Figuring maternity: Christine Dixie’s Parturient Prospects
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Abstract
The Interior, Birthing Tray and Parturition are three sub-sections of a project entitled Parturient Prospects that artist Christine Dixie began in 2005, when she was pregnant with her second child, and completed by the end of 2006. In Parturient Prospects, the author reveals, Dixie situates her experiences against Western discourses, especially images from early modern Europe. Focusing on the ways in which visual representations construct woman as ‘other’, Dixie invokes reference to not only representations of birth and maternity but also religious, medical and geographical images. While the gendered underpinnings of these discourses are not always immediately transparent when they are kept discrete from one another, they become evident when they are invoked simultaneously, and Dixie’s works reveal that they are in fact mutually reinforcing agents and indeed often use related tropes. Dixie destabilises their authority not only by challenging their discreteness, however, but also, and even more crucially, by introducing motifs that interfere with their meanings. These additions to, or substitutions for, the imagery in the discourses to which she refers are markers of both a female subjectivity and a postmodernist feminist voice that sees ‘otherness’ as a potential position of strength – a place from which to subvert and transgress gendered norms and understandings.

Introduction
Childbirth is bound up with culture. Labour may be a physiognomic process but, as various studies of the history of childbirth reveal, its performance will necessarily be regulated and managed in terms of religious beliefs and social protocols. In contemporary westernised contexts, social constructs about maternity also affect whether or not women become pregnant in the first place. As British writer Rosemary Betterton (1996, 108) points out: ‘For women, the decision to have or not to have a child, whether by choice, circumstance, or reason of infertility, is inevitably shaped by representations of what motherhood means in our culture.’

But while representations of birth and maternity serve as the mechanism by which a woman negotiates her identity as a possible mother, works by a number of contemporary artists working in feminist frameworks reveal that it is also in fact possible for the messages that underpin those discourses to be the topic of critical examination. Parturient Prospects, a series of images and objects by Grahamstown artist, Christine Dixie, is one such body of work. Begun in 2005, when Dixie was pregnant, Parturient Prospects was also worked on in the months following the birth of her daughter Rosalie in February 2006. The works that I discuss here – The Interior, Birthing Tray and Parturition – are three sub-sections of this project that Dixie had completed by the end of 2006.

In Parturient Prospects, I reveal, Dixie situates her experiences against Western discourses, especially images from early modern Europe. Focusing on the ways in which visual representations construct woman as ‘other’, she invokes reference to not only representations of birth and maternity but also religious, medical and geographical images. While the gendered underpinnings of these discourses are not always immediately transparent when they are kept discrete from one another, they become evident when they are invoked simultaneously, and Dixie’s works reveal that they are in fact mutually reinforcing agents and indeed often use related tropes. Dixie destabilises their authority not only by challenging their discreteness, however, but also, and even more crucially, by introducing motifs that interfere with their meanings. These additions to, or substitutions for, the imagery in the discourses to which she refers are, I would argue, markers of both a female subjectivity and a postmodernist feminist voice that sees ‘otherness’ as a potential position of strength – a place from which to subvert and transgress gendered norms and understandings.

Parturient Prospects and Feminist Art
Feminist concerns have featured in Dixie’s works since the early 1990s. In 1991, she exhibited a series of etchings entitled The Dark Woods which involved an ‘attempt to undermine various stereotypes of “good” and “evil”, such as the Madonna or Eve.’ In 1993, Dixie held an exhibition entitled The Gendered Gaze at the Irma Stern Gallery in

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Cape Town, a show in which, Hazel Friedman (1993) notes, she used ‘biblical narratives in which woman is portrayed as temptress and predator as her starting point’ but shifted the plots and subverted conventional gender roles, thus evoking a sense of ‘the insidious ways’ in which those narratives and understandings of female capacities ‘are socially and culturally constructed’. In Thresholds, a series of etchings from 1997 that explored the Oedipal complex as well as Sophocles’ account of the myth of Oedipus, Dixie extended her exploration of the cultural construction of gender roles. Included in a chapter of my study of South African women artists’ representations of self that is entitled ‘Enactments’ (Schmahmann 2004, 76–95), Thresholds can be examined in light of a broad interest amongst contemporary feminists in gender as a form of role-playing and womanliness as a masquerade. Parturient Prospects stems from Dixie’s prior feminist interests, as it does to a lesser extent from a long-standing concern with what David Bunn has identified as ‘the wounding history of landscape representation, and its role in the formation of white settler subjectivity’.

Dixie’s works on maternity, while motivated by her own experience of pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing, are also made in awareness of the ways in which this topic has been an area of interest for other artists operating in feminist frameworks. While it would be impractical to attempt an outline that would do justice to these varied explorations, a brief consideration of some feminist art initiatives can help to locate Parturient Prospects within this broader arena of investigation.

Often associated with the 1970s but not in fact unique to that decade, works underpinned by an essentialist approach to maternity have featured strongly in the women’s art movement. Judy Chicago’s Birth Project (1980–85), a series in needlework, might perhaps be considered as typical of art in this vein.4

Structuring a depiction of birth in terms of a metaphor of origins, the works comprising the Birth Project endeavour to convey the idea of an ostensibly archetypal female creative energy. This type of a-historical approach – which collapses distinctions between the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’, and instead defines femaleness as simply a matter of biology – is widely regarded as highly problematic in its disregard for the impact of race and class in shaping women’s different experiences and capacities for agency. Essentialism of this kind, it must be emphasised, does not inform Dixie’s works in any way whatsoever. Rather than conceptualising pregnancy and birth as stable signifiers of an intrinsic or fundamental womanliness, her works construct pregnancy and birth as processes that are defined in accordance with specific contextual cultural norms and practices.

