

## **Self realised Void**

*Roman Grabner in dialogue with the artist Julia Krahn about "Mutterschwere".*

As hardly any other artist, the Milan based Julia Krahn thematises conception, motherhood and infantilism in art and society.

Her own body often serves as a terrain, into which the span between mother and daughter, giving and taking, wafting and bearing, longing and void, chastity/ purity and defilement is being inscribed. In conversation with Roman Grabner she is developing theoretical aspects about three of her works, and juxtaposing Christian iconography to conception, mother and child.

### **Julia Krahn, in your latest works you have set out to explore in depth the person and representation of mother. What was your point of initiation?**

The main inspiration comes from my own mother being an extremely important person to me. She is very present in my artistic work, as she ever has had and continues to have a very big influence on my personality. My mother is a convinced Christian with a deep religious intent - accordingly she has been serving the world being a mother to many, yet did this circumstance not leave much space for me to have felt and experienced much of "my own" mother apart. By this means I think, that I have encountered a lot of friction with her, and the church as an institution within herself. My work reflects my personal conflicts.

**In your work "mother and daughter" you carry your mother on your back, with a photography on the ground next to you, that obviously shows your mother holding you in her arms as a baby. As an event, is this carriage of your mother rather assuming a load, that one offers to someone else as an assistance, a support, or has the mother turned into a burden, that may strain oneself through education and who will become an encumbrance with age?**

It means here undoubtedly a general allocation of load, more specifically the awareness of identifying and accepting the load itself.

My mother is still relatively young, so that I don't have to care for her in the same way that she had to care for me when I was a child. On the contrary, she was obliged to care for my grandmother from a much younger age. As a consequence, the inherited load of my mother, that she herself was not able to resolve with her parents is rather important to me. This might not have something to do with my work directly, but my mother has an enormous feeling of guilt. I do envy her faith. But I think that it is extreme for that it is inspired by it. And I myself am also left with this guilt, of which I don't really know what it is and where it originated, probably out of another generation.

I carry forth their burden.

My self portraits are a sort of self analysis, I aim to materialise the things that are not feasible to me in in the first place in order to eventually make them comprehensible to myself.

About three years ago I started talking to my mother about my wish to integrate her into my artistic work. It took quite a while before she could take the decision to face this project.

But one day she agreed and said: OK I am ready, let's do it. and I took her on my shoulder.

It is definitely not easy for anybody to come to face one's own deepest and often unconscious difficulties. It was just after we had started working together that I finally achieved to turn around, to embrace her and to tell her: OK, it is in your silence, that I find you and how much you love me. I think it is the moment to admit: Yes I am your daughter and I know, you love me and I am there for you as well. After that everything feels much lighter.

I think, then is the big turning point, where it no longer is the mother that carries the child, but, that we will start to carry our parents, because we are ready to carry our own children.

For many many years I have not been able to really hug my mother. To the point that I rarely felt that I could embrace her, I rather settled with the possibility that I could, instead of daring it.

These two images are the product of this process.

**You did already mention it: It is on one hand the burden from the parents and on the other hand the burden that one carries forth by oneself. As a pendant to your “mother”/”daughter” work you created a work about mother, in which you leave the role of a daughter behind to become a mother instead. You fall back to the iconography of maria with the child, except, that there is no daughter embedded in the cloth that you are holding. Unperturbed by that fact, your gaze is loving and absorbing the void within your arms. what do you see in it's depths?**

It is very clear, here I am mother. I have realised that I reached an age to the maturity that I want to have a family on my own, but that I lack on certain preconditions.

I have seen myself, me and my future. I come forth out of a generation that has questioned the role of the family. Individualism has led us to concentrate on ourselves, whereby unfortunately many values concerning family have gotten lost in the process.

I see more and more people around me having a tremendous attraction to security, safety and family, but at the same time are unable to complete that wish.

I assume there is a big fear on side of the opposite sex towards confident woman, combined with the fear of responsibility, while women have a strong wish for support, that is indeed biased in favour of their urge for own footing.

We have been growing into gender roles that can hardly coexist any more, and this often results not in self realisation but in self realised emptiness and loneliness.

Decisions to lead a conjunct life are seen as a personal sacrifice. Especially in Mailand, where I live, family and children are being looked at as an impediment rather than a blessing.

The new values are unrestricted freedom, flexibility and self sufficiency and that seems incompatible with family, except if one could afford a 24/7 babysitting. A child becomes a symbol of status, while the actual background of a family in itself is being dropped back. A mother is actually not the one that bears a child, but the one that provides the kid with everything possible. According to me, this can be a family as well. And that is why I really think, that we are a generation that is amputated- maybe handicapped is the better word. In Italian it expresses this disability semantically to the better.

We do miss a future I believe.

