



Interview with Megan Wynne

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Interview conducted by Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee

Interview edited by Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee

Megan Wynne is a conceptual artist who lives and works in Chesapeake, Virginia. Her work is an investigation of maternal mental health, ambivalence, the shifting power

dynamic of the mother-child relationship, and prevailing notions of what embodies a “good” “healthy” or “normal” mother. She holds a BFA in sculpture from Pratt Institute and an MFA in New Genres from San Francisco Art Institute. Her work has been exhibited internationally at spaces such as MF Gallery in Brooklyn, NY, Stills Center for Photography in Edinburgh, UK, Aggregate Space in Oakland CA, Root Division in San Francisco, Artist/Mother Podcast, and in Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art. Her work has also been in multiple publications including *Elephant Magazine* and *Bust Magazine*, *How Art Can Be Thought* by Allan deSouza (Duke University Press 2018), *The British Journal of Photography* and *Maternal Art Magazine*.

Emily Underwood-Lee: Do you identify as mother/artist and what does that identification mean, either positively or negatively?

Megan Wynne: I feel like that's a tough question because that title has so much baggage, and I want to fight it. So part of me wants to say ‘no’

but part of me also wants to rebel against the negative associations I have with that word. I'm kind of conflicted about it. It's a really hard question to answer but in my answer you are going to get an idea of how I feel about that word and its associations with not being a full artist, instead being like a niche artist, making niche work that's not for everyone. I resent that. I resent making work with the pressure of needing to 'be appropriate' in some way, like appropriate for children to see, Puritanistic constraints on motherhood that I believe are put on that term. So I have a lot of conflict with that term.

Emily: Can I just pick up on something you just said about the work being appropriate for children to see? That's really interesting and something that hasn't arisen in any of our conversations around this. Your work is often collaborative with your children. That collaboration opens up the question of whether your children consider themselves to be authors in the artworks as well. And why does it need to be appropriate for children to see? Can we not make artwork that's maternal that is absolutely unsuitable for children to see?

Megan: Exactly. I feel that sometimes in my own community I get 'side-eye' about the work I make, even when I'm using my kids in a way that's totally appropriate for everyone. But it's about this idea that they're not giving their consent. Yet, at the same time, for me to really talk about my experience as a mother, I can't think, "Oh, I need to make work that's appropriate for children to see". That's not my job and that has nothing to do with how I feel about being a mother. I need to make work about being a mother because of the feelings I feel and because of the assumptions or pressures placed on women as mothers working under or with those rules. I have an urge to fight that. It's not like I make work that's inappropriate for children to see in general, but I

make work that touches on ideas that butt up against that assumption. That is, I make work which in any reading of it isn't all just nice and simple.

Lena Šimić: Obviously there's a difference in how we perceive ourselves as mothers and how we perceive ourselves as mother/artists or artists making work around maternal themes, taking into consideration the ethics of making that work too. Do you have an ethical position as an artist who engages with maternal work or work with your children?

Megan: I do, and it's something that I've thought about. I keep revisiting over, and over again, and it's come up a lot recently. Because people started stealing my work from my Instagram page. People take my work with my children in it and they make memes out of it. They even watermark the images as their own and frame the work with their own intention to sell things. For example, I had a plastic surgeon use my work without asking. It was Home Birth, it is constantly stolen and was just stolen by a huge baby product company on Instagram just a couple days ago.¹ The Plastic Surgeon was an Instagram account trying to sell "mommy makeovers", my work ended up on Reddit with forty thousand upvotes. Someone had put a Durex condom ad symbol in the corner of the image with me and my children. It was a joke about not having kids. My kids were in the image with me with marker all over my face. I was holding my kids and my daughter's breastfeeding.² It's an oversimplification of my work. It's gotten complicated because I know what I'm doing but then I can't control what other people do with my

¹ For more information see *Home Birth* (2015) <http://meganwynne.net/work/second-child>.

² For more information see *Mask of Motherhood* (2016) available at <http://meganwynne.net/work/mask-motherhood>.

work. The most offensive thing to me is stealing my work as an artist. So my work and my kids is getting complicated in that way.

