

Professional Analysis

The Birth of Pregnant Photography

Jennifer Loomis was one of the first photographers to make a business of pregnant nude photography. Having been referred to as a pioneer of maternity photography, she got her start in San Francisco in 1991 photographing nudes of women. Loomis refers to San Francisco photographer Ruth Bernhard as her biggest influence on her work with nudes. Bernhard is best known for her studio work of still lifes and nudes done primarily in black and white. She is also known for her work with lesbians, most notably *Two Forms* (1962). In that work, a black woman and a white woman who were real-life lovers are featured with their nude bodies pressed against one another. Most of her work spanned from the mid 1930's to the 1980's. Ansel Adams referred to her as "*the greatest photographer of the nude.*"



Sand Dune, 1967
Ruth Bernhard



Two Forms, 1962
Ruth Bernhard

Loomis respected Bernhard's work because she was doing something that nobody else was doing. She found that inspiration helpful in approaching her own maternity work. Loomis wanted her work to have a lasting impact and change the way people think about an issue. She used Bernhard's inspiration when she was younger with her work with nudes, and then carried it over to her maternity work.

By 1994 Loomis had started photographing pregnant nudes. This was just a few years after the *Vanity Fair* cover of a pregnant nude Demi Moore hit the shelves. The photograph of Moore taken by Annie Leibovitz in 1991 had a lasting impact on society's acceptance of pregnancy and the pregnant form. Since the cover was released, more

celebrities have posed for photos in late stages of pregnancy, and the trend of having intimate pregnancy photos of the female form was born.



Vanity Fair, August 1991
Annie Leibovitz

While this photo had a lasting impact on society's acceptance of pregnancy and the pregnant form, it was met with as much shock and outrage as admiration, according to Matthews and Wexler, 2000. "Liebovitz crossed a boundary at a ripe cultural moment, and with her image of the pregnant woman, pregnant pictures crossed over into the public visual domain." Carol Stabile points out in her essay "Shooting the Mother: Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance," the controversy over Leibovitz's image is evidence that, "in a culture that places such a premium on thinness, the pregnant body is anathema. Not only is it perhaps the most visible and physical mark of sexual

difference, it is also the sign for deeply embedded fears and anxieties about femininity and the female reproductive system.” Our culture has historically been uncomfortable acknowledging the sexual associations of pregnancy. Matthews and Wexler (2000) note that “lack of representation of pregnant women is reflected by the fact that Western cultures have traditionally tried to separate the maternal from the sexual roles in women’s lives.”

When Loomis began there was little or no photography out there in the field of maternity photography to look at for inspiration so she had to find her own. Having been an artist her entire life, she drew inspiration from friends who were painters, along with many photography books. Working as a photojournalist also helped Loomis develop an eye for what she was looking for. After receiving her Master’s Degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia, she worked as a freelance photojournalist in East Africa. She was able to draw on her experience as a photojournalist in her work as a portrait photographer. One of her biggest influences was Henri Cartier-Bresson. Loomis explains that she is looking for a moment when she is doing family or maternity photography.

“So it’s not all about setting up this gorgeous shoot with gorgeous lighting and just fitting the pregnant woman in there. It’s waiting for her to do something.”

In this way portraiture is very much like photojournalism: the image is about connection and intimacy and feeling like you learn something about the subject. Otherwise, it is just another pretty picture.

Approach

When Loomis first got started in maternity photography she was motivated by her art, and felt passionate about changing society’s definition of beauty, and our acceptance

of the pregnant form. Loomis described herself as a rebel in her twenties and thirties, and loved the idea of forcing people to look at an issue they are uncomfortable with. She says, “I felt that we were all coming from pregnant women and now that I’ve had a baby it even more so drives it home.” Loomis felt passionate about exposing our societies tendencies to disregard pregnant women and had a chance to do so in a gallery show in Seattle:

“I had huge torsos printed and we hung them in the window; it was this gallery owned by these gay men and we would sit on the sofa and drink wine and watch everybody walk by and do a double take and come back and look at the pictures.”

