

A close-up photograph of a honeycomb structure. The cells are filled with a translucent, golden liquid, and the walls are covered in a thick, white foam. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the foam and the clarity of the liquid.

Ilana Harris-Babou

Liquid Gold

January 30– March 5, 2023 Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Ilana Harris-Babou

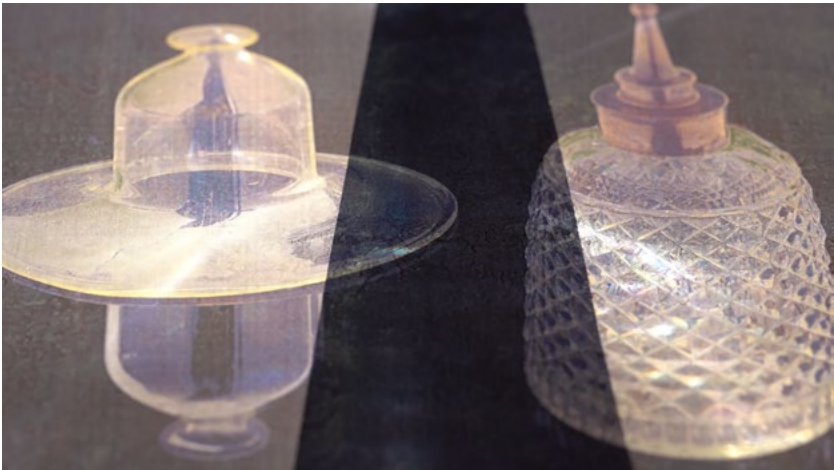
Liquid Gold

Liquid Gold is the first chapter in a series of installations by the artist Ilana Harris-Babou looking at the history of breastfeeding as it has been narrativized, advertised, and suggested for Black mothers in America. Referring to the value assigned to human breast milk, “liquid gold” is another name for colostrum, a fatty nutrient-rich liquid that mothers produce exclusively for the first few days postpartum before breast milk production begins. Colostrum is thick and sticky and can be yellow in color, lending to its nickname. Made up of antibodies, protein, sugar, and fats, it can provide valuable nutrients to the baby and some immunity to the germs in the surrounding environment, to which the mother has also been exposed.¹ Further research on breast milk refers to breast milk not only as “liquid gold” but also breastfeeding as the “gold standard.”²

Like other projects by Harris-Babou, this exhibition, composed of both a video installation and a sculpture, examines the consumerism and complexity of the wellness industry, while bringing attention to the racialized social structures that create the parameters for an individual’s agency in making personal health decisions.

The video component is made with a shallow depth of field, close and textured, constructing an intimate space for viewing in the gallery. Harris-Babou created milky areas—images of foamy, flowing liquid moving through tubes or covering the whole projection screen. Interspersed are images of objects which Harris-Babou moved by hand in front the camera as printed transparencies. At points the images layer over one another creating darker areas where they overlap. This imagery is of historic objects designed to aid in nursing or breastfeeding. The artist found these images, and others of Black mothers breastfeeding, which were sourced from UNICEF materials promoting breastfeeding in Africa, in the Wellcome Collection’s archives.

The sound for the video, calibrated by the artist to the acoustic resonance of the gallery space, contains many different elements including the core melodic content of “All the Pretty Little Horses,” a traditional American lullaby, thought to be of African-American origin. The video begins with a soft melody played on a harp. At points through the video Harris-Babou can be heard humming the lullaby while in other moments her mother, her sister, herself, and her niece take turns singing the song. Even before Harris-Babou begins singing the words to the song, a soft heartbeat emerges from the din. In studying lullabies, the artist noticed that while some recordings of lullabies are symphonic and disembodied. Those that captured her interest instead represented the natal experience of a lullaby—as an intimate closeness between the singer and child.



Still image from Ilana Harris-Babou, *Liquid Gold*, 2023, HD video, 14:35 min. Courtesy of the artist.