I feel pressure on me to not use my kids in my work. I've been told that I shouldn't because they can't give consent, which I agree with. We as caregivers make them do things all day long, every day, that they don't actually have a choice to do or not do, and I know that I am doing what I'm doing with integrity for how I feel about them and my position as their mother. I know I'm doing it for the right reasons and I'm thinking about them when I do it. The work is about me and it's not even about them. But they're there, they're part of my life, and they're always with me. They're in it but it's about my experience and omitting them or my experience is a silencing for me. To say women can't talk about their kids is just another aspect of silencing mothers and women.

I always bring up the diaper aisle where you find naked baby butts. Do those parents get hate mail? For some reason in the realm of art I'm held to this standard that's totally not held to in any other situation. For example, with the parent of a child actor or a parent who puts their kid in a dance recital, they're on a stage or their image is even printed on a product for everyone to see and they can't fully give consent either. I do take the criticism seriously and I really think about it. I think about it all the time. I've thought about it for years. Again, I keep going back to the fact that it is a double standard that silences me as an artist and a mother. I think that it's an insult to all of us.



Megan Wynne, *Home Birth* (2015)

Emily: So there are two things here, the devaluing of your work as an artwork and the de-contextualising of your work, the issue of copyright, your integrity, and the framing of the work, and also the issue that every parent has to consider when putting images of their children in the public domain or on social media. So the debate about showing images of your children publicly on Instagram is no different than any other parent would have.

Megan: Yes, a third issue is a financial issue. It's a class issue. This is how I show my work. I do not have the money to print out giant prints of my work and mail them around the world. So for me to engage with human beings I use the Internet. If I don't do that I don't have a career. I can't afford to apply to shows and I'm put in a double bind. As mothers and women that sounds so familiar, doesn't it? A big aspect of that is that I have met so many amazing people. This is where my

career exists. This is why I have a career and I make my work in such a way, not intentionally, that it's easily shareable on the Internet.

Lena: Before you became a mother were you an artist as well or how did it happen in terms of your artistic career? Were you always making autobiographical work in some sense, even before you had kids, or has it come to you through having children?

Megan: I didn't feel like I was a mature artist until I had kids. I always had some existential conflict with art making, with not knowing my purpose. I always made autobiographical work, that was vulnerable, personal and about my relationships. When I had kids I think it really fell into place for me, my sense of purpose. Because I'd never been in a more intense symbiotic relationship before.

Breastfeeding opened a whole new world of feminist rage for me: the judgment, the pressure and the wanting to hide it. "Why am I being expected to hide?" and just feeling so distraught. It was awful. Also, it was such an incredible healing process for me in terms of my relationship to my own body.

Lena: I'm interested in your ambivalent position to being called a mother/artist or identified as a mother/artist. Of course, many women have a very ambivalent position towards becoming a mother. There's a similarity in that it is a hate/love relationship. So I wonder, do you attempt to also showcase your work outside of what we would say are maternal art contexts?

Megan: Yes, definitely I do, although the network of people that I found through the maternal art realm has been amazing and essential to my career and my sense of belonging and place. To juxtapose myself to,

and to see other ways that mothers are working on the subject has been really enlightening. But I do show my work in other places and ways. The Internet and my Instagram page are one example.

Emily: Our project is framed around maternal performance and we're writing about your work. We're framing your work within a context of performance and more often I see your work framed within the context of visual art practice, or fine art practice. But, for us, we see it as performance because you're performing actions to camera and using your live body to do that. Do you identify as a performer at all? Does the form of performance speak to you at all?

Megan: I probably consider myself a performer more than I consider myself a visual artist in many ways because I actually grew up as a dancer. My first career plan was to become a professional tap dancer. I was going to run away from home! My dance teacher was going to help me fix my car so I could go to New York and study at the Broadway Dance Center. But I couldn't major in tap dancing in college. So I went into art as a fallback.

Emily: Funny to think of art as a safety back up career.

