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Juliann Emmons Allison, Susan Ossman

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Making *Matrice*

Intersubjectivity in Ethnography and Art

JULIANN EMMONS ALLISON,
University of California, Riverside
SUSAN OSSMAN,
University of California, Riverside

Through collaborative research design and creative process, artists, activists, and researchers often seek to give voice to underrepresented communities, to gain a better mutual understanding of common experiences or to call attention to issues of public interest. Artists and ethnographers work together to probe topics of common concern or to devise projects that bring people together to stage events or develop community artworks.[1] Fewer collaborative projects involving the arts focus on more intimate topics and situations; and those that do rarely have the production of art as their primary goal.[2] In this article we develop an intersubjective narrative (McCleary and Viotti 2009) about one such project that resulted in the making of *Matrice*, an installation composed of latex, burlap, and oil paint on canvas panels.

In addition to the intersubjectivity of written word and audience, the *Matrice* narrative itself embodies dual related intersubjectivities (McCleary and Viotti 2009; Stolorow 2013)—a reconstructed conversation between the authors as well as the physical interaction between Susan as artist and the presence of Juliann in the form of a plaster belly cast. Juliann's exploration of her experience of maternity motivated Susan's artwork, itself informed by her skills as an ethnographer as well as an artist. The contours of our collaboration derive from two traditional *mises en scène*: that of figure drawing and portrait painting, which involves an artist and a model, and that of the researcher engaged in field-

work with what used to be called an "informant" (Foster 1995). Each of these archetypical scenes is altered in the "Lifeworks" program, of which Susan writes: "Rather than asking the subject to sit for a portrait, I ask her to intervene in shaping a work of art. Artworks emerge from the process of talking about an event, looking at old photos, or exploring feelings about a person or a place. Dreams or conversations between the artist and subject might set the rhythm for the strokes of the paintbrush or offer clues about the media or color of an installation" (Ossman 2011).

In this collaboration the ethnographer is not a handmaiden to the artwork of her interlocutor; she alone is responsible for making something of the interaction. The subject initiates the process of research and selects the topic. And the subject is the intended recipient of this work. These are not "sittings" intended to produce a likeness but encounters more akin to ethnographic exchanges; however, unlike ethnographic research, they are not designed to answer questions of theoretical interest. While the research process may lead to a variety of interactions ranging from quasi-therapeutic analysis to texts like this one, the stated objective of the collaboration is the production an artwork, the value of which transcends the process of production.

Juliann describes *Matrice* as "a tangible representation of a real belly that models the tensions inherent in conceiving, carrying, and bearing children for a mother who is a professional, in this case, an academic." Over the nine months it took to make the installation, our exchanges focused on Juliann's experiences of maternity, her family history, and the tension she has felt between motherhood and professional life. In the coming pages we develop a narrative that reconstructs significant pieces of conversations as a means of exposing and interrogating the process by which our exchanges led to *Matrice*. To do this we engage the meaning of the "real" with respect to body parts, copies of them, and their possible extensions. We examine corporeal transformations in relation to media ranging from paint to plastic, discuss popular and academic writings on women's work and childbirth, and then use these literatures to contextualize artistic discussions of reproduction. We tease out how the imperative of making artwork from conversations about the physicality of one mother's lived experience enabled Juliann to "guide" Susan's hand and imagination. The narrative closes

Fig. 1. *Matrice*: an installation composed of a latex mold of Juliann's plaster cast of her pregnant belly, with burlap ribbon and oil on canvas board. Photograph Rogers Brubaker.

with the safe arrival of *Matrice* in Juliann's home, though the project has moved forward in the form of autoethnography and self-reflexive artistic practice.

The Belly

Juliann. It was November 28, 2004. The Sunday before the last week of classes. I'd planned to finish the fall quarter, turn in grades, and sit back to await my baby girl's arrival. That I was huge due to water retention, hypertensive and out of breath much of the time, and obsessed with keeping my legs as close together as possible to keep "the baby" from "falling out" precluded a scheduled trip to the Getty Museum with my eldest children, then seven and nine years old. One of my four sisters volunteered to take the kids. Another, whose first child had arrived only a little over three months earlier, opted to spend the day with me and my then youngest child, three-year-old Parker—nesting and making a plaster cast of my belly.

My sister, the belly cast enthusiast, is only five years younger than I am, but her approach to pregnancy (and birth and motherhood) could not be more different from my own. Customarily far more concerned with my health by way of ensuring a natural birth, healthy newborn, and swift return to my life as a professor and competitive runner than with documenting my transition to motherhood, I had only a handful of photos—total—from my previous pregnancies. At the time I had never heard of belly casting. Apparently my sister is rather more representative of typical of twenty-first-century moms, for whom the belly cast has become a staple of the contemporary practices surrounding pregnancy. She had preserved her belly at its apex, compliments of a kit she had purchased at Michael's craft store; she arrived with just such a kit in hand for my cast. While most women approach belly casting as an afternoon DIY project to be completed arts-and-crafts fashion as a pregnancy souvenir, belly casting has become a full service "salon" industry; ninety dollars buy the expectant mom a private session, strongly encouraged due to the (partial) nudity involved, with a waxing add-on available for an additional charge (Osler 2008; Warner 2006).

