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A (Mother's) Visual Diary on Social Media: Pregnancy and Motherhood during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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By Jocelyn Allen



"I Keep Looking At The Scan As I Can Not Believe It (9 and a half weeks)," from*Waiting For Things In A Time When You Rarely Wait For Things*

When I found out I was pregnant in October 2019, I knew I was going to document my pregnancy, but it would have been weird not to considering I have been making photographic self-portraiture projects since 2009. When I could, I told friends and family the good news in person, but if this was not possible, I would share it over the phone or via WhatsApp. I was a bit nervous about something bad happening, though, and as a result I did not share it on social media until I was 20 weeks pregnant.

I have long had a love-hate relationship with social media. I see the benefits of being able to share my artwork with a wider audience and staying in touch with friends and family, but with these positives I also see negatives. Anyone can comment on what I post, and at times it can make me too accessible and I feel like I am expected to reply quickly. Posting can make me feel quite self-conscious and anxious, though I also use it to work on my confidence.

My public announcement consisted of two photographs which were taken at my very first solo exhibition and part of the caption said, 'So here are just two pictures – one of me with the entrance photo and title, and one with two members of my family who came to the show'. The two members of my family were my husband, Tiago, and the baby in my just-apparent bump.

My show was in Norway in February 2020. I felt a little anxious going as Covid-19 seemed to be getting

closer, but I just washed my hands a lot more than normal and thought that perhaps I was being a bit paranoid. The idea of being pregnant during a pandemic seemed a bit hard to imagine.

By the time I made my pregnancy public, I had already done 34 shoots of the 84 I would eventually do for the project. I started to post the selected images online (mainly just on my Instagram account), but I did not finish sharing them until after my baby was already over a month old. With each post, I shared a diary entry which was composed of up to 30 long hashtags. This was something I had done with my previous project in response to my awkwardness around using hashtags, but I had found it was a good way to talk about how I felt in a manner that somehow seemed less revealing. I usually wrote just before or after a shoot, so they talked about how I was feeling or anything of note that had happened. The series is called *Waiting For Things In A Time When You Rarely Wait For Things*. It seemed like such a smart title when I thought of it early on in my pregnancy, as when did you really have to wait very long for anything in 2019? Obviously by March 2020, life in the UK had really changed and soon everyone was waiting: waiting to see how long it would be until their situation changed. I felt lucky that Tiago and I had the birth of our child to count down to. We had already had our hospital appointments and as I was planning for a homebirth, the midwife came to our flat. Soon, she was the only person I was in close contact with besides Tiago, which was kind of odd.

Tiago and I met in 2015 via Tinder in London. We had both lived there for some years already, but in late 2018 we decided to move to Liverpool to be closer to his work. We did not know many people there and we had not made many new friends, so when lockdown arrived, we were quite cut off physically from people we knew. It was nice to have more time together though, especially as I was in my last trimester, and he also appeared in the project more than I thought he would have initially as he was more available.

In the end, the project became not only a diary for me, but also for family and friends who never saw me heavily pregnant in real life. I had been looking forward to seeing familiar faces during my pregnancy and letting them witness my growing bump, but instead I just saw strangers on our daily walks who I would get annoyed at for getting too close. I mostly kept in touch with people on WhatsApp and Instagram and found myself talking mainly with friends and acquaintances who were pregnant or had babies or young children, as I found they understood what I was going through more. Sometimes I find social media tiring though. I feel like with most people I watch every word I say and it can be mentally draining, as I worry about saying the wrong thing, accidentally upsetting someone or saying something which they might misinterpret. Whereas when I see someone in real life, I feel a lot freer and am less self-monitoring, perhaps as my words are not available to be looked back on again and again. As I write, a second lockdown is about to be imposed on Liverpool and I am finding myself feeling overwhelmed with having to reply to messages. I am frustrated that technology is my main way of communicating with people; it feels so demanding at times, and more energy and time consuming than talking face to face.



"2nd," from *Puke Portraits*

With my project, I was trying to censor myself less and just say what I wanted to say. I felt awkward – as I have for years – sharing my photographs and writing online. This time it felt different, though, as it seems like people have a lot of comments around what pregnant women and people should and should not do. I had morning sickness in my first trimester and I talked about it a lot in Waiting…, but I also made a separate series called *Puke Portraits* where I photographed myself after every time I was sick. There are 56 images in total.

I did not talk about negative aspects of my pregnancy for sympathy or advice; I just wanted to share my experiences and hoped that someone would find it useful. I knew that I was not the first or only person to feel the way I felt, so I thought it might provide some reassurance or help someone feel less alone with their thoughts. A few friends have commented on how it has been helpful to have an honest account to compare their pregnancy to, to see the similarities and differences, and to know what they might expect in weeks to come. After a while I turned off the comments on my images, as although people meant well, I found replying to them quite stressful, particularly when I kept saying that these pictures were taken in the past so I no longer felt that way.

My work was very therapeutic for me, however, in terms of getting my head around what it meant to be pregnant and adapting to my changing body. It also helped to have existing projects in place for me to add to, as although I quite enjoy being at home, suddenly having to be there 99% of the time with no understanding of when this would change was a bit of a life shift. I get a bit stressed when I am not able to work on my personal projects, so luckily for me I have always had a 'home studio' and I could continue my

work in the same way as before.

