

Silver Eye

Gallery Guide
Feb 6–Mar 21, 2020



Barbara Weissberger
Mother

About the Artist

Barbara Weissberger's photographs—and related photo-objects—contain familiar things and things that are confounding enough to sow doubt about the nature of those that are most identifiable. She started as a sculptor and is still deeply engaged with materials and making objects. Weissberger crafts many of the objects within her photographs, mingling found objects with the miscellany found in her studio. Her work has been shown at The Drawing Center, White Columns, PS1/MoMA, Gridspace (Brooklyn), Photoville (Brooklyn), and Hallwalls (Buffalo) in New York; Coop Gallery, Nashville; Big Medium, Austin; The Mattress Factory, SPACE Gallery and the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh; GRIN (Aldrich + Weissberger), Providence, RI; Artspace New Haven, Connecticut; ADA Gallery, Richmond, VA; and The Holter Museum of Art, Montana.

Mother

Kate Kelley
Assistant Curator,
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In deciding to title this exhibition *Mother*, Barbara Weissberger opens a floodgate to potential allusions, references, and interpretations. The artist eschews any specific meaning as to what the exhibition title is in reference to, emphasizing that the title is “open to a multiplicity of responses.” This approach makes space for lots of fertile questioning, as we ponder who the mother is in this exhibition—or perhaps a better question might be, *what* mother is. In this exhibition, Weissberger has created images and objects which resemble bodily forms, yet the elements she uses are mostly disembodied: eyes that float, hands that remain estranged from arms, and intestinal-looking tubular shapes. It isn’t always clear precisely what kind of body or bodies are being created. Instead, there is a suggestive ambiguity to how “mother” functions here, as forms and shapes slip into one another, disturbing any clear reading of how they come together to form a whole. Viewing these lumpen, yet strangely active images and objects is an exercise in thinking through new questions about the creative impulse, and how Weissberger might test our assumptions about a word we think we understand.

Creation is naturally at the forefront of our thoughts surrounding mothers and motherhood. In *Mother*, Weissberger creates with utilitarian, often ignored items such as cardboard, spare one-way mirror window film, and emergency blankets, “celebrating humble material”. It is not just the materials that are humble, but the techniques as well. Hand and machine stitching can be seen in several instances throughout the exhibition, such as in a large piece at the center of the main gallery, *Shape Involvement*. The visible stitches remind us of the hand which brought the work into existence, and the painstaking process involved in its creation. This almost tender gesture of human labor sits at an opposition to the smooth, sleek look and feel of the digital photographs in the exhibition. As an artist who inhabits multiple mediums, among them drawing, collage, sewing, photography, and sculpture, Weissberger is unafraid to play with our assumptions of how a finished work of art should look or feel. Reveling in the cognitive dissonance that this unexpected pairing creates, Weissberger

provides moments where her work feels quite vulnerable, even perishable, and others where it sits cool and pristine.

Further complicating these reactions is the way in which Weissberger blurs the distinctions between her time spent in the studio, and the way her finished work exists in the space of the gallery. Weissberger chooses to wrap several of her frames in the same fabric material that appears in her photographs, creating the feeling that the material has oozed out of the image, or the studio, and into the gallery. The soft, corporeal forms which act as props in many of Weissberger's photographs also appear as three dimensional soft sculptures in a work entitled *Hold Me*, which is meant to be worn by the viewer, and held against their body. Weissberger's photographs and objects seem to teeter on the edge of creation and creating, as they almost seem to possess human forms, but do so through fragments, or disembodied parts. These partial views of a total body also recall what Weissberger refers to as "the view of the self without a mirror". This push and pull between a bodily form becoming whole, being taken apart, or simply viewing itself from a personal point of view adds a level of humorous tension to the work, where images could be examining themselves as they come into being. In *Soft Surveillance*, a watchful eye hovers in what appears to be a metallic primordial soup; the tubular forms and disembodied hand in *Elephant* feel ungainly, finding their footing in a new existence.

In looking at these bodily forms, a comparison to another well-known creator cannot go unnoticed. In fact, Weissberger cites Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" as an influence upon this new body of work; she referenced the novel as she sat "sewing parts together by hand, with visible stitches holding everything together." While Weissberger's bodily images and sculptures do not turn back towards their creator in the vengeful manner of Victor Frankenstein's creature, the work does seem to possess a sense of self. This is complicated when a hand or form reaches out from a cardboard hole or a curtain, while the body it should be attached to goes unseen. This feeling of dissociation in the fragmented body parts sets up an interesting paradox, where the moment these objects and forms inch towards life, we are reminded of the very fact of their formation by Weissberger's hand. In an image appropriately titled *Navel*, a life-like, belly button and cropped torso

appear, with loose, blue, hair-like threads descending from the titular navel. Made through photographing fabric and then hand stitching the belly button and a crease below the navel, this image feels the closest to an intact bodily form. Yet the frame surrounding the work feels necessary to carry this sectioned-off body into existence, into objecthood. The framing of the work brings Weissberger's hands back into existence, and her labor of creation again comes to the fore.

As an exhibition, *Mother* embodies many of the contradictions wrapped up in trying to define its title. The question of what "mother" means to Weissberger is left unanswered. The work ranges from anthropomorphic and abstract, from fragile to almost fierce, at once definitely creepy, but also very cuddly. Weissberger has made a space to get cozy with the uncomfortable and the unknowable, and to enjoy feeling unmoored, at least a little, as we entertain new ideas about creation and creators. In a small, easy to miss image in the back gallery, titled *Journey of a Memory*, a black and white photograph gives us a glimpse of the artist's studio as just that: a humble space of creation. One of her sculptural forms perches atop a stool, inanimate, almost melancholy. In this image, a look "behind the curtain", our understanding of the weird, playful world Weissberger has created in this exhibition is dismantled. Weissberger offers us an enigmatic narrative of both fact and illusion, mystery and humor—a rare chance to consider creating and creation in tandem.

Silver Eye Center for Photography
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- 2 About the Artist**
- 3 About the Exhibition**
- 6 Price Guide**

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