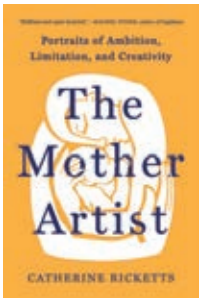
The Art of Mothering

In her debut book, *The Mother Artist*, Catherine Ricketts explores the limitations and creative benefits for mothers who make art. A mother herself, she faced many of the same hurdles as she wrote the book—and she's not the only alumna (or alumnus) finding both challenge and success navigating the balance between art and caregiving.

By Molly Petrilla

Fresh from maternity leave, just moments after breastfeeding her newborn son at home, Catherine Ricketts C'09 roamed the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She worked in their public programming department and often cruised the galleries for inspiration. But today was different. Among the museum's hundreds of thousands of works, she was searching for something specific: fellow mothers.



As she found them in medieval paintings, in Post-Impressionist portraits, and on the walls of the American wing, it occurred to her that these images of motherhood had all come from men. Here are the mothers, she thought, but where are the mother artists?

She looked into it. Only a few women ever make the list of household-name painters—Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, Mary Cassatt—and none of them had children. Ricketts scanned her own list of upcoming PMA programs. Out of over 30 performers, just one was a mother.

"I started to wonder about the compatibility of caregiving with creative work," Ricketts recalls.

How, exactly, are motherhood and artmaking at odds? Can they also enrich each other? Why aren't there more mother artists out there, and what does it take to be one?

Those questions became the foundation of her debut book, *The Mother Artist,* released in April by Broadleaf Books. In it, Ricketts mixes her own reflections with insights from 30 other mother artists who have persevered in their various art forms. There are big names—Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, Greta Gerwig—but also lesser-known Philly-area creatives, and even a fellow Penn alumna.

Ricketts hopes that women who make art will read the book and feel "re-energized about how important their particular vision of the world is, and how much our culture needs their voice and their vision."

"Something really significant is lost," she adds, "when caregivers are absent from the making and shaping of culture."

I spoke with some of those caregivers who, like the ones in Ricketts's book, are decidedly *not* absent. They've plowed forward in their creative work, even when caring for tiny humans made it feel impossible—and many, including Ricketts herself, have found fresh artistic inspiration along the way.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDACE DICARLO

Aimee Koran: ***Milkscape (Trio I)***, dried breast milk on glass, as inkjet print on paper, 2016; ***Chromed Life (Sophie)***, chrome plated rubber teether, 2016.

Spilled Milk

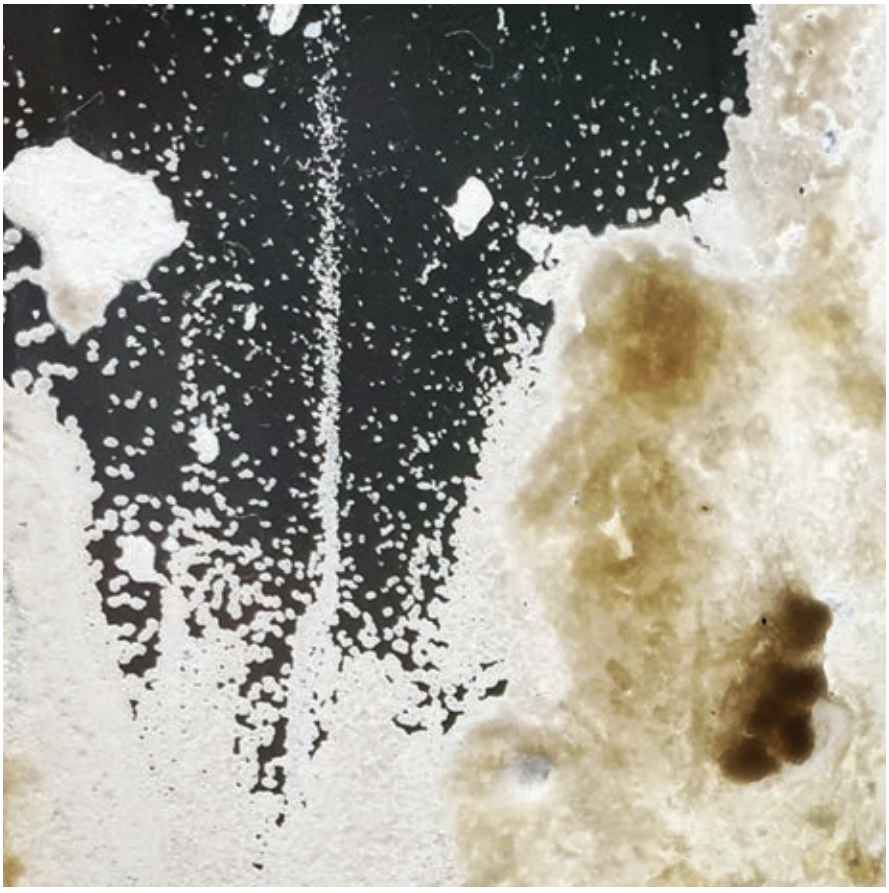
An electric breast pump, fully encased in shiny red chrome, sits on a matching red end table. Hanging nearby: framed works, in the style of Ukrainian embroidery designs, made from carefully arranged ovulation and pregnancy test strips.

