*A Note to the Virgin: Commentary on Stephanie Slate's “Grief and Joy’”*

by Kristina Bivona

Unless you are the virgin Mary herself or fall into the ilk of folk art that has been fetishized and categorized into domesticity as non-art, good luck talking about birth and maternity in visual art. Like a black hole, this cosmic body, where not even light can escape, forms a specter of maternity in Stephanie Slate’s images of *Grief and Joy* on view at 356 Foundation from May 3- May 24th*.* The exhibition features a series of bleed-printed Prussian blue cyanotypes bleached and toned into bile of maternal feeling that consumes the virtue of motherhood into a psyche of ideology. These 34”x53” prints are complemented by four smaller photogravure prints made in letter size or smaller, creating a staccato of rhythmic being in visual form.

Slate contends with fear of loss and consummate love in deep blue, tannic browns, and graphic grays. The universal lineage of birth and death in Western consumerist society is moved away from a narrative of cleanliness in baby blue and powder pink items to a bile of psychology akin to the amniotic sac we were all once encased in. The images in sequence call us all back to the cadence of that fluid of the womb where a heart beats in unison with the potential for another life.

The intelligence of Slate’s specter is that it carries the taboo of motherhood away from the individual and allows a viewer to move through these works to transcend the codified respectability of maternity that shrink-wraps motherhood into an individualized and isolated experience. These are not socially acceptable portrayals of ancient, tatted lace by chaste nuns; they are not a dinner table set for every important woman in time or a popular artisanal birthing gift set. Instead, the ghostliness of these prints brings all viewers back to an immediate place of loss where, without the synchronous connection to another person, the drum of life will cease to exist forever.

We all remember the portal of loss within these dark and mysterious views of watery pear-shaped spaces. The impersonalization of ghostliness in Slate’s prints shifts the contemporary conversation of motherhood into a comprehensive ideological framework where the works of Sally Mann, Wangetchi Mutu, and Joel Peter Witkin all appear as influential marks in the service of the origin of life. Slate’s most recent works are on view in their full scale and collection at 365 Foundation from May 3 to May 24th in the presentation of *Grief and Joy*. Here, the viewer may enter a portal of their choice through twelve prints and if they remain quiet and connected as they traverse the series a de-identification may occur that alleviates the pain and isolation of individuality and returns us all to the pre-breath of the woman's power to create life.

Bio:

Stephanie Slate is an artist who primarily uses alternative and historical processes in photography and printmaking, such as cyanotype and photogravure. Her work often explores darker themes such as loss, death, the afterlife, and the Unknown.

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In 2008, Slate received her BFA in photography from the Pratt Institute in New York, and in 2016, she earned her MFA in Studio Art from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Slate teaches Fine Art Photography to Summer Prep students at the University of Pennsylvania and has taught pinhole photography and cyanotype workshops since 2008. Her work has been published in Seities magazine, the Hand magazine, SHOTS, Aeonian magazine, and Nikon’s Best of College photography book. Her work has been exhibited internationally and resides in permanent collections such as The University of Denver Special Collections, The University of Pennsylvania, Virginia Commonwealth University Special Collections, and the Santa Reparata International School of Art in Florence, Italy. Notable awards include the grand prize winner of the Living Image exhibition at the Halide Project, UArts President’s Fund for Excellence award, and portfolio winner of Seities magazine cyanotype issue.

Artist Statement: *Greif and Joy* began exploring my extreme fear of loss. Fear of losing myself (identity) as a mother and fear of losing my daughter.

Heavy expectations are laid upon Mothers, and we are often made to feel that we cannot have any emotion except joy when it comes to being a mother.

Before my daughter was born, I had an ectopic pregnancy, which took my left fallopian tube and ovary. Because of this, during my pregnancy with my daughter, I was terrified of losing her. Almost immediately after her birth, I was terrified of losing myself.

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I unconventionally use the Cyanotype photography process to ‘paint’ with chemistry and light. Though sometimes abstract, I often work in layers and use imagery of myself and my daughter to depict incomplete figures floating between a state of connection and disconnect.

The Cyanotypes are over 4 feet high. It is important for me to work on a large scale because it attempts to depict very large and complex emotions visually. Therefore, I want the viewer to feel subsumed and engulfed by the image in front of them.

Images in *Grief and Joy* attempt to explore the complicated feelings of motherhood and the delicate balance of giving away pieces of yourself to loved ones without completely losing yourself.

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