



The bitter-sweet embrace of motherhood

BEDLAM

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

GALLERY ONE



BEDLAM

THE BITTER-SWEET EMBRACE OF MOTHERHOOD

In this exhibition Sophia Xeros-Constantinides extends her visual exploration of women's reproductive experiences and the maternal-infant relationship. Whilst acknowledging and celebrating the wonders of procreation, she is aware of the enormous risk and cost falling to women in their reproductive lives, not least in terms of mental health and well-being.

As artist, mother and clinician dealing with perinatal mother-infant distress, Xeros-Constantinides is well-placed to give representation to the breadth and depth of mother-infant exploits.

Bedlam: The bitter-sweet embrace of motherhood showcases current work alongside work from the recent past, in a variety of media, including drawing, printmaking, digital photography and collage. She uses collage as metaphor for the schisms and disruptions which confront women in their reproductive quest.

Xeros-Constantinides is currently undertaking research for a PhD in Fine Art at Monash University. Her work has recently been selected for exhibition in National drawing and printmaking exhibitions, including the Fremantle Print Prize. Her triptych drawing entitled *Nursling* (2009) was shown in the 2010 Swan Hill Print & Drawing Prize exhibition, and her 6-part drawing *Foundling* (2009) has been included in the 2010 *Beleura National Works on Paper* exhibition at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery.

GALLERY TWO



MYSELF AS A TREE

This exhibition exploring motherhood journeys has been curated by Sophia Xeros-Constantinides. In her capacity as a therapist, Xeros-Constantinides has collaborated with Maternal & Child Health Nurses in the East and Outer East (Maroondah, Knox and Yarra Ranges Shires) conducting Mother-Infant Therapy Groups for distressed mothers and babies. These Groups encourage self-expression, including the use of artistic media, as a means of promoting psychological healing.

Gallery Two displays imagery produced by mothers in these Mother-Infant Therapy Groups and other therapeutic settings. Some works are Group Projects exploring experiences of post-natal depression or distress, and other pieces are individual works. Participants across Groups have made work in response to the set theme "Myself as a Tree". These works are installed to great effect within the Gallery space, demonstrating particular sensitivity and expression.



Sophia Xeros-Constantinides *The scream* (detail) (2001) Charcoal on paper

The bitter-sweet embrace of motherhood

BEDLAM

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

*Bedlam**

(noun) a scene of uproar and confusion.

Uproar, pandemonium, commotion, mayhem, confusion, disorder, chaos, anarchy, lawlessness; furore, upheaval, hubbub, hurly-burly, turmoil, riot, ruckus, rumpus, tumult; *informal* hullabaloo, ructions.

OPPOSITES: calm

Origin from the name of the mental hospital of St Mary of *Bethlehem* in London.

*COMPACT OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, 2005

Curated by Wendy Garden

MAROONDAH ART GALLERY 7TH OCTOBER – 6TH NOVEMBER 2010



MONSTROUS MONTAGE

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides
Glovework: Fertile Imagination (Beige-gloved) (2008)
Photo-etch print on found kid-leather ladies' gloves

Motherhood is marketed to women as the natural fulfilment of their biological destiny. Popular culture disseminates photographic images reproduced in magazines, television and film of mothers as happy nurturers contentedly caring for their families. These images of mothering belie the complexity and conflict that is the reality for many new mothers. Sophia Xeros-Constantinides is an artist and clinician who works with perinatal mother-infant distress. Through her practice Xeros-Constantinides has become acutely aware of the gulf between the popular culture ideal of motherhood and the reality many women experience. According to Xeros-Constantinides 'pregnancy and birth are often disorientating and disruptive for women.' She speaks of the enormous risk child birth can bring to women's mental health and wellbeing. Her clinical work with mothers experiencing post-natal depression informs the body of work in the exhibition, *Bedlam: The Bitter Sweet Embrace of Motherhood*. Included in the exhibition are drawings and photographs but it is the photomontages that most evocatively express the schisms inherent in the experience of motherhood for many women.

Photomontage has long been deployed in political agitation. The Russian Constructivists used photomontage to critique oppressive political regimes, while John Heartfield's anti-Nazi images exemplify the ways in which photomontage could be mobilized as biting commentary. In the practice of Xeros-Constantinides montage is a strategy to critique the private. The second wave feminists declared the personal is political and this is played out in Xeros-Constantinides' interventions which bring to visibility the physical and psychic disjunctions of the maternal body.

Xeros-Constantinides appropriates images from magazines, nineteenth century medical atlases, contemporary medical texts and illustrated books which she cuts and recombines to take issue with popular culture images of motherhood and the medicalization of the maternal body in western science. Both produce knowledge of women's bodies that diminishes women's own authority, leaving many expectant and new mothers vulnerable to societal prejudices and persecution. Through slicing, cutting and tearing, violence is enacted upon the source imagery. This makes salient the latent anger that is masked by many women's despair.

