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Nurture: Exploring Surrogacy through Visual Art

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Abstract: This body of work portrays my time being a gestational surrogate for a family member and the honor I felt to be part of the journey. As a surrogate you are opening your life – physically and mentally to carry someone else’s load – for me this was a choice, a joy, and not a burden. This work takes the form of a large mixed media installation, which chronicles the complex journey I had as a gestational surrogate. Wall-mounted assemblages take viewers through a timeline documenting the different chapters of this experience. Stages include contracts and legal status, medical examinations and preparation, implantation, and my relationship with the family. The assemblages contain altered medical documents, medication, correspondence, tins, hair, breast milk, and personal items collected during the surrogacy. While this pregnancy was not always easy, the hard work and challenges do not make it less important or rewarding. I am devoted to sharing this story and remove the stigma that surrogacy would be an impersonal service or doomed to end with a sense of loss. The gift of surrogacy is invisible after the baby is born. This work provides visual evidence of this intangible experience.

Keywords: Ceramics, milk glazing, obvara, saggar, surrogate.

Over the past two years, my research and artistic practice has looked at gestational surrogacy based on my experience as a surrogate for a family. The journey of being a surrogate was significant but once I wasn’t pregnant anymore, there was no evidence of that experience. How do I share my joy and happiness? What do I want people to know about surrogacy? How do you create art that shows “surrogacy” without just looking like pregnancy?

My first semester as an MAT graduate student, I spent exploring ceramic forms and alternative firing processes. The forms are influenced by the womb and the protection it creates for a growing fetus. The vessels are tipped forward, inviting the viewer to see inside of them. This is my invitation to share my journey as a surrogate.

When thinking about creating shapes that represented a uterus, I knew that traditional glaze would not be right for my project. Researching and experimenting with milk glazing, obvara, and saggar firing became my focus for two semesters. Milk glazing uses milk on bisque fired ceramics to seal the pieces. Using milk to seal a womb-like vessel continues with my theme of protection, joy, and hard work that being a surrogate entail. Obvara is an Eastern European technique dating back to the twelfth century. It is when a fermented mixture is used on hot bisqued ceramics to scald the surface before dunking it in cold water to stop the reaction. The mixture is water or milk, yeast,
flour, and sugar. Connections are made between the fermented mixture with milk and gestating a baby. The last technique that I researched and tested was saggar firing. A saggar is a container used to keep precious pots or ceramics from being damaged during firing. Since my body was used to protect a baby, I became the “saggar” while a surrogate. What is fascinating about saggar firing is that no matter what you put into the container, the results are unpredictable. You need combustible materials to create color and patterns. I used seaweed, banana peels, hay, hair, steel wool, and other items in my experiments.

I really enjoy the puzzle solving that art is. My ceramics were documented, tracked and the data has helped me get closer to a completed body of work. It also showed me that for this project, ceramics is not the correct material. Without my time making and reflecting, I wouldn’t have put together those puzzle pieces. The theme of gestational surrogacy has stayed the same—but the materials needed to change. The abstract forms don’t show enough information to the viewer for them to see “surrogacy.”

My next steps will be to explore including personal items such as medical documents, conversations, and images between the families, as well as including hair, milk, and those containers that keep coming back into my research. I plan to create an installation that is chronological as well as brings personal joy back into the picture. Even though the ceramic pieces are not likely to be part of my thesis art
show, they are a key part of my artistic research and
development in the process of my journey as an artist
(come back next year for part two).

**Note on Author:** Megan Kenealy is an artist and art teacher living in southeast Massachusetts. She received her Bachelor of Arts from BSU. Before becoming a teacher, Kenealy worked in museums and art institutions throughout Massachusetts such as the Institute of Contemporary Art, Fuller Craft Museum, and the North Bennet Street School. She has been teaching for over ten years in public schools. When not in the studio or teaching, she enjoys spending time with her two kids and husband outside playing all the games and sports or tending to her garden. Kenealy expects to receive her Master of Arts in Teaching in Visual Arts from BSU in December 2023.