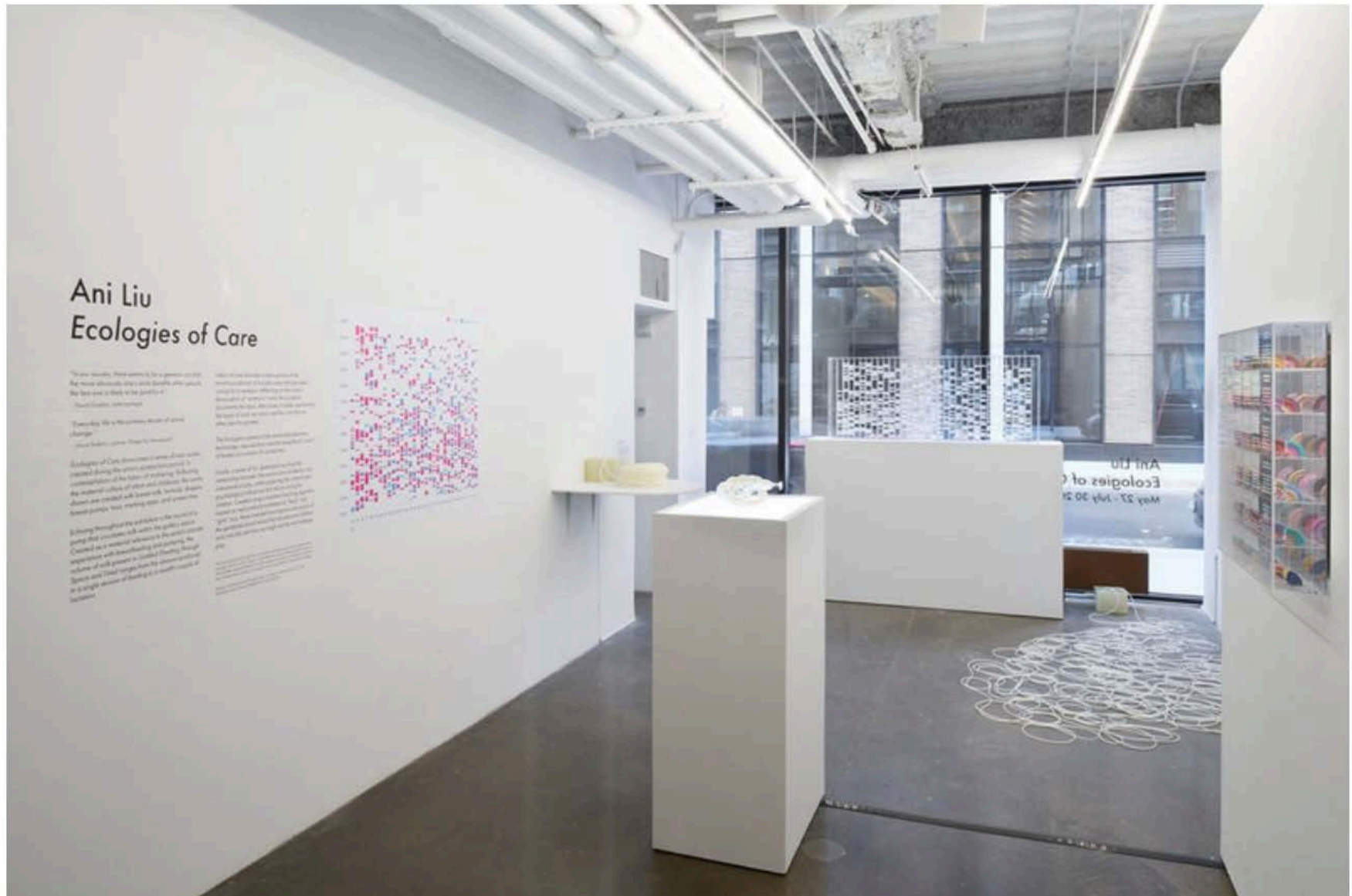


## ArtSeen

# Ani Liu: *Ecologies of Care*

By [Helena Haimes](#)



Installation View: Ani Liu, *Ecologies of Care*, Cuchifritos Gallery, New York, 2022. Photo: Brad Farwell.