We did not actually get to the casting until nearly 8:00 p.m., well after our little sister and my children had returned from Los Angeles, and our youngest sister had joined us en route home to San Diego. With

three sisters in attendance, complimented by the assistance of three children, and serenaded by the wails of a hungry baby and barking dogs, I assure you my own casting experience was anything but private. At the time I was a willing but only marginally enthusiastic participant. Later I was glad to have evidence of what turned out to be my most difficult pregnancy. Months later, in fact, I noted in my journal: "Looking back now, it's hard to believe, and scary to think, that I was ever that big . . . especially when Olivia was so very small." (She weighed just six pounds at birth.) I just didn't know what to do with the cast.

Susan. The project began when my colleague and friend Juliann did me a favor and I asked how I could repay her. How about a work of art? She liked the large, abstract paintings she had seen in my home, but her request was more specific. She'd read about the Lifeworks project on my art website and thought I might develop a piece along those lines for her. She already had the "canvas." Not long before she gave birth to her youngest child, her sisters had helped Juliann to make a plaster cast of her belly. She thought I might be able to "do something with it." I agreed to try.

So after spending eight years in a storage bin in Juliann's garage, what we came to call "the Belly" took up residence in my studio. Until then, I'd imagined that as the artist I would determine the media for the pieces I developed for Lifeworks. Paper, canvas, wood, cloth—these have been my preferred materials for developing paintings, collages, or installations. As soon as Juliann took the plaster cast of her pregnant belly out of the box, I began to panic. I'd imagined that I'd be required to be emotionally alert and flexible in the manner of the ethnographer for this project, considering that elements from the archive of the person I was working with might be incorporated into artworks, but clearly I was going to have to stretch myself in different ways this time to work on this bulky, rotund support. Working with a unique, presumably treasured object in media new to me was not a challenge I'd expected.

I was initially unfamiliar with the practice of making plaster casts of pregnant bellies. Online research quickly revealed that what I originally took to be an unusual effort to retain a body-sized trace of pregnancy is now a common practice across North America among mothers to be. Affordable belly cast kits are widely available in craft stores

and online, and women organize festive gatherings to make the molds. Juliann's sisters helped her to wrap the plaster-drenched gauze bandages around her middle. They wrapped to her bra line then followed the lower curves of her breasts. This relatively early effort does not conform to current practice, which routinely includes the full bust in the cast as a "reference point" for the belly. Although the plaster can be colored, Juliann's cast is white.

While the surface was not that different from an artist's canvas, the shape of the Belly made me nervous: looking at the round abdomen, the round breasts, and especially the deep indentation below them, I was daunted by the idea of painting it—not only because of its shape but because of its singularity. *What if I ruin it?* I thought. An ordinary canvas is easily discarded. But this was not just any support. While it evoked the pregnant woman in general, I was also exceedingly aware that this was the imprint of Juliann's body.

Juliann. November 27, 2012. Olivia, the baby girl responsible for the Belly, was almost eight years old before I had the opportunity to do anything with it. At various times during the first year of Olivia's life, most of which I spent off campus thanks to a sequence of leaves and teaching releases, I looked at enough painted, stenciled, decoupaged, bronzed, and oven-fired belly casts to know what I did not want to make of my own. I concluded that it was better to leave mine in its bin than risk life with a garishly painted—despite my best efforts, of course—wall sculpture or bowl.

I could not quite articulate it at the time, but I wanted the Belly to capture both the physicality of expectant motherhood and the broader, cultural import of being a working mother. My own experience as an academic represents a particular twist on the cultural contradictions associated with embodied motherhood in professional life, especially if the workplace lacks the permeability necessary to craft a supportive work-life balance (Douglas and Michaels 2005; Maushart 1997; Rich 1995).[3] The general expectation of disembodied scholarly work may be unique to the research university, but the often limited acceptability of children in the office, even if only psychically in the sense of being on one's mind or to-do list, is characteristic across professions. When I met with Susan for our first interview, I held a vague image in my mind of the rounded belly somehow mounted on a board or frame. That jux-

taposition of malleability and inflexibility captured my imagination but exceeded my artistic abilities.

Susan. At our first meeting Juliann joked about what the Belly might become: "What do you do—turn it over and use it as a fruit bowl?" But I soon learned that some women who preserve their bumps in plaster do exactly that. Some take photos of the newborn inside the plaster cavity; others have elaborate tattoos inscribed on the "skin" and hang it on the wall. Many more paint the baby's name and record the date of birth across the cast. Bellies seem to encourage designs similar to those typically applied to birthday cakes: a silver stork, butterflies, peace signs, polka dots, etc. Viewing bellies online, I began to think my research would end up focusing on kitsch more than motherhood, but then I realized that Juliann was reacting to reacting to precisely this. She had found herself involved in a popular practice but did not feel comfortable with the low-brow style many women adopt to decorate and memorialize their baby bumps. Juliann noted that she had toyed with the more upmarket practice of bronzing the belly but decided it would be going a little "too far." At least, if it was to be set in metal, it seemed she envisioned something more original, perhaps quirkier, something that corresponded to her ideas of herself as a woman and a mother—something more attuned to the way she actually lived as a suburban southern California mom: a professor at a research university, and a runner, who home-schools her children, including "rotating" their churchgoing to be sure they would learn about a variety of religious traditions (Allison 2011).

