

# Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood

## Audio Descriptions

### 1. Creation



#### Lea Cetera, *You Can't Have It All*

This sculpture is titled *You Can't Have It All* and was made by artist Lea Cetera in 2022. It is made with clear, Borosilicate glass and sand, and is approximately 20cm high and wide.

The sculpture looks like a slender, upright hourglass timer. It is upright and in the shape of two connected heart-shaped uteruses, one on top of the other, with oval ovaries, and curved fallopian tubes. Warm pink sand pours between the conjoined organs through a narrow gap.

Cetera explores the idea of time pressures associated with motherhood and reproductive rights worldwide. *You Can't Have It All* can be interpreted as depicting time dedicated to personal self-fulfilment or indicating the years of fertility and notions of the 'biological clock'.



## **Claudette Johnson, Afterbirth**

This work is titled *Afterbirth* and was made by artist Claudette Johnson in 1990. It is a drawing made with pastel on paper and is in portrait format measuring approximately 80 cm wide and 1.2 metres high.

The drawing is of a nude woman. Her right arm is draped over the top of her head with her hand resting on her cheek. She is not attempting to hide her body. Her breasts are bare, thighs open and pubic hair exposed. She looks straight at the viewer with a sharp gaze and pursed full lips. The piece celebrates a mother's form without fear or shame.

Johnson used smooth, flowing strokes to outline her figure. Parts of her face and torso are contoured in a shade of deep, murky brown contributing to the raw and earthy feeling of the work.

Claudette Johnson is a founding member of the Black British Arts Movement, a key figure in Black British feminist art and widely considered one of the most significant figurative artists of her generation. For over 30 years, she has created powerful, large-scale drawings, specifically highlighting a Black female perspective. In this self-portrait of the artist, she showcases the stretch marks on her stomach and cellulite on her sides as she explores the impact of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth on her body, and how they remain afterbirth.

## 2. Maintenance



### **VALIE EXPORT, Die Geburtenmadonna (The Birth Madonna)**

This photograph is titled *Die Geburtenmadonna (The Birth Madonna)* and was made by artist VALIE EXPORT in 1976. It is a chromogenic colour print laid on chip board. It is portrait format and measures approximately 1.5 metres high and 1 metre wide.

The work is a self-portrait of the artist. A white woman in her 30s/40s with dark, shoulder length hair, is sat on a washing machine. The drum of the machine with its door wide open is in between her legs. Her right foot balances on two, stacked, rectangular black boxes. She is sat in front of an empty white background, dressed in a simple dark t-shirt and knee-length floral-printed skirt. The entire image is in greyscale apart from a scarlet-red and tangerine-orange coloured towel spewing from the washing machine which is wide open.

She is slightly leaning back and looks like she is cradling someone – her right arm is positioned as if wrapped around their back and her left palm is turned upward with her fingers gently apart as if holding up a figure's legs. She wears a somewhat resigned expression with her eyes closed and lips tightly pursed.

Export often uses her own body to challenge women's social roles. This work is part of the series - *Körperkonfigurationen (Body Configurations)* made between 1972 to 1976 – where Export imitates the poses of female subjects in historical artworks. In this instance, she is referring to

Michaelangelo's *La Pietà* – a marble sculpture capturing the moment when Jesus, after being taken down from the cross, is given to his mother Mary.



### **Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table* series**

This collection of 9 photographs is titled *The Kitchen Table* and were made by artist Carrie Mae Weems in 1990. The photographs are square in format and measure approximately 50cm by 50cm.

The artwork is a series of black and white self-portraits, set at a kitchen table, that presents the artist as a woman in various stages of life. It portrays passionate romance; finding support in sisterhood; or standing alone, independent and discovering solace in solitude.

Each photograph consists of a large conical lampshade hanging from the top of the image. It floods light below like a stage light, illuminating a room with a wooden kitchen table with matching chairs, and a door on the right-hand side. The photos have been taken at the same angle, as if the viewer is seated at the opposite end of the table with a front row seat to the scenes unfolding.

In one image, a man is sat at the head of the table as Weems stands behind him, leaning down to cradle his head in her arms. The man envelopes her in

an embrace. They are both wearing black which merges their bodies together, making them look like one body with two heads and a mesh of limbs. His eyes are closed, and her face is obscured as she burrows her face into his forehead.

In another tender image, Weems sits at the head of the table, seemingly distraught with her hand covering her face. She is flanked on both sides by two women - a black woman stands to her left, resting a hand on her shoulder. A white woman sits in the chair to the right, resting a hand on the artist's arm. They look like they are giving their friend emotional and physical support, consoling her in a time of need.

In a contrasting image, the artist stands alone with palms firmly planted on the table's surface. She is looking straight at the camera with a defiant gaze, commanding the full attention of the viewer.

*The Kitchen Table* series is an iconic collection of photography due to the revolutionary portrayal of womanhood in many of its forms. In what can be described as a performance to the camera, Weems's kitchen bears witness to a world of romance and family, education and collaboration, resilience and nurture, and one that centres Black women's perspectives.



## Barbara Walker, *Kinsdale*

This work is titled *Kinsdale* and was made by artist Barbara Walker in 2006. It consists of two charcoal drawings on digital print. They are in portrait format and each measure approximately 80 cm wide and 1 metre high.

In this series of work, Walker uses digital copies of an official West Midlands Police form relating to the stop and search as her canvas. One drawing, which takes up the top third of the composition, illustrates a detailed sketch of a pathway underneath a bridge in Central Birmingham. A canal runs alongside the path to the right. Phrases such as 'street encounter', 'reasonable grounds' and 'suspect possession of controlled drug' are slightly obscured by the urban landscape drawing.