In the series *Occasional Images from a Birthing Chamber*, 2009, the collages are based upon printed materials including photocopy, lithography and engraving. However their power arises from the juxtaposition of photographic imagery. Photography, as a mechanical medium of visual reproduction has a unique relationship to the real. The truth effect of photography has long been deployed in the lie of advertising and within medical science to convey knowledge of mental and physical disease. This is utilized by Xeros-Constantinides to rupture and expose the darker side of the mothering myth.

Photography's frankness is reconfigured into assemblages that foreground the psychic landscape of pregnancy and labour. The experience of trauma and loss, fracture and disjunction, terror and apprehension that can underlie experiences of pregnancy, labour and early motherhood, are graphically brought to the fore. Through re-membering, inside and outside mutate across the surface of the body. With antecedents in surrealism, the collages call up subconscious horrors in visually compelling images that trouble and disturb.

John Berger argued that the specific advantage of the photographic montage lay in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. This imbues photomontage with a sense of the uncanny. In Freudian psychoanalytic theory the uncanny, or the unhomely, was a form of absolute terror at the sight of something familiar made strange through repression. For Freud the mother's genitals, as the home of the unborn child epitomized the unhomely place. In the series *Occasional Images from a Birthing Chamber*, Xeros-Constantinides mobilizes the uncanny to transgress social boundaries to challenge accepted understandings of the maternal body. By intensifying the corporeality of the maternal body she makes strange the familiar to poetically evoke the subliminal anxieties childbirth engenders for women.

The individual works in the series depict the maternal body in a provocative retort to the reclining nude of the western art canon. Like the classical nude Xeros-Constantinides places each body within a domestic interior constructed from architectural elements of grand Italianate mansions or a boudoir. These interiors also allude to the womb - the body's internal spaces where the foetus grows and develops. The hint of a proscenium arch or draped fabric creates the sense of a stage upon which the inner psychic dramas unfold. Her interior landscapes do not flatten the picture plane but are constructed to permit spatial depth. The black and white square patterned tiling recalls Renaissance strategies for creating single point perspective, but whereas the didacticism of Renaissance painting reduced meaning, Xeros-Constantinides resists the fixity of a unified perspective. Rather the tiling is chopped up and reconfigured to fracture a seamless plane. Furthermore architectural features recede creating not just room to move but a potential escape route. The inclusion of blank, white space - areas where the surface of the paper support remains uncovered - presents an emptiness that opens up other possibilities. This is poignantly suggested in the image *Fallen*, perhaps the most despondent in the series. The figure in the foreground is depicted in a moment of despair, slumped over, her forehead resting on her arm. The crisp whiteness behind her is rimed by a cloud formation. The haloed effect speaks of flight into a place that promises serenity and hope and suggests her anguish will be transitory.

In contrast to this series, the figures in the *Embodiment* series, 2009, perform their internal dramas against an inky black backdrop. Again dismembered body parts are re-membered to bring to vision the murky depths of repressed fears. These mutant forms evoke the monstrous feminine. The maternal body has become abject, a term Julia Kristeva used in the *Powers of Horror*, to describe the undivided space of the mother/child which forever threatens the unity of the social subject. For Kristeva the abject is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.' It is that which is in-between, ambiguous, or composite. Kristeva describes the abject as 'the night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out... the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control.' In this series the abject is amplified and no longer restrained to privilege the displacement mothers feel, through the physical and mental disruption to their bodies. Bodily orifices and internal organs protrude from fleshy membranes. Skin fails to contain and primal anxieties morph into human shape. Redolent of human form the figures emerge from the dark depths like unspeakable ogres from the bowels of subconscious. These works both revile and fascinate. They permit a more intuitive response wherein the 'imponderable affect' is made possible.

In the work of Sophia Xeros-Constantinides the body is not so much an inscriptive surface upon which meaning is mapped but rather a container of hidden interiorities and cavernous depths. In this exhibition she unhinges the maternal body to lay bare the anguish and dread that lies at the heart of many women's experiences of maternity and early motherhood. Through a collision of the symbolic and the specific she explores the invisible mechanisms of alienation and the ambivalence women have with their changing bodies as a result of reproduction. By bringing to visibility deeply interred fears Xeros-Constantinides' monstrous montages reclaim the maternal body, intervening in the knowledge-struggles over early mothering and validating women's private experiences.

Wendy Garden
Curator
Maroondah Art Gallery

- 1 Sophia Xeros-Constantinides, artist statement, 2010.
- 2 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1982, p4
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp10-11.



BEDLAM THE BITTER-SWEET EMBRACE OF MOTHERHOOD

This exhibition lives up to its title and holds the viewer in a bitter-sweet embrace, as it explores the issues of motherhood, for it confronts its audience with a challenge to popular conceptions of the maternal experience. The joy and tenderness which shape our ideal of the mother baby relationship is cast into the context of bedlam, the anguished description of all that is chaotic sourced from the name of the mental hospital St Mary of *Bethlehem* in London, a synonym for despair and image of all that is terrible in human experience. This is no idle juxtaposition to sensationalize and feed the curiosity of the art faithful; rather it is the summation of years of clinical experience in which the artist, Sophia Xeros-Constantinides, has treated, counselled, empathized with and advised countless women whose experience of motherhood falls far short of the ideal and in many instances has resulted in chronic and desperate clinical conditions. The caring process has shaped the content of art.

