

REAL
ART WAYS

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Go" competition in 2007, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Go" was juried by Derrick Adams (Artist, Founding Director and Curator at Rush Arts Gallery and Resource Center, New York); Olu Oguiibe (Visual Artist, Writer, Scholar, and Curator, Connecticut); Jane Philbrick (Digital Artist, Connecticut).

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Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary art organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

Ellen Shattuck



On the cover: Baby Björn Mothers, contact paper, 62" x 32", 2008.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

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Dead Meat, relief cut, 12" x 12", 2007.

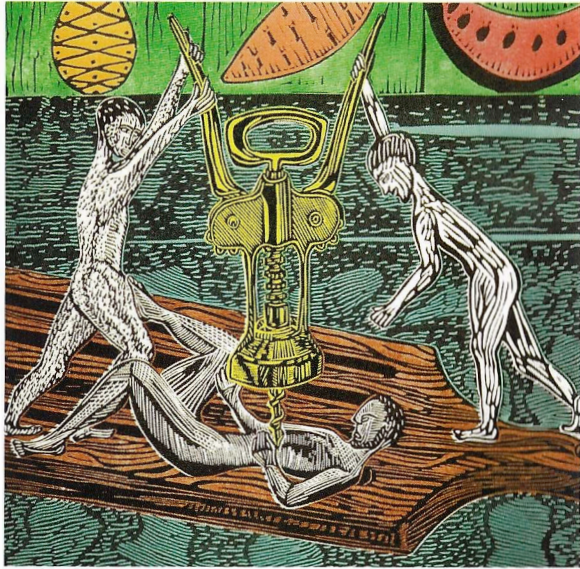
Ellen Shattuck

By Nina Levy

Ellen Shattuck uses the traditional medium of printmaking to take an untraditional look at the difficulty of being a mother. In images that are both humorous and disturbing, she explores the frustration and latent hostility that can be the flipside of the selfless care of small needy people.

Despite at least two generations of feminist insight, we still largely consider homemaking and childrearing to be less important than other kinds of work. And yet, we also continue to burden mothers with unrealistic expectations of perfection and fulfillment. An artist and the full-time mother of two young children, Shattuck wryly observes the gap between expectation and reality when it comes to maternal labor.

Ellen Shattuck grew up in Rutland, Vermont. She graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a BA in Art and Women's Studies and received an MFA from York University in Toronto. Her work has been exhibited in Ontario, Vermont, Massachusetts, Arkansas, Wisconsin, and New York. She lives with her husband and two boys in Boston, Massachusetts.



Screwed, relief cut, 10" x 10", 2007.

Food is of course a primary concern of motherhood. A mother is supposed to protect and grow the vulnerable bodies of her children by making food in her body or in her kitchen. Shattuck's ten linoleum block prints imagine the dark side of food preparation. They comically magnify the violence inherent in kitchen utensils, exploring actions and emotions antithetical to ideal motherhood. At first glance, the images are a sort of perverse wish fulfillment: tiny people take over the work in the kitchen. It becomes immediately clear, however, that the wishes being fulfilled are more sadistic than culinary.

In these ten prints, the small people are adults who are overwhelmed, maimed and processed by the kitchen implements. Both aggressors and victims, they malevolently grill, zest, corkscrew, mash and puree one another and themselves. Their expressions are peevish, but they seem diligent and unresisting.

The prints bulge with texture, intricate decorative patterns and saturated color. The workers' bodies themselves are modeled by active patterning. Shattuck fills the square frames with detailed and repeated marks to suggest both a charged



Blending In, relief cut, 12" x 11", 2007.

emotional atmosphere and repetitive labor. The titles, *Blending In*, *Restraint*, *Measured Tones*, *Screwed*, and the like, both name the literal culinary process and suggest a humorously extreme psychological reading.

