

Cleveland Museum of Art's new exhibition 'Picturing Motherhood Now' focuses on role through wide, contemporary lens

'I hope people find an entry point for themselves,' co-curator says



A visitor to the new Cleveland of Art exhibition "Picturing Motherhood Now" views "Portrait of Her Mother," a large oil painting by Mequitta Ahuja that greets guests upon entering the Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation Exhibition Gallery (Mark Meszoros — The News-Herald)

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It consists of a circular sink, below which sits a pitcher, to the sides a couple of towels and above it an oval mirror. Below the mirror and directly above the sink are a pair of hands in a baby-catching position.

This is "Pure," a 2017 work of art by American Andrea Chung that, its accompanying placard tells us, "honors the labor and history of Caribbean nana midwives, beloved members of the community who passed invaluable knowledge on maternal health from one generation of women to the next. "



“Pure,” by American Andrea Chung, is a tribute to Caribbean nana midwives (Mark Meszoros — The News-Herald)

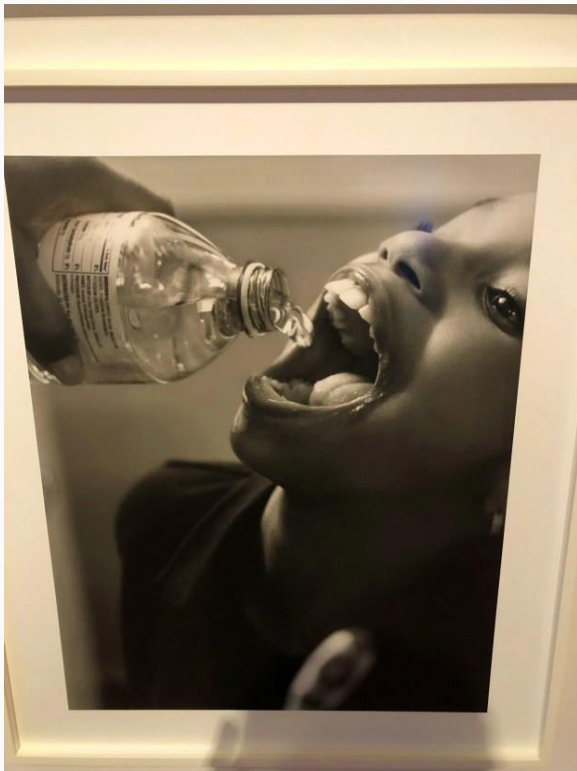
Not far from it is “Seemed Right,” a work by another American woman, Mary Kelly, composed of three illuminated rectangles, across which is written, “seemed right ... just made sense ... like a lightning bolt!” It is a tribute to the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s.

“Rendered in light, their words have an ephemeral quality, like memory itself,” its accompanying panel states.

And yet what may capture your eye as you walk among the eclectic pieces that comprise [“Picturing Motherhood Now”](#) — a new ticketed exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art — is a simple but beautiful photograph. Hanging on a wall among others by American LaToya Ruby Frazier, it shows the hand of a Black woman in Flint, Michigan, pouring water from the bottle into the receptive mouth of her young daughter.

“Over a five-year period, (Frazier) documented the Flint water crisis, but she did that through a grandmother, a mother and a daughter,” says Emily Liebert, CMA curator of contemporary art. “Through three generations of women, she talked about this ecological crisis and issues of social justice and the way that crisis affects different populations differently.

“I think that image, in particular — that also really distills what’s so powerful about the series,” Liebert says. “She’s talking about this huge issue through the personal lives and experiences of individuals.



This photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier is part of her series “Flint Is Family Act I,” which examines the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, through three generations of Black females. Here, a mother pours bottled water into her daughter’s mouth. (Mark Meszoros — The News-Herald)

“You’re looking so close up at this girl’s mouth being filled with water, and that talks about so many things.”

Co-curated by Liebert and Nadiah Rivera Fella, associate curator of contemporary art at CMA, “Picturing Motherhood Now” is a response to what they were seeing in the world of contemporary art, the former says in a recent phone interview.

“It was our observation that a lot of diverse contemporary artists — diverse in terms of their backgrounds but also the interests of their work, the media they were using — were addressing motherhood in their work,” she says. “We focused on artists who were using motherhood as a lens to talk about the contemporary world.”

Opened in mid-October, the show was approved by museum higher-ups in November 2019 — a different time, to say the least.

“‘Picturing Motherhood Now’ emerged during the global pandemic and in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the important conversations about race that followed,” Liebert says. “I think these world events did inflect the show. They inevitably

shaped the way artists were thinking, and the issues that were on the minds of our catalog contributors.”

While the exhibition’s title doesn’t say anything about race, at least not overtly, it is a major topic — especially in the first of its four themed sections, “Missing Pictures.”

“In focusing on pictures that are missing, you end up with a lot of bodies of color because those have been some of the images that are not typically included in the iconic or historical images of mother and child,” Liebert says.

Visitors to the exhibition are greeted with “Portrait of Her Mother,” a large oil painting by Mequitta Ahuja, who is of South Asian and African American descent. The 2020 work was created during the final months of her mother’s life and shows her with a picture of her mother sitting in her studio among brushes, paints and works in progress.