This exhibition recounts the artist's experiences, drawn from events in her own life and from her clinical encounters. The work is challenging, even confrontational at times and invites the viewer, any viewer, to reassess what motherhood means. Xeros-Constantinides draws on the history of childbirth, recorded in prints and text from the Renaissance on, to place her work in an historic context. These visual sources demonstrate that the subject of maternal distress is not new, but just ignored over centuries, where events, emotions and the dreaded melancholia, were closeted within the home, neglected, overlooked and misunderstood, and for the those mothers under the sway of emotional trauma there

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

#1. *Green fabric swathe* from the series *Frolicworks* (2010)

Original collage, also enlarged as digital print

was no escape. This exhibition brings attention to this incipient problem, drawing open the curtains on the home, the bedroom and the feelings which, although unacknowledged, are integral to many women's understanding of birth.

The images move from the disturbing, with fragmented body parts and collaged distortions, as in the *Occasional Images from a Birthing Chamber* (2009) series, to surreal fantasy, as in the *Embodied* (2009) series. There is even some sense of the comic in *Cavort* (2010), and of the erotic also in the *Frolicworks* series (2010) – #1 (*Green fabric swathe*), #2 (*White tu-tu*) and #3 (*Bare back with leg raise*). This breadth of approach in the work helps raise the texture of the exhibition to allow for greater expressive range. However the overriding mood is harsh and disturbing. The fracturing of illusion and the sometimes bizarre representation of reality circumvents any enduring emotional respite – the work is intense, and focuses solidly on the nature of the birthing experience. It creates a dialogue; once the concept of maternity is questioned and its possibilities explicated beyond the romantic and ideal, the diverse nature of motherhood is explored. The work sets a dialectic in place, a debate between popular conception, with which most of us arrive, and the difference in the range of what motherhood might mean. Knowledge and imagination blend experience with fiction in expressive recordings of history and experience, interpreted to convey meaning. It is a process of learning which pervades the exhibition, the changing of belief in front of information and the reformulation of meaning in the context of understanding. What these works express we want/need to know: the artist's knowledge is distilled into imagery from which we can learn.

However the exhibition is much more than this. From a clinical perspective the show is informative and potentially changes our view of childbirth, but there is the aesthetic dimension, which in the end, is dominant. Xeros-Constantinides is an accomplished artist, proficient in her technical expertise across media, evident in the range of art forms in the exhibition, and accomplished in her understanding of the visual mode. Her work is not about words, but about the intensity of visual communication. The images speak articulately, fresh, clear and sharp, sometimes fragmented and collaged, always descriptive and sometimes, often even, filled with evocation. The story of birth is told and the feelings of motherhood are explored, from the most wrenching to the most sublime. The subtlety of line in the gentle flowing rhythms of *Foundling* (2009), exploring the nature of the birthing process, the tenderness and warmth of *Nursling* (2009) and the traumatic emotional intensity of images in the *Pandemonium* (2009) series, all tell a story, reflect some mother's reality, but transform the nature of the personal into the aesthetic, through technical skill and visual understanding. The works move from statement to expression as the evolving understanding of the many manifestations of motherhood progressively emerge.

This is vital work, rich in meaning, informative in content and moving in form. Sophia Xeros-Constantinides has used her insight and sensitivity to this most integral of female experiences, to shape images which live in the memory, because their meaning is relevant to us all. But the works also raise a general issue in regard to its subject matter and the representation of the birthing theme in art. While a dimension of the imagery relates to historic study, a further aspect reflects the artist's clinical observations and encounters. There is an intensely moving quality to the work, which comes, I suspect, from her own personal involvement in giving birth. It is this that shapes the centre of what the works express – the experience of the birthing process, with its myriad of attendant feelings and the highly individual meanings they reflect. There are emotions which cross the gamut of human experience, pushing mind, body and of course, heart to the limits of their potential. I would query whether it is possible for an artist other than a mother, to have created this body of work, or to have identified the diversity in what giving birth means, not in the description, which is a matter of observation and knowledge, but in the nature of how that description might be understood in the many varied ways each mother interprets and relates to it. This exhibition demonstrates the vast panorama of maternal emotion, from the devastating and desperate to the sensual and sublime, it is there for us to recognize and interpret through our own feelings and knowledge range. The work informs and it challenges, but the core of this exhibition is in how it moves us, how it invites us to empathise, for many of us, beyond the scope of what is possible in our own experience, with the diverse nature of motherhood.

This is an original body of work dealing with a theme of universal relevance. It creatively and imaginatively develops art which communicates from the shaded side of experience and draws it out into the light of day.

