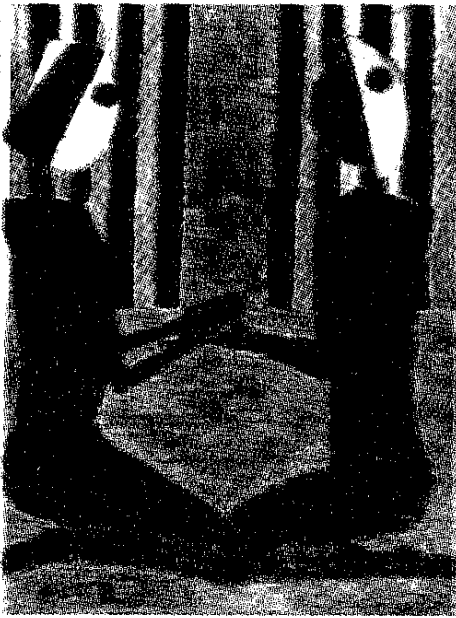


'Nine Months': when motherhood's the muse

Galleries

'Nine Months': motherhood as muse

By Nancy Stapen
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE



Christina Lanzl's "Lovers II"
at Ashuah Irving Gallery.

Summer is the slowest time of the year in the galleries. One word that comes to mind is "barren." Not at Howard Yezerski's, though, where a show called "Nine Months: Art and Pregnancy" presents an unusually fertile offering.

Eleven artists from Boston, New York and Los Angeles take diverse approaches to the subject. Media range from the traditional painting, drawing, photography and printmaking to mixed-media constructions and sewn objects.

Young Boston artist Cheryl Warrick's painting, "Wombroom," is characteristically subtle, with dark, green depths pierced by a white, fetuslike form encased in a linear tracing that suggests a swollen belly. The image uses an abstract language of form to convey a unified sense of interior

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and exterior, encompassing a pregnant woman's and her unborn child's perceptions of their shared domain.

An issue that surfaces repeatedly is the culture's conflicting attitudes toward pregnancy. Artists here explore the contradictions between the glorified pedestal pregnant women may be placed on, the desexualization of the mother and the sense of the maternal body as communal property — as in those oft-told recitations of pregnant women about the way that complete strangers will approach with advice, even going so far as to touch their stomachs. New York painter Elena Sisto, who usually works with abstract images, addresses some of these themes in her "Bimbo" series, paintings peopled by caricaturish lechers and Barbie-types bumping into abstract, round monoliths. The work uses "low art" cartoons to explore such issues as the heightened, often unpleasant body awareness many pregnant women experience.

Demi Moore's infamous Vanity Fair cover (and her rash of followers — pregnant supermodels Paulina Porizkova, Beverly Peleé and Victoria's Secret cover girl Stephanie Seymour have recently bared all in the popular press) pales before Renee Cox, a New York photographer who has no need for a gimmicky, painted-on tux. In near life-size proportions, she presents herself — black, beautiful, immensely pregnant and wearing nothing but a regal turban. Seated on a bench with outstretched arms and firmly planted legs in a warehouse-type setting, she's a take-no-prisoners, queen-of-the-streets mama. Cox gives the work a conceptual edge, placing her image in an exquisite wood frame suitable for a most precious object. In short, Cox confronts the viewer with a noble bearing that asserts, in no uncertain terms, the sanctity of her maternal role.

Boston artist Ilana Manolson created visual "diaries" during and immediately after her two pregnancies. She represents each day with a small plastic bag filled or adorned with symbolic objects and text. Displayed in a grid, these "excerpts" range from stones arranged like a tiny fertility goddess (apparently not too sublime when experienced firsthand by Manolson; it's accompanied by the text: "That awkward stage. No one knows I'm pregnant, and my breasts are already twice the size.") to crossed red and purple gloves, each holding an egg, marked with the words "delicate juggle." All harried new mothers, as well as some new dads, will identify with such