I was relieved that Juliann's feelings about the more popular belly designs matched mine. An ethnographer might maintain and even relish the opportunity to examine aesthetic and ethical positions very different from her own, but as an artist I would have found it difficult to embellish the tummy with pink butterflies for the little girl once within unless also inserting some perceptible element of irony. Differences of taste might provoke interesting interactions but probably would not lead to a piece of work the subject would want to own or display or one I'd want to make. In further Lifeworks projects, some subjects will surely reject the artworks I offer them, which will be a topic of research in itself. But Juliann and I were on the same page.

Juliann did initially say she had imagined some kind of white plank

on which the Belly might be mounted, or that I might paint the cast in some fashion. But this was why she was here. She was leaving it to me to gather together our exchanges and somehow get the Belly to give birth to a piece of art. Two months into our meetings, I'd examined Juliann's family photo albums and learned about her tastes and favorite activities; I knew her children and had met her spouse, Ted. We had become Facebook friends, exchanged ideas about fashion, and shared our common experience of growing up in large families and having children of our own (Ossman 2001, 2007). My experience of maternity and motherhood diverged from Juliann's in many ways, though. For instance, I gave birth to my son thirty years ago in Paris, rather than on the cusp of the millennium. My American friends have tended to live in major metropolitan areas, like New York and Washington DC; my sisters who have children and live in suburban environments did not hold full-time jobs while raising their children. Learning about Juliann's life helped acquaint me with suburban southern California mores and contemporary American modes of mothering. Our conversations provided a first-hand perspective on the pressures of serving as chauffeur, coach, teacher, and breadwinner.[4]

Everything seemed to be going perfectly ethnographically, but I remained on edge. What was I going to *make* of this? The Belly was there, in the studio. I approached it from every angle, looked at it in the light of the morning and in the late afternoon. Its presence was troubling. Was this something like the irreproducible work of art? Its production manifested a desire to record and register that seemed more scientific than artful to me. The desire to preserve for future reference had prompted Juliann's sisters to register a life moment directly with plastered gauze. The imprint of the belly and breasts was precisely intended to record, yet the object in itself was silent with respect to the particular woman whose round forms served as its model, making any particular birth story foreign to it (Taussig 2011).

The abstraction of an actual belly and breasts may appear similar to a damaged ancient statue lacking head, arms, or legs. However, this was no portrait or sculpture. Like an archaeologist, I needed to piece together the material context of this carefully produced object. Talking with Juliann, examining her photo albums, and meeting her family, in addition to my own knowledge of the milieu in which she works and lives, enabled me to associate the plaster cast with a specific per-

son, context, and situation. Thoughts about the Belly as an oddly anonymous object did not dispel the knowledge that it had been made through contact with Juliann's body. That knowledge about the cast's origins was essential to my assignment yet also made it difficult for me to move forward.

So I put aside the idea of working on the piece for a while and instead went back to what Juliann said about her four pregnancies, her feelings about maternity, and how the body and mind are altered by motherhood. I found myself thinking often about the stark contrast between the trim, marathon-running woman I know and the rotund curves of the object on my drawing table. And I began to inspect the plaster belly more carefully, noticing the way the gauze obscures the nipples yet makes the belly button quite visible, making the entire object look like an enormous breast. When I shared this observation with Juliann her eyes closed momentarily, as though I'd said something important or perhaps unwelcome. The next time we met, she arrived with a draft of an article about the breast restoration surgery she underwent after her daughter was weaned. And this in turn led to a breakthrough in my approach to making the Belly into art.

Juliann. Although Susan's work is not, by definition, therapeutic, it was healing to share my experience as a mother in academia—a kind of extended "birth story" situated in the specific details of my experience as a professor and contextualized by a complex of relevant cultural dualisms: scholar/mother, mind/body-belly-boobs, masculine/feminine, right/wrong. Birth stories serve as significant sources of knowledge about childbirth and have historically played a central role in the informal education of expectant mothers and in the psychological development of mothers (Douglass and Michaels 2005: Savage 2001). The sharing of these personal accounts of a universal experience once occurred face to face and primarily between and among women; today they are the subject of countless books, articles, and blogs, the basis for academic and scientific research, and the source material for reality television programming. These venues run the gamut from truthful accounts of birth as full of elation as they are of pain and blood—such as at ImprovingBirth.org, which provides support for evidence-based care for women and children—to reality shows like the Learning Channel's *Birth Story*, which has been roundly criticized for "marketing fear" (Lothian 2003).

