

# Making for Fleeting Control

Jennifer Combe

**D**rawing from a personal sense of overwhelm, I locate the essence of an experience and then distill my understanding of that experience into simplified forms. Working in reductive abstraction allows me to translate memories and emotions through the direct and slow process of making. Often working in multiples, I examine experiences in singular works and then rejoin the simplified forms to make a complex yet fleeting whole. My hope is to claim control over the ambiguities of experience and emotion, if even for a moment.



Figure 1. Jennifer Combe, *Nurture, Nature*, detail, acrylic on glass, 2016, The Holter Museum, Helena, Montana, photograph by Matt Hamon.



Figure 2. Jennifer Combe, *Nurture, Nature*, detail, acrylic on glass, 2016, The Holter Museum, Helena, Montana, photograph by Matt Hamon.

The work *Nurture, Nature* touches on my experience with in vitro fertilization (IVF) and egg donation. The interactive glass rectangles, composed of the twenty-three human chromosomes and the letters of the English alphabet, are free for viewers to touch and manipulate. Viewers are encouraged to mix and match the glass pieces to create a composition, thus influencing the design with careful consideration and deliberation or through spontaneous chance. The hard lines, white pedestals, and bevelled glass reference the sterile environment of the conception and the sterility of my aging body. Finally, the work comments on how the environment, the nature of DNA, epigenetics, socioeconomic status, and chance all play out in the complex process of attaining a child.

After easily having conceived our first child at age thirty-nine with my own egg, I found my ovarian reserve depleted by age forty-one. After fertility drugs and two rounds of intrauterine insemination, my spouse and I were fortunate to resort to IVF with a donor egg. I understand the rapid depletion of ovarian reserve post age thirty-five, yet I cannot help

but think that the stress of pretenure academic expectations and the complete lack of government support for working parents contributed to my body's inability to conceive. If there were more social structures in place, such as high-quality daycare and more support for postpartum mothers, the stress levels in parents and their dependents would drastically decrease.

I was pregnant with my IVF embryo when I made the work *Nurture, Nature*. The solitude of my studio allowed me to process the fact that my second child would have none of my DNA—something I did not think mattered in my younger years. I was surprised to learn that I was attached to a genetic connection between my second child and me. I was scared that I would not feel the deep connection with this baby, child, and then adult that I felt with my first. The methodical process of systematically painting each chromosome and English letter provided time and space to grieve. It was the first step in a long process of healing, and it allowed me to emotionally comprehend, not just cognitively comprehend, the role that chance plays in any type of conception, and the process acted as a welcomed salve.



Figure 3. Jennifer Combe, *Nurture, Nature*, acrylic on glass, 2016, Northern State University, Aberdeen, South Dakota, photograph by Matt Hamon.