Megan: I know. My birth mother is an artist so I never wanted to be an artist because of her. I had negative feelings about that. I resisted it my whole life. I don't enjoy sitting down and drawing. I like teaching it. But I don't do art for fun. But I do dance for fun. That is my bliss. Performing is where I find my bliss. I've been dancing since I was two. I performed at a recital in my old dance school a couple of years ago with my best friend who now is the Assistant Director there. So, yes, I consider my work and my process very performative.

Emily: And do you see anything unique about performing as a means of representing the maternal or maternal experience? We are making the argument that performance is well placed to represent the maternal philosophically and formally.

Lena: We are trying to ask questions about to which degree performance is aligned with maternal experience as opposed to any other art form.

Megan: I can speak to my own experience as everyone identifies with processes differently. The act of mothering is a physical act of engagement with your children. And you're going through the motions of performing motherhood in your mothering. You do a behaviour, or you treat your children in a certain way, or you say certain things and you see your mother in yourself. Or you're reminded of a cliché of a mother or stereotype and you think, "This is not how a mother is supposed to act or perform". In the daily act of mothering I do that all the time. Just yesterday I was teaching my kids about the solar system using an alternative mnemonic device for the order of the planets: 'My Very Evil Mother Slaps Ugly Narwhals'. Even though I was joking around, I was attempting to subvert the conventional role of the mother while doing it. I very methodically suggested the idea of calling a mother evil and spoke of a violent act taken against an innocent being for how they look. I broke three rules of being a "good mother" there in that statement. But I thought that by breaking those rules and even my own values, as a joke, that it would help them remember the order of the planets more effectively. It was a performance of rule breaking. There's definitely a strong alignment with performance in the act of mothering.

Also, in terms of me working with my kids, I have a piece called *Home Birth* (2015) and it's of my daughter coming up under my legs while I'm on the toilet, and that is something that she did naturally.³ We restaged it together because it's a performative motion that is natural, but one that we could also reperform. I'm trying to come up with the words to describe what I'm thinking. But there's something about motherhood in my own experience of making work about it in which it is reframing the everyday in a performative way but asserting that the every day is not banal and everyday. There's some sort of strange nuance and recognising of it through the performance of the everyday. “

Lena: There is a re-enactment of the everyday which is reframed as a performance or as an art form which happens with mother/artists who are obviously aware that they are creating art out of their everyday experiences. You said that it is in these performative motions that we notice the mothering, and, of course, it's very bodily.

Megan: Yes, its so bodily. Motherhood is so bodily. It's painfully bodily in so many ways, and also beautiful in that way. I'm talking about breastfeeding as reframing my whole understanding of my physical body.

Emily: Through my experience with pregnancy I certainly got respect for my body.

Megan: Oh, yes. Pregnancy too. My belly. It's like, “I'm supposed to look like this. Look at my beautiful body”. It's a total reframing and then you have to be careful of being pigeonholed with thinking such as, “Oh, the maternal body is so chaste” and that's all you are.

³ For more information see <http://meganwynne.net/work/second-child>.



Megan Wynne, *All We Have* (2020)

Emily: What kind of subjectivities do you want to embody in your work? For example, when you're talking about being more than the chaste maternal mother or the very evil mother.

Megan: It's tough because it's so personal. You have anxiety around being good enough and not following the negative examples that I have before me that haunt me as a person. This intergenerational haunting is something that I think about a lot in terms of my personal experience. It is so often glossed over and not touched on how intergenerational trauma and pain is a conduit. Mothers get such a bad rap

because the conduit is so directly and so easily travelled through them, they're the ones traditionally forming the little baby brains, minds and perspectives. They're the first perspective. Your kids are seeing through your eyes in many ways because you help them form opinions about the world, which includes the things that have haunted and negatively affected you. I think that's part of the reason why mothers have that huge burden. Mothers get a really bad rap for that but what else are we going to do? This is all we know. So we're going to parent them from that perspective and that power we have can be just like the evil mother power or whatever. It's the traumatised human trying to raise children but the narrative of motherhood is sold to us in this "pure", falsely narrow way.

Emily: Do you think about that in terms of raising daughters particularly? It's something I feel very consciously in raising my daughters - that I either perform this self-sacrificing support that gives them everything or I model this strong woman who I want them to grow into, and the two are constantly in conflict.