Regardless, the communicative and therapeutic role of the birth story has become both more private in the sense of being removed from women's everyday lives and more public with respect to its audience. It has become arguably even more silenced among professional women pressed by workplace demands to demarcate their public and private lives. At the risk of losing scholarly merit, mothers who are also academics often feel compelled to separate professional lives defined by a pursuit of intellectual achievement from personal lives permeated by the physical and emotional work inherent in caring for children. Hence the intrusion of the bodily experiences of birth and motherhood into the academic workplace can be regarded as subversive.[5] In this context, telling my birth story to Susan provided an opportunity that is increasingly rare among professional working women, even those who share more conventional women's friendships outside work or, in our case, off campus. It was, moreover, remarkably free of the latest twist on the "mommy wars"—the exhortation to "lean in" not only at work but also at home by playing both Suzy homemaker *and* Diane Keaton's "Tiger Lady."[6]

If maternity is a hot-button topic among scholars and other learned professionals, imagine the furor cosmetic surgery raises.[7] Notwithstanding feminist analyses buttressed by psychological and market research and supporting such procedures as rational in a culture that so blatantly privileges youth and beauty, consideration is hard to come by among scholars and others who ostensibly value intellect over physical attraction (Davis 1995, 1997; Dion et al. 1972; Heyes and Jones 2009; Neustatter 2014; Udry and Eckland 1984). Not surprisingly, therefore, divulging my breast augmentation surgery was perhaps more necessary and more difficult than sharing earlier episodes in my birth story. Not without reason. Female colleagues' cautionary responses to my lighthearted posts on the persistent bounciness of surgically "restored" breasts and the co-evolution of boobs and brains prompted me to withhold from publication the essay about breast identity that I shared with Susan.

My decision to undergo breast augmentation surgery was, in part, the result of straightforward problem solving. No matter how tightly I fastened my bra around my chest, my permanently postpartum breasts were simply not full and heavy enough to keep it in place, and I was just not willing to embrace my athletic identity completely enough to go the way of a "uniboob," compliments of the compression sports bra. More important, it satisfied a longing to retain the capacity to sense the

heavy head of an infant or young child against a full chest. This desire for a kind of everyday eros was rooted in a youth far removed from the big-busted party girl (Griffin 1996). Indeed, long before I nursed my own children, laid them on my shoulder to burp, and lulled them to sleep, I had cuddled and rocked my youngest siblings—twelve to sixteen years younger than I—in much the same way.

Susan. Motherhood had altered Juliann in ways she had not expected—ways that led her to profound shifts in her relationship to the institutional and political environment in which she lived. She is a university professor, a profession in which few women have many children. A colleague's "Are you having another one?" seemed to express negative feelings about maternity in the context of the traditional scholarly enterprise. What's more, she explained that the experience of motherhood led her to question and then largely abandon the formal modeling and more quantitative political science she had practiced up until that time—a shift that has had serious consequences for her career.

In addition, while Juliann loved having children, she didn't necessarily welcome the way four successive pregnancies led her breasts to sag. Figures had been her thinking medium, and yet here she was, starting to write for feminist journals about her changing "figure" and the social aftermath of her decision to have breast augmentation surgery. For Juliann, being a mother who is also a professor has proved challenging; she often feels she does not fit into any mold. For me, multiple births, the soft materials of implants, rejection of numbers, and the matrix that enabled this led me finally to commence work on *Matrice*.

Focusing on these lines of investigation, I began to shift my thoughts away from the idea of the unique plaster cast, that singular imprint of a particular belly as a symbol of a once in a lifetime event. I found distance from the path of mothers planning to have only one or two children—the majority in the United States, especially in our educated milieu—and thought about Juliann's experience to focus on how this was just one pregnancy among others. Indeed, had she had time, she might have decided to have more children; her spouse had wanted six. The belly cast registered the swell of a belly that had expanded and contracted several times. It bore the mark of a specific moment in a given pregnancy. Yet it was also "about" reproduction and maternal bodies in general. It was important to note that the reproductive poten-

tial of the female body, as well as Juliann's body, represents a marked readiness to use it, even though the decisions she and Ted made with respect to family size and how they raised their children ultimately put her at odds with the institutions in which she worked and perhaps even distanced her from her former self (Allison 2007).

Juliann. With the exception of one fellow political scientist who is the mother of eight children, I've encountered very few academic women with more than two children, and the children are often spaced six or more years apart—the first from before securing a first job, the other from after tenure. As the headstrong eldest of nine children who ultimately sided with my parents regarding the relatively high value of siblings versus pools, trips, and college funds, I understandably walked out of a brown bag talk on balancing academic life with motherhood during graduate school. The speaker's message? Plan to have your children in graduate school or after tenure. I had four children prior to tenure. The timing of my first pregnancy—less than three months into my first semester as an assistant professor at a state research university—was medically necessary. The others resulted from equally compelling circumstances but never strategic planning.