More influential on Dixie’s thinking are works that stress the physicality of the expectant female body, such as the well-known representations of pregnant women by Alice Neel. In her Pregnant Woman (1971), for example, Neel revealed the effects of toxemia on the body of her daughter-in-law, Nancy, who was heavily pregnant with twins. Nancy’s distended belly conveys a sense of acute bodily discomfort, and, as Pamela Allara (1994, 21) notes, its ‘chartreuse-brown colour chord lends the pall of disease to her torso and its womblike surround’. A work such as Pregnant Woman lends itself to interpretation in light of anthropologist Mary Douglas’s arguments about the liminal. In Purity and Danger, her groundbreaking study first published in 1966, Douglas (2002, 150) argued that ‘all margins are dangerous’, but especially matter issuing from the orifices of the body, such as blood, milk, urine or faeces. Taboos on such matter, she suggested, are intrinsically linked to endeavours to maintain social boundaries and stable terms of categorisation. Julia Kristeva, in an adaptation of Douglas’s ideas, defined marginal matter as ‘abjection’. For Kristeva, the abject ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ and does not respect ‘borders, positions, rules’.

As such, it can become a device deployed strategically to defy cultural systems and norms. The potentially subversive capacity of the liminal or abject – manifest especially acutely in the pregnant, labouring and lactating body – is explored by Dixie in Parturient Prospects.

Mary Kelly’s installation, Post-Partum Document (1973–6), while very different in form and overall concept to Parturient Prospects, also provides a precedent for some of the ideas that Dixie explores. Focusing on shifts and changes in the relationship between Kelly and her son during the first six years of his life, Post-Partum Document examines how a child enters a society, picking up its value systems and norms and, more particularly, how the mother adapts and responds to changes in the child’s relation to her. Working in response
to Lacan’s ideas, Kelly explores the process by which her child learns to conform to social norms about gender difference. The 135 components of Post-Partum Document include such elements as nappy liners with faecal stains and feeding charts as well as castings of the child’s hands. While in many instances functioning as markers of transgression because of their abjectness, these items also provide traces and evidence of a relationship. The maturing of the child and his learning of social codes and norms – or to use Lacan’s term, his entrance into the Symbolic Order – must mean a loss for the mother. The records and emblems in Post-Partum Document are in a sense preserved fetishes: they are small items that the mother collects to commemorate her closeness to the child and which are intended to function as substitutes for that bond when it breaks down, as it inevitably must. While Dixie has no particular Lacanian focus, this idea also emerges in Parturition where, as I indicate, she includes objects that commemorate the pre-linguistic mother and child relationship.

Finally, one would want to take cognisance of works by South African women artists dealing with maternity and of the ways in which local concerns have sometimes informed these explorations. Especially notable in this regard are works that Penny Siopis began making in the early 1990s. Working from her own experience as the mother of a son but clearly also influenced by Kelly, Siopis investigated how ‘the loss entailed for the mother in giving her child a “voice” – his (male) subjectivity – entails sacrificing her own’ (Siopis 1999, 256).

Simultaneously, she began to explore how this loss, this sacrifice of subjectivity, might have had particular kinds of impact on those black ‘nannies’ that had long assumed the role of surrogate mothers to white children in South Africa. In her eight-metre wide The Baby and the Bathwater (1992–3), for example, Siopis juxtaposed images of slave women threatened with the loss of their babies with representations of self as well as images of her son Alexander. While commenting on histories of racial oppression in South Africa, the images of slave mothers in the work also related to Siopis’ personal recollections of the black women who looked after her as a child. This consideration of maternity in terms of South African histories is also to some extent manifest in Parturient Prospects where, in The Interior, Dixie alludes to the ways in which medical disourses on the reproductive body might be viewed in light of a politics of exploration that underpinned the establishment of a European colony at the Cape of Good Hope.

The Interior

Made from prints on rice paper which has been covered in latex, the elements constituting The Interior (1) are positioned in such a way that they accord with a map of Africa by G. Blaeu that was included in the Grooten Atlas (1648–1665) (2). Dixie’s choice of a map by Blaeu is significant. Maps such as the one Dixie quotes here speak of an imperative to harness new topographical knowledge for the successful establishment of the commercial interests of the Dutch East India Company. Signifying the end of the speculative geography that had been a feature of the sixteenth century, the seventeenth-century map ‘laid claims to its presence as a studiedly transparent image of an increasingly known world’ (Brotton 1997, 186). Dixie has, however, collapsed her reference to Blaeu with a second discourse – one that involves another kind of mapping. Presented as a substitute for the African continent, but adapted to accord with its contours, a medical diagram forms the central motif of The Interior. But this is no general map of the body, and instead one of an especially mysterious physiognomic terrain – female reproductive organs. The geographies of dark Africa and female reproductive anatomy have thus both, as it were, been charted and supposedly fixed through geographical and medical inquiry: as Dixie’s juxtaposition of these two discourses makes clear, to a masculine scientific imagination it seemed that the equally troublesome uncertainties signified by both these ‘others’ – foreign topography and woman – might be overcome by their being methodically diagrammed.