Megan: Yes, especially as an artist with an art career. Is it better to show them a mother that is going to leave to go to work so they can look up to her later on and say, "Well, my mom was a good mom because she gave me an example and gave time to herself?" I don't think either of my kids want to be mothers and I wonder if it is because they see my life and think, "Oh no!". Yes, that conflict also of, "I'm here with you giving myself to you". Like yesterday we were decorating the whole front yard for Halloween, and that was my afternoon after home-schooling them (because of COVID) all day long. What is the right choice? I guess there's a balance but I can't be trusted to live a balanced life. That's not something that I know how to do. I don't know what balance is.

Lena: There are so many different versions of mothers and which one, in the end, we choose to represent or enact is a really tough one. I think we are all struggling with similar issues in terms of dedication of time to the children but also showing this more independent side of us. This conversation reminds me Jacqueline Rose's book, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018), where she writes about how such a burden is placed on mothers that they have to hold the whole world on their shoulders.⁴ You were saying that an infant, is first confronted by this potentially traumatised individual who has to suddenly give the world

⁴ Rose, Jacqueline (2018) *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. London: Faber.

to them and represent the world. It's an incredibly tough burden. But I guess where the power of art or performance lies is that we can expose those inconsistencies or those issues in our different forms.

We have a question about maternal aesthetics. Do you think there is such a thing? You've been a part of the context of maternal art and obviously you have your own developed aesthetics as an artist. Would you say that there is such a thing as maternal aesthetics? Can we talk about in this way?

Megan: I think there's a stereotype in terms of maternal art making which I hope to subvert. But there is also a stereotype of feminist art making. When I was growing up I was of that generation that distanced myself from feminism because it felt like we didn't need it anymore. I wasn't consciously doing this but it was like this idea that I was a cool girl because I was like a boy. For example, when I was a teen I always kept band aids in my purse just in case anybody needed one and people would say, "Oh, you're like a mom" and I'd respond, "No, I'm like a boy scout". I didn't want to identify as being like a mom. There is also the idea that feminist art is didactic and in your face. I think of Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). I remember seeing that in grad school and thinking, "Oh, this is not funny. It's just obnoxious".⁵ It's like not being able to get it because you're embarrassed. There's some sort of internalisation of shame wrapped around being a woman and a mother and seeing how other people are seeing you and being afraid of that. I'm still working on that. I don't need to prove myself and be aggressively against making work that might come off as too saccharin or too celebratory of motherhood. So when you say the aesthetics of

⁵ For more information see <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/88937>.

mothering in terms of art, for me, the stereotype is celebrating motherhood or this relationship (similar to feminist art) of making work about housework. Personally, I've been resistant to that. I do feel it could be internalised misogyny on my part but then you want to continue the conversation too. I want to feel like I have something to add to the dialogue of mothering.

Lena: So that you insert yourself into the feminist art conversation. So that your voice matters. I completely agree with you in terms of this problem of embarrassment or shame about being a feminist mother/artist. There is this idea that you are being boxed in but, of course, you can make that your weapon as well and speak out. It's a good one in certain contexts, to put it out there and feel embarrassed.

Emily: Can I ask about humour? I find a lot of your work extremely funny. There's a lot of humour in there. So with your comment about not wanting to be didactic, I just wonder if humour is almost a direct or conscious response to that anti-didactic approach?

Megan: Yes, I think so. It's funny because the humour disturbs people too. Some people find it funny but some people find it more disturbing than funny. Or the fact that I'm trying to be funny is what's disturbing. I enjoy this aspect of it because I like the idea of this kind of psychological playing with ideas. It's not like I'm playing with the viewer or making a joke of them but I'm doing it with myself. When I make a successful piece it makes me feel weird and I can't really put my finger on it. I'm always trying to find that kind of magic where I've perplexed myself. I think that I try to use the humour to talk about anxiety because there's that anxiety of the play between being uncomfortable and funny, and I'm talking about the anxiety of motherhood by doing

that. But again, it's like I want to know myself and I want to know how to make good work. Yet I also don't want to solve the mystery too much for myself either because I want it to still be exciting, fascinating, and mysterious for myself. I make work for myself too.