Below the sketch, the section that details the grounds for the 'stop and search' reads 'Part of a pre-planned police operation KINSDALE'. The number 0589728 is stamped on the top right corner of the form. At the very bottom it reads: 'E, entitlement, you will receive a copy of this form. L, legal, this is the legal power used. Y, you, you are detained for the purpose of this search.'

These drawings are a part of a larger body of work titled *Louder Than Words* created between 2002 and 2006. Barbara Walker grew up in Birmingham,

and her experiences directly influence her work that touches on class, race, gender and power. Walker's son was subjected to being stopped and searched by the police on several separate occasions and issued with a yellow A5 copy of the form. The series addresses the artist's complex feelings towards the prejudice and police scrutiny that her son was experiencing in his hometown. She considers what the implications of these attitudes are on the forming of identities of young Black men in British society.

### 3. The Temple



#### **Janine Antoni, 2038**

This photograph is titled *2038*, made by artist Janine Antoni in 2000. It, measures approximately 50 cm wide and 50 cm high,

The work is a self-portrait of the artist. A woman with black curly hair lays naked in a white bathtub used as a trough for cows to drink from. The tub's metal base is mottled with rusty brown patches and held up with tarnished dark red and green metal struts. Behind her is a line of 4 dairy cows. One cow leans down over her shoulder drinking the murky green-brown water, its face positioned near her chest as if nursing from her breast. Her pale skin is bright against the cow's black hair. There is something quite tender about the way her face rests against the cow's head, as she gazes down with a calm, neutral expression.

The work takes its title from the tag in the cow's ear that identifies the animal as merely a number, 2038. In Antoni's own words, [quote] "I was ecstatic when our relationship had come full circle. I was weaned off my mother and onto the cow. Making the photograph allowed me to experience this intimate relationship: the cow becomes a wet nurse, a surrogate mother of sorts." [end quote]



### **Eileen Cooper, Putting Down Roots**

This oil painting is titled *Putting Down Roots* and was made by artist Eileen Cooper in 1985. It is in portrait orientation and measures approximately 2.5metres high and 2 metres wide.

A nude female figure lays horizontal at the bottom of the frame. Her arms are bent at the elbows with her hands gathered by her breasts. A second figure, indicated only by two feet and legs cut off at the knees, stands above her. Their hands reach down from the top of the canvas, covering their knees. A plant with long stems and oval leaves wraps around the legs while its roots cling to the body lying at the bottom of the frame. There is a face wearing a neutral expression painted to the left of the image, and a small, kneeling child with a cherub-like face to the right. The figures are painted with short, thick brushstrokes in a palette of earthy purples and lilacs with sections of warm yellows and bold royal blue highlights.

Cooper's depiction of the female figure as deeply intertwined with plants and roots suggest a strong connection between the female body, birth, growth, and nature. In the artist's own words, [quote] 'Stories are never far



away. Mythology, fairytales, bible stories, comics and early special effects movies...They are all inspirations.' [end quote]



### **Renee Cox, THE YO MAMA**

This work is titled *THE YO MAMA* and was made by artist Renee Cox in 1993. It is a black and white photographic print and measures approximately 1.2 metres wide and 2 metres high.

The image shows a Black woman with a toned physique wearing nothing but a pair of black heels, holding her naked toddler horizontally in her arms. She is stood against a pitch-black background, the heels on her feet almost fading into the background too. There is a bright spotlight illuminating them from the right. The woman is stood tall with her face forward, toned shoulders squared back, with breasts and pubic hair exposed. Her head is tilted slightly upwards as she stares down into the camera. It's almost as if she is looking at the viewer directly in the eye as we look up at her. She looks defiant, while her son has his fingers in his mouth, with tongue out and a cheeky glint in his eye.

Renee Cox is internationally celebrated for the *YO MAMA* series, and is known for using her own image to challenge what it means to be a Black woman, as well as her contribution to the diversity of motherhood depicted in art. Her work often challenges gender norms, racial stereotypes, and sexual politics.



## **Billie Zangewa, *Every Woman***

This silk tapestry is titled *Every Woman* and was made by artist Billie Zangewa in 2017. It is in portrait format and measures approximately 1 metre wide and 1.4 metres high.

From afar the work depicts a Black woman stood in a living room space. She is wearing a sky-blue blouse, blue jeans, and black high heels. She is stood on a maroon-red plush rug embellished with white stitches and she is carrying a speckled soft pink, grey and white teddy bear in one hand and a beige lunchbox in the other. There is a pile of brightly coloured toys by her feet. Behind her, there is a light brown dining table, with a red toy car peeking out from behind the chairs, and three pictures decorating the wall in the background. The composition of the work is slightly tilted, with the tip of her head just outside of the frame.

Up close, the collaged nature of the work is noticeable. The tapestry is made up of intricately hand-stitched pieces of raw silk in vibrant shades of blue, red, green, white, grey and brown. The edges of the work have been left raw and unfinished with loose and fraying threads. There is a small rectangular chunk on the bottom right-hand corner of the work that has been intentionally left 'missing' and empty by the artist.

Zangewa's work places a spotlight on the domestic labours of motherhood that can often go unnoticed and undervalued. In the artist's own words, 'By

sharing the intimate daily life of a Black African woman, I was looking firstly to comfort myself by saying, “The world might be a difficult place to navigate because of your identity, but you can make a place for yourself in it. You can still access your personal power and find pleasure and joy.”