

# Tamara Zibners

## Studio Visit

By Erika B. Hess

Tamara Zibners was born in Carmichael, California. In 2004 she received her undergraduate degree in Fine Arts from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Through support of a Fulbright Scholarship she moved to Latvia in 2006 and produced a body of work about her family's exile during World War II. In 2011, she received her Masters in Fine Art from the University of New Mexico. She is currently enjoying working in her studio and caring for her child at the Roswell Artist In Residence compound in Roswell, New Mexico.

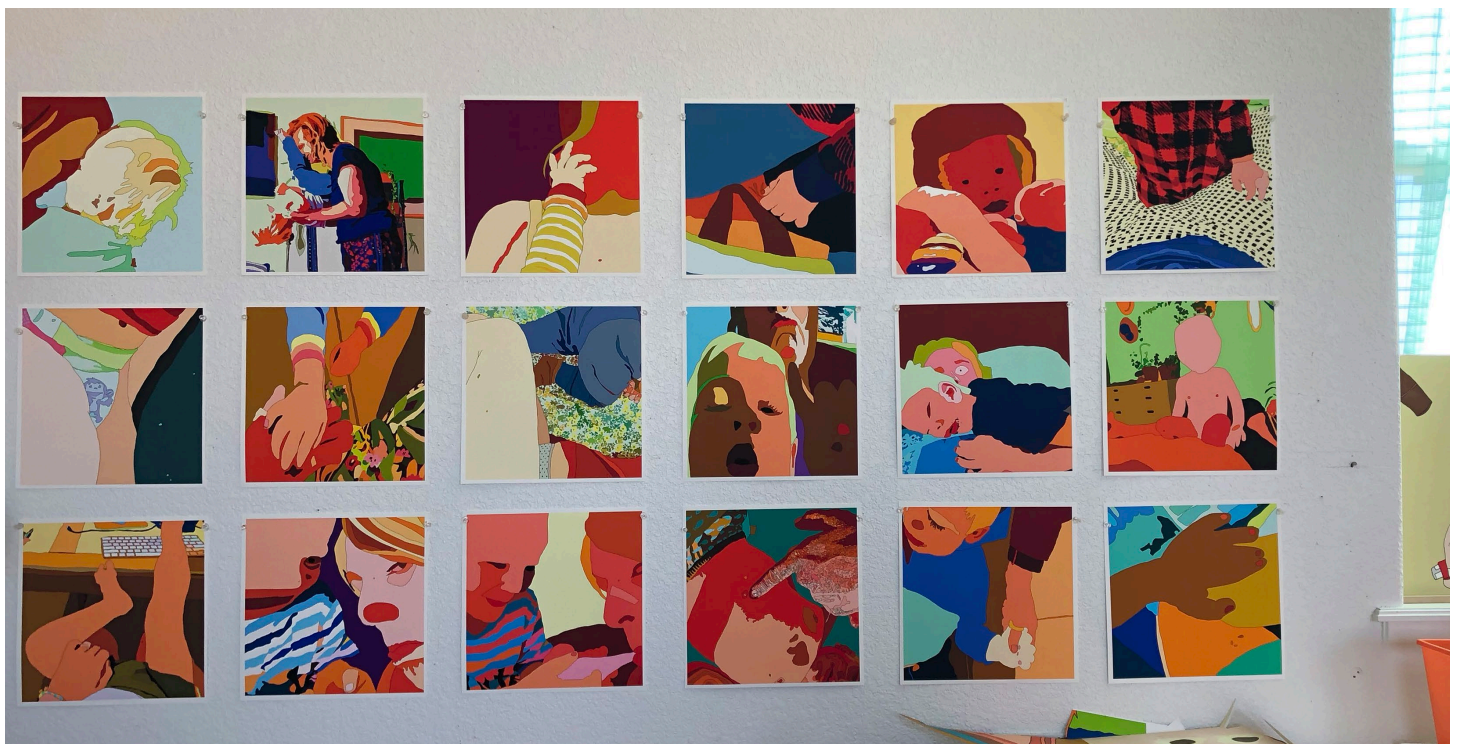
Check out her work at [www.zibners.com](http://www.zibners.com)

into this horrific debacle, I photographed myself and my child...him sleeping, me with my bandages and scar. I realized later that this photograph was a different conversation I was having with my camera and my child. It reflected on our relationship. It also showed my own distant vanity, crushed by nurture.