We're inside Aimee Koran GFA'17's Philadelphia studio, where she has spent the last seven years exploring motherhood in her art.

Koran entered Penn's Master of Fine Arts program when her first child, daughter Maya, was just three months old. As her classmates stepped outside for cigarette breaks, Koran—the only parent in the class—felt uneasy asking for her own much-needed breastmilk-pumping breaks. And with no pumping-friendly spots near her classrooms, she'd often run to her studio in Philadelphia's Fairmount neighborhood, pump, then run back to campus.

On one of those time-crunched breaks, she'd just finished pumping out her milk—and then spilled it all over her desk. It's a tragic moment that all pumping moms understand. But Koran had no time to mourn her spilled milk, or even wipe it up. She had to run back to class.

When she returned the next day to tidy up, she noticed how her milk had dried onto a clear plastic Mylar sheet sitting on her desk. "I picked it up to throw it away, it hit the light, and I was like, 'It's so beautiful!'" she remembers. "The milk had curdled, it had dried, and it had turned different colors. I was so amazed by how it looked both macro and micro."



"I think about the work really as ways of holding on to memories and ways of showing the passage of time."

She began spilling her milk onto pieces of glass intentionally to make more "Milkscapes," as she eventually termed them. "I thought it was such a beautiful metaphor for the fleetingness of it all," she says, "because my body is only making this material for a very specific and short amount of time. So these images are special, and this series is limited. I thought that was overwhelmingly beautiful."

But when she presented her new pieces for MFA critiques, "immediately the overwhelming response was *no, no, no, no, no* from everyone," Koran says. "Too sentimental," they all told her. One professor asked why she would waste her breastmilk rather than donate it. *Don't worry,* said another. *You're a good artist, and you'll be interested in other things again*.

Andy Warhol made his Oxidation paintings by urinating on copper-coated canvases. Other artists have used semen and feces in their work. But breastmilk? "No one wanted to talk about breastmilk," she says. She often cried after getting "horrible" class critiques.

Rather than discourage her, the negative feedback drove Koran more firmly into work inspired by her mothering. "Maybe it's the middle child or the Philly in me," she says, "but hearing 'no' just fueled the fire."

At the same time, she was finding her way through new motherhood. In those early

Photos courtesy Aimee Koran

Pamela Hetherington says she is "unique" in her field of women tap dancers "in that I have children, especially three."

MFA days, when Maya was still a newborn, Koran would wear her in a carrier while working or grab time to sketch and ideate during naps. Private studio space became a must-have. "I need this studio," she says now. "This studio is pivotal to my work. This is 'A Room of One's Own,' for sure."

But her kids are welcome there, and in fact spend much of their time playing and drawing nearby while Koran works—or plays right along with them, since "a lot of the work really does come from playing with my kids and being around them," she says.