In The Interior, Dixie also reveals how an exploration of the dark mysteries of female anatomy becomes one in which scientific and libidinous imperatives are intricately fused. For her diagram of an open womb in The Interior, Dixie quoted a series of woodcuts that appeared in De Dissectione partium corporis humani, a manual of anatomy that a Renaissance medical doctor, Charles Estienne, published in 1545 – one of which is reproduced here (3). As Bette Talvacchia (1999, 161) reveals, Estienne’s diagrams reworked a series of engravings.
by Caraglio entitled *Loves of the Gods* that legitimised ‘erotic representation through the use of mythological references’. In adapting these images to function as medical diagrams, Estienne did not in fact obfuscate their original function but instead created a conjunction between the erotic and the scientific:

The libidinous positions of the women and their placement in luxurious bedroom interiors underscore the sumptuous elements of the visual experience and cancel the connection of these figures to cadavers. Estienne’s women do not give the impression of death; rather, they loll in sensuous abandon. The postures of Estienne’s female figures eroticize them and put them somewhere between life and death, analogous to the remote, mythological realm from which their prototypes are taken (Talvacchia 1999, 167).

This decidedly uncomfortable doubling of the libidinal and the scientific was extended to the realms of the religious. On the bottom level of a piece of furniture against which the dissected figure leans is a vessel – a motif that frequently served as a metaphor for woman. Probably bound up with a view of procreation in which women were conceptualised simply as receptacles for their husband’s form-creating
semen, it was also, as Talvacchia (1999, 171) notes, common in representations of the Annunciation. Through the inclusion of this vessel in a medical diagram, an imperative to expose the workings of female sexual organs acquires the authority of a theological inquiry. Dixie has taken care to sustain a reading of the central motif in The Interior as a map of Africa as well as a representation of an illustration of female anatomy. Hence she represents various animals within its boundaries—creatures, she indicates, that were introduced by cartographers when a terrain remained unknown and which do in fact feature in Blaeu’s map—as well as ‘medical names of parts of the body, cervix and uterus for example’. Equally, lines of latitude appear in Dixie’s work, as they do in the map that served as its source. But while continuing to signify the demarcation of distances, they invoke reference to a pregnant stomach while also reading as medical sutures across a female body.

Through these simultaneous references to cartography and illustrations of female anatomy, Dixie refers to the ways in which journeys of expedition and discovery were, repeatedly, conceptualised as acts of male penetration into a female interior – an analogy that is made explicit in the title for the work. But this association has still further resonance and meaning: in alluding to illustrations in which the disclosure of the mysteries of female reproductive anatomy catered to libidinous interests, *The Interior* demonstrates how uncharted terrain was itself eroticised by explorers. As Anne McClintock (1995, 22) notes:

For centuries, the uncertain continents – Africa, the Americas, Asia – were figured in European lore as libidinously erotised. Travellers’ tales abounded with visions of the monstrous sexuality of far-off lands, where, as legend had it, men sported gigantic penises and women consorted with apes, feminized men’s breasts flowed with milk and militarised women lopped theirs off. Renaissance travellers found an eager and lascivious audience for their spicy tales, so that, long before the era of high Victorian imperialism, Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination – a fantastical magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears.

References to the erotic are reinforced though blocks of images on the left and right borders of *The Interior* which include details of Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation and focus, variously, on details of the Virgin, the Angel Gabriel and the Child. Strangely dislocated from their original contexts, the gestures of Gabriel and the Madonna become evocative of a ritual of seduction and convey messages about touch and desire. Troublingly, medical instruments replace traditional iconographic elements such as olive branches and lilies, and the represented seduction, for all its stylised delicacy, thus becomes one in which Gabriel wields implements suggestive of violation and a brutal deflowering. Derived in fact from illustrations of implements used in eye surgery, these items extracted from medical discourse are, for Dixie, indicative of gazing as sexual possession.

Dixie’s parodies of Renaissance images of the Annunciation disturbingly conflate religion and science. And Dixie would indeed appear to be suggesting that both fields of inquiry attempt to negotiate the potential threat to male authority posed by a uniquely female capability – birth. If, as McClintock (1995, 28) notes, the ‘atrocius rituals of militarised masculinity’ enacted during journeys of discovery ‘sprang not only from the economic lust for spices, silver and gold, but also from the implacable rage of paranoia’, much the same level of insecurity must surely have underpinned endeavours to explain and manage women’s bodies and their reproductive capacities through the twin weapons of Bible and dissecting knife.

The details of the Annunciation that Dixie includes in *The Interior* replace images on the left and right of Blaeu’s map which show strange and exotic people encountered by Europeans during expeditions of discovery. While on one level pointing to the ways in which Europe has a tradition of constructing the pregnant woman as ‘other’, Dixie’s substitution of exotic people with Annunciation details may also allude to what McClintock describes as a fixation with origins underpinning the imperialist enterprise. Men’s ‘uncertain and fleeting contribution’ to the process of human reproduction, McClintock (1995, 31) suggests, could find compensation in imperialist acts of discovery: ‘By flamboyantly naming “new” lands, male imperialists mark them as their own, guaranteeing thereby, or so they believe, a privileged relation to origins – in the embarrassing absence of other guarantees’. Furthermore, she suggests, this process of naming ‘newly’ discovered lands is in fact analogous to an enactment of Christian baptism – a ceremony in which the child is named ‘after the father, not the mother’ and which thus demands that ‘the child must be born again and named, by men’ (McClintock 1995, 29). But the imperial act of discovery is, as McClintock notes, an imperfect surrogate birthing ritual because ‘the lands are already peopled, as the child is already born’. While ‘discovery’ might involve no more than simply seeing what already exists, the imperialist supposedly brings his finding into being through the act of reportage and thus attains the capacity to ‘invent a moment of pure (male) origin and mark it visibly with one of Europe’s fetishes: a flag, a name on a map, a stone, or later perhaps, a monument’ (McClintock 1995, 30).
At the top of Blaeu’s map are nine roundels depicting harbours, spaces at which the explorer might arrive before proceeding on a journey to an unmapped interior, and which thus mark the threshold between known and unknown worlds. Dixie substitutes these images of harbours with scenes derived from early modern representations of labour and delivery, thus pointing to a concept of birth as one in which the child undergoes passage between the mysterious and atavistic interior of the mother’s body and the ‘civilized’ world. They have, however, still further resonance and meaning. As Dixie has created more specific focus on these images in her Birthing Tray series, it is helpful to unpack their significance by analysing them in that context.

