
Milkyways

(Pro)Creation and its myths

Birth, miscarriages, stillbirths or bodily fluids have rarely found a visual representation in art history. In her first column, Camille Henrot questions the myths of procreation in both art and life.

By Camille Henrot (idea and art) and [Antje Stahl](#) (text), 17.04.2021

English [Deutsch](#)



«Milkyways», 2020, watercolour, acrylic and oil on canvas. Annik Wetter/Kamel Mennour Gallery

Death and birth both seem to be the most banal, inescapable, yet most decisive moments of every human life. But while death has been prolifically inspiring narratives in literature, philosophy, cinema and the visual arts, the representation of birth has remained limited to the birth of gods and mythical figures.

There is Venus, for example, who emerged naked and beautiful in a shell from the ocean, Athena who came forth from Zeus' splitted head(ache), and Eve, who was formed out of Adam's rib – and the Virgin Mary with Jesus Christ, of course ... But all of them came to life by ways of male or divine fertility: They are detached from sexuality and pain, separated from the shadows of deaths – miscarriages, stillbirths and maternal deaths. They are waterproof and unaffected by all body fluids. Apparently, the female experience of procreation and birth was never considered to be artistically worthy.

A few months after I had given birth myself, I decided to work on a series of paintings dedicated to this basic chapter of the life of all women and men – using an application called «Procreate». It is designed for «creative professionals and aspiring artists alike» Apple writes on its [product description](#). The app offers a great variety of digital brushes. They help me layout and cut different masks to manually set digital brushstrokes (the digital brush-

strokes themselves being an imitation of brushstrokes). And while using the app on works on motherhood, I realized – quite amused – that its name «Procreate» draws an analogy between the production of art and the making of human beings.

Creation and procreation are still being mystified as quasi-divine manifestations located in the secrecy of ateliers, bedrooms and hospitals. In the western culture the artistic genius and the Virgin Mary remain two lonely figures, as archetypes they continue to influence the way we perceive artistic, sexual and domestic life. Creation was considered a God-given gift mainly granted to the chosen few of the church, the castle holders and the elite. Only the male genius was able to bring to life the masterpieces of Venus and Mary. This attitude blinded art history to women's experience. In this art tradition and, more generally speaking, in our paternalistic society creation has unfortunately always been associated with female self-sacrifice – women either devote themselves to a child or, if they are allowed at all, to their artistic vocation.

Interestingly, this moral setting and the still very clerical system get twisted once technology comes into the picture: in vitro fertilisation, egg freezing, sperm and egg banks and maybe soon uterus machines de-mystify procreation in quite the same way the digital tools used by all artists nowadays de-mystify the creation of art.

Apple surely did not have this effect in mind when baptizing the App «Procreation». It is an acronym for «professional creation» that clearly tries to succeed in demoting the work of amateur artists. Yet, in the advertisement Apple claims that we can get rid of any professional set-up and «work on the couch, on the train, on the beach, or while queuing for our coffee». It is a complete art studio «you can take anywhere».

However, this casual approach to «baby production» has yet to be invented: While procreation «on the couch» must have been performed as many times as there are stars in the sky, the idea of being inseminated while queuing for our coffee remains science fiction. It is a matter of fact that in the past sexuality was a casual event for men – what if assisted procreation became as accessible as sketching with an Apple paintbrush on the beach?



Tereza Mundilová

About the artist

At the 55th Venice Biennale, [French artist Camille Henrot](#) was awarded the Silver Lion for her video «Grosse Fatigue», among others. Since she gave birth to her son, she has both intellectually and artistically been exploring the ambivalent feelings associated with so-called motherhood. She, her partner, the Swiss composer Mauro Hertig, and her son Iddu are based in Berlin.