

Play, Battling

Representing Resistant Mothers with “Mothers Who Refuse to Choose”

By considering the works of visual artists Sandra Brown and Brenna George, two members of a group of mother artists at Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art (MAWA) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, this paper explores the functions of Susan Rubin Suleiman’s playful mother and Rozsika Parker’s ambivalent mother in artist–mothers’ own representations of motherhood. In contrast to maternal theory that locates feminist mothering outside the patriarchal institution of motherhood described by Adrienne Rich, I argue that it is by understanding our positions as always both within and outside patriarchy that mothers can develop resistant and affirmative practices of feminist mothering. The “Mothers Who Refuse to Choose,” many of whom combine stay-at-home parenting with artistic practice, model playful, ambivalent artist–mothering and ground their feminist politics in lived experience.

It was while I was completing my MA in Cultural Studies that I got to know the “Mothers Who Refuse to Choose,” a group of Winnipeg mother-artists. This group was the grounding I needed during that intense year, and it also became a testing ground for the theories on motherhood I was reading and for my own thinking on art and mothering. This essay presents some of my learnings, combining a study of visual art about mothering made by two members of the group (Sandra Brown and Brenna George) with feminist theories of the playful mother (Susan Rubin Suleiman) and the ambivalent mother (Rozsika Parker) and with my own contention that it is by understanding our positions as always both within and outside patriarchy that mothers can develop resistant and affirmative practices of feminist mothering.

The “Mothers Who Refuse to Choose” group at the Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art (MAWA) centre in Winnipeg formed in 2010 after a screening

of Pamela Tanner Boll and Nancy Kennedy's film *Who Does She Think She Is?* that documents the lives of a diverse set of U.S. women who are mothers and artists. The "Mothers Who Refuse to Choose," now most often called the "Artist Mothers," resist what Susan Rubin Suleiman calls "either/or theories" that pit "the mother's creative needs" against "the child's needs" (*Risking* 38); we choose to be both artists and mothers. We have monthly meetings to make art together, share the art we've been working on, and discuss the benefits and challenges of combining art-making and motherhood.

We come together, in part, around a shared experience of disempowerment based on male privilege—in the art world, in the job market, and in the cultural expectations of mothers. This is easy for us to acknowledge. We also come together around similar social locations of empowerment: our group is predominantly white, heterosexual, able-bodied, university-educated, and middle-class. Even for this privileged group of women, the refusal to choose costs, in economic, social, and emotional terms. For some—especially those whose families are surviving on one low salary—it costs a lot; but it's important for us to recognize that our sense that we have a choice at all is a sign of privilege.

I joined the group as a recent defector from the world of stay-at-home and work-at-home mothering. I identified with, and made, feminist art about mothering that was angry and biting, but I found something completely different at MAWA: the Mothers were making funny, joyful artworks that at first I had trouble seeing as feminist, or as being about mothering at all. It's been an essential part of my education and my identification as a feminist mother-artist to seek out ways of understanding these artists' works, exemplified here by Sandra Brown's *Hockey Dresses* and Brenna George's *Play Battling* series, as feminist resistance to patriarchal motherhood.

Representing Motherhood as Institution and Experience

In her groundbreaking feminist text on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the experience of mothering and the patriarchal institution of motherhood:

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (xv)

This passage, and the distinction it makes between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, is an oft-cited one that has

frequently been used to establish the binary oppositions of institution/experience, mothering/motherhood (in the phrase “mothering against motherhood”), and empowered mothering/patriarchal mothering in the discourse of feminist maternal theory. The separation of institution and experience—which, as D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein argues in her essay on “Conceiving Intensive Mothering” is a kind of splitting that “leads to feminisms’ inability to theorize fully intensive mothering and women’s current split subjectivity and agency between the contemporary ‘ideal’ Mother subject position and a new empowered feminist mothering subject position” (98)—is also a misreading of Rich’s text. I contend that much of contemporary feminist theory about motherhood has failed to understand the importance of the difficulty Rich identifies in distinguishing between the “two meanings of motherhood,” a difficulty which is present in the quotation from Rich (above) in the words “[t]hroughout this book I *try to distinguish...*” [emphasis mine], and in her characterization of institution and experience as overlapping. Feminist thought about motherhood has often assumed, in a contradiction of a Foucauldian understanding of power, and of Rich’s contention that “the institution affects all women” (282), that it is possible to locate some resistant subject positions for mothers outside patriarchal power structures, outside the institution of motherhood. The lines of resistance and complicity are often drawn between queer and heterosexual mothers, so that queer mothers are assumed to practice empowered mothering from *outside* the institution of mothering while heterosexual empowered or feminist mothers resist from *inside*.