Now Maya is nine and her son Max is five. She brings them to any artist talks she gives and invites them to her museum openings. Sometimes they're loud. Sometimes they run around, or touch things they shouldn't, or run a finger through the refreshment-table hummus.

She always includes them though, even if it feels like some people would rather she didn't, because "I want them to see my work in a space that's beautiful, see other people commenting and enjoying it, and to be able to share a proud moment with them," she says.

At some level, the anti-kid nature of the visual art world (*don't touch, stand back, no running, shhh!*) may be why Koran has gravitated toward making work that can be touched. "I don't really feel that kind of gatekeeping," she says. "Like this dollhouse," she adds, pointing to another of her chrome pieces. "It's so detailed and shiny and you've got to get in there to feel and look at it."

Objects of inspiration are tucked around her studio: a box of stuffed animals, a bin of breastmilk bottles, the walls of a backyard playhouse. Koran plans to continue making mothering-related art, and since graduating from Penn, she's found a more enthusiastic audience.

She's been in group and solo shows, and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts acquired a prayer-style necklace she made from breastmilk-infused beads in 2022. She appears in Ricketts's *Mother Artist* book, sharing a chapter with the esteemed painter Alice Neel. The Fabric Workshop and Museum and the Philadelphia International Airport will both be exhibiting her work this winter.

Many of the group shows she's been in have focused on motherhood and mother artists, and Koran loves that. "But my push for the work is that it's included in shows that aren't specifically about that," she says. "I think about the work really as ways of holding on to memories and ways of showing the passage of time."

And besides, she adds, "what's more universal than being born?"

Dancing Through

Getting older doesn't stop a tap dancer. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was tapping on Broadway in his late 60s, and Ann Miller danced on live TV at age 66. But what can cause a tapper to throw aside their metal-soled shoes? Motherhood.

"When I look around at my field of women tap dancers," says Pamela Hetherington C'01, "I am unique in that I have children, especially three."

That's because professional dancing requires a flexibility of time and place that many moms don't have. There's the travel—to festivals, to residencies, to teaching gigs, to shows. "When these jobs come up to teach places, the people that grab them first are the ones that can just pick up and go," Hetherington says. "That's not really a possibility for people with families." And even if you stick close to home, odds are you're performing at night, right when you'd be putting the kids to bed and finally snagging some rest yourself.

A lifelong Philadelphian, Hetherington began dancing at age three and kept it up through her time at Penn. She performed with Penn Dance and started Soundworks, the University's only tap group. The double major in English and psychology? That was to mollify her family, who insisted she take a more tradi-

Photo by Ashley Smith courtesy Pamela Hetherington

tional undergrad route, even though she'd gotten into several dance schools.

"I had been conditioned from a very young age, because of how I grew up in a blue-collar Philadelphia household, that I could never be an artist," she says.

The same thinking led her into the corporate world, where she stayed until 2013. But she kept dancing, too, even as her own family began to grow. Her first child, a daughter, was born in 2006. By the time her youngest came along in 2014, Hetherington had quit her publishing job and opened her own dance studio.

She had also founded the Philadelphia Jazz Tap Ensemble (PJTE). Her pieces there blend tap choreography with jazz music, poetry, history, and body percussion—and lately, they've been focusing on women of the past. "I've been making what I call 'jazz stories' about women who had powerhouse careers and then sort of fell off the map," Hetherington says. "There are many of them, and it's largely due to choosing a family."

That includes Terry Pollard, who became a major presence in the 1950s Detroit jazz scene. "Then she had her son and she kind of disappeared," Hetherington says. Her piece for PJTE, *Terry Pollard: A Jazz Epistolary,* includes a section on the challenge of laying a baby down to sleep while you're brimming with impatience to go make your art. It won a Best Music Performance award at 2023's Philadelphia Fringe Festival.

To create pieces like *Pollard*, "I need so much time to just be doing nothing, letting my brain cogitate so that I go into a flow state," Hetherington says. With kids in the picture, "it takes a very determined person to find and make that time," she adds. She's learned to grab moments to think wherever she can—especially in the car—and often gets up as early as 3 a.m. to work in solitude.

