

Why can't great artists be mothers?

A group of rising artists strongly rejects the all-or-nothing, children-versus-art premise

BY JACOBA URIST 05.21.15



Rania Matar

Soraya and Tala, Yarze Lebanon, 2014

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The art world is full of enduring stereotypes. There's the [myth of the starving artist](#). [The crazy artist](#). [The hermit artist](#). And then there's the [childless artist](#)— a woman (yes, she's usually [female](#)) so fervidly dedicated to her craft that there's no room in her life for motherhood. Indeed, some of the greatest visual artists — [Georgia O'Keefe](#), [Frida Kahlo](#), and [Lee Krasner](#) — had no children. Kids and their constant battery of needs, the argument goes, are incompatible with true creativity. Art is supposed to be an all-consuming enterprise — [and now modern parenting is too](#).

British sculptor and painter Tracey Emin never had children and doesn't think she ever could have. Internationally renowned, Emin is known for "confessional" pieces like *My Bed* (1998), for which she staged her mattress with stained underwear and a used condom: The work is currently on view at [Tate Britain](#) after a 15-year hiatus. Nominated for the prestigious [Turner prize in 1999](#), *My Bed* sold at Christie's for around \$4.3 million last July. Just three months after the [record-breaking sale](#), Emin told U.K.'s [Red Magazine](#) that motherhood would have diminished her work: "I know some women can. But that's not the kind of artist I aspire to be. I would have been either 100 percent mother or 100 percent artist. I'm not flaky and I don't compromise." There are good artists who are parents, assured Emin. Only they're men. Mothers are too "emotionally torn."

But there's a group of rising artists who strongly reject the all-or-nothing, children-versus-art premise. Motherhood, they argue, has increased the complexity of their work and intensified their perspectives, whether or not their subject matter is domestic life. And they believe that the art world is slowly warming to the idea that great artists can also be great mothers.

That doesn't mean art mythologies don't apply. These women — like their male or childless counterparts — immerse themselves in their work to the point of compulsivity. "Art, in any form, demands that you turn yourself inside out. You must be obsessed for it to be any good," explained Cig Harvey, an artist, based in Rockport, Maine, whose photography has been called "[visual fiction](#)" or "[magic realism](#)." Harvey captures nature and ordinary objects — a bird's nest, sprig of flowers, or woman's hands — in a dreamlike state. Her new book, *Gardening at Night*, and current [solo Boston show](#), explore "family, time, and nature through the eyes of a new mother." Despite the myth, said Harvey, mother to 3-year old Scout, you can be obsessed with two things — art and your child. Missouri photographer, [Julie Blackmon](#) is known for edgy parodies of home life — a terrified infant [being tossed in the air](#), (a subject [one curator labeled](#) ripe for cliché). She [told Art News](#) about balancing passion and motherhood: When your kid tells you that he had to eat croutons for breakfast because he couldn't find anything else, you know you've gone too far.

"Art is mirroring and life became more complicated and richer in my opinion after Scout was born," explained Harvey. "But the world was also much more terrifying to me."

