

Lenka Clayton

cville

Motherhood is at the center of Studio IX's May exhibition

By Elizabeth Derby
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"Leaking Madonna" by elin o'Hara slavick is on display in "Mother Mother" at Studio IX through May 27. The opening reception is on Friday, May 4. Courtesy of the artist.

When you imagine a mother, what do you picture?

A woman up to her elbows in soapy dishwasher with a baby strapped to her chest or a toddler clinging to her ankle? A woman who wheels and deals like a boss until she sprints off to daycare? Or do you think of your own mother? The mothers you know? Our universal longing for mother-love?

"It's different for everybody," says Ashley Florence, the curator of the group show "Mother Mother" at Studio IX. "We can't limit ourselves into thinking that the idea of 'mother' says dirty dishes and screaming child. Because it's just so much bigger than that."

As a Charlottesville-based photographer, Florence sees the theme come up often in her work. “Not necessarily just motherhood, but my mother, and being mothered, and what is transmitted through that relationship. It’s something all of us, men and women alike, have experienced.”

But the subject, she says, feels fairly taboo in the art world. Unless it’s rendered in a smart enough way, “the basic experience of motherhood, or the mother in its everyday-ness,” she says, tends to get ignored.

The oversight prompted Florence to conceive a group show featuring female artists in her network, and so “Mother Mother” was born.

Fourteen women explore the idea of mother across a range of mediums, from sculpture, painting and illustration to photography, video, performance and collage. Contributors include Lenka Clayton, Sarah Boyts Yoder, elin o’Hara slavick, Jina Valentine, Tracy Spencer Stonestreet, Laura Dillon Rogers, Lisa Ryan, Allyson Mellberg Taylor, Meredith McKown, Ashley Florence, Sage Latane Hastert, Amanda Monroe Finn, Holly Bass and Jamila Felton.

“These artists have really approached it in so many intelligent and sensitive ways. There’s this tenderness, and connection, and humanity, but there’s also tenacity, and split personality, and there’s violence when it goes wrong,” Florence says. “The commonality really is the polarity and the vastness, because it’s not an identifiable, nameable, easy-to-talk-about-able subject.”

The experience of motherhood ranges as widely as the show’s themes.

Nervous limitation is the center of Clayton’s video project, which follows her in different environments. She lets her son walk away from her until she gets nervous, then runs after him and literally measures the distance she can be from him.

In “The Split,” Boyts Yoder explores the everyday duality of being a mother. “You have the person that you were before you had kids. That person doesn’t go away,” Florence says. “Then you have the person that you are with your kids. You’re split between personalities, split between feelings and split between pure joy and pure terror at the same time.”

In a different video, queer mother Spencer Stonestreet demonstrates the burden of being expected to be a traditional Southern woman. Her work features a mother dragging furniture and housewares for three miles through a southern landscape.

“There’s heaviness that is present in some of the work, but there’s also lightness,” Florence says. “It comes around the whole idea of mother, that there’s this weight we bear, and there’s the lightness of being.”

A mother herself, the curator of the show identifies with many of the feelings expressed by the artists. “Once you become a mother, you realize that a lot of your fears and a lot of your hopes are exactly the same as everybody else’s. You’re really having a lot of the same feelings as the next person.”

However, her contribution to “Mother Mother” doesn’t focus on her own motherhood. Instead, she’s showing work about her mother: two chromogenic prints with etched glass, each with a piece of writing on it. The first reads: “I told mommy I’m going to have a black baby when I grow up.” On the second: “She said just wait for your grandfather to die.”

“For me, that piece is about my innocence being interrupted by racism and racist thought,” Florence says. “How language is part of that, and how we transmit ideas into our children’s minds through our mouths and our language.”

Dillon Rogers also hints at the subtle influence of mothers with a series of photographs that overlay images of herself and her children. The subjects are nude, though “you can’t really see much of anything except the form,” Florence says.

“In one image, [Rogers’] body is totally in focus and very present. In the other one, she’s like a mist. And it’s like, ‘Yeah, that’s totally it. When you think of the growing relationship you had with your mother, she was a person, but she also wasn’t.”

“Because mothers are human, but they’re also not human. They’re something more than that.”