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Why is Zoe Buckman Using her Placenta to Create Art?

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Why Is Zoe Buckman Using Her Placenta to Create Art?

She also embroiders lingerie with lyrics by Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur.



Zoe Buckman, *Untitled 7 (Present Life)* (2013) Neon mounted on corrian 57.5 x 41.5 in. Edition of 3 Image courtesy the artist and Bethanie Brady Artist Management

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When British artist Zoe Buckman wanted to preserve her placenta as a piece of art, she had to look as far afield as Germany. Despite the precedent of actress January Jones popping pills made from her own placenta (and generations of women choosing to consume or preserve it in other ways), no one in the United States would touch it. But the Institute for Plastination in Germany took Buckman's request "no questions asked." In nine months, she received the package—her placenta as a hard, pink, sculptural object complete with an umbilical cord.

"I wanted to try and freeze that moment when something living begins to die," Buckman told artnet News on a recent visit to the East Village home she shares with her husband, actor David Schwimmer, and their three-year-old daughter Cleo. "This was all part of having the baby and then starting to think about death, and how my child is going to die, and I am going to die," said Buckman who found out she was close to losing her child during her pregnancy due to a partially "depleted" placenta. "That's really fucked up."

Using her placenta, Buckman created a series of concrete tile reliefs with its image as well as a neon sculpture, which will be on view, along with other new work, at her upcoming show "Present Life" at Garis & Hahn, which opens on February 24.



Zoe Buckman, *Untitled 10 (Present Life)* (2015)

Hand-blown glass, sand, epoxy

Image courtesy the artist and Bethanie Brady Artist Management

The 29-year-old multimedia artist follows in something of a long tradition of women who have used the experience of motherhood as a source for their work, including Mary Kelly, Louise Bourgeois (who Buckman names one of her favorite artists), and more recently, Marni Kotak. In Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), one of the foremost examples of an artistic exploration of motherhood, Kelly catalogs her son's journey through early life via artifacts like diapers, onesies, and detailed notes. Bourgeois used motherhood as a topic throughout her career, often exploring her relationship with her own mother as well as her role as a mother to

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her three sons. Kotak, a performance artist, took the dialogue to a whole new level when she gave birth to her son in front of a live audience at Brooklyn's Microscope Gallery in 2011 .

While many women fear having a child will put a damper on their career, for Buckman, motherhood has had quite the opposite effect. "I would credit the experience of becoming a mother as the thing that empowered me," she said.

Buckman's studio on the fourth floor of her home is a sunlit space filled with dreamy vintage lingerie she's hand-embroidered with lyrics about women from songs by Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, who she says were huge influences on her growing up but whose sentiments are often hard to reconcile with a feminist outlook. In pastel colors and trimmed with delicate lace, and hung from the ceiling where they blow lightly in the breeze, they command about a third of the room. Above the entrance, a neon sign with a line from Tennessee Williams' play *the Glass Menagerie* hangs, and by the window is a large, plush sofa.



Zoe Buckman, *Untitled 5 (Present Life)* (2012)

C-print

Image courtesy the artist and Bethanie Brady Artist Management

At the time of our visit, the remainder of the space was occupied with the menagerie of works to be featured in "Present Life," which includes embroidery, photography, concrete sculpture, glass sculpture, and neon sculpture. There are photographs of dying flowers, the ones that were dropped off at her home by family and friends postpartum and shot wrapped in trash bags just before "they really start to smell and stink up the

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apartment.” There are two neons, one of a pink placenta and the other of a glowing white hourglass; neon, Buckman explains to me, also has a shelf life, as the gas trapped inside the glass will eventually burn out.

There are also poems crafted from vivid, often nightmarish dreams Buckman had while pregnant, stitched onto lace left to her by her grandmother. These will be displayed on the basement floor of the gallery, in a room filled with sand (“as much sand as the gallery will allow for”) along with two sound installations.

When asked how her husband feels about these works that draw so much from their personal lives, Buckman said, “As an actor, he’s an artist too. So I think he understands that any time you’re making art, you’re drawing on your own experiences.”



Zoe Buckman, *Untitled 6 (Present Life)* (2013)

Neon

Image courtesy the artist and Bethanie Brady Artist Management

It’s easy to forget that Buckman is young and relatively new to the art scene. She graduated from the International Center of Photography in 2009, and has lived in New York for eight years. But she is unpretentious and admits that while she has recently become friends with a few New York artists and curators, she often prefers to skip packed gallery openings.

This year was also her first time attending Art Basel in Miami Beach, where on her way to a gallery party, she attended one the protests over the killings of Michael Brown and Israel “Reefa” Hernandez that took place during the fair week. (see [Footage of the Traffic-Blocking #Ferguson2Miami Protests During Art Basel](#) , and [Artists Take to Miami Streets to Protest Michael Brown and Israel Hernandez Killings](#)). She ultimately found the juxtaposition of the protests and the glitzy fair hard to stomach.

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“But it did make me realize that I’m drawn more to artists that make more resonant, political, important work,” she said. “So in a way, Miami was great, because it showed me all the dirty, horrible bullshit, and then like, offered the solution.”

Zoe Buckman, “Present Life” is on display at Garis & Hahn from February 24–March 28, 2015.