



Roberta Trentin, Bios/βίος series (2012 –2015).

A Narrative of Warmth

Roberta Trentin

Life is ubiquitous, but none is closer to us than our own. Sometimes a consideration of life in general, or in the form of 'the other', can uncover what might normally be taken for granted. In this interview, Roberta Trentin asks how a juxtaposition between microbial and familial growth creates a fulcrum around which the passage of time, values, and nurture can be observed.

In your Bios/βίος series (2012–2015), photographic portraits capture your family in a process of growth and transformation. The parallel that emerges in the works between microbial and familial life is an unusual one, especially in such an intimate context. What is the comparison you wish to draw between the notion of family and this living media?

When a family is created, a new entity is born, and different layers are built on top of each other. These layers consist of the emotions, hopes, needs, and efforts that propagate within that new entity. Atop these elements, there is the pivot of all – time. With time, the interactions within the new entity become more dynamic, and time translates into co-existence: there is harmony, collaboration, understanding, learning, but also conflict and tension. With time, the entity grows because the individual components do. Further, just like any living organism you might experience growing, a family needs warmth, nurturing attention, space (nurturing my own as a parent and allowing it to my kids to be what they like to be), and protection. Lastly, there is a macro concept here around survival, a central driving

motivation for all species: Mould reproduces through spreading spores just as we perpetuate our species through the creation of the next generation, each subject to evolutionary pressures and the action of natural selection. These are the foundations that help us thrive as a family and unfold as values that will propagate with the new generations within the family. Growth is brought on by a passage of love and deeply held values.

The juxtaposition I use between microbial and familial growth to explore these ideas is now a critical one in my work. You would need to look at my work from the year 2012 up to the present to really grasp the concept of growth that I am trying to invoke; the *Bios/ βίος* series is revealing in this way. Under development since 2012, the project looks at the concept of growth within a family – *my own family*. During my year at the International Center of Photography in New York, I came across the work of Elinor Carucci; I loved her aesthetics and the way I could feel the warmth of motherhood and family. Inspired by her approach, I started to explore the narrative of my own family and the deeper connection between myself, my partner, and the child we ‘created’. For the first time, I had a clear feeling of wholeness built by unique and single parts. That is when I thought of us as a ‘microorganism’ colony, an entity for the first time! In *Bios/βίος*, having a living organism superimposed onto family portraits is the key to showing the different concepts of growth I am interested in. When I apply mould to the plate, which contains nutritive agar, it takes only up to a few hours for the mould to start growing. The medium and the warm temperature of my home generate good growth conditions for mould. The plate itself becomes a home for growth, in parallel to my own family home. Lastly, a still photograph captures an exact moment in time, whereas the presence of the growing organism on top of the still photograph renders the work a truly dynamic and lively ensemble, suggesting familial growth in the background. Physical, conceptual, and emotional layers come together; their two-dimensional stillness loosens up and allows flow to take place.

The human microbiome is a unique identifier for us individually and collectively. It is, in part, acquired through birth and subject to our daily interactions with others. *Bios/βίος* 2014 captures you at a late stage of pregnancy; it seems to speak both to this microbial connection between mother and child, but also of danger, contagion, and infection?

While I was pregnant, I found myself thinking profoundly about my growing womb. There was growth within growth, and, cell after cell, a new life formed. That was the reason why I placed the mould on top of my belly in that work. Also, I wanted to reveal and showcase my particular beliefs about mould. People are used to looking at mould as something contagious and unhealthy, and often associate it only with rotten and decaying food. In some cases, it is true that it is unhealthy, for example, when you are co-existing with black mould. However, my understanding of mould is that it is an organism that lives and grows; its life cycle interacts with the surrounding environment and – like all living matter – it manifests under certain conditions. Mould grows spore after spore. Once a spore lands on a surface, it searches for water and nutrients to feed off. As the spore takes root, it begins to spread and create more spores and spread quickly over the surface. This process easily reminded me of the pregnancy stage of conception and implantation of the human embryo into the womb.

