

Celebrating Women in Photography Today

MOTHER ESSAY

Lizzy Orcutt

The *Mother Essay* images were an attempt to engage with an aspect of my identity and address, “What am I”? These images proved fertile ground for the project and indicated the vital role of the mother in the formation of self, theorized not only by D.W. Winnicott but also Julia Kristeva. Winnicott proposes the self or personhood formed in the look of the mother. His ideas are based on close observation in his clinical practice. He credits his understanding to his patients, “who have paid to teach me” (2005). Winnicott describes what he names the transitional space (the gap between baby and carer) and the transitional object, items that bridge the gap and/or stand in for the caregiver (often the mother’s breast). During this stage of self-development, the child gradually perceives that she is no longer a part of mother, in utero, but is separate. It is in this transition that the baby understands an idea of herself. Self is begun to be perceived, felt, sensed and experienced in a shared gaze with the mother. Winnicott propounds the visual in the self (2000: 75-79, 2005: 151 & 154). Whereas, Kristeva’s argument is that by adopting the Virgin’s image, I am demanding to include myself in the symbolic order—the Western system of kinship (1991: 147, 151). By this she means a repression of maternal jouissance is achieved through immaculate conception, and this in the established patriarchal economy is a denial of womanhood and an identification with the father.

Elizabeth Orcutt (b. 1963, UK) is an artist working with photography, currently making self-portraits as part of a PhD by practice with an expected completion in 2019. Working through a series of visual essays (attempts or try-outs), Lizzy is interested in how image mediates the experience of self. The earliest research series, the Mother Essays, indicated the visual self sited within the look, neither subject nor object but intersubjective and experiential.

Lizzy also works as a lecturer in the Fashion & Textiles Institute (Cultural Studies) at Falmouth University and has had an earlier career as a picture editor most recently at The Times and The Sunday Times magazine as well as a discrete project for Reuters. She is an Associate Artist of Fotonow CIC (Plymouth, UK), a social enterprise exploring visual culture as a means to stimulate social change.

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