

## Mothering myths shattered

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Dear Reader,

*Good Mom/Bad Mom* is the title of an exhibition of two hundred works of art about mothering myths, care, emancipation and the politics of the uterus. Visiting the exhibition at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht last week shattered some conceptions I had about pregnancy and art, just as a book by the historian Trudy Dehue called *Ei, foetus, baby* (egg, fetus, baby), shattered the ones I had about pregnancy and science.

I recently wrote about [Dehue's book, a brilliant history of pregnancy research](#), and she is also involved with the exhibition in Utrecht: she curated a small section of it. The book traces five hundred years of scientific knowledge about pregnancy and birth; how that knowledge came about, in often gruesome ways and at the expense of women's physical autonomy.

[You can read my essay on Ei, Foetus, Baby here](#). Continue reading this newsletter for some of my personal highlights from the exhibition.

Sincerely,

Wiegertje Postma

*Co-founding Editor*

## Mother myths: a visit to *Good Mom/Bad Mom*

By Wiegertje Postma

The essay I wrote for Issue Seven is called *The business of men* in reference to the fact that for about five hundred years, the medical study of pregnancy and birth was performed only by men, and the women they studied were, often, barely more than an afterthought.

*Good Mom/Bad Mom*, now on view at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, is motivated by the fact *art* has likewise been, for centuries, the business of men: the immense and universal topics of birth and motherhood were not considered valid as subjects to create art around (beyond Mary and Jesus, that is). The exhibition's curators, Laurie Cluitmans and Heske ten Cate, endeavor to correct that slant with a wonderfully wide array of works, which together form a journey through the history of motherhood in art: from romanticized depictions of mother and child, to raw expressions of feeling around miscarriage or abortion, from the stereotypical to the hyper-personal.

The thrill in the exhibition is in seeing both — the stereotypical and the hyper-personal, the *conventions* and the pointed breaks from convention — especially when they come together in one work. One of the first pieces that Laurie Cluitmans pointed out when showing me around was a painting of the Madonna and Child by the seventeenth-century Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi. It is hung beneath two similar depictions of the *virgo lactans* by male painters, and the difference shows. The male painters represented a flawless unity between mother and child — both are engaged, serene, happy to be there. But Gentileschi's Madonna looks exhausted (no surprises there, for a new mother), and the Child looks slightly puzzled by the sight of the boob his mother is trying to wriggle out of her corset. There's a distance between them. Gentileschi shows the very

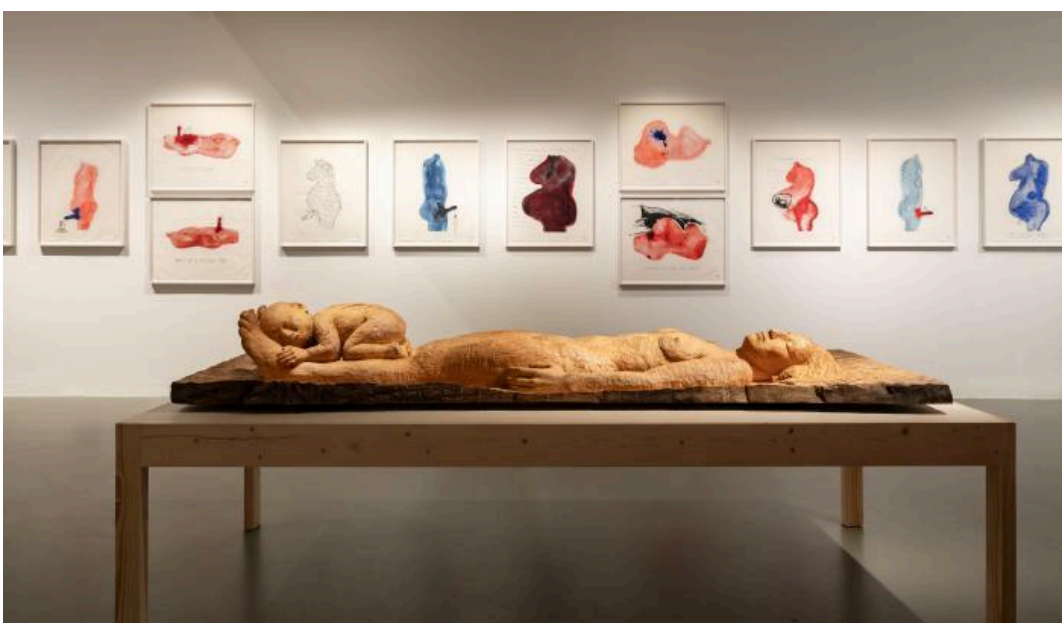
familiar image of Mary breastfeeding, sure, but also something truer and more intimate about that act.



