

Accompanying paper for the exhibit "**Ee-Mahoot**"*

- Postpartum Depression

By Nurit Tal-Tenne, Initiator and Curator of the Exhibit

From Hebrew: Shira Richter

The term "Postpartum Depression" is used to describe a whole range of disturbances a woman might develop at different times and degrees of severity after giving birth. However, the acknowledgement of this phenomenon by the medical profession is relatively new. In the mid 19th century the French psychiatrist Victor Lui Marce noted the "Gloomy mood" in postpartum women, and about two decades later a researcher by the name of Savage used the term "milk fever" in order to describe a woman's adjustment difficulties to her new circumstance. Indeed there is no doubt a potential crisis is concealed in the event of giving birth, because the changes a woman goes through in the course of pregnancy do not disappear with the emergence of the baby. Studies show that the hypersensitivity noticed in a woman the first few weeks after birth, might, if exaggerated, develop into psychological disturbances.

More than a few women experience conflicting feelings from staying at home with a new baby. One moment they might enjoy it, and the next – feel trapped. They might feel enveloped in happiness, on the verge of euphoria, like one who has fulfilled herself and her womanhood, and at the same time feel gloomy and helpless. They feel they have a new identity, are proud of their accomplishment that they have burst into real life and are beginning to fulfill their destiny as women – but at the same time some harbor a startling, even horrifying feeling that they have been abandoned and life as they knew it- is lost. And indeed, in certain ways-

life as they knew it will not return. The new reality demands of the woman and couple flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to change.

To all this one might add the fear connected to the complex feelings towards the baby, an attitude that is not one-dimensional. Together with the eruption of streams of love towards the baby, in the heart of the mother awakens the anxiety she doesn't love the baby enough, is not a good enough mother, and sometimes, on top of all this hovers a dark fear of losing control of the fear itself.

Many of the adjustment difficulties women experience today are influenced by the pressures which characterize our times. The use of the term "Birth vacation"*** communicates a message the woman is on a so-called vacation. The purpose of this "birth vacation" period is to allow the woman rest from long work hours, which is supposed to assist her in overcoming the difficulties of her new situation, including the adjustment to her baby. However, sometimes, precisely this "time off" might awaken in her the feeling of being imprisoned. Although each generation is becoming more aware of the mental and emotional aspects of pregnancy and labor, there are still subjects which are considered taboo - even in birthing classes. [1]

"Different degrees of Postpartum Depression appear in ten to fifteen percent of the women who give birth" says an expert of the field, "And it has several causes. [2] The process of motherhood is not simple and it's often tied up with an ambivalent attitude and negative feelings, but these do not receive social legitimacy". These words demonstrate how adjusting to motherhood is a long process, in the course of which difficulties might awaken, like – for instance- incompatibilities between the baby and mother's temperaments. The fact that there is no such thing

as "instant motherhood" arouses anxiety and feelings of "not suited for the job". Social expectations (and sometimes the woman herself) demand the young mother get used to a dramatic change in her life, devote herself to the baby, be a wife, continue the part of a well groomed career woman and enjoy her motherhood and life style.

Many women report a never-ending tension and a feeling of existential persecution due to the difficulty of integrating so many endless roles which have conflicting demands and some develop psychiatric syndromes. Amongst the most notable is the phenomenon named Postpartum Depression that lasts from a few months to a year or more, with several degrees of severity. Starting from a light, temporary situation that doesn't affect the woman's functioning and in several instances is not even diagnosed, on to a severe depression accompanied by suicidal thoughts and major disturbances in her functioning, sometimes leading to hospitalization. The characteristics of the depression are usually a gloomy mood, fatigue and apathy, neglect of one's appearance, an inability to enjoy anything including one's relationship with the baby, anxiety and guilt, memory and concentration disturbances, confusion, sleeping difficulties and loss of appetite. In extreme and rare cases, in the midst of a depression and as a result of guilt feelings, the suicidal mother might decide it's better the baby die together with her so he/she won't suffer. In most cases these symptoms pass by themselves. However, without suitable treatment a depression might go on for a long time and involve acute suffering and distress. In extreme cases this might cause irreversible harm to the baby and lead to the mother harming herself.