In decade-old videos, Hetherington tap dances inside her studio while her youngest crawls by. The teaching studio she opened became "my way of having a space" to create new work, she says. Now she has a few spots around the city where she can go to dance. Just like Koran with her "room of one's own" in Fairmount, every artist-mom needs "a place where they do what they do," Hetherington adds. "That was a key hack for me, and it was important to me that I maintain that."

Her kids are older now—18, 15, and 10—and she's in her mid-40s. At an age when dancers who postpone motherhood are just settling into life with young kids, Hetherington is starting to become free for nighttime gigs and travel. She's in the thick of planning a PJTE show at the Barnes Foundation in November and organizing a springtime "jazz without patriarchy" festival.

"Obviously we're moms forever, but the hard part does go away at some point," she says, "and then you have to grapple with yourself as an artist." When you're deep in the trenches of newborn care or chasing after curious toddlers, it's easy to put your creative work aside. Hetherington urges moms to keep going, even when it feels impossible.

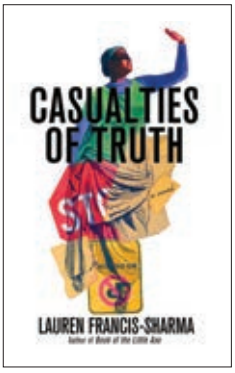
"Make the work and don't let anything stop you from it," she says. "There's going to be a whole bunch of excuses as to why you can't do it, but you just can't pay any attention. Even if the baby is screaming that day, if you have to hold them in one hand and feed them while you type, that's what you do."

Not Just Moms

Lauren Francis-Sharma C'94's daughter had just finished her freshman year at Penn and was ready to come home. She asked her mom to pick her up at night, and Francis-Sharma agreed—but she was worried. Copy edits were due the next day for her third novel, *Casualties of Truth*, which comes out in February 2025.

As she drove through rainy darkness, heading from the Washington, DC, suburbs to West Philly, her view began to shift from stress to opportunity. "I calmed down, and I was like, 'OK, you've got two hours in the car, what are you going to do with this?'" she recalls.

She focused on a scene she'd been struggling with in her book. Any big changes would have to come in this round of edits or not at all. And somewhere along that drive to Philly, "I got it," she says. The tricky scene was officially cracked.



"There are moments where I resent that the kids are interrupting me. But there are also huge moments where I realize that I probably wouldn't even be doing this work but for my children."

It's late May, and Francis-Sharma is telling this story inside the Kelly Writers House. She's on a panel with four other Penn alumni who have all come to discuss the ups and downs of their parent-artist lives for an Alumni Weekend event. "There are so many moments like that," she says, "where you are taken in by the parenting, and yet it opens a space and an opportunity you just would not have had. … If we can actually turn those moments for ourselves, they're just fantastic, fiery, energetic opportunities."

Francis-Sharma has been using her mom-task time—driving, doing dishes, making meals, cleaning—to mentally work through her novels for the past 15 years now. She left a job in corporate law to become a writer when her kids were four and two years old. "There are moments where I resent that the kids are

Lauren Francis-Sharma left her job in corporate law to become a writer when her kids were four and two.

Photo courtesy Lauren Francis-Sharma

Father artist Joseph Earl Thomas, who has four kids ages six to 13, recommends "always wake up before them."

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Sitting beside Francis-Sharma is Joseph Earl Thomas Gr'24, who wrote the acclaimed memoir *Sink*. He's one of two men on this five-person panel—because dads struggle with this stuff, too. Thomas says that after leaving the military to become a writer, he imagined he'd start each day doling out Eggo waffles, seeing his kids off to school, then settling in for a long stretch of productive writing and thinking. Reality had other plans. "Every other day is a dentist's appointment, doctor's appointment, somebody's sick, then the other one's sick," he says.

