

Opening Remarks  
Perinatal: A Symposium on Birth Practices and Reproductive Rights  
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Good morning and welcome. Thank you all for being here today at Perinatal, a symposium on birth practices and reproductive rights. My name is Jessica Clements, and I'm the organizer of the conference and a graduate student here at George Mason University's School of Art.

The inspiration for today started several years ago in 2003, when I attended my cousin Laura's birth. I didn't know much about childbirth then. Laura wanted a natural birth, but that's not what happened for her: her early labor was slow, and so the doctor used drugs to accelerate it. She gave Laura an epidural to control the pain from the labor-enhancing drugs, and put a monitor in the baby's scalp. Not long after, baby Alexandre was in distress, and Laura was taken to have an emergency c-section.

At the time, this all seemed scary but necessary to me, and I didn't question it. I was nervous for Laura and concerned for her baby. I was sad that things hadn't gone as she'd planned, but relieved they were both okay. Except that in the years that followed, Laura struggled with the events of that day, and I struggled to understand where she was coming from. We talked for hours and hours, as she read about childbirth and cesarean sections. She reported to me the horrible experiences she had talking about her birth with her doctor, the doctor who delivered her baby, and even a counselor. After I hung up the phone when we talked, my husband would look at me quizzically and ask: why is she so upset? She and the baby are okay.

On the surface, so it seemed. But this was not what I was hearing from Laura. Her body had been wounded, and it took years for Laura to recover from the pains of surgery. She was also wounded emotionally: Laura was willing to consider that the cesarean was necessary, but she struggled to come to terms with *how* it had happened, and with her role in the process.

Two years later, when I discovered I was pregnant, I faced childbirth with my eyes wide open. I wanted to know as much as I could about childbirth and the decisions that might need to be made. I wanted to know what was safe about birth, what might go wrong, and how I'd know for sure if there might be a problem. I wanted to know I had a care provider who would be honest with me, who would share with me everything she knew about my situation, and who would trust me to decide what was best for myself and my baby.

I also wanted to know that birth was *possible*. Clearly it had been done before – but it seemed so impossible. All my life, and even when I was pregnant, I heard stories of birth only in terms of ease or pain, and usually shame and discomfort. I wanted to hear what it was really like to give birth, both physically and emotionally: what was labor like, how did birth feel? A crucial question for me was: how did birth look? I couldn't envision this happening to my body, and I needed to know it was possible. I sought out birth stories, and when I couldn't find inspiring or vivid images of childbirth, I started to paint it. As a student, I struggled with working on such a specifically female issue: I worried that I wouldn't be taken seriously as a painter.

When I started to show my paintings, the response was a mixture of support and adamant rejection of the content. I realized that how I felt about birth – my fear of it – was not unique. As a culture, Americans fear childbirth. We don't want to hear about it or see it, and we don't believe that it's something we're capable of understanding. I began to see childbirth stories and childbirth images as essential: without these experiences of birth, women go through their lives, their pregnancies, and even their births, without a vocabulary to talk about what happens in childbirth. This creates a culture of fear and misunderstanding, distrust and even distaste for our bodies. Sometimes, birth goes as planned, and everyone is satisfied. But when it does not, women have no way and virtually no place to talk about it, and no forum to rectify what went wrong for them. They have little hope, even, of avoiding it in future births.

The presentations, discussions, and events today are designed to look at these issues. This culture of fear we have inherited, how did it come about? Why are we still stuck in it in a day and age when we talk about sex with more openness than we have in generations, and when we expect to be involved in other healthcare decisions? What do women need to know as they go into childbirth, so that they come to birth with trust and not fear, but with their eyes open to what they can *truly* expect? How can we create an environment where women can talk about birth without whispering, and without being labeled selfish or bad?

We'll also look at the birth movement. Women have advocated for themselves in childbirth for over a century. What have been the successes and pitfalls for women before us? What is happening today? There seems to be a fierce cultural division right now, with many women advocating for birth rights at the grassroots level – but much apathy and dismissal from establishments. Much of the best research happening in childbirth occurs despite steady opposition from within the academy among those who should be our allies—including women's studies departments. How did this come to be the case? How are things changing?

Most importantly, we'll address the question of how to move forward. At 4pm, we'll have a roundtable of leaders in childbirth research and advocacy – experts on childbirth rights from many fields. We will work to understand the key components of effective legal and political strategies to advance reproductive rights for birthing women.

These discussions that you will hear today matter. At stake are the physical and emotional integrity of countless women – young and old, conservative and liberal, gay and straight, partnered and single; biological mothers, surrogate mothers, working mothers, and mothers who parent full-time. I was fortunate in my life to discover these issues before I became a mother. I was one of the lucky ones who had time to ask questions. But this is rare. Our work here today has the power to improve the lives of countless others: by providing them with information, increasing awareness and availability of options, and changing the social context in which we experience and talk about childbirth. Thank you for joining us today to engage in these important conversations.