"What I felt was far from the common images of pregnancy, birth and parenting. I did not feel the myth-bliss of Demi Moore's airbrushed tummy; I identified neither with the heavenly breastfeeding Madonna nor

with home movies that show pieces of bloody flesh coming out of vaginas; the super-realistic, depressing images of sagging bodies also didn't feel right. Mine was a powerful, awe-inspiring, wonderful and terrible, ridiculous and humbling experience, transforming everything and demanding everything; like a head-on collision. It tore everything apart, including the body, and put everything back together- but nothing was as it had been before. It was a profound physical and mental transformation, in which extremes met and clashed: life and death, body and spirit, youth and old age, awe and disgust, love and hatred, past and future, attraction and revulsion, truth and lies, miracle and myth. Deep, archaic preconceptions were unleashed, which had little to do with the actual experience". [3]

Postpartum Depression, the "dirty secret" of motherhood, is not openly depicted in works of art and hardly any artistic papers deal explicitly with the subject.

The image of mother and child appear in numerous art creations and cultures all through history. Till the end of the 18th century mainly sentimental works appeared depicting the warm emotional connection between the mother and her child. Thus we find different and extended variations of mother Mary and her baby, and at a later stage popular images of the mother breastfeeding her child, showing both as a single harmonic unit. The emotional relationship between the mother and baby are described in several situations as well. In both modern and contemporary art we notice subversive attempts to undermine these traditional images but nevertheless, the myth of the mother; Creator of Geneses and "Eve" are still sacred concepts in society, and make publically exposing a favorable representation of the other- bleaker side- of the results of giving birth, difficult.

From a review of the development of mother representations in art emerges that the story of Jesus birth in Christianity had a huge influence on the subjects of art to such an extent, it created a central connection between Mary- mother of Jesus- to motherhood in general. "In all the early depictions of Mary her place isn't central and she appears as a functional character who either carries the infant, or gives birth to him. This is also true regarding the birth scenes, which conceptionally and formally connect to the descriptions of idolizing baby Jesus who appears in the center and is the object of his mother's admiration as well. [4]

In the middle ages and the beginning of the early modern period the concept of motherhood maintained the purposeful attitude according to which the role of the mother is to supply protection, warmth and food for her baby. Till the eighteenth century motherhood is not described as the main source of happiness and enjoyment, however, despite all the reincarnations the mother image went through from the fourth century till the 18th, "she will always, totally and absolutely, represent the good mother. Traits like obedience, humility, subservience and passivity are taken fore granted and her body is presented as a place of shelter and security and as the source of nourishment for Jesus. [5]

During the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries the image slowly emptied from its catholic content and refilled with bourgeois and protestant values. The mother image became established as the main purpose of female existence and as the exclusive source of happiness and enjoyment. A significant change occurred at the first half of the 20th century; the arts of this period supply us with very few mother representations and the second half of the century is characterized by the crystallization and strengthening of radical feminism (the sixth and seventh decades) which viewed the female body and motherhood as the

source of women's inferior status. This presumption led to the denial of the female body, its sexual desires, and motherhood as well. What's interesting is the more feminist theory concentrated on the subject of motherhood, so slowly disappeared the pool of representations of motherhood and mother-child relations. Fine art, literature, poetry and feminist cinema usually abstained from giving attention to these subjects, similar to art in general. [6]

