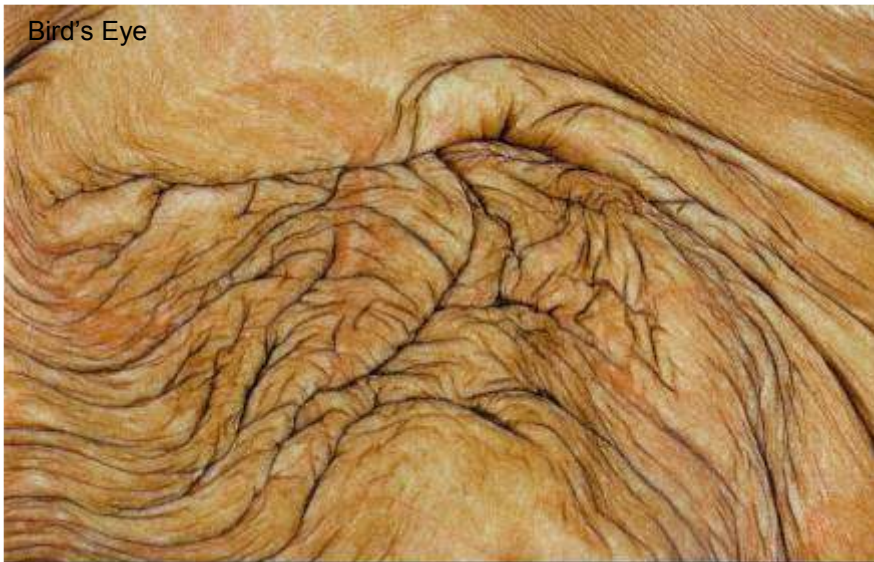


Bird's Eye



Shira Richter  
The Mother, Daughter and Holy Spirit



שירה ריכטר  
האם, הבת ורוח הקודש

## The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit Mapping the Gap

Art Project

Photography and Phototext

by Artist Shira Richter



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## **The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit**

### **About the Name :**

At the beginning I named the project “In limbo” – because I felt as if I was existing in an unexisting unacknowledged -unnamed space –or planet, between identities. A gap opened between what I felt and what everyone else around me was telling me I should feel. “This collision between expectation and reality creates a kind of *statelessness* for many women of my generation...” writes Naomi Wolf in her own account “Misconceptions”. So I went about searching to “fill the gap”, to “solidify” my experience into form and words. To visibilize the invisible. “The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit” is the name of one of the photographs.

Living in Israel, a state based on a religion, speaking in Hebrew, made me painfully aware of the tradition of saying “in sorrow ye shall bear sons” I was consciously angry the only “formal” reference to such a huge

complex transforming event in my life was a punishment, a negative curse, of a male god. Not a blessing, miracle or achievement. There is no ceremony honoring the humongous physical mental and emotional effort of the woman, or the shift of the couple into parenthood. The name “Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit” invokes a female divinity. And also the name “The Father, Son and Holy Spirit” which creates, by way of gestalt, in one’s thought, a duality, or a double trinity, of male and female. The act of creation is never solitary the way our “hero” monogod culture pretends. Another reason for the name has to do with the complex relationships between mothers and daughters, between one woman to another. When you are not told the truth by those closest to you, those who traveled before -you feel betrayed. The women closest to me -personally and professionally, almost all lied. I wanted to create a large scale subjective monument in honor of this transition and transformation.



**There are several reasons I pointed my camera to the “nature reserve” that emerged in the center of my body.**

The skin that was created, or more accurately, “remained” on the stomach area after giving birth resembled exposed intestines, and expressed what I felt and couldn’t say, and what no one else wanted to hear. The stomach, visually opened, gaped, and became a mouth, a crater and the all knowing one. In certain angles it looked like the Syrian-African rift valley which slices Israel’s landscape. **(Riviera)**

