

Parenting in Historical and Contemporary Art

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Ruby Sky Stiler, *Father and Child*, 2018. Acid-free foam-core, aqua-resin, paint, graphite, thermal adhesive on panel, 50 x 60 in (127 x 152.4 cm)

In the exhibition *No Forms* presented at the Hill Art Foundation, Ruby Sky Stiler's work *Father and Child* catches your attention as you enter the space. The work was created in 2018, with materials including acid-free foam-core, aqua-resin, paint, graphite and thermal adhesive. While at first glance you might think it's another Minimalist art piece with no meaning. This work showcases Stiler's feminist ideas about parenting and gender roles.

The mixture of shapes, patterns, and colors in *Father and Child* evokes cubist paintings and collages. Located at the center of the work are two figures and a vase placed right next to them. The black and white background contrasts with the beige figures and vase at the

foreground, making them stand out. Upon closer inspection, the artist carved the background pattern out of foam core then painted parts of it black. The patterns vary in design from straight black and white lines to zigzags, curves, letters, spirals, and triangles. The figures are much larger than the vase, indicating that they are farther in the foreground and creating depth in the work. The relative size of the figures indicates an adult and a child sitting together. The sitting position of the adult seems more relaxed and open in contrast to the way the child is sitting. The child has their legs close to their chest but not hugging them, which suggests that the child is more reserved and not as comfortable as their parent. Both the figures and the vase are made up of geometric shapes in colors including light maroon, yellow, orange, and pink. There are also colors like fern green and a grayish blue that gives shadows to the figures but not to the vase. On the vase there are smaller graphite drawings of Greco-Roman and Egyptian figures and patterns. There are small pores and bumps on the art piece that add texture.

Ruby Sky Stiler was born in Portland, Maine in 1979. She is 42 years old and is based in NYC, more specifically Brooklyn. She has lived in NYC for almost 20 years. She graduated in 2001 from Rhode Island School of Design with a B.F.A and then in 2009 from Yale university school of Arts with an M.F.A. She is mostly inspired by Greco-Roman sculptures, cubism, collages, geometric shapes, and historical art (*Opener 34 Ruby Sky Stiler New Patterns - Tang Teaching Museum*, n.d.). She uses carved foam core in most of her work. Stiler has spoken about wanting to portray men in her work as more feminine, because for most of art history women have been simplified as mothers or depicted for pure enjoyment of a male viewer. To counteract this trend, she has made the men in her art curvier and shows imitate emotional bonding moments between fathers and their children. (Stiler, 2018, 53)

Many women in art are drawn to emphasize their duty as mothers. Works such as *Mother Playing with Child* (1897) by Mary Cassatt illustrate this trend of women being shown as caretakers with men rarely being in the picture. A contrasting example is *Saturn* (1636) by Peter Paul Rubens, which shows the widely known Greco-Roman myth of the titan Saturn eating his kids as they are born. In an interview with *The Aldrich*, Stiler stated, “how fucked up it is that there is not a lot of positive representation of fatherhood...how could you be a good father if you do not have those images to look at.” (#*AldrichStudios With Ruby Sky Stiler*, 2020) Stiler is interested in the historical depictions of fatherhood and motherhood, and believes that more positive examples should be shown in art.

In her book *Fathers*, Stiler includes photos of the process to create her exhibition. Lumi Tan, a curator at The Kitchen, stated “the male figures on these vases are familiar, even from a few pencil marks: Muscular, elongated bodies that are always prepared to take action...effort to find how her men can share curves of her women....Clearly, it is not only a formal challenge.....It is a necessary correction. As women are consistently defined by this relationship, men need to be as well” (Stiler, 2018, 53). This quote can be applied specifically to *Father and Child*. The work is supposed to be a new reference to fathers and their parenting, change stereotypes that have been placed on women for so long, show fathers having emotional connections with their children, and even challenge the way fathers look. Instead of rough edges giving off a scary and dominating look, Stiler’s figure is softer and helps the viewer see father figures in a different tone.

The topic of parenting has come up a lot during the last few years. The views of many have changed the way I thought about parenting. Ruby Sky Stiler is one of them. Showing good images that represent fatherhood could change the way future men treat their children. Not only

that but as well make both parents work in unity. Initially I thought that it was just an art piece that had a parent and a child or older sibling. I didn't think much of it other than it was very pretty and I couldn't take my eyes off of it. Now learning the process and the meaning I have come to respect it more and it encourages me to create art that has a similar tone. The artist took care and time to make this work, which helped me understand its deeper meaning.

Ruby Sky Stiler has done an amazing job at trying to address this topic of parenthood in a historical narrative that most people don't usually think of. Hopefully in the near future there will be more artists engaging with questions of parenthood, or any gender stereotype, and change the way it's viewed.

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