AIMS For a better birth...

Why Birth Art?

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By Sophie Jenna

I love to paint and create, and have since childhood. When I was pregnant, I felt like growing a baby was the ultimate act of creativity! Like many mothers, I set to work educating myself about physiological birth and doing everything I could to prepare myself. I listened to audiobooks and read through multiple books on the stages of birth and how best to support oneself without drugs or medical interventions. I learned about how I could use my voice to say no, I could assess my own risk in any given situation. I realised that I didn't need to "know" anything to give birth, my body would just do it, but I think due to the culture of fear we live in, I wanted to reassure myself with understanding.

One of the best things I did for myself during the pregnancy was to join a weekly "village prenatal" circle with deregistered midwife Joy Horner and doula Jady Mountjoy (from whom I received wonderful doula support). Not only was I gifted a wealth of information through the educational aspect of the group, which left me feeling empowered with knowledge, I also found a space to express my fears, thoughts, emotions. I met other women having babies around the same time as me, and together we created birth artworks. Being an artist, I loved this aspect of the group!

No matter how much I prepared for my birth, I still couldn't completely believe I would do it. I myself was a caesarean baby after my mum was exposed in labour to the hospital environment that does not in any way support physiological birth. The unsurprising outcome was presented as a failing of her body rather than a failing of the system. I am so sad to think this is how more and more mums are giving birth.

Knowing what I know now, I think it is surprising that any woman gives birth normally within that brightly lit, unfamiliar, uncomfortable environment surrounded by strangers. Having this story as my blueprint for birth left me with a niggling feeling that I should prepare for my worst case scenario 'just in case', so I researched my options for emergency caesarean sections and created a plan with all my preferences and choices such as waiting for the cord to turn white before cutting. I am so pleased that this plan was never needed in the end because I have since learned that these choices are usually not adhered to with just one minute being considered as 'delayed' cord clamping! At the time however, having this plan allowed me to set those fears aside and focus on what I truly wanted: a normal, physiological birthing experience for me and baby.

When it came to the birth, I eventually settled on going to the midwife led unit (MLU) which was what felt right at the time. This was more in relation to not feeling that the house was the right place rather than any concerns or worries about the birth. In relation to the birth itself, I felt excited and surrendered. I watched many home birth videos on youtube to try and prepare myself. I found a birth podcast and devoured the stories, gleaning nuggets of wisdom from the women's different experiences. When labour began at 41 weeks, we stayed at home for the first 30 hours of the early stages, slowly transitioning to a more active labour. We went to the birth centre and ended up having another 30 hours of stop-start contractions with lots of back pain as the baby was posterior (back to back). I declined all checks at the beginning as I knew my baby and I were well but, as things were taking so long and because I also had PROM (premature rupture of the membranes), they wanted to transfer me to the labour ward, so eventually I agreed to some intermittent monitoring as a compromise to stay on the MLU.



The thirty hours were filled with many emotions from laughter and joy to disappointment and frustration. I had many moments of feeling I couldn't cope and other moments, especially later towards the end, when I felt very able to cope and flow with the sensations. My doula had to advocate a lot for me and my choices and it would have been impossible to maintain that advocacy without her and her skills.



Eventually the baby was ready and I settled on a supported squatting position to birth him. I had a physiological placenta birth too and also breastfeed immediately. I was beyond ecstatic that not only did I have a healthy baby but I had also experienced a positive, empowering birth. I was prouder of myself in

that moment than I have ever been at any time in my life. Even now I pinch myself that I did it! I did it even though it took two and a half days, even though I was outside of hospital guidelines, even though I sometimes doubted myself, even though it was hard work. I wish that same joy and jubilation for all mothers, and I truly believe that if our culture and maternity system was supportive of physiological birth, more would experience it.



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My takeaway from my choice of birth place was that I would not choose a MLU again: even though everything went well, and the midwives were lovely, nothing happened there that couldn't happen in a domestic or home environment, and the sheer level of advocation and compromise that had to happen

from my doula in order to clear the path for my birth to occur feels so wrong and unnecessary. It was exhausting for her and me to keep holding those boundaries. Giving birth in an institutional space feels counterintuitive. Having strangers in the room, even very friendly and kind ones, feels bizarre looking back. In those postpartum days, none of this mattered. I was on such a high and feeling such triumph that I got to give birth in such an awesome way.