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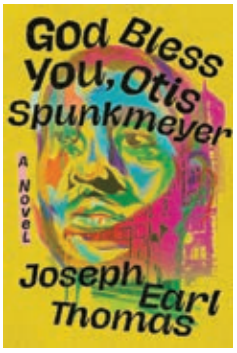

When school went virtual in 2020, his kids would often pop in to ask whether he was working or what he was writing. "I was frustrated, but it was also kind of cute, and sometimes really funny," he says. But "I think it did make me much slower. I can't get through projects as quickly as I used to anymore."

Much like Francis-Sharma, Thomas has learned to maximize the time he does have. He's a single dad with four kids, ages six (twins), 12, and 13. On family road trips, he throws on audiobooks that enhance his dissertation work or writing projects ("you can stay awake, you can fall asleep, it is what it is," he responds to any grumbles).

When an idea for a scene pops into his head or one of his kids says something funny or poignant, Thomas pulls out his phone and taps it into his Notes app—even if he's breaking up a sibling fight with his other hand. Conversations with his kids have shaped his written dialogue (*Sink*'s narrator is a child) and given him new powers of description. They also surface ideas he'd never come to on his own.

"I don't necessarily think about how people know what dinosaurs do or don't sound like," he says, "but I ended up doing a lot of research on that because I was having an hour-and-a-half-long conversation with a six-year-old who wanted to imitate the sound of a pterodactyl."

Ricketts, who is moderating the panel, asks what advice these parent-artist alumni would give to someone else in their shoes. "You do not have to do your art every single day," Francis-Sharma says. "You can give yourself a break. You can think. You can go on vacation. And it's good if you do."

"I would say, always wake up before them," says Thomas, whose novel *God Bless You, Otis Spunkmeyer* came out in June. "Even if I don't get any work done … that gives me enough energy for the rest of the day."

When we speak months later, Ricketts says that she wasn't surprised to hear dads grappling with the same challenges that she and the other women in her book do—and she knows it isn't just parents, either. When she prepared to lead several Caregiving and Creative Practice workshops at the Philadelphia Museum of Art this summer, she expected to see mostly moms of young kids there. Instead, she met people who were caring for their own aging parents or aging spouses, and others who work in art therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy.

"It was a really wonderful conversation more broadly—not just about mothering, but about caregiving," she says, "and how caring for an individual might change the way we see the world and therefore the art that we make."

Penn to Paper

Ricketts's own caregiving began long before she was a mother herself. Only a few years out of Penn, she helped tend to her dad, who had brain cancer. "When I was a student here," she says, "I didn't seek opportunities … to examine concerns of caregiving. Though I hoped one day I might become a parent, at the time, caregiving felt like a concern for the very far future."

But groundwork for *The Mother Artist* was in motion. Ricketts read Joan Didion and took two writing classes with Anthony DeCurtis, the music journalist and lecturer in creative writing at Penn, in which she crafted record reviews, book reviews, artist interviews, and longform pieces. "That was really the beginning of my training for the kind of writing that ends up in this book," she says.

Her senior year, she actually met Didion, who was a 2009 Kelly Writers House Fellow. Ricketts's seminar class studied Didion's work before a visit that included intimate conversations with the author herself. "Her voice has always stuck with me throughout my years of writing," she says, "and it was fun to realize that she had a place in this book."

The Didion chapter, entitled *Pietà: The Loss of a Child*, opens with Ricketts telling her own mom that she's pregnant. The news comes two years after the family buried Ricketts's father along with her brother, who died from a drug overdose. Didion lost a child, too—daughter Quintana, who was 39 years old.

"My mom sits on our couch, and I show her the test, which still reads, 'Pregnant,'" Ricketts writes. "Her gladness is absolute—hard-earned joy on the other side of suffering. She doesn't squeal or jump, just tilts her head and

Photo courtesy Joseph Earl Thomas

says, 'Aww,' with tears in her eyes. They're the same tears I see when she's remembering my father—just enough to wet her eyes but not enough to fall."

Ricketts doesn't shy from these highly personal moments as she continues to weave her own motherhood story with those of the other 30 artists in her book. Her writing has a tranquility to it. It's the same unhurried calm that infuses a conversation with her. "That's truly her essence," notes Koran. "She's just, like, so chill."

