

Artist Janine Antoni Takes on Childbirth and the Female Body in Two New Shows



Janine Antoni

VIEW SLIDESHOW 

On a bitterly cold day in Brooklyn, artist Janine Antoni is sipping tea in her studio and talking children. Not the usual discussion of nannies, schools, social-media fears — but the profound act of childbirth itself, or the “miraculousness,” as she describes it in her native Bahamian lilt, of “this thing moving from the inside to the outside.”

That feat — more specifically, the moment known as “crowning,” when the mother’s pelvic bones resemble a crown encircling the baby’s head — forms the basis of her new sculpture show at San Francisco’s [Anthony Meier Fine Arts](#) opening on February 27. She’ll continue to explore the idea, along with other themes about the body, in a show at [Luhring Augustine](#) in Chelsea on March 20.

Antoni, now 51, became an art-world star in the 1990s for a succession of deeply idiosyncratic artworks rooted in feminism and the female body. For her 1992 piece *Loving Care*, she dunked her long, dark hair in a bucket of hair dye and, crouching on all fours, mopped the gallery floor, using her hair like a paintbrush — a simultaneous send-up of Abstract Expressionism and commentary on torturous beauty regimens. Her 1993 work *Lick and Lather* began with 14

identical busts of herself, half of them chocolate, half soap. As part of a daily ritual, she slowly ingested and bathed away her features. For the 1995 photograph *Momme*, she hid under her mother’s dress, her own adult body bulging like a pregnant belly. In 1998, she earned a MacArthur Fellowship.

Antoni has been less visible since giving birth to her daughter in 2004, partly a result of struggling to translate her intense feelings about motherhood into art. Finally, intrigued by the mutual sculpting between a mother's hips and a baby's head, she acquired models of women's gently splayed pelvic bones from a medical supply company and scraped one along a still-wet ceramic pot — shaping the vessel the way the bone had shaped an infant's head. She then cast the bones themselves, which now serve as handles on elegant amphoras and as legs on bowls with delicately mottled raku patinas. And, in a visual pun on “crown moldings,” Antoni has replaced the chair rail of Meier's townhouse gallery with a row of plaster bones.

Her starting point for the Lühring Augustine show was based on Milagros — the small sculptures of body parts hung in churches in Spain and Latin America as prayers for healing — as well as her curiosity about impossible yearnings. In one resin piece, a cast of her head is fused to human ribs, the ear penetrating between two bones. “You know what it is to rest your head on your lover to try to hear their heart,” she says. “This person wants so much to hear that the ear is going straight through.” Another piece depicts a woman's crossed legs, one flesh, the other bone. “I was taught to cross my legs to be ladylike,” she says. “Our culture always narrows the base of women: Whether it's high heels or toe shoes, we want our ladies to float. The body holds these memories that are charged and deep. I'm forever trying to uncross my legs — even as a metaphor.”

Her fascination with the body extends to experimentations with dance, including ongoing collaborations with 94-year-old avant-garde legend Anna Halprin and contemporary choreographer Stephen Petronio, giving way to what she calls “one of my most fruitful periods” these last few years. As part of the Lühring Augustine show, Antoni will show *Honey Baby*, a video she made with Petronio of a male dancer “in utero,” — i.e., nude and writhing in honey — which she calls a stand-in for amniotic fluid. Told by her assistant that they used 50 gallons for the shoot, Antoni sighs, “No wonder I'm broke. It's an addiction, art.”

Antoni spoke to the Cut about separation anxiety, melding feminism with motherhood, and living in a two-artist household.

How did you come to make works about crowning?

When they first told me about crowning, I just thought it was so beautiful — this idea to be crowned by your mother's hip bones right before you enter the world — and I've been trying to make a piece for ten years about this, and I wasn't satisfied. I made a lot of things I threw away, and some were just ideas I threw away. It was really about looking for a form that was right. I don't know about your birth story, but I had a natural childbirth, and the thing that I remember as the very painful part was this pushing out of the sacrum and the coccyx.

I'm impressed that you know what specifically was causing the pain. All I knew was that it hurt.

I had a doula, and I remember that certain positions made [the baby] come faster than others. She was monitoring how much pain I could handle, and we were going back and forth. I wanted to articulate that in relationship to making the vessels.

Many older female artists have told me they felt they couldn't have children and still be artists, or if they did have children they weren't supposed to talk about it.

The generation before me of woman artists, it wasn't a topic that we thought could be taken seriously, so I almost feel like it's my duty to try to talk about my experience. Considering that we all have mothers and some of us are mothers, we have very few works about mothering, besides the Madonna and Child.

Your earlier pieces about motherhood were from the perspective of a daughter. How difficult was it to take the mother's point of view?

No matter how many times people tell you what it is to be a parent, you can't know it until you've been there. I have a pretty extreme connection emotionally and physically to my mother, and that has completely been extended to my daughter, and to see that as a continuum is really interesting to me, especially as a feminist. Those instincts are so shocking. I felt them very strongly in my mother and I watch them in

myself with awe — how they take over. You know how much you can love another person when their joy is so much greater than even your own joy. There's this quote I read about two things trying to become one. Having a child is about one thing becoming two. So the expression of the love is in a kind of retreat.

Does your art help you cope with your separation anxiety?

My art is all about separation anxiety. I'm obviously working on that issue.

Would you describe your work as autobiographical?

It's an interesting question because it is absolutely coming out of my life. In some ways this is the most autobiographical work I've made. [But] as much as it comes out of my experience, I'm interested in connecting to *your* experience. I want you to think about your mother when you look at these.

You've made these works at a time when every aspect of motherhood is politicized, from birth control and abortion to natural childbirth, caesarian sections, breastfeeding, working versus staying home.

It really divides people. That's really problematic for a woman because you don't know what you're going to need. It stems, to me, from a lack of trust in the body. Don't even get me started with the whole medical — I think that comes from being disembodied. We just take tests; we don't listen to our bodies.

Did you have a home birth?

I didn't because I was 40. That alone put me in a high-risk category, so I *thought* I needed to be in a hospital. I ended up in a hospital where, with natural childbirth, they thought I was some kind of freak that liked pain.

My second daughter arrived before the doctor did.

You're probably really lucky.

How did you come to collaborate with avant-garde dance legend Anna Halprin?

I found she was giving workshops, and she had one coming up. I did the workshop and was too shy to introduce myself. About a year later it was still resonating, so I decided to write her a letter and tell her about the impact it was having on me. She wrote back and said, "I know of your work and why didn't you introduce yourself?"

How has your sculpture drawn from dance?

I've had these crazy moments where you realize something that is quite obvious, which is that your jaw and your ankle are connected. So I made these objects, which are these places coming together in impossible ways.

Your husband, Paul Ramirez Jonas, is also an artist. Is it hard having two in the family?

I don't think anyone would put up with me besides another artist. Paul and I have known each other since RISD, since graduate school. We've been talking about each other's work for a really long time. I just can't imagine the whole thing without Paul.