The Birthing Tray series

Eight of the nine images in the Birthing Tray series were based on the same woodcut prints as those included on the top border of The Interior. But the images were in this instance produced through digital photography. Each birth scene from The Interior has been represented as a birth tray, one that supports a bowl, jug or cup containing a foodstuff or beverage and is placed on a cloth surface (4, 5, 6 and 7).15

Studies by Jacqueline Musacchio (1997 and 1999) have suggested that Italian Renaissance birth trays did not merely serve the practical function of holding food and drink served to new mothers but were also in fact understood to have magical properties. Labour in the Renaissance period was by no means a safe matter: a vast number of women died in childbirth or produced stillborn babies. To negotiate this danger, a range of remedies or ‘magical’ objects were available to a woman and, Musacchio argues, birth trays numbered amongst these. When acquired prior to labour, they seem to have functioned as objects for the expectant mother to contemplate quietly and privately, as part of a spiritual meditation, and, in so doing, harness their magical potential. Often showing scenes of holy birth, they may have offered a portent of a sanctified and trouble-free labour for expectant mothers who devoted time to focusing on their imagery. But if Dixie represents scenes of the confinement chamber and thus alludes to subject matter that did indeed frequently feature in fifteenth-century Italian birth trays, the scenarios she represents are either problematical births to

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4 Christine Dixie, Birthing Tray – Wine (2006). Digital print of scanned woodcut and photograph, 54 x 83 cm. Photograph from the original scan supplied by artist.
which an expectant mother in the Renaissance period would never have been advised (or indeed allowed) to expose herself or scenes that, while based on idealised representations of the birth of the Virgin or John the Baptist, are complicated through her reworking of them.

Five of the Birthing Tray images represent caesarean section deliveries, and the three examined here, Birthing Tray – Wine (4), Birthing Tray – Eggs (5) and Birthing Tray – Wishbone (6), were all based on prints illustrating the birth of Julius Caesar included in an early modern manuscript of Roman history, Les Faits des Romains. Dixie’s choice of this subject matter was doubtless motivated to some extent by autobiographical factors: her son was delivered via caesarean section in 2003 and the procedure was to be used again to deliver her daughter in 2006. More crucially, however, this topic was especially amenable to a focus on the politics of gender underpinning birth practices.

Associations attached to caesarean birth have, historically, been positive in some instances. As Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990, 2–3) notes: ‘According to Pliny’s Natural History (7.9), birth by Caesarean was an auspicious omen for the child’s future. This opinion was shared by a father in 1601 who gave the surname “Fortunatus” to his son born by Caesarean.’ Yet caesareans could, in contrast, be invested with diabolical meanings. Presumably because it could be considered the counterpoint of the positively supernatural circumstances of Christ’s birth (that is, conception by a virgin who was also spared labour pains), birth by caesarean was used in fifteenth-century prints illustrating the birth of the Antichrist. Caesarean section was also a process that became the locus for misogynistic ideas. In the early modern period, caesareans were normally undertaken only when the mother had died in childbirth. Aimed at saving the child, if only until the youngster could be baptised, caesarean section was in fact considered exceptional precisely because of the mother’s marginalisation. References to the child of a caesarean section as ‘not of woman born’, as in the case of the character Macduff in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, implied not only a birth that was miraculous but also one that had transpired without any maternal contribution. Alternatively, visualisations of the birth of the Antichrist by caesarean were probably linked to a belief that the evil behaviour of the mother had given rise to diabolical forces and that her death in labour was in fact the immediate outcome of her perverse conduct.
Such constructions would have stemmed from medieval texts, most notably the Scivias by Hildegard of Bingen which described an Antichrist ‘conceived in passionate fornication’ by a mother living ‘a life of vice and dissolution’ (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 133).

Furthermore, caesareans became the site for a gendered struggle within the field of medicine. Blumenfeld-Kosinski reveals that, in fifteenth-century Europe, there were endeavours to force the female midwife to submit to the authority of the male surgeon. Men had participated in the management of childbirth in the antique and Islamic worlds, and males in the Latin West sought to regain some of these functions by wresting them ‘from women who for centuries had been in control of obstetrics and gynecology and thus of their own bodies’ (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 96). Surgeons, intent on advancing their status to a level that might parallel university-trained physicians, sought to distinguish themselves from barbers by undertaking only procedures that might point to their skill and expertise, caesareans amongst them. As Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990), reveals, efforts to limit women’s role in obstetrics were manifest through ordinances and regulations which demanded that midwives be licensed and, later, that they call in surgeons whenever a caesarean be deemed necessary rather than performing this procedure themselves. Since the medieval midwife had to decide whether a caesarean might be required, she had the concomitant responsibility for the life and death of both a mother and a child as well as the spiritual salvation of the latter (through the performance of an emergency baptism). Hence fifteenth-century regulations that curtailed her involvement in caesarean were bound up with an imperative to delimit her role in not simply medicine but also religion. It is in fact no coincidence that the introduction of regulations which called into question the competency of midwives was simultaneous with a targeting of female medical practitioners in witch hunts: if ill fortune could be explained as the midwife’s misdirection of her special knowledge of procreation to a diabolical purpose, it made sense to patriarchal officialdom to limit her agency in practices with both medical and theological implications.