**I would like to come back talking about this void, which is essential to me, as it is in the focal point of the picture. On the one hand, as you already mentioned, it stands for the loss of the child, the family in a classic sense, for the breaking away of values, but it gains a brisant importance on the other hand, as you pick up on Christian iconography, while apparently integrating Maria with the Holy Child, the saviour figure, that is now visibly absent. In effect, the central point of believing is missing.**

**Can you elaborate this a little further?**

The particular choice of iconography has on one hand a lot to do with my personal education and on the other hand with my method of working. I try to encourage the viewer to be an engaged spectator. The person looking at this mother, assumes he already knows what he sees. But upon second sight he is forced to question it, because in fact there is something missing. In this case the iconography is so self evident, that everybody no matter from which religious background “recognises” this image. I have enjoyed a very Christian education, that I am unbelievably proud of, although I am not involved very much with the church as an institution. I have been told, that I am terribly Christian nevertheless, maybe because I have collaborated a lot with the church. I have spend six months in Africa, working with nuns in a hospice, like wise half a year in Colombia and I also did a lot with the Caritas organisation in Siberia.

To come back to my conflict, I think that the church continues to live in their icons, while often missing out on an unmediated reference to life. At the same time that my generation has questioned and eliminated values, without finding new answers and ways.

We have detached ourselves from all authorities, but still have to face what we pass on and how. Values have to come from somewhere. TV and computer certainly do not offer an alternative in that sense.

There is a feeling of: I want to feel safe, I would like to hold something and build something up, I want to find myself in this role,

it repeats itself. But there is nothing.

Why does this generation miss out on that decision:

I will stay with this person and let something grow?

I do not understand this. And if he arrives, why does he arrive so late?

For women it then often comes down to: I do also want the child now. but that does not solve it.

This is a very important point. Because one does not get a child in order to satisfy oneself.

People have come to think: I have to satisfy myself in this manner.

A child is not self fulfilment. A child is the decision:

I stop realising myself, but I give myself for this child.

**I realise, that what you transport in your images is a personally strong matter of concern to you, and that they are emotionally charged to you as a person. I nevertheless want to ask you a very dry art historical question and return once again to the void.**

**It can be related to something not available, none existing, something in fact gotten lost, as well as to something without quiddity, something non tangible.**

**Would it be possible to represent your 'mother' image as a transformation of Christian iconography to god initially being unrepresentative?**

Certainly yes. I place major importance especially to the inconceivable.

Paradox as it might sound, it is the very conflict with the strong belief, which I experienced through/with my mother, that emphasizes this incomprehensibility. I have said a lot about the child that is not there, and I have criticized a lot. On the other hand this image, as being a proposal, is of utter importance to me, because it is represented in such way that something actually is there.

That one feels, even if it is not visible.

**It is a very beautiful thought to me, that your image proceeds a transformation of Christian iconography, which on one side is contemporary, and at the same time reaches out to much older roots.**

**This transformation and back reference to old modi I also see being realised in the embedding of your pictures into these old medallions. A medallion usually bears a photo of a beloved being, whom one can tote very close to oneself - above the heart. In its outline as an amulet it serves at the same time as a protection of mischief and evil and is supposed to attract fortune. What are the underlying considerations about this transformation?**

As I already mentioned before, my works are always based on personal experiences. The last circle of work "mother" is particularly intimate and at the same time very direct in its language. The work actually has started out with little medallions. The first image of the series, that I created, was "mother", the mother without a child, or Maria without Jesus. Inspired also from all these little medallions, that are hanging on the walls in my home, filling me with peace and at the same time reminding me of the void in me, in a melancholic way. I wanted to bring this intimacy into the process. That is why, from the very beginning, I started working with the original polaroids and contact sheets. The very image is therefore very small and I wanted to leave it in that size. But It is not just about the small oval frames, into that one inserts one's beloveds and which one carries around the neck, the work is also very much inspired by exvotos. They are pictures, alms, often just a heart through which people express gratitude, e.g. when someone has been saved or healed.

Common to all of them is the oval form, the round glass, that arguably represents something precious and very intimate. Which I also wanted to communicate.

Some of my little "cornici" are "reliquiari", in which hair or pieces of cloth had been enclosed.

I did not remove the original pictures, moreover allowed myself the naughtiness to open them and to add my own pictures. It is a romantic thought that that the pictures live on that way, I meet it with a smile, with the result that these little fragile images exactly reflect my feeling.

Of further importance was also, that the image "mother" literally is a nude act and that this nudity is not to be understood to be of disturbing nature.

It is not shocking to see a naked body in such a small format, it diminishes the fact of the body being seen naked, but rather intimate and delicate.

**You have already mentioned your nudity in the image, that you mask with white colour, to provoke a certain sculpturesqueness, but on the other hand probably to not overexpose your genitals. The veil, obviously being committed to the representation of Maria, chastely covers your hair, while the body's nudity forms an obvious tension. It creates a play between disguise and divest, and at the same time a contradiction of chasteness and licentiousness to a subtle eroticism on the other hand. As you are nude in almost all of your images, which significance do you attach to nudity as a strategy in your work?**

In my work I turn my innermost candid. I get naked and see the psychic bareness materialised physically. That does not necessarily result in complete nudity, but the disclosure is my point of depart. Every further element is well thought about and carefully set in scene. The circumstance that the images are often perceived erotically is a fact that I do not necessarily look for, but which does not counteract the work in it itself. On some pictures in the process my genitals were covered by the cloth, though eventually I concentrated purely on the cloth as a veil and a cloak.

