

The Maternal Body: The Paradox of Desire Paintings by Deb Thompson

Motherhood—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism.

Adrienne Rich

In **The Maternal Body** we have the essence of the history of two mothers, two species. There is a hint at what is fiercer than history's tribalisms or nationalisms. There is quiescence of motherhood in the lactating squirrel hit by a car, an everyday consequence of our civilization's heavy footprint upon the earth. And there is a human mother who reflects, in painted study, upon the similarities between the two, as a Tibetan Buddhist might— seeing all of nature as our mothers. The painter has survived. She is aware; it appears, of this privilege and the necessity to record the fact with compassion, painting as contemplation, working at the figure of the mothers much as Plotinus advised in the search for beauty: *You must first become all god-like and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty.*

A mother's presence came before all other fierceness contains wine's ruby breath the pomegranate's wet seeds soaking blue heaven

Deb Thompson paints an ideology which is older than tribalism and nationalisms. These bodies of work capture in glimpses what all mothers, across species, have in common: desire to keep alive the milky thread of nurture.

The viewer of enters a strange world when viewing **The Maternal Body: The Paradox of Desire**: cold observation literally and figuratively, reflection upon societal values, heartbreak. There is sadness and battle weariness in both mothers. The woman is carrying on, and the implication is that she is caring in some way for the squirrel mother, her death marked, noted, ritualized and mourned. The implication is in the juxtaposition of the two bodies of work

The soul's femininity, like sages' wisdom, clutches at nothing. It is hard to say at first sight whether the squirrel is a fetish object in a green cast or the mother treated with unusual compassion. Translucent glazes and bloody washes evoke interpretation. One needs to view the whole exhibition to understand the intelligence at work here, which would rescue the squirrel from the road and then freeze the body to capture her beauty and sadness, repeatedly. One is reminded of grave robbers, who supplied anatomists and surgeons with corpses to study. In this case, the need to study is not for anatomical knowledge but for spiritual understanding, the essence of the lactating squirrel, stopped mid-

course in her life.

A mother's presence pours itself invisible to lenses of territory has within it the terror of colour spilling from arteries opened scarlet returning boiling oxygen to the air leaking chlorophyll grass knitting earth's white underground.

Deb Thompson's art works are characterized by a beautifully strange psychological bent. The first Thompson exhibition I viewed, **Impotent** at the Langham Gallery in Kaslo, 2002 was shocking to me. I was mystified and intrigued. I wrote a compliment in the guest book, "But you look like such a nice person!" The comment delighted Deb. She has been reassuring me ever since, that indeed she is a nice person. I never really doubted it but I have been interested to observe the necessity of her work and I become more and more convinced that it is capturing an aspect of our life on this planet that few others have had the courage

to do. And perhaps that is because few others have noticed. In **The Maternal Body** we have the female gaze painted loudly and clearly, fiercely and compassionately. It is most interesting that the female gaze would include two species. There is in this work compassion and beauty found in bodies well-used and well-worn by accommodation of new life, caught in the process of being maternal. This is a point of view that eclipses a dominating male perception and provides a shocking new one, which includes an open ended incompleteness which honestly speaks of the tenure of human occupation of the planet.

Contemplation is clothing for the journey, lighted shelter in the night.

Thompson's art has experienced some transformation over the last few years, grasping what is essential (and probably invisible) by drawing in an immediate fashion, using traditional underpainting with translucent washes. This technical strategy is a part of the desire to subvert the patriarchal strictures carried in the psyche which both inform and conform the artist at work.

Thompson comes to the body-as-subject with information acquired from an education in art as well as medical illustration, an occupation which captures what the camera fails to see. The medical illustrator presents death as process. **The Maternal Body**, as exhibition, is a journey: the spirit inhabiting the human mother, the trace of spirit in the squirrel mother, the connections between them. Both wear badges of flesh, their breasts, with honour and authority in their biologically appointed roles as mother: the squirrel cruelly relieved, her body returning to a fetal position.

Few artists put psychological/spiritual states on the page, canvas or stage with the honesty and in such states of nakedness as Thompson does. There's an urgency in **The Maternal Body** as there is in all of Thompson's work but this work goes beyond that, including for the first time figures from the families: Scurius and Hominoidea: two species, *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* and *Homo sapiens*.

The Maternal Body is new direction for Thompson. It may well also be sacrament.
The mother is before all and will reclaim.

—Susan Andrews Grace

Notes

Adrienne Rich *Of Woman Born*, p15

Plotinus- *Enneads* (1.6.9)

All right-justified text from **Gathering**, Selah, Book 3, a manuscript in progress by Susan Andrews Grace

