DIVISION OF LABOR

Chicago Artist Parents
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What consequences does an artist face if they choose to raise a child? The issue of artist-parenthood, biological and otherwise, opens up many lateral conversations about gender and discrimination, economics, social norms and expectations. Changes that come with parenthood can indeed alter the course of an artist’s practice and professional identity, and yet this profound and fundamental human experience remains largely absent from critical dialogue even as it continues to influence the work artists make. Division of Labor: Chicago Artist Parents explores the specialized and multilayered work created by artist parents. The constellation of creative approaches allow an examination of how parenthood manifests in artists’ work, impacts their practice, and affects their careers.

The intersection of art-making and family life has long been a taboo subject in an art world where motherhood in particular is often seen as the endpoint of a serious career. Artists in the exhibition range from emergent to internationally recognized, and each created these works while actively raising kid(ren). Although very few of the works included here depict children, several are made in collaboration with them. Some employ a playful use of materials or aesthetics as a byproduct of an artist’s exposure to their kids’ toys or creative play, while others pose difficult questions about power dynamics and the agency of children in collaborative practice. The linkage of studio work and family life reveals uncomfortable truths about our own deeply gendered parental expectations: artist fathers are often celebrated for merging the two, while artist mothers are accused of everywhere from manipulation to sentimentality. With a focus on new and recent work from across media including painting, sculpture, installation, comics, sound, performance and moving image, Division of Labor reveals a diversity of perspectives with special attention paid to a balanced roster of both women and men. By virtue of the remarkable work they make, the artists presented here challenge the commonly-held notion that having children will deplete an artist’s creativity or destroy their professional life; if anything, it has enriched them.

As the stigmas that surround artists raising kids slowly start to dissolve, a richer context for their work begins to materialize. The artworks in Division of Labor can easily be positioned in relation to integrative projects such as Palle Nielsen’s Model for a Qualitative Society installation for children at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet (1968); Mary Kelly’s Postpartum Document (1973–79) which recorded the personal and theoretical ephemera of working motherhood; Sally Mann’s controversial Immediate Family series (1992) which touched on related themes of loneliness, injury, childhood sexuality and death; and the recent video work Guy Ben-Ner creates with his children (1999–present), which has been a lightning rod for discussion around the ethics of depicting and working with kids, and how those artistic choices affect the careers of men and women differently. Division of Labor also exists within the broader continuum of art made by parents who weren’t always so explicit about it, including Nancy Spero, Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Dennis Oppenheim, Lygia Clarke and Abelardo Morell.

Chicago’s strong history of social engagement and a working-class approach to studio practice has fostered generations of multifaceted makers, and access to space, thrift, and a dispassionate gender parity are built into the city’s artistic DNA. Division of Labor’s focus on Chicago artists stemmed from an interest in revealing hidden lines of connection within the city’s diverse community of cultural producers, as well as re-contextualizing work by local artists.

Of the many possible configurations that Division of Labor could have taken, the theme that emerged organically from conversations with exhibiting artists was that of time. Children create temporal wormholes through which vivid moments from our own childhoods reappear, and into which we look toward the unknowable future. Parenthood itself is alternately unpredictable and then repetitive, busy and then lonely, inspiring and draining. For many artists raising children, the primary concern is just how to find the time to create work. There is an urgency and focus that comes from art making in concentrated windows of time.

The artists in Division of Labor offer a range of creative strategies for combining art making with the realities of family life, many of which are radically different from that long-dominant template of the autonomous artist working in isolation. Whether you have children or not, it is well worth considering how an art world that prioritizes professional demands over personal responsibilities, relationships, and general well-being has shaped things for everyone. Division of Labor raises issues that contribute to the larger question of what constitutes a sustainable artistic practice. This array of mutually viable approaches to making work presents a public forum through which to build community and advocate for change.
SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE CURATORS

As cultural producers and parents ourselves, this show is very personally meaningful to us. It also feels timely and broadly relevant as conferences and fairs begin to offer on-site childcare; art institutions look beyond traditional forms of museum education; residency programs respond to the needs of artist parents requiring flexible scheduling and family friendly accommodations; and artists’ practices expand to include a focus on collaboration and the weaving together of various life roles. We’ve found supportive colleagues in Justin Witte and Neysa Page-Lieberman, and a gracious host site in Columbia College Chicago’s Glass Curtain Gallery. Several friends and colleagues offered early encouragement and acted as informal mentors along the way; Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Lorelei Stewart and Selina Trepp. And of course our biggest thank you goes to all the artists we’ve had the pleasure of working with in putting together this exhibition.