My current body of work looks at the fleeting period of time during early motherhood where my child and I are constantly physically connected. I create digital drawings by using photographic images as underlays, using the natural colors as a source. I then alter and push the color to enhance or confuse the mood, and amplify the abstract nature of the positive and negative shapes found through defined contours. I intend to create an image that is both recognizable as a domestic snapshot, but is degraded, cartooned and abstracted enough to present a picture that contains as much mild grotesquerie as embedded endearing cuteness.

## Artist Statement

I started photographing my child constantly as soon as he was born. What modern mother doesn't fall into this trap? When he was three months old I broke my shoulder, landing myself in the emergency room for two days, unable to nurse or hold my baby. About a week





*I wanted to start with the process of photography and how it plays into your work. Can you share with us how these images become a starting point for your larger drawings?*

I appreciate this question, because while my work appears as drawings, or painterly collages, the foundation of my practice comes from photography.

Every drawing or collage in my current body of work originally comes from a photograph taken on my phone. When my son and I are in a moment of physical entanglement I start snapping pictures from intimate angles, to capture little gestures of contact—him pinching the skin on the back of my hand for example. Later I'll look through these images and select ones with significant content or with interesting compositions. I then work

on the computer and create digital drawings, which are loose tracings of the original photograph. Under each drawing exists a photographic layer from which the final image is sourced.

To create my large-scale collages, I'm printing my drawings digitally, then I cut them up based on the positive and negative space or the colors within the images, and assemble a new, big picture.

*You work both on large-scale pieces and smaller, more intimate work. I'm curious if the smaller work is preparatory for your larger pieces or if they are separate?*

I really enjoy having work that is small and intimate, and forces the viewer to get up close and peer in. I show a number of the drawings at a small scale, because I think they function well and allow the viewer to have a private moment with the image. The content for my collages at a small scale is very loose. I source scraps of cut up drawings and play with the compositions and the figures the pieces create. I might start with color as my motivation, or one scrap of paper potentially left for dead suddenly looks like a face, and I work from there. In short, the small pieces function on their own, but they do allow me to work quickly, take risks, and continue to build and change them which helps me navigate some of the larger work.

*Can you share how you start one of your larger drawings?*

The large pieces start with a very simple composition I have in my head, I've seen repeated in my drawings, or that appears as I start working with the cut up pieces. The compositions

The work of Tamara Zibners is visually confrontational. It brings to mind a glitched-out movie—half in the past, half in the future, all coexisting in the now. Moments that crash together, create fractured shapes that force the viewer's eye to aggressively move through the piece. We dart through the work being driven by the abstract underlying structure. Then, the work slows us down as we notice a baby's hand. The hand leads to a child's pajamas and the piece restructures itself to reveal intimate moments in a mother's fast paced life. The time in between cereal on the table and grabbing backpacks. When a parent sees their child outside of the frantic to-do list and hopes to suspend time for just a second. Tamara's work becomes a tapestry of these moments.

We live in a time of "Instagram mommies", the aesthetic of perfect motherhood with white walls, and hand-knitted neutral colored bonnets. We get to see the #soblessed moments and miss out on the other slew of experiences new parents have. The work of Tamara Zibners flips this aesthetic on its head. Tamara uses photography of her and her child as a starting point for her work but focuses on the seemingly private moments between mother and child. Nude flesh, pinched skin, open mouths, and the bodies of a mother and child squeezed together for better or worse. The moments in between smiles for the camera reveal vulnerability, rage, love, and frantic attempts to keep a piece of ourselves. By layering fragments of an image, we never get a full view of the person but rather experience the raw feeling of parenthood.



are figurative in that they show a gesture— a grab, a suck, or a kiss. I then create this composition by printing large scale versions of my drawings at 44”x44” and cut them up. I cut along the lines of the original drawing, but break up the image by color, mostly. As I start envisioning the piece with more clarity, the color palette takes shape, and as I need more and more material for the large piece, the palette becomes solidified. I then start building the picture I envision by relying on positive and negative shapes, which don’t always fit my ultimate goal. This mess of shapes and colors allows the pieces to shift and move, ultimately becoming something of a tapestry of detritus. I assemble the cut pieces with matte medium, which functions as a glue and a surface protectant, and as I’m shaping and wetting these large pieces I do feel transported as an artist—suddenly I am a quilter or a baker. It is no longer “just” paper and glue. These materials now move and fold and ultimately get caressed into their final position.