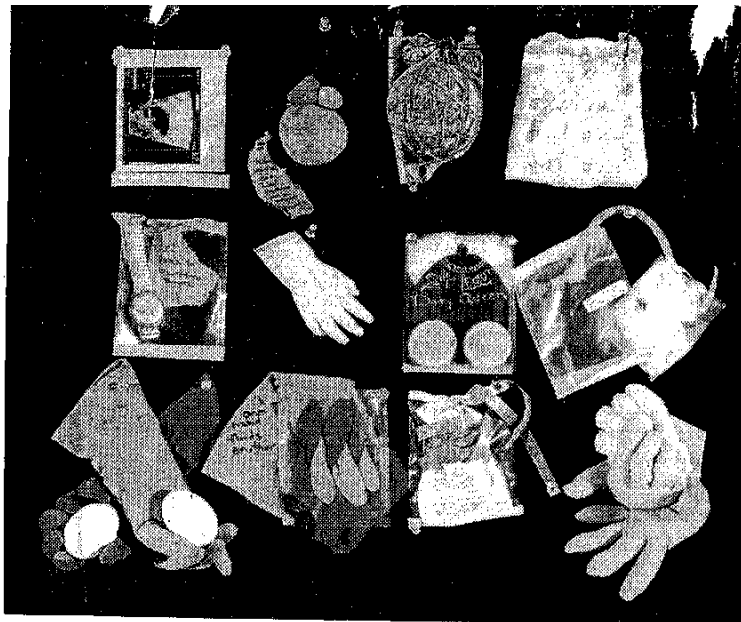


PHOTO / KAY CANAVINO

Detail from Ilana Manolson's "Pregnancy Diary."

NINE MONTHS

Art and Pregnancy

At: Howard Yezerki Gallery, 11
Newbury St., through Aug. 19

CHRISTINA LANZL

At: Ashuah Irving Gallery, 236 Congress
St., through Aug. 4

RED, WHITE, AND BLACK

At: Arden Gallery, 129 Newbury St.,
through July 30

motherhood. In Phyllis Ewen's series, "Nappy Piece," cloth diapers are transformed via patchwork, safety pins, wires, gold thread and metal leaf into delicate, exquisitely crafted geometric designs. The calm, ethereal nature of these works evokes the peace and fulfillment of nurturing; they also integrate the role of mothering with the maker's identity as an artist.

The "grandmother" of this approach is Mary Kelly, the London-based artist whose feminist images from the '70s, which paired intricate documentation and autobiographical text, influenced an emerging generation of women artists, as well as an important group of feminist historians, film and literary critics. The show includes a rare prototype of Kelly's seminal "1st-Partum Document," in which she created prints made from the oily fecal matter from her infant's papers, accompanied by a corresponding detailed analysis of the child's daily food intake. Although Kelly's use of scatological material may offend some viewers, her work graphically conveys the often messy physical process of birthing and raising children, a view often excluded from the culture's sanitized ideas, as well as

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herself is evident in Denise Marika's photographic projection of herself curled in a fetal position. Recessed at the end of a hallway, with the figure's shadow visible on the wall, the image acts as a metaphor for the relationship between maternal birth and the artist's process of creation.

The show is accompanied by original music by Karl Lundeberg. He and his wife, Julia Lundeberg's, due date was June 24, the date this show opened. Tragically, their child miscarried. Julia Lundeberg contributes a moving farewell letter to their unborn child. The piece comes across as an invented ritual, affectingly identifying the culture's lack of recognition for the profound loss of miscarriage.

The show also includes works by Emily Cheng, Ana Maria Hernando

pregnant too." Organizers Tom Grabosky's and Natasha Otero-Santiago's decision to restrict themselves to women artists follows in the tradition of such artists as Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot and Julia Margeret Cameron, who, long before Demi Moore was a glint in Tina Brown's eye, pioneered the female interpretation of the mother-child relationship.

Christina Lanzl, known in Boston as the director of the Bromfield Gallery, is also an artist in her own right. Her paintings, as well as a new foray into sculpture, are on view at the Ashuah Irving Gallery.

Born in Los Angeles but raised in Bavaria, Lanzl moved to Boston in 1987. Her dual heritage carries into her work, which is based on the reconciliation of opposites.

Lanzl's large sculptures of figures composed of chicken wire appear in process; they are not up to exhibition standards. But they hold a trace of the searching quality Lanzl achieves in her paintings, most of which are variations on a diptych format. Usually two corresponding androgynous, elongated figures balance each other out; sometimes a person is paired with an animal, or several figures merge into a single circular form.

In "Lovers II," two kneeling figures with masklike heads face each other, forming a symmetrical unit. In "Aquatic Ballet," an inverted figure cascading through space is paired with a curled up duck, whose round form anchors the figure's vertical free-fall.

Lanzl's geometric division of space and brushy techniques shows the influence of American modernism. Picasso and African art are also recalled. On the German end, Lanzl's affection for horses brings Franz Marc to mind, and her angular forms reveal a stylistic affinity for German Expressionism.

But unlike the biting topicality of the latter, Lanzl's mood is harmonious and timeless. Her earthy black and copper palette suggests an integration between persons and nature; her work is political only in the sense that it offers a utopian vision of tolerance and community.

Drawings, prints, photographs and sculpture make up an interesting group show at the Arden Gallery. Among the most compelling works are Sally Bishop's abstract acrylic figures; primitive in form, they convey authentic feeling. Conservationist and photographer Dorothy Monelly's vision of nature reflects an environmentalist's reverence for the land's intrinsic beauty