

# ESSENTIALLY MIDIRS

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# A new form of birth art:

the rise of birth photography as a woman-centred expression of the experience of birth



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## **About Mariamni Plested**

Mariamni is a freelance qualitative midwife researcher with a special interest in women's experiences of childbirth and midwifery attitudes about 'high-risk' or unconventional birth choices. Her other research interests include the spirituality of birth, birth art and creativity in midwifery practice. Mariamni has a particular interest in health experience research and is especially keen to raise awareness and understanding of poorly understood areas of women's experience of childbirth. She currently divides her time between research projects based in the UK and further study in the USA where she also runs 'The Nativity Studio' making birth art.

The way in which many women are sharing their experience of birth has been transformed by a decade of internet forums and the rise of social media (Glenn 2014a). In the 1990s birth stories began to be shared via email groups such as Yahoo or birth support websites; the rise of Facebook and other social media forums have incrementally become a common way of announcing a birth, often accompanied by a photo of mum and baby (Glenn 2014a). The use of the internet to share birth photos is a recent phenomenon which merits attention as a new form of social documentation and an 'unveiling' of images of birth in the public arena. While a common form of the birth photo is mum with the baby in her arms, a new and rising trend for birth photography is growing, which captures the events of labour, the event of birth and the early moments of bonding (Tyzack 2014). This journalistic style of visually recording the birth is becoming increasingly popular and gaining media attention, with a recent poll suggesting that one in five women have considered hiring a birth photographer (Tyzack 2014). The International Association of Professional Birth Photographers demonstrates how widespread this phenomenon has become with over 860 members across 24 countries; the organisation provides resources for parents and photographers and has a strong emphasis on supporting and facilitating normal birth.



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## Turning the tide of birth imagery

This window into the moment of birth is unprecedented in the history of photography and art, which has by and large treated birth as a taboo subject as a result of the dominance of patriarchal norms in the arena of art and culture (England 2007). Birth has typically been portrayed within the context of the medicalisation of childbirth, scientific objectivity and anatomical accuracy; birth as a lived experience has been largely ignored (Davies 2007). The rise of birth photography in

this context is a remarkable turn in the tide and reclamation of images of birth and the female body by women for women. Birth photographers are usually women; they are familiar with normal labour and often have experience as a doula. Some describe their work as a 'calling' and have a deep respect for the birthing environment, and their role as witness and documenter of the birth (Rogers 2014). My first exposure to this type of photographic documentation was a midwife-photographer collaboration between Vicki Chan, an Australian midwife, and Nic Edmondstone, photographer, in their video production *In a simple way...*

*a child is born* (2004) which was shown at a study day promoting normal birth. The film is an entirely non-verbal photographic documentation of a normal birth. The lack of narration highlights the visual representation of the experience of normal birth with a strength and power which words cannot articulate. The debut of the use of photographs to convey the joy and ecstasy of normal birth can be found in the now 'classics' of normal birth literature *Birth reborn* (Odent 1984) and *Spiritual midwifery* (Gaskin 2002).



“ It is this joy that birth photography captures, and captures regardless of mode of birth — both caesarean and normal birth photographs document wonder and awe”

### **Birth photography as a holistic woman-centred activity**

Birth photography is documenting the experience of normal birth and empowering women to embrace their unique experience of birth in a way that has the potential to deeply challenge how birth is usually portrayed in our culture. The prevailing social images of childbirth tend to be seen through a clinical lens of impending emergency and a medical 'objectification' of women; Davies in her work on birth art argues that '*...until doctors, and society at large, begin to recognise that women's lived experiences of childbearing are worthy and reliable sources of knowledge, women will be denied an experience of childbearing that is meaningful and life enhancing*' (Davies 2007:26). She emphasises the deep impact of imagery and birth art on the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and social well-being of birthing women. Birth photography offers such imagery and seeks to document the event of birth in a holistic manner, often incorporating pictures of the pregnancy at different weeks of gestation, stages of labour, family and friends, the moment of birth, breastfeeding and images of parenting. This type of documentation seeks to convey something of the whole event not simply a few 'snaps' following the birth. Birth photographers usually meet with clients during the pregnancy and will have discussed getting permission from the woman's care provider and planned what to do in the event of an emergency or unplanned event (Stephens 2014).

### **Birth as a graphic event**

Birth photography — while it may be discreet it is also often graphic — it displays the reality of normal labour and birth without soft focus, and for some can be controversial and uncomfortable viewing. Social forums such as *Birth without fear* regularly engage in debate with social media censorship when birth photographs are labelled as 'unsuitable' or pornographic, and images interpreted as sexual and explicit. Many childbirth educators and writers have made a strong connection between sexuality and childbirth, and the 'climactic' nature of the moment of birth (Kitzinger 1987). The film *Orgasmic birth* focuses on the pleasure, satisfaction, and joy of empowered birth (Pascali-Bonaro 2008). The phenomenon of 'joy' at birth has begun to be recognised within midwifery literature as a unique, sacred expression of the experience of birth (Crowther *et al* 2014). It is this joy that birth photography captures, and captures regardless of mode of birth — both caesarean and normal birth photographs document wonder and awe.

The graphic nature of images of birth is a subject area that deserves attention, especially in the context of the modern multi-billion dollar pornography industry. In this context the appropriation of birth photographs by women serves to assert women's control over birth, female power, and over how women's bodies are represented. Social media platforms such as Facebook have come under strong criticism for branding images of birth and home birth as pornographic (Abraham 2014), and the ability of these sites to shutdown proponents of birth imagery under the auspices of social censorship provides much food for thought. The role of pornography, including its unprecedented availability and its addictive nature, in shaping male attitudes to women's bodies and its impact on birthing women is only beginning to be reflected on and urgently needs greater consideration and research (Glenn 2014b).

## Birth photography as a feminist issue

Birth photography impinges on and blurs perceived moral boundaries and can be seen both as a feminist and a political issue, as women take back control of images of their bodies — not as objects for a male audience or objects to be saved by medical science but as birthing bodies which are normal, with birth viewed as a normal social event (Davies 2007). It also has the radical potential to challenge gender stereotypes, as a fundraising calendar which portrayed home birth dads adopting labour and birthing positions discovered last year (Huffington Post 2013). The calendar, brainchild of midwife Kimberley McGuinness-Rook and birth photographer Katie Hall, went viral. Documentary photography also has the capacity to transform postnatal body image as shown in the Ashley Wells Jackson's '4<sup>th</sup> trimester bodies project' which seeks to embrace the physical changes brought about by birth and breastfeeding (Wallwork 2014).

## Implications of birth photography for midwifery

This type of birth imagery has much to offer midwifery practice, particularly in the area of antenatal preparation, the use of photography and images in health care settings, positive body image, in midwifery education and as material for midwifery research. The message of birth photography in a health care setting can be utilised in a way which is 'far from being simply decorative' (Grehan 2007:58) and judicious awareness and sensitivity must be employed to balance the emotional vulnerability of childbearing women with the stimulating potential of the experience of positive and powerful images. The groundswell of interest and use of birth photography indicates that the experience of birth is something that women want to document and to share, and the use of images as a resource and data for midwifery research should be encouraged. Birth photography may also have implications as evidence for litigious purposes which is an issue that needs further consideration.



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For midwives, the birth photographer can also serve as a vital reminder to practise with the woman at the centre of care, as the camera literally looks to the woman and points the lens to her as the focal centre of what is happening during birth.

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