

RON MUECK



Ron Mueck's *Pregnant woman*, 2002 is a long term loan to the Maitland Regional Art Gallery from the National Gallery of Australia with support from the Australian Government as part of Sharing the National Collection program.

13 APRIL 2024 — 23 JUNE 2025



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PREGNANT WOMAN

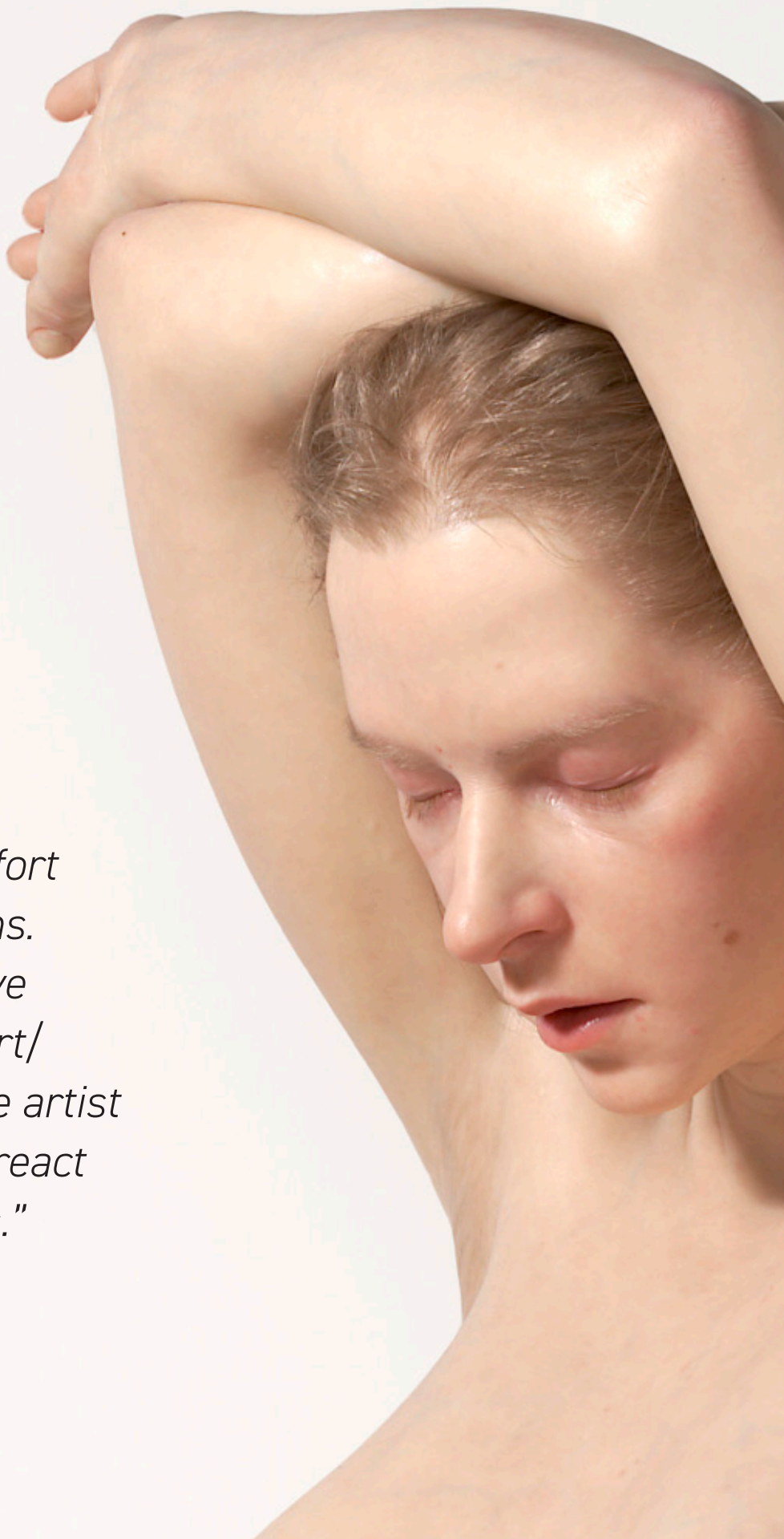
Pregnant woman, is a celebration of the body, growth, the magnitude of birth and the marvel of humanity. We can also recognise it as an example of the ways in which a pregnant woman's body becomes a public entity; exposed, gazed upon, the boundaries of public and private often blurred when visual clues of pregnancy start to show.