and in certain angles it looks like a volcano. And that is how I felt. I felt I went through a lethal earthquake, I felt I was kicked in the gut. In every day life we are expected to keep a façade, to keep our “gut feelings” bottled up. Especially regarding the truths of pregnancy and birth, which is considered a wonderful and positive thing and how dare you complain you lucky woman. The gutscape exposed all. The inner twisting, and distortion required of me from external untalked about but existing social conventions – conscious and less conscious, became an external and visual distortion. The tummy was more naked than me. She told all. By photographing her I consciously and almost rebelliously took back control. I chose to refuse the dominant fashion of whitewashing pregnancy and parenting experiences. **(Mt. Novolak)**. In the process of pregnancy labor and parenting there were many things I couldn’t refuse. I was forced to go through checkups I didn’t want, was forced to give birth a way I didn’t want to do. Relatives “forced” me to smile to their unannounced visits...the pregnancy itself forced a shape and behavior I didn’t want. The stomach, on the other hand, refused to “go back to normal” and refused to pretend “nothing major just happened”. I conquered my body and stomach back through re-owning the story. I refused. I refused to conceal - on the contrary- I blew it up, so everyone could see. I refused to cut (plastic surgery). I refused to be silent, to ignore or deny. I refused to cooperate with what (almost) everyone else does.

In the process you are invaded, by these lovely lively cells **(Sprouts)**, by other’s hands, by tests and opinions and practices. Your form is changed, your stomach is spread, jumped on, **(Waterbed)**, pressed, depressed, caressed **(Push)**, your desires feelings and wishes ignored, Your mouth is shut– **(Bad aid)**, your form is ripped open, you are sucked from **(Mobile)**, cut, and all in good spirits- in “congratulations,” with balloons and colorful ribbons. **(Gift)**.

You, as a person, become the backdrop of the stomach, of the pregnancy. So this is how I use my body in the series, as a photographers backdrop, background, as grounds. Play-ground. Fields, mountain ridges, water beds. It’s like a trip to a strange country, a new planet. Topography, Landscapes. The closer you get, the farther you see. The closer and nearer you get to the skin textures, the farther you become. From up close it looks like an aerial photograph of the Sahara desert. Of a ski resort, or mountain ridge.

The tummy, or skin, didn’t conceal. She didn’t conceal the tension and extreme stretching, the pain and suffering of this stretch, the contraction and depletion, the old age. She didn’t hide the rip and tear, the cracks and rifts and geologic swallow holes. The stomach became, in the most visual and unromantic aspect, mother earth.

The images, without the accompanying text I wrote, are de-void of identity. Viewers who see the exhibit ask “what is this? Or- what is it? Or- who is this? there are people who, till this day, have no idea that this “thing” depicted in the photograph is skin, and not of an old man, or elephant, or tree bark, but it’s a stomach and it’s part of this thin “nice” woman who just spoke with them. Why did I add personal exposing/revealing text? Because I didn’t want yet another other to write about me, the exhibit, or the experience. Too many “others” defined the experience already. (Their way, their text, their photo’s their point of view, their research, their feelings. )

## Photo text

**Tummy Photo Diary, June 2003 / They are one year and five months old / Running out of external eyes. Need a pervert.**

When I bend over, it looks like one huge cunt in the center of my gut. Or a volcano. P. doesn't want to be involved in the shooting, so I have to find someone else. It's hard to expose someone new to this intimacy, to ask him to crawl between my legs for shooting purposes. The person I am most intimate with doesn't want to crawl between my legs for that purpose. For other purposes he agrees to do it. But the eighty-year-old woman attached to me is not one of them. Evidence of aging and dying - and wisdom, too. It moves, giggles and waddles. It's my secret. A secret I have no intention of sharing with my fellow women swimmers in the public dressing room. I don't want their advice on this or that cream, with or without Wheat Germ, with or without Calendula. Don't tell me how to fix/heal/smooth/get rid of it. I need to find someone who fancies such distortions. A pervert. A pervert will connect to this project.

Who's the bigger pervert: the one who wants everything smooth and hairless, with no wrinkles, creases or stretch marks, or the one who investigates this mutation?

Shira Richter



The Photo text, presented here the way it is viewed on the gallery wall, is a photograph taken of the “inner intestines”, meaning, the thought. It appears in animation, letter by letter, white on white (the wall is white), exposing its meaning slowly, as if drifting silently through the room this very moment. It is presented in the same size as the other photographs.



