

NADIA MOSS AS AN ELUSIVE ARTIST WITH FLICKR AS HER VIRTUAL EXHIBITION SPACE

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When contacting people about the Montreal based artist Nadia Moss, the first thing I found out was that Moss is elusive. Though any website will tell you she has widely exhibited in artist-run centers across Canada and the United States, there is very little detailed information about her life and work. Moss boasts nothing close to an artist's website so what we are left with are tidbits of information that are mostly found on blogs, art news or event websites and other internet publications. But this is not to diminish the clout of Nadia Moss. She is well known for her time spent as a musician in Montreal and has created many album covers for bands such as *A Silver Mount Zion* (2005) and *God Speed! You Black Emperor* (2002). She has painted murals, exhibited in local cafés and her work often appears on event posters as well as in such obscure places as on the cash register of a vintage store in the Mile End in the form of printed post-cards. Accordingly, there is no lack of exposure for Moss. Even though she has published two art books the most cohesive and dynamic location where Moss's work can be viewed is on her Flickr page. Nadia's profile reads:

Joined: 2007

Currently: Montreal

I am: Other

Occupation: Thing

This is where the true documentation of Nadia's work begins. Moss's Flickr page is a virtual exhibition of her work as an artist where we can trace the progression of her work as well as contextualize, critique and comment on it.

One of the first images that appears when you Google search Nadia Moss is an untitled work of three figures (fig. 1). There is an androgynous looking hairless creature in a blue smock on top of whom sits what one assumes is a woman, because of its protruding breasts. It is difficult to tell whether or not the figure is a woman because its chest is covered with hair and it has a monstrous looking hairy head. This creature cradles a baby who sleeps passively in its arms. This unusual looking family unit depicts an interesting dynamic of an ambivalent-looking father supporting a mother who is cradling a baby awkwardly in her arms. The father figure in the back is touching the face of the mother ambiguously so that one cannot tell if it is caring or about to attack. This image, at first glance, is as elusive as the artist herself.

By viewing, however, the wide range of work on the six pages of Nadia's Flickr page the works become more easily interpretable. This image is emblematic of Moss's work in 2007-2008. It illustrates family dynamics with psychological depth and, though it is figurative, the figures are in no way typical images. The lack of information that surrounds this mysterious artist as well as the fact that there is no contextualization by her for the work posted on her Flickr allows the viewers to appreciate her work individually but also as a narrative of her progression as an artist. By examining this artist's page we can see how the major themes and characters of her work are teased out or used in different ways, and how this untitled image exemplifies the theme of family dynamic in her work.

Moss published an art book in 2008 at the same approximate time as this untitled work. The book is called *Bébé* and the infant or child figure occurs over and over throughout her paintings at this time. *Bébé* is described on the website *Artmetropole* as:

an exploration on care giving and the beasts that live within us. It features mother and child characters, couples and babies, lots of babies. *Bébé* is an exploration on care giving and the beasts that live within us. It features mother and child characters, couples and babies, lots of babies. The mothers are often beastly creatures, hairy breasted and faceless. Sometimes the babies are more like old men. The couples bleed into each other, hands trying to fix another's insides. And then there is the beach. Is it life after death? Retirement? Relaxation? The drawings are figurative, often hovering just on the 'good' side of creepy. At once unsettling and humorous.¹

The article continues by describing the images of couples that are melding together, the beastly nature of Nadia's mothers and the resemblance between the male figures and the babies, who are both often androgynous and hairless. Rover, a website for arts and culture review, describes Moss's work saying that she displays a "maturity of technique, humour amid crisis, and stories seemingly suspended on clouds."² Another article points to the ambiguity or double meanings that she produces such as the ties that hold us together but that bind us.

Other images created around the time of *Bébé* depict similar characters and themes such as the mother, the mother-child relationship, and the family or couple dynamic, for example in her works titled *Kids*, *In the Grass*, *Nesting* and *Son Père*.

Kids is an ink drawing that is also the cover of *Bébé* (fig. 2). It depicts again one of these "monster mothers" with multiple babies draped on and around her. The babies appear to be menacing and almost harassing the mother. One woman comments on the photo, "This is how she feels every night at 3 am."³ This comment helps capture this dual nature of Nadia's work, in the sense that motherhood, though often depicted as tender and ever loving, is also an inescapable and often daunting experience.

In the Grass is an image which, like the untitled work discussed above, depicts one of Moss's mothers standing over a father who lies calmly on a gentle sloping hill in the grass (fig. 3). In the top right of the image flies two of Nadia's reoccurring geese. The mother reaches out to the father, and the father gently cradles an egg-like white thing the shape of a bowling pin. Through examining Nadia's other works we find this image over and over again. These eggs also appear scattered throughout the dirt and in the grass. *In The Grass*, opposed to the untitled work, displays much more intimacy between the family unit and is much more openly caring. The geese in the background each carry one of the eggs with them. Geese appear throughout Moss's work, often with infants to whom they menace or pick at. The other places where these geese occur are almost always behind the mother figure for example in the work *Nesting*.