On the opposite side of the wall hangs “Not My Burden,” an intriguing 2019 oil work by American Titus Kaphar. It depicts two sisters holding children on their laps — but the children are silhouettes, as the accompanying information states, “their forms cut out, revealing the white wall behind the canvas and even the stretcher bars that support it. One interpretation is that these forms represent the white children who have long been in Black women’s care; another is that the absent children stand for the lives of young Black men and women tragically lost in the United States right before their mothers’ eyes.”



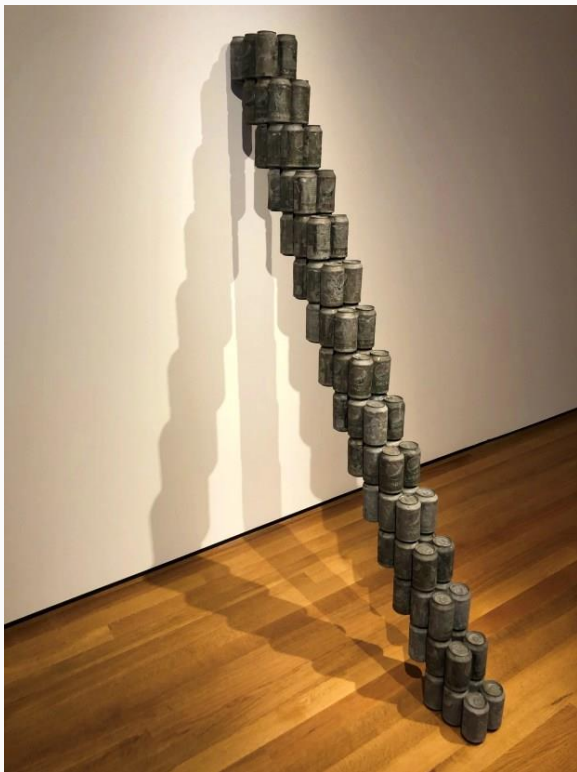
Titus Kaphar's painting "Not My Burden" removes the children being held by a pair of sisters. Its meaning is open to interpretation. (Mark Meszoros — The News-Herald)

The three other themed galleries in "Picturing Motherhood Now":

— "Making and Matrilineage," which features the works of artists that "preserve matrilineal and Indigenous artistic traditions that are passed down from one generation of women to the next. Their work animates and carries forward in time maternal knowledge and histories of making. Some artists use found or family photographs, while others engage with tradition through materials such as clay and thread. All the artists celebrate mothers as the leaders and maintainers of cultural traditions."

— "Mother Tongue," which focuses on language and narrative as "the primary mediums to animate strong female protagonists. The stories that unfold in this section span generations. While they often focus on individual experiences, they point to collective social histories relating to ecology, land use and issues of economic equality."

— "Kinships," which "celebrates unconventional ideas of motherhood and family. The artists in this section give form to maternal lineage that is not necessarily biological, nor even rooted in normative gender identities. They show the ways that heritage can be anchored instead by shared values, politics and artistic ideals."



“MMDP Verbal Magic” sees artist Kaari Upson paying homage to her mother’s daily 4 p.m. ritual: drinking a can of Pepsi. The letters in the title stand for “My Mother Drinks Pepsi.” (Mark Meszoros — The News-Herald)

Although the exhibition borrows pieces from numerous collections, “Kinships” boasts one of two works newly commissioned for “Picturing Motherhood Now.” American Carmen Winant’s “Passing On” is composed of the artist’s decade-old collection of obituaries from The New York Times.

“As my own mother says, the generation who invented modern feminism and provoked social revolution is passing,” Winant says in the accompanying panel. “How will we remember them?”

Even if you do not buy a ticket for the exhibition but visit the museum, you are likely to encounter two related works by one of the artists represented, the late Louise Bourgeois, who, Liebert says, would have been the oldest artist in the show.

“She is a really important artist to generations of feminist artists,” Liebert says of Bourgeois.

While two of the artist’s large spider sculptures reside in the museum’s atrium, other spider-centric works reside in the exhibit’s home, the Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation Exhibition Gallery.

“The spider was a motif through her career — the spider for her represents her mother,” Liebert says, adding that Bourgeois found the parallels in the creature’s qualities of being fierce, protective and wily.



Louise Bourgeois’ 1996 work “Spider IV” hangs on a wall in the new Cleveland Museum of Art exhibition “Picturing Motherhood Now.” It is one of several works by the artist on display at CMA that use the spider as commentary about motherhood. (Mark Meszoros — The News-Herald)

“It’s also a weaver, and her mother worked in the family tapestry business.”

What’s key, Liebert says, is this is not the typical idealized image of a mother.

“All of her work about spiders references the complex psychic and emotional relationship between mothers and daughters.”

Ultimately, the show strives to offer myriad perspectives, including those of trans and queer communities, as well as those of men.

“I hope people find an entry point for themselves,” Liebert says. “We have a really broad range of work by a really broad range of artists.

“Motherhood touches everyone’s life, so I hope there’s something for everyone in the show — there’s some point of connection.”

‘Picturing Motherhood Now’

Where: Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Blvd.

When: Through March 13.

Tickets: Adults \$12; seniors, college students with ID, and children ages 12 to 17, \$10; member guests \$6; children ages 11 and under and CMA members free.

Info: ClevelandArt.org or 216-421-7350.