



EYE MAMA

5ELEVEN speaks with BAFTA nominated filmmaker and photographer Karni Arieli on her newly released book *Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Motherhood*.

words by CHARLIE NEWMAN

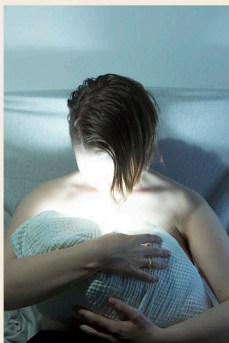
When we were all starved from the delights of the outside world during the Covid-19 pandemic, we hungrily searched for freedom via our phones though we ended up doom-scrolling through social media. Unsurprisingly this didn't make us feel any better. Karni Arieli only saw her fellow mothers on screen, "wearing white and juggling apple pie on their toe whilst raising three kids." This otherworldly online depiction of parenthood, which we often forget is heavily constructed, left other parents, Arieli included, feeling inferior whilst juggling working from home, home-schooling and the relentless anxiety surrounding the effects of the pandemic. "As a photographer and a mother, I couldn't find what I was looking for... it almost felt criminal." And so in 2020 she founded the Eye Mama Project on Instagram as an online platform for sharing an "inclusive picture of motherhood."

Scrolling through her dedicated feed you'll find intimate images of parents and children – but not as you've seen them before. They're gritty and at times difficult to observe but they're also joyful and playful, overwhelming you with the sense of wonder that comes so innately to children. Arieli reflects, "When it's life or death, you tend to not pretty up the reality. You tend to not manufacture things. You tend to be

either creative, bonkers or very truthful because you have nothing to lose and also you haven't got much time."

Previously, major historical events have typically been documented through male eyes. From wars to famines and much more, "There has been little documentation inside the home," but then suddenly we were all trapped indoors during a unique set of circumstances and creativity had to come from within. For Arieli, picking up her camera during the pandemic gave her, "Control of the narrative again. For me that meant I was going to be OK because I could document, think, and get some perspective and power back: I was not in fight-or-flight mode anymore."

Prior to the pandemic, motherhood was not celebrated by the arts, and nor did artistic parents wish to only channel one dimension of their lives at work. Writer and editor, Clorinde Peters writes in her essay, 'Visualising The Labour Of Motherhood', "Collectively, the photographs speak back to the message that mothering is something we do but must hide, something that happens behind closed doors, something that is banal and homey, unintellectual and unflattering." Thanks to the Mama Gaze, motherhood is now, "part of our visual lexicon rather than an aberration from the professional



from left to right. Lara Wilde, Megan Jacobs and Jade Carr-Daley. All images from Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Motherhood.
left page. Asia Werbel. Images from Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Motherhood.

norm.” whilst simultaneously highlighting the juxtaposition of “the intertwined struggle for autonomy within the home sphere and the fight for it in the public space.”

As the followers came flooding in (over 20,000 at the time of print) and with over 50,000 submissions from over 50 countries it became evident that the collective was so much more than an Instagram page and instead needed to be also reincarnated into a book. After a frustrating year of ‘no’s’ and people trying to lead Arieli astray from the powerful message of the Mama Gaze, she found herself on her way to being photographed by the lauded photographer Rankin. Once on set, Rankin quickly praised Arieli for her tireless work. He soon introduced her to the publisher teNeues and finally the book, Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Home And Motherhood was in the right hands.

Eye Mama is divided into four sections, dawn, afternoon, dusk and the witching hours. Throughout each chapter you can feel the energy of the day roar and quell; the cracked red soles of a newborn, tearful exhaustion, a scattered mess of toys, a close crop of breastfeeding, breast milk served in a wine glass, a tangle of limbs sleeping together on a mattress. Whatever your background, every parent and child is familiar with these sights and yet this is the first time they have been collected together. Peters remarks on how, “Motherhood is a profound experience, because while it feels so rare and personal it tethers us to others in its universality. These photographs visualise that bond.”

Eye Mama is a totem of truth amongst the “stereotypical romanticised representation of motherhood,” that we are constantly bombarded with. Behind the gold embossed title of the book you’ll find Arieli’s, what Gloria Steinham calls, “psychic family”, fellow artists and women, her chosen family, universally supporting one another. Arieli firmly believes that, “The power of the Eye Mama is the shared experience, the community. It’s a community that caters to human beings in their entirety: we might not all be mothers, but we were all someone’s child, and we all love and care for somebody.”

We’ve never celebrated and appreciated care, whether that be at home, in schools or in hospitals, as much as we did during the pandemic, and yet still carers are not financially rewarded. Eye Mama gives visibility to the lack of societal and governmental support for mothers. Whether they’re cis women, non-binary, trans, IVF mothers, adoptive mothers, foster or step-parents, or mothers who have miscarried or chosen abortion, Peters writes about how Eye Mama teaches a, “Lesson of visibility that comes from understanding who these photographers are and the complex overlap of care, work and creative labour.” The book also highlights the importance of “bodily autonomy, reproductive choice, childcare, healthcare, paid leave for non-birthing parents, adequate compensation for childcare workers and so much more.”

It says a lot about the compassion and honest practice that so many mothers have felt comfortable enough to give Arieli the liberty to nourish and support the raw and confidential imagery of their home life. As a result, the book is rippling positive waves throughout motherhood for, as Arieli points out, “When you see yourself in other people’s work, you feel seen, you feel connected and you feel less alone.” The media often tackles stories from one narrow angle, but Eye Mama provides a safe space for the madness and magic of motherhood to flourish. Arieli shares, “I think it’s more beautiful to show that duality because I think mothers of the future would benefit from that. I think if I saw a duality that was both beautiful and challenging I would be better equipped for motherhood. I wouldn’t have had such high standards of myself, asking, ‘Why am I the only mum who hasn’t lost the baby weight and isn’t making wicker baskets?’ Like how I felt wild and itchy and hairy and dirty and crazy and animalistic all at once, while being outwardly this human mum.”

In Eye Mama you’ll gaze in awe at the climbing frame, food-giving, warmth-providing body of a mother. A body marked by stretch marks, c-section or mastectomy scars, swathed in compression socks, and carrying future generations forward.