

*Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)" — Maggie Nelson*

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson offers an introspective, first-person exploration of love and motherhood beyond the bounds of the heteropatriarchal norm. She recounts her relationship with transgender artist Harry Dodge and examines gender roles and parenthood through her own experience of pregnancy and queer family-making. At the heart of this autobiographical essay is her evolving relationship with her changing body—while her partner simultaneously undergoes a gender transition—and her developing intimacy with the child she carries. Nelson describes becoming a parent as a radical transformation: a kind of moral emancipation and dissolution of identity into a fertile fluidity and multiplicity.

In *Waves in the Closet*, Vanessa Safavi poetically echoes these themes, probing the relationship between motherhood and identity through the evocative image of the sea. In *Fluids & Relationships (my ecosystems)*, she presents an assemblage of shells and plastic containers through which a whitish liquid reminiscent of breast milk flows. This display of DIY-looking fountains combines and recontextualizes tools, objects and motifs characteristic of Safavi's practice—shells, synthetic elements, as well as liquids, which she uses as metaphors for the fluidity of social and identity constructs.

Safavi frequently explores the complex and ambiguous tension between corporeality and identity, often working with silicone— a material evocative of skin or organs yet paradoxically seemingly inorganic. While her earlier work addressed the alienation of the body under social norms and imperatives or due to illness, she now turns her attention to the strange experience of breastfeeding and its physiological, hormonal, and emotional effects. Breastfeeding is both a gesture reminiscent of our animality and a process that transforms the body into a food production and delivery system while forging an unfathomable bond of interdependence with another being. As natural as it may seem, breastfeeding radically alters the way one's body looks and is perceived. The alienation it produces—this queer feeling of a body that suddenly feels different and functions in an unfamiliar way—is precisely what Safavi translates into her installation. The flowing liquid evokes nourishment and care, while the shells—originating from hermaphroditic mollusks—epitomize porous identities and the symbiosis between distinct beings.

In her book, Maggie Nelson also wonders about the physical and sensorial effects of breastfeeding, in particular the eroticism of such an intimate and sensual gesture: "[...] it's romantic, erotic, and consuming—but without tentacles. I have my baby, and my baby has me. It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology." She notes that breastfeeding releases the same hormones as sex, yet the intimacy it creates between her and her child is not predatory or stifling. The bond is, in fact, reciprocal—while the child is physically dependent on her, she is emotionally and sensorially nourished in return. Though unsettling, the experience of breastfeeding becomes a source of learning and self-discovery.

Safavi continues her reflection on the intimate and fertile bond between mother and child in her work *An Octopus on Estrogens*—a visual and sonic poem filmed during a trip to Fuerteventura. The video shows the artist and her child playing at the water's edge on a deserted beach in the golden late afternoon light. Dressed in costumes with tentacular appendages, they draw in the wet sand while a voice-over recites texts by the artist on the visceral and ambivalent experience of motherhood. This contemplative work emphasizes

horizontality and reciprocity, both in word and image. The camera often remains at the child's level—on occasion fleetingly catching his gaze—seemingly attempting to probe his subjectivity and agency in this shared creative space. It is the same child's voice that we can hear at the beginning of the video, which opens on a long black-screen sequence that lets us into the intimacy of bedtime rituals and the stories that Safavi tells him to lull him to sleep.

The stories the artist invents usually take place in an underwater environment and, among its fauna, the octopus holds a central place—the same octopus that we later see them drawing in the sand in the video. A creature with strange morphology and metabolism—its soft body, three hearts, blue blood, eight tentacles housing autonomous neural networks, and its ability to change color and texture at will—the octopus embodies otherness and transformation. By invoking it in her video, Vanessa Safavi expresses the profound metamorphosis inherent in becoming a mother, and invites us to contemplate the construction of a new, relational, and fluid identity founded on exchange, transmission, and the gift of self.

Octopus reproduction is sometimes cited as an example of ultimate sacrifice. It marks both the climax and the conclusion of the life cycle of these cephalopods. After mating, the male typically weakens and dies shortly after fulfilling his reproductive role—unless he is eaten by the female. The female, for her part, stops feeding entirely and devotes all her energy to guarding and caring for her eggs until they hatch, eventually dying from exhaustion. The deep-sea species *Graneledone boreopacifica* holds the record for maternal endurance, having been observed brooding her eggs for over four and a half years. Yet another species has evolved a unique and remarkable strategy to protect its offspring: it secretes a delicate, spiral-shaped calcareous shell that it gradually enlarges and repairs over time, using it both to deposit its eggs and to hide. The two tentacles responsible for producing and clinging onto this eggcase possess recognizable membranes. It is believed that Aristotle, upon seeing these appendages, mistook them for sails—hence the animal's name: the argonaut.

I can't say whether Maggie Nelson is aware of the existence of this octopus mother—both architect and captain of a floating cocoon in which she shelters and carries her precious offspring. She chose the title *The Argonauts* as a tribute to Roland Barthes, who, in his prose self-portrait *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, likens love to the mythical ship Argo: continuously repaired and renewed by its crew, yet always bearing the same name. But the parallel is curiously striking. In both Nelson's text and the behavior of this crafty cephalopod, the Argo and its heroic crew come to embody a total and irreversible metamorphosis: the adventure of motherhood.

Like the ever-changing Argo, Safavi's depiction of motherhood in *Waves in the Closet* is fluid, ambivalent, multifaceted and transformative. Her works tell the story of an adventure not unlike that of the Argonauts'. In this journey, octopuses, waves, and saltwater all become sensory and emotional metaphors for an identity and a relationship in the making. Through these analogies, mother and sea become one, merging into a poetic meditation on kinship beyond norms and imperatives.

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