

Katharina Bosse(KB) in conversation with Nadine Droste(ND)

Katharina Bosse is an artist and professor of photography at the FH Bielefeld (Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences). She runs the Elsa Kunst &/ Raum in Bielefeld. Nadine Droste is director of Kunstverein Bielefeld.



*Mountains, 2007*



*Woods, 2007*



*Two Trees, 2005*

ND In 2004, you started to examine the representation of motherhood in your artistic work. The series titled *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Mother* was created, in which you portray yourself with your children, who were toddlers at that time. What motivated you to produce this photo series?

KB After living in New York for six years, I moved to Germany and became pregnant. Nothing in my career as a photographer and artist had prepared me for this experience. Not only were the physical demands of carrying and caring for the babies challenging, but it was also a forced change from everything I had learned so far: individuality, ambition, and workaholicism. I felt like a teenager again, changing rapidly into a new person, not knowing the outcome. I started to look for articles and images about this process and found lots of advice, but very few actual descriptions of the unsettling shift in identity I was experiencing. And so, over the course of five years, I brought to life two children and a series of photographs. I felt compelled to undress (or dress up) and create images of motherhood I had not seen before. I gave up control of the shutter release and got in front of the camera to extract a knowledge only my body could tell.

ND Depictions of mothers in the visual arts are certainly ideologically charged, especially when they are formulated from a male perspective. In your series, you question the claim to legitimacy of power that is expressed in the depiction of motherhood by breaking taboos.

KB The topic is the transformative power of motherhood to the woman, the experience of the *birth of a mother*. It is not a family portrait of the mother and children. It is a portrait of a mother, conceptualized by a mother.

ND What motives are you referring to specifically?

KB The overall concept is a mix-and-match of references and symbols, gained from art history as well as photo history and contemporary fashion photography. There is the Botticelli hair in *Cornfield* contrasting the pregnant belly and the prostitute's outfit (the female split identities of either Saint, Mother or

Prostitute combined in one body) and the almost holy love ensemble reminiscent of Mary, Baby Jesus and John the Baptist in *Woods*—with the light as a gothic cathedral, and thorns at the feet. I try to keep the Virgin Mary references at bay, but there is no way of avoiding them! In *Two Trees*, there are references questioning the German Nazi ideal of motherhood. In *Berge*, there is an amazing compositional similarity to Meret Oppenheim's *Würgeengel* (this one done unconsciously, I only discovered it later), and here the mother image is unsettling, but not deadly, with the witch holding the child quite maternally, close to her belly, pairing a hand-carved mask of traditional scary Carnival customs with the red cloak reminiscent of the Virgin Mary.

ND The series ended in 2009.

KB In photography, there are specific development states in which a direction takes place. First, it is most important for me to find the right location. After that, I do sketches of ideas in this location. I will decide on props and all colored elements and set up the camera, but after that, I am really at the mercy of the helpful people behind the camera. There are only 15 images on a roll of 645 120 film. After the pictures are taken, there comes a time in which I regain some level of control: in the darkroom and while editing the images. This process took a long time. I needed to digest, and grow. The book was published in 2011, two years after I finished shooting.

ND How was it received at the time of its publication and how do you perceive the work itself almost ten years later?

KB The work was featured in part at the Festival Images Vevey, Switzerland and at a gallery solo show in Paris in 2008. In Germany, people reacted from the gut, either liking or disliking it immediately. Several curators included selected works in shows, and it was a runner-up for the Gabriele Münter award in 2010. But overall it was not easy, there was a certain amount of dislike of the work and I lost a bit of support I had worked hard to obtain as an artist. In 2011, the Kunsthalle Bielefeld took a leap of faith and showed all 12 large format pieces, and added a text

to the book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mother* that was published in both France and Germany. Looking back, the reception in France was very important for the continuation of the work. It was received as provocative and got a lot of media attention, but there was an existing discourse in which to place it. In Germany, so many images were taboo, and I still don't see them around: mothers being sexual, artistic, independent, ambivalent, and above all, thinking.

ND Has the representation of motherhood changed in today's contemporary art? And additionally, has the image of the artist as a producer changed under current conditions?

KB I don't feel a big change. Unfortunately, women 20 years younger than me seem to be grappling with quite the same contradictions I did. I wish there were a group of big shot Mother Artists, it is such a powerful combo!

ND You are not only an artist and mother, but also a professor at the FH Bielefeld (Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences) in the department of photography. How do you think the younger generation deals with the representation of women in general and the representation of motherhood in particular?

KB Questions of gender and identity have always been of interest, especially in that age group. When I was young, photography was 90 percent male. As a female student, I was an exception, so that was quite different. In the last 20 years, in which we have had more gender equality among the photography students, I see ongoing interest in these topics. Motherhood is more of an interest to the students around thirty.

ND On a practical level, what questions do you see young female artists facing today? Can they free themselves from prevailing gender-specific images? What is your advice to them as a professor?

KB I feel that the younger female artists are questioning gender issues, but while at university it is a personal exploration, and afterward, when it comes to etching out an existence within the world of art and photography, the struggle is existential. It is related to being visible, getting jobs, and exhibition opportunities. From a professor's perspective, we discuss topics like *male* and *female* gaze in class regularly to create awareness. I also offer insights into the importance of networking and other choices that affect a career. And I present them with a photographic canon that is 50 percent female photographers. However, the time when gender inequality hits hardest is after graduation, a few years into the business. This is the time when my former students need advice and encouragement most, and I am generally happy to stay in touch. I'd like to mention it here as advice: good networking is a give and take that kind of goes on for a while. It is not an umbilical cord providing one-way nurturing you need to cut at some point. Resist that voice telling you to "do it alone". That voice is gender-specific, and it will trip you up. My advice is to be more aware, to think more long-term, and to reactivate older networks from time to time.

I think it is very important to understand the circumstances under which art is produced. I cannot stress this highly enough: art is not created on your own. The successful artists all have a support system, often including not only professional support like a gallery, but also family, peer groups, and other networks.

ND The network Female Photographers, of which you are a part, was founded in 2019 and is an association of female artists who negotiate feminist themes in their photographic works, and who exhibit and publish together. What role does the question of motherhood play in this context?

KB I think it does on some level, as both of the founders are mothers. The first book, the *Body Issue* includes a wide variety of photographs dealing with identity and bodies, and the theme of motherhood is among the array of content. I also like that the network consists of women of different generations and cultures. We can always hope that the art market will change to include more women, but I think the best bet is changing the public funding and private foundation guidelines. Women

are cut off from grants more than men. There should be way more opportunities to bring your kids to a residency, and ways to apply for *emerging artist* funding without the age cutoff at 35 or 40, as these are exactly the child-rearing years.

ND What possibilities do you see for undermining heteronormative representations of motherhood from the perspective of the visual arts?

KB Thank you for that question. I think it is as much about the conditions of art production as the art itself. I feel the experience of motherhood has inspired not only the work dealing with the topic of motherhood but has led me to question the established systems of art production on a deeper level. Before I became a mother myself, I believed what I had been told by our culture: that mothers were almighty and to blame for almost anything. Only when I became a mother did I see through this ideological bullshit, and I saw how the description of mothers is made up by grown-up men, and women, who look at them through the eyes of the children they once were. Only mothers themselves can change their stories. Although there are some beautiful images by fathers, too.



*Cornfield, 2006*