

Madonnas, Models and Maternity: Icons of Breastfeeding in the Visual Arts.

Abstract

In 1999, the Australian published on the front cover of its weekend Magazine a richly elegant and glamorous photo of Jerry Hall breastfeeding her baby, Gabriel Jagger, taken by celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz. Drawing on the history of photography, and the history of visual conventions more commonly associated with representing the Virgin Mary, this paper discusses the ways in which Leibovitz's photograph becomes emblematic of cultural anxieties around breastfeeding and maternity.

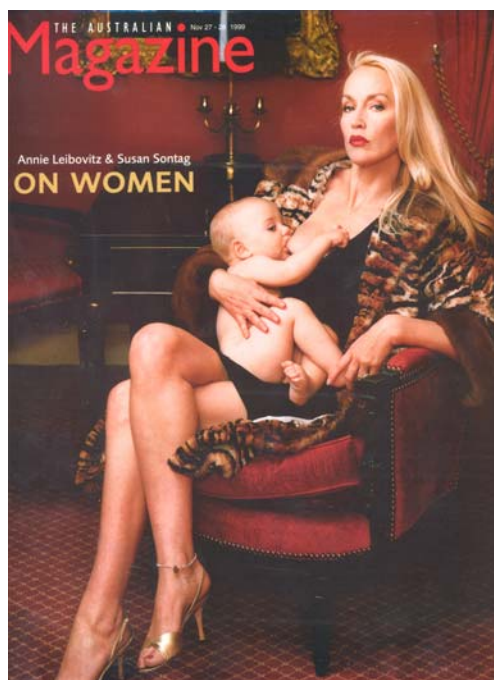
New photographic representations of breastfeeding (by Annie Leibovitz, Cindy Sherman, Patty Chang) and earlier renaissance visual traditions of representing the Madonna Lactans, are both shown to be inextricably embedded in ideological debates of their time around the practice of breastfeeding and the cultural values attributed to maternity.

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This paper is part of a larger project which looks at breastfeeding as a cultural practice. Here, I look at the politics of visual culture. I argue that there are particular conventions of pictorialising breastfeeding mothers which are taken up in high art at times of manifest social anxiety around women's practices of breastfeeding. These images are iconic in function, and can be read as emblematic of the issues at the core of breastfeeding debates: the regulation and representation of women's bodies and sexuality. Their representation visually contributes another discursive field through which women must negotiate their own lived practices, but may also make possible more productive and enabling meanings for breastfeeding.

The Photo

It was this front cover on *The Weekend Australian's* Magazine in 1999 that piqued my interest in visual narratives of breastfeeding. It is publicity for a book of photos by Annie Leibovitz called *Women*. It's an unusually stark cover for the Magazine with the barest minimum of typescript restricted to one corner. The photograph, of Jerry Hall with her son, dominates.



Model and her Son
Annie Leibovitz 1999

Leibovitz's photograph is quite obviously staged. It does not purport to be a 'snapshot' of someone breastfeeding. The model is wearing a little black dress with a tiger striped fur coat over it. She is fully made-up, wearing bright red lipstick, her long blonde hair loosely cascading over the fur. She is sitting, right leg over left, in a plush red upholstered chair, her body slightly side on, and we follow her long legs down to see gold stilettos, a gold chain attached with a heart around her beautifully curved ankle. It is a

glamour pose, a scene of seduction. The interior of the room is richly furnished in red, black and gold. We can just make out a large gilt-framed mirror in the background, a candelabra, heavy red drapes and antique-looking furniture. It is a setting and a portrait position in which we might be used to seeing Jerry Hall placed in her modelling career, but the big naked baby in the very centre of the photograph, suckling on a breast drawn out over the top of the dress, is uncannily out of place and yet at home. The baby is curled on her lap, one arm reaching up to the other breast, and looks across the mother's body. Hall has one arm around the baby's body, the other on the chair arm stroking his foot. She looks directly at the camera, seriously, almost surly, as if daring us to challenge her.

