

The Burden of Birth

Depictions of Pregnancy by Women during the Women's Liberation Movement
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Abstract: This analysis explores the contribution of female artists, Niki de Saint Phalle, Alice Neel, and Judy Chicago, to the discourse of womanhood and motherhood during the Women's Liberation Movement. By utilizing the pregnant body as a focal point, these artists challenged societal norms and traditional depictions of the female body. Through collage, portraiture, and mixed-media fiber work respectively, they emphasized the physical and emotional tolls of pregnancy, showcasing a truthful representation of motherhood that subverts the objectification of the female body. The analysis highlights the transformative potential of art in these feminist discourses and questions the historical depiction of the female nude.

Introduction

Throughout history, representations of the female nude in Western art have been heavily influenced by the male gaze, resulting in depictions of women as passive objects for male consumption. From Prehistoric sculptures to High Classical representations of deities, women's bodies were primarily made by and for male desire (Discover Nude Art in All Its Form Expressions During History). However, the women's liberation movement of the 1960s-1980s brought about a significant shift in the way feminist artists approached the portrayal of the female body. These artists sought to challenge traditional norms and explore new ways of representing women as active and empowered subjects. One such radical departure from traditional depictions of the female form is the emergence of pregnancy images in art. Through an analysis of three works, *Clarice Rivers* by Niki de Saint Phalle, *The Pregnant Woman* by Alice Neel, and *EU – 53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure* by Judy Chicago, this paper explores how female artists during the women's liberation movement have reclaimed the female nude by subverting traditional notions of pregnancy, femininity, and the role of women in society.

Historical Context

The representation of pregnancy in art has a complex history, shaped by changing attitudes towards sexuality and marriage. Historically, the art world was dominated by male artists, and depictions of women were created through the male gaze, resulting in hyper-feminine objects of desire (Feigel, 2020). Although pregnancy was a common subject in art until the Middle Ages, it gradually fell out of favor and was erased, coinciding with changing attitudes towards sexuality and marriage (Berthiaud, 2013). Due to the influence of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, pregnancy taboo became popularized (Kordic, 2018). While childbearing was an essential facet of female married life, the taboo reflected a societal aversion to acknowledging the sexual agency of women, and the ability to see a woman's sexual history through pregnancy was considered a less acceptable subject for art. Instead, the selective characteristic of portraiture allowed artists to ignore the "sinful" side of motherhood, rendering pregnancy depictions obsolete (Jansen, 2020). Likewise, previous images of nude women were created for male consumption and were the object of male desire, and the canons of this classic art did not include in this image a woman's pregnant body. For example, Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (Figure 1) portrays the goddess of love and beauty emerging from the sea, fully nude and with her hands strategically placed to cover her genitalia. Despite her nudity, her posture and expression suggest a demure and almost submissive demeanor, emphasizing her beauty and availability as a sexual object. Similarly, in Francisco Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* (Figure 2), the female subject is depicted laying naked on a couch, with her back arched and her gaze directly towards the viewer.



Figure 1: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484-1486, Tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.9 cm, Uffizi, Florence, Italy

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Again, her nudity and seductive pose are intended to elicit desire from the male viewer, rather than portraying her as a fully realized human being.



Figure 2: Francisco de Goya, La Maja Desnuda, 1800, Oil on canvas, 98 x 191 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

The women's liberation movement, also known as the second wave of feminism, was a transformative social movement in the 1960s and 1970s that aimed to challenge traditional gender roles and bring about change in every area of women's experience, including politics, work, the family, and sexuality (Burkett, 2022). The approval of the oral contraceptive pill by the FDA in 1961 was

a landmark moment for the movement, as it gave women the ability for the first time to control their reproductive health and plan their futures. This newfound freedom empowered women to pursue careers and educational opportunities, rather than being limited to traditional roles as wives and mothers (Anand, 2018). Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, also contributed to the movement's momentum by exposing the unhappiness and frustration of many women living within traditional gender roles. These cultural shifts gave rise to organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW), which advocated for women's rights and fought for greater access to education, employment, and reproductive healthcare. Although the movement created unprecedented opportunities for women in the workforce, there remained persistent societal biases that used motherhood and child-rearing to justify excluding women from equal professional and economic advancement (Allara, 1994, pp. 9).