This move to marginalise midwives is made evident in Dixie’s prints. Birthing Tray – Wine (4), based on a fourteenth-century print, shows a midwife (indicated by her distinctive headdress) removing a child from the belly of the mother while a female attendant, at the foot of the bed, prepares a bath for the infant.

6 Christine Dixie, Birthing Tray – Wishbone (2006). Digital print of scanned woodcut and photograph, 54 x 83 cm. Photograph from the original scan supplied by artist.
The print which Dixie used as a source along with other illustrations of caesarean birth from the fourteenth century show midwives ‘who are obviously competent, as they carry out a well-orchestrated procedure that also involves the helpers in useful ways’ (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 68). *Birthing Tray – Eggs* (5), in contrast, is based on a fifteenth-century print that Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990, 79–81) describes as follows:

The male surgeon, holding a slightly curved surgical razor in his right hand, has just made a long median incision along the *linea alba*. A haglike midwife pulls the newborn out of the gaping wound.... A female onlooker on the left seems to be pronouncing a prayer.... Nothing is stylised here: the child is not pulled out ceremoniously through the mother’s nightgown .... here we see the incision, the blood, and the awkward position of the half-naked woman (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 79–81).

Dixie, while overlaying the stomach and child with the bowl of eggs, has actually increased the violence of the original. The surgeon is a sinister presence, almost a dark shadow wielding the phallic knife, while the midwife – now relegated to the role of assistant – has transmuted from a hag into the skeletal figure of Death. *Birthing Tray – Wishbone*, also based on a fifteenth-century print, shows the male surgeon extracting the baby from the mother’s side, while a female assistant, on the right, holds out a cloth to receive the child. But while Dixie has included the outline of a woman who kneels in prayer at the far side of the bed, the midwife – a marginal figure partly obscured by the doctor in the fifteenth-century source – is excluded entirely. *In Birthing Tray – Wishbone*, then, Dixie offers a stark juxtaposition of the active male medical practitioner and the female assistant who simply submits to his authority, thus exposing – even more than in the print that served as her source – a process of divesting women of participation in obstetrics and gynaecology that had begun to be implemented in the fifteenth century.

In the *Birthing Tray* series, as in *The Interior*, an interest in the ways in which gendered norms play out in birth processes is explored through references to discourses associated with expeditions and discovery. Dixie indicates that she includes in her representations ‘little objects or scenarios that refer to navigation or exploring the world’, places that ‘women could not have gone and hadn’t had access to’. These are complemented by a representation of...
edibles that, on one level may perhaps invoke those ‘exotic foodstuffs’ that the male explorer brought home\textsuperscript{22} but which also, and much more crucially, comment on the implications of the birth process that has been represented in each print. A foreign land with exotic creatures is demarcated on the left of Birthing Tray – Eggs, while navigation and journeys of exploration are also invoked through the representation of a sextant on the right-hand side of the tray. The phallic projection of the sextant is in tension with the bowl of eggs, suggestive of ova, and it in fact reiterates the shape of the raised knife of the surgeon. Alluding to a discourse in which the journey of expedition was conceptualised as a male penetration into a female interior, the motifs included in the work also reveal how acts of imperialist discovery – like caesarean births – were implicated in gendered violence. In Birthing Tray – Wishbone, a wild terrain, seen on the right of the tray, becomes a counterpoint to the interior scene. The smart robes of the surgeon may speak of his social authority and status, but his dark outline also in fact parallels that of the wild elephant (and the child, whom he dislodges from the womb, becomes in effect his ‘trunk’). The wishbone that is placed over this figure is pincer-like, and thus suggestive of his capacity for violence, while it simultaneously alludes to bodily remains – perhaps the splayed legs of the now deceased mother. In Birthing Tray – Wine, the drink – photographed from above so that it constitutes a shape that is at once sun-like and ova-like – is also suggestive of blood, and thus perhaps indicates how a celebration of the birth of the (male) child was in fact contingent on the sacrifice of his mother. Although the midwife and her female assistant manage the caesarean birth, this work – like the other two – includes allusions to the enterprises of men. The iguana that Dixie has introduced into the scene is suggestive of male journeys to foreign and exotic lands. Liminal in the sense that it can move through land and water, it alludes simultaneously to the traveller on the threshold of unknown geographies and the male surgeon who, with a subsequent loss of agency by the midwives who are represented here, could embark on a parallel journey of discovery – a scientific exploration of the dark recesses of female reproductive organs.

The contrast between a domesticated interior and untamed exterior, evident in the three Birthing Tray images I have discussed, is not exclusive to Parturient Prospects but in fact appears elsewhere in Dixie’s art. When in a 2004 publication I commented on this device in Dixie’s Thresholds (1997) series, I invoked Dorothy van Ghent’s remark about the window motif in Emily Bronte’s 1847 novel Wuthering Heights. In a discussion of the appearance of Cathy Earnshaw at the window in Mr Lockwood’s dream, Von Ghent (1970, 178) noted how the window is the medium ‘separating the “inside” from the “outside”; the human from the alien and terrible “other”’. This comment could well be applied to Birthing Tray – Eggs and Birthing Tray – Wishbone where interior and exterior spaces are demarcated and counterpoised, as indeed it might to Birthing Tray – Wine where an iguana – a creature associated with uncharted terrain – invades the birthing chamber. Yet, as I noted, ‘outside’ might also in fact be read as a space of constructive transgression: … if the ‘outside’ represents the space of otherness, it is also the domain of impulses and drives that are pre-linguistic – the space of ‘the semiotic’. In Kristeva’s terms. If, in Kristeva’s view, a relinquishment of the semiotic is essential for the pre-oedipal child to become a unified, gendered subject, she also argues that this renunciation is never actually entirely finalised. In radical creative writing, disturbances and subversions are manifest through the semiotic defying the order and containment signified by the Symbolic. Examined in these terms, the ‘outside’ that spills into the ‘inside’ is not simply a sign for negative and fearful forces, but is also in fact an indicator of refusal and constructive transgression (Schmahmann 2004, 92).