*I’m really interested in your color palette, how do you go about selecting the palette for your work?*

I want the color in my work to evoke a response, be it pleasure or disgust. To arrive at my ultimate color palette is pretty simple. I already described how I start building the original image on the computer, and to add color to my drawing I simply use the eyedropper tool in Photoshop to source the colors from the original photograph. I then crank up the saturation, and start making adjustments to the colors to my liking. I love walking the line of fact and fiction, and so even with my intense color palette there will be references to some pattern in a t-shirt that mimics reality, right next to a skin tone that’s become so hyper-saturated that it appears bloody or disfigured.

I’m currently working on a large collage which will have a loose figuration of two hands reaching. For this piece I am using a color palette of flesh tones: pinks, peaches, a little orange. I love the idea of having monstrous hands grabbing



violently, encased in colors that evoke memories of an apron my mom might have worn baking cookies or furniture in a dollhouse. It's all sweet and sour, and all about color for me.

*You reference cartoons in your drawings. Can you tell us more about these references?*

In working with bright colors and wiggly, cartoonish figures, I am able to construct a picture that appears benign even if the content is dark. This style of drawing also grants me the freedom to share that which may not be "safe", culturally. I've worked in this style of drawing in previous bodies of work including one series based on photographs I would see while I was working as a forensic photographer—a cartoon of a dead body is much more accessible to a viewer than an actual photograph of a dead person, in part because the colors and lines lure the viewer in to a happy space.

In this current body of work, this style of drawing allows me to show some of the more personal themes I am confronting— assault of my body from my son, or his naked body without revealing the real deal. I personally don't want a lot of nude pictures of my son or myself on the internet, but by drawing these images, the image no longer has to be us. Even if my son and I are the reference for

the work, I ultimately don't want the work to be about me and him - the way a photograph would be - rather it can be more of a universal narrative around mother and child.

I am certainly influenced by cartoon artists as well, being enamored by the colors and dark humor of Chris Ware's work, or the vulnerability and feminine rawness depicted in Phoebe Gloeckner's comics. Just this past month, days after the US Capital Insurrection, artist David Shrigley posted on Instagram his picture of a train with the caption "Fast Train to Shitsville". For all of the complex news I had been reading, trying to digest the state of my country, the people around me— this simple cartoon said it all and made me laugh. Even if he wasn't referencing what I was thinking about, it clicked. I thought about it, and it made me consider other simple depictions that "say it all".

*For the past two years, you have been at the Roswell Artist in Residence in Roswell, New Mexico where you and your partner live with your child. Has living at the residency with various artists coming and going impacted your work?*

To clarify, I'm not a resident, my husband, Larry Bob Phillips is the director, and the director lives on the residency grounds, taking care of and managing the residency. I have a strange, and amazing life down here in Roswell, and I do feel my work has been able to grow and flourish in this environment.

For one, I'm surrounded by dedicated artists. Can you imagine your little cul de sac of seven houses all being inhabited by international artists? It's very inspirational to learn from the artists (be it technique or their histories), but it's also been really important for me personally to be around people that are committed to being artists as a philosophy of ultimate life goals.

There are also some very practical benefits of living at this residency. I have access to the facilities (wood shop, metal shop, ceramic studio, printmaking studio, digital print studio) which are all on our compound, just steps away from my front door. This past year we renovated the digital print lab, purchasing a new large format digital printer which has allowed me to create my recent large scale drawings. The best part is that I have a large studio attached to our house to work in whenever I'm not caring for our child or helping out around the compound.

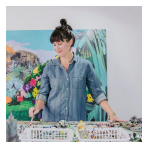
*There is an ongoing conversation about how to make residencies more accessible to mothers and families. Do you have any recommendations on how residencies could make their programs more accessible?*

I suppose other residencies could be more like the Roswell Residency! RAIr has been family-friendly for 54 years. RAIr's founder, Don Anderson, recognized that artists aren't living islands - artists have partners and children. For that reason, any artists applying can be comforted in

knowing that their families are welcome. The residency provides extra stipends for a spouse and each child, and we even have two extra studios for partners. RAIr provides each resident with a three-bedroom house (clearly inviting families) for a whole year - these types of accommodations make RAIr a perfect residency for an artist with kids.

Currently a three-year-old boy is here, son of resident artist Masha Sha (RAiR 2020-2021), Marie Alarcon (RAiR 2021-22) is here with her four-year-old daughter, and this summer, Eric Garcia (RAiR 2021-22) will bring his partner and one-year-old daughter. RAIr's deadline this year is March 15th, and my little boy wants some more friends!

My advice to other residencies is that it may be as simple as saying, "We want artists with kids." The artists with kids will come and help guide the residency as to how it can be more accommodating to families.



*Erika B. Hess,  
artist, curator, host  
I Like Your Work Podcast*