During the women's liberation movement, feminist artists began to use pregnancy as a subject in art, challenging the longstanding traditional depictions of the female body and critiquing the canon of the female nude in Western art history (Allara, 1994, pp. 7). American art historian Linda Nochlin comment in the 1972 *Artnews* annual, *Woman as Sex Object*, further galvanized this movement by critiquing nineteenth-century erotic art imagery as being solely "erotic for men" (Allara, 1994, pp. 7). This statement became a rallying cry for the Body Art movement, which explored sexuality from a woman's perspective. The use of pregnant nudes in art became a powerful tool in blocking the male gaze by challenging the cultural norms of stability and unity associated with the ideal nude. In this subversion of the traditional sex symbol, pregnant imagery violated cultural norms of male pleasure, instead highlighting the feminine experience with sex and nudity (Allara, 1994, pp. 11). Led by artists such as Niki de Saint Phalle, Alice Neel, and Judy Chicago, representations of pregnant women were reintroduced into popular Western art as a direct confrontation of the idealized female form (Berthiaud, 2013). Their images of pregnant women not only challenged traditional notions of beauty but also highlighted the lived experiences of women during a time when reproductive

rights were a central concern of the feminist movement. Through art, the pregnant body became a symbol of social deviation, challenging traditional notions of femininity and motherhood (Allara, 1994, pp. 11).

Niki de Saint Phalle

Niki de Saint Phalle was a Franco-American artist known for her insightful analysis of the female condition and the pressures of motherhood. After spending her youth in New York City, Saint Phalle moved back to Paris in the 1950s with her husband and children to establish her studio. Drawn to the work of Jean Tinguely, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Rousseau, Saint Phalle joined the Nouveau Réalisme movement, an Avant-Garde art group (Life & Work). However, Saint Phalle soon realized the challenges of balancing her professional aspirations with her caretaking responsibilities. She felt compelled to choose between her family and career, ultimately abandoning her family in order to prove herself as a painter and real professional (Dossin, 2010, pp. 31). This painful experience led her to understand that most existing art of women was done for and by men, not representational of the female experience. This realization drove her to create art that explored the struggles of women and deconstructed traditional images of womanhood (Dossin, 2010, pp. 35). Although never publicly identified as a feminist, Saint Phalle's bodies of work center on women's experiences and challenges. Her artistic legacy continues to inspire and provoke critical thought about the representation of women in art and society.

Clarice Rivers (Figure 3), sketched in pencil and graphite by Larry Rivers and collaged by Niki de Saint Phalle in 1964, presents a life size portrait of a female nude in profile who stares appraisingly at the viewer. Within the massive 157 x 112 canvas, her positioning highlights her swollen, pregnant belly, while her stance is relaxed (Keever, 2021). The woman's head is adorned with flowers and fluttering birds, while the outline of her body is filled with a cacophony of life. Brightly colored flowers, animals, and butterflies fill her limbs, while childlike toys – a ballerina, kittens, barbie, etc. – take up all open space in her legs. Instead of a child in her belly, her stomach is filled with crustaceans. Her entire body, except for her sketched, bare face, is intricately covered with bright, multicolored, abstract designs and text (Keever, 2021). The curves of her body are further accentuated with the sharply sketched arrows, and the rainbows of color within the outline of her body is juxtaposed with the subdued, cream paper (Anderson). The image is completed with a series of sketched lines and arrows pointing at specific parts of her



Figure 3: Niki de Saint Phalle and Larry Rivers, Clarice Rivers, 1964, Collage, color pencils, pastel, graphite, and ink on paper, 157 x 112 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California

body: chin, breast, the middle of her back, her belly button, uterus, and vagina. Although unlabeled, the markings create an impression of an anatomical scientific examination, as if she were, herself, a butterfly on display. The piece is located at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and is part of a larger collection of artworks.

The portrait of *Clarice Rivers* by Niki de Saint Phalle and Larry Rivers is more than just a stunning work of art; it carries significant meaning and social commentary. As Virginia Billeaud Anderson notes, the portrayal of Clarice's pregnancy in the work "was obvious but timely: women were perceived as brainless sex objects, child-bearing machines" (Clarice Rivers). In response to these sexist attitudes, de Saint Phalle sought to create a representation of the female experience that highlighted the beauty and complexity of natural birth. The vibrant collage of Clarice's body teeming with life serves as a metaphor for pregnancy, with every part of her being providing for the living things inside her. At the same time, the sheer number of objects and creatures on her body overwhelm her, underscoring the dichotomy of pregnancy as both life-giving and identity-erasing. As she stands, clearly aware of her own perception, the arrows protruding from her being indicate the need to label and judge her body, much like a specimen in a science lab. Despite being a shell of herself, Clarice stands as a near goddess, her face the only part of her left untouched, a vision of beauty that is expected of pregnant women (Bishop, 2008). This work was the first in de Saint Phalle's series of archetypal female figures, which inspired her later work to create updated versions of "every(wo)man" (Life & Work).