Nesting is an image of one of Moss's female or mother figures that is this time holding one of her Canada Geese (fig. 4). The woman is forcing open the chest of the goose from where eggs fall to the ground landing in a pile of leaves. The goose often appears with these mothers and, judging by the title of this work, it further highlights a conflation between the goose and the mother as symbolic of motherhood and of feminine fertility, where the eggs are possibly associated with female ovulation. The title *Nesting*

has the double connotation of modern home making as well as the mother goose nesting on its eggs. Again there is a duality of feeling being that the mother is forcing the nesting on the goose and maybe herself as well.

Another interesting work titled *Son Père* is an ink drawing, which displays another facet of parent-child relations (fig. 5). This image depicts an almost pitch black faceless figure. This figure is giving birth to an infant while the 'monster mother', who stands to the right, supports the figure by the arm. To the left it is written "Son père est..." twice but there is no final word telling us where, or who the father is. This image decoded implies an absent father but yet shows a supportive mother. We are not sure whether the artist is alluding to the father of the figure or the father of the baby. We are also unsure if the artist is depicting a single mother or just a father who is absent at birth. Again, we see the exploration of differing family dynamics and care-giving that characterizes a lot of the images in *Bébé*.

By beginning an examination of the untitled work and following with the work that is created around the same time, we see how Moss's Flickr page has created a narrative of its own, functioning as a grand exhibition space for her unusual work. The reoccurring images of the monster mother, father and baby as androgynous looking figures and, the Canada goose as a symbol of fertility and caring, as well as a nit picking figure we are able to contextualize the commentary on Moss's work. We see her humour amid crisis, and dual levels of meaning, such as the ties of a bond, that are also binding us to our responsibilities like that which characterizes the untitled work. Her exploration of family and parent child as well as parent-to-parent relationships has an ironic quality in the sense of the mother as monster and the father as both a child and an old man, which lead us to question the nature and variance of these relationships. Though it is possible that Nadia is creating her own sort of fable or myth with her mothers that are monsters and two headed geese in it is impossible to decode because of the ambiguity and lack of information on her work. Because there is so little known about Nadia herself, we may never understand exactly why she chose these means of depiction that are both disturbing and yet bring a slight smile to our faces. In light of her Flickr profile perhaps Moss's occupation as "thing" gives us insight into why she chooses to paint these unusual figures.

Nadia Moss works in varying media ranging from sound to film and doll-making to painting and ink-drawing. Her work tends to be scattered across the internet, in different galleries, private homes and even in public toilets. Flickr has served as a unifying space to display her work as an artist. It is interesting how even on Flickr, though very little information is given on any of the images by using Flickr as a main exhibition space Moss is allowing people to give their own interpretation of the work. For example in the work *Kids* she was able to tap into one woman's sentiment of the never ending nature of motherhood and the inescapability of responsibility. Though Moss herself only appears in two photos on her page, by examining it as a whole, we are able to understand the artist by viewing what she chooses to display of her work. We see her progression, her process of creation and can read her commentary where she chooses to leave it. Underneath the post of the poster for the book launch of *Bébé* Nadia leaves a comment saying "My book launch!!! Your invited!!! Matana's going to play some of the best saxophone you will ever hear. I will be shy and drunk. Yay!" Perhaps it is this shyness that she herself advertises that makes her seem to be such an elusive artist. Flickr has become a common space for artists of all levels to display their work. It is a place where we can discover so much more than simple biography and information about the artist's projects. In a sense, it is much more personal than an artist's website

because, instead of being primarily commercial, it is also like *Facebook* and other social networking sites. It is a place for not only the art world but also friends and family to follow her work, as well as comment and critique it. We can only hope that Nadia Moss will one day speak out about her art to help us decode her mysterious images.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Nadia Moss. *Untitled*. 2007. (Image: <<http://www.anteism.com/nadia-moss/>>)



FIG. 2

Nadia Moss. *Kids*. 2007. (Image: <<http://www.anteism.com/nadia-moss/>>)



FIG. 3

Nadia Moss. *In the Grass*. 2008. (Image: <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nadiamoss/2242591559/>>)



FIG. 4

Nadia Moss. *Nesting*. 2008. (Image: <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nadiamoss/2243383902/>>)



FIG. 5

Nadia Moss. *Son Père*. 2008. (Image: <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nadiamoss/3075688655/>>)

ENDNOTES

¹ Art Metropole - Nadia Moss & Dare-Dare, *Art Metropole :: Artists Books, Video, Audio, Multiples* (24 Nov. 2010) <http://www.artmetropole.com/popups/events/events_09/mtl2x/montreal_double.html>.

² Marie-Ann Ackermann, *Nadia Moss* (24 Nov. 2010) <<http://roverarts.com/nadia-moss/>>.

³ Nadia Moss (24 Nov. 2010) <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nadiamoss/2209730554/>>.

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