In the seventies of the twentieth century leading women artists began portraying motherhood and the mother-child connection in a complexity not previously shown. The artist Mary Kelly, in her work "Postpartum Document" (1973-1979) spoke out against the traditional contradiction prevalent until then between motherhood and creativity and dealt with the mother's emotional world both after giving birth and in the course of the child's first years of development. Kelly processed findings, objects, and information pertaining to her relationship with her son and though the work does not explicitly deal with Postpartum Depression, it touches on the ongoing process between a mother and child, a process involving various emotions, difficulties, anxieties and the drudgery of everyday. Kelly showed the complex and conflicting emotions involved in motherhood, which at the time were considered taboo. She wasn't afraid to deal with a subject which harmed her so-called feminist status and succeeded in confronting both the negative and positive emotions which inhibited the feminist artists of her time from examining things from the perspective of the mother. In interviews Kelly talked about the split she experienced as a mother who's expected to fulfill several functions at the same time; To be both mother and artist, private woman and wife inside the house, and also a woman of political aspirations interested in making herself heard as a feminist in the public sphere. In this work Kelly, in the

most extreme way, undermines the compilation of prejuditions pertaining to "natural motherhood" and "the maternal instinct". [7]

A detail from "Post Partum Document"- six-part installation. Mary Kelly (1973-79)

In the years 1972-1974 in communist Poland, artist Zofia Kulik and her partner Przemyslaw Kwiek, also named "the Kwiekulik Couple" created a postpartum document which chronicles their activities and intimate relations with their baby son Dobromierz. The work is assembled from seven hundred color slides and two hundred black and white photos taken over the course of two years in which the son is seen situated next to various household objects, while the parents role remains relatively vague. Kulik displays diagrams and activities with the son, charts of repetitive character that show the desolation and exhaustion of the everyday chores related to taking care of a baby.

Zofia Kulik, (Kwiekulik Artists), from "Activities with Dobromierz" 1972-1974

Artist **Barbara Kruger** questions the automatic love a mother has for her baby. In her photograph we see a naked baby pressed between the knees of a woman and on his back the sign "Free Love". Kruger challenges the idea of immediate and unconditional mother love and thus, indirectly, touches the subject. Psychological and anthropological studies and leading feminist writings doubted the naturalness of mothering feelings and shed light on the part of social conditioning in developing these emotions [8]. Kruger's works deals with the psychoanalytical discourse and the social conditioning of motherhood. They expose the mother's voice which up till then was suppressed, allow her point of view

and a confrontation with the anger the new status of motherhood sometimes awakens.

Barbara Kruger "Free Love" Photograph, 1988

The 20th century female trailblazers of portraying the complexities of subjective motherhood investigate the mother- baby relationship and raise essential questions about it, but still, an explicit showing of situations and emotions in the context of PPD are still hard to find.

In 2010, at the Tate museum in London Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra showed photographs of portraits of mothers and babies an hour after birth. The mothers are all naked, their pain and pubic hair exposed, and they are in a state of complex personal trauma. The photographs capture the confusion caused by hormonal flooding, different emotions and the entry into new identity as mother.

Rineke Dijkstra, Julie, Hague, Holand February 29, 1994

Today, the art world and especially the female art world is open to diverse attitudes towards mothers and motherhood and a variety of depictions of the emotional territory between the mother and her baby. In relation to PPD there are hints pointing to this or that issue connected to the subject, but unlike mental disorders like anxiety in its many forms and unlike other body and soul issues that are extensively shown in artistic and textual representations, PPD is a subject practically forbidden to mention.

Is it possible that in the course of feminism's many reincarnations a fear was created which made women themselves reluctant to expose the "dirty secret" and to be perceived as weak in comparison to men? Is there still a need for "man talk" in the artistic discourse in order to be accepted

by the male audience? Perhaps the social expectation for "mother earth" and "natural motherhood" on the one hand and guilt feelings and fear of social excommunication on the other hand- are what caused artistic castration regarding exposing this subject?

