

John Haber  
in New York City

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### 11.9.18 — NOT WAVING BUT DROWNING

Topics: Aneta Grzeszykowska, Lyles and King

A girl and her mother lie on their backs together, basking in shallow water. Their heads point in opposite directions, side by side, almost nestling in one another's shoulders.

They invite one to join in a moment of intimacy and an afternoon at the lake, only the water is too weedy and murky to provide true solace, and it may be drawing them down. The girl has shut her eyes and opened her mouth, in pleasure or in danger, and what I took for her mother is lifeless and unaware. They could, as in the poem, be "much farther out that you thought / And not waving but drowning." Like the staged photograph, they are also not communing with nature, but questioning the natural.



With her last show, [Aneta Grzeszykowska](#) was literally setting off fireworks. They emerged on video from her mouth, along with much else, and her limbs more often than not lay apart from her, refusing to behave. They spoke to pride at being a woman and making art as a woman, but also the cost. Did she, in retrospect, shout too loudly and focus too much on her abjection and herself? If so, her photographs have found a collaborator in her daughter and grown closer to silence, even with that open mouth,

at [Lyles & King](#) through November 18. And her daughter in turn has found a playmate in a mere image of her mother, a life-size mannequin with neither arms nor legs.

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The series, *Mama*, is all about psychic and body doubles, with the usual creepy overtones after **Surrealism**, **Sigmund Freud**, and his **postmodern followers**. It brings her closer than ever to **Cindy Sherman**—not this time to Sherman's **Untitled Film Stills**, but to her later work, lying ostentatiously and abjectly in rotting leaves like Grzeszykowska and her daughter in the weeds. It also makes explicit the debt to others who play with dismemberment and dolls, like **Laurie Simmons** and Hans Bellmer. Photos of her offspring may bring her closer as well to **Sally Mann**, but with an artist from Poland rather than the rural South. Smearred all over with lipstick, the mannequin even resembles Mann's son with a seriously bloody nose. One just has to accept that both kids are just playing around.

A second series speaks more quietly than before, too. It even enforces silence. Here Grzeszykowska seeks solace not in mothering, but in a fashion accessory meant to revitalize a woman's skin, a beauty mask. And here, too, the promise of creature comforts cuts both ways. A mask, like fashion itself, can offer protection or a place to hide—and one mask does look like equipment for ice hockey or a prop in a slasher movie. Masks can also constrain and confine, and softer beauty masks in fabric fit tightly, with limited gaps for sullen eyes and mouth.

Those, too, could serve for play or as accessories to a crime, like a ski mask for a terrorist. And with both series, play can have sinister overtones. The girl, I want to say, is “just playing with her mother,” and the photographer is “just playing with her little girl.” That can mean playing together or one manipulating the other—exactly what makes Mann so unsettling for many. Meanwhile Mann's children think of themselves as not willfully exposed, but rather taking on a role, and so no doubt does Grzeszykowska's daughter. She gets to apply the lipstick, in purple and red, like a girl's first attempt at smearing on war paint or blood.

The show opens with the *Body Masks*, but it darkens with *Mama* without altogether losing its sense of intimacy and joy. When she takes the legless creature to the lake's shore in a wheelbarrow, she could be sharing a special moment with her mother or about to dispose of the body. The mannequin seems older than the woman herself, with paler hair and icy skin, but also more caring and knowing. The girl seems to appreciate that when she leans her head against its shoulder, eyes closed, or stands behind it with her hands over its eyes. What could be a more innocent game, if also a guessing game, even if I took it at first for Grzeszykowska's contorting herself? Only when she grows up will the child know that she, like Stevie Smith, “was too far out all her life / And not waving but drowning.”