Authority

The composition of the photograph – its setting, class signifiers, and the gaze of the subject – confer a rare level of authority to the image of this woman breastfeeding. This authority is augmented on another level by the famous names which circulate around its production. It is public knowledge that Jerry Hall is a famous model, partially through her association with the famous rock and roll bad boy, Mick Jagger. It is their son, Gabriel Jagger, in the photo. Susan Sontag, whose introduction to the collection of photographs is reprinted in the Magazine that week, is a well respected U.S. social critic. Leibovitz herself is the highest paid celebrity photographer in America. It was her image of nude and pregnant Demi Moore that became famously controversial when it was featured on *Vanity Fair* in August 1991. The image provoked unprecedented discussion about values around pregnancy, motherhood, and femininity. It also began a trend of celebrities being photographed pregnant and with their babies. Matthews and Wexler contend that this 1991 image of a pregnant model as ‘cover girl’ was prescient. They argue,

Leibovitz crossed a boundary at a ripe cultural moment, and with her image of the pregnant woman, pregnant pictures crossed over into the public visual domain. (199).

Affect

This image may also be prescient. It provoked a number of letters to the editor the following weekend. Some praised the depiction of Jerry Hall ('after all she's been through') and the depiction of breastfeeding; others criticised the romanticising of breastfeeding. All the letters assumed the realism of the photograph, despite its quite obvious staging. On the level of symbolism, however, the photograph marks something much more powerful for women whose embodied experiences include breastfeeding. In the quite conservative regional town in which I live, a number of women framed and hung the magazine cover on the walls of their kitchen and office, and others propped up the magazine on the mantelpiece for some time. The lack of visual representation that relates to women's lived experiences of breastfeeding renders this photograph important – not because it necessarily reflects experience but because it iconises a woman breastfeeding as sexy and transgressive. This is not an image of a woman feeling like a cow, or a milkbar, or any of the other diminutive metaphors women use to describe their lactation experiences. I want to argue that the power of this photograph hinges on its patent transformation of what it might mean to breastfeed: firstly, through its relation to the historical function of photography; and secondly, through its relation to a tradition of pictorialising mother and child as derivations of the holy Madonna and Child and its attendant value system.

Models Of Photography

Photography has generally been promoted and accepted as depicting reality (as Leibovitz's photograph is assumed to be in the letters to the editor) rather than shaping it or manipulating it. The photograph is used to document, as evidence of presence or events. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, a new critical vocabulary derived from Marxist, psychoanalytic, and cultural studies began to be applied to photography, highlighting the politics of representation in

which photography was deeply implicated. Simon Watney writes of photographs being ‘no more, and no less, than fragments of ideology, activated by the mechanisms of fantasy and desire’ (196). In the mid 1980s, Holland, Spence and Watney were arguing that

photographs do not simply offer us commodities for vicarious consumption – they also offer us identities to inhabit, constructing and circulating a systematic regime of images through which we are constantly invited to think the probabilities and possibilities of our lives. (1)

It is from this emergent critical culture that feminist art practitioners began constructing an alternative visual culture which challenged and intervened in traditional fantasies of visuality (Pollock 1992). In the introduction to Leibovitz’s book, Susan Sontag positions the collection as consciously engaged in the sexual politics of representation:

Nobody scrutinizing the book will fail to note the confirmation of stereotypes of what women are like and the challenge to those stereotypes. Whether well-known or obscure, each of the nearly one hundred and seventy women in this album will be looked at (especially by other women) as models. (Sontag 1999 n.p.)

Sontag historicises the tradition of representing women as models by citing the story of Julia Margaret Cameron, a professional English photographer from the 1860’s who photographed eminent men as themselves, for portraits, and photographed women (and mostly women she knew) as models ‘to personify ideals of womanliness drawn from literature or mythology: the vulnerability and pathos of Ophelia; the tenderness of the Madonna with her Child’ (Sontag 1999 n.p.). This story distinguishes between men being photographed as ‘someone’ and women being ‘something’ in order to place Leibovitz’s project in direct relation to those conventions. In her image of Jerry Hall, Leibovitz draws as much on the historical photographic conventions of picturing beautiful women and constructing women as beautiful, as much as she draws on the iconography of Madonna and Child. Jerry Hall is not only a model in her ‘real’ public life, but is also constructed here through a tradition of modelling motherhood. The photograph is called ‘Model and her son’.

Iconic Modes

In their book, *Pregnant Pictures*, Matthews and Wexler identify a mode of looking they classify as 'iconic', which 'adheres to specific images of women that carry a collective cultural weight' (xiv-xv). An iconic image 'distils cultural meaning from specific images and connects individual spectators to a collective sense of social formations' (xv). Reading Leibovitz's image through the iconic mode, I argue that it appropriates and contests a particularly disabling visual tradition of using the Madonna as the model mother.

