

Jessica Gardner
Artist Statement

My work has traditionally been a subtle reflection of the introspective nature and self-assessment that form the pillars of my personality... and then I had children. Suddenly, my tendency toward diplomacy in life and in my art gave way to exhaustion and turmoil. This body of work reflects the simultaneous elation and emotional erosion that coalesced into my experience of motherhood in modernity.

My experience of motherhood has been a challenging one. I breastfed, but not exclusively for a year. I am a cuddly mom, but not a co-sleeper or a Moby-wrap mom. Finding the balance from my myriad options has often been as overwhelming as motherhood itself. I began to think that only modern motherhood came with this many unrealistic expectations but quickly realized that though the digital dissemination of expectations is unique to modern society, unrealistic goals are certainly not. Historical renderings of the Madonna and child do not have her covered in spit up and crying from exhaustion. Her depicted perfection compounded my sense of failure as I confronted my messy daily life, conflicted hormonal emotions and feelings of ineptitude. My initial sense of guilt at my deficiencies was soon joined by frustration that the Madonna did not represent motherhood as the visceral experience it is – the physical and emotional changes that extend beyond pregnancy and giving birth or even breastfeeding that indelibly alter you for better or for worse.

“Mother’s Meditation” uses the perfect mother as a starting point for a calendar of my experience of motherhood. I created a plaster mold that was then slip-cast or press-molded daily, and the resulting figure was altered based on my experience/feeling about being a mom that day. Some happy, some defeated, these figures illustrate the reality of everyday life and the struggle to be the best mother possible.

Other works, including “I wish I could sustain you,” which discusses the pressure to breastfeed exclusively, incorporate re-fired found objects. These pieces are covered with altered and over-fired decals reminiscent of eroded wallpaper and faded quilts. Their traditional imagery is intended to be simultaneously comforting and intrusive when paired with advice from merchants, medical professionals and opinion bloggers. Acronyms from Mommy Blogs are also scattered through the conversations, making some messages elusive. These words of wisdom are exclusive to a set of media-savvy moms with the time to learn the secret code. The popular acronyms themselves – DS (Dear Son), DD (Dear Daughter), DH (Dear Husband), DuM (Dumb Mommy – there is no acronym listed for dumb husband) – set a subtle expectation for the club members and may discomfit those who don’t fit. And so began the cultural phenomena, which my piece “Mommy Wars” explores – a conflict between exhausted souls who need validation and support but instead spend their remaining synaptic power arguing with strangers online.

I view my work as hopeful but also painfully honest. Home is where the heart is, but our heads are filled with the expectations of motherhood in modernity.