This work is a great example of Mueck's artistic practice, an experimentation with both scale and his ability to make us empathise with an object. It is a sculpture created with such great likeness that the viewer's reality is suspended, even though the figure towers over its audience, we are tempted to believe that she is warm to the touch. Simply caught in a moment of introspection, before her child comes earth side, a private moment between her mind, her body and her baby.

"Comfort and discomfort are pretty broad terms. Each viewer will arrive with their own comfort/discomfort levels. The artist makes something to react to... the viewer reacts."

– RON MUECK

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KEY WORDS

- scale
- figure
- pregnancy
- transitions
- birth
- detail
- sculpture
- hyperrealism

KEY THEMES

- context
- scale
- pose
- reality
- bodies
- life
- psychology
- pregnancy
- transition
- cycles

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ron Mueck was born in Melbourne in 1958. His German parents started a small toy making business in Australia, and Mueck often made puppets and creatures in his childhood.

He worked as a window dresser before venturing into model making and puppeteering for children's films and TV shows. In the 1980s, he worked briefly in the USA, at the Henson Muppet Workshop in New York, before moving to London to work on Henson films and TV productions. In the 1990's he began working for advertising agencies, creating realistic props and animatronics for advertising campaigns.

Mueck gained recognition within the art world after collaborating with renowned Portuguese artist Paula Rego. This work, a sculpture of Pinocchio, caught the attention of Charles Saatchi, a prominent art collector and led to an invitation to exhibit at London's Royal Academy of Arts. This is where he exhibited his first significant work, *Dead Dad*, 1997, a small naked sculpture of his father. This cemented his place as one of the most important artists of his generation.

Mueck takes a traditional approach to sculpture, contrasted by his use of modern materials. His works are meticulously sculpted and characterised through manipulation of scale and proportion. They defy realism by portraying characters much larger or smaller than their real-life counterparts. Infused with hyperrealism, his practice is a meditation on the human condition, compelling viewers to empathise and reconsider the intricacies of the human experience.

"I never made life-size figures because it never seemed to be interesting. We meet life-size people every day."

– RON MUECK

SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is your initial response to viewing this work? Make note of any mental, physical and emotional responses and discuss your reactions with a fellow class-mate. How were your reactions similar or different?
- People who view Mueck's work often report an increase of bodily self-awareness, is this something you experienced? Why do you think this happens?
- How do you personally relate to this work? Does it evoke a sense of empathy? What kind of other emotional responses does it elicit, if any?

POSE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Discuss the relationship between the monumental size and presence of the work and the expression and stance of the woman. Are they at odds? Does your initial impression of the work change the longer you spend with the sculpture?
- Try to recreate this position with your own body, how does it make you feel, does your mood change?

ART MAKING

- Create some sketches of *Pregnant woman*, choose different angles, perhaps try and capture the scale of the sculpture by including the architecture of the gallery, or other people in the space.
- Play around with time – 30 second, 1 minute, 2 minutes, 10 minutes.
- Have a look at the level of detail Mueck has created. Using a view finder, focus on one small part of the sculpture and try and capture as much detail as you can.

THINKING ABOUT THE SCULPTURE AS ART

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The work is titled '*Pregnant woman*' rather than having the name of an actual woman, does this affect how the work might be read?
- Is this work a portrait?
- If so, is it a portrait of one or two people?
- Would you argue that this work is Realism or Surrealism? Or both?
- Does *Pregnant woman* fall into the ideal archetype of women within the cannon of art history? Why? Why not?

CREATING PREGNANT WOMAN

"I wanted to make something that a photograph wouldn't do justice to... although I spend a lot of time on the surface, it's the life inside that I want to capture."

– RON MUECK

Mueck takes a traditional approach to sculpture using non-traditional materials. He is able to use and manipulate materials in a way that suspends our reality. When looking at traditional sculpture materials we know how they might feel to the touch, bronze and marble being hard and cool for example. But Mueck makes his sculpture look warm, our reality is suspended, we expect this work to be warm, while also knowing that she is as cold as a marble sculpture would be.