## About the Project

I carried twin boys to full term - to the fortieth week. My skin started to rip and tear on the thirty second week. After giving birth 'normally' (meaning no cesarean section, as most twin pregnancies end) my midbody resembled the Elephant Man's skin. I was no longer pregnant but looked pregnant. I was not yet a mother but was called a mother. I couldn't think (exhaustion and breastfeeding erased my memory); I had no form or identity; invisible to others and to myself.

Between loop lactations and healing bodily wounds, I dared look at the 'ground zero' that my body had become. It was then that the artist in me awoke. Ugly, despicable reservoirs of scarred skin transformed into fascinating versatile material to work with. I molded and played, using it to express the unexpressed, undefined and unacknowledged passages I was experiencing. My attitude shifted - from wanting to get back to 'my own body' as soon as possible to wanting the excessive skin to stay around long enough to get my photos done. Hate turned into love.

What I felt was far from the common images of pregnancy, birth and parenting. I did not feel the myth-bliss of Demi Moore's tummy in flowers; I identified neither with the heavenly breastfeeding Madonna nor with home movies that show pieces of bloody flesh coming out of vaginas; the super-realistic, depressing images of sagging bodies also didn't feel right. Mine was a powerful, awe-inspiring, wonderful and terrible, ridiculous and humbling experience, transforming everything and demanding everything; like a head-on collision. It tore everything apart, including the body, and put everything back together - but nothing was as it had been before. It was a profound physical and mental transformation, in which extremes met and clashed: life and death, body and spirit, youth and old age, awe and disgust, love and hatred, past and future, attraction and revulsion, truth and lies, miracle and myth. Deep, archaic preconceptions were unleashed, which had little to do with the actual experience.

I believe that this is a process that brings out the best and worst in all of us, by exposing excruciating truths – personal, cultural, social, political and economical. It is a fierce test of character, a total shift in what was and what will be. I have lost so much and gained so much. During this transition and transformation I yearned for something that would adequately honor and acknowledge the depths of the reality I was experiencing – unlike the weak, belittling or trivializing images I found around me. This work is an attempt to map a chaotic, uncharted territory. It is an effort to build a bridge, to fill a gap. It was my ladder out of the abyss.



**Riviera-** The moment before everything changes. In horror films, you have a harmonious but eerie scene of the family or couple right before something major happens. The view resembles the dead sea, the lowest place in the world, and the place of the big divide- the Syrian-African rift valley which slices Israel's landscape lengthwise.

The perfect couple are vacationing, oblivious to the fact they sit on the site of a volcano about to erupt. Little prepares couples for the devastation of their dual relationship when a baby comes along. A new baby is one of biggest stressors on a relationship as it affects all parameters.



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**Gift-** tied up like a gift, or maybe a strait jacket? It is acceptable to celebrate such a positive event. However, this positiveness becomes your strait jacket. It is not polite to refuse these well meant blessings. The blue yellow and red ribbons are the ribbons on the balloons brought, by the happy uninvited visitors who flock your side.





Shira Richter 2004

**Sprouts-** life has it's own vicious "in your face" vitality which leaves us all in awe. It will sprout from destruction. The tear in the abdomen muscles can be fixed only by an expensive operation.





**Mt Novolak-** Novolak is a milk formula.

It seems the formula companies are best at the public whitewashing of the truth and depth of the experience. They are the first to send you material in the mail, and their television advertisements depict effortless bliss of mother and baby. I don't remember being told about the acute pain first time breastfeeding causes, but I do remember being told two distinctly different truths regarding breastfeeding at the hospital. However, this is also about the height of the drugged feeling washed over us once you get over the first hardships.





**The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit** each triangle represents a different (sacred) entity: Upper triangle represents the aging crinkled “ginger roots”, as one viewer said; the mother. The black triangle represented by the tight underwear is the daughter- and the third triangle is concealed by the underwear- the mysteries of creation- which put us all in awe- the holy spirit. One of the central reasons for this project, is the lack of solidarity between women. Several women I met along the way, lied, denied, belittled, forgot. A few years later, I caught myself doing the same. This isn't innocent. Once you get out of the danger zone, of the “sinkhole” you have no yearning to be reminded of it again. Even today few dare to speak the truth of this.





Shira Richter 2004



**Waterbed-** the hand bound bouncing happy babies are the promotion symbol of Israel's most popular children's snack. Bounce bounce bounce. You are so exhausted you see double. Also, the blessing of having twins is a different bounce game.