Columbia College Chicago’s Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS) extends a gigantic THANK YOU to Christa Donner and Thea Liberty Nichols for thoughtfully and tirelessly producing this exhibition for Glass Curtain Gallery. We are honored to present this important work on a theme seldom touched on in contemporary art dialogue. We also thank Division of Labor artists for lending their stunning, smart work to this project. We would additionally like to recognize: Jessica Burton and the students from Columbia’s National Art Education Association Student Chapter for contributing creative programming geared towards engaging children in the arts; to Curatorial Student Intern Matthew Robinson for developing an online companion to the exhibition’s Reading Room; designer Hannah Rebernick for working diligently and responsively towards the curators’ vision, and the staff and leadership of the department of Student Success for their support of this project.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Christa Donner is an artist, writer and curator whose multimedia projects are exhibited internationally. She is a founding member of Cultural ReProducers, a creative platform supporting cultural workers who are also working it out as parents.

Thea Liberty Nichols is a curator, writer and arts administrator from Chicago.
Necessity is the mother of invention for many artists suddenly faced with the limitations of early parenthood. Selina Trepp's clever and concise animations are fantastical, but also framed by the everyday realities of making creative work while raising a small child. The intermittent and unpredictable spaces of her young daughter's daytime sleep provide the main creative constraint for an ongoing series of vibrant Nap Animations, hand-drawn, looped animations Trepp creates using their shared set of felt-tipped markers. Creative problem solving is Trepp's forte, and she applies this logic to the editing and economy of gesture in her shorts as well as to the financial constraints that come with adding a third person to the household budget. Sparking a very intentional process of 'non-consumption,' she positions her making due and zero-waste approach as one of empowerment. Whatever Trepp needs she can create: limited resources and lack of sophisticated tools don't impede her imagination or her artistic output. Although largely hidden in the finished work, these self-imposed and external limitations are productive ones, transforming the financial and temporal restrictions of parenthood into creative assets.
After the recent closing of fifty Chicago Public Schools (CPS) made nationwide headlines, John Preus was invited to salvage material from one of them. The upended and reconfigured CPS desks and chairs he sourced there form the material and conceptual basis for his bitingly titled Proposal for Charter School Swingset. The son of missionaries, Preus grew up “running around barefoot outside all day every day” in Tanzania. These formative experiences shaped his relationship to the use value of materials, his understanding of public space and his appreciation for open, un-programmed forms of learning and community. He recently completed a massive site-responsive installation at the Hyde Park Art Center entitled The Beast, the rib-cage framework of which is echoed in Charter School Swingset. A strong believer in the agency of kids, one of his proudest moments was the organic evolution of his artwork into a hangout spot for neighborhood teens; it was a, “...temporary respite from the de facto criminalization of adolescence by virtue of the fact that there are so few places to go where they are not considered a nuisance, a danger, or a liability.” In his piece for Division of Labor, the swing also acts as a liberating force, as well as a catalyst for play, all the while bearing the weight of its constituent parts history.
Cándida Alvarez is a painter best known for her brightly colored, layered abstractions that dismantle and remix an array of influences cutting across pop culture, modern art, world news and personal memory. When Alvarez first became a mother and couldn’t get to the studio, she began working on dinner napkins at home. Though her son is now grown into adulthood and her large-scale paintings dominate the gallery scene, the intimate nature of these early works continue to recur in her practice, offering a flexible substrate for experimentation. Describing the broader impact of parenthood on her work, she states; “I learned to multi-task, as time and exhaustion competed for prominent roles... Bright colors seemed to follow me from the baby shower through high school. Slowly they seeped into the studio and became important to the paintings.”
Claire Ashley

Sleepovers and Playdates, 2014
Spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fan
Dimensions variable

