

ARTS

Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design show makes infertility visible



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No matter which entrance you take to see it, "In a State of IF" is a swiftly visceral exhibit.

Dozens of local artists, each with their own story of infertility, showcase raw tributes to the immeasurable grief of child loss and the often invisible labor of overcoming infertility, in an exhibit now on view at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.

Curated by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor Maria Novotny and guest curator Katherine Gressel, "In a State of IF" seeks to make visible the meticulous struggle of building a family, with a particular focus on Wisconsinites. The show features art across mediums, including photography, sculpture, painting, film and audio recordings.

Novotny, co-director of the national arts organization [The ART of Infertility](#), has been mounting reproductive health exhibitions across the country since before the pandemic.

Now 40 and the mother of a 7-year-old daughter she and her husband adopted in 2019, Novotny's work began as a 24-year old graduate student and wife facing an unexplained infertility diagnosis with no health insurance.

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She'd come from a big family. Novotny was the oldest of six, and her mother conceived easily in her 40s.

"No one was talking about this back then," Novotny said. "This was in the era when people were really blogging about their infertility, like that was the thing. It wasn't covered even in the same way that it is now."

She started a support group with others who had received infertility diagnoses, and at the encouragement of one of her graduate instructors, she attended a larger gathering on reproductive health in Washington, D.C., in 2014.

"That really struck a chord with me that you could take a lot of the pain and the grief that you were carrying, and isolation, and work with these larger community advocacy organizations to feel not just less alone, but really to take that grief and move it towards action for good and collective recognition," Novotny said.

She believes art possesses the same power to channel grief into something positive.

She says that despite all the blog posts she read about infertility in the early years after her diagnosis, art was able to communicate a level of emotional depth that words could not.

In the MIAD show, several works seem to bridge the gap that words cannot reach.

There is the loud silence of Crystal Tursich's photograph of an empty rocking chair, for example.

In the haunting image, the chair is placed before a barren wall, its footstool stacked with children's books and an heirloom Winnie the Pooh plushie. Aptly titled "Things We Saved," the photograph reflects on the singular emptiness of returning home without the child you filled the home for. The image bears the grief of seeing objects that were meant to hold so many memories, now sitting idle and untouched.

There are also Alexis M. Neider's raw self-portraits, where she is seen giving herself routine hormone injections. Its paired portrait, deliberately unseemly, honors the

less than glamorous physicality of infertility, as the figure is seen placing a hand in her rectum.

Though Neider has identified herself as the figure, her face is covered by a mask, and her breasts are hidden under pieces of fruit. As she makes the arduous nature of in vitro fertilization visible, she admits a creeping sense of shame and refuses to completely relinquish her privacy.

The exhibit, free and open to the public, establishes an intergenerational dialogue about infertility. One work, created by a college student, is derived from the pages of her mother's infertility journals. The young artist created butterflies from the pages to represent the metamorphosis of her mom's grief in infertility transformed as she ultimately bears a child.

MIAD students will respond to the exhibit in a course this fall, collectively creating a digital collage based on a featured artwork. Then, students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee will respond to the collage with prose, in Novotny's spring course, "Engagement with the Reproductive Arts."

The public is also encouraged to engage with the exhibit through a few interactive pieces, including a historical timeline of reproductive legislation where visitors can tack personal experiences to a particular year, and a garland where visitors are invited to tie messages about access to reproductive healthcare and family planning. The League of Women Voters of Milwaukee County, who contributed the garland, will take the messages to Madison to lobby for legislation that supports a woman's right to choose.

Though certain reproductive freedoms remain legal in Wisconsin – abortion being the most notable among them in, the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson* – Novotny and Gressel note that insurers are not mandated to cover fertility treatments for families. With this exhibit, they hope that by bringing the fertility process out from the shadowed private space into the public realm, it might increase empathy around patients' experiences and needs.

If you go

The exhibit, housed in MIAD's Frederick Layton Gallery, 273 E. Erie St., is on view through Nov 21. Visit the free galleries from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

Anya Sesay covers arts and culture for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Send her story ideas, things to see and people to meet at asesay@usatodayco.com. Follow her on Instagram [@anyanicolette](https://www.instagram.com/anyanicolette).

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