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GOT MILK?: ANI LIU AT CUCHIFRITOS GALLERY + PROJECT SPACE

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Ani Liu, *Untitled (Labor of Love)* (detail), 2022, breastmilk, diaper hydrogel, diaper cotton, glass, mirrored acrylic, spandex fiber.
PHOTO D PETERSCHMIDT

Visitors arrive at [Ani Liu \(https://www.artnews.com/t/ani-liu/\)](https://www.artnews.com/t/ani-liu/)'s show “Ecologies of Care” at [Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space \(https://www.artnews.com/t/cuchifritos-gallery-project-space/\)](https://www.artnews.com/t/cuchifritos-gallery-project-space/) already overwhelmed from having entered through Essex Market, a mazelike configuration of vendors selling produce and items from local artisans. For Liu, whose research-based practice often deals with systems of labor, this entry is not distracting, but fitting.

As in her prior shows, Liu's exhibition has the pristine atmosphere of a space where controlled experiments might take place. *Untitled (Labor of Love)*, 2022, standing against the gallery's back window, is the first work to come into view: a rectangular acrylic sculpture that glistens as it catches and refracts light from outside. Small glass tubes filled with either breastmilk, diaper hydrogel, or diaper cotton populate the horizontal frame—each row representing one hour, each column, one day—diagramming, in order, every feeding and diaper change during Liu's child's first 30 days of life. While nodding to [Mary Kelly](https://www.artnews.com/t/mary-kelly/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/mary-kelly/>)'s *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), in which the artist recorded her son's growth and milestones as well as her inner thoughts as a new mother, Liu's piece documents the labor of early child-rearing in a sort of time sheet, without particular emphasis on the relational dynamic or psychological landscape of mother and child.

Strewn across the gallery floor, *Untitled (Feeding Through Space and Time)*, 2022, comprises loops of tubing that circulate "milk" from a pump inside a pale yellow box. The liquid volume circulating therein is equivalent to the supply that Liu herself would have created over a month's time, nearly six gallons. Although the liquid is an emulsion of oils Liu created to closely resemble the breast milk she fed her son, the viewing experience is visceral. As the pump hums rhythmically, a sense of futility emerges as the milk goes back into the pump and out again. No bottle is being filled here. The flow is merely a measurement of time.



Ani Liu, *Untitled (Feeding Through Space and Time)* (detail), 2022, food grade tubing, liquid pump, air pump, microcontroller, synthetic milk.
Technical consultants: William Liu, Julian Goldman.

PHOTO ANI LIU

Liu's lactic clock points to larger concerns beyond her own production. While breast milk is championed as having the most health benefits for babies, it has also become another means of controlling and shaming mothers who may not have the time, support, or ability

to breastfeed, especially given the common lack of postpartum care. Women in the workplace are often left to pump in their cubicles on lunch breaks, as few employers provide dedicated space or time for it.

While these works suggest a visual companion to women's postpartum experience, they may initially strike a viewer as being cold or mechanized. But Liu's work has the potential to promote more care for mothers by presenting their effort as measurable and knowable rather than shrouded in mystery, overshadowed by the start of a new life, where the attention always shifts. Indeed, visual culture tends to portray new mothers either as hysterics or as peaceful Madonnas gazing lovingly at their young. Liu draws attention to the fuller experience of early motherhood.



Ani Liu, *A.I. Toys (unboxing mania)* (detail), 2021, machine learning algorithm, 3d printed toys, holographic vinyl, collector's case. Research team: Ryan Thorpe, Andrea Li, Michelle Lim, Jenny Zhang
PHOTO BRAD FARWELL

While these milk-focused works are specific to the artist's body and labor, another group of her works here explores the nonhuman future of child-rearing. *A.I. Toys (unboxing mania)*, 2021, and *A.I. Toys (MEGA HAUL RANDOM AND MIXED SURPRISE ULTRA RARE UNBOXING COMPILATION!!!)*, 2022, are part of an ongoing series for which Liu created a machine-learning algorithm to study toys marketed according to gender, and then had the algorithm invent new toys, which she 3D printed, based on the data. The resulting strange objects, called "Silver Scented Pony Hair Barbie Doll" or "Aqua Rider Scoot Knifeman Figure," clearly convey how toys marketed to girls, usually focused on themes of caretaking or grooming, differ from those for boys, which tend to center on machinery and violence. Liu's absurd toys capture how even seemingly innocuous items intended for play reflect oppressive gendered roles, and can be inadvertently passed on to children.

Another work in the exhibition, *Untitled (Milk fat globules)*, 2022, is a circular print on aluminum with scalloped edges, depicting an ambiguous image of small bubbles—partly including a 40 x magnification of Liu's breast milk. The bubbles are milk fat globules surrounded by a tri-layer membrane containing proteins that play a role in building an infant's immune system. While much research has been conducted about the importance of antibodies, oligosaccharides, and DHA for developing children, the significance of this membrane appears less widely known, and homogenization usually removes it; after discovering its extra benefits, some baby formula companies are now reengineering the casing. Liu is interested in the metaphorical implications of this development: women, who are often politically reduced to vessels for carrying children, and who are then expected to raise those kids through overlooked labor, can produce milk that contains unacknowledged carriers of sustenance for their babies. This is not an affirmation of women as vessels nor an assertion that breast milk is the only right option. It is an exhortation to look more closely not only at the unborn, but also at the women who bear them, without turning away.



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