Claire Ashley’s interest in inflatables was inspired by children’s bouncy castles, coupled with the desire to make work that was safe to keep around a home studio. The figurative basis of her sculptural paintings manifests itself in both form and content—Sleepovers and Playdates has a skin, it bulges when inflated and lies limp when flaccid. Pressed up against and restricted by the gallery’s exterior “glass curtain” window wall, it also squeezes around the corner and into the exhibition space, buoyant and freely flapping. Sleepovers and Playdates is simultaneously harmless and smothering. It’s a soft, safe plaything and a suffocating, monumental self-portrait. Glowing outside and in, Ashley’s signature patterned surfaces are bound and spray-painted in a Day-Glo adolescent color palette, and fabricated with interior lights that literally glow-in-the-dark. Its daytime presence and nighttime personality is one of many markers of the passage of time throughout Division of Labor.
Paul Nudd’s drawings, sculptures, videos and zines speak a visceral cartoon language that both adults and children instinctually understand. *Moon Mutt, Lil’ Pea Mutt* and *Meat Pea* are juvenile versions of his larger figure drawings, scaled to the size of his daughter’s dolls. They depict festering humanoid amoebas bristling with hairy pimples and teeming with bacteria. Of course, nobody spreads germs around quite like kids do, but these petri dish-like portraits were part of Nudd’s visual vocabulary long before he became a parent. Currently, his children spend a lot of time in his studio, helping him paint lumpy film-set dioramas, getting traced as models for his larger bacteria-body drawings, or just keeping him company while he works. “They’re not in the content, but in the process,” he explains, “It’s not that I need their help in the studio, but I want to normalize the idea of creative work for them.”
Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam are partners and artistic collaborators, perhaps best known for The Suburban, an acclaimed artist project space they co-founded in 1999. Located in their suburban backyard, it operates “within the economy of (their) household” and amidst the trappings of family life, an endeavor born out of an artist-parent imperative to “invent structures where the outside world would come to us.” Its pro-artist mission, print projects and satellite summer residency space, The Great Poor Farm Experiment in rural Wisconsin, all demonstrate Grabner and Killam’s espousal of pedagogy as an extension of parenthood itself. They began working together and alongside their two sons in the early 1990’s with a project entitled Conceptual Artist Research (CAR) that included Super-8 documentation of diaper changes (Oli/Wipe) and a composite installation featuring pre-school report cards and a tessellation of toothpicks and mini-marshmallows (Title Unknown, 1997). For Division of Labor, they present Oyster Multiple, a recent sculptural collage of elements taken from both of their respective practices: Grabner’s celebrated silverpoint tondos, selectively un-woven canvas works and appropriated textile pattern paintings are layered over a classic Killam beaten garbage pail lid. Suspended from a thin cord to create a makeshift mobile, the work is anchored to the wall by a shelf apparatus that holds a copy of Can I Come Over to Your House?, chronicling The Suburban’s first fifteen years, and a DVD of Killam hammering. The resulting kinetic sculpture is a portable shrine to the balancing act of art and family.
