

interview with Karni Arieli

Founder of Eye Mama Project



**“Little details that build
a bigger story of what it
means to be a mama”**

The Eye Mama Project is a platform for photographs taken by mothers that tell the real story of what life is like through the mama gaze. It is the brainchild of Karni Arieli, a photographer, filmmaker, curator, and mother of two kids aged 9 and 17. In an interview with Charlotte Davidi, she explains why she started the project and how it evolved into a book, *Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Home and Motherhood*.

How did the Eye Mama Project begin?

I'm a mother and an artist, so I follow a lot of women artists on social media. During Covid-19 lockdowns, when we were all in our homes, I was seeing all these women document what was happening in their homes. These images felt like portals into their lives: the baby's crying, and the food's on the floor, and I'm struggling. This is the beauty, this is the pain, and this is how I live.

Seeing these day-to-day images and stories in parallel to my lockdown experience, I felt this great connection and empathy – like a web of connection to thousands of women worldwide, who are mothering and doing art. I saw myself in them, which made me feel less alone. And I was like, why isn't anyone collecting this?

So, I set up the Eye Mama platform, to collect what I call the "Mama Gaze" – self-portraits by mamas of the real world as told by them, looking introspectively into their own families and homes.

What do you think is missing in our current stories and representation of motherhood?

A great many women are struggling to meet the unmeetable representations of motherhood: the all-consumed, all-giving, boobs-and-flesh-and-selfless mother. All those images of women juggling apple pies and their kids, while wearing white linen, looking cute, going out for date night with your partner, and being really thin a month after birth, they all need to come with a disclaimer: "This is fiction!"

If you don't see enough depictions of reality, you think you're the only person in the world struggling with those voices: "I'm a failure. I do this badly." And that leads to really bad places. So, the more we see images of motherhood that aren't of a "perfect"

mama cuddling her happy baby, the better off we'll all be. And that's all to do with society empowering us and nothing to do with us as failures.

Why do mothers need to tell and share more stories about care? Can it help change how undervalued care work is?

When I started the Eye Mama project, it wasn't a political or empowering movement. It was me saying: "I love these images. I want to see more visual stories out there. I want to see dark and light." But yes, we need things that point out that we're putting in the same amount of hours, if not more, as any paid worker does but we're not receiving the societal credit, or being paid, or even being given paid leave from our other jobs.

Why tell the story? Because if social media are today's cave walls and we are the cave people painting on the walls, the storytellers and the cave people need to be mamas as well, carers as well, leaving their stories in the media, books, and popular culture.

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Why is it so hard for mamas to tell their own stories?

The beginning of motherhood is like a rollercoaster: you can't get off and you're just holding tight. So, you're not going to say: "What I need is to empower myself and I shall write a story or make a book." No, you don't have the distance and perspective, you're only going to reflect years later. And by then you might be too tired and too removed from the experience to even bother.

So, we really need other women, and other people who care about care, to tell stories that empower the other carers. Or give them a platform to do so. If my kid wasn't already 5 in lockdown, I wouldn't have been able to do any of this and that's the honest truth.

The Eye Mama platform has created a community of photographer mamas – what stories do they tell?

The beauty of it is that all the stories are the same on one level, but also there's absolutely no singular experience of motherhood. Each mama is telling us about her life and her experience through her

particular lens. Some are very close up because the kid is sitting on your head. Some are further away because you've found a moment of observational time. Some zoom into detail, a nappy on the floor, or the light on the wall, the toys, or yourself within the chaos.



↑ **Playing with the Shadows, Brazil**

Photo: Paula Brandão

This is a picture by an eye mama from Brazil. You don't know if the child is female or male, you don't know if it's light or dark, you don't know if they're dancing or falling, playing or crying. There's movement. There's liveliness, but there's also a bit of scariness and the unknown because it's behind the curtain. Most importantly, it's visual pleasure. It's saying, "Come in, have a look." It's an opening into a world, so go in, have a look, and hopefully something in these stories touches you.

"There's liveliness, but there's also a bit of scariness and the unknown because it's behind the curtain."

→ *Long Days, Short Weeks*
(Self-portrait), Hungary
Photo: Luca Marko

“Nearly all the mamas are saying, *I exist. I’m here.*
To me, that is so powerful.”

↘ *Divided Body*, Indonesia
Photo: Shindy Lestari

↘ *Finished Chapter*, USA
Photo: Bri McDaniel



“Then there are the portraits saying the opposite, *I don’t exist.*”

→ **Hidden Mother: Eileen, USA**
Photo: Megan Jacobs





“There are the dualities, the dark and light; nothing meaningful is one thing.”

← **My Four, Barbados**
Photo: Aniya Emtage Legnaro



“Then there are the funny ones.”

↑ **Uta and Dad (Bathtime Tales), Japan**
Photo: Vika Množina Hashimoto



↑ *Bump as Canvas, USA*
Photo: Jamie Diamond

“The playful
ones.”

↓ **Mutant, Estonia**
Photo: Cloe Jancis



“The ones that say motherhood
without saying motherhood.”





“The ones that embody me as a photographer and a mama.”

← **Self-portrait, UK**
Photo: Imogen Freeland

“The joyfulness and the exhaustion.”

↓ **Entrelazadas, Colombia**
Photo: Paola Lizarazo Peña



“The fantasy and beauty
in everyday details.”

↓ **Vortex, Brazil**
Photo: Andressa Rangel

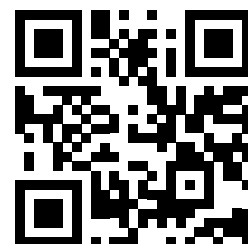




↑ *Look Mum! I Made Some Tiger Soup!*, Greece
Photo: Chrissa Vogiatzi

“The beauty of it all is the little details that build a bigger story of what it means to be a mama. It’s the feeling of motherhood. The realities of care unfiltered. There are plenty of parallels but each one is distinctive. Like *Tiger Soup*. We’ve all been there.”

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-5



Note

More about the Eye Mama project and details of Karni Arieli’s book *Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Home and Motherhood* (2023) can be found at: <https://eyemamaproject.com>