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## Maternity Dress

RISD Museum

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My name is Deborah Johnson. I am a professor of art history, women's studies, and black studies at Providence College. I'm talking about Mimi Smith's *Maternity Dress* of 1966. We should begin our discussion with a statement that may seem both obvious and not obvious. That is that this is not a dress. This is in fact a sculpture. Smith herself has said the following about these dresses, which are in fact sculptures:

“I believed that women knew how to look at clothes, and that if I made sculpture in the form of clothing, I could say something about events and concerns in my life as a young woman, and communicate the shared experience of being female in society.”

Straight out of the starting gate, that's one of the most exciting things about this piece that it addresses certainly her personal concerns as a woman, but especially it introduces iconography subject matter particular to women.

Smith herself said she really didn't know the word nor had particular respect for that political movement of feminism until the 70s, but she clearly is showing here a feminist consciousness.

The personal is the political, especially in feminism. It very much is about the shift in attitudes that Smith is exploring – that we would later call feminist – toward pregnancy.

We have the metaphor of the transparent dome implying that at least on a personal level, the mother can see into her own skin and womb, and reveal the mystery of who and what her child is.

The dome on this dress not only does not conceal in any way, but it draws attention to all of those issues in women's lives; pregnancy, but also the embarrassment that sometimes accompanies issues of female sexuality. It draws attention to it and celebrates it in a way that has much to do with the direction in which feminist art begins to go in the late 60s and early 70s.

*Maternity Dress* recorded by Hilary Treadwell

My name is Hilary Treadwell, and I'm an artist and designer living in Providence, Rhode Island. I also work as a birth doula, which is someone who accompanies women while they have their babies. And I am here today with Mimi Smith's *Maternity Dress*, which she made in 1966.

When I first looked at the dress, I can imagine a pregnant belly filling it, or a belly growing into it. It's a very sort of perfect circle, which some pregnant women have when they carry a baby and, everyone's a different shape, but it's definitely a very caricatured sort of circle. But also, the idea of a woman wearing this—it doesn't seem like the most comfortable dress. So it also seems like a cartoonish sort of version of a pregnant housewife of the era.

I really can't think of very many representations of pregnancy at all in art. I mean, there's, you know, hundreds of years of the Virgin Mary with her son, but not about her as a pregnant person. And the female nude is always, a sort of beautiful or sexual or elegant female nude. So, to me, this is really interesting because it's putting out in art this pregnant belly.

So I do think Mimi Smith addresses all of that sort of hush-hush about pregnancy and about women and their bodies. In this way, that comes across as this sort of funny, whimsical object.

I am Judith Tannenbaum, the curator of contemporary art at the RISD Museum, and I am looking at Mimi Smith's *Maternity Dress*, which was made in 1966. Mimi Smith is a really interesting artist who probably isn't as well-known as she deserves to be. She started working in the 60's, and she actually made this dress for herself when she was pregnant, which is kind of amazing. At the time, women's maternity dresses were very different than they are today; most of them were very full, flowing, they had Peter Pan collars. The idea was to obscure that you were pregnant, basically, as opposed to today, where you see women with very form-fitting maternity clothes. It's prescient in the sense that here she has placed a clear bubble over the area where the baby is, so that she's really drawing attention to it and saying, "There's a baby in here; I want you to see it."

She actually made the dress to fit herself. She made it out of this faux marbled oilcloth material that was used in lots of kitchens at the time for upholstering the chairs, and the tables were kind of a Formica that looked like gray marble. So it's an interesting play, I think—the reference to domesticity. Mimi, as a young woman then, was very aware of how her experiences were quite different from the stereotypes that were promoted for women at the time.

It's interesting seeing it in a museum space, where we actually have objects of clothing that are designed to be worn. This one she could wear, but it wasn't something that she was obviously going to be walking around in too much.