Artworks In this exhibit

Eyelet Hashahar Cohen shows a series of works in which emotional memory is present. "Self portrait that belongs to the past" is a raggedy-ann type doll with no feet, dressed in a pink dress full of holes and at the center of her stomach a reproduction of a smaller doll of the same image. The small figure represents a female baby or an undeveloped inner "me" while the larger figure implicates the responsible, containing, caretaking role of a mother. The double but different scale figures emphasize the role-playing and the ambivalent identity of the larger, perforated, doll figure.

The painterly realism of **Ann Ben-Or** captures a scene in which a young mother and her baby are situated in an empty and alienated room. The mother's mental state and loneliness are communicated through her melancholy gaze which is turned inward as if she's in a state of inner contemplation. There is no eye contact between the mother and baby.

Dalia Zarhia shows photographs documenting a breastfeeding bra infused with cabbage, at various states of being in the course of a day. Zarhia deals with the subject of breastfeeding and concentrates on the physical pain. Our attention goes from the nursing baby to the hurting

breast. The public discourse usually stresses the ideal of "the joy of breastfeeding". Here the other side of the coin is exposed- the suffering body. The woman's face is not revealed meaning she doesn't actually exist as an individual person. This way the artist stresses the instrumental aspect of the breastfeeding mother.

Tali Ben Bassat Exhibits images of a mother and baby in a series of works (2008-2010) of dribbling paint on paper. The tearful mothers' image melts and disappears, pours into the paper, and the baby is represented as a reflection of her situation and gaze as he's reflected through her eyes. A large-scale practically monstrous baby. His eyes are vacant and empty; he sucks from a bottle as if sucking the mother's marrow. His body, painted the color scale of both murky grey, orange and poisonous pink, hangs in a threatening way. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott wrote: "What does a baby, looking at the face of his mother, see?" My argument is that the baby usually sees himself. In other words, the mother looks at the child, and her face shows what she sees there. [9]

The photographs of **Yael Yudkovik** create a plastic prism for describing hell. Amongst them is a self portrait photograph of Yudkovik next to a skull and two more photographs showing a naked woman sitting on a bed, a sign chained to her body that says, in three languages "How do you spell hell?" "Comment épelez-vous l'enfer?"

The Sculptural work of **Meital Katz Minerbo** corresponds with the definition of the cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin regarding "The grotesque

body". "In contrast to modern artistic cannons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed and perfect unit to itself, it's not complete, it doesn't grow on its own, and it doesn't rebuild its own borders ". [10] the sculpted object- the lower body and its vegetable-like secretions which gush and spill from inside the body enable studies regarding the borders of the grotesque body. The secretions and flora burst out as a symbiotic dialogue between the body and the world. The body is in a continual process of never-ending construction. It's an independent organism which detaches from the soul, thus a split is created which expresses itself in feelings of loneliness and sadness.

Miri Nishri unrolls materials of a self portrait creating a universal story which powerful experience is silenced. Nishri displays a close-up photograph of a young bride wearing a veil over her head, standing under her wedding canopy, her whole being vibrating extreme joy and excited anticipation towards the promised happiness. Alongside the photo a series of female figures rolled up in fetus position are placed. The body of work points to the transition from freedom and individuality to entering the commitment of marriage and family life which means- pregnancy, birth, motherhood, the burden of endless house-hold chores and others. The fetal position is a sort of introversion that indicates the inability or reluctance to deal with the intensity of this burden.

Through intimate and revealing photographs, under the title "**Romke and me**", **Noa Sadka** documents motherhood situations. "**Romke and me House, Tel-Aviv**" 2006.