The arrival of each of my children elicited the requisite polite congratulations from campus colleagues and in one instance even a flower arrangement. The trouble started when baby came to school and stayed. Contrary to the departmental rumor mill, obstinacy was not the motivation for the nursery in my office. Rather, it was the only way I could manage to nurse my firstborn exclusively once I returned to campus full-time just two weeks after his birth. it worked. Until my youngest child entered preschool, my office was distinguishable by a gate across the doorway whenever I needed to bring an infant or toddler to campus. The rather long duration of this "tenant improvement" was not always welcomed by my colleagues. A senior colleague once asked me when I was going wean my son and "come back" to the department. Later, at another institution, a colleague simply could not understand why I declined the opportunity to move my then six-month-old daughter out of my office and into the campus childcare center. Even if I could have afforded it at the time, I would have hesitated because I'd grown to enjoy having her with me while I worked. My challenge to institutional norms did not turn ugly until the department chair respond-

ed to my revelation that I was pregnant for third time by telling me that I "should not expect to get tenure."

The details of my experience, in practice if not philosophy—as a "natural" or "attached" mother whose decision about exclusively breastfeeding engendered child wearing, among a host of daily accommodations—are far from usual in academia or in professional life more generally (Bobel 2001). Yet the accompanying idea that "kids are a normal and usual part of things—not the kind of personalized, fragile 'works' that some contemporary families make them out to be," as Susan reflected in an early email exchange related to this article, is not at all farfetched (Allport 1997).

Susan. I am trained as a painter. I draw, have done some printmaking, and am able to handle fabric and collage. But bronze? Clay? Plastic? Having detached myself from the idea that I would use the plaster cast as the ground for a painting, I set out to research what material would enable me to copy the plaster tummy. Thinking about Juliann's experience of having several children, our discussions about our both being from large families, and the general reproductive capacity denoted by the cast, but also about its *being* a cast and potentially a mold, led me to apprehend the maternal body in its *re*productive capacity. I began to perceive the belly in its active capacity. Thoughts about reproduction and repetition led me contemplate issues long raised in the literature on media and art, mimesis, beauty and bodies. The art I was engaged to produce had to be made with the extraordinary, transhistoric symbolism of the belly in mind, but Juliann's transformation also spoke to more contemporary definitions of kinds of women and forms of beauty. I recalled the research I did on beauty and beauty salons as places where images are embodied. Those analyses of feminine sociability and modernity led me to ask: What was the relationship of this weighty belly to the light, lithe body of the modern woman? How did Juliann embody each of these characteristic forms in the course of a nine-month pregnancy? And the Belly had to be compared to Juliann's present physique: her feat of becoming "full" contrasted to her figure at present.

I had written about how the "heavy" body associated with tradition, the local, the unconscious reproduction not only of babies but of culture is necessary for the "enlightened" body of the modern woman to take form, but I did not approach the theme of pregnancy then

(Mauss 1973; Ossman 2002). The belly proves an interesting topic in this regard. For while not all women manage it in a society where plumpness is the norm rather than the exception, Juliann has handled the transition between being heavy and becoming light with exceptional success. And she has done so several times. I needed to develop a piece that could take all this into account. The materials had to be flexible. The expression could be colorful but had to be contained, controlled, and "slim."

Thinking about stretched skin of belly and breast led me to recall the way I felt when my own belly jiggled and swayed while I was pregnant so very long ago. I thought it would be necessary to use a medium with some elasticity. Still, I wanted to preserve the "molding" capacity of the material. I thought about how the new breasts recall the roundedness of the belly even now that Juliann is perfectly slim. Indeed, Juliann's writings on this subject underscored that the "maternal" aspects of having full breasts trumped any desire to regain the bust of her youth (Allison 2008). What did that say about the dialectic of heavy maternity to lively atheleticism? Classical, straight lines to baroque fullness? To investigate this scientifically would require research beyond the scope of this project; however, art has the capacity to point out and include cultural paradoxes like the simultaneous disdain of fat and love of hefty, full breasts and leave it to the viewer to come up with answers.[8]

Thoughts about the stretch of the skin during pregnancy, imagining the wobble of the baby in the belly, and the quiver of the stretched out and then the newly implanted breast inspired me to experiment with latex. It did not hurt that I knew the rubber could be spread directly on the plaster cast without damaging it. So I lightly sanded the Belly. I applied one fine layer after another of the liquid plastic: in the end, forty layers on the top and twelve on the interior. This process took months because each coat had to dry completely before the next one was added. Throughout the fall and winter, applying the latex became something of a habit. The Belly was always somewhere in the back of my mind. When the weather turned cold, I thought about the Belly; latex can crack below a certain temperature, and so I sometimes brought the Belly into the kitchen to keep it warm. When my garage and home were burglarized over the Christmas holidays, I panicked: what about the Belly? Had they touched it? To my relief, they had not.

Throughout this period I was working hard on a solo show of my

Fig. 2. Susan experimented with a variety of molds and approaches to the piece before settling on using a thick latex mold of the belly cast in *Matrice*. Photograph Susan Ossman.

paintings, and initially I believed that my thoughts about what to make of the plaster cast were muddled because I was preoccupied. In spite of the many exchanges with Juliann and what I'd learned about her life and about the experience of being a mother in the contemporary United States, I simply was not making progress on conceiving the artwork I'd promise her. But I kept up with the latex and in the spring I freed the Belly from its mold.

