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## hidden mothers

photographer megan jacobs is  
bringing mums back into frame.

WORDS KOREN HELBIG

Photography was a complicated business in the early days. Aside from all the camera twiddling required to get an exposure just right, the subject also had to sit perfectly still for a minute or more to achieve a sharp image. Add a wriggly kid to that mix and, without some careful parental management, you'd end up with little more than a blur for a memory. In the 19th century, photographers devised a peculiar solution to this conundrum: keep mum in shot, but chuck a sheet over her to hide her.

New Mexico artist Megan Jacobs first discovered this odd bit of history via Linda Fregni Nagler's book, *The Hidden Mother*. It's a collection of historical baby portraits, each with a strange human lump lurking in the background – a mother crouched behind the chair, awkwardly obscured by a black sheet or embroidered curtain, holding her child still. "The Victorians were interested in just the baby or the child," Megan says. "In some instances, the mother is cloaked totally in a sheet and there are three children next to her. It's a really haunting collection, in some ways."

Inspired by the book, and as both a photographer and mum herself, Megan decided to create her own take on the hidden mothers idea. "I was really interested in remaking these images in contemporary terms, to look at the unrecognised things mothers do to support and nurture their children. Could this format of the mother being obscured be a visual metaphor?" she says.

After amassing a choice collection of floral vintage sheets – chosen as a nod to traditional forms of femininity and domestic spaces – Megan tapped into a local mothers' group and started inviting women over for photo shoots in her living room. Luckily, most kids weren't at all weirded out by their mum suddenly disappearing beneath a sheet. "It was funny, because so many mums would just do the peekaboo game," Megan says.

In her resulting *Hidden Mothers* photo series, Megan did allow some mums to partially show themselves – maybe just a hand or arm

escaping the sheet she's beneath. That evolution began with a woman named D, who sits alone and childless in her photo, a mop of braided hair spilling down her one exposed arm. Megan initially photographed D with her son and daughter, before learning that she had another little girl who tragically passed away. "I just said, 'I don't even know how to begin to talk about this. This must be so painful for you,'" Megan recalls. "And she said, 'That's been one of the hardest things. People feel like they have to pussyfoot around this, but I want to keep the memory alive. I need to be able to talk about these things.' After that conversation, the photo just felt like a natural fit."

It made Megan question how else she could break the hidden mother mould, allowing each mum's personality to shine through while simultaneously shattering stereotypes. She later depicted one mother entirely covered up aside from her tattooed arms, which are wrapped gently around a toddler. The tattoos might be the antithesis of the wholesome, clean-cut image too often depicted in major mothering magazines, Megan says, but this mum's gesture couldn't be more loving.

In Megan's favourite shot, an arm and breast are revealed as the mother feeds her bub. "It was just so organic. The baby was hungry and Eileen was like, 'I'm going to feed her.' It's this physical communication – she wasn't even looking at her baby, but she just knew. That unspoken relationship is pretty incredible." This year, Megan plans to take more photos to finish the series and "embrace that breaking through the sheet even more".

When exhibiting *Hidden Mothers*, Megan pairs each photo with quotes from historical woman scholars and poets, including Adrienne Rich, Ellen Bass and Audre Lorde. She wants to highlight the joys and tensions of modern motherhood, and the sacrifice of self that being a mum often involves. "I hope people are struck by the beauty of the pieces, but beyond that, I hope they scratch at that visual metaphor of what it means to cover the mother," she says. "I hope it prompts people to ask questions, and strikes a dialogue." ✨