As funny and outlandish as these images are, the emotion that they convey is immediately recognizable. Perhaps their resonance has something to do with Shattuck's work process. An artist who is the full-time parent of small children must make a virtue out of her limitations or stop making art entirely. Shattuck works with the physical materials and conceptual content immediately at hand. While her young children napped, Shattuck executed this series of prints at her kitchen table, gouging repeatedly into the linoleum with sharp tools. The narratives of the prints take place on such a kitchen table, complete with cutting implements, a childless environment liberated from nurturing behavior.

The full wall installation of *Yellow Wallpaper* displays much calmer subject matter. While evoking 18th-century toile textiles, however, it offers another skewed perspective within a visually appealing format. On a basic formal level, a whole wall covered in a detailed, repeated pattern is appropriate to depict the obsessive routines of life with small children.

At first glance, *Yellow Wallpaper* appears soothingly decorative. Historically, toiles are best known for their idyllic country and garden scenes. In this case, a closer look reveals an unsettling conflation of gardening and mothering. In one vignette, a woman wearing a breast-mounted watering can tends to topiary children. Behind her are a lovely gazebo and latticed fence topped by 18th-century-style portrait silhouettes of couples. In front of another gazebo, a dark naked adult figure lurks behind a laundry line, watching two unaware children, while grasses sprout out of a family's worth of shirt collars on the ground. In the ornamental borders, the stuff of domestic life—a spilled grocery bag, dirty dishes, and various kitchen tools—lies out-of-doors in the shrubbery, pleasingly abandoned.

Everywhere within the wallpaper's imagery, maternal and domestic care is ambivalent and odd. A large knife featured in one decorative arrangement points in the direction of two small children left dangling unsupervised sitting in a swing. Elsewhere, an adult figure climbs up an enormous grater that leans precariously against a ladder. Midway up this ladder perches a woman, expressing breast milk into a huge funnel. These two endangered figures are picturesquely surrounded by leaves, blossoms and bunches of grapes. *Yellow Wallpaper* captures what Shattuck calls the "never-ending pattern of childcare," and through its juxtapositions and shifts of scale it alerts us to the problematic and tenuous nature of that pattern.

In *BabyBjorn Mothers*, Shattuck uses a silhouette, again referencing an 18th century decorative art form. She made this piece from a material close at hand in the kitchen: the liner paper in the drawers. Shattuck comments that the paper comes in a "fake blonde wood, which is curiously close to flesh tone, and when anthropomorphized, further propagates my fear that I am becoming my kitchen."

Like the wallpaper installation, *BabyBjorn Mothers* brings the strangeness of everyday life to the surface. The life-size silhouettes outline two women wearing babies strapped to their chests. The women are unexpressive and contained, but the infants kick and flail at one another. While current trends in parenting make the baby-as-adult-body-accessory a con-

temporary commonplace, Shattuck's distillation shows us the peculiarity of the arrangement. She describes them as "eight-legged monsters." As the two mothers stoically face one another, they also allude to another dark aspect of being Mom: the constant comparison of one's baby to others'. As Shattuck describes, while making *BabyBjorn Mothers*, she thought of the all-too-common new mom conversation. It begins with, "how old is your baby?" and sometimes progresses to more ridiculous questions like "does your baby speak Spanish?" or "does she eat organic kale?"

In the best of circumstances, it is difficult to be a full-time mother of small children. It is all the harder to be Mom and to find the time and space, mental or physical, to make insightful art. Although she may be concerned about being defined only by her cooking and housework, Ellen Shattuck has turned her home and kitchen literally and metaphorically into her studio. She has transformed her response to daily life into evocative visual metaphors for the struggle to manage emotions and routine. And, these images of struggle are broadly resonant, even for those who do not have children.

Yellow Wallpaper, vinyl, dimensions variable, 2008 (detail).



Nina Levy is a Brooklyn artist and mother of two sons who is very aware of how difficult it is to make art with small people in the studio. She has exhibited with the National Portrait Gallery in D.C., the Aldrich, Brooklyn, DeCordova, and San Diego Museums of Contemporary Art, and is represented in Brooklyn by Metaphor Contemporary Art.