The result was satisfactory—the "top" layer was firm but still supple, like a thick skin. The inside layer was skin-thin. Uncolored latex has a golden tone, rather like Juliann's tanned arms. But how would I use this latex mold of the mold? Should I employ it as a cast to make more round bellies? I thought about Juliann's several experiences of childbirth, manipulated the latex, and thought about the multiple meanings and connotations of "plastic" or "rubber." I reviewed my notes about Juliann's "numerical" beginnings as a political scientist, compared these to her post-child endeavors, and pondered the way she thought of the "new" breasts as a restoration to a former bodily state of comfort with herself. On a hot summer day I finally came up with a plan. I purchased burlap ribbon to make the latex mold into an "apron" and used a single palette of colors to paint "bundles" of color on four small canvas panels, representing Juliann's four children. I called it *Matrice*, French for "matrix," a word that conjured up both mathematical and maternal functions. Its letters and sonority are also close to "maitresse," which can be used to describe a woman who "masters" something but also a female elementary school teacher and a "mistress."

Juliann. August 9, 2013. By coincidence or not, the gestation of *Matrice* required almost nine months from the time Susan and I first discussed the Belly and its potential for a Lifeworks project. Our ongoing if often interrupted meetings at her home or on campus or at a local bar and via email exchanges blurred boundaries between the scholarly life of the mind and "real" life. The complexity of lives that involve caregiving can stretch those already hazy boundaries to the breaking point. The chronic mixing of professional and personal conversations initiated by our exchanges revealed both the blurred boundaries that characterize the lives of most contemporary scholars and the practical as well as psychological costs of integrating motherhood, intellectual work, and professional life.

The 2012–13 academic year that became the backdrop for *Matrice* was among my busiest in recent years and overall was an excruciating experience. A Monday-Wednesday-Friday teaching schedule required more days on campus than usual; I administered twice as many grants as I usually do; and two of my children entered new schools—middle school and university—while a third required testing for dyslexia and the initiation of a compensating rigorous language arts program.

Susan. Would Juliann like *Matrice?* Anxious to know, as soon as the paintings were dry and the latex belly strung with burlap ribbon, I mounted it on the mustard yellow wall of my kitchen and texted her a picture. *What would she think of it?*

Relief. She responded enthusiastically. I was thrilled. She would pick it up in a couple of days. In the meantime, I asked my partner, Rogers, to take a proper photo of the installation. He thought this new piece expanded my art in new directions. I agreed. It was interesting to me that while the gestures and aesthetic language I'd developed through training and practice in visual art and over the years might have seemed entirely suited to expressing the kinds of bodily sensations and emotions that came up in my collaboration with Juliann, there were obvious connections between this project, my writing on women's work, body techniques, and fashion and my exhibitions "The Fabric of Fieldwork" in 2012 and the "On the Line" exhibition that I was preparing while working with Juliann (Balderrama 2013; Ossman 2013; "UCR Professor to Exhibit Paintings" 2013; Zagorska-Thomas 2103).[9]

Sustained research with Juliann over several months brought me to develop a distance from my own spontaneous practice. I used new materials, but more than this, I departed from my lyrical tendencies to develop something I felt was more in line with Juliann's aesthetic and personal values and style. The work involved complicity that engaged difference of a kind well known to ethnographers but that can be difficult to assimilate and address in art, at least in my experience (Marcus 1997; Ossman 1998). *Matrice* was a piece I was happy to give to Juliann and that I would gladly include in a public exhibition.

When Juliann came to take *Matrice* home she was on her way to pick up Olivia. She did not have much time to talk but said she liked it even better now that she saw it "live." We went about packing up the instal-

lation and I returned the Belly to her in the same plastic container in which it had arrived nine months before.

Juliann. *Matrice* came home in a cardboard box that spent the afternoon unceremoniously wedged among scooters, shopping totes, and gym bags in the back of my SUV. Olivia, whose impending birth had been the source of the belly cast, could not wait to get the box out of the car and *Matrice* out of the box. Once home, I mimicked Susan's presentation of the piece. I showed the kids the photo and then held the latex Belly up against a wall for a quick display, punched it up some, and then held it up just under my bust as if I were going to use the ribbons to tie it to me like an apron. Quizzical looks turned to smiles and then laughter.

Olivia touched it first, crawling in between my torso and the back side of the Belly as if trying to crawl back inside. "I was that small?" she asked. Busting up with laughter, her twelve-year-old brother Parker snatched the Belly from me and tried it on himself, striking an exaggerated Victoria's Secret model pose—holding it in front of him with one hand, resting the other on his overextended hip. My sixteen-year-old focused on the baby bundles, the set of four linked paintings that first struck me as shaded collections of strings or threads that have not quite been fashioned into anything—yet. She thought she saw a face in one and played with various possible arrangements on the downstairs landing.

Although Ted asked about the piece when he came home to find latex and burlap ribbon spilling out of a cardboard box at the top of the stairs, surrounded by what he thought were our daughter's latest attempt at painting on canvas, he did not say anything until Sunday, when I began moving *Matrice* around the house in search of a home. "Put it in your office," he advised. He meant my home office, which he knows very well does not have any available wall space (a consequence of floor to ceiling bookcases). Ted admitted that the malleable latex Belly beats the fruit bowl he was afraid I'd insist on putting out or affixing prominently to a wall, but—"It's just too much," he said. "Sometimes I'm just overwhelmed by your experience."

