

Supercharged by motherhood

Design | Identity crisis or fertile inspiration?

Crafting narratives after having children finds dynamic new expression, writes *Daisy Dawney*

Ceramicist Noe Kuremoto's intense interest in ancient female talismans arose from a moment of crisis. Sitting in her studio, crying – she had just received an ultimatum from her husband to start a family or else part ways – she picked up a pencil and found herself sketching *dōgi* figures. These clay figurines, which emerged from Japan's Jōmon era (10,000BC–300BC), are symbols of fertility – with “big breasts, big tummies”, she says. “It just came out.”

The question of if – and when – to have children was explored with haunting nuance in a number of artworks in the Hayward Gallery's recent touring exhibition, *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood*. In Lea Cetera's womb-shaped bronze work, titled “You Can't Have It All” (2022), time is shown slipping away, grains of sand stuck in the ovaries. Painter Caroline Walker depicts bottles and pumps on the draining board or puts a spotlight on overlooked nursery workers. French multimedia sculptor Camille Henrot highlights the quiet, lonely work of breastfeeding.

Motherhood is a rich seam for art – but has been less so in design. That is subtly changing. Indeed, it had not been a subject hitherto in mind for Kuremoto. Raised in Osaka, Japan, she arrived in

London to study at Central Saint Martins in the 1990s, amid the heyday of Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Marina Abramović. “I thought this is it, I want to be them”, she recalls. The narrative of the western independent woman “was very healthy for me as a young Japanese girl”, she says. “And I capitalised on that.” Her career as a ceramicist became fast-paced, making pieces for a cycle of international art fairs.

Kuremoto's eventual decision to start a family proved a turning point personally and professionally, though things didn't change all at once. Two weeks after her first son was born in 2019, she was back in her London studio, pretending nothing had happened. “I was so afraid. I didn't even want to talk about it,” she says. But with her second, her mother came over from Japan to help the family and something shifted. “I began to enjoy it. I gave myself a new narrative.”

She began creating what was to prove a continuing series of vessels – some of which will be on display at PAD London this October – inspired by the Jōmon era's rituals and folk tales, interpreted through a contemporary lens. Her own *dōgi* versions “are for my girlfriends and all the women facing the same fears and concerns [as I did] before they become mothers”. Often grouped together like an offering, their sinuous shapes carry new power. “The danger has shifted from childbirth to identity”, she says. “Women are fighting for their identity and what happens to them post-birth.”

Dublin-based artist Niamh Barry creates site-specific fluid sculptures cast in bronze, often incorporating light sources. While she stresses that motherhood hasn't influenced the aesthetic of her work, carving her career was a way to retain her own identity, separate from family life.

“I don't think of my work in the context of my gender”, she says, but the arrival of her two daughters (now aged 21 and 25) “absolutely supercharged my working



life”, she adds, citing the discipline, routine and focus it brought. Barry has created “a very slowly evolving body of work that changes over a long period of time.” At PAD she is showing “Artist Hand VII” – an elegant and deceptively simple piece created using complex metalworking. It took her and her team more than eight weeks of continuous work to make – some pieces take up to 50 weeks. “That's how you bring up children too. It's not about grand gestures, it's the slow and steady every day.”

Ceramicist Hitomi Hosono agrees, likening her delicate process with porcelain to mothering. Both require immense “patience, care and compassion”, she says. One of her works on show at PAD is the ornately carved “A Large Zenmai and Nazuna Open Bowl”



(2026). It was partly inspired by her own mother, a keen gardener, who “took me into the forest to hunt and forage”, as a child in Japan, to pass on her knowledge of plants. Hosono, who has lived in London since she graduated from art school, now lives near Epping Forest where *nazuna* (also known as shepherd's purse) grows freely. It's the same plant that she would pick on her way home from school in Japan: seeing it in London “connects my past and my present.”

“When my own daughter was born I was fascinated by her delicate, tiny world... her nails were so small I couldn't even trim them,” says Hosono. “It made me want to make a detailed

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work, to create that fine, beautiful, delicate world my daughter had on her finger.” The bowl took more than a year to complete; a tactile process that started with the plants, noticing their thickness, the spread of their veins or how the edges curve. She likens clay to a living thing; the unfurling stems of her final piece almost seem to grow.

Kuremoto, meanwhile, now has four children, which has radically changed how much time she can spend working. “Quality time is absolute bollocks,” she laughs. “Babies don't need quality time, they need quantity time.” Nevertheless, her career has continued to thrive and grow in new directions, and at a different pace. It's a slow burn. Barry agrees: “My work, like motherhood, is a lifelong commitment.”