This alternative reading of the dynamic between interior and exterior, I would suggest, has particular pertinence to Birthing Tray – Water (7). While Bernardino Pintoricchio’s fresco of The Birth of John the Baptist (c. 1506) in the Baptistry of the Siena Cathedral\textsuperscript{23} provided the source for the reclining mother, the midwife and the woman bathing the newborn child (here framed by a jug of water in the manner of a roundel), the work also includes a figure described by Dixie as a ‘strange kind of wild woman’ that she based on an image from a medieval bestiary.\textsuperscript{24} The ceremony of Christian baptism, invoked in Birthing Tray – Water through a representation of John the Baptist’s birth as well as the jug of water, normally ended ‘a period of liminality (the ambiguous state of the unbaptized baby)’, thus enabling the child
as the three reproduced here (8, 9 and 11) indicate, each is a ‘reliquary’ that includes on its lower level a woodcut print on silicone. Four of these five prints are taken from details of the Annunciation that were included in *The Interior*, but each has been incised with additional imagery. The upper compartment of each ‘reliquary’ includes found objects that are either medical instruments or objects related to birth and childrearing. Dixie explains that she sought to effect ‘a dialogue between the medical and the religious because these are the two areas in which birth is explored in discourses’. Hence the objects placed on the upper level of the containers, while the product of medical and lay practices rather than religious ritual, become ‘almost sanctified’ through their placement.

Electrical illumination of each ‘reliquary’ performs a similar function: while red light conveys a sense of the mystical glow of candlelight in sacred shrines, white light is suggestive of a surgical theatre. Wording carved on the base of each object, likewise, offers a conflation of the religious and the medical. As Dixie notes, these texts are based on words ‘that the angel speaks to Mary announcing she is pregnant’ but also include medical terms and numbers that she derived from scans of Rosalie during her pregnancy.

This conjunction of the medical and the religious is especially pronounced in *Parturition – Mucosa* (8) where, on the top register of the ‘reliquary’, medical instruments are posed in the formation of a Holy Trinity. An image of the Child shown glowing from within the womb of the Virgin Mary appears on the lower register of the ‘reliquary’. Alluding to a contemporary medical scan, it invokes simultaneous reference to ‘transparent’ pregnant women in religious images in the fourteenth century such as illustrations of the Visitation ‘which show the holy infants in chest cavities of both Saint Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary’ (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 55). An image of a caesarean operation that Dixie derived from a medical textbook published in 1939 appears on the bottom left. Sewn onto the silicone in such a way that its stitched edges invoke reference to medical sutures, the pinned-back integument of the body represented in this image actually rhymes with the folds in the Virgin’s gown. Both religion and medicine, the work suggests, depend on a construction of woman as a mysterious ‘other’ who, lacking subjectivity, simply presents the male doctor/theologian with...
the raw material for speculative inquiry. Parturition, it should be noted, while intricately related to The Interior and the Birthing Tray series in terms of its focus on medical and religious discourses, also differs from them in one important respect. Here, unlike the other two, Dixie includes components that reveal explicitly that the making of Parturient Prospects coincided with her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter Rosalie. In Parturition – Umbilicus (9), Dixie has placed traces of this birth in the upper compartment of the ‘reliquary’ – Rosalie’s umbilicus, the first clippings of Rosalie’s fingernails, hair shaved from her pubis before she underwent a caesarean section as well as the wristbands that she and Rosalie wore in hospital (10). These elements might perhaps be understood as fetishes. As with the various components in Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document, they commemorate a relationship between Dixie and her baby and have the potential to act as substitutes when the bond between mother and child is challenged through the child’s learning of social codes and language. But, apart from this, the umbilicus, nail clippings and pubic hairs are what Douglas would identify as marginal substances that have traversed the boundaries of the body and, as such, are ‘dangerous’. Taboos against such marginal matter are, she argues, bound up with their potential threat to social structures to which the body is intricately linked: ‘The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from other margins. There is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual’s attitude to his own bodily and emotional experience, any more than for his cultural and social experience’ (Douglas 2002, 150). Historical practices surrounding birth, such as a norm in Tudor and Stuart England for labour to take place in dark and insulated rooms (see Cressy 1999, 53–54), may speak of an impetus to contain and separate an activity that must, by definition, result in ‘dangerous’ bodily spillages. For a new mother, no less than the society in which she operates, bodily discharges – lactating breasts and vaginal emissions, for example – must surely induce anxiety about a loss of bodily integrity. Dixie’s act of revealing marginal matter
associated with the birth of her child is, in light of this, a profound act of transgression.

It is also revealing to consider these traces of birth in relation to the print on silicone on the lower register of the ‘reliquary’ – a juxtaposition that takes on a certain irony. Dixie has based this image on a detail of the figure of Gabriel in Fra Filippo Lippi’s panel painting of the *Annunciation* (c. 1442) in San Lorenzo, Florence, an image that has interesting implications in light of her adaptation of it. Michael Baxandall proposes that a fifteenth-century interpretation of a religious image tended to involve ‘a marriage between the painting and beholder’s previous visualizing activity on the same matter’ (Baxandall 1972, 45) and that both might in some instances be framed in terms of the accounts of biblical events articulated in popular sermons. The preacher Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce’s sermon on the *Annunciation*, Baxandall suggests, may be informative in this regard.