**Mobile-** the skin is mobile, I am A mobile. I feed, entertain, supply. I am latched & have little mobility. Who wants to play hang woman?



Shira Richter 2004

**Bad aid-** band aids are supposed to hide a wound from contamination and allow healing. This wound is impossible to hide and impossible to heal. Trying to cover the suffering and ugliness wastes valuable energy. Take a nap, bath, read a paper- nothing and no one touches on the acuteness of not being able to think, being excommunicated from the art world, the cinema world, dependent on people who don't speak my language. Working 24 hrs a day and not being paid for it. It didn't surprise me to learn at the National Conference for promoting women's mental health in the postpartum depression session- that it's not that a woman after birth needs help, it's what kind of help and from whom, that matters.





**Men at work** - I love men - Men are (most of) the gynecologists. They tell me how my body works. Men deliver. Men are the heads of the women's departments. At work on the territory which is your body... Men are the plastic surgeons. Men are inside me. Three phalluses - one who participated in the deed, and the two extras, tenderly floating inside my womb..



**Void-** Death and fear of death becomes a moment to moment escort. No one talks about it. Death by natural miscarriage, by medical needles poking at internal waters. Death of womb, death in child labor. The sensitivity to violence is tenfold. Terror attacks both in Israel and the world surrounded me. The person I was died. After 4 years a new identity begins to form.



**White drape Blue drape**





**Push-** the hand of a son pressing the skin of the place where he was developed, protected and fed. The natural way of growth is by pushing at something. A baby comes out because a mother pushes. A person pushes away his mother or parents in order to individuate and create her own personality. To walk one must push the ground. Any kind of growth means something must be pushed. Something close.







**Without icing** – a friend saw the photo & asked why aren't there candies & chocolate to lure him into believing this is a real cake, why must he see the ugly truth of it?

My answer – As women, we are the artists of seduction & beauty. We are expected to show what is pretty & hide what is ugly. I do this a little in this body of work, by exposing only part of the picture & keeping the image composition aesthetic. But I do *not* want to beautify this reality. On the contrary. Media, society & other women do this & are responsible for the after shock.



The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit exhibits 2006- 2009 :

Solo Exhibition - Artist Residence Gallery, Hertzliya, Curator Varda Genosar

Special event at the exhibit:

Lecture of Chief Curator of Haifa Museum of Art Tami Katz – Freiman

The exhibit is chosen to Open International Woman's Month In Hertzliya:

Wounds and Bandages - Um El Fahim Art Gallery –Curator Efi Gen

League –Comme ill faut Tel Aviv Curator Galia Yahav

Disturbances and Disfigurations Titan Design Gallery, Tel Aviv. Curator Dafna Ichilov

Skin - Kastiel Art Gallery- Tel Aviv, Curator Dr. Ktsia Alon

Presented as lecture at Symposia of birth experts: Doctors, Gynecologists, Midwives –  
*The Essence of pain* – Nazareth

Presented as paper and lecture at 3<sup>rd</sup> National Conference For Promoting Women's  
Mental Health – Ben Gurion University *Mother Earth and all that Crap*

References to The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit in academic work of:

Dr. Tal Dekel- Tel Aviv University, Beit Berel Academic College

Dr. Roni Halprin – *The Mother Body*- Tel Aviv University- Women's Studies

Dr. Hadara Sheflan Katsav- The college of Management academic department,

Kibbutzim College of Education. The project appears in the doctorate theses

of Dr. Hadara Sheflan Katsav ;*The encounter between the maternal subject and the  
visual signifier in the current Israeli art.*

Tami Katz Freiman- Chief Curator of Haifa Museum of Art

Articles and reviews of the project appeared in

Jerusalem post – culture

Haaretz- Culture- Shamenet Magazine

Maariv

Several Internet Portals.



Shira Richter- Award Winning Artist  
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Two States of Mind – Award Winning Film 1hour. English and Hebrew



The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit Project- 120X180 cm C- prints, Animated PhotoText



Luxurious Think Space- 5 X 1.5m chandelier installation, Wood, diapers, Clothespins, Haaretz newspaper bags



Invisible Invaluables –Photography – Light Instillation + Sound 120X80 cm'



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Mapping the gap

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