Absolutely haunting is a work of video art by Buhlebezwe Siwani, which I watched with the provided headphones on, listening to a South African lullaby (« Thula Thula » sung by Ncebakazi Mnukwana). Its four panels show the artist and other women on a plantation, sitting down to breastfeed, or wandering around the grounds to rock a child. Sometimes the child is there in their arms, sometimes their arms are empty. Showing Black mothers in these classic poses alludes to the sickening history of enslaved Black women abused for breeding programs: at once forced into motherhood and forced into separation from their children.



Another highlight from my tour around the exhibition was Femmy Otten's *Birthland*, which first struck me as an enormous fertility statue: it's a life-sized naked woman, lying down, carved from a single block of lime wood. A baby, carved from the same block, is curled up on her lower legs. And while the woman's hands are nowhere near the baby, one can make out the imprint of a hand on its back. The sculpture projects love and closeness — yet I could also feel, almost physically, the baby as a literal wooden « blok aan haar been » (a block on her leg), a Dutch saying for a weight on one's shoulders, a ball and chain.

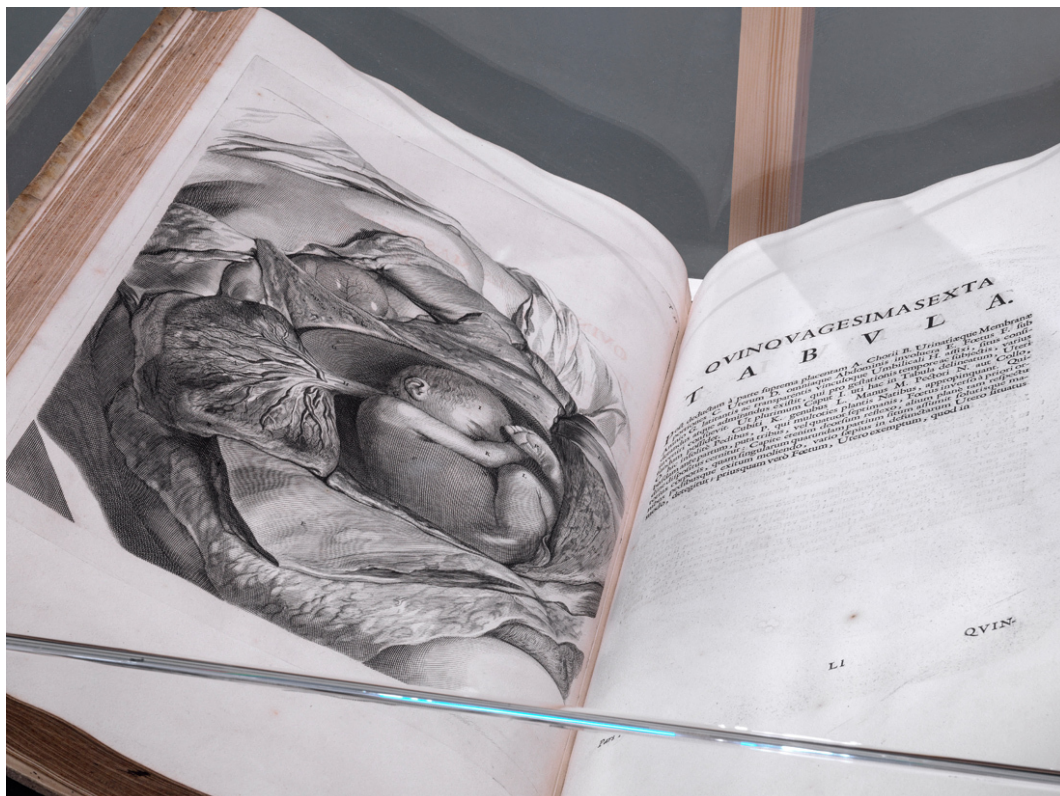


Trudy Dehue curated a cabinet for the exhibition, and it amounts a visual library of her book's highlights — or lowlights.



It includes X-ray images of a baby in a uterus (I learned from *Ei, Foetus, Baby* that the risks of X-ray technology to mothers and fetuses were long dismissed as a conspiracy theory); sixteenth-century illustrated imaginings of a fetus's position in the womb (drawn, inexplicably and terrifyingly, as a buff little man); and the influential issue of *LIFE* magazine from 1965 that had on its cover a beautiful photograph of an eighteen-week-old fetus. That imagery would be appropriated by the anti-abortion movement. In a grim irony, meanwhile, creating those images required the photographer, Lennart Nilsson, to use fetuses from miscarried or terminated pregnancies.

Read the essay for more wild, infuriating and tragic facts and findings from Dehue's book (which is currently only available in Dutch).



If you're anywhere near Utrecht between now and 14 September 2025, I recommend you go and see *Good Mom/Bad Mom* in the Centraal Museum, for a riveting compendium of motherhood in art that is nuanced, new and necessary.

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