"At the time Romke was born, I could still situate the camera, take photographs, and Romke was quite often placed and photographed. She (the camera) was present kind-of the same way I was present. Now, regrettably, I don't have this, both because the camera's self timer and light meter don't work anymore, and also, mainly, I don't have a minute, a second, the possibility to inspect myself and what's around me. I'm more occupied in trying to get things done on time, in doing, with continual screams of "must" instead of just being and seeing. I see less, I'm more in a hurry all the time. Art, I think, requires a kind of break from the outside world which demands meticulous functioning. In my opinion, "Mother Noa" hasn't yet entered into "The art of Noa" and I don't know if she ever will". [11]

Rakefet Viner-Omer's video alludes to pain and a tragic situation. The word "Relax" (which appears in the female tense), is put together with floating towels, situated and deconstructing on the surface of the sea, as if symbolizing a mother's reality and her unattained aspiration for tranquility. The roses, also strewn atop the sea waves, seem to communicate an aspiration for a romantic ideal and an expectation for the longed-for happiness that will arrive together with the birth of a baby and entrance into the state of motherhood. But the sea is polluted, and the roses are falling apart in contaminated water. Viner Omer condenses a mental situation saturated with loaded symbols into one word– "Relax".

The meticulously staged photographs of **Pesi Girsch** allude to a complex chilling and tragic situation- a different kind of motherhood. A hinted comparison exists between two photographs: "Siberian tiger" was crushed by his mother who went mad in the zoo and the photograph of

baby Kaifo. In yet another photograph, we see a mother and her baby in a position reminding us of the Christian iconographic image of Mary and baby Jesus. Eyes shut; a mother kneels in between the roots of a thick tree-trunk, surrounded by several wriggling black kittens.

Shira Richter, in a series of photographs from her project "**The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit**" shows internal and external topography exposing scars and distortion of and on the body as result of the process of twin pregnancy. Richter transforms "ugly" to beautiful, and what we consider beautiful –to outrageous.

"I go to the ugly repulsive place, which the social instinct wants to conceal. I detach it from its surrounding, enlarge it, and examine it like a scientist. In fact, I don't just look at it, I play around with it. This way a double transformation takes place. I see the beauty and esthetics of the material, the humor and irony of the ugly and repulsive, and – more important, I take back control over my body and display it the way *I* see and experience it. In these photographs there is no identity, the exact same way a woman is treated as if she has no identity both during and after her first pregnancy. In this project, similar to life, my body became something else –material I use to express emotions I had no words for and even if I did, it's not acceptable to say them. Therefore I drew a map, I invented a new language of images and scenes, *exploiting* my body, in the same way the twins "used" my body to come into the world, the same way the medical institutions treat our female bodies- as if we are a vessel and not an identity. [12]

End Notes

[1] Based on an article by Yael Eitan-Shieler, a psychologist, family therapist and group facilitator.

[2] Taken From an interview with Dr. Miki Bloch, of Tel Aviv University's Sackler Faculty of Medicine and the Sourasky Medical Center in Tel Aviv

[3] Richter, Shira, (2006) From the Catalogue of *The Mother, Daughter and Holy Spirit* – Photography and text project . Self Published

[4] Scheflan-Katsav, Hadara (1997) a possible historical aspect to the representation of the mother. The section about Boaz Tal (editor), *Ho-Mama*, pg, s 20, Ramat Gan. The Ramat Gan Museum of Israeli Art.

[5] Ibid, Page 21

[6] Ibid.

[7] Dekel, Tal (2011) *Memugdarot (Gendered) Art and feminist theory in the nineteen seventies in the United States*. Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad/Red line.

[8] See for instance: Chodorow, Nancy (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of Berkeley Press; Rich, Adrienne (1978). *On lies, secrets, and silence – Selected prose*. W.W. Norton and Company, NY: New York.

[9] Winnicott, Dr. (1996) "Playing and Reality" Tel Aviv: Am Oved, pg.

[10] Mikhail Bakhtin "Rabelais and his world" Indiana University press, Bloomington, USA, 1984, pg 26

[11] From an interview with Noa Tsdaka, 2011

[12] See note #3 above.

Translator's notes:

* Ee-Mahoot, in Hebrew, has three simultaneous meanings: Motherhood, An island of substance, Non –Substance.

** "Birth Vacation" is the formal definition of the three month maternity leave in Israel.