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Niazi, Amil. "The Art of Motherhood, Madeline Donahue captures the ecstasy and agony of being a mom." *The CUT*. Online. October 5, 2022.

THE CUT

STYLE | SELF | CULTURE | POWER

ART AND SOUL | 1:50 P.M.

The Art of Motherhood Madeline Donahue captures the ecstasy and agony of being a mom.

By Amil Niazi



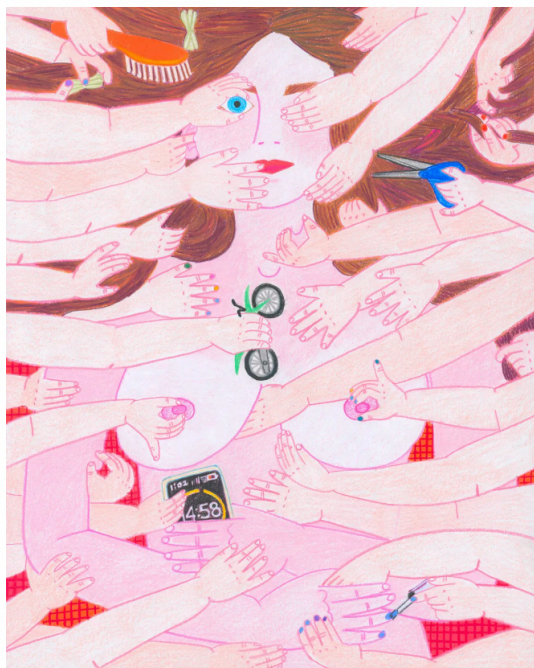
Bathers (Livingston, NY) by Madeline Donahue Photo: Corey Towers

The first Madeline Donahue piece I ever came across was a brightly hued painting of a mother wrapped around her two small kids, one child hanging across her back with his hand pressed tenderly on her face, the other cradled to her chest. The mother's body was at the mercy of her children's weight, their simultaneous push and pull. Precariously balanced yet beatific and smiling. It's an image that conveys so many emotions at once: chaos, joy, contentment, and love. I recognized myself in it instantly. I was probably in a similar position when I came across it on my phone.

It was more than just recognition, I felt *known* — in so accurately capturing this experience, Donahue also saw me. I shared it on my Instagram feed and instantly saw it bounced back to me on my friends' Stories, ricocheting across all of our feeds in an endless loop because of how immediately it spoke to every other mother I knew. That's the power of Donahue's art, to have something so specific feel so universal in its story about motherhood that everyone from *New York's* own Jerry Saltz to actress Busy Phillips has shared

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her work in their own feeds. Her new solo exhibition, “Strange Magic,” opens October 6 at Hesse Flatow in New York City.



From left: *Over-touched 15 Minute Nap* Photo: Madeline Donahue; *Scales* Photo: Madeline Donahue.

While it's her paintings of the experience of motherhood that have really taken off, Donahue, 39, has always been interested in the idea of *familyhood*. “When I was 16, the focus of my paintings was to kind of re-create family portraits from found photographs,” she tells me over Zoom from her in-laws’ place in Maine. She’s chatting with me from a temporarily quiet corner of the house, relieved for the time being of parenting duties with some help from her extended family. I’m doing much the same, only my son is sitting within arm’s reach, watching an episode of *Bluey* so Mommy can work. I instantly recognize her piercing blue eyes from her paintings, and the distinct auburn hair of the mother from all these portraits who I now see is so distinctly Madeline yet manages to embody all of us. “I would find all these photographs I always loved — expressive portraits of my mom holding me as a small child, my dad holding me as a small child. I’ve always been interested in the intimacy of family,” says Donahue. Those early paintings and collages were very much connected to the work she makes now, building off of the foundation of the closeness of family and especially, she says, of the mother-child relationship. “As a young teenager, I was trying to figure out how I existed in my own family, within my understanding of my family, and then 20 years later, it’s more about my own experiences of this,” she adds.