Emily: The two pieces that we wanted to look at really closely in our are writing are your video pieces *My Puppet* (2014) and *Affirmation* (2018).⁶ They particularly spoke to me about this moment of *jouissance*. The moment when you've birthed this new person into the world but your subjectivity is still so intermingled with them. The point where your identity as an artist and the pieces you are making couldn't exist if there wasn't this intermingled subjectivity. Where you are separating from but also absolutely co-dependent with the baby. The things that you have shared really spoke to me about that moment because we're looking at the early stages of maternal subjectivity in relation to the baby through your work. Your works allow me a glimpse into somebody else's moment of finding their identity in relation to a new child. I find it really fascinating to be able to share an understanding, quite powerfully, about that moment. Could you talk a little bit about those pieces specifically? Is there anything you'd like to say about them?

Megan: *My Puppet* was the first piece I made about motherhood and about my personal experience of being a mother. I was too stressed out with first kid in the early days of the birth but this piece was really important to me in terms of realising my voice and the strange dynamic

⁶ For more information see <http://meganwynne.net/work/my-puppet-2013> and <http://meganwynne.net/work/affirmation-2018-i-am-professional-artist>

of interconnectivity that I had with her as a baby. My second child was very young then, she was three or four days old.



Megan Wynne, *My Puppet* (2014)

I'm going back in time in my head now. I can hardly watch the piece myself because I find it so disturbing. But that was intentional. I went about it with this idea of being a character, while at the same time speaking this kind of exaggerated underlying true feeling. I was thinking about the idea of the bad mother as a character and what a bad mother would say, and my fear about the feeling inside myself. I was fearful about identifying with those feelings of self-sacrifice. I've always resented that. It's a feminist thing. It's the mother wound thing. It's the seeing that in your mother and being disgusted by it. Then being disgusted with yourself but then also being someone who went through actual real trauma that needs to be addressed. Yet still going about things in a kind of tongue-in-cheek and humorous way which complicates things and makes things kind of mucky. That was what I

was thinking of when I made that piece. I feel like that piece is successful for me because it's disturbing to me.

Lena: What's your relationship with the camera? Is camera your first audience? Because obviously you must first of all make it for the camera and then decide to distribute it as artwork. So do you have a relationship with a camera?

Megan: I think of the camera like an extension of myself. It's like with our phones now. I don't think I even had a phone back then. I think I was using a video camera. But how people use cameras now is just an extension of their own eyes. That's how I was thinking about it and I really feel like that level of intimacy is something I'm really interested in. The video is so intimate, it's right up in her face. It's so quiet and dark, and you can hear her little newborn nostrils breathing. It's like real life but accentuated and focused in with the context cropped out. So it's like a hyper reality.

Lena: You've reminded me of some of the images I took of my newborn children before the age of phone cameras. When it seemed to be much more of a decision to do it, to say "I'm going to pick up this camera and take photographs". Now, as you say, the phone camera is an extension of ourselves. We don't even think about it. We take a selfie or we record each other. But these particular images you made in *My Puppet* were before this proliferation, so it was different, possibly more sinister somehow. Video is an interesting medium because it stands in for an audience eye before an audience arrives later on.

Megan: But it's almost like the audience is me because the audience is looking at my child. But at the same time I understand that relationship because at the same time I wasn't talking for myself. So it's like building

a character and that disgust of embodying that character and then putting it on for the audience and trying to have the audience feel that same feeling of repulsion. As an artist, as I make it, I just go with this gut feeling. But I can totally break it down now. I can totally understand why I did it that way in terms of creating that audience eye. Because I wasn't speaking for myself either. I was creating a role. Then being that role was gross. It felt gross and I want the audience to feel that same level of discomfort.

