

Another mama out of place is Gail Rebhan, whose photographs and mixed-media work create a compelling assemblage of active and contemplative maternal observations structured to demonstrate her dissent from the conventional ways that children, especially boys, learn about gender, race, and ethnicity. In a series of work published in her artist's book *Mother-Son Talk: A Dialogue between a Mother and Her Young Sons* (1996),⁶ Rebhan conducted investigations of her two sons' domestic and social worlds through her visual study of their developing perceptions of these realms. Akin to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, the objects Rebhan created and the conversations with her boys that she recorded function as artifacts of and memorials to crucial psychic moments of the everyday. However, rather than Kelly's redefined psychoanalytic focus on her son's early development and her active maternal thinking in response to their intimacies and distances, Rebhan's work began when her sons left the exclusiveness of the familial realm and entered the social world outside the home. As the mother of two sons, she has been and continues to be particularly concerned with and fascinated by how her boys respond to the often-distorted cultural and social images they receive about gender and the representation of women.

Especially compelling to me about the work Rebhan constructs based on issues of gender is that the form many of her art pieces take is in direct aesthetic relationship to the type of art media her boys are instructed to use in school as they progress through different grades. Works from this project reproduce media images as the screen upon which her sons make sense of the world. Rebhan thus demonstrates that the boys' perceptions are already prefabricated in part through standardized, institutionalized forms of expression. Nonetheless, their vivid and individual reception of knowledge about the world comes through. The mother then adds her own text to the boys' perceptions. Such is the case with *A tree, a house, a car* (1992), a xerograph in which her oldest son, then six years old, told her and her husband that girls cannot grow up to be anything they want. As Rebhan's written text at the left side of the image recounts, "I brace myself for a sexist comment. My husband and I exchange glances. Then my son says that's silly, girls can't grow up to be a tree, a house or a car." The absolute truth to the boy's innocent logic is ironically emphasized by Rebhan's reproduction of her son's drawings of a tree, a house, and a car, below which she placed the corresponding nouns.

In *Pronouns* (1992), a photograph collaged onto a xerograph, stories about the perception of gender continue with her younger son. Rebhan recounts that even at four years old, he had never used the female pronoun, although he could distinguish between boys and girls. She writes, "It drove

The whole family
is riding
in the car.
My six year old
is perplexed
by a song he heard
on Sesame Street.
The song says
that girls
can grow up to be
anything they want.
My son says
that is not true.
I brace
myself for
a sexist comment.
My husband and I
exchange glances.
Then my son says
that's silly,
girls can't grow
up to be



a tree,



a house



or a car.

I agree that
women can't be
those things.
But I reply
men can't be
those things
either. I know
responds my son.
I'm relieved.

Gail S. Rebhan, *A tree, a house, a car*, 1992. Xerograph, 18½ x 31½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

me crazy. Mommy is reading his book . . ." This pronoun problem unexpectedly changed when both boys were watching two women wrestler-actresses on television, a ludicrous image that Rebhan reproduces in this project. Her son yells, "They're HER wrestlers!" Below the image of these two women, Rebhan's text coyly states, "Ever since then my son uses pronouns correctly."

I am drawn to the humorous, ironic, and dead-serious maternal gaze Rebhan set into motion in this series of works. It is crucial that she positioned herself as an active observer in her encounters with her sons as she amusingly anticipated sexist attitudes from them. Seemingly self-evident, these works reveal the deep mysteries and infinite subtleties of children's, and in this case, her sons' developing cultural perceptions of gender and, by association, their perceptions of their own mother. They also give testimony to the shifting textures of Rebhan's dissenting maternal observations and open-minded realizations.

In 1997, a few years after Rebhan worked on the images that were published in the *Mother-Son Talk* artist's book, she produced several untitled

black-and-white photographic portraits of both of her sons. The mother's gaze in these lovely portraits differs from those in the previous series. In these images, Rebhan allowed herself the erotic space of the maternal to gaze upon her sons, no longer infants or small children, and take in their utter sensuousness. Her photographic gaze is a caress. In one of these untitled photographs, she pictures her oldest son from the back, focusing on his furry hairline that softly extends from the back of his head and down his neck. His close-up figure occupies the entire photograph, which Rebhan has framed against a blurred landscape. Thus the tones and shadows on his skin and the soft folds on his T-shirt covering his slight shoulders occupy the viewer's and this mother's gaze. In another portrait, Rebhan pictures her younger son in an everyday scene reminiscent of the lusciousness of light and darkness and the delicacies of food that are found in eighteenth-century European still life and genre paintings. Her son's dark hair and sweatshirt blend into the velvety background as light filtering in from the side window illuminates the table, a white cup and saucer, and the boy's hands and face as he prepares warm morning toast.

Judith Hopkins also works with the photographer–mother's careful, caring, and focused gaze, extending her observations beyond the familial to



Gail S. Rebhan, untitled, 1997. C-print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Gail S. Rebhan, untitled, 1997. C-print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

encompass other mothers and their children. Her photographic and text project *Stretching It: Surviving on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)* (1994) was produced as a suite of color photographs and as a pamphlet for public dissemination with the support of the Cultural Affairs Department of the city of Los Angeles. In this unusual project, Hopkins cleverly manipulates documentary photographic strategies of the victim to give mothers living in poverty the voice and sense of personhood they deserve. This project offers poignant, cogent, and forceful perspectives on the perverse ethics of government aid and maternal responses to refusing victimhood in these circumstances. This is a transformative, activist project that performs an ironic interplay between critical moments of domestic life involving mothers and their children and the macropolitics of government agencies confronted with maternal acts that defy passivity and enforced poverty.

Stretching It is a powerful, multivoice project composed of stories narrated by mothers who have undergone transformations in their senses of motherhood and empowerment, as well as their accounts of the degradation of being on or trying to receive AFDC. Hopkins's photographs heighten the pathos and irony of these women's accounts. The photographs, both