

Espace Sculpture

Emilie Mattson

Hangin' out the wash

Paula Gustafson

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EMILIE MATTSON HANGIN' OUT THE WASH

PAULA GUSTAFSON

The most dangerous — and the least visible — of all female imagery is woman as birthing mother. Even ardently feminist artists seldom consider the bloody, painful process that culminates pregnancy a suitable subject for art. That it should be so, when every other permutation of female (and male) sexuality is splashed across billboards and movie screens, suggests that some taboos persist long past their expiry dates.

For anyone raised on a farm, the cycle of copulation, gestation, and birth is an integral part of seasonal change. In a rhythm of renewal as old as the earth, each spring-time celebrates the miracle of new life. At the Mattson ranch near Dawson Creek in northeastern British Columbia, calving can begin as early as February. The first newborn calf arrives while snow still covers the ground. During the weeks that follow, the frozen fields are littered with dozens of scarlet red placentas, the incredibly tough membranes that protect and nourish the growing fetuses for 283 days.

For artist Emilie Mattson, these brilliantly-coloured afterbirths are both a symbol and a chore. Left in the field, they are temptations to coyotes and wolves — and consequently a danger to the young calves. Like most mammals, cows will remove birthing evidence by ingesting the placenta; however, current husbandry practice discourages cows from eating the thickly-veined membrane. Despite the nutritive value, the placenta's high protein content is undigestible in ruminant stomachs.

Although Mattson has spent most of her adult life working a cattle ranch, only recently, while picking up the slippery placentas, did she consider them as raw material for her art making. In the same way that other artists might use kitchen utensils as readily recognizable icons of domestic servitude, to Mattson the placentas represent primary vessels of "women's work." Her intention is not to shock, but merely to respond to a readily available material that expresses the textures of her rural environment and her life as a farm wife and mother.

Slimy warm when fresh, the pla-

centas quickly stiffen in the dry, cold air. As they dehydrate, they become darkened streaks of colour that repeat the rich reddish-browns of the ranch's Red Angus cattle. As elastic as birthday balloons, they adjust to accommodate awkward postures and sharp hoofs. At the same time, they are incredibly rugged structures with a high tensile strength. (Cauls that cling around a calf's head, restricting its breathing, can't be pulled apart; they must be slit with a sharp knife.)

Written on the placentas is the life-sustaining story of blood and water; a road map of veins that mediate the exchange of fluids. The veining, which becomes more apparent as the membranes dry to a parchment-like transparency, is a maze of interrelated markings — some as thick as a pencil, others as thin as single-strand embroidery silk — each an extension of the cotyledonary "buttons" attached to caulicles in the cow's uterus. Expelled from the cows and dropped on the ground, the placentas are garbage that must be cleaned up. But, looking at the bloodstained debris, Mattson realized it represented an emotional nexus; the miracle and mystery of birth, and the sacred and violent act of labour. Instead of disposing of the contents of her bucket, she draped the material over fences and pegged it to clotheslines. The pieces resembled tattered clothing. In strong sunlight the membranes glowed.

Mattson is not a theorist. She's a physical person who solves problems by going to work on them. Things that might make others squeamish — pulling calves, dehorning, cleaning infected hoofs — she takes for granted. Not surprisingly, her paintings and sculptures are grounded in the realities of daily life on a cattle ranch. When she was invited to participate in *Consolidation*, one of the curated sections of the *Artropolis 2001* mega-exhibition in Vancouver, May 7-28, 2001, she unhesitatingly chose to work with both a material and a subject matter that were authentic to her experience.

"I first got the notion of using placenta as an art medium when observing how beautiful it was draped over a fence, especially with the light behind it," she writes in her



artist statement. "Last year, during calving, I experimented by freeze-drying the placenta; it dried intact like pieces of jerky attached by parchment. I was delighted! But it could be better. This year I am using a preservative that replaces formaldehyde in the hopes of retaining the beautiful colours present in the fresh state. Besides being visually intriguing, placenta has the wonderful connotation of 'nurturing' and 'female-ness'; an effective tool for what I want to say."

Mattson's sculptural installation, *Hangin' out the wash*, consisted of a life-size female figure bending over a wash tub, backgrounded by a line of clothes hung to dry in the wind. As sculpture, the piece paralleled the banality of George Segal's plaster cast "ordinary people;" however, the comparatives stop there. Mattson's representation of a woman washing clothes was not in chalk white anonymity or painted to look like the real thing. Her sculpture wore the skin of hard labour. Deep red placental membrane was stretched taut over the female figure's metal armature form, the cotyledonous veining showing as jagged scars, and tissue-thin areas splitting open like fissures across the figure's buttocks and back. The shredded clothing on the line seemed to be

chunks of raw flesh ripped from the same body.

Although Mattson's installation was badly lit and mercilessly crowded for space amongst the 196 other artworks crammed into the *Artropolis 2001* exhibition site at CBC Vancouver studios, *Hangin' out the wash* garnered considerable attention from the show's 15,000 viewers. Sensationalism, however fashionable that might be as a current art trend, wasn't Mattson's goal. In fact, she is blissfully unaware of the outrage generated by British artist Damien Hirst's longitudinally-sliced pig, or of other artists working with animal parts. If pressed, she suggests her use of placentas has a tangential link to the work of another Peace River region artist; the twigs and branches Peter von Tiesenhausen uses to create his indigenous land sculptures.

It's rare to find an artist whose creative vision bears unflinching witness to her own experience. It's even rarer to find one whose choices so compellingly embrace life-affirming process and mythic female knowledge. ■

Emilie Mattson
Hangin' out the wash
Artropolis 2001, CBC Vancouver
studios, Vancouver
May 7-28, 2001

EMILIE MATTSON, *Hangin' out the wash*, 2001. Detail. Mixed media. Photo courtesy of the artist.