In his reading of Luke (I, 26–38), Fra Roberto identified five states or emotional conditions that Mary underwent during her encounter with Gabriel – Disquiet, Reflection, Inquiry, Submission and Merit. Baxandall suggests that the first of these, Disquiet (*Conturbatio*), is represented in Lippi’s *San Lorenzo Annunciation*. Fra Roberto described this stage of the *Annunciation* narrative as follows:

... as St. Luke writes, when the Virgin heard the Angel’s salutation – ‘Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women’ – she was troubled. This disquiet, as Nicholas of Lyra writes, came not from incredulity but from wonder, since she was used to seeing angels and marvelled not at the fact of the Angel’s apparition as much as at the lofty and grand salutation, in which the Angel made plain for her such great and marvellous things, and at which she in her humility was astonished and amazed (quoted in Baxandall 1972, 51).

The Virgin is in fact absent from *Parturition – Umbilicus*, however, and we as viewers are instead presented with only a detail of the figure of Gabriel whose ‘lofty and grand salutation’ involves the presentation of, not the lily that Lippi had represented, but a medical instrument used in eye surgery. The angel’s portent of ‘such great and marvellous things’ is, in Dixie’s reworking of the Lippi painting, curiously displaced from its Christian narrative. If in *The Interior* it functioned as a component of a strange rite of seduction, here it reads rather as a comment on the artist’s own impending experience of birth – attested to through the ‘relics’ displayed on the upper register of the ‘reliquary’. And for Dixie herself, the forecast – here delivered via Gabriel’s wielding of a medical instrument associated with optics – is in fact of a caesarean section that will involve submitting her body to the invasive gaze of a surgical team.

In *Parturition – Lacteal* (11), Dixie focuses on a history of negotiating the liminality of the maternal body. On the bottom register of the ‘reliquary’ is a detail of a *Madonna del Latte* or nursing Madonna while above it, on the top register of the object, is an actual breast pump with milk. Breast milk and tears are – for Julia Kristeva – the *leitmotifs* of the *Mater dolorosa* whose appeal resides in her capacity to provoke reminiscences of semiotic plenitude (Kristeva 1985, 109). While a desire to return to a

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11 Christine Dixie, *Parturition – Lacteal. Reliquary* with woodcut on silicone, thread, found objects and electrical light, 90 x 47 cm. Photograph by Monique Pelser.
the breast pump rhyme with one another, nursing Madonna exposes a politics of both ironical juxtaposition of the breast pump and popularity in the fourteenth century. Dixie's social realities than it was when it achieved necessarily even more at odds with current influence a concept of the maternal ideal, is the in Miles 1985, 199). The representation of having sucked her polluted blood' (quoted receive the impress of those customs because he will has evil customs or is of base condition, he will be prone to spillage. The somewhat stylised breast of the Virgin in Dixie's image, attached to the body in the manner of a prosthesis, reads in fact as a mechanical device - much like the breast pump above it. Indeed, it points to a tendency in fourteenth-century Madonna del Latte images to eschew naturalism and to insist that the breast be understood as simply a symbol for the Virgin's corporeality.

If the Madonna del Latte image and the breast pump rhyme with one another, their juxtaposition also in fact points to the discrepancy between an idealised concept and the actual process of breastfeeding. Patrician mothers in fourteenth-century Italy, it seems, experienced this inconsistency especially acutely. While custom and social norms made it essential for them to farm out their offspring to wet nurses, they were also urged to be mindful of the possibility that the milk received by their children might corrupt rather than sustain them. According to Miles, it was believed that a wet nurse of low moral calibre could well pass on this characteristic to the child placed in her care. Bernardino of Sienna, in a warning about his potential danger, observed: ‘...the child acquires certain of the customs of the one who suckles him. If the one who cares for him has evil customs or is of base condition, he will receive the impress of those customs because of having sucked her polluted blood’ (quoted in Miles 1985, 199). The representation of the Madonna del Latte, while continuing to influence a concept of the maternal ideal, is necessarily even more at odds with current social realities than it was when it achieved popularity in the fourteenth century. Dixie's ironical juxtaposition of the breast pump and nursing Madonna exposes a politics of both class and race that surrounds the practice of breastfeeding in contemporary South Africa. The breast pump placed on the top register of the 'reliquary' is in fact a surrogate for the absent (white) professional mother. But if milk from the mother – here presented in the manner of a holy relic – provides the nutrition for the child, it is in fact the (black) working-class nanny who actually feeds her. It is thus a ritual of compensatory practices, ones that enable the child to be 'miraculously' breast-fed by the mother without in fact being suckled, that define an experience of motherhood for both Dixie, the biological mother, and the carer she employs to take on a maternal role.

Conclusion

In the first volume of his History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault (1978, 102) suggests that power is not a mechanism that resides within a unitary state control, but is instead ‘a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced’. The existence of power relationships ‘depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance’ which ‘play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations’ (Foucault 1978, 95). For Foucault, dominance and resistance are both structured in single discourses.

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault 1978, 101).

Understood in these terms, discourses are sites of struggle and instability – fields in which potential resistance exists as an intrinsic rather than extrinsic force.

