

Mom's the word in Blue Star Contemporary exhibit

By Elda Silva | February 8, 2017

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Photo: Courtesy Photo / Courtesy Photo

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"He's A Bad Mother," a silkscreen print by Julia Barbosa Landois, features a lyric from the theme of the movie "Shaft" against a diaper brand logo.

In Spanish, the phrase “que padre” means something is cool, excellent, awesome.

Substitute “madre” for “padre” — or “mother” for “father” — and it all goes to hell: “That sucks.”

Artist Julia Barbosa Landois always has been interested in language and the subtle undercurrents of meaning that reveal social and cultural attitudes, particularly in regard to women. In “M*dres,” a new series of text-based silkscreens on display at Blue Star Contemporary, she explores English and Spanish phrases that employ the words “mom,” “mother” and “madre.” The phrases she chose include everyday expressions and curses.

One — “That’s not a mom body” — is a backhanded compliment that Landois herself, the mother of two young children, has had the dubious honor of receiving.

“My interest in these phrases is what they connote for the large social framing of motherhood, as well as my own paradoxical existence as a caretaker in a profession that lionizes the unattached individual living only for the work,” she wrote in an artist statement.

An alum of Blue Star Contemporary’s Berlin residency program, Landois spent three months at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien last year. She took her family with her and immersed herself in performance art — observing the differences between European and American practices from both performer and audience perspectives. Shortly after Landois returned to San Antonio, she began working on the print series. Though known primarily for her work in performance, installation and video, Landois started out as a painter.

“I totally love color, and printmaking is a way for me to connect back to that,” she said. “And my work always has a political-feminist edge, but with dark humor, and so I

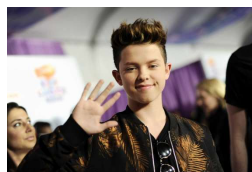
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think the humor is in here, but not so dark. I'm more thinking about it in a funnier and sort of absurd way."



The series is "well-timed," said Blue Star executive director Mary Heathcott, "when there's so much talk in politics and in our social sphere about women's rights and there's the women's march on Washington. It seems to be themes that are on everybody's mind."



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Many of the phrases Landois chose to feature in the prints use "mom" as an adjective —

one that functions like a wet blanket, instantly dampening the appeal of the noun that follows. In a pair of prints, the text "That's Not a Mom Body" is superimposed over a what looks like abstract flower-like patterns. Closer inspection reveals one of the designs is a doubled image of back-to-back mudflap girls. The other is a daisy wheel of Virgen de Guadalupe silhouettes.

One of the paradoxes of motherhood is that a woman uses her sexuality to become pregnant and have a child, but "as soon as they take on the title of mother, that part of their life is negated," Landois said.

In Spanish, Landois chose to steer away from the more vulgar phrases.

"I left those out on purpose because I didn't want the negativity to come from the obvious vulgarity," she said. "I wanted it to come actually from just the word 'madre.'"

"Ni madres" — roughly "no way" — features a woman working at a computer and talking on the phone as she pumps breast milk with the help of a hands-free pumping bra.

"There's this idea that you can go out and grab it and have it all, but it's all up to you and it's not up to your employer to provide paid parenting leave and it's not up to our society to think about things like subsidized childcare and all of the things that support caretaking that are outside of individual choices," she said.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Landois did a performance titled “Serious Work” in January. During the performance, which was videotaped and is on view at the Blue Star, she put her “mom body” on view and confronted the audience with her gaze. She said the 30-minute piece was structured to look like a “’70s style endurance performance with (an artist in the nude) doing something very serious and extreme.”

Over the course of the performance, the structure broke down into absurdity as Landois exchanged texts with her partner and friends, which were projected on a screen behind her. In one exchange, her partner asks her to pick up diapers on the way home. In another, she and a friend discuss how her breasts look onstage.

“All these things that you wouldn’t expect, but also performance artists are people and they’re thinking about these things, particularly if they’re women,” Landois said.

“M*dres” continues through May 7 at Blue Star Contemporary, 116 Blue Star, 210-227-6960, bluestarart.org.

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