Alice Neel

Across the ocean in New York City, American Realist painter Alice Neel was celebrated for her honest and expressive portraits, produced at a time when Abstract Expressionism was the prevailing style in American painting. After experiencing a nervous breakdown following her husband's departure with their second child in 1930, Neel used portraiture to depict destitute mothers and women (Ferry & Blumberg, 2023). Once recovered, she returned to her home in Harlem and painted the people around her to convey the systemic inequities in her community. During the active years of the women's liberation movement, Neel's series of seven pregnant nudes were a visual expression of her support for the Body Art movement of the late 1960s through the 1970s (Allara, 1994, pp. 7). She was particularly interested in the transformation of the woman's body to accommodate a growing fetus and the subsequent physical changes. Unlike her male counterparts, Neel painted the pregnant body with realistic and unforgiving brushstrokes, erasing the glamour and mystique of pregnancy (Ferry & Blumberg, 2023). Her works addressed a generation of politically active women agitating for social change about the perceptions of motherhood and childbirth. Although she was never declared feminist, her art certainly contributed to the movement and drew attention to the realistic side of pregnancy (Kordic, 2018). Her paintings portray the honest image of pregnancy at the same time that women had the agency to make informed decisions about motherhood. Neel's pregnancy paintings addressed a generation of politically active women agitating for social change about the perceptions of motherhood and childbirth (Allara, 1994, pp. 8).

In 1971, Alice Neel created a compelling oil painting titled *The Pregnant Woman* (Figure 4), featuring a nude woman in a late-stage pregnancy in $\frac{3}{4}$ view reclining on a sofa. The woman takes up most of the 101.2 x 152.4 cm canvas, with her body splayed on its side, and one arm draped suggestively over her head and the arm of her chair while the other supports her face. The woman's face is rendered in a detailed and expressive style, capturing her introspective and somewhat exhausted countenance that expresses the physical and emotional toll of pregnancy (*Pregnant Woman*, 1971). The woman's swollen belly and breasts are prominently portrayed in varying tones of pale greens and pinks, lending her an unhealthy appearance (*Pregnant Woman*, 1971). The background is sparsely depicted, with a man's portrait in a similar green hue hanging behind her head, and the couch outlined with crude strokes. The painting's swirling brushstrokes and rounded curves reflect the woman's figure and the shape of the sofa, with only straight lines present in the frame of the portrait and couch legs. The left side of canvas holds most of the volume, while the right remains bare. *The Pregnant Woman* is one of several pregnant nudes in the Alice Neel Estate's private collection, showcasing Neel's talent for capturing the female experience of pregnancy.



Figure 4: Alice Neel, *The Pregnant Woman*, 1971, Oil on Canvas, 101.2 x 152.4 cm, Estate of Alice Neel, New York

Alice Neel subverted the traditional female nude through *The Pregnant Woman*, illustrating the loss of identity she found inherent to motherhood. Nancy, Neel's daughter in law and muse for this work, was carrying twins and suffering from toxemia at the time of her painting. She is illustrated with a belly that threatens to rip her apart, and the colors of the painting are reminiscent of her pregnancy-induced illness (Allara, 1994, pp. 21). With her arms raised above her and her dark hair curling around her neck, her head appears to be severed from her body. Nancy is pictured as dismembered from her body, her pregnant stomach becoming



Figure 5: Alexandre Cabanel, *Naissance de Vénus*, 1863, Oil on canvas, 130 x 225 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

central to her being. Likewise, the painting does not even offer her name, "pregnant woman" reflecting her loss of individual identity (Allara, 1994, pp. 22). The portrait of her husband in the background serves as a reminder that this pregnancy is legitimate, yet his corporeal absence illustrates the alienation and isolation caused by pregnancy (Allara, 1994, pp. 21). Nancy's absent gaze and the bareness of the room around her further emphasizes this analysis, indicating that she has nothing but this

pregnancy shackling her to her home and domesticity. Alice Neel chose to paint Nancy in the classical female pose, lounging on her side with an arm over her head. Much like Alexandre Cabanel's *Naissance de Vénus* (Figure 5), Nancy lays in a traditionally erotic position, the entirety of her naked body on display. In portraying Nancy in this way, Neel presented the female body to be surveyed without the sexual undertones of the male gaze (Allara, 1994, pp. 17). Instead, viewers are presented with a female body immune to the desires of men and confronted with the gaze and desire of Nancy, herself. Although she didn't consider herself a feminist, Neel attempted to correct the absence of pregnant women in art history through honest human experience, effectually subverting the traditional female nude (Gokce, 2022).