ON VIEW

Cuchifritos Gallery +

Project Space

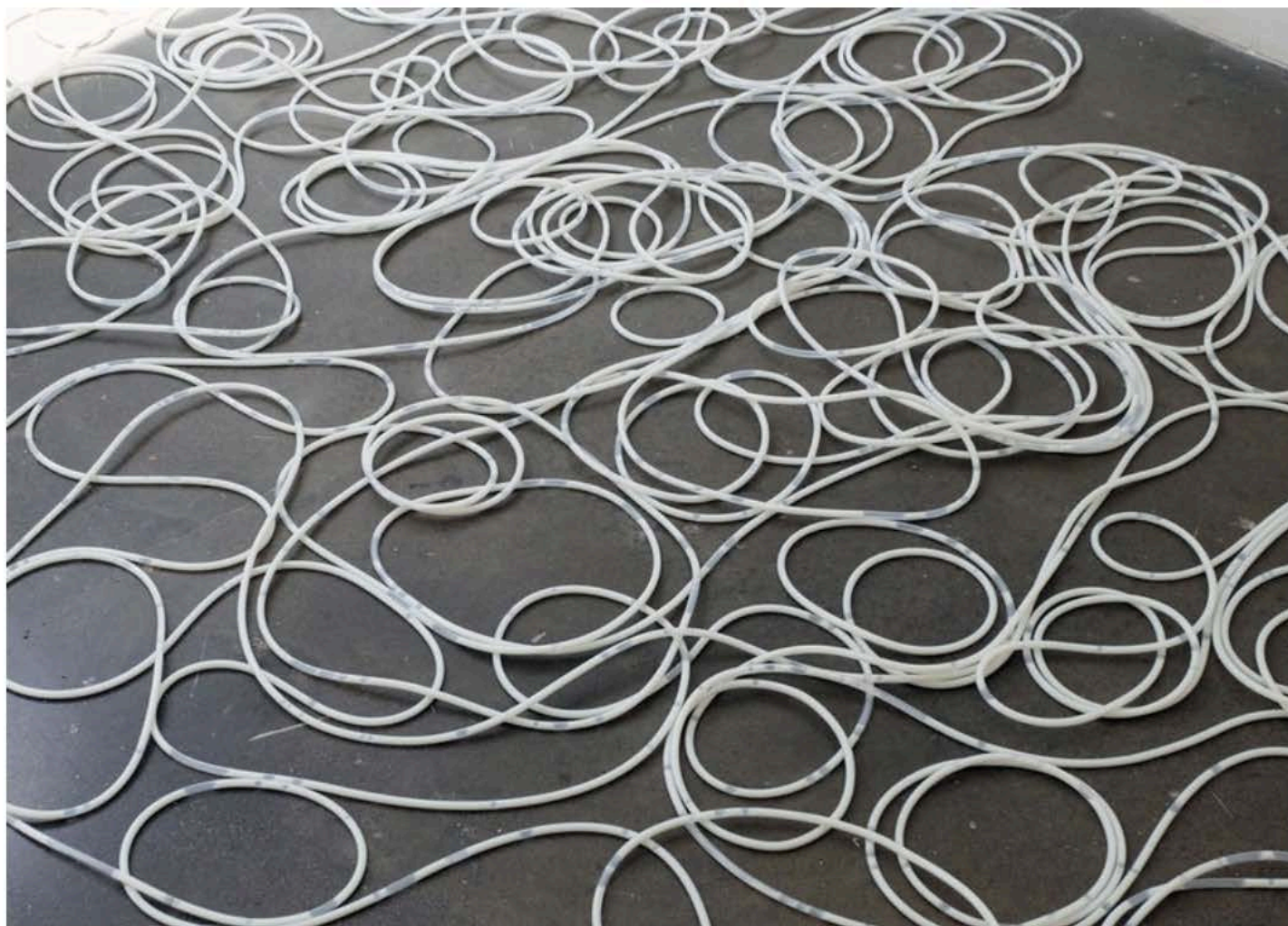
*Ecologies of Care*

May 27 – August 6, 2022

New York

It's no secret that the postpartum period can be extraordinarily tough: physically, mentally, and emotionally. For parents working in the art world, it's also no secret that combining parenthood with a successful artistic career is also exceptionally difficult. For artist mothers or other primary caregivers, there's often a disarming lack of interest, combined with a reluctance to confront systemic limitations and structural issues, all conspiring to ensure the twenty-four-hour intensity of the labor involved in taking care of children remains firmly invisible.