Another thing that I have often heard regarding my work is the term decay. However, the only decay that I perceive from my work is the one represented by my growing family. We start ageing the moment we are conceived and the life cycle applies to us just as simply as with any other living organism (and no matter how complex the organism is). Imagine *Bios/βίος* in 10 years, and you will probably be able to grasp what I am trying to explain! I believe that decay is part of the growth that we face, and although it is commonly associated with death, I strongly see it as the opposite. In nature, decomposition and decay are vital processes as they allow organic matter to be broken down, recycled, and made available

again for new organisms to utilise. In my own family, as we grow, we make available experiences that will *mould* our children into persons that will create their own families one day. Isn't death the completion of a life lived?

Unlike some artists who work with biological media in laboratory conditions, you source your fungal spores from home produce and use kitchen oven gloves to prepare agar plates in the home. Does your work speak in this way to a kind of domesticity, an everyday existence with microbial life that largely goes unnoticed?

My work as an artist is mainly inspired by what happens in the sanctuary of my own home. Domestic realities are my biggest inspiration, so you are absolutely correct. My work has a kind of domesticity about it and is really about everyday life and interactions with each of us as individuals and a family unit. At the moment, I am actually working on three other projects that take their inspiration from the kitchen counter, daily routines with my children, or simply being home in the most secure place. However, generally speaking, my family's co-existence with microbial life happens both inside and outside of the home.

In *Bios/ βίος*, I have really come to embrace the fact that I am not working under the controlling and sterile conditions of a bio lab; in contrast to a lab setting, I expect much more than just what I put onto my petri plates to come out and show its presence. In my laboratory work, I was trying to prove the validity of a technique that sterilises fruit fly males such that their release into the natural environment will reduce the fitness of the overall population. My work focused on researching the impact of the sterilisation method on the bacteria present in the fruit flies' head and gut. In order to get reproducible results, my working environment had to be as uncontaminated and sterile as possible.

However, the domestic environment in which I create my art is nothing but uncontrolled – no matter if I follow the same procedures very strictly, the end results are often unpredictable, creating irreproducible pieces of art. I look at the presence of bacteria in my plates like the things we cannot control in life, things that happen outside our immediate family but that still relate to us and have an impact on our emotional balance and health – whether in the working environment, at school, amongst extended family and friends, but also in the political and spiritual sphere. These external factors can be either positive or more challenging, but, none the less, they exist and they influence us as a family. This way of creating work frees me to explore growth in a way that reflects what happens in real life. So, in direct opposition to the thinking behind my lab work, I embrace and incorporate unplanned occurrences into my art, speaking up for that unpredictability that life reserves for us – the unpredictability that is a key part of life itself.

The parallels you draw between the growth of living entities, between different forms of life, and between practices of art and everyday life extends the medium of the work beyond the mere confines of the sealed agar plate. Is there a sense, then, that in engaging with these works, we too `become media'?

There is, indeed. The parallels that are drawn in my work between the growth of living entities and the processes that connect them are deep within my practice. Certainly, the connections extend the medium beyond the confines of the agar plate and/or the paper printed photograph. Concerning the idea that we, too, become media, I think that the act of using a camera (re) creates us as media in the work, especially given that there is, from my side, an intentional performance for the camera as well. I do not direct my kids or my husband with a great amount of details: I let them know what I think the pose should portray and I let them express themselves freely. With these portraits, the layers of mould, agar, and the

petri dish itself (all built on top of each other) aim to create a sense of living media as well. Furthermore, in *Bios*, the translucent features that agar possesses not only transforms the concept of canvas but also offers a new ephemeral layer for the artist to engage with. Agar becomes a surface of convergence between the concepts performed and those shown. The viewer is called to get closer to the piece, to look at the details, grasp the presence of life, and perhaps to experience growth with the same deep sense I put into creating the work.

Could you tell us more about the photographic element of the work and the interaction between photo and living media over it – from the emergence of air bubbles in the agar to patterns of emphasis and concealment caused by microbial growth?