Professor Bernard Hoffert
Associate Dean, Graduate Studies
Monash University Faculty of Art & Design

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides *Hermaphrodite* (2010)
Original collage on paper, 23cm(h) x 25cm(w)
Also enlarged as digital print

My first acquaintance with Sophia Xeros-Constantinides was through her work as a therapist with high risk mothers and their infants. Her group runs an intensive program called Parent and Infant Relationship Support (PAIRS) with mothers who have experienced domestic violence, difficult births, teenage (and perhaps unwanted) pregnancies, substance abuse, and the like with the aim of decreasing maternal depression and increasing secure and positive attachment between mothers and their infants. I was asked to write a commentary on their findings, both of which were published in *The International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*. To my surprise and delight, I discovered Sophie's art when she asked me to write a commentary for this show.

Bedlam – an inspired title for this exhibition. The popular name for the Hospital of Saint Mary of Bethlehem, an insane asylum founded in the 16th century in London, bedlam is a place of uproar and confusion. Referring simultaneously to Bethlehem, the mythic marker of the virgin birth, and to the madhouse of London, we wonder whether maternity is the pure and sacred of the Marianists, or sent by the Christian Father to drive us mad?

Art and reality are inextricably intertwined in Sophie's artistic productions. In some sense, her inspiration may be derived from her clinical work with mothers who face fearsome and deep persecutory anxieties in relation to their pregnancies and later with their babies. But that is not the whole story. The maternal body, whether joyously welcoming or caught in persecutory anxiety, represents an aspect of displacement from the self. As much as we may romanticize the mysteries of pregnancy and childbirth, there is a colonization

that marks the maternal body and fractures it from itself. As Julia Kristeva argues in *The Powers of Horror*, the gendered body, inescapable in its maternity, cannot be entirely symbolized in its defilement, always owing its debt to nature. The maternal body is simultaneous with abjection and sacrifice, power and colonization, nutrition and defilement. Sophie represents this split in the maternal body through the visual displacement and fracturing of the body, externally "man-handled" and internally displaced, carrying its sac externally for all to see. In this sense, to quote Kristeva, the maternal body is "something to be scared of". And there are also moments of tenderness. The displaced soft small buttocks around the mother's neck may be seen not simply as a stranglehold, but as a gentle hug, a suggestion of sweetness to come. These part objects of infancy, prefigured in the displacement of the maternal body, these hints of bits of babies' bodies intertwined, not yet separate, from the maternal body, allow love to creep in.

Karen L. Lombardi PhD is a Professor at the Derner Institute for Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York and a psychoanalyst in private practice, seeing adults as well as infants and children. She is author, with Naomi Rucker, of *Subject Relations: Unconscious Experience and Relational Psychoanalysis*, published by Routledge, as well as the author of numerous journal articles. Some of her current interests are in cultural studies, gender, myths and fairy tales. She is also (perhaps primarily) a mother.



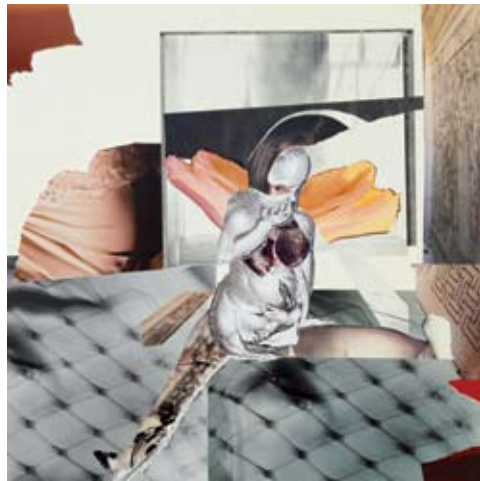


Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

L-R: #6 Feet First, #5 Swoon, #4 Chrysalis, #3 Birthing Reverie, #2 Anxious, #1 Fallen

All from the series *Occasional Images from a Birthing Chamber* (2009), otherwise

known as *Angelworks* (2009). Original collage on paper, each 50cm x 50cm





Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

Traceworks – L-R: *Untitled #2*, *Untitled #3* (detail) & *Untitled #1* (2010)

Collograph prints on paper with chine collé (Artist's proofs)

These works have been made with the assistance of Deanna Hitti of Rambunctious Press, Richmond

*Je me souviens de la matrice de ma mère
Elle était tendrement rosée
Et ses parois sentaient la peur.*

**Joyce Mansour, Déchirures, Paris:
Editions de Minuit, 1955, p.120.**

*I remember my mother's womb
It was delicately rosy
And its lining smelled of fear.*



Foundling (2009) extends Xeros-Constantinides' visual exploration of the female reproductive body and its offspring. Constructed over a number of weeks, using herself as subject, and drawing from observation with a mirror and her daughter's baby-doll, this work explores the ambivalence inherent in motherhood and the mother's struggle to find herself within the melee.

Birthing embodies the ultimate challenge to personal and interpersonal identity for the woman – physically and psychologically the integrity of the self is disrupted, as the baby presents itself in the public realm. The mother must relinquish certainties she took for granted, in her renewed search for self and for connection with the neonate.

A 'foundling' is defined as a young child abandoned by its parents, found and cared for by others. With this work, Xeros-Constantinides references the vulnerability of the infant, who waits for consistent maternal care and attention, and the vulnerability of the new mother searching for identity.