I have long thought about the cloth itself. There are polaroids with a lighter, slightly rose coloured cloth, but at the end of the day I have decided to go with raw linen, the kind you embed a child in. It is supposed to form a unity.

The breast though is unambiguously and willingly exposed on one side. She represents my fertility and natural femininity. I am not Maria, I am Julia Krahn, an ordinary female.

**Because it is white linen, I want to ask you, if it could be exactly that linen, that artists over centuries have used to hand down the mother image.**

The cloth is linen indeed and in that sense of course bears an art historical reference, much as the indigo (esque) wallpaper in the background does, that I too have chosen because of symbolic reason.

**Thus you pick up a motive, you transform it and you use exactly that material, on which the original motive had been generated and passed on?**

Children have been bedded in linen and linen in itself is simple and distinct. The material is poor, but historically rich. The wraparound is the same cloth, that covers my head and unites me with the shrouded. My head is covered, because I am pure in this moment and my intentions are pure. I have looked at a lot of representations of Maria and their colours do change, white, blue, indigo, gold. I have decided white to be the colour of purity, the purity of intention, of the basic instinct and the child, that is not visible. Gold comes into play in other images, as for example in the work titled "purity".

**Your image "purity" shows you in a lasziv pose, in a rather explicit gesture. You are sitting with spread legs in a corner, covering your genitals with your left hand and you hold a rosary on the ground in front of you in your fingers. Your eyes are closed, it seems that you are lost in your thoughts. Contemplating while your mouth is slightly opened. Altogether forming a highly erotic picture, supported also by the light moisture on your skin. In opposition to the "mother" image where you appear rather sculptural, you are here clearly and thoroughly of the flesh. How exactly does the title "purity" fit into the picture here?**

The choice of title is of crucial importance to me, because it often is the first and only indication that the viewer takes into consideration. In Italian the image originally was termed "conception", but after some reconsideration I then decided to call it "purity" because it does not just mean conception to me but also birth in a certain sense.

**That is interesting, I am tempted to ask as a last question, if one could also allow the interpretation of a contemporary continuation or adaptation of the Christian salvation history: A birth scene with the rosary as a symbolic umbilical cord, and the holy child, that virtually is in front of you as the already crucified redeemer.**

**On the one hand there is an analogy in Christian literature, that draws a line between Maria's natal pain and the anguish of Christ during the Passion. This has repeatedly been thematised. On the other hand, as well, a form of a realistic deconstruction of that mythical marriage, which is often pictured in art history. The mythical coupling with her betrothed, that is Christ, which you indicate through the rosary. As far as I understand the image moves into the direction of a spiritual conception and union.**

Despite the obvious eroticism it is a very spiritual image to me. My eyes are being closed because it is my innermost that is most significant. In iconography closed eyes signify internalization/spiritualism. The eyes are closed but the mouth is open. This expresses a preparedness, to absorb, but in a further step also communication.

The air, the spirit, the whiff, there is an exchange that happens via the oral organ

The wide opened legs represent conception. I have realised that I perceived an unbelievably strong faith and that I am in the process of bearing an unbelievably strong believe. I am a human being, made out of flesh and blood, but am at the same time, because I am made of flesh and blood, a sinner, if you want to call it that way, and I want to clearly demonstrate that. I am a woman there, you can see my chest. I am moist, as this brings on the expression of effort and confrontation. To ask questions clearly and not to marginalise any aspect of it. What is important to me in this work is the conception and birth of my spirituality in contrast to my being human. About spirituality and rationalism if I may reach out so far.

**Of course I am now curious, whether the majority of the spectators would rather assume love pearls and masturbation, or even consider it a blasphemous reproach.**

**You live in Italy since a couple of years, you live and work there and you expose there.**

**For one, did you already expose this very image, and secondly, did you get feedback in this direction?**

There are certainly people, that in the first moment see love pearls instead of a naval chord and masturbation instead of birth or conception.

And as a pictorial representation of intimate love and needs of people, I honestly think, it is not that odd and by far not blasphemous. I do not intend to provoke a scandal.

But I also do not deny that I welcome a dialogue about sexuality within the church.

I want to stress yet again, it is a very spiritual image in the first place.

The series "mother" is relatively fresh and I am still in the process of producing more images. This year "mother" and "mother and daughter" have been shown for the first time at the Volta6 in Basel.

Just "purity" has been denied by the gallery in fear of criticism.

**That was practically a form of self censorship.**

It was the gallery's censorship. I would have loved to have seen the image exhibited and will keep on seeking the opportunity to do so. I want to communicate and I am curious about how it would resonate.

In my immediate surroundings the image has not been recognised being blasphemous at all. It is interesting that the first impressions varied between "birth" and "conception" and that they provoked interest in my views about the church. It often found its way into a conversation about sexuality in religion. That satisfies me, because it means: Somebody is questioning him/herself.

Somebody, that asks a question, is open for dialogue.