Loomis’s motivation began to change as she photographed more women because they began talking about how beautiful it made them feel. This is when Loomis realized it was “something for them.” Her work was not only helping to change societies’ views of women’s bodies, but also allowing the women to see their bodies in a new way.

Loomis’s motivation changed again after years of doing maternity photography, as the kids who used to be inside the bellies were now grown up and able to talk about it. Loomis describes their reactions to the photographs as “completely enthralled,” and states it has given her a third reason for doing this work.

Over the years, many women have confided their stories of pregnancy with Loomis, and this is what motivated her to put together her book, “Portraits of Pregnancy-The Birth of a Mother.” Her book combines artistic portraits of pregnant women accompanied by narratives from each woman’s journey through pregnancy and into motherhood. It’s another way for Loomis to bring exposure to the pregnant form, while also providing women with relatable stories of pregnancy and birth.

Representation of the Pregnant Form

Loomis made a conscious decision in her approach to take the sexuality away from the female body and look at it from a sensual perspective.

“I have worked hard to divorce my work from sexuality and objectification. I like to think more about sensuality and light. I want to show the soft curves of the pregnant woman— any shape or size, they are all beautiful. I want to show how the body grows in so many different ways to hold life. I see the pregnant woman and her womb as the holding place between heaven and earth, I am not religious but it is a sacred space and these bodies are sacred.” (Loomis interview)

Loomis believes that “society has accepted the pregnant woman’s body, at least in the urban areas and the locations that are more liberal. But there are other areas of the country where it is still shrouded: typically these are areas of the country where women are more oppressed whether they admit it or not.” When referencing the influence of her work, Loomis states that she is most proud of how the pregnant female form is being recognized as beautiful and is being photographed daily around the world.

Loomis has spent most of her career studying and photographing the pregnant form. In her most recent series, she began studying the landscape created by this form.

“Worthy of examination and discussion, this shape represents an area of the women’s body that is surrounded by debate of ownership, degradation by toxic environments, and depravation of corporate fertility centers charging exorbitant fees for women who want to become pregnant.” (jenniferloomis.com)

The well-known Japanese photographer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, famous for his black and white seascapes, inspired Loomis’s work on maternal landscapes. Loomis states her idea when approaching a maternal landscape is, “to strip this form of all of its identifying features and let the viewer absorb the beauty and the softness of each individual shape.” By experimenting with a macro lens, a 35mm, and a 4x5 view camera, Loomis explores

all that the maternal form represents and questions why the shape isn't better represented in visual history.

Loomis looks at pregnant women as the backbone of society and is using her maternal landscape work to make people get up close and personal to it. In line with Loomis's rebellious side, she wants the images in their face where they can see the lines and stretch marks and really study it. Loomis has printed large-scale prints of the landscapes from 6-feet to 12-feet wide. She found that if she "could create it as a landscape that becomes unidentifiable, more people will get up close to it and then be like "what is this?"