Like modernist painting made from the discards of his college-age son’s dorm room mini-fridge, Tony Tasset’s Baby Muscle is a surreal pop collage of cheap household cleaning products, personal hygiene items, and grocery store aisle dips, drinks, spreads and sauces. Continuing the conversation he began in the late 1980’s with his “domestic abstractions,” Tasset’s spill paintings examine the formal techniques and aesthetic tropes of post-painterly abstraction through these domestically-engineered, store-bought items cast in resin. Tasset has a history of creating pointedly parental work, including the video I AM U R Me (1998), which morphs the faces of his wife, his son and himself as they sit around the kitchen table eating breakfast, and Pieta (2007) a sculpture depicting Tasset cradling his collapsed teenage son in a pose provocatively referencing Virgin and Child statuary. More recent sculptures of melting, grime-tinged snowmen and smashed or rotting jack-o-lanterns loop back to Baby Muscle in their imaging of childhood tradition with an edge of filth, sleaze and violence. Baby Muscle has a sense of humor, while challenging the excesses of consumerism. By conflating “high art” with brand names, Tasset takes a conceptual swipe at the artistic masterpiece versus the mass-produced, an inquiry not unlike the appropriative gestures and serialization of Grabner and Killam’s Oyster Multiple.
After the birth of her daughter, Heather Mekkelson’s studio practice shifted dramatically. She went from producing complex debris field installations to an “anti-pessimistic” body of work centered around an ongoing interest in the cosmos. Seeking solace and pleasure from her studio practice, she also no longer had the luxury of research time. Drawing inspiration from observing her daughter at play, Mekkelson incorporated material exploration into her working methods and embraced the use of whatever was at hand. Box of Raisins is a minimalist replica of a Sunmaid box of raisins found crushed at the bottom of her “mom bag.” She cast the piece out of a heavy white metal alloy, evoking the weight of the bag, stating, “If a mom bag is the universe, then the raisins are the meteoroids.” Also contained within this cumbersome cosmology are literal rocks: the small gifts her daughter hands her when they’re out on walks. Vanity of Time is fabricated from these, which Mekkelson has with silver leafed rocks balanced atop the infinite plane of a first surface mirror.
If Mekkelson’s trajectory is outer space, Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford’s interests lie in non-linear time travel. The underlying structure of Sketch for an Anachronic Object re-envisioned the remnants of historic Italian buildings in combination with his old Star Wars toys, which were passed down to his kids. Cast in resin and laid like a skin over an arsenal of unexpected materials, such as Great Stuff and foam insulation, the matrix of past, present and future seems an apt metaphor for parenthood itself, which creates its own strange compression and expansion of time through suspended moments in contrast to years that speed by. “Parenthood opens you up to take more risks,” says Hulsebos-Spofford as he recounts imagery from a sculpture inspired by his son’s repetitive requests for a pet cat, and a video work-in-progress about the Bay of Pigs Invasion sparked by his son’s literal misinterpretation of that historic event (a misunderstanding he remembers having with his own mother when he was a kid). Sketch for an Anachronic Object anchors Hulsebos-Spofford’s sculptural forms to a skeletal platform, building a bridge between them. He invites visitors to step aboard and experience the living history combined with speculative sci-fi futures in this rubbery ruin of jumbled time and place.
Ann Toebbe