Alongside my photographic work, I was also continuing to dance on YouTube. I started a channel in 2013 and as an exercise to work on my confidence, I have made over 1,500 videos of me dancing to songs that I like. I am not a good dancer, but it is great for trying to learn not to care what people think of me – as people are less afraid to share their opinions via a screen – and I carried on dancing whilst I was pregnant. I never announced on YouTube that I was expecting, but it was getting too hot to keep wearing a big jumper when I danced, which was why I eventually decided to share my news elsewhere on the web. I used the pseudonym of Helena Teasdale for my account name, though it was not a secret that it was me, but I changed it to my real name after giving birth and felt the need to own my identity more. Just because I am now a mother, it does not mean I am just that; I am much more, and I want to show it proudly. With more responsibility and less time, parenthood also makes you realise what aspects of your old life you want to keep and make time for; making art is the biggest keeper for me.

When I was six months pregnant, I was approached by the Portuguese singer-songwriter Tiago Bettencourt to appear in a music video for his new single Dança. He had been planning to come to Liverpool so we could appear together, but the world changed quickly and he had to modify his ideas, so we recorded our parts separately in our flats. I planned to keep dancing for as long as I could and in the end, I made some videos the day before I gave birth.

I was 37+5 when my waters broke at around 1 am and I called the hospital. They said to come in for CTG monitoring and that I would be able to go home to give birth if everything was okay. It was the second week of June. I had not been in the car since March, and I had not been in any other building besides our flat since then too. Tiago had to wait in the car whilst I found out our baby was breech and that I would not be going home. A caesarean was presented as my best option, but I wanted to try for a vaginal birth; I was given a deadline of 6 pm to be in established labour (it was 9 am when I was told that turning the baby would be impossible due to lack of fluid). They said that the baby would need to be born that day and that it was better for the caesarean to be planned for early evening rather than late at night. I had done an online hypnobirthing course and knew that panicking would stop any surges, so I focused on staying positive. I was moved to a ward where there were two other women and it felt odd but quite lovely to be talking to strangers. When my surges got stronger, I danced behind my curtain to stay in a good mood, and when I was 4 cm dilated, Tiago was able to join me in the delivery suite. Two hours after a cannula had been inserted into my wrist (in case they needed to administer any drugs), our baby girl was born vaginally. Tiago had wanted to find out the gender, but she did not 'present' in scans, so I was quite happy to be surprised.



"First Family Portrait Session (28th June 2020)," from *Oh Me, Oh Mãe*

Due to restrictions, our daughter 'met' a lot of friends and family for the first time via WhatsApp video, and my parents commented on how they were sad that they would miss out on her newborn smell. Most of my family has now been able to spend some time with her, whereas we do not know when she will be able to meet any of my husband's family due to them all living outside of the UK. With social media, I decided that I did not want to show her face or reveal her full name, as though I share a lot about myself, I feel like B (as I refer to her online) deserves some privacy.

I have since started a new project called *Oh Me, Oh Mãe*, where I am trying to honestly share my experiences of early motherhood. Mãe is Portuguese for mother (B is half-Portuguese) and the title is a play on the phrase 'oh me, oh my'. I am mainly sharing the images through Instagram, but I have also made a blog (Jockey Greys, an autocorrect of my Instagram name Jocelynfreya) where I expand on the hashtags. Again, I am finding it awkward to share the work, particularly when I am writing about crying due to lack of sleep and feeling like a terrible mother.

It is true that I do not have to share anything online. I did not know much about pregnancy or motherhood before it happened to me, so I hope that by sharing my experiences it can help someone else; even if it feels uneasy to disclose certain things. Knowing that there is an audience does make me think about what I choose to write or photograph, but ultimately, I am in control of its initial outing and I weigh up what I want to share with what I think is necessary and/or helpful. I know that things can be

interpreted by people however they want depending on their own experiences, feelings or mood, so you can not control how people will respond. I often self-censor any nudity with white blocks, which helps my work not get taken down on social media whilst also only publicly displaying what I feel comfortable with but having the whole document for myself.

I have talked about confidence and making my work over the years has changed me. The photographs and videos have helped me (though I think it is always a work in progress) learn to accept myself and my body more, and now the hashtags are enabling me to feel more comfortable and confident with my own thoughts and opinions. The first part of the therapeutic nature of my work is making it, but the second part is sharing it and leaving myself open for more judgement than if I did not reveal much.

The most useful thing about social media for me during this time has been a WhatsApp group of seven other mums who I met through an NCT course. There is less than two months between the oldest and youngest baby, so it was really reassuring to be able to ask women who were having a similar experience during this unique time about themselves and their babies. Also, before bothering the doctors with any queries – I would worry about sounding stupid or looking like a bad mother – in the early days of panic I would often send photos of any concerns to my Mum and older sister. I stressed about leaving the house in the beginning for appointments or anything, but due to the pandemic, our doctors would ask for a photograph followed by a phone call instead, which is a service that I hope will stay forever.

Being pregnant during a pandemic was a bit of a surprise, but I feel like I handled it well. As it was my first time, I had nothing else to compare it to, though it felt odd that I never really got to say goodbye to my past life; things just changed fast and I realised that it had gone. Who knows how things will be in the future, but for now I am just grateful that I have a healthy family, and I am excited to watch my daughter grow and find her place in an uncertain world.

Jocelyn Allen is an artist who mainly works with photography, writing, video and dance. She predominantly uses herself within her personal work to explore the themes of self-confidence, hiding and revealing, body image, and motherhood.