



Art

# This Artist Stages Scenes of Anxiety and Tenderness with Her Daughter

Ariela Gittlen

Oct 22, 2018 6:09PM



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama #45*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama #31*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.

When Aneta Grzeszykowska photographed her daughter Franciszka playing with a realistic sculpture of her mother's naked torso, it was, in a sense, an ordinary family activity. "Our daughter is growing up in a family of artists, where life and art are mixed together," Aneta Grzeszykowska told *Artsy*. It was natural, she said, for the 8-year-old to collaborate. The resulting series, "Mama" (2018), on view through November 18th at [Lyles & King](#) in New York, shows Franciszka and the doll exploring the Polish countryside, floating in a lake, pretending to smoke, and playing with finger paints—all in all, an idyllic summer vacation. Then again, her companion is a life-sized replica of her mother's nude upper half—a silicone model created by a team of special-effects technicians—so these scenes seesaw between tender and uncanny, silly and nightmarish.

Grzeszykowska's artistic practice has long been a family affair. Both Grzeszykowska and her husband, the artist Jan Smaga, have made work that muddies the divisions between public and private, art and life. Their video piece *4/51 Dolna St.* (1999) is a montage showing a bird's-eye view of the couple's small apartment as they go about their day. Their collaborative collection of photographs, *Private Archive*—published as a book in 2012—gives an intimate view of both their studio practices and their relationship. Their daughter Franciszka has previously appeared in other works, among them *Franciszka* (2016), for which she acted as the

model for a series of hand-sewn woolen dolls. But “Mama” pushes Franciszka’s involvement to a more active and complex level.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama #44*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama #50*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.

Many artists mine their own lives for inspiration and employ their own bodies as material. Yet when they involve their children in the work, a new set of ethical and conceptual questions are raised.

When discussing “Mama,” Grzeszykowska cites the work of the Polish duo KwieKulik, who, after the birth of their son, made him the central character in their photographic series “Activities with Dobromierz” (1972–74). Created under the Communist regime in 1970s Poland, the work suggested a parallel between the artists’ own total control over their infant son and the reach of the totalitarian state. The baby is always seen alone in these images, whether sitting inside a toilet or lying on the floor, surrounded by circular arrangements of onions. He is posed with different objects in the apartment and is treated as an object himself, carefully arranged and put on display.

Grzeszykowska reverses that dynamic by literally turning herself into an object to be poked and painted, set afloat in a pond or buried in the dirt. Because Franciszka determined her own interactions with the doll, she was also, in Grzeszykowska’s view, an active participant in the work. In one of the most haunting photographs in the series, the doll sits on the bed, with Franciszka’s bare legs emerging from the shadows behind it, her small hand resting on the doll’s shoulder. This image came about not through Grzeszykowska’s instruction, but because her daughter was tired of participating the project and decided to hide. Other actions found in the series were also initiated by Franciszka, from offering the doll a cigarette to painting its face or washing its hair. “My daughter is the subject and the author here; I am the object,” Grzeszykowska said.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama #34*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama #27*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.

“Mama” is an explicitly feminist work, addressing how gender roles are socially enforced from early childhood by the toys we give to children. “Girls play with dolls, [which are] babies who need to be looked after, or Barbies who are their imagined ideal for the future,” the artist explained. The series also complicates the relationship between mother and daughter by reversing their roles. The daughter nurtures the mother as she would a baby doll, and the mother becomes the object onto which the child projects a fantasy of adulthood. Grzeszykowska nods to the work of psychologist Luce Irigaray, who believed that reimagining the mother-daughter relationship was crucial to improving the position of women.

It’s worth noting that many of the artists best known for including their children in their work are women. [Sally Mann](#), [Justine Kurland](#), and [Catherine Opie](#) all photographed their children when they were young, often with an eye towards exploring the trials and rewards of motherhood. “I think that the experience of motherhood is a huge change for every human being,” Grzeszykowska said, adding that she was always surprised when artists insisted they must reject motherhood in favor of art. ([Marina Abramović](#) once famously announced that having children would have been disastrous for her work.) For Grzeszykowska, such declarations seem absurd. “In my art I deal with life, and the child expands my worldview,” she said. “Without her, I would be a little like a priest giving advice to a married couple.”



Aneta Grzeszykowska  
*Selfie #19b*, 2014  
Raster

“Mama,” like much of Grzeszykowska’s oeuvre, is a form of self-portraiture in which the artist fragments, alters, or replicates her body to induce both humor and horror. (It’s a sensibility she shares with a fellow Polish artist, the late Alina Szapocznikow.) She sees this fragmentation as a metaphor for the slippery nature of identity. By breaking up the human form and personifying its individual parts, the body becomes both self and other, familiar and alien, at the same time. “For me, identity does not exist as a permanent form,” Grzeszykowska said, “it is a process.” In her 2014 series “Selfie”—photographs of the artist fashioning body parts out of animal skin—we see her disembodied hands entering the frame to paint lipstick on a half-formed face or to cradle a single, lonely breast. In *Holes* (2011), lips, vulva, ears, eyes, and breasts emerge from a white background, and are summarily poked and prodded by curious fingers. But what of the terror and revulsion that such images of free-range body parts often inspire? Photographs of Franziska burying her mother’s replica in the dirt like a corpse, or carefully washing her in the tub, allow both mother and daughter to explore the dynamic of their relationship, in all its tenderness and power. Both artist and child are safely cocooned within a space of art and play—even when their explorations touch on Grzeszykowska’s own mortality. “Horror movies are spaces in which we can experience fear without the fear of being killed, which is a kind of catharsis,” Grzeszykowska said. “Art is a similar space, parallel to reality, that allows us to tame it.”

Ariela Gittlen