

Recap: Desirée Holman's *Reborn*

Exhibit at the Silverman Gallery takes a new look at motherhood



By Dia Felix April 21, 2009

Take a quick glance at local artist Desirée Holman's new exhibit at the [Silverman Gallery](#), which runs through May 30, and you'll observe what seems to be a collection of drawings that depict women lovingly cradling infants. You might think it's a celebration of the maternal bond, a sort of Mary Cassatt-esque portraiture for the modern age. But if you knew anything about Holman's work, you'd know better.

Look slightly closer, and you'll begin to see the fissures.

In one drawing, the melancholy mother stares into space while milk flows down her chin. Another drawing shows a large, out-of-proportion infant with a face that doesn't exactly look healthy. In another, the mother's body, depicted from neck to feet (no head), appears tense and hurried—she's in business attire and her bony legs suggest weariness and strain as her baby sucks at her breast. Her fingernails are painted black. And this one baby has two heads. The mother stares down at the double-headed creature in calm detachment, as if to say, "Really? Well, all right."

The video component, a single-channel installation screened in a separate room at the back of the gallery, delivers the most thrilling moments of the show. It opens with a shot of a woman rocking a baby to sleep in a green field. The camera's movement toward the woman is reminiscent of horror movies, and you're waiting for the worst as the camera settles on a close-up of her face, her black hair dancing gently around her mouth as she stares at her baby, unaware of the camera's gaze. From there, the video explodes into a fast, loud, and colorful tableau of utterly freaked-out motherhood. Milk dribbles from abject mothers' mouths and is slurped back up again. A cluster of women dance sexily to modern minimal disco while wearing brightly colored, near-complete body coverings—Martial artists? Religious devotees? Chemically sensitive?—as their infants, held by fabric slings, bounce haphazardly against their middles. Babies are passed from mother to breathless mother like hot potatoes, touched with and without tenderness.

Except they're not babies.

They are "reborns"—dolls that are carefully hand-produced to look and feel like real infants. Holman extensively researched the community of reborn doll makers and their sometimes-obsessive collectors, and learned the techniques of "reborning." Ultimately, she produced eight reborns herself, painting their skin multiple times to achieve the most lifelike skin tone, weighting their bodies, and rooting each one of their hairs.

Despite the fact that the sculptures themselves aren't in the show—or maybe because of this—the work successfully conveys the total weirdness of the existence of such things. But the lasting impact of the show isn't exclusively eerie or grotesque: On the whole, the work comes across as an acknowledgement, a celebration even, of the expansive range of possibilities around modern motherhood and attachment—including the darker, weirder parts—and successfully intervenes on the pat, one-dimensional representations that are more generally circulated.