

Bridget Mullen *Birthday Series*

essay by Michael Stamm

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Does anyone remember being born? I imagine not – I certainly don't. And what a sad fact, that one of the most universal human experiences is lost to us all. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud idealizes birth as a brief point of total oneness of the world. Unpleasure and pain, our first and by no means last unwelcome feelings, introduce the border between ourselves and the external world. In the end, to be a person is to be "a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all embracing – feeling which corresponded to an intimate bond between the ego and the world around it."

To me, it is that specific fantasy of recalling a feeling of oneness that animates Bridget's newest body of work. In her paintings, birth at once generates everything and is generated by everything. From indeterminate canals emerge clenched, spasmodic faces, gasping for air, belonging to baby and mother alike. But sexual anatomies do not stop at birthing the eyes, ears, mouths, and hands from which they themselves are playfully indistinguishable. What is in one painting the undulating prismatic mound of a baby's head crowning is in another the furrowed brow of a sullen teen emerging from beneath a puffy coat. Bridget's technical facility, fearless and chaotic, makes anything possible: an array of bubbles become eyes and nose, a droopy green hound-dog brandishes a vaginal tongue, psychedelic vines entangle the edges of a face. One painting even imagines the birth canal as a stoner playing cat's cradle.

At the same time, the coursing, demented fun of Bridget's paintings remains pointed. Playfully correcting the patriarchal literalism of Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, her work unchains familiar dyads – the vagina and femaleness, femaleness and motherhood, motherhood and childbirth. And while she builds on the radical formalism of Georgia O'Keefe's vaginal flowers, Bridget embraces a more contemporary idea of the body as a near-totally unstable and immaterial signifier. Having a gendered body is probably a *political* condition, Bridget's paintings suggest, but it is definitely a *weird* one.

The erratic anatomical patterns that might serve as scaffolding for this "content" fall away as soon as the viewer attempts to overlay them with meaning. Take one example: the lower left- and right-hand quadrants of the paintings do often seem to house a pair of globular hands... until they turn into furry purple paws behind which a cowardly cat shivers... or grooved cascades of tears emitted by a forlorn cartoon grandmother... or are they actually the fins of two contorting trout brushing the droplets away? The paintings are always one absurdist step away from becoming *something* – an exasperated mom, a monkey shading his eyes with his hands, an art deco dog's butt. To understand one of Bridget's paintings is to delight in completing the exquisite corpse of a narrative it has passed one's way. Her play begets yours.

Flailing appendages, windswept strands of hair, pleading eyes and trembling pouts accentuate the painting's metaphysical quivering, yes, but they also contour unexpected expressions of fear, sadness, shock, bashfulness. Even the painting's most far-fetched hypothesis of a character elicits sympathy and emits warmth. Something about them sustains a real feeling. Although it may not be my story to relay, Bridget did tell me, in an aside at the end of a long meandering studio visit, that this series was begun in a storage room turned studio in her father's house, a room that held all her mother's old belongings after she prematurely passed away. It was, in fact, right after her own birthday. I was stunned. "I thought it didn't matter," she contested.

Shulamit Nazarian

Los Angeles

It does and it doesn't. Paintings make room for everyone's secrets to gestate into thoughts and ideas, not just those belonging to the artist. Indeed, the recurring hands, according to Bridget, belong not just to the person holding the baby but to the baby as well. Each painting, she explains, is meant to "hold itself." The paintings are, in that way, "all-embracing," as Freud idealizes it, capable of returning to a less traumatized state of safely touching and being all things. I truly believe that making a good painting, like holding a baby, is an act of love and trust. Bridget's paintings, being good, hold themselves out for us, a profusion of varied propositions for ways of being that extend not just beyond the orderly confines of the human body, but across species, material, time.

And in that way, it is not insignificant that Bridget has trusted me, an indelicate, childless, cisgender gay man, to write about this body of work: to wonder and learn about anatomic, sexual, and emotional realms essentially inaccessible to me; to pretend I can understand the psychic world of any other being without completely wringing out its inner life; to relate parentally, for a moment, to the churning materiality of the universe and its infinite arrangements. It is an act of trust so radically generous as to be deranged. And yet, it doesn't surprise me. Because it is exactly what her paintings do too. For me and for everyone, together.

Michael Stamm, 2021