*Ecologies of Care*, Ani Liu's current exhibition at Cuchifritos Gallery and Project Space, uses the language of technology and material culture to confront the all-encompassing, messy, pressured experience that is contemporary motherhood and thrust it front and center.

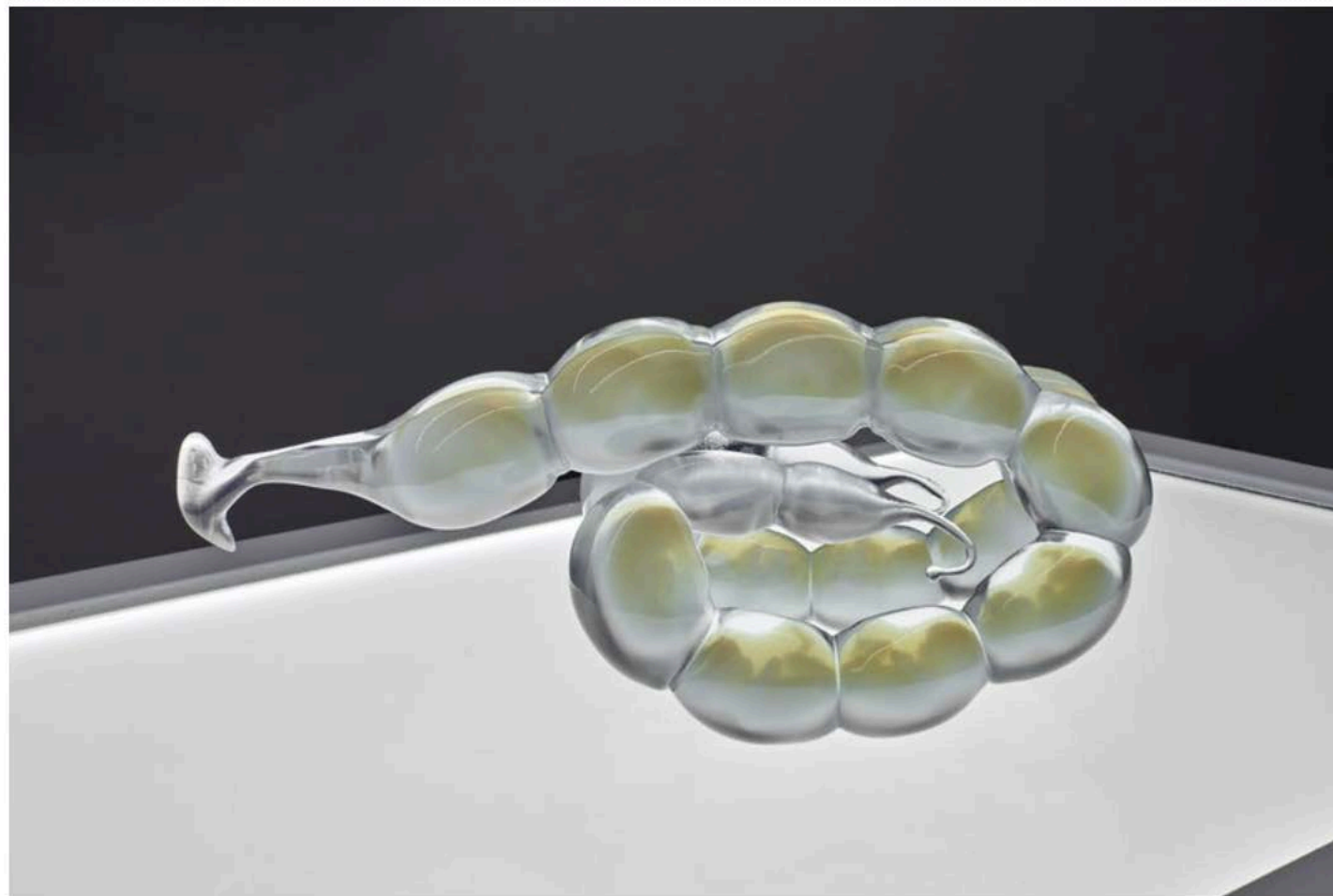


Ani Liu, *Untitled (Feeding Through Space and Time)*, detail, 2022. Courtesy Cuchifritos Gallery, New York.  
Photo: Ani Liu.