Mueck spent 6 months working with a pregnant model in his studio (the model giving birth before the sculpture was completed). He started with drawings and sketches, experimenting with different poses and learning to visually understand the ratios and dimensions of the pregnant model's body. He also used photographs and anatomy texts books as visual reference.

Creating a maquette out of clay and wire first, he was able to create a miniature version of his vision for the final work. The next step was to create scaled up drawings of piece, to get an idea of size and proportions. He then built a large scaffolding skeleton like base, created out of chicken wire and plaster bandaging. Layering clay onto this base, he was able to build up the surface and create all the minute details on the surface, such as wrinkles and dimples on the skin.

After creating a mould of the clay figure, the final sculpture was cast in fiberglass and silicon. Mueck painted the inner and outer layers of the fiberglass to create the sense of depth and, in a way, this work is both a sculpture and a painting.

Mueck takes about a year in his studio to create his sculptures.

WATCH MORE ABOUT THE PROCESS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTy5cORM3CI>

"[Pregnancy is] just a fact of life. It's a very important part of life and it was neglected. I feel as a subject it is perfectly legitimate, and people out of false modesty, or being sissies, never showed it, but it's a basic fact of life. Also plastically, its very exciting."

- ALICE NEEL

CULTURAL CONTEXT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- This sculpture captures the intense physicality of maternity – are there any other examples you can think of, within art, general pop culture or history, that showcase diverse perspectives on pregnancy, or explore it's physicality, emotional dimensions, or societal implications?
- In what ways could culture and society influence our interpretation of this artwork? How might this interpretation vary based on an individual's cultural background or personal history?
- How does the influence of media contribute to shaping our reactions and responses to Pregnant Woman?



Alice Neel, *Margaret Evans Pregnant*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 57 3/4 × 38 inches (146.7 × 96.5 cm). Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women. © The Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner.



Ron Meuck, *Pregnant Woman*, 2002
Fibreglass, resin, silicone; 252×78×72 cm

VISUALLY ANALYSE AND COMPARE

ALICE NEEL'S PAINTING *MARGARET EVANS PREGNANT*, 1978,
WITH RON MUECK'S *PREGNANT WOMAN*.

Consider things like body position, stance, context, and how the interplay between the male and female gaze shape the artistic portrayal of a pregnant woman. To what extent does the gender of the artist influence the viewer's interpretation of the work? Consider how societal expectations, cultural perspectives, and individual experiences contribute to the nuanced understanding of each of these artworks.

FURTHER LEARNING AND RESEARCH

- Research some of the ways Ron Mueck creates his sculptures: How does he make them look so realistic? List the processes, materials and techniques involved.
- What other sculptures has Mueck made that link to themes of life and birth?
- What other artists have depicted the subject of pregnancy in their practice?

ART MAKING

EXPLORING THE PROCESSES OF RON MUECK

Following Mueck's early-stage processes of making a sculpture and create a miniature marquette working from a series of sketches.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A4 paper, pencils, aluminium foil, pipe cleaners or armature wire, air dry clay, cardboard, scissors. Start by working in pairs – one person will be the model and one will be the artist. As the artist, ask your model to create a variety of shapes or poses with their body. Decide on a pose that you feel is interesting and balanced. Create some simple sketches from 3 different angles; front, back, side and any close ups of details that you feel are important. Things that will be key is joints like elbows and knees as well as the direction and curve of the spine and neck. Time these for two minutes, making sure your model is comfortable and checking if they need to take any breaks. Swap over once your 6 minutes of sketching is complete.

CREATING THE MARQUETTE

Cut a 15x15cm cardboard square to be the base for your model.

Using your sketches as you reference, start to form an armature of the basic shape of your pose using your pipe cleaners or wire – this can be mapped out by figuring out where the skeleton would be. Check that the side on view matches with your side on sketch. You can bulk your armature out with aluminium foil.

Once you are happy with your pipe-cleaner structure, fix it to your cardboard base with wire or hot glue. Take small bits of airdry clay and smooth them onto your armature. Slowly build up the surface, thinking about where the muscles and joints are located. Add any details with clay tools or tooth picks.

Discuss your sculptures with the class. Were they challenging to make? How did you approach scale and proportion?

What would your sculpture be like if it was 2 meters tall? Do you think it would be easier working on a small or a giant scale? Did your pose work well as a sculpture?

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