Four Sisters, 2014
Gouache, paper and pencil on panel
18” x 20”

Courtesy of Steven Zevitas Gallery

*Four Sisters* depicts the re-imagined childhood bedroom of Ann Toebbe’s children’s babysitter Hortencia, who grew up in Veracruz, Mexico. Toebbe’s disorienting domestic interiors are often created based on sketches and descriptions of the remembered spaces of others. *Four Sisters* was produced through a collaboration with Hortencia that included interviews and sketches she shared with Toebbe. A mixture of painting and collage, Toebbe’s inventory of the room’s sparse objects contrasts with its overwhelming amount of patterned brickwork. Through flattening, folding and cropping, she depicts multiple perspectival dimensions, as well as layered emotional states. Toebbe’s labor-intensive work was made about Hortencia, and was also made possible through the work Hortencia provides: like many artist parents, Toebbe’s studio time is thanks in part to childcare.
Brittany Southworth-LaFlamme started art school as the newly-single mother of a four-year-old. Studio and parenting time were rarely separate. “My studio’s in my brain: I make the work in my head,” she says of her efficient and pragmatic approach. Her young son’s actions and impressions permeated Southworth-LaFlamme’s practice as she blended the roles of artist and parent, making a photographic series of his early fascination with corners, recording the sounds he made, and filming staged collaborative performances at the dinner table. Now eight years old, her son is less interested in participating in his mother’s creative work. Southworth-LaFlamme captures the diverging identities of mother and son in *Illuminate Each Other*, a new video work commissioned for the exhibition. A split screen reveals each of their perspectives simultaneously as the pair takes one of their daily walks through the neighborhood, cameras strapped to their heads. Complicating this affectionate gesture is the formalized system of remuneration Southworth-LaFlamme has devised, using Pokemon cards as a sort of kid-currency to compensate her son for his creative labor. Is he a willing collaborator? A paid studio assistant? Or a child performer? *Illuminate Each Other* is a complex examination of the ever-evolving intimacies of parent-child relationships wrapped around an experiment in the artistic economy. By acknowledging the agency of her son and recognizing his contributions as co-author of this work, LaFlamme documents the maturing relationship between mother and child, each from their own point of view.
Alberto Aguilar records the gestures, rituals and personal discoveries that comprise everyday life, transforming them through repetition, reconfiguration and re-presentation. As the father of four children, family often plays a central role in his work. Aguilar’s dedication to making art that is accessible and participatory has led to a practice that encompasses the invention of synesthetic children’s games, sculptural rearrangements of household objects, and a collaborative performance with his daughter’s class at school. In the face of an art world that generally dismisses the presence of children, Aguilar showcases their abilities as artists in their own right. Within the exhibition, his sound piece Family Move brings together all six members of his household through a re-creation of Enya’s The Celts. Wearing headphones playing the song, the family is recorded humming, tongue-clicking, oohing and aahing along with it. Reinterpreting Enya’s ethereal multi-tracked vocals, Aguilar captures his family’s small virtual choir as they approximate the song’s Celtic lyrics, which translate to “Life of Lives, Beginning to End.” Unlike the original version, this rendition contains the sporadic and unrefined elements that lend family life its texture — sometimes charmingly off-key, sometimes mumbled — and with the occasional sonic outbursts from its youngest participant. Aguilar records the “life of lives” as a family portrait.
Art world taboos about childrearing are rich territory for Lise Haller Baggesen, who “aims to locate the mother-shaped hole in contemporary art and discourse” through drawing, writing, and socially activated installation. Haller Baggesen found conceptual inspiration and collaborative potential in her children’s narrative play early on, openly addressing the art world’s discomfort with kids as agents of culture. As her children have grown older she’s turned her lens on motherhood itself, creating a futuristic disco feminist named Liba who serves as heroine and alter ego for a dissertation cum installation entitled *Mothernism*. For *Division of Labor*, she reconfigures her psychedelic tent complex to house print materials made by other artists in a reading room / womb. Its streaming banners, glowing walls and spinning disco ball invite visitors to re-imagine the maternal body as a site for growth through radical pedagogy.
Originaly trained as a chemist and biologist, **Andrew Yang**’s work engages issues of authenticity and wonder rooted in the natural sciences. *Stella’s Stoichiometry: All things being equal, 6 lbs. 13 oz.*, an arrangement of liquids and solids alongside a mathematical chart, is in fact a precise portrait of his young daughter on the day of her birth. Yang employs the discipline of stoichiometry to translate the exact chemical equation of his newborn’s matter into the appropriate amounts of common household materials such as water, sugar, canola oil, and baking powder. In so doing he engages affection through the language of science and art while emphasizing the importance of the immaterial: “If you are invested in the relation of substance to form, look at the things you love most, that are made both by your body and by themselves, and whose alchemy of arrangement might find its own way to love you too, someday.”
Known for his unconventional approach to filmmaking, which began early on in his career with animated shorts such as *The Bats* and *The Moschops*, **Jim Trainor** once stated, “If my films were live-action, I’d probably be jailed.” His forthcoming feature length *The Pink Egg* does in fact use costumed actors, using costumed actors and actresses to portray the life cycles of insects and track the evolution of their societies. On view is a looped excerpt from this work-in-progress, featuring a single actress (Julia Zinn) playing both a mother and daughter insect scuffling over the titular pink eggs. Instead of anthropomorphizing insects, Trainor takes a much more complex and perverse view of blurring the line between dark human emotions and instinctually-driven insect behavior. His unsentimental perspective of nature and culture in this excerpt’s macabre mother-daughter relationship, echoed elsewhere throughout the film, even applies to the brief cameo of his then-pregnant wife, whom he casts as an expectant parasitic fly.
READING ROOM & AUXILIARY PROGRAMMING