In “Feminist Mothers,” a study of the feminist mothering practices of Winnipeg mothers, Fiona Green follows this delineation of the inside and the outside, but highlights “Rich’s monumental contention that even when restrained by patriarchy, motherhood can be a site of empowerment and political activism for women” (31). I would push the limits of Rich’s contention even further to say that all mothering is restrained by patriarchy, but that feminist mothers assume resistant and complicit positions *within* the institution of motherhood.

It is from this position of interiority that the “Mothers Who Refuse to Choose” operate, often combining stay-at-home parenting with their art practices in a challenging mixture of two undervalued roles in culture. Their art is, not surprisingly, also a blend of institution and experience.

Rich first published *Of Woman Born* in 1976, and at that time she observed that “the institution of motherhood cannot be touched or seen: in art perhaps only Käthe Kollwitz has come close to evoking it. It must go on being evoked, so that women never again forget that our many fragments of lived experience belong to a whole which is not of our creation” (281). Her emphasis on Kollwitz’s art as pioneering in its attention to the institution of motherhood

(in contrast to art that pays attention only to the experience) is astute. Rich's call for new representations of motherhood as both experience and institution coincides with early-second-wave feminist representations of motherhood that were beginning to engage with motherhood in this way.

Two recent books, Andrea Liss's *Feminist Art and the Maternal* and Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein's *The M Word: Mothers in Contemporary Art*, include images and analysis of feminist artwork about mothering from the 1970s on, beginning with the pioneering work of Mary Kelly (*Post-Partum Document*) and the Mother Art collective (*Laundry Works, Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks, Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*) and extending into a wide range of smart, provocative feminist art about mothering. The works presented in these volumes, like the artwork about mothering made by my contemporaries at MAWA, surprised me with their playfulness and dailiness, and also with the frequent exclusion of the mother from the images. It took me a while, fixated as I was on the idea that feminist representations of motherhood should be unhappy and serious (like Kollwitz's lithographs), to recognize the resistance in contemporary art about mothering. Now I see that artists like the "Mothers Who Refuse to Choose" are using visual art to produce an integration of experience and institution that I hope maternal theory can also accomplish.

Sandra Brown, *Hockey Dresses*

Sandra Brown, a Winnipeg visual artist and stay-at-home mother, has two teenaged children. When her children were young, she discovered that she liked painting and she decided to go to art school. She completed a fine arts degree on a part-time basis while her children were growing up. Recently graduated from university and also a recent graduate of MAWA's mentorship program for emerging artists, and with a little more time for making art now that her children are getting older, Brown is developing a project that she began as a student: her *Hockey Dresses* use parody of NHL logos and of the glorification of the achievements of athletes to represent the work—often invisible and undervalued—that is performed by women. The 1960s-era dresses that Brown has transformed into hockey uniforms using paint, embroidery, and appliqué function as commentaries on constructions of femininity and, in some cases, "patriarchal motherhood." Brown imagines the dresses as jerseys that are worn for a time and then retired, and she hopes that both the appropriation of the familiar language of sports and her use of humour will provoke people who see the dresses, especially men, to think in new ways about women's experiences and lives. Brown and other women wore the dresses to exhibit them at MAWA for Nuit Blanche in 2010; Brown also envisions exhibiting the dresses in public places like arenas.

Four of the dresses represent stages or activities of motherhood. *Preggo* is a modification of a vintage wedding gown that features a parody of the Edmonton Oilers logo with a foetus in the womb replacing the drop of oil (Figures 1, 2, and 3). The effect of the wedding dress is humorous: imagine a very pregnant body wearing such an awkward and bold dress! It emphasizes the work involved in pregnancy by representing it as a kind of athleticism or



Figure 1: Sandra Brown, *Preggo*



Figure 2: Sandra Brown, *Preggo*



Figure 3: Sandra Brown, *Preggo*

physical endurance. It also raises the issue of the stigmatization of pregnancy outside of wedlock or of unplanned pregnancy. A pregnant woman/bride who might wear this dress is more likely to be described, especially in this outfit, as “knocked up” rather than “expecting.”