Foundling (2009) has been critiqued by Dr Vivien Gaston, academic and portraiture expert, in her essay prepared for the 2010 Beleura National Works on Paper Exhibition at Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery. She wrote:

Sophie Xeros-Constantinides' Foundling is an accomplished example of anatomical drawing, referencing Leonardo da Vinci's studies of a baby in utero or female anatomy. This is combined with a radical exploration of unprecedented subject matter, the physiognomic and psychological impact of birth on the mother, through images that depict the invasion of the mother's body by a creature that is part of that body but also an encroachment on it. The quality of the line is both analytic and exploratory, moving as if feeling its way around the skeleton and flesh.





Sophia Xeros-Constantinides
Foundling (2009) Charcoal on paper
88cm(h) x 94cm(w)
Box-framed sextet



Pregnancy throws into question body boundaries which since babyhood have defined the separateness of her [the procreative female's] own self within her own skin.....she is literally possessed by another: she throbs with the other's heartbeat, excretes his/her waste, is jolted into fitful waking, and stung to the quick with each lively quiver of the baby's being.....Integrity takes on a different meaning now that she has become divisible.

Raphael-Leff, *Pregnancy: The Inside Story* (1995)

Like the abject, maternity is the splitting, fusing, merging, fragmenting of a series of bodily processes outside the will or control of a subject. Woman, the woman-mother, does not find her identity as a woman affirmed in maternity but, rather, her corporeality, her animality, her position on the threshold between nature and culture...she takes on the status of the part-object, or breast for the child.

Grosz, *Sexual Subversions - Three French Feminists* (1989)



Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

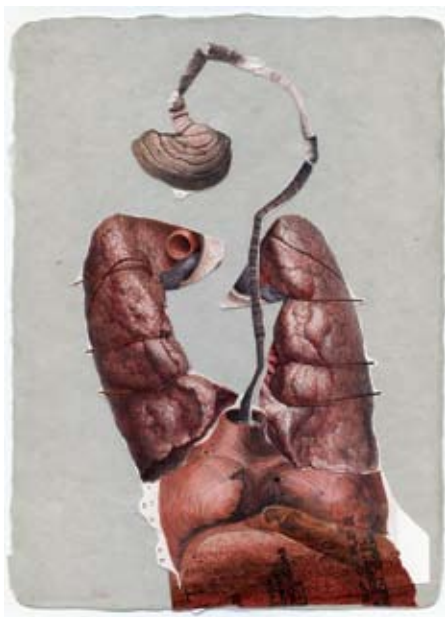
left: *Untitled #9* (detail)

above L-R: *Untitled #4*, *Untitled #2* & *Untitled #3*

from the series *Embodied* (2009)

Original collage on paper

Also enlarged as digital prints



Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

above: *Untitled #2*, *Untitled #17* & *Untitled #5*
from the series *Pandemonium* (2009)

Original collage on hand-made Japanese paper
20.5 x 14.5 cm approx

right: *White Tu-tu* from the series *Frolicworks* (2010)

Original collage

Also enlarged as digital print





Antique print showing the sacking of Smyrna, Asia Minor, September 1922.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL LEGACY

MY GRANDMOTHER YIAYIA'S
ASYLUM-SEEKER BABY

In memoriam

Uncle Nick from his loving niece

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

Melbourne July 2010

This poem was recognized in August 2010 by the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health (Victorian branch) with the award of equal first place in the inaugural Ann Morgan Prize for a piece of writing “contributing to our understanding of the inner world, and the relational world, of the infant”.

1. Karl Marx [1852]

2. Selma Fraiberg, Edna Adelson & Vivian Shapiro (1975) in *Ghosts in the Nursery: a psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships* in *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 14, 387-421

Dear little Nicholas...

Would that I'd been able to touch him then

It didn't manifest 'til later in life

I came to glimpse it after my visit to Birmingham when I took him a plant in a pot as a present

and he told me I had to take it away

He wasn't resourced to look after another living thing

Allergic to the responsibility of it

And he'd recoiled

He had his reasons

beyond his control.

Wise Marx his hero knew:

People make their own history

but they do not make it just as they please

They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves

but under circumstances directly encountered

given and transmitted from the past

The tradition of all the dead generations

weighs like a nightmare

*on the brains of the living.*¹

*A Ghosts in the Nursery*² thing

You see she was replete with grief herself,

his mother

My maternal grandmother

managing her own nightmare losses

after first born *Elephteria*

Liberty

died of pneumonia as a baby when they fled

the sacking of the Greeks in Smyrna

1922

She showed me the print of the slaughter when I was four or five

Used to take it out of the old *baolo* chest at the bottom of the stairs

where she secreted it away from sight

but not from mind

I saw the red blotches of blood spurts and the way the Turkish soldiers were

holding the babies

upside-down by one leg as they sliced through their tender bodies with

cutlasses

It looked bad to my little eyes.

I realised

he was imprinted from way-back when an infant himself in the arms of my *yiayia*

ever vigilant

he couldn't help it and I forgive him, my surrogate father,

a baby

in emotional terms himself

For hurting me so.

