

Casting One's Belly in Plaster: New Pregnancy Rite

by Dawn Fallik

It wasn't so long ago that women in the late stages of pregnancy stayed inside the house, meandering around in muumuus, waiting for the big moment to arrive when both baby and mother could appear in public view.

Now what was once hidden is now prominently

displayed. As women come to accept their natural body images, the most womanly of times is celebrated in photos, fashion and art.

Women are even taking the time to memorialise their bodies in a permanent way by taking plaster casts of their pregnant bodies. Kris and Vanessa Fritzsche

felt the process of being pregnant and the body that goes with it was something to remember. So in Vanessa's ninth month, they took part in a belly casting, a new maternal ritual that is spreading across the United States. Using plaster strips, a mould is made of the mother's body, whether just of her belly or more.

"Women are celebrated more in our society; it's not our grandparents' world anymore," said Kris, who is an artist. He said he took pictures of his wife as she moved through the trimesters, but was entranced by the thought of a 3-D perspective.

The belly-casting process takes different forms, both artistically and figuratively. The Fritzsches sent the cast of Vanessa's belly to a Colorado company called Mama's Belly, which turned the cast into a stone bowl—earthy red on the outside and vibrant blue inside.

"The first time I did one, I didn't stop at just the belly. I kind of got lost in the gorgeous power of this pregnant body," said Maggie Stewart, owner of Mama's Belly. She said people usually do a good job of doing the casts themselves, but she sometimes comes in to help—once even in the beginning stages of one woman's labour.

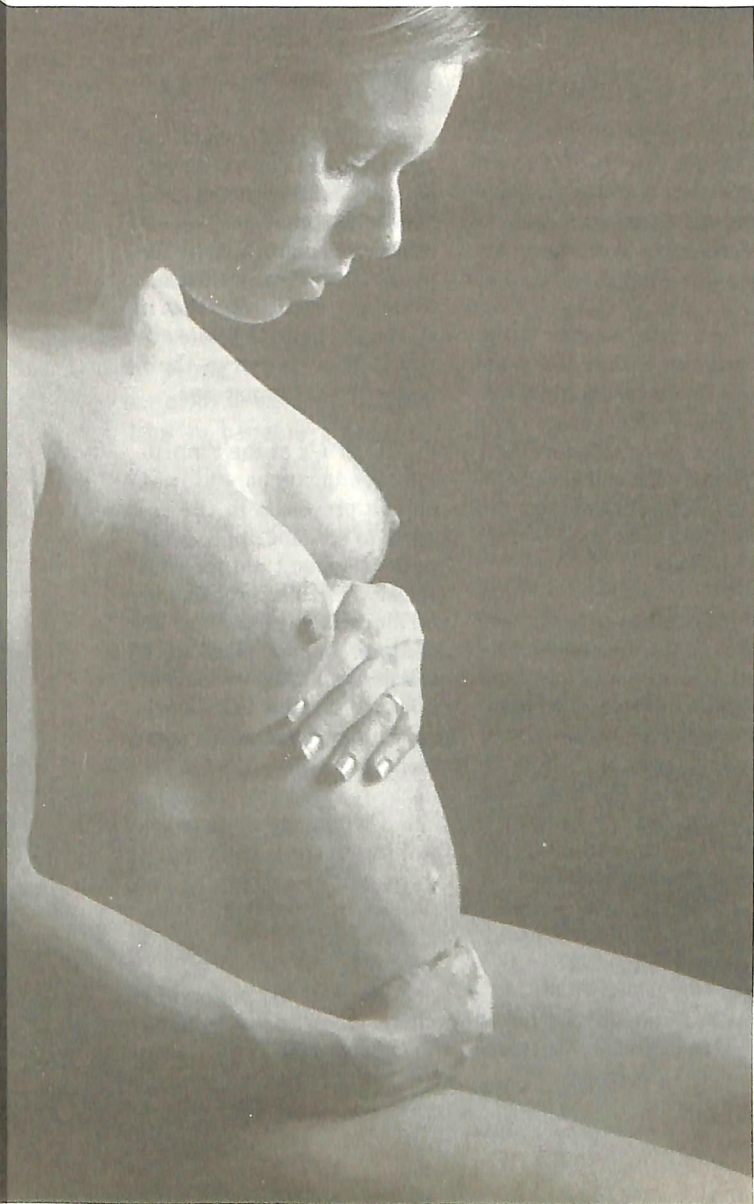
The casting itself is not hard to do, but mothers say the key is being comfortable with being naked. A petroleum jelly is spread across the areas that will be moulded and the plaster spread in strips and then smoothed out. The mother can stand or sit or lie on her back—whatever position she's most comfortable in. Some women take casts of just their bellies, others cast their entire torsos or place their hands on their bellies. After about 20 minutes, the cast is dry and can be removed.