I welcome the unpredictable behaviour of the living media as it emphasises the fact that in life, we too face a good deal of encounter with the unknown. From our life experiences to relationships, we can actively influence our life's own path, but we often have to leave room for unforeseeable events. However, the air bubbles are an active element of the medium itself and I am really glad you mentioned them. First of all, the bubbles add a wonderful texture to the two-dimensional image and give an extra spark of life as well. Second of all, agar plates that contain bubbles are not very helpful when studying bacterial colony growth; bubbles make the counting and identification of bacteria colonies much harder, so it is very important not to have too many of them. Bubbles also add a playful touch that, when raising young children, becomes a daily routine in the family. Working in a lab where I had to prepare hundreds of plates in a day, the most stressful part was to make sure there were no bubbles; and I mean not even one. However, in my art practice, I can finally free myself from that and allow unpredictability to be a part of my art.

Bios/βίος has unfolded over four years. As the project and your own family have grown, have the parallels around the concept of *growth* generated new insights, connections, or associations beyond the original expectation of the work?

Bios/βίος is an ongoing project – a constant observation of how we grow as individuals and as a family. The work has witnessed an important conceptual shift over the years, allowing room to reflect on what is happening to us as a family while we are growing together, without being limited to what my ideas of family were at any given time. Accepting and building new insight is an active part of growth.

When I began creating the *Bios* pieces, my first child was a toddler; so, the focus of the work centred on the concept of personal growth. A stronger focus on physical transformation will probably become more apparent later on in the series as the viewer will become more aware of the kids growing and the parents ageing. But then there is the idea of a more conceptual growth within the work – the growth that comes with the learning acquired by being a mother and a partner. Before becoming a parent, I had clear ideas about the ways in which I would parent my children. Growing up, I suffered from the lack of interaction and communication that my parents had with each other and with my sister and I. They were good and loving parents, but, blame it on the generation and their personality, they missed so many valuable moments for offering support and guidance. And although I started digging into these memories only recently, I have always felt something was missing in our relationship. That is why I wanted to offer my children a different, more liberal environment where they could express themselves and be who they were going to be freely – something that is more easily said than put into practice.

Today, children are the focus of the family and lead on decision-making much more than in earlier generations. Therefore, children require stronger guidance for their rapidly growing emotions and responsibilities. Children

have voices that want to be heard and, as parents, we need to let them be heard, but also filter, buffer, and guide them. When my own young children started showing their personalities, tempers, and opinions, I struggled to accept their independence – especially when it contrasted with my own expectations of them. In my youth, I always tried to stay away from conflict as I felt ill-equipped to manage such situations. But conflicts are unavoidable, especially with children growing up together. Although it is clear to me that I should be a role model for my children and show them how to accept and manage their strong emotions, the ideal environment I ended up wanting for my children became similar to the one I had. So here came a different kind of growth – a growth that begins as an adult, one that I was not wired for, one that involves a loosening of control to embrace the unpredictable.

In Bios 2015, the mould is growing above my eyes and my throat in the self-portrait piece. It is a clear acceptance of my personal growth at this adult stage, as a mother and a wife, but also as an artist. Recognising both the work we have done, and the work that still needs to be done, to create a balanced life is the first step towards a more grown-up state of mind. You could say that a balanced life is a form of utopia (I could not agree more), but there is such value in the journey to achieve it that it does not really matter anymore whether that perfect balance is achieved in the end or not.

Author Biography

Roberta Trentin is an artist and photographer working in New York City. She produces self-portraits, family portraits, and experimental images exploring concepts of growth. Roberta earned a master's degree in Agriculture Science and Technologies from the University of Florence, before moving to the US where she obtained certification in Photography from the International Centre of Photography in New York City, completing a Director Fellowship and participating in their 2012 and 2013 exhibitions. Her ongoing project *Bios/βίος* has been awarded the 2013 Grand Prize from NYC4P (the New York Center for Photographic Art) and First Prize from the Ministry of Science, ICT, and Future Planning in Seoul, South Korea. Her work has also been exhibited in Shanghai and in galleries across the US. Her work recently featured in Musée magazine in an issue dedicated to photographic culture in science and technology. More on her work can be found at <http://trentinroberta.com/>.