Here's Ricketts describing those early days with her first baby at home, in a passage steeped with that sense of chill:

We speak in hushed tones. The baby sleeps deeply as though he knows he is home, as though the sounds and smells and the light through the western windows—once barely discernable through the scrim of my skin—are familiar to him. He is still unfamiliar to us, but our only task now is to get to know him. Austin and I sit on the couch and study. He's nine and a half pounds. His hair is fine and dark. He thrusts his tongue forward like he's tasting the air and opens and closes his hands, slow as jellyfish. Everything he does is slow, and we settle into step. We study his slender fingernails. The way his lips turn down from the weight of his cheeks—these delicious cheeks. His discerning brow, the outsized length of his lashes, the slate of his eyes. We are utterly focused. We have entered the sanctum of his infancy.

Fifteen pages later, even the seemingly unflappable Ricketts has shifted into a state of newborn-induced stress:

We're ten weeks into parenthood, and the magic of infancy is dimming. Our son still wakes every one or two hours and wails for my milk. When his cries are shrill, I know they are for my body, mine alone, and this unnerves me. My back aches. I dread nights. I've never been so needed.

The questions that became *The Mother Artist* sprang up only a few weeks later, as she roamed the PMA galleries.

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But it wasn't until the pandemic paused her art museum job in 2020 that Ricketts found space to deeply explore. Eventually she sent out a proposal and landed a contract with Broadleaf Books.

They gave her a year to write. By that time, Ricketts's first son was two and a half and he had a new baby brother. The same hurdles that so many of the artists in her book describe—time, exhaustion, space, nursing demands—were her challenges, too.

She relied on self-made mini-writing retreats. Each month, she'd spend two days at an Airbnb or retreat center. She'd write for a full day, sink into an uninterrupted night of sleep, then write the next day and be home in time for dinner. She produced one chapter a month, and spent the time in between refining her prose, preparing her research, and finding moments "where I could keep my head in the world of the book"—like putting on related podcasts while in the car.

"There were these two tracks in my mind happening at all times," she says. "One was the world of the book, and one was the urgent, immediate needs of my kids. Somehow, I was able to keep both of those tracks at once."

As she continued through her book—writing about a dancer who now performs and choreographs with her young daughter, an artist who exhibited more than 2,000 found photos of childbirth, a musician who nursed her baby minutes before taking the stage, and so many others—"I was really struck by how many different ways there are to be a mother and how many different ways there are to be an artist," she says.

Ricketts learned that Toni Morrison sent her two sons to stay with their grandparents every summer so she could write. She brushed up on Didion and discovered that she'd brought her young daughter to film shoots and on reporting trips. "There are just many ways to maximize our resources, and resources are not limited to money and to time," Ricketts says. "If you are married or have a partner in parenting, that's a resource. If you work a lucrative day job, that's a resource. If you have a really flexible day job, that's a resource. If you have extended family nearby, that's a resource. If your kid is a really good sleeper, that's a resource."

In early July, Ricketts was in the thick of promoting *The Mother Artist* while tending to her two young sons and ill husband. She was also nine months pregnant with her third child.

On top of her full-time day job in higher education, she had been giving podcast interviews, leading public workshops, reading at a Brooklyn art gallery, and curating a list of "smart and artful books about motherhood" to publish online. A few months earlier, she'd held her book launch at a gallery in Old City. Wellspring: A Mother Artist Project turned the second floor into a children's make-space. The third floor housed an exhibition of mother artists' work. Ricketts's four-year-old son sat in the front row for her reading.

This all sounds like seamless mom-artist balancing, at least from the outside. But it turns out Ricketts is still feeling her way through—just like so many other mothers and artists and mother artists. As she writes at the end of her book: "I have not yet resolved many of the tensions I explore in these chapters. Except for one: whether an artist comes back to her art practice three weeks or thirty years after her child is born, her audience is better for her departure, and for her return."

Molly Petrilla C'06 is a frequent *Gazette* contributor.