With the infant’s body against the singer’s body, the sound and vibration of the singer’s heartbeat becomes an important component of the baby’s listening experience. The percussionist/acupuncturist/herbalist/martial artist/programmer Milford Graves’ studies of the healing potential of heartbeats were influential on Harris-Babou in thinking about the sound in *Liquid Gold*. As a drummer, Graves studied people’s heart rhythms, creating portraits of people’s hearts. He became interested in the variations in cardiac activity from one person to the next. Studying the hearts of those Graves played music with, he hoped to create music that would be more fitting to their temperaments. Graves also studied the hearts of those who were ill expecting to find displeasing rhythms. Instead he found the opposite, explaining, “When people are ill, they should have fantastic, beautiful melodies...your internal doctor is trying to heal you.”³

The healing potential of the heart was not limited to addressing diagnosed illness. Graves also noticed the effects of the systemic stress caused by enduring racism as a Black person living in America —the direct links between structural systems and the most intimate of our individual experiences, our heartbeats. Harris-Babou’s work moves in this space between personal choices and structural systems. The presence of a designed interior viewing area with a color-matched rug, pillows, and canvas-covered shades reminds us of the totalized viewpoint of an art installation. In this context, Harris-Babou’s use of humor, personal stories, and pathos bring a critical distance to dominant narratives.

In early research for this piece, Harris-Babou started collecting samples of humming voices, including the humming in Bill Withers’ “Grandma’s Hands” (1971) and its sampling in “No Diggity” (1996) by Blackstreet (feat. Dr. Dre and Queen Pen). Harris-Babou asked her mother and her sister to hum lullabies that they remembered. Her mother hummed the tune of “All the Pretty Horses” and recalled being sung the song by her mother (Harris-Babou’s grandmother). At the time she was being raised in a mansion in Connecticut, while her mother cared for the white children of the household. “All the Pretty Little Horses,” also known as “Hush-a-bye,” is commonly understood to be a lullaby that originated in the American South, sung by enslaved Black women to the white children in their care while their own children were left uncared for and unprotected. To the white children of the master, to whom the song is addressed, the “Mammy’s” lyrics reassure them that when they awake, they will have anything they wish if they will just fall asleep:

Hushaby,
Don’t you cry,
Go to sleepy, little baby
When you wake,
You shall have
All the pretty little horses⁴

Some documented variations of the song promise “a little cake” or all of the ponies “in the stable” to the white child.⁵ In the second verse, which is not sung in *Liquid Gold*, “lambie” refers to the “Mammy’s” own child who is out, exposed to the elements, and perhaps, not alive:

Way down yonder
In de medder
There’s a po’ lil lambie,
De bees an’ de butterflies
Peckin’ out its eyes,
De po’ lil thing cried, “Mammy!”⁶

The conditions of enslavement forced the Black nurse to “lavish more affection—or at least more demonstration of affection—on her white charges than on her own children,”⁷ leaving their own children to be raised more communally amongst the enslaved community on the property. This “lambie” didn’t survive those conditions. And yet the song communicates more than just the tragic narrative content of the lyrics. Many contemporary arrangements set “All the Pretty Horses” in e minor, the last line of each stanza landing on the tonic, communicating a deep melancholia and sadness, while promising to the white child the fulfillment of any material goods that they could desire.

In Harris-Babou’s video *Decision Fatigue* (2020), not included in this presentation, her mother, as the central protagonist, gives beautification advice while applying makeup in front of a mirror. Amidst dispensing advice about how to make choices and remain young, she also provides advice about how her beautification regiment doesn’t allow for breastfeeding, “When you breastfeed, your life force is drained from you. It’s drained. It’s being taken away. It’s metaphysical in fact. Eventually I’ve been told that it doesn’t cause that much of a physical reaction on your part in terms of pain, but my personal experiences have been to the contrary. Your breasts become very, very swollen and hard, and tender. The nipples become crusted sometimes and they invert. And it causes, for me, a frustration that I just can’t deal with it.”⁸