"It was pretty easy to pull off and you can really see the belly button because it gets huge when you're pregnant and it sticks out and that was really neat to see," said Stephanie Maiers of Englewood, Colorado, whose mother-in-law paid for the casting as a gift.

"She thought it would be really cool to have a memory of being pregnant and I thought it would be a neat thing to pass down to a daughter or a granddaughter," said Maiers.

Changing View of Pregnancy, Especially Among Older Women

"It's just such a unique way of seeing yourself and appreciating what you look like," said Nicole Langlois, who made a belly cast of herself during her second pregnancy and now makes casts



www.arttoday.com

for others under the name Belly Treasures in upstate New York. "My grandmother says, 'It's disgusting. Why would you want to show your body like that?' But I just think it's the most beautiful thing, why wouldn't you?"

Legato said women are learning to appreciate their bodies and once had portraits painted and busts made of their heads, so why not a cast of a pregnant body? She particularly pointed to the increase in older women becoming pregnant as part of the tide in the changing self-image.

As women wait longer to become pregnant—6 percent of all pregnancies in the United States occur in women over 40—the issues of body image lessen. Instead of looking for clothes to hide a growing tummy, women are more concerned with finding fashionable clothes that fit and with staying in shape throughout the pregnancy.

"Older people have a strong sense of who they are," she said. "I also think that older women no longer emphasise the physical but count on their other achievements and roles."

The change in the way women view pregnancy is reflected in the growing number of magazines geared toward pregnant women, from *Fit Pregnancy* to *American Baby* to specialised websites such as "Pregnancy Today" and Parent's Place.com.

"I think the pregnant pictures of Demi Moore and Christie Brinkley were really inspiring for women," said Dr. Marianne J. Legato, founder and director of the Partnership for Gender Specific Medicine at Columbia University. "These were women who thought their bodies were beautiful—that their pregnant bodies were as beautiful as any other cover girl."

Varied Use of Casts

The cost of a belly cast ranges from US\$150 for a plain cast to US\$1,500 for a bronzed bowl. But the decoration is up to the mothers and the artists. The plaster casts can be decorated by the families or by individual artists. Some paint the moulds and hang them on the wall. Others use it as an opportunity to include older children in the upcoming birth. One woman lined her belly bowl with sheepskin and used it as a cradle for the first few days after her child was born.

Carla Vincent, who lives in Maryland, asked Langois and Lynn to decorate the cast of her torso with one arm wrapped around her belly. The artists asked Vincent to fill out a short survey about her favorite colours and where the statue would go. The end result: a lavender bust with a blue jewel in the belly and an ivy tendril around the arm.

"My husband really didn't understand it until he saw the pictures. Then he thought it was really neat," Vincent said. "It's hard to remember how you looked when you were pregnant."

"It's a decorative art piece and it's something that sparks conversation," said Kris Fritzsche of the cast of his wife's belly. "It has a distinctive shape and people aren't really surprised when they find out what it is, but they're interested and they love the concept."

Legato said she's glad to see that the role of the husband is incorporated as well.

"Every pregnancy is unique and in a healthy woman, it's a beautiful experience to be savored and enjoyed, including the changes in the body," she said. "Many

SOUTH "TOO FAR" ... FROM P. 7

organisations we deal with from the North. We don't understand their purpose because there is a lack of information coming to us from the North."

At the same time, Angulo says that the pressures that increasingly shape the role of CSOs are a clear product of outside leverage. "Privatisation and global economic determinants are the pressures that most define us," he says.

"In Kenya there are CSOs that want to effect social transformation, and there are private enterprises that want to access donor funds," says Karuti Kanyinga of the IDS. "The latter are real entrepreneurs, they carry briefcases filled with excellent proposals. In most cases they have no impact at all, but they are very vocal and influential."

Montree Chantawong of the Thai Project for Ecological

husbands are just enchanted with their wives' pregnant bodies."

For more information:
Mama's Belly: <<http://www.mamasbelly.com>>
Belly Treasures: <<http://www.bellytreasures.bigstep.com>>

Partnership for Gender-Specific Medicine: <<http://partnership.hs.columbia.edu>>

Dawn Fallik is a full-time reporter living in St. Louis.

Source: Women's Enews, <<http://www.womensenews.org>>, 30 September 2002

Recovery says Northern aid tends to empower mainstream development policy locked into structural adjustment, the global market and privatisation. "Though aid may carry an excellent goal and is seen by the public as acceptable, it tends to work in such a way that it eventually helps the state authorities to preserve their power," Chantawong says.

Officials at the Finnish foreign ministry hope to draw on the proposals in the reports to reshape approaches to development aid for civil society. "Civil society should be a channel for the poor to demand their rights," says Christian Sundgren, head of information and NGO work at the development department.

Civil society workers are waiting to see if such sentiment will eventually be reflected in official development policy.

Source: Inter Press Service, <<http://www.ipsnews.net>>, 10 October 2002