It's interesting that photographic practitioner and theorist Jo Spence also uses the example of the Madonna and Child as an archetypal image that she automatically sought to reproduce as a commercial 'High Street' photographer in the early 1970s. She writes:

Contrary to my belief that I was inventing my technique, I realize with hindsight that my work was totally of its period and influenced by the dominant trends in portrait photography. I had already internalised various ways of encoding photographs from watching others at work, from reading magazines and from the cinema. (Spence 26)
I carried this repertoire of images within me, and lo and behold they came out of me in the studio. I can go through countless sets of negatives of sessions of mothers and children and pick out the Madonna and Child endlessly now. There's no way, though, at the time, that I would ever have identified it as such. (43)

There can be no doubt that the Madonna has historically functioned as a model mother in Western culture. Breastfeeding inherits this symbolic and pictorial tradition. While many women might eschew such traditions now, remnants of this socio-historical inheritance remain strongly embedded in our cultural practices, often in uncomfortable combination with the sexualization of women's bodies and the sexual liberation of women. Breastfeeding is thus rendered something confusingly sacred and sexual simultaneously in Western culture, an anxiety that continues to inform debates about women breastfeeding in public (see Bartlett 2002).

Representing the Madonna and Child

The tension between the sacred and the sexual is not restricted to late twentieth century visual culture. Early Renaissance painters went to great lengths to develop conventions for the *Madonna Lactans*, or *Madonna del Latte*, in which the Virgin is depicted with one bare breast in readiness to feed her Son. At the height of European devotion to the Cult of the Virgin Mary during the 14th and 15th centuries, this religious icon enjoyed a popularity in Tuscany rarely seen before or since. It emerged from a movement to depict the Virgin as a humble peasant woman – the Madonna of Humility – who was dressed in ordinary clothes, often barefoot, kneeling or seated on the ground (Miles 202), and with whom mortal women could visually identify.



Madonna del Latte
Ambrogio Lorenzetti 1330



Virgin of Humility
Masolino de Panicale 1420.

As Marina Warner notes, breastfeeding was the one corporeal act associated with reproduction permitted of the Virgin, and her readiness to breastfeed indicated her exemplary ‘lowliness’ (Warner 201). This was in distinct contrast to the immediately

preceding tradition of representing Mary as an elaborately ornate and bejewelled regal empress. As Margaret Miles explains, however, there were some problems associated with the Virgin’s partial nudity as a lactating mother:

The bare-breasted Virgin ... evokes visual associations that emphasize her similarity with other women; yet popular devotional texts and sermons frequently contradicted these evoked associations by insisting on her difference ... Second, nudity in religious paintings creates a tension between erotic attraction and religious meaning ...[it] can

intensify the narrative, doctrinal, or devotional message of the painting by evoking subliminal erotic associations. (203)

In trying to balance the erotic and the devotional gaze, particular visual conventions were developed: the Virgin's one bare breast was often partially covered by her gown, but never with any suggestion that her clothes are in disarray as an erotic encounter may produce (see Bartolomeo); her breast 'is displaced to the level of her collarbone, detached from her body, and distorted in size and shape' (Holmes 169), in what became known as the 'signed' breast (see Monaco); and the other side of her chest is absolutely flat (Miles 204).



Madonna of Humility
Barolomeo da Camogli 1346



Madonna and Child
Lorenzo Monaco 1420

If, as Jane Gallop comments, 'the' breast functions symbolically 'like a painting in a museum', while plural 'breasts' are usually attributed to a person (11), then the nursing Madonna's breast became increasingly symbolic during this period, to the extent that it became non-integral, disembodied from the Virgin.

The devotional gaze became even more difficult to sustain during the early fifteenth century, when dominant art practices shifted to favour pictorial naturalism (Holmes 175) requiring

greater precision in the anatomical correctness of human figures (Holmes 178). Furthermore, women's breasts became an eroticised site in other visual domains, like the frescoes adorning the bedrooms of patrician houses, for example, which functioned as a source of visual foreplay. This meant that the *Madonna Lactans* became increasingly problematic for display in churches and monasteries, and Holmes argues that 'Theologians sought to discourage illicit looking by formalizing a devotion gaze and by elaborating iconographic conventions for imaging the Virgin' (173). These included emphasising her aristocratic bearing and idealising her through elevation onto a throne, surrounding her with angels above and saints below, with gold-ground background and framing (see Van der Weyden). An elaborate slit in her gown revealed yet concealed her breast (see Masolina; Master of Saint Bartholomew Altarpiece, DaVinci).



