

Carriers

Text by Anna Souter

I

To be a carrier is to hold something, to collect and contain it. It could mean a deliberate choice has been made to nurture the thing carried. It could be an unknown condition of being, containing something that does no damage to the holder but might wreak havoc on the recipient. To carry is a fundamental human action – perhaps in the hands, or in the body, or in a vessel designed for the purpose.

Ursula Le Guin has argued that the first human tool was not a spear designed for death, but a carrier bag in which to gather food. While the spear speaks of masculine violence and competition, the carrier bag allows the user to store food for later and, importantly, to gather enough to share with others. It is no coincidence that the phallic spear has been brought to prominence by patriarchal accounts of pre-history, while the womb-shaped bag has been overlooked.

Hannah Rowan's clay torsos are carriers in many senses. They act as temporary shell-like holders for the body, protective breastplates that form of a point of exchange between interior and exterior. Some of them feature vessels for water or perhaps for living plants, imbuing them with a liveliness and positioning them as caretakers in themselves. Several of them also allude explicitly to the transformational experience of carrying a child through pregnancy and breastfeeding, considering the conditions of symbiosis that speak beyond the boundaries of the individual person or even species.

II

Pregnancy, for the most part, is a process of being measured – and often being found wanting. Urine is sampled, carbon monoxide levels are monitored, blood is tested. You are told which vitamins to take, which foods to avoid (blue cheese), and which to limit (tuna and oily fish, watch out for those mercury levels). Medical professionals want to know what is going in and out of your body, in and out of your baby.

The fear is that environmental toxins might build up and do damage to your unborn child. Here, as elsewhere, the responsibility is placed on the mother to take steps to avoid the toxins that suffuse everyday life in the contemporary world, rather than on society or large polluting corporations to reduce those toxins. As Helen Jukes point out in her book *Mother Animal*, avoiding poisonous chemicals is entirely impossible on a personal level; simply to exist in this world is to take in toxins on a molecular level, and

pregnancy inevitably means passing those toxins on to the baby through the placenta and then again later through breastmilk.

Some of Hannah Rowan's work has previously drawn on oyster shells, which also provide a point of reference for this series through the shell-like lustre of the glazes she chooses. Much like layers of ice or the growth rings of a tree, oyster shells can be studied as archives of planetary knowledge, because of the ways in which they build environmental particles (including toxins) into their calcite layers. Oysters engage in a two-way relationship with their surroundings, cleaning and filtering the water, while also acting as warning signals; there are places from which we are warned not to eat the oysters because of ongoing sewage pollution, for instance.

The oyster fits into the palm of a human hand, but in itself it contains an ocean. There is a powerful parallel here to the pregnant body, which like the shell stands as a reader for the health of the environment. A body containing an ocean, an archive for the planet, a warning sensor for the wider damage being done to our shared ecologies. And yet at the same time, pregnancy remains an intensely personal and embodied experience, in which symbiosis becomes a lived reality, both magical and mundane.

Though the torsos in Rowan's *Carriers* series do not directly represent pregnant bodies, they allude to bodily aspects of matrescence, such as milk ducts and the placenta (a complex organ grown anew for each pregnancy, protecting the foetus and conveying nutrients). These nodes of exchange between mother and baby are markers of the porousness of the body, where environmental factors and bodily fluids weave a complex dance of liquid interconnection between beings.

However, these sculptural works are not only relevant to those who have experienced pregnancy or lactation. Instead, these states of being are shown to be synecdoche for a wider truth: that all bodies are porous and fluid, existing in a wildly fluctuating state of interweaving. Pregnancy is not a unique example of symbiosis, but instead evidence that symbiosis is a universal fact of life. Expanding on our perceived definitions of motherhood, care, and kinship, *Carriers* is not only about the maternal body, but about all bodies, and the relationships between those bodies, land, and water.

III

Across the *Carriers* series, Rowan draws out formal parallels between human anatomy and the networked structures of fungi and plants. What reads as a placenta on one piece could also be a tree, transforming elsewhere into the braided Celtic Tree of Life, rich with elemental symbols. Human ribs are swapped out for aloe vera leaves, while on other works milk ducts bloom like flowers at the breast, complex networks of tubes and openings that provide nourishment to the sucking baby. There is an ongoing slippage

between species at play, an invitation to break down the absolute distinctions between self and other insisted upon under the patriarchy.

Many of the networked forms, often traced onto the clay torsos in liquid slip, also resemble structures in the human brain and nervous system. Although we tend to think of the brain as being confined to the protective cavity of the skull, it is in fact tree-like, part of an extended nervous system that stretches like roots or mycorrhiza into every corner of the anatomy. The mind is distributed through the body, communicatory signals spreading diffused like water.

The milk duct has an incredibly powerful relationship with the mind, further indicating the fallacy of the mind/body divide. Merely thinking about breastfeeding or hearing a baby cry can trigger the “let down” reflex; here anatomy refuses to act in a self-contained way, responding instead to what the lactating person eats, drinks, feels, and senses.

The lactating and leaking maternal body is often pressed with padding, shields, or cups, forms of armour designed to catch fluid excretions of blood or milk. When researching this series, Rowan also looked at historical examples of armour designed for women, shaped to fit the breasts and belly. Her breastplates imply vulnerability even as they proclaim strength, since armour wouldn’t be needed if the body underneath weren’t vulnerable and soft. Her chosen material of clay has a similarly contradictory quality, being hard, solid, and smooth, while also being fragile and brittle.

The *Carriers* also speak to the idea of ecdysis – the shedding of old skin or shells by reptiles and insects. Many of the works feature scales or shell-like forms and glazes, suggesting a sense of a body expanding into other bodies, breaking out of a constrictive skin that no longer fits. This series peels back the membrane and draws the inside onto the outside and vice versa: anatomy becomes armour; plant life becomes physiology; the body becomes part of an ongoing interchange.