Mamans honours the work of mothering young children through a parody of the logo of the Montreal Canadiens (Figure 4). The prints of a child’s hands halfway up the skirt show that the mother who wears this jersey is kept busy with the intense and intensely physical needs of her children. *Winnipeg Hockey Moms* and *The Chauffeurs* (Figures 5 and 6) represent mothering roles performed by parents of pre-teen and teenaged children in a kind of “intensive mothering” that, as Andrea O’Reilly observes in *Mother Outlaws*, is “oppressive not because children have needs, but because we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them; that children’s needs must always come before those of the mother; and, that children’s needs must be responded to around the clock and with extensive time, money, and energy” (11).

No one keeps “stats” on the daily accomplishments of individual mothers, but Brown plans to develop hockey cards with statistics like “number of diapers changed, average number of sleep hours per night, and number of family meals cooked” (Brown, “Project”). Her project inspires not only laughter, but also critical thinking about the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the work performed by mothers. The wearability and removability of this art is significant: it highlights the importance of the roles, their constructedness and performativity, their sometimes immense weight, the stigma that may be



Figure 4: Sandra Brown, Mamans



Figure 5: Winnipeg Hockey Moms

attached to them, and also the possibility that women can “retire” mothering roles and move on to another stage of life (as represented in the other dresses; see Figures 7, 8, and 9). This would work more effectively if some of the dresses could reflect other, less stereotypical or essential roles played by women, like the roles of artist, businessperson, student, or athlete; or other, less feminine, less middle-class, less white versions of motherhood.

The organization of women into teams, which is played out in Brown’s paintings of teams playing hockey using household items like vacuum cleaners and dishwashing gloves, could represent teamwork among women, in contrast to what Susan Maushart describes among mothers as the wearing of “masks” (“mostly brave, serene, and all-knowing” [460]) that keep mothers “silent about what they feel and suspicious of what they know” and that prevent women from telling each other what it’s really like to be a mother (461). There is, however, also a dimension of the formation of “teams” that pits, for example, mothers of young children against teenage girls in *Mamans vs. OMG!*, and that resonates



Figure 6: Sandra Brown, *The Chauffeurs*



Figure 7: Sandra Brown, *Grande Dames*

with conflicts between generations of women. And the teams of women raise issues of essentialism: how universal are the gender roles represented by these dresses? what does a mother look like? what kinds of connections do the dresses draw between individual bodies, prescribed gender roles, and cultural politics? and do the dresses suggest alternatives to the traditionally feminine roles and gendered or sexed experiences they represent? Although the dresses already do important work in their attention to women's labour and experience—and also in their exposure of gender roles as constructed, wearable, and removable—I'd like to see Brown expand the scope of the project by opening up or questioning the categories of "woman" and "mother" to include a wider range of roles and experiences.

The Playful Mother

It is productive to think of Sandra Brown's work—and in fact the work of several artists in the MAWA group—in relationship to Susan Rubin Suleiman's writing about the "playful mother." In "Playing and Motherhood; or,



Figure 8 Sandra Brown, Cougars



Figure 9: Sandra Brown, Nightingales

How to Get the Most Out of the Avant-Garde,” Suleiman imagines for the contemporary feminist avant-garde a displacement from representations of the “patriarchal mother” (or the mother who is complicit in patriarchy, “a figure of both derision and hatred” [277]) to the laughing, transgressive, resistant, and transformative figure of the “playful mother” (273).