As the narrator in *Decision Fatigue*, Harris-Babou’s mother is unreliable. Her dialog fluctuates between the plausible and the absurd—later in the video she makes and applies a mask out of Cheetos. Yet there’s truth in her statements as well. As Harris-Babou reflects, “in the video, when she describes feeling disgusted by breastfeeding, it’s implicit that she was disgusted by breastfeeding me.”⁹ In *Liquid Gold*, Harris-Babou’s mother shares more about her decision not to breastfeed her daughter and about how this differed from how she was raised. She recounts the story she heard from her own mother of how, as a young child, she nursed all the way from New Orleans to New York City when they relocated. Harris-Babou’s sister recounts how she defaulted to using formula with her own child until it became clear that switching to breastfeeding could save her own daughter’s life.¹⁰ She also remembers as a teenager adding Hershey’s chocolate syrup to her younger sister’s (Harris-Babou’s) formula. In the narration, Harris-Babou’s mother explains making a personal decision about using formula while her sister’s explanation of her decision-making process is different, “I sort of feel the decision was more about circumstances and it was more of her health condition made the decision for me.”¹¹



Still image from Ilana Harris-Babou, *Liquid Gold*, 2023, HD video, 14:35 min.
Courtesy of the artist.

In *Skimmed: Breastfeeding, Race, and Injustice*, Andrea Freeman tells the story of the world's first recorded identical quadruplets birthed by Black Cherokee woman Annie Mae Fultz. Fred Klenner, the doctor who aided Fultz in the birth, saw a career opportunity with the publicity. He experimented on the babies with Vitamin C injections and also named the four girls after women in his family, beginning a pathway that led to removing the babies from their mother's custody. Klenner then negotiated with formula companies for sponsorship. He selected the Pet Milk company and they began a formula advertising campaign directed at Black families, the first to market anything other than alcohol, tobacco, or beauty products.¹²

Freeman explains the inter-marriage of U.S. government policies and corporate campaigns which lead to subsidies for low-income mothers to purchase formula. Since Michelle Obama's publicity campaign for breastfeeding and Obama-era federal mandates withholding WIC benefits until mothers have taken breastfeeding training, there has been increased public health pressure for Black mothers to breastfeed. Black mothers still use formula more than White mothers today. Freeman explains that "Black women and children suffer from conditions and diseases linked to formula feeding at significantly higher rates" and links these disparities not to a lack of education or to cultural preferences, but sees them as a reflection of the "absence of choice created by government policies and unaccommodating social structures."¹³ Jennifer C. Nash summarizes Freeman's notion of Black mothers' agency within *Birthing Black Mothers*, "this constellation of state efforts has a particular effect on Black women

who are often interpreted as ‘choosing’ formula when they are actually operating under a set of intense constraints that eviscerate their capacities for ‘choice and free will.’”¹⁴

In the catalog accompanying the eponymously-titled exhibition *Designing Motherhood*, authors Michelle Millar Fisher and Amber Winick are clear to state there is no one experience of motherhood. What does appear as a commonality is that the designs and designed objects surrounding birth are “too often kept out of sight and out of mind unless they are required.”¹⁵ For *Liquid Gold*, Harris-Babou made a series of small ceramic objects and installed them on a canvas-covered table in the passageway approaching the video. These are playful renditions of designed objects, removed or relieved of their function. One device that appears reproduced in ceramic, and is also pictured in the video, are glass nipple shields.¹⁶ Designed to aid mothers in breastfeeding and to protect the mother’s nipple from flattening or biting, these Victorian era devices were ironically never popular with mothers, serving only to separate them from their infant.