***Virgin and Child*
Rogier Van der
Weyden 1430-32**



***Madonna & Child*
Masolino da Panicale
1425**



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***Virgin and Child with
musical Angels. Master of
the Saint Bartholomew
altarpiece 1485***



***Little Madonna*
DaVinci 1485-90**

However, these often ‘jarr[ed] dissonantly with the greater degree of naturalism in the painting’ (Holmes 179). The popularity of the Madonna Lactans gradually dwindled as her representation became overdetermined by negotiating such conventions.

Sherman’s ‘History Portraits’

It is the extremes of artifice involved in this tradition that another contemporary New York photographer, Cindy Sherman, parodies. Using herself as model, with props and prosthetics,



Untitled #222
Cindy Sherman 1989



Untitled #223
Cindy Sherman 1989



Untitled #225
Cindy Sherman 1989

Untitled #222 is of a wet nurse with two hugely ponderous breasts; *Untitled #223* portrays a Madonna-like mother suckling a baby on a plastic dome; *Untitled #225* shows a woman holding one bared breast between her first two fingers with a drop of milk dangling from an exaggerated nipple, and surrounded by the blue associated with the Virgin. In ‘*Untitled #216*’ her one prosthetic breast is placed at the exact centre of the photograph with a prominent nipple. It is the unavoidable focus of the viewer’s attention. By picturing the breast as an actual appendage, Sherman highlights the artifice of photography and also satirises the



**Untitled #216
Cindy Sherman 1989**

tradition of depicting the *Madonna Lactans* with a disembodied breast. The face is also a literal mask, with that diverting high forehead and its unhidden seam where mask meets skin.

The Model

While most of Sherman's images are simulacra – copies without originals – you can see the resemblance of this image to Fouquet's *Madonna of Melun*. This painting is located at the end of the popularity of the *Madonna Lactans*, and exhibits some of the difficulties of viewing

such images as iconography. It was controversial in its time because Fouquet used the famous beauty, Agnès Sorel, as his model. She was reputedly the mistress of the King of France, Charles VII, and said to have had four children with him. Apparently the King's Treasurer was so 'bewitched' by her that he commissioned this portrait (Warner 276 fig.28). The public knowledge of her illegitimate sexuality and the depiction of her breast as erotically swollen and spherical made her modeling of the Virgin Mary controversial, as did her highly fashionable dress, high-shaven forehead, and lavishly jewelled throne and crown. By choosing



**Madonna of Melun
Jean Fouquet 1450-60**

Fouquet's work as her model, Sherman is already questioning the conventions of the visual tradition and its entanglement in social and political issues of representation.

Politics

Both Margaret Miles and Megan Holmes indicate a number of interwoven social and political issues at stake in the popularity of the Madonna icon in Tuscany. The shortage of food caused by the failure of crops from the early 1300s, extending to famine across the continent by 1309, and then plague in the 1350s, meant that ‘visual images of the infant Christ, held and suckled by this mother ... [were important] symbolic expressions of nourishment ... and support’ (Miles 197-8), and are given weight by Christian symbolism which associated Mary as Mother of the Church and milk as ‘the sustenance of the Christian soul’ (Warner 197). During this time breastmilk was vital for the survival of babies (Warner 194), and the church actively instructed and preached from the pulpit that mothers should breastfeed. Many middle class Tuscan women, however, were passing their babies on to wet nurses. This was a sign of their upward mobility (Miles 199). To their husbands, wet nursing meant that sexual relations and fertility would resume more quickly. The church argued that socially ‘undesirable’ traits of the working class wet nurse would transfer to the infant through the milk, a logic which also made the feeding of animal milk taboo at the time, lest the infant develop traits of that milk source (Miles 198). Megan Holmes argues that the continuation of lineage was the overriding factor contributing to the normative use of wet nurses by 1450 (187). Whichever argument is used, maternal breastfeeding was a controversial social issue, and its differing discourses generated different social meanings. The emergence of paintings and al frescoes of the Virgin lactating during this particular period were therefore significant. Miles reminds us that, being

Accessible to all members of Christian communities on a daily basis, religious paintings were the media images of medieval people, informing their self-images and their ideas of relationship, God, and world in strong and immediate ways. The function of these paintings in conditioning religious and social attitudes cannot be overestimated. (Miles 201)

Interestingly, Matthews and Wexler maintain a similar social function for visual imagery today, that,