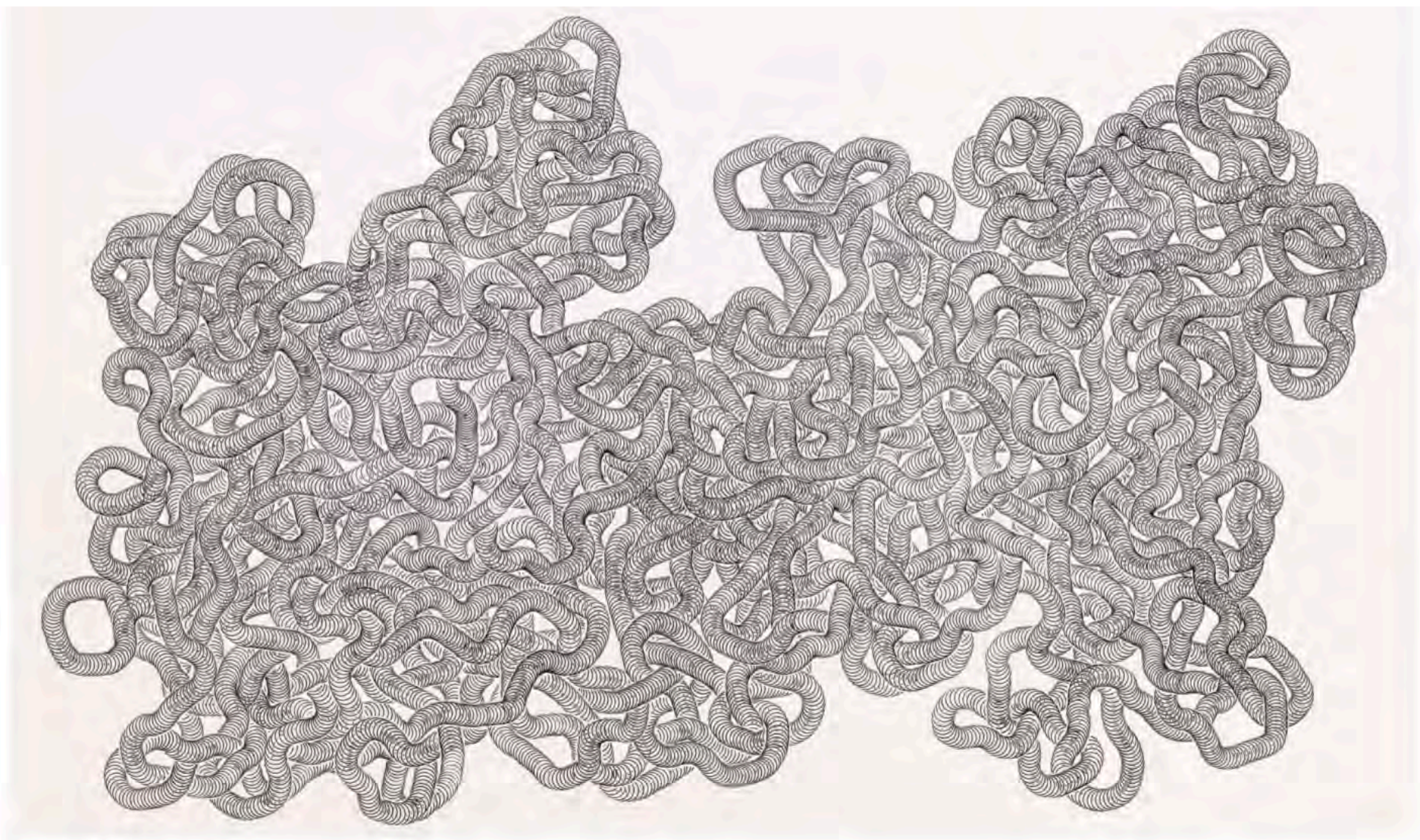
Riots and wars in the news— hundreds or thousands of miles away— feel more acute. In the fleeting moments of daily life— a baby's first tooth or day of school— parents often become hyper-aware of the Sanskrit term *kalpa*, or the cosmic passage of time. [Sarah Sze](#), mother of [two daughters](#) and celebrated sculptor whose work *Triple Point* was featured at the 2013 Venice Biennale, echoed the sentiment [in an interview with The Guardian](#). Now that she had children, she explained, time was “more significant” and had “more weight.” And ultimately, Harvey believes, this intensity that motherhood brings isn't a hindrance — it's “an extraordinary gift for art.”

Artist Rania Matar grew up in Beirut. At age 20, in the wake of the Lebanese Civil War, she moved to upstate New York and studied architecture at Cornell. While she had done some painting and worked for a decade as an architect in Boston, she said it wasn't until she was pregnant with her fourth child, at 35, that she took photography workshops. She wanted to take better pictures of her family, but fell in love with the medium as a way of telling a story and learning to find beauty in mundane, “nothing” moments (like many new parents). Matar eventually moved away from architecture and became a photographer— her four children were her main subjects. Nine years later, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq war, she published her first book, *Ordinary Lives*, a collection of black-and-white photographs of women and children in Lebanon—work celebrating the strength and dignity of humanity amidst rubble and refugee camps.

“Being a mother has made me a better photographer in every possible way,” Matar said. “Photographing my kids made me appreciate how important intimacy is in photography and made me realize how important it is for me to work on projects I feel personally and deeply connected to.”

For example, Matar's 2012 series [A Girl And Her Room](#) was inspired by the adolescence of her older daughter, who was “transforming before [her] eyes.” Matar photographed teenage girls in the United States and the Middle East, in their bedrooms, which ranged from “Spartan cleanliness to chaotic disarray,” but shared common imagery associated with teenage girls, “despite all we see in the media about how different these two cultures are,” the photographer said. “The journey to womanhood for all these girls was very similar.” Matar's recent portfolio [Unspoken Conversations](#) captures the emotionally charged and universally difficult relationships of mothers and daughters. Her latest book, “L'Enfant-Femme,” inspired by her younger daughter, will be pre-released at [Paris Photo](#) this November. It focuses on preteen girls, ages eight to 12, with an introduction by Queen Noor of Jordan.

On a recent Friday evening in Manhattan, twin 5-year-old boys handed out Slinkys at a blue-chip opening. Their mother, acclaimed artist [Tara Donovan](#), the recipient of a 2008 “[MacArthur genius award](#),” creates large, dramatic installations from everyday objects—vast moonscapes out of Styrofoam cups and plastic straws. For her new show at [Pace Prints](#) (in conjunction with one at [Pace Gallery](#)), Donovan unveiled a [series of prints](#), as well as a spiral wall assemblage, based on her “ongoing investigation of Slinkys as sculptural material.” What mother hasn’t, at some point, helped a child catapult a Slinky down the stairs? But in the hands of a master, an old toy becomes high art.



Tara Donovan

Untitled (2015), Relief print from a Slinky® matrix

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