Parents and children are often left out of the dialogue of the art world due to institutions’ limited structures for participation. Division of Labor embodies an oblique form of institutional critique, while focusing most of its energy on how to re-make these self-same institutions to better reflect a sustainable art world. Housed within Lise Haller Baggeson’s Mothernism installation, and addressing issues of access and visibility of parental labor within the arts, the Division of Labor Reading Room provides an additional layer of critical context to the work on view through the inclusion of relevant artist books, exhibition catalogues, zines and comics. Viewable both in-situ and online, works include Melissa Potter’s adoptive family tree soft-book and Baggesen’s, Paul Nudd’s, and Michelle Grabner’s and Brad Killam’s translation of their creative visions into texts. Chicago-based comics artists Chris Ware, Jeffrey Brown and Keiler Roberts communicate complex — and often darkly funny — aspects of parenthood through the space and time of graphic narrative. Original Plumbing’s family issue shares perspectives from a cohort of transgender parents, and a multitude of cultural workers with kids speak up through Andrea Francke’s Invisible Spaces of Parenthood, as well as Propositions, Manifestos, and Experiments, by Cultural ReProducers.

Inside the exhibition, experimental installation strategies developed in conversation with exhibiting artists include low-lying plinths to display works parallel to the ground and flat screen monitors that lean against walls, inviting close investigation and interaction by viewers of all ages. Our curatorial approach also extends to a series of trans-generational events aimed to include those often isolated by the organization and timing of typical arts programming. A Saturday morning, family-friendly soft opening, scheduled during hours that young children are often most active, offers an alternative to the traditional evening reception. Tiny Cover Band performs their unique brand of pop music on toy instruments with hands-on art activities run by Columbia College arts education grad students. Childcare is often a major issue for artists, who are the most under-paid/unpaid workers in the arts economy. Artist-parent collective Cultural ReProducers leads “Making It What We Need,” a workshop and conversation hosted in collaboration with arts administrators, students, and exhibiting artists that examines how to create a more inclusive art world. The event includes free on-site childcare while also providing a model for institutions to better serve artists and audiences.

“Co-Occupations: Readings from Division of Labor” is hosted by local bookstore Sector 2337 and co-organized by Caroline Picard. A handful of artists represented within the exhibition will read works and share personal experiences that highlight the reciprocal but often private relationships between family life and professional life. “The Day After Groundhog Day Might Still be Groundhog Day” offers an all-ages evening event at the Nightingale Theater for an artist-curated screening of short films by artist parents, doubling as a fundraiser for conceptual project S.A.C.K. (Supporting Artists and their Children or Kids), which raises money to purchase artwork from artists raising kids.
EXHIBITION PROGRAMMING

Opening Reception: Thursday, November 20, 5–8pm

Family Friendly Opening Party + Tiny Cover Band: Saturday, November 22, 10am–12pm

Cultural ReProducers \ Making It What We Need: Saturday, December 6, 10am Glass Curtain Gallery

A workshop and conversation generating concrete ideas about how cultural institutions can support the work of cultural producers who are also working it out as parents. Led by artists Christa Donner and Selina Trepp, this is the final installment of the Cultural ReProducers’ Event Series, a project supported by the Propeller Fund. Free on-site childcare is available by pre-registration only. For more information visit culturalreproducers.org

Co-Occupations: Readings from Division of Labor

Wednesday, December 10, doors at 7pm, reading at 7:30pm
Sector 2337, 2337 N. Milwaukee Ave, Chicago IL 60647

Sector 2337 hosts a reading and curated bookshelf that explores personal reflections on the impact of parenthood on an artist’s personal and professional lives. Co-organized by Caroline Picard, this event features readings by artists including Cándida Alvarez, Christa Donner, Lise Haller Baggesen, Thea Liberty Nichols, Keiler Roberts and Fred Sasaki. Sector 2337 hosts an affiliated shelf in the bookstore with titles from these readers available for purchase. For more information: sector2337.com

The Day After Groundhog Day Might Still be Groundhog Day: a kid* friendly screening of works by former kids* who have current kids*

Tuesday, February 3, 7pm, Nightingale Theater, 1084 Milwaukee Ave, Chicago IL 60642

An all-ages screening of short films by artist parents benefiting S.A.C.K. (Supporting Artists with Children and/or Kids). Programmed by Jesse Malmed and Kyle Schlie. All proceeds support the work of artist parents. For more information: nightingalecinema.org

* and/or children

Glass Curtain Gallery
1104 S. Wabash Ave., 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

For more information about the exhibition and programming visit: colum.edu/glasscurtain