A few days later however, everything settled and reality hit me. I loved my baby more than I knew it was possible to love, but I was also past exhausted, breastfeeding round the clock. I felt the weight of the responsibility hit me like a ton of bricks. I was completely floored by the change in identity and the loss of energy, freedom, and purpose outside of the home; and also by the lack of differentiation between day and night, and the sudden change in what felt important such as life values. I remember thinking and feeling incredulously that it cannot be normal for it to feel this huge. Yet, as the weeks and months passed, I spoke to other mothers and realised that to some extent, yes, it is normal to feel this way. Everyone is experiencing some level of immense change and essentially grief too, for the life left behind. It is normal for it to be a huge change emotionally and physically.

I think this is the beginning spark for my birth artwork. In recognising and acknowledging that birth and life after birth is a noteworthy, important, potent, life changing experience and rite of passage for a woman, I began to deeply value my birth story and other women's stories. Although no more babies were coming for me, I stayed in a home birth support group on Facebook and read with great interest hundreds of birth stories over the next two years, learning more about physiological birth, solidifying what I already knew and growing my knowledge through hearing other stories. I was a full time, stay at home mum for two years, so I didn't have time to channel my passion into any physical form. When my son started a village preschool at the age of 2, I leapt on the opportunity to create my first painting, inspired by my own birth. I didn't plan for it to have any purpose beyond being a nice way to spend my newfound free time and a therapeutic expression of my experience as a mother. However, two more followed, and then I exhibited them in a group show. I was surprised and glad to receive positive feedback, and I made the offer online to create paintings for other mothers to honour their birth journeys.

For over a year now I have created a steady stream of paintings for mothers. Each story that comes to me feels like such a gift, I have to pinch myself that I am trusted and that I have the opportunity to create art about these births. I feel very grateful and happy when a mother plans a painting with me and I begin work: it is a truly joyous act of women supporting women. Some of the stories that have come to me are ecstatic and joyful and just want to be celebrated, while others are hard stories that need lots of love and tenderness. Sometimes the hardest ones are the ones that most need a painting. It's a small gesture in the face of birth trauma, but it's a way of saying this story matters, this story deserves to be told, and shared, and given a voice. Even though I am a huge advocate for optimising physiological birth, stories that don't follow this path aren't less important to me; they are all deeply, uniquely valuable. I LOVE creating my birth paintings and when I am at work I feel this amazing, purposeful creative flow.

For the paintings I use a lot of warm, womb or blood like colours as well as watery colours. Night skies

and moons feature heavily as I associate night time with those early days and birthing days. Many women birth in pools, so the curved edges of the pools and water surface protecting their bodies is a common feature too. My paintings can take me many weeks to complete, fitting them around my own motherhood and other work duties and never hurrying or rushing, letting the journey take place in its own time. Sometimes I reflect on just how similar the creative process is to the birthing one: moments of wanting to give up, of not knowing, of knowing, of feeling inspired and motivated, of feeling stuck; the many ups and downs of the journey but eventually getting to the end one way or another. The paintings are less about creating a portrait but more about trying to capture the energy and the essence of the experience. I want to work on my ability and skill as an artist and just keep going with them. I have discovered a real sense of purpose in these paintings.

I have just grown more passionate and excited about birth as time goes on. I feel deeply within my bones that birth matters, that birth is meaningful. Birth is an 'everyday' miracle every time it happens. It is a life changing rite of passage, a spiritual event for mother and baby and everyone else involved. Each individual birth story is inherently worthy of acknowledgment and value. It should not have to be endured as an unhappy medical event but sometimes it turns out that way within the system we are in, or even, occasionally, just due to mother nature, and I will listen to those stories just the same as I will listen to a home birth story. My artwork is personal, political, spiritual. Putting paint to paper and giving birth the time, love, attention and care that it takes to make art, is a statement. I am saying that birth is important, and beautiful. Birth is not something that happens on the sidelines of real life, it's not something that we should hand over to strangers. Birth is a core moment in our lives as women and mothers. Birth is ours, it is powerful.

Author Bio: Sophie Jenna, mother to a three year old son, is an artist who creates paintings celebrating birth. She began with inspiration from her own birthing journey, and went on to make art for other mums and births. sophie.danby@hotmail.co.uk

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1 All three images by Sophie Jenna, instagram @artistsophiejenna