LIST OF WORKS

Works on display at *Bedlam* have been selected from the following:

Drawings on paper

Nursling (2009)

Triptych, Charcoal on paper
98cm (h) x 47cm (w) framed

Selected *Autograph* works (2009-2010)

Charcoal on paper

Each sheet 42.2cm (h) x 29.9cm (w)

The Scream (2001)

Charcoal on paper

Drawings on canvas

The Heaviness of Being (2001)

Mixed media on canvas

Puella (2001)

Mixed media on canvas

Angelworks

Occasional Images from a Birthing Chamber (2008-9)

Six original collages on paper

50cm (h) x 50cm (w)

Embodied series

Embodied (2009-10)

Selected works – Digital prints enlarged from original collages

Pandemonium series

Pandemonium (2009-10)

Selected works – Original collage &/or enlarged digital prints

Gloveworks

Photo-etch prints on found women's gloves

Frolicworks

Frolicworks (2010)

Selected works – Digital prints enlarged from original collages

#1. *Green fabric swathe*

#2. *White tu-tu*

Boudoir series

Hermaphrodite (2010)

Digital print enlarged from original collage

Cavort (2010)

Digital print enlarged from original collage

Traceworks

Untitled #1 - #3 Traceworks (2010)

Collograph prints with chine collé

Rorschach works

Rorschach works from the *Beget* series (2004-5)

Photoetch prints on Sommerset Rag paper

Foetusworks

Foetus works from the *Beget* series (2004-5)

Photo-etch prints on Japanese Silk Paper

Corpus luteum series

Corpus Luteum works (2003-4)

Digital prints on Duroflex photographic paper



MY SELF AS A TREE

ONE TOLD ME
clueless



this way — that way



resentful
Exhausted



home alone - bound



BLEAK



reflux colic



Dealing with pain



love for baby
Building a family
baby smiles
change & change



Bright



Regrowth



Instant Connection



I can do this



Feel

MY SELF AS A TREE

Over the last 13 years, Eastern Health has been proactive in offering interventions to distressed mothers and infants through conducting the PAIRS (Parent & Infant Relationship Support) Mother-Baby Therapy Groups as a means to psychological healing in the post-natal period. These have provided a life-line to needy Maroondah and Eastern Health families, at a critical time in their life-cycles. The Shire of Yarra Ranges, too, has recognised the importance of supporting mothers and infants through their 'CONNECT' Mother-Baby Group Program. Such Post-natal Group Therapy interventions help to nurture and support families by recognising the centrality of the early mother-baby relationship, and the importance of social connectedness at this time of change.

One mother (Anon., see tree image #16), when asked to depict her life as a tree, said of her post-natal experience: "I walk out of the house feeling trapped, anxious, alone, lost and overwhelmed. Breathe in the fresh air and feel better. Ah...there is a world out here after all. It's OK, everything is as it was, how it should be. Look, the sky is blue, I can feel a gentle breeze and see the trees blowing in the wind. Again I breath in and out. It's OK, there's a world out here. I focus on my feet on the ground, connected to the earth. I hear the birds singing. I feel the breeze on my face. I touch the trunk on the tree and wonder how long this tree has been standing here. Who planted it? How many women have stood before this tree in the past? How many will stand here after me? The wind picks up and blows all of the petals to the ground. So pretty and so fragile."

Another mother painted an umbilical cord floating in yellow fluid between two bodies (Kelly B, see image #12). She said of the painting: "It shows the space in the womb, which will be filled with love as baby grows."

The *My Self as a Tree* exhibition is a testament to the therapeutic and creative endeavour of participants who have had the courage to contemplate and share their motherhood journeys, often forged over rough terrain.

Dr Sophia Xeros-Constantinides M.B.,B.S

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides is involved in co-conducting the P.A.I.R.S. Therapy Groups (Parent & Infant Relationship Support) at Eastern Health Child, Youth and Family Mental Health Service, together with Maternal & Child Health Nurses in the Maroondah and Knox Shires. She is also involved in co-conducting the CONNECT Mother-Baby Groups with Enhanced Home-Visiting Maternal & Child Health Nurse Lynne Bishop and colleagues in the Shire of Yarra Ranges.

previous page:

Jessica, Fiona, Peta, Angela, Tania & Liesa
The Winter & Spring of Motherhood
(detail, Connect-1 Group Project) (2008)
Mixed media on foam core board



1



3



5



6



9



10



2



4



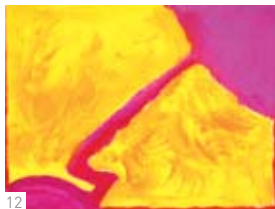
7



8



11



12

I'M GLAD I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE...

The bitter-sweet embrace of motherhood is one often played out in mother-infant groups such as PAIRS (Parent And Infant Relationship Support) groups and CONNECT mother-baby art-expression groups. Mothers' expectations are usually high during pregnancy – for the baby to be like a cherub or a 'gift from the gods'. The mixture of pain and joy, uncertainty and tiredness actually experienced after the birth of a baby can make the motherhood journey a vastly different experience than the one hoped for!

