

Invisible Mother's Milk

Artist: Ellen Greene

Packer Schopf Gallery

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Ellen Greene's oeuvre is a cacophony of symbols. It is birthed from the artist's visions, old school tattoo flash turned feminine power symbols, countless pairs of womens' hand gloves and "Invisible Mother" Victorian photographs. Greene's work defies categories and time periods; she doesn't fit into outsider art, fine art or high fashion, yet could slip by in each one. Greene is a rebel girl at heart and a steadfast mother of two young girls. In this new body of work, her two identities collide and converge into one — she is a heavily tattooed, redheaded female artist conjuring up mythic powers through classic tattoo imagery, yet lives in a modern-day consumer culture in which youth and beauty trump integrity and devotion to the family. Greene seeks to carve out a new vocabulary for the woman who is both and neither, who is of this world while simultaneously envisioning and seeking another one.

In her solo exhibition "Invisible Mother's Milk" at Packer-Schopf Gallery, Greene transforms the demure womens' hand glove into a piece of art that embodies transformational mystery, intrigue and feminine power. When the mother slips these gloves on, or even has them in her presence, they remove her from the mundane and thankless yet powerfully human tasks of care giving. The mother's job is not easy; she must simultaneously stand back and watch while silently guiding. She must push and prod her children through everything, from birth to the tweenage years and into those vulnerable adolescent moments. Greene presents the mother as a glove-wielding magician who reveals secrets of the universe, childbirth, death, sex, anger, fear, love, loss and lust. The gloves inhabit a space of second skins, of powerful femininity, psychological transformation and quiet spiritual awakenings.

In her work, Greene challenges notions of what it means to be an artist and a mother, and moreover one who works with incredibly charged, hypersexual, classic tattoo imagery. In her domestic life, Greene fully embraces her roles as mother and wife, complete with their moments of utter bliss and ultimate tragedy. In these roles, she allows others to possess her body — it is no longer fully her own. She uses art as a means of embracing and purging the effect these roles and occupations have on her. Greene's work explores what it means to be a "good mother" in a society of impossible feminine ideals that are still firmly rooted in Christian morality. As an artist, she tiptoes on the edge of being seen as a witch, a female archetype that is revered for her healing powers, yet feared nearly as much as the widow.

Gloves form the center of Greene's work. The fierce tattoo imagery that she paints onto the gloves merges the two identities of mother and artist, nature and culture, domesticated and wild. The woman who dons them embraces this double identity. Greene's tattoos are not the dainty, fashion accessory-like tattoos that have become common amongst girls and young people today.

On one pair of Greene's white leather gloves, a proud eagle rests on a banner that reads "Mother's Milk." It raises its wings, looking out into the distance as milk tears drip from its giant breasts. On that same glove, Jesus cries, and a skull with a dagger through its head is draped in a ribbon banner that reads "All is sorrowful but in perfect rapture." A mermaid with a wrapped serpent as hair bleeds with bows sticking out of her body. A cross hangs from a sheet, and the classic heart MOM tattoo appears as tears drop, stopping only at the glove's knuckle text, which reads: WITCH MILK RAIN DOWN. The gloves tell the mythic mother's story; she is a woman who had to burn the young girl inside to transform into the woman. For Greene, tattoos represent an outward expression of freedom and a literal reclaiming of the body. Her gloves are not for the faint of heart.

In addition to an assortment of regular-length gloves, Greene includes one nearly six-foot long pair by master glovemaker Daniel Storto. Covered in her signature tattoo flash images – the invisible mother, the Virgin Mary mermaid, a serpent with a dagger through it, the sailing ship and a rose, to name a few – these gloves stand tall, fingers reaching toward the onlooker. They reach into the sky, and toward the unknown.

Greene rounds out this exhibition with a modern-day re-staging of Victorian-era "Invisible Mother" photographs. Photographs of this time period required longer exposures, making it even more difficult to capture a still image of the child. Back then, instead of handing kids more candy and stuffed animals, the photographer called in the mother. She was draped in a tapestry or cloth, and then her kids were placed on her lap. Often times, her hands emerged as the only visible part of her; in effect, she was rendered practically invisible from the public eye. The "Invisible Mother" is not just a figurative state, however; it is an emotional state that many women feel they must inhabit in order to fulfill their role as a caregiver and be a "good mother," even today.

For a mother to be a working artist, she must spend some time away from the family. The artist's departure from the domestic realm and into the often times dark, inner world of the artist is something that a consumer-driven mommy culture frowns upon. Greene's work inspires the dreams, mysteries and secrets of mothers who know what it's like to experience the world in second skins, costumes and cloaks.

—*Alicia Eler*

Editor: Lauren Levato
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