The “patriarchal mother” is an easy target for derision and mockery, but Suleiman proposes, after Hélène Cixous’s laughing Medusa, that the playfulness and parody of the avant-garde can transform, rather than reinforce, negative attitudes about mothers. She shows that Cixous’s Medusa functions as a parody of the mother in psychoanalysis, and argues that when Cixous writes that she will “blow up the law” she refers to the “notion that the mother is always patriarchal” (277). Suleiman argues that the creative writing of the French feminists has failed to use play and laughter, favouring instead an “expansive lyric mode” to represent the experiences of mothers (279). She imagines for the contemporary feminist avant-garde a laughing, transgressive, playful mother as a resistant and transformative figure. After Sigmund Freud’s and D. W. Winnicott’s thinking about play as important in the construction of the

subject, Suleiman proposes (somewhat hesitantly) that the playful mother can play with “the boundaries of the self” to constitute a creative self and can effect change by being playful herself, rather than being the “motionless” *location of jouissance* for her children. Artist mothers who refuse to choose accomplish this on two levels, both *becoming* and *representing* the playful, moving mother (“Playing” 281).

Brenna George, *Play Battling*

Brenna George¹ is a stay-at-home mother and visual artist living in Winnipeg. George’s three children are school-aged, with the youngest recently having started half-days of preschool. She attended art school and worked as an artist before becoming a mother. For ten years, George worked in film, making films and editing for other filmmakers. After she lost all of her work when her toddler peed on her computer two years ago, George has been most interested in making more physical or material art, and she has focused on painting with acrylics. George makes art as a kind of journaling process. She likes to make playful art that engages with the present moment (rather than looking back to the past), so she has made paintings and films related to all of the stages of pregnancy (including miscarriage), breastfeeding, and parenting that she has experienced so far.

Like the *Hockey Dresses*, George’s *Play Battling* series of acrylic paintings also features a playful mother, although it takes some work to see her. I locate the mother in Brenna’s paintings in the mother/artist’s participation and engagement in play with her children, as a certain gaze that is constructed in the composition, and as a maternal absence that has been theorized by Canadian artists Leslie Reid and Elizabeth MacKenzie. MacKenzie writes,

This is what I hope to do within my own work: invite the viewer to construct a maternal image from the traces I provide, as well as from their own imagination. The maternal becomes what is there and what is not there, a representation forged from two or more perspectives, provisional, incomplete and contingent, a presence marked by a (partial) absence. (227)

George writes in her project description, “As this series is developing I am becoming aware that it is my voice as a mother that is shaping the tableau” (“Play”). The presence of the absent mother in George’s paintings is made stronger, more than “present only as watcher” (Reid, “Afterimage” 113) through her participation in play. George paints from photographs of her children “play battling,” to which she and her children have added special effects to make



Figure 10: Brenna George, *Support Structure*

comic-book-like scenes in Photoshop. Her careful and dedicated work on painting human figures and representing emotion give the paintings, despite their magical imagery and their personal nature, a sense of reality and a broad emotional range that make the images more widely resonant as representations of childhood and motherhood.

More than the obvious forms of play in the series, I am interested in another kind of play, what George calls the “drama of darkness and light” in the images, to which the children seem to be oblivious but over which the mother’s gaze worries (see, for example, Figure 10). For George, the white on the canvas of the *Play Battling* paintings represents “art and being a mother”; the darkness is the outside world from which she cannot insulate her children. Although she has experimented with removing the darkness, she has returned to it. Indeed, it adds something to the images and to the representation of the mother. In the paintings, George identifies “[f]ighting that is playful and light and yet holds significance for a much more dire communication. Anger, rage, injury, suffering, fragility, isolation, love, caring” (“Play”). There is a range of positive and negative affect at play here that George downplays when I ask her about it, but that I see as important.

In *Crack It Open* (Figure 11), there is a dark hole in front of which the children play and a crack in the ground below their feet. George says this painting is about how having children cracks open the mother’s world, “but in an exciting way.” The darkness is destabilizing and exciting, but also unpredictable and even threatening: the three children seem to be in control of the



Figure 11: Brenna George, *Crack It Open*

explosive energy, but will they fall into either the crack or the opening behind them? What is back there? Sometimes I see the children as emerging from the darkness, and then the background becomes a much more literal metaphor for the mother's body. What happens when we think of the background in terms of the mother's emotions or her power? The mother then seems not to be entirely safe or stable.

In *Making Home* (Figure 12), the children play with darkness and light, creating a light (or safe?) space for themselves. The *homemaker*, the stay-at-home mother/painter, participates here too (even in the title).