Judy Chicago

Judy Chicago is an American artist and feminist who rose to prominence in the 1970s with her pioneering feminist art and her active involvement in the women's liberation movement. Born in Chicago in 1939, Chicago attended the Art Institute of Chicago and turned to feminist content in the late 1960s, eventually creating the first Feminist Art Program in California (Judy Chicago). Part of the Feminist Art movements, Chicago was inspired by Minimalist artist Donald Judd. As she observed, "the problem with the women's movement in art...was the involvement of the figureheads of the movement in stereotypes of women," highlighting the need for more diverse representations of women (Khan, 1977). Chicago believed that female artists, because of their gender, were expected to conform to feminine stereotypes, and her work subsequently challenged these assumptions and pushed back against the male-dominated art world (Khan, 1977). Her artwork became an instant touchstone for the growing feminist movement in the United States and served as a powerful tool for social and political change (Yood, 2022).

EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure (Figure 6) by Judy Chicago is a striking piece of artwork that demands attention. In the center of the 156.2 x 55.9 cm panel stands a female figure in $\frac{3}{4}$ view. Made of smocking and embroidery over a drawing and laminated panel, the medium is what differentiates Chicago's work from other contemporary artists. The unnamed woman holds her head in her hands as if crying, and the curvature of her stomach indicates pregnancy. Her form is nothing but a simple rainbow outline, but the emptiness of the space inside and around her echoes her melancholy sentiments. The border of this 1984 work is a series of repeating geometric patterns created in rainbow material, juxtaposing the taupe fabric within. While the woman's body is created with continuing



Figure 6: Judy Chicago, EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure, 1984, Smocking and Embroidery over Drawing (needleworker: Mary Ewanoski), Laminated Title Panel, One Laminated Text Panel, 156.2 x 55.9 cm, Salon 94, New York, New York

curves, the form of the piece creates strong horizontals and verticals around her.

Judy Chicago's *EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure* is part of a larger series of mixed-media fiber work entitled *The Birth Project* that celebrates the birth-giving capacity of women and their sacrifice. The artist collaborated with over 150 needleworkers to create images about various aspects of pregnancy (Birth Project (1980-85)). Chicago created the initial idea but then handed off the work to female artists and mothers around the country to add their own stories and inspiration to the work. Although she chose not to have children of her own, Chicago engaged with groups of women who had chosen to have children and became awed by their momentous power (Dintino, 2022). In *The Birth Project*, Chicago wanted to reveal birth as spiritual and symbolic while expressing the physical pain of labor. As a challenge to existing norms of religious purity and sin, she hoped to re-envision the Creation myth with a feminist twist. In *EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure*, the needleworker related the story of her mother realizing she was pregnant with her fifth child. In contrast with the other pieces in the collection, this piece reminds viewers of the sobering truths about pregnancy. Historically, smocking material was worn by laborers due to its freedom of movement; however, it came to be associated with children's clothes, a reminder of the transition from individual to caregiver. When smocking is fixed with pleated cable stitching, it becomes taut, symbolically "binding the figure" to her children (Chicago, 1982). The needlework itself has a feminine associations, although it also holds a history of sexist work. Through *EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure*, Chicago hopes to reunite feminist and traditional female roles, subverting material and pregnancy to illustrate the power and sacrifice of childbirth.

Conclusion

Throughout the women's liberation movement of the 1960s-1980s, female artists began to subvert the traditional female nude through the use of pregnant bodies, simultaneously challenging the male gaze and exploring the sacrifice of motherhood. Niki de Saint Phalle, through her use of collage and natural imagery, relays the loss of identity through maternal burden in her work *Clarice Rivers*. Likewise, in *The Pregnant Woman*, Alice Neel shares the isolation and pain of pregnancy, showcasing its physical and emotional toll. For Judy Chicago's piece *EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure*, the enforcement of birth is communicated, the figure bound to motherhood. While all three women evolved in their work to encapsulate holistic maternal experiences, these seminal feminist artists contributed to the women's liberation movement by portraying pregnant women as realistic, multidimensional agents rather than passive caretakers and sexual beings.