Tubes running through some of the objects and over others carry a white liquid, pumped in and out of a larger vessel on the table. A stand-in for breast milk, this milky substance echoes the projected images of milk in the video, and like breast milk, it’s also uniquely subjective and terrifically ordinary. Representations of breastfeeding/nursing touches on one of the most intimate experiences of our lives and is also a point of contact between structural systems and individuals. In speaking of her working method around a past project, Harris-Babou shared: “I take a viewer along that journey with me and go from something seeming familiar and safe, to some kind of grand narrative seeming authentic, to realizing that it’s actually totally weird.”¹⁷

—Benjamin Chaffee

NOTES

- 1 More information about colostrum can be found here: <https://www.llli.org/breastfeeding-info/colostrum-general/>
- 2 <https://nihrecord.nih.gov/2016/04/22/breast-milk-%E2%80%98liquid-gold%E2%80%99-infants-hinde-says>
- 3 Milford Graves quoted in John Corbett, "Pulseology," Mark Christman, Celeste DiNucci, and Anthony Elms, eds. *Milford Graves: A Mind-Body Deal*. Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2022, p.55.
- 4 Dorothy Scarborough. *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925, pgs. 146-7.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax. *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967, p.305.
- 7 Scarborough, p.146.
- 8 Ilana Harris-Babou, *Decision Fatigue*, 2020, HD video, Edition of 3.
- 9 Ilana Harris Babou, "Camille Henrot in conversation with Ilana Harris-Babou," *e-flux*, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/479414/decision-fatigue/>
- 10 In *Liquid Gold*, Harris-Babou's sister explains how her daughter was diagnosed with Achalasia at birth, a rare condition that makes it difficult to pass solids and liquids into the stomach. Her newly-born child was spitting up formula and losing weight until they tried breastfeeding, which her baby was able to tolerate.
- 11 Ilana Harris-Babou, *Liquid Gold*, 2023, HD video.
- 12 Andrea Freeman. *Skimmed: Breastfeeding, Race, and Injustice*. Stanford University Press, 2020.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.4.
- 14 Jennifer C. Nash. *Birthing Black Mothers*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, p.38.
- 15 Michelle Millar Fisher and Amber Winick. *Designing Motherhood*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021, p.15.
- 16 Examples can be found in Fisher and Winick, pp.157-158.
- 17 Courtney McClellan, "Fantasies of Creation: In Conversation with Ilana Harris-Babou." *Burnaway*, September 13, 2021, <https://burnaway.org/magazine/fantasies-of-creation/>.

Ilana Harris-Babou

(b. 1991, Brooklyn, New York)

Ilana Harris-Babou lives and works in Brooklyn and Middletown, Connecticut. She has a new video work that will be exhibited as part of the group show *Milk* at the Wellcome Collection, London (2023). She has presented solo exhibitions of her work at institutions including Artspace New Haven (2022); Kunsthaus Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany (2021); Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland (2021); Jacob Lawrence Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle (2020); and The Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York (2017). Her work has been featured in group exhibitions including *Contact Traces*, California College of the Arts Wattis Institute, San Francisco, California (2021); *Care Box*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2021); and *After the Plaster Foundation*, Queens Museum, Corona, New York (2020). She has participated in major exhibitions including the Istanbul Design Biennial, Turkey (2020); and the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York (2019). Harris-Babou is an Assistant Professor of Art and Luther Gregg Sullivan Fellow in Art at Wesleyan University.

CHECKLIST

Ilana Harris-Babou

Liquid Gold

2023

HD video

14:35 min.

Ilana Harris-Babou

Untitled sculpture from Liquid Gold

2023

Glazed ceramic, wood, canvas, silicone, pump, water, pigment

Dimensions variable

RELATED EVENTS

Opening Reception

Monday, January 30, 2023 at 4:30pm

Curator and artist remarks at 5:00pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Artist talk by Ilana Harris-Babou

Wednesday, February 15, 2023 at 4:30pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Cover image:

Still image (detail) from Ilana Harris-Babou, *Liquid Gold*, 2023, HD video, 14:35 min.

Courtesy of the artist.

Curated by Benjamin Chaffee. Art installation by Paul Theriault and exhibition management by Rosemary Lennox. Special thanks to Ilana Harris-Babou, Andrew Chatfield, John Elmore, and Tony Hernandez. Sound and production support was provided by Reese Chahal and Anna Clock. Production and exhibition support provided by the Sullivan Fellowship in the Studio Art Program.



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