AIMS For a better birth...

Birth Undisturbed

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Collection by Natalie Lennard

S&P Gallery, London

Review by Salli Ward, AIMS Journal co-editor



'Royal Blood'. Picture by kind permission of the artist, Natalie Lennard

Birth Undisturbed is an award-winning narrative series by British photographer Natalie Lennard. Travelling through the world and history to depict birth from ancient to modern and squalid to famous, the collection shows women real and imagined in different contexts and different times.

In the guidebook that viewers are handed in the small gallery, the artist says that the collection, "is my

labour of love for five years; it is my ode to the simple glory of the wild birthing woman". The series features, for example, Mary's birth of Christ, Calamity Jane giving birth in the Wild West and birth in the confines of a narrowboat (something that resonated with me as a boat-dweller, though my children were all born in a conventional house). In the notes, Natalie Lennard mentions Michel Odent, Grantly Dick-Read and Ina May Gaskin, and it feels like she comes from a similar place, on the side of birthing women.

I came across the exhibition because I know the model posing as Prince Phillip in Lennard's depiction of the birth of Prince Edward in 1964. I asked my young friend, not yet a father himself, what it was like: he was treated like a king, he said, but the actual pictures produced are 'gruesome' and 'graphic' (although he was also interested and proud); I imagine his view is fairly common amongst younger people who have not experienced or witnessed birth. To me, the pictures are beautiful. As well as what they show, they are exquisitely set up and, fascinatingly, accompanied by short films that show a little of the process. The guide says that, "Natalie Lennard has spoken at art and midwifery conventions where her images bridge the gap between art and birth" – a gap that needed bridging when you consider more common ideas about birth portrayed in art. I hope very much that these works are part of a movement towards normalising and celebrating birth and that my young friend helps spread the word.

The exhibition has closed now but will open elsewhere and a lot can be seen (and bought!)here[1]. You can also find information on the artist's own site, including her backstory about the birth of her first child, Evan, who she triumphantly carried to term knowing he had a fatal condition incompatible with life outside the womb: .[2]

Author Bio: Salli has helped raise 8 children - all born at home, though only 3 from her own womb - and is now an overly proud Nana. She is passionate about birth rights and rites, and about punctuation including the Oxford comma. Until recently these interests were useful to her as co-editor of the AIMS Journal, but she is now employed as fundraiser for the British Deaf Association and freelance as a copywriter.

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[1] Natalie Lennard collection. https://spgallery.co.uk/collections/natalie-lennard

[2] Birth Undisturbed. www.birthundisturbed.com/the-series