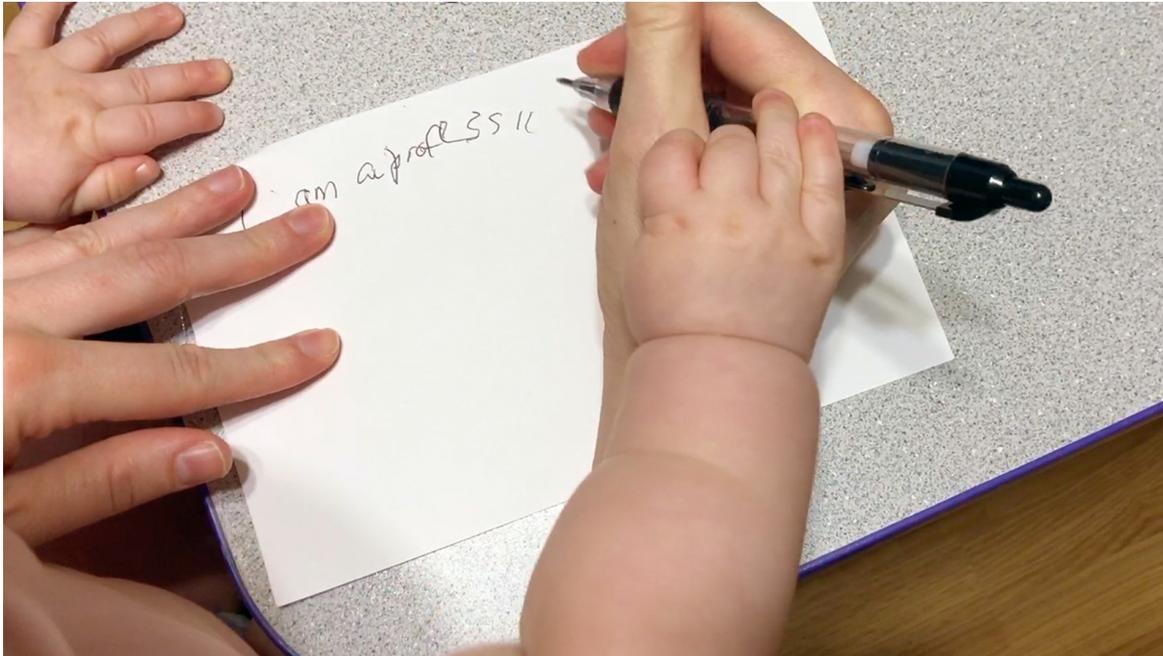
Lena: Yes, disturbed. I feel that there is a great potential in maternal themes for disturbance, or for an unsettlement.

Emily: You said that you act on gut instinct as you are making your art. What's your process in terms of editing and selecting what you share, for example in your video piece *Affirmation (I am a professional artist)* (2018)?⁷ So what's the process after the initial point of making?

Megan: Does the image look cool? Not to dumb down my work too much. I ask if there is something surreal in it that's kind of off balance. I know how to speak my artistic language now, so compositions become intuitive. It's almost hard to talk about at this point. A lot of it is about framing and eliminating extraneous information and having it be an aesthetic experience. I still get excited about trying to put that all together and have it be meaningful but also be cool-looking. So, yes, it's been from the gut a lot of time up to this point in my life, so it's hard to talk about. But it's about timing also. In the video you're talking about, *Affirmation*, I was trying to write something. My child was sitting on my lap and I was trying to write something for myself, just a note. But he would not let me write it down. He kept grabbing at my pen. That piece

⁷ For more information see <http://www.meganwynne.net/work/affirmation-2018-i-am-professional-artist>.

took a second to make. It was just like, “What if I tried to write I am a professional artist”. I was like, “Blade (my husband), hold my cell phone for a second”. Then I did it three times and that was it.



Megan Wynne, *Affirmation (I am a professional artist)* (2018)

I feel that, for me as an artist, the work that I like the most is work that's just teetering on the edge of garbage. It's like this kind of momentary thing that just happened in the right place at the right time. It's not an expensive production when everything is thought up perfectly and is very sophisticated and slick. For me, the magic is in that rawness and the moment. So, it's like unlearning everything you're taught in school about how artists are supposed to make work that I feel such an emotional connection to. That kind of magic, balance and discord happening all at the same time. This is just my philosophy. I think simplicity in art is too often overlooked.