Appendix

Figure 7: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484-1486, Tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.9 cm, Uffizi, Florence, Italy

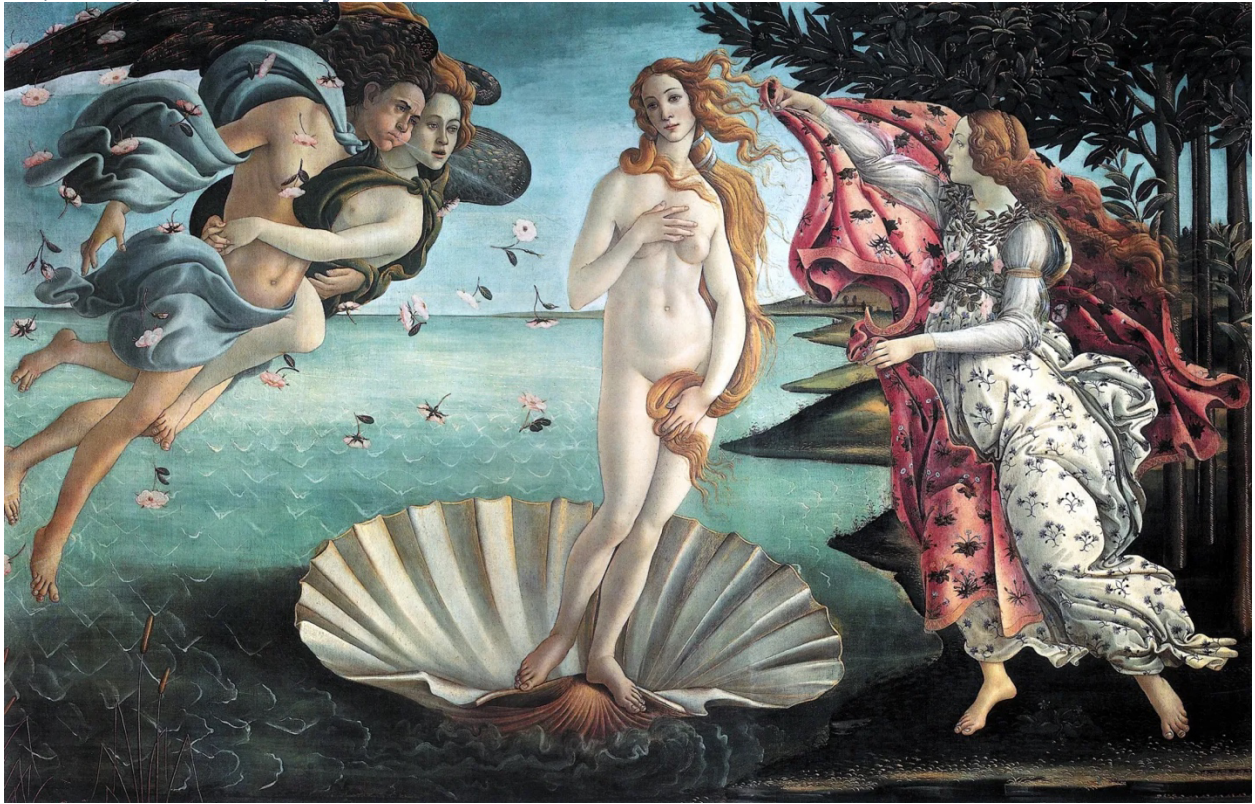


Figure 8: Francisco de Goya, *La Maja Desnuda*, 1800, Oil on canvas, 98 x 191 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain



Figure 9: Niki de Saint Phalle and Larry Rivers, *Clarice Rivers*, 1964, Collage, color pencils, pastel, graphite, and ink on paper, 157 x 112 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California



Figure 10: Alice Neel, *The Pregnant Woman*, 1971, Oil on Canvas, 101.2 x 152.4 cm, Estate of Alice Neel, New York



Figure 11: Alexandre Cabanel, *Naissance de Vénus*, 1863, Oil on canvas, 130 x 225 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France



Figure 12: Judy Chicago, *EU-53 Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure*, 1984, Smocking and Embroidery over Drawing (needleworker: Mary Ewanoski), Laminated Title Panel, One Laminated Text Panel, 156.2 x 55.9 cm, Salon 94, New York, New York



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