An unflinching look at maternity and childbirth

By Cate McQuaid

WORCESTER — Otto Dix, the German painter best known for savage images of war and unrelenting visions of inhumanity during the Weimar Republic, once told a group of students: “You have to decide, ladies and gentlemen, whether you see people as angels or as bastards like me.”

Dix, who was a beloved teacher, probably wasn’t a bastard, but he was a cynic. Brutally wounded in World War I, he obsessed over the forces of destruction. But he had a corollary fascination with creation. He painted pregnant women throughout his career and was present with a sketchpad at the births of two of his children in the 1920s.

No exhibition has taken up Dix’s preoccupation with pregnancy until now. “With Child: Otto Dix/Carmen Winant,” a sobering, joyful, eye-opening show at the Worcester Art Museum, pairs Dix’s 20th-century work with Winant’s installation made this year, “Ha Hoo . . . Ha Ha Hoo,” an unflinching examination of childbirth.

“With Child,” curated by Marcia Lagerwey, the museum’s former director of education, cuts to the quick. Pregnancy and childbirth are risky, high-stakes, life-changing events — and they are not often seen in art. Death is addressed a thousand times more. That can only be because anything having to do with a woman’s body (other than sex) makes those of us raised in a patriarchy queasy.

Lagerwey was moved to put this show together after the museum’s 2016 acquisition and subsequent display of “The Pregnant Woman,” Dix’s wonderfully frank yet elusive 1931 nude. Visitor response was fervent. Some hated it. Some rejoiced.

In thin paint with a classically reverent hand, Dix renders the model against an empty ground, belly immense over a low drape, breasts resting upon it like plump sacs. Her flesh, her fecundity, cannot be denied.

Her face turns away.

Perhaps Dix didn’t want to distract from the magnificent roundness of the anonymous model’s form. Perhaps her hidden face reflects the interiority of gestation, and the expectant mother’s own inwardness as she attends to that process. Perhaps he was less interested in who she was and more interested in her maternity, which by all appearances is not her first. It’s a discomforting image, and yet a bold declaration, a fertility icon made intimately fleshly.

It hangs beside a gentler painting of the same model by Dix’s student Gussy Hippold-Ahnert. Here we see the woman’s face — serene, eyes closed. Hippold-Ahnert does not drape the model’s naked legs. Still, her depiction is nowhere near as naked as Dix’s.

Dix painted “The Pregnant Woman” during a time of social and economic turmoil in Germany. In the 1920s, he had protested a proposal to criminalize abortion. German policy encouraged families to have many children. His searing 1922 etching “Pregnancy,” which depicts a death-faced pregnant woman standing amid corpse-strewn rubble, argues with any glorification of pregnancy when the world seems at an end.

Yet, also in the 1920s, he watched and sketched as his wife Martha gave birth. His etching of his pudgy-cheeked infant daughter Nelly staring fixedly at the magic of her own fingers is fond yet unsentimental. Nelly grew up to lose four children immediately after their births. She perished of sepsis, possibly after taking drugs to end a pregnancy.

We still don’t talk much about such losses — miscarriages, still births, infant and maternal mortality, which are shockingly high in the United States. Why not? There’s still something unacknowledged and inchoate about birth, one of the most elemental experiences of life, and one that cuts chillingly close to death. It’s messy, bodily, and female. It’s also miraculous and beyond our puny minds to grasp. We simply don’t go there unless we have to.

Dix chose to. It was his nature to wrestle with the blood, grit, and toll of being human. Such things are harrowing and they can approach transcendence. His late nude “Pregnant Woman” (1966), depicting his daughter Katharina König (a half-sister to Nelly), made with thick, scumbled paint and an expressionistic brush, depicts a proud woman, hand on hip, gazing right at us. It seems a final triumph after the struggles and losses in Dix’s life. As if now, three years before his death, it was OK to move forward.

This trajectory prepares us for Winant’s “Ha Hoo . . . Ha Ha Hoo,” a temple of an installation titled after the sound of Lamaze breathing exercises, and a sequel to her installation...
last year at the Museum of Modern Art, “My Birth.” Winant has said that she sees in the turned head of the model in Dix’s 1931 painting the approach and retreat a woman must take toward pain during labor.

In a darkened room, several slide projectors hum and click through more than 480 found photographs of births dating from 1934 to the present. Here, a woman prone on an operating table is administered gas; there, a newborn ushered in by waterbirth hovers submerged, as if flying. In several images, women peer over their bellies, faces softly luminous as they watch their children emerge. Others are dead-on perspectives of crowning newborns.

The cumulative effect of Winant’s unspooling catalog of childbirth is tidal; waves engulf and crash, maybe in a distant echo of labor’s rhythms.

Like Dix, Winant is giving us something more than fact and flesh, something that approaches the terrible, beautiful mythic quality in ushering a new being into the world. “Ha Hoo . . . Ha Ha Hoo” un-masks something our society has made taboo and reveals its holiness. Will it make people uncomfortable? You bet. Holy things do that.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter @cmcq.

**ART REVIEW**

**WITH CHILD: OTTO DIX/ CARMEN WINANT**


A found image included in “With Child: Otto Dix/Carmen Winant.”
A found image (above) and Otto Dix's "Pregnancy" (above right) are part of "With Child: Otto Dix/Carmen Winant."