

OF WOMAN BORN
2004-2007

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In 2004, when my son Casper was born, I began a series of photographs of mothers and babies. I staged them grouped naked in natural settings, as though bound by the brute endurance of a shared animal existence. I wanted to test the essentialist theory of “mother earth,” to follow it to the full extent of my imagination. While it’s clear that the earth is nobody’s mother, I wondered how our relationship with the natural world has been influenced by gendered expectations. Would we still be raping, pillaging, and extracting if we considered her a father instead?

The title *Of Woman Born* was lifted from Adrienne Rich and her foundational 1976 text by the same name. She examines the multiplicities of motherhood as a contested ground, a site of socially condoned subjugation, as well as an ambivalent, often rage-inducing personal experience of one’s devaluation and forced subservience. Of the mother’s body, she writes that it has at once been “territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life.”

These photographs chart my winding road trips from New York City to the Pacific Northwest by way of the American South. They depict utopic, pastoral scenes of mothers and their children and homoerotic eagerness to be in harmony with one another and with nature; they share an expectant optimism with motherhood itself. The predominately white women I met along the way undressed for my camera, collaborating on a shared fantasy. In the photographs women are communally embedded in the landscape, among the pines in stark, naked forests, draped along craggy shores, or curled up on a beach. These surreally idyllic projections are distorted by the call of their children, the binding of a mother to her duty and a presumed allegiance to the institution of motherhood.

These photographs challenge that institution, the motherhood of compulsory, even sacrificial caretaking made more pronounced by the recent supreme court ruling. Without reproductive freedom, there is no such thing as motherhood. By abdicating husbands, suburbs, and the status quo, the women in these photographs lay claim to their own destinies, as stewards and advocates of the land, carving protections and rights out of this statutory bedrock.