The findings from conducting a decade of PAIRS group programs has resulted in an international publication*. Mothers and infants coming together for ten weeks in a mother-baby group format which included separate time for a mothers' group and a baby group, benefited the participants more than mothers and babies receiving universal care. At the end of the program the mothers felt happier and enjoyed their infants more, while the infants thrived in their physical and emotional development.

The arrival of a baby is a momentous event in the life of a couple, transforming their identity as the couple into that of a family. A subsequent child brings another human being into the family for a life time. Pregnancy and birth carry risks to the mother and the infant and many of these are emotional if not physical. First time mothers especially face a huge hormonal and emotional upheaval and a unique experience. There can be many difficulties and challenges associated with this and becoming a member of a mothers' group can be a powerful support. The presence of other mothers doing their best to cope in the presence of skilled, understanding staff has been shown to be of significant help. Individual, couple and family therapy has also been shown to be beneficial at this critical stage of development.

As the twig is bent, so the tree inclines and at no life stage is this more true than in infancy. In a review of the PAIRS article, Karen Lombardi wrote "Holding is a requirement for normal development, and a salve for psychic development gone awry. The PAIRS program 'holds' the mother so that she can better hold the baby, holds the baby directly when needed, and holds the 'pair' so that they can better recognize themselves within each other".**

Dr Jan Smith

Dr Jan Smith is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. Jan is the former Head of Child Psychology at the Southern Health Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. She founded the model of short term parallel combined group work for parents and children in the 1980s and expanded its use from infancy to adolescence with teams from the Royal Children's Hospital, Monash Medical Centre and Maroondah.

PAIRS website is www.pairs.net.au

* Smith, J., Cumming, A. & Xeros-Constantinides, S. [2010]. A Decade of Parent and Infant Relationship Support Group Therapy Programs. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 60 [1], pp.59 – 89.

** Lombardi, K., [2010]. Holding: A Psychoanalytic Commentary on Smith et al., "A Decade of Parent and Infant Relationship Support Group Therapy Programs." *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 60 [1] p.149.

- 1 Kimberley
- 2 Tracey
- 3 Jessica, Fiona, Peta,
Angela, Tania & Liesa
- 4 Melissa, Peta, Tania & Liesa
- 5 Andrea
- 6 Anna Taifernopoulos
- 7 Sharon
- 8 AJM
- 9 Cherie
- 10 Andrea
- 11 Amy
- 12 Kelly B
- 13 Leanne
- 14 Caroline Benson
- 15 Jules
- 16 Anon
- 17 Karlene
- 18 Natalie Nichol
- 19 AJM
- 20 Tracey K
- 21 Anon
- 22 Kelly B
- 23 Tracey
- 24 Heather
- 25 Andrea
- 26 Kimberley
- 27 Anon
- 28 Sharon
- 29 Sally
- 30 Kate
- 31 Rachel
- 32 Monique
- 33 Jo
- 34 Kim
- 35 Heather Mann
- 36 Zoe
- 37 Monique
- 38 Mel
- 39 Tanya
- 40 Sharon
- 41 Hailey
- 42 Anna Taifernopoulos
- 43 Narelle
- 44 Trish
- 45 Lisa
- 46 Anon
- 47 Amanda
- 48 Tamara
- 49 Pam



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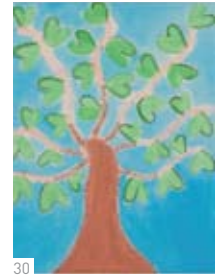
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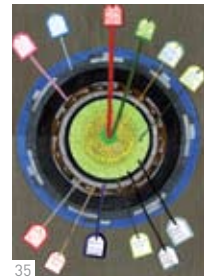
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This art catalogue has been produced in association with two art exhibitions, *Bedlam: The Bitter-Sweet Embrace of Motherhood and Myself as a Tree*, on display at the Maroondah Art Gallery, Federation Estate, Ringwood, Melbourne from 7th October to 6th November, 2010.

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Sophia Xeros-Constantinides, would like to thank the following, without whom this project would not have been possible:

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My special thanks go to the Mothers & Babies who have participated in the Mother-Infant Therapy Groups and given of themselves – without their commitment and bravery we would have no trace of the journey which I know has been bitter-sweet for many. And to their partners and families who, despite their own losses, offer support and understanding for the sacrifice which the motherhood journey oftentimes demands.

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Finally, and most importantly, my appreciation and gratitude to family & friends for their forbearance in the face of my singular passion.

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

Melbourne, Australia, September 2010

Dedicated to my mother, Maria
To her late brother, Uncle Nick Xeros
And to their mother, my *Yiayia Evdokia*

Sophia Xeros-Constantinides is a Post-Graduate PhD student with the Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University.