Mediterranean Sea
Hiroshi Sugimoto



Maternal Landscape Series, 2012



Maternal Landscape Series, 2013



Maternal Landscape Series, 2012

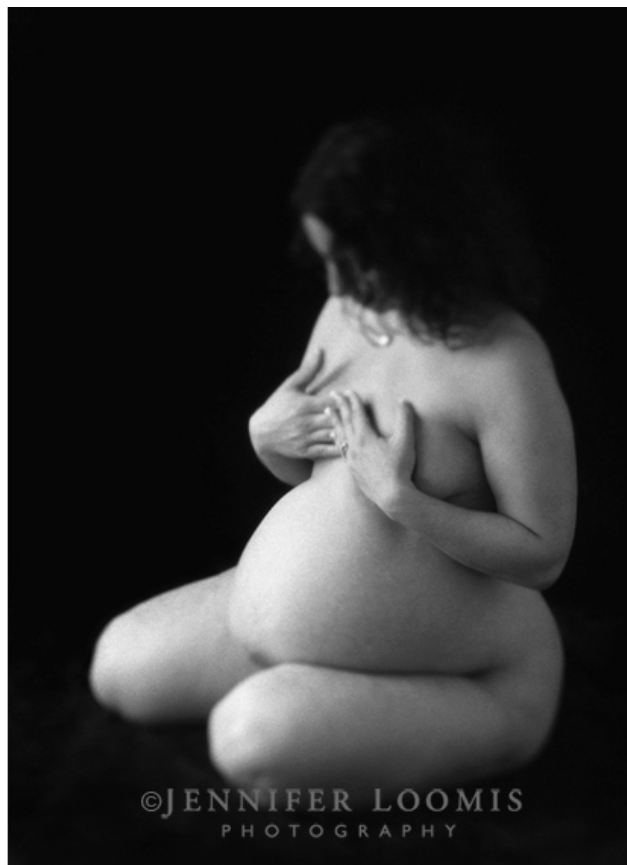


Maternal Landscape Series, 2013

Effects of Images on Pregnant Subjects

Many women struggle with the shape and changes in their bodies while pregnant. Our culture's standards of beauty for women are hard to uphold, and impossible during pregnancy. While magazines featuring celebrity pregnancies focus on how fast the woman can lose her "baby weight," Loomis's approach seems to contradict that by making women of all shapes and sizes feel beautiful. Loomis notes that many of the women she photographs are struggling with the shape and changes in their bodies, and she believes it's partly due to our cultural ideals that force women to believe that they need to be unhealthily thin.

"I think this pregnancy photography is a time for them to pause and reflect on the specialness of what's going on truthfully for them because often they're so busy they don't have that luxury." (Loomis interview)







For this reason, a good photo session becomes important because of the effect it can have on a woman's body image. Over the years of photographing women, Loomis has learned what women like and don't like about themselves in the photographs. She says, "I can see things now ahead of time that they may not even be able to articulate or maybe a newer photographer doing this may not be able to see, but I know I've got to turn her 3cm to the right and she's going to like that better." Loomis's work has given many women and their partners the ability to see their bodies in a new way.

On Being a Mom

After devoting many years of her life to photographing pregnant women, Loomis recently became a mom herself. Loomis believes spending years with pregnant women helped her be more prepared for her pregnancy. It's also given her more empathy and compassion toward pregnant women. Loomis feels like pregnant women in our society are generally not well cared for by the male population, so in her photo shoots she wants them to feel well cared for.

Recently with her own pregnancy, Loomis decided to “document the reality of the pregnancy instead of beautifying it.” Her intimate portraits are powerful and show the struggles that so many women have faced in their journey to motherhood. Loomis has found that other women are very private about their stories, and have not expressed an interest in having a realistic documentation surrounding their pregnancies.

The Four Trimesters of Pregnancy



©JENNIFER LOOMIS PHOTOGRAPHY

Evolution of Maternity Photography

One of the challenges Loomis faced when she began was finding a market for photographing pregnant nudes. The sentiment was, “nobody is going to pay you to photograph them semi-naked and pregnant. That’s pretty much stupid.” There was resistance to showing her photography if she wanted to run an ad in a newspaper or magazine. While pregnant celebrities had begun making appearances on magazine covers, our society was not fully ready to embrace images of the pregnant form. When Loomis began there was secrecy surrounding her work. She says, “a lot of times I found that the women who would come to me would not tell their friends and family that they had done this.” Between 2001 and 2002, her business started taking off, which Loomis feels was in tandem with what was going on in our culture’s obsession with celebrities. Now that maternity photography is widely accepted, Loomis is embracing the plateau as a chance to push herself into a new direction in exploring the pregnant form. While her approach continues to evolve, her passion remains the same- to challenge society’s definition of beauty.