When I visited her home last February, George was working on another *Play Battling* painting, an image of her children playing in the snow at night, with her camera's flash shining in the reflective tape on their snowsuits and falling snowflakes the only light breaking up the dark night. Whatever that darkness is, it is potent and beautiful.

Maternal Ambivalence

Although George, a true optimist and an inspiringly happy mother, resists this,² what I see in the darkness and light of the painting is what psychotherapist and art historian Rozsika Parker calls "maternal ambivalence." In her book *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, Parker reverses the usual focus on the child in psychoanalysis to consider the psyche of the mother. She uses Melanie Klein's theory about the ambivalence that the child feels toward the



Figure 12: Brenna George, Making Home

mother to consider the ambivalence experienced by the mother who both loves and hates her child. Patriarchal culture is “ambivalent about ambivalence,” and requires that mothers feel only love for their children:

Our culture defends itself against the recognition of ambivalence originating in the mother by denigrating or idealising her. A denigrated mother is simply hateful and has no love for the child to lose. An idealised mother is hate-free, constant, and unreal. (24)

Parker argues that mothers look in the “mirror” of other mothers, hoping to recognize the ambivalence they feel. Often, what they see reflected back is an ideal-mother who makes the real mother see herself as bad for being ambivalent. When a mother recognizes ambivalence in the other mother, or when that mother validates her ambivalence, the effect is reassuring (3). Recognizing and integrating ambivalence (and moving from a reverse-Kleinian “paranoid/schizoid” position of maternal splitting that separates the loving mother from the hateful mother to a “depressive,” integrative position [22]) helps mothers cope with mothering, spurs thinking and creativity (8-9), causes mothers to distance themselves from their children in developmentally appropriate ways (75), and dissolves the “maternal ideal” and the guilt that comes with it (40).

In contrast to images that represent the mother by showing her ambivalence as if in a mirror (Renée Cox’s *Yo Mama* portraits come to mind, and Catherine Opie’s *Self Portrait/Nursing* which illustrates the cover of Andrea Liss’s

book), Canadian artists Leslie Reid and Elizabeth MacKenzie have worked with Parker's concept of maternal ambivalence to theorize and even privilege images of ambivalence in maternal absence. Reid discusses maternal ambivalence in relationship to her artwork about mothering in which the mother is always absent (for instance, her *Afterimage* paintings of her children at play in a lake). I recognize a similar absent, ambivalent mother in Brenna George's *Play Battling* paintings: the playfulness of the paintings is more real against the ambivalent background created through George's attention to darkness and light. The mother in the paintings is not an ideal-mother or an unreal mother, but a reassuring, ambivalent, real one.

The mothers evoked by Brown's *Hockey Dresses*—both the artist-mother and the other implied wearers of the dresses—are also ambivalent, especially in their absence. The dresses represent motherhood as work, as difficult, as rewarding, and as deserving reward. Perhaps the works by both of these artists can be seen as ambivalent precisely because they do not allow us to read the smiling or unsmiling, serene or troubled faces of mothers, but instead accommodate a wider range of emotions in their representations of motherhood, as both experience and institution.

Conclusion

As mothers who are all affected by the patriarchal institution of motherhood, the “Mothers Who Refuse to Choose” come together around an oppositional, resistant politics. Their artwork, as represented by Sandra Brown's *Hockey Dresses* and Brenna George's *Play Battling* series, is not always negative or critical, but can often be affirmative and playful, with the agency of the mother coming through in her play. And in representing maternal absence and ambivalence, their works also serve an affirmative function: providing the mirror in which other mothers see the imperfections, frustrations, and joys of real mothers.

¹All quotations from Brenna George are from our conversation on February 21, 2011 (see works cited), unless in-text citations indicate another source.

²The language of maternal ambivalence does not work for George. She says she feels only love for her children, and any ambivalent feelings she has have to do with the everyday frustrations of parenting and with her concern about being unable to completely protect her children. She also expresses concern about the way that the voices of mothers who are academics can be overpowering in feminist discourses about motherhood. Those voices represent one kind of motherhood, she observes. I agree that there is often a disconnect between

feminist scholarship and the lives of women outside the academy, and, even as I proceed to interpret George's paintings, I hope that my attempt to "read" the work of these local artists who are also my friends both *as theory* and *alongside theory* has resulted in a more balanced approach.

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