

A Reckoning  
By Danielle Avram

Six years ago in a feverish haze, I became a mother to a 4lb baby, born 8 weeks too early. After holding her for a minute she was whisked away to the NICU, my blissfully easy pregnancy turned into a crash course in survival. Belly rubs and kick counts were replaced by ringing oxygen monitors and feeding tubes, my tiny daughter nestled amidst a tangle of delicate cords instead of in my womb. Life became a routine of sterilizing pump parts and disinfecting myself up to my elbows, staving off the possibility of any slight germ infecting a baby who was not yet ready for this world. Life became about keeping death at bay.

In the ensuing years I've thought a lot about the connection between motherhood and death, about how from the moment a woman discovers she is pregnant, her life is consumed by promise and loss, by the before and after. In her essay *Mothers as Makers of Death*, Claudia Dey writes, "No one had warned me that with a child comes death. Death slinks into your mind. It circles your growing body, and once your child has left it, death circles him too. It would be dangerous to turn your attentions away from your child—this is how the death presence makes you feel."

Emily Peacock is no stranger to death. Prior to giving birth to her son Emily experienced the loss of her mother, which she detailed in a series of photographs and sculptures titled *Soft Diet* (2014-15). While that series had a decidedly more sentimental and redemptive tone with family album-style aesthetics, her latest body of work, *Smother*, is luscious and moody, combining aspects of vanitas and old master paintings, early photographic portraiture, and sculptural history. It's a tragi-comic reckoning about succumbing to fear of the unknown in the wake of entering a strange new phase of life.

A large section of *Smother* consists of a series of classical portraits featuring Emily and her husband clad in various types of industrial garments, wielding an assortment of objects: a heart-shaped candy box, a red telephone, gardening tools, and a jade facial tool. Titled *H.S.A.N.O. (Home Security Apparatuses for Non-desirable Outcomes)*, the portraits stem from Emily's experience with post-partum depression and anxiety, which manifested itself as an obsession with keeping her family from harm. *Backyard Vanitas*, a still life of poisonous plants found in the artist's own backyard, addresses the same fear. They speak to the initial descent into motherhood, which can often feel like a descent into madness; the shock of suddenly having your baby outside of your body amplified by the aftermath of childbirth and the physical, mental, and emotional demands of caring for an utterly helpless being.

*Self-Healing Technology*, a suite of geode portraits, act as a talismanic antidote, a nod to the crunchy lifestyle many mothers feel compelled to adopt – both a means of warding off harm and a way of embracing the more instinctual side of motherhood. Amidst the slog of diapers and feedings exist continual realizations that you are now part of something greater than yourself, something ancient and animalistic.

*BIF: The Bifurcated Uvulae*, *Bubble Boy*, and *Proper Procedures* directly reference the artist's son. *BIF* is a series of cyanotypes of his bifurcated uvula, a genetic condition that can either be a benign isolated occurrence or carry the possibility of greater health risks. The shape is echoed by the fig in *Bubble Boy*, which gently rests atop various layers of bubble wrap. The images are complimented by *Proper Procedures*, a series of flocked baby blue safety plugs. The works capture the joys and sorrows of coming to understand your child as an individual, and the acceptance that you can only do so much to keep them safe from harm. Darkly comedic takes on how even the smallest things – the soft tissue at the back of your throat or a plastic outlet cover – can carry great importance, and how some may be let go along the way while others are carried for a lifetime.

*Smother* derives its title from a namesake series of small marble and soap sculptures that circle back to *Soft Diet*. Featuring Emily's baby teeth, strands of her mother's hair, her son's umbilical cord, and a chunk of her placenta immersed in puddles of hardened soap, the pieces play with ideas of hard and soft,

grandeur and simplicity, the artistic and the domestic. Reliquaries that are suggestive of tombstones, mausoleums, and classical sculpture, they represent a set of unrealized relationships between grandmother, mother, and child; the acknowledgement that next to death, becoming a mother is the ultimate no going back, the greatest leap into the unknown.

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