

Blake Gopnik: "Here's Looking at You Kid". The Globe & Mail, March 18, 2000

Here's looking at you, kid

Lyla Rye's clever video of her six-week-old daughter celebrates the passion of parenthood.

by Blake Gopnik
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Birth. Love. Sex. Death. The "universal human moments" they say great art is meant to commemorate.

Well, recent decades have given us plenty of death art. Sex pictures, too. Even love gets an occasional nod. But birth and babyhood have been sadly neglected. (Dare I venture that it's because they've traditionally been the property of women?) Even when art does take a look at life's beginnings, the view is rarely pretty. Mary Kelly's famous *Post-Partum Document* of 1975 – a compulsive record of life with new-born, including soiled diapers and other nasty bits – was hardly Mother Goose. But now a new video work called *Siren*, by Toronto artist Lyla Rye, celebrates the glories of new parenthood, without ever descending into cloying motherese.

Most viewers first notice the piece, now on show at Toronto's Mercer Union artist-run centre, by its soundtrack. The whole gallery echoes with the quietly nagging sound of a baby crying. (I wonder how the other artists showing in the space feel about this *Siren* song?) Trace the noise to its origins in one corner of the gallery, and you discover a little peephole in the drywall; look through it, and you see the source of the tears. A tiny baby, only six weeks old, has been caught in one continuous, close-up take on video.

Chances are, she won't actually be crying when you take a look. For most of the five-minute loop, the little newborn lies quiet on her back, listening to the sound of some other baby's tears. If you catch the tape at its beginning, you get to watch her almost smiling – gurgling, at least – in a moment of baby calm.

There is nothing more entrancing than a baby's face at rest. Of course, we're all hard-wired to go gaga over those chubby cheeks and tiny, pouty lips. But there's also the fact that you can almost feel the frantic learning going on as she comes to grips with her environment. (One child psychologist has written that, based on learning speed and quantity of knowledge gathered, babies beat out any scientist for smarts.) It's no wonder that the Christian Saviour was often shown as a baby. In a good moment, there's no better, more improbable mix of wisdom and innocent composure than a tiny dot.

But good moments don't last long, unless you've got a truly beatific child.

Even Baby Rye eventually gets fussy, as she begins to react to that other crying infant. (A peek behind the scenes: Rye recorded her baby straight, in the natural progression from smiles to tears that comes when Mom pays more attention to a video camera than to her flesh and blood. Then Rye pushed the soundtrack out of sync, so that you hear her baby's wail even when the footage shows her happy. You read the infant as responding to some other baby's noise, rather than to parental neglect.)

Baby's eyes start getting shifty; her top lip wobbles; her lungs fill up with air as she prepares a yell. And the delicate stasis that is the best of infancy gets shattered once again.

Rye's piece isn't artistic pablum. It captures the glorious enchantment of infant life, but also its terrifying fragility. For all the video's happy innocence, the worry of living on this earth and among others is captured here *in utero*.

Siren is at Mercer Union, 37 Lisgar St., Toronto, until April 8 (416-536-1519).