

# Art in America

March 2007

## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### Chris Twomey at Tribes

Chris Twomey's "Madonna" series, consisting of works from 2006, is based on her photographs of fellow moms holding

young children. (Twomey herself is a mother of three.) In some cases, the photos were ink-jet printed at large scale and pasted onto canvas in such a way that the cuddling figures, their heads framed by hand-drawn haloes, evoke Renaissance paintings. Each rapturous, modern-day Mary-and-Jesus hovers against a vaguely celestial-looking backdrop of freehand bars and circles that appear abstract but are in fact portions of something called a mitochondrial chart—an evolutionary tree tracking DNA passed down matrilineally. (This branch of genetics has lately made news with the theory that we all can be traced, via matrilineal genes, to a common female ancestor in Africa.) The seven canvases present a racially diverse group; in each, the background is an imaginary

"close-up" of a larger genetic chart. The details Twomey chooses allow her to locate each mother-and-child pair individually within the globe-spanning matrix of genetic possibilities. A border motif includes maps of the world's continents, each with arrows showing migrations from a common point of origin.



Chris Twomey: *Madonna Series: I*, 2006, ultrachrome ink print, 13 inches square; at Tribes.

This is the artist's second exhibition at Tribes Gallery, an East Village apartment converted into an intriguing salon-exhibition space specializing in socially significant, off-the-beaten-track art. Twomey is a former filmmaker; her photos are accomplished and affecting, but there is a somewhat disconcertingly casual, hand-rendered quality to these images that is at odds with the science-based theme. This theme is also manifest in a digital photo sequence, shown on a monitor, of the mother-and-child pairs fading into one another, as if we could see genetic identity morphing, sci-fi-like, before our eyes. Similarly, 10 still digital photos feature pairs in mid-morph, creating a kind of conglomerate of maternal affection.

In the "Madonna" series, Twomey stresses the distaff side of a genetics story usually told from the patrilineal point of view, although she doesn't explore the politics of this any further. (Twomey's 2002 Tribes installation, *Omni*, also examined science and motherhood, focusing on the belly button, umbilical cord and stem cells.) In spirit, though, these images—visually divided into unequal quadrants, as if by a Christian cross—are modern-day equivalents of Byzantine icons, in which Virgin and Child are surrounded by saints, their attributes and their mortal attendants. Historical icons represented a framework of ideas, the best understanding at the time of the meaning of the universe. Similarly, Twomey's gene mapping offers a present-day formulation of life's mystery.

—Carey Lovelace