

NEW YORK

Justine Kurland

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

The celebration of motherhood hasn't been a favored subject for artists since Impressionism and the early-twentieth-century movements on which its influence is immediately discernible. German Expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, for example, is renowned for her intimate portraits of mothers and their children (which look back to Renaissance portraits of Mary and the infant Jesus), as well as for her nude self-portraits in nature. What is unique about her art is the visualization of a subjectivity that is decidedly feminine. Indeed, taken at face value, Modersohn-Becker's oeuvre portrays a modern-day cosmology with an entirely female cast of characters. She presents the female body and the experience of motherhood from the inside out, making images that refuse the voyeuristic overtones of those of many of her male counterparts.

Like a latter-day Modersohn-Becker, Justine Kurland goes against the grain by taking up the subject of motherhood without any apparent ambivalence about maternity. Kurland gives her all to fashioning a female cosmology—a Garden of Eden without Adam—grounded in the fertility of nature and modeled as a communal matriarchal culture. In fifteen color photographs that made up a show titled “Of Woman Born,” Kurland weaves a visual fiction of a place beyond time. A tribe of pregnant women, together with their infants and young children, inhabit this unspoiled scenic environment. Traveling from rocky ocean shorelines to sunny mountaintops, from spectacular waterfalls to verdant pine forests, implying a nomadic way of life for her subjects, Kurland directs her cast of mamas and babies in idyllic pursuits that point in the direction of paradise. But one woman's paradise can be another's prison. Remember when feminist debate first erupted over the waning viability of conventional gender roles, and over the problematic of



Justine Kurland,
The Milk Sucker, 2006,
color photograph,
40 x 30".

nature (feminine) versus culture (masculine)? Kurland's audacious photographs revisit that moment but push purely ideological concerns aside in favor of images that satisfy the artist's sensibility without being the least bit self-conscious or defensive about their apparent promotion of the virtues of motherhood or their reveling in a return to nature.

Kurland's interests are partly autobiographical—she's a new mother, grew up on a commune, and has a streak of wanderlust that she satisfies by taking road trips—but she's hardly alone in bringing a renewed focus to bear on motherhood. Dana Hoey, for example, has moved from working with adolescent models to addressing experiences of motherhood, while Pipilotti Rist and Catherine Opie both, in their own ways, revel in the beauty of the female body, and Andrea Zittel explores themes of domesticity.

But what sets Kurland apart from the growing number of women who unequivocally celebrate the most traditional of female roles is not only the pronounced fictional aspects of her pictures, but also the logistics of her practice. As with the work of her colleague Katy Grannan, who has solicited subjects via newspaper ads, you can't look at Kurland's images and not wonder about the backstory. This curiosity persists whether she leads us to contemplate teenage girls in a landscape, living

a dream of independence as reverse-gender Huckleberry Finns; or hippies in communes; or a congregation of nude pregnant women. Notwithstanding their dreamy qualities, Kurland's photographs exist as performance documents. They reflect her abiding interest in the collaborative process and in social networking and are an extended exploration of a “family of woman,” as well as of life off the grid.

—Jan Augikos