Susan. I was very curious to hear about how Juliann and her family reacted to *Matrice*.[10] I was also interested in how she came to "own" the piece, which included taking pictures of her children wearing the "apron" and thinking about how to photograph it to be able to display

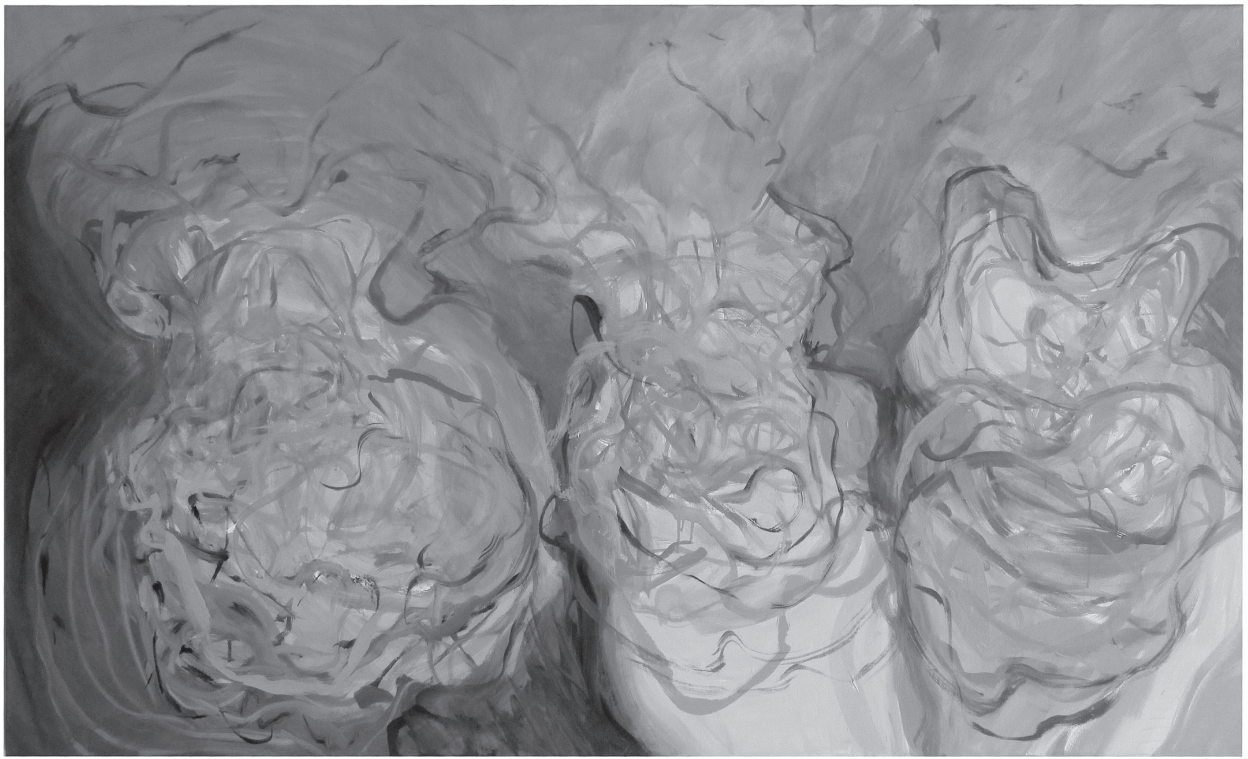

Fig. 3. *Belly Dance*. Oil on Canvas, 2014. Photograph Reuben Munoz.

it on the wall of her office at the university. *Matrice* was "done" as far as my role was concerned. But it seemed I'd passed on the role of ethnographer and curator, and perhaps also director of performance art or photography, to Juliann. She recorded interactions with the piece and used it to instigate conversations with other people about the topics we had discussed over the preceding months. As she began to report to me on this work we began to imagine how the processes might continue: an impromptu performance in Watkins Hall, where both our departmental offices are located ? An entire exhibition of belly art? Texts like this article? The matrix was in place: what might it generate?

From Belly to Belly Dance

Susan. It must have been a couple of days after Juliann took the Belly home that I began to feel its absence. Making *Matrice* had involved a long gestation; I'd grown used to thinking about whether the precious plaster of Paris mold was too hot, too cold, or might be exposed to some dust in the garage studio. I'd become accustomed Juliann's story residing in the back of my mind. It was done now, I thought. Juliann could take her photos and we could write an article about it. I could now turn to other projects. Or so I imagined.