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Images from Connect-3 group by Zoe Murdoch

Design by Mary Callahan

LIST OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND PERINATAL SUPPORTS FOR MOTHERS, INFANTS & FAMILIES

Child, Youth and Family Services Central Access	1300 721 927-option #2
Mental Health Advice Line/Psychiatric Triage	1300 721 927
Maternal & Child Health Line (24 hour line)	13 22 29
Breast Feeding Helpline (24 hours)	03 9885 0653
Parentline	13 22 89
Kids Helpline	1800 551 800 (free call)
Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Line (24 hours)	03 9373 0123 1800 015 188 (free call)
O'Connell Family Centre (Early parenting Support)	03 8416 7600
Anglicare Croydon	03 9725 1622
Connections Croydon	03 9724 2222
PANDA-Post & Antenatal Depression Assoc Inc Support	1300 726 306
BeyondBlue Info Line	1300 22 4636
Angliss Hospital Perinatal Service	03 9764 6111
Drug Information Line	03 9594 2361
Drug & Alcohol Support Direct Line	1800 888 236
Lifeline	13 11 14
ADEC (Action on Disability in Ethnic Communities)	03 9480 1666 1800 626 178 (free call)
Child Protection After Hours Service	13 12 78
Centrelink	13 10 21
Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service	03 9280 1955

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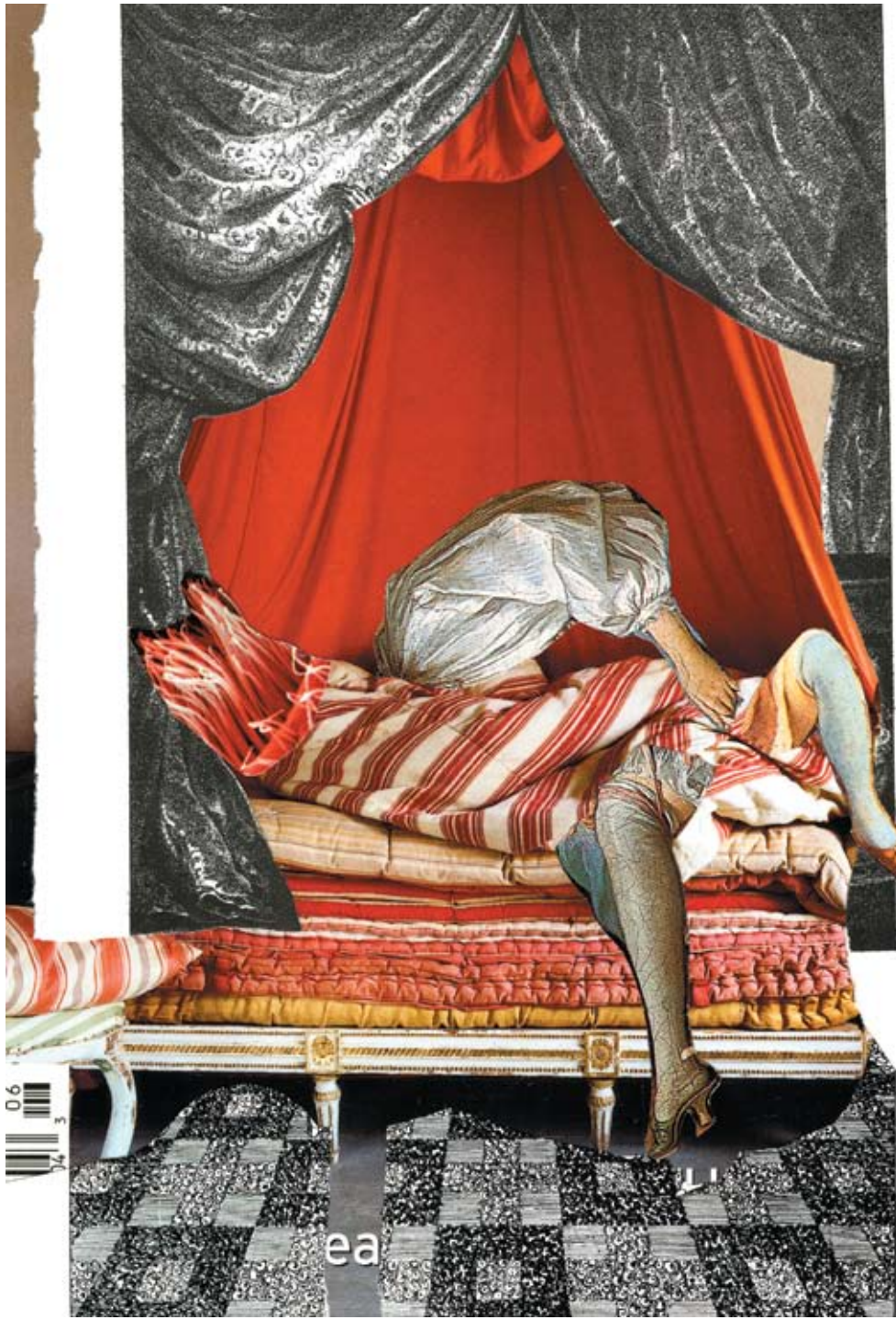
above: Souvenir from Italy – Madonna Del Parto by Piero della Francesca

back cover: Sophia Xeros-Constantinides

Cavort from the Boudoir series (2010)

Original collage

Also enlarged as digital print



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