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Mirror Photo:
Madeline Donahue

Donahue grew up in Houston; her dad was a criminal defense attorney and her mom was a teacher, but the household was always a creative one. “My mom taught special ed by building cardboard structures with her students — they built the city of New York out of cardboard,” she says, laughing. All of this set the foundation for Donahue’s early art education. She attended the prestigious High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, where she became inspired by such artists as Alice Neel, Joan Brown, and Jennifer Bartlett. She then went on to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts, where she found herself thrust into a hypercompetitive, hypermale world and unable to find professors who would take her into their painting courses. In response, Donahue pursued every other medium besides painting that she could. “I ended up having a really incredible, kind of scrappy art education going there, and I found ceramics because it was a less ‘important’ medium,”

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she says. It was that unforgiving environment that readied her for her eventual move to New York in 2006: “It prepared me for rejection and all the things that come with it, especially preparing to make art in a competitive city.”



Lunch in the Grass Photo: Madeline Donahue

Once in New York, Donahue worked “every job she could,” continuing to make work but mostly trying to survive. Then in 2016, she had a child. For many artists, particularly women, there has always been a narrative that children and art work in opposition to each other, that it’s almost impossible to give yourself over to both at once. Even Donahue initially felt she’d have to keep this aspect of her life a secret, or at the very least far away from her practice, having just started an M.F.A. program in studio art at Brooklyn College when her daughter was just 6 weeks old. But she also knew that the male artists

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she'd grown up admiring — Picasso, Matisse, and Julian Schnabel — had all embraced family and represented their families in their work and made it an integral facet of their art. “I’m very interested in the lifelong career of an artist. And these things we go through as we grow. So I was really interested in how my brain and my work would evolve,” she says about entering motherhood.



From left: Knife Drawer (Wheel of Fortune) Photo: Corey Towers; Scissors Photo: Corey Towers.

Even still, Donahue initially kept the two experiences separate, making work about motherhood on the side. But when the program’s faculty and fellow classmates would come into her studio and see those paintings focused on motherhood — on the awkwardness, melancholy, and joy being expressed in these scenes — *that’s* what they were naturally drawn to. “There’s this idea that you want to make work that’s broad and available to everyone. And it’s almost impossible to do that without honing in on your own experiences,” Donahue says of why this work was connecting with people. “One of the things that really changed for me through my work is that I try to really hone in on any of the bad feelings I have about myself or about a situation,” she explains. “And lean into that shame, especially shame and joy for me are so closely related and that somehow I can make an image that creates joy by just completely giving over to these feelings of shame.”

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Clown Alley Photo:
Madeline Donahue

It is remarkable the emotional and psychic range of what Donahue is able to capture in her images. The shame and awkwardness of motherhood and the physical way we molt into our kids, but also the beauty and joy and small pleasures of that specific pain that caregiving demands of us. She also taps into a certain kind of fear that comes from not being taught about ourselves, from being kept in the dark about pregnancy and motherhood and our own bodies. “Growing up, I was kind of taught to fear my body and that I needed to protect it no matter what,” Donahue tells me. “I had to educate myself about how to be pregnant and what kind of birth I would hope to have. It was almost like I became my own mother.”

What Donahue manages to paint are the minute yet momentous milliseconds that make up the experience of motherhood. They are snapshots of the

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mundane and the grotesque, the horrible and the wonderful, all imbued with a clear sense of time, both the lack of it and how quickly it seems to go by. “I have this urgency about being a parent, that it’s something that I’ve chosen to do, and I love being a parent, I love my children,” she says. “But there’s a melancholy to it because it’s a very short period of time that we’re parents. And I’m very aware of the shortness of it.”



From left: *Nail Polish* Photo: Madeline Donahue; *Swirly* Photo: Madeline Donahue.

This limitation of time also affects her actual practice as an artist, working around her kids and their needs means she’s become a process-based artist who adapts her work to her lifestyle. Not that this has limited her impact or reach as an artist — she’s even managed to find joy in the process. “My one goal is to make work,” Donahue says, “and then other than that, my goal is to be with my children. And not, you know, lose my mind. And so, with that one goal, I’ve been able to do more than I expected to do. And it’s been really fun.”

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The artist. Photo: Corey Towers