Dixie's works, I would argue, expose the points of resistance, fragility and uncertainty within discourses about maternity. In revealing the devices and tropes that have been used to counter or manage the threat of female power and subjectivity, in suggesting that they are ultimately provisional rather than essential and stable signifiers, her works invite viewers to question the ideologies underpinning not only historical but also contemporary representations.
of birth. Indeed her works suggest that, while current constructs about maternity may in many instances stem from centuries-old patterns of thought, they are in fact as unstable in their definition of suitable female roles and identities as their precursors, and are thus amenable to being shifted.

Notes

1 See, for example, Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990), Gélis (1991), Cressy (1999) and Musacchio (1997 and 1999).

2 Christine Dixie (born in 1966) graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1988. She obtained an Advanced Diploma in Fine Arts from the University in Cape Town in 1990 and a Master in Fine Arts, also from the University of Cape Town, in 1993. She has been a lecturer in the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University since 2002.

3 Unpublished statement by Christine Dixie about her works exhibited under the title Bridge of Judgement at the Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery in Johannesburg, 1991.

4 David Bunn, Speech at the opening of Christine Dixie’s exhibition, Hide, at the Millennium Gallery in Johannesburg, 2002.

5 While Parturient Prospects was begun only during her second pregnancy, it is also the first major body of works she has made since the birth of her first child, Daniel, in 2003.

6 See Chicago (1985) for reproductions of the works constituting this project. See also Judy Chicago’s website, www.judychicago.com (accessed December 2006).

7 Alice Neel, Pregnant Woman (1971), oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches, Estate of Alice Neel. For a reproduction of the painting, see www.uam.ucsb.edu/Pages/neel.html (accessed December 2006).

8 My discussion of Kelly’s Post-Partum Document is indebted to Iversen, Crimp and Bhabha (1997), who also include high-quality reproductions of the work.

9 Terry Kurgan curated an exhibition of South African art entitled Bringing up Baby: Artists survey the Reproductive Body that is accompanied by a catalogue (Kurgan 1998). Shown at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and The Castle in Cape Town in 1998, the exhibition included works by not only female artists such as Jane Alexander, Veronique Malherbe and Penny Siopis, but also male artists such as Clive van den Berg and Mandla Mabila. Christine Dixie had not, however, worked with the theme of maternity at that stage.

10 Penny Siopis, The Baby and the Bathwater (1992), mixed media on board 250 x 800 cm, artist’s collection. See Smith (2005: 54–55) for a reproduction of the work.

11 Willem Jonszoon Blaeu, Lister (1970: 40–41) notes, founded a map-making firm in 1596, and after his death in 1638, his sons Johann and Cornelis completed some of his publications. Lister observes that he used variations on the name ‘W.J. Blaeu’ until 1617 and, thereafter ‘signed his name either as G. Blaeu or with his Christian name expanded, Guilelmus Blaeu. Sometimes from 1621, his surname is spelled Blaeuw.’

12 Fredrika Jacobs (1994: 80) notes that Aristotle’s notion of procreation as one in which ‘the female always provides the material, the male that which fashions it’ was current in the sixteenth century. Hence according to the Venetian physician, Giovanni Marinello, a ‘woman’s womb simply “holds the heat and the spirit”, preventing it from evaporating’.

13 Interview of Christine Dixie by the author conducted on 12 December 2006 in Grahamstown.

14 Informal conversation with Christine Dixie, 22 December 2006.

15 Birthing Tray – Mussels, which I do not discuss here, is the only image without a precedent in The Interior. Unlike the other works in the series, the tray in Birthing Tray – Mussels is blank and the focus is exclusively on the collection of foetal-like mussels placed on it.

16 It is in fact the circumstance surrounding Caesar’s birth, albeit founded on myth and tradition rather than proven fact, which has given rise to the term ‘caesarean’.

17 See Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990) where these are examined in Chapter Four.


19 Caesar as emperor (left), the birth of Julius Caesar (upper right) and Caesar’s assassination (lower right), Les Faits des Romains, Paris, Arsenal, MS 5186, fol. Ir. See Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990: 76).

20 The birth of Julius Caesar (left), a battle scene (background), Caesar contemplating the status of Alexander the Great (upper right), a follower of Catalina being killed in the Tullianum (lower right), Les Faits des Romains, Paris, B.N. f. fr. 64, fol. 234r. See Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990: 82).

21 Interview of Christine Dixie by the author conducted on 12 December 2006 in Grahamstown.

22 Interview of Christine Dixie, 12 December 2006.

23 See Musacchio (1999: 50) for a reproduction of the detail Dixie used as a source.

24 Interview of Christine Dixie, 12 December 2006.
Figuring maternity: Christine Dixie’s Parturient Prospects

25 Juliet Flower Maccannell (1995: 185–6) notes that this French term ‘for extreme pleasure has no adequate equivalent in English’. Kristeva, she notes, ‘only intimates or alludes to a feminine jouissance, specified as “maternal”. She assigns jouissance to that portion of woman that exceeds the bounds of oedipal laws, especially the law of language: it remains within her range of vision and experience, but can never be articulated within Oedipus, where the woman is imprisoned.’

26 One of the readers of this article made an interesting suggestion. The goddess Artemis is associated with childbirth. This in turn has implications for the wild woman represented by Dixie who may perhaps be read as ‘a reference to Artemis (the goddess of hunting and wild animals) who exceeds patriarchal boundaries’.

28 Interview of Christine Dixie, 12 December 2006.

29 Interview of Christine Dixie, 12 December 2006.

30 Interview of Christine Dixie, 12 December 2006.

31 The work is reproduced in Baxandall (1972: 50). See also artyzm.com/e_obraz.php?id=981 (accessed December 2006).

References