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*Untitled (Feeding Through Space and Time)* (all works 2022) dominates the gallery space. Programmed to the same rhythm as Liu's own breast pump, the creamy white box gently pumps the equivalent of a week's worth of Liu's milk (it's synthetic; real breast milk would have quickly started to spoil) through a mass of transparent tubing, spread over the floor like an aerial view of a badly planned road system. The sound is oddly soothing even in its mechanistic cadence—you have to strain to hear it over the hubbub from Essex Market — and bombastically cyborgian. The breastpump as it's conceived here is a pervasive biopolitical tool, often ensuring that lactating women can return to the workplace far sooner than they might if they had the choice; that paid work and caregiving can be undertaken simultaneously, never mind the consequences for mother and child.

Installed in the gallery window so that light streams through it, *Untitled (Labor of Love)* is a data portrait that records every feed and diaper change in the first thirty days after giving birth. Composed of tiny glass vials, some containing misted drops of real breastmilk and diaper hydrogel, the piece is a starkly physical depiction of the sheer time involved in taking care of a newborn. Its clinical, minimalist aesthetic belies its subject matter—grit, sweat, and unrelenting hard work; invisible labor made hauntingly visible. It is also a sharp reminder of parents' increasing reliance on technology, especially smartphone apps. The constant tracking and quantifying of sleep, feeding, pumping, diaper changes, etc. that Liu so boldly represents can be anxiety provoking and stifling for one parent, or provide a comforting sense of control for another.



Ani Liu, *The Surrogacy (bodies are not factories)*, 2022. Courtesy Cuchifritos Gallery, New York. Photo: Brad Farwell.

*The Surrogacy (bodies are not factories)* takes the exhibition into even more controversial biopolitical territory. It depicts tiny human fetuses encased in a 3D-polymer model of a pig's uterus; inspired by real experiments in incubating endangered species. It apparently wants us to reflect on a potential future in which non-human wombs incubate our children, forcing us to confront ethical questions around anthropocentrism, as well as the technologization of reproduction and whether it could lead to true gender equality. There's an urgent, if depressingly obvious, sense of prescience here with contemporary events: the sword hanging over the reproductive rights of millions of women as the Supreme Court prepares to issue a potentially momentous decision on *Roe v. Wade* in the next few days, as I write this.

*A.I. Toys (unboxing mania)* takes on another enormous subject: the societal construction of gender, specifically through the toy industry. Liu and her research team built an A.I. learning algorithm that was trained to invent ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ toys based on real consumer products sold online. Unsurprisingly, the algorithm’s inventions—which take the form of small, multi-colored 3D-printed objects and accompanying texts that border on the nonsensical—tilted strongly towards domestic chores, dolls, animals and jewelry for those aimed at girls, and cars, weapons, electronics and construction toys targeting boys. Amusingly, the language of activism also started to creep into both sets of gendered designs, resulting in such wonderful content as “sign the petition and tell your #herdaughter is going to get a lot of message about her well-being.”

The exhibition as a whole is uncompromisingly sharp, almost clinically so. There are no images of cute babies or depictions of tender moments, and it all hangs together memorably as a result. Liu presents a stark, uncompromising take on the experience of caring for a young baby. It’s actually a remarkably brave move—reluctant as I am to describe it that way. I think most artist-parents would be inclined to agree that art-making and parenthood are horribly difficult to reconcile. In 2022, it’s depressing that this labor remains so invisible to so many that Liu’s work has such an impact by ‘exposing’ it. This eloquent show feels as if it’s part of a broader effort to force the realities of caregiving into public consciousness. I hope it heralds a shift in attitudes, an attempt to carve out some space for these experiences and treat them as worthy of artistic reflection. Motherhood isn’t going anywhere, and the more decent artists treat it as ripe territory for contemplation, the sooner the situation for artist-parents might start to shift for the better.



Ani Liu, *A.I. Toys (unboxing mania)*, 2022. Courtesy Cuchifritos Gallery, New York. Photo: Brad Farwell.

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## Contributor

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**Helena Haimes** is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.