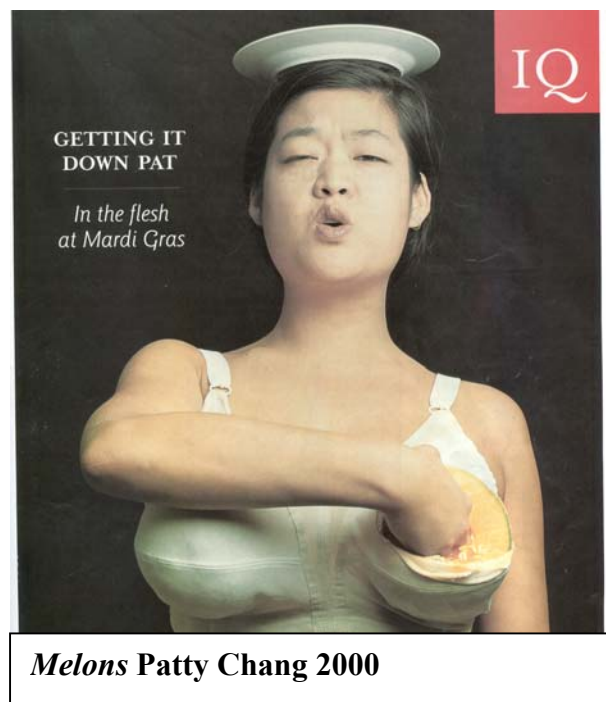
Just as ... an individual constructs her sense of self in part from images of herself, so does our society derive a sense of collectivity from the images it constructs and circulates. (2)

An important function of icons, they argue, is to ‘manage anxiety’ (211). Breastfeeding has frequently produced social anxiety in various historical periods, and I think it can be argued that Renaissance iconography was mobilised in response to these social issues. In the late twentieth century, breastfeeding is again a topic of public debate and legislation – on television last year the US cop show *Law & Order* had an entire episode about a ‘breastfeeding murder’ (‘Mother’s Milk’ 8.11.01), indicating to me the current level of anxiety around breastfeeding and the extent to which it is now available for public debate. I argue that these debates are centrally concerned with the regulation and representation of women’s sexuality, as they were also in the Renaissance.

A Queer Conclusion: Eating Breasts

For an even more provocative image of breastfeeding, New York photographer and performance artist Patty Chang’s work is worth pondering. *Melons* was published in March/April edition of *HQ* Magazine in 2000. It is both a performance and a set of images of Chang eating her ‘breast’. Underneath the photo, it explains:

As she tells a story, she digs a spoon into her left breast which is half a melon, eating some spoonfuls and putting others on a plate balanced on her head. The performance is messy, she speaks with her mouthful, telling some family tale that you don’t get on the first listen. But it doesn’t matter, the image of a woman eating her own breast is arresting in its own right’ (Anon. 17).



Chang's performance centres on 'the' (symbolic) breast as a source of food, but never has it been considered a source of food for women. While Chang materialises the metaphors of fruit used to imagine and eroticise breasts and their qualities (see Yalom 78, 272), their usual association with pleasure or sensuality or even redemption is neglected. The armoured protection of the maternity bra, the plunging action of her hand and serious facial expression render this performance of breastfeeding much more ambivalent. The erotic gaze is denied incarnation, as carnality here borders on cannibalism.

Chang's performance at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and her exhibition in conjunction with those appearances in 2000, can be read as 'queering' the meanings of breastfeeding. Barbara Creed suggests that conventional, heterosexual master narratives are contested by queer politics which explores sexuality as 'a series of practices, discourses and social relations' (156), often through strategies designed to shock and often through a visual apparatus (she discusses cinema and film theory). Chang's performance does question the usual practices, discourses, and social relations of breastfeeding. It can be linked to Pam Carter's conclusion, after a study of breastfeeding literature, that 'Breast feeding is an overwhelmingly heterosexual subject' (116). In contrast, Carter advocates that breastfeeding may well provide 'opportunities for women to occasionally experience their bodies outside of dominant heterosexual frameworks' (115), and that research into the experiences of lesbian mothers may provide an important source of subversive thinking. In addition, she advocates further thinking around the lesbian gaze: 'The heterosexuality of both breasts and breastfeeding is significantly defined through the visual. Breasts have a central place in male-defined visual sexual pleasure ... Lesbian looking may suggest other ways of thinking about the sexuality of breasts' (116). Chang's queer breast may well be the beginning of such an examination.

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