A couple of weeks later, faced with an empty canvas in my studio, I began tracing circles with a piece of charcoal. I was not thinking about the Belly or *Matrice*, or pregnancy for that matter, but my hand seemed to be "thinking" in circles; bellies perhaps? In the past I'd often worked with round forms, vortexes of sorts. I'd always found it challenging and interesting to work with roundedness against the rectilinear canvas. But this time I found my charcoal and then my brush moved easily: thoughts about motherhood or Juliann's experiences of it had faded from my conscious thoughts. But my hands and visual imagination continued to circle; I drew lines that might recall pictures of strings of chromosomes, umbilical cords, or bundles of multicolored yarn. I began to become aware of thinking about the tangled colors I'd used on the four canvas boards to represent Juliann's four children. Then, listening to music, I thought of the Belly and dancing, and with the circling motions of my hands I traced the lines in ways that felt like the way I might imagine my full belly jiggling if I were to dance while pregnant. What could it be but a "Belly Dance?"

The persistent questioning, reflection, observation, and sharing of ideas and emotions related to the topic of maternity, motherhood, and work had clearly left its mark on me. Was this simply because the topic lent itself to embodied reactions? Complicity might seem "normal" or "easy" when two women who have experienced motherhood talk about their experiences. But the project design was also clearly *for* something in its embodied and imaginative persistence and in its success. Our exchanges illuminated more differences than similarities in personal experiences of motherhood. The ongoing conversation enabled these comparisons to surface and be worked out by my developing new forms of artistic expression in media new to me. Had we set out to develop a piece of art together? Or had Juliann somehow coached me? If I had developed a piece of work on a similar theme for some unknown audience the process would obviously have been quite different. Our differential participation and making it my responsibility to make something of the Belly did not quite foster a "collective subject," but it did engender a distinctly intersubjective project. The Belly and its incarnation in *Matrice* is something we created together from common themes, different experiences, and distinct skills: an entity with no clear endpoint.

Juliann. The Belly carefully stowed away again, *Matrice* has become a fixture in my home as well as in my office and has taken up residence in my psyche as well. *Matrice* quickly became the centerpiece of our family room, where I am frequently called to perform a kind of autoethnography of the expectant and post-partum mother for quizzical friends and family members. As soon as I can select just the right photograph of the piece, an image of *Matrice* will find a place in my campus office as well and is sure to become the source of conversations on my "maternal obsession" and related themes. Yet perhaps most significant, *Matrice* resides at the edges of my mind—an image of a tough yet flexible bit of myself as participant in the creative processes of birth and motherhood as well as scholar.

Susan. Even if *Matrice* is now at home on Juliann's wall, my circular gestures affirm that the Belly belongs to both of us. Now, I work reflexively within the extended context of our common project, yet still in solitude with what our exchanges gave me. At home, where I hung *Belly Dance* to welcome my pregnant daughter-in-law on a visit from Paris, guests

inquire: "Are those several women dancing or did you want to portray a single woman at diverse moments?" This question has no answer but it sums up many aspects of this project.

JULIANN EMMONS ALLISON is associate professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside, where she serves as director of Interdisciplinary Studies and associate director of the Center for Sustainable Suburban Development. Her research and teaching interests emphasize political economy, environmental politics and policy, and community-based social change, especially as it relates to gender and sustainability. Recent work appears in the journals *PolicyMatters*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law, and Economics*, and the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*.

SUSAN OSSMAN is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, where she directs the program of Global Studies. She has pursued research on aesthetics, media, politics, and migration in North Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Her publications include *Picturing Casablanca: Portraits of Power in a Modern City* (California, 1994) and *Three Faces of Beauty: Casablanca, Cairo, Paris* (Duke, 2002). Her latest book, *Paths of Serial Migration* (Stanford, 2013) inspired *The Moving Matters Traveling Workshop*, a mobile platform for serial migrant artists.

Notes

1. Many publications now document such work; see, for instance, Bishop 2012; Crehan 2011; Schneider and Wright 2011, 2012; Strand et al. 2003.

2. One may have therapeutic goals (Hogan and Pink 2010). Sketches or paintings and photographs may be included in field notes or may incite reactions among interlocutors in the context of a broader research agenda (Hendrickson 2008; Taussig 2011).

3. My observations about cultural contradictions and embodied motherhood are variations on the phrase coined by Sharon Hays (1998).

4. For an account of some aspects of my upbringing see Ossman 2007.

5. See Maushart 1997 on maternal subversion, and see Castaneda and Igro 2013 on the more general contradiction between academic pursuits and caretaking responsibilities. Mama PhD at Inside Higher Ed covers topics related to the challenge of balancing motherhood and scholarly work. Of course, it is not "strange" for academics to study how "others" alter their bodies, but this largely remains "academic."

6. "Lean in," coined by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), refers to a strategy of tough conformity in the workplace as a basis for negotiating a healthy work-family balance, much like Diane Keaton's J. C. Wiatt—the "Tiger Lady"—in the 1987 film *Baby Boom*. Critics include Anne-Marie Slaughter (2013) and Jessica Grose (2014).

7. Davis (1995, 1997) offers a counterbalance.

8. The "inclusive" aspects of the image are explored in Ossman (1994).

9. "The Fabric of Fieldwork" was a duet exhibition with WESSIELING at the Brunei Gallery of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

10. The modalities of visual art exhibition and reception are quite unlike those of a book, a journal article, or even a picture book. Small or large groups of people can view

an artwork together, sparking further discussions about the event or topic engaged by subject and ethnographer, leading to further creativity—including research and analysis as well as art.

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