

INTERVIEW

The Body as Our Universal Mother Tongue — A Conversation with Mimi Kunz

by Christina Wunder



Mimi Kunz, born in 1986 in Germany, is a Brussels-based visual artist and poet. After studying painting and graphics in Germany, she did residencies in Vietnam and Italy, exhibited in Brussels, in Chile, South Korea and much more. Her work can be found in private collections across all continents. Mimi's art is shaped by her curiosity of the “body as a language,” with its universal expressions and personal characteristics. Her book *Mother Tongue* is a collection of poetry and painting, published November 2024 (The Kyoudai Press).

What does it mean to “put the mind in the body”? This is what Mimi was told to do by a Buddhist monk. Meeting her, I can feel that she took this advice to heart. Her presence radiates balance of mind, body and creative soul.

The launch of her new book takes place at The Nine, a women’s business club in the heart of Brussels, housing works of female artists from around the world. We fit right into the flair of the place: two small women, adorning the stage’s high chairs with our very pregnant bellies. The following interview is an extract of our conversation.

Mother Tongue, Mimi’s first collection of poetry and painting, tells the story of how two beings — mother and daughter — get to know each other via the universal language we are all born with: our bodies.

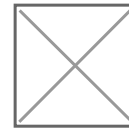
Christina Wunder: Mimi, your book’s title *Mother Tongue* is very poetic, and very fitting. In their book *The Great Cosmic Mother*, artists and anthropologists Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor reconstruct how the seeds of the first human language must have been sowed by mothers interacting with their newborns. They cite studies in which researchers have observed that the movements of a newborn’s head, limbs and body are harmonised with the mothers speech, showing that “in rhythmic synchrony with the pulse of [their] mother's words, the newborn is literally dancing to language before [s]he can utter a word.” You started your work on this book right after you gave birth, even though you had planned to take a break. How did this come about?

Mimi Kunz: Yes, absolutely. I didn’t expect how inspiring it would be for me to be with a baby. Body language has long been a main theme in my artwork, and with a newborn, every communication is physical.

When my friend Zane asked me “So what’s it like, this love?” a few weeks after Iris was born, poems started to grow and I went to the studio to paint what I observed and experienced. The paintings and poems developed side by side: the poems mostly while

walking around tables or parks for hours. It was only after a year or so that I saw how the poems and paintings might play together in a collection.

Christina: Let's stay with the title of the book a little longer. "Mother tongue" is a term often discussed in the context of nationality, belonging or identity. But you instead apply it to the body and explore movement as everybody's first language. Where does your focus on body language come from?



Mimi Kunz (c) Maite Morren

Mimi: I grew up doing dance and dance theater. After my A-levels I worked in Thailand for a year, teaching English. I didn't speak Thai in the beginning, but was amazed by how much we can share and communicate through gestures and postures. Although movements have different connotations in different cultures, we express so much through our body — we can see if a couple is in love, or recognize the walk of a friend in a crowd. There's something universal about body language that I'm drawn to. When I was sixteen, I learnt Esperanto — I thought it'd be great if everyone shared a language. I think I found this concept true for body language.

Christina: Speaking of movement — the poems in *Mother Tongue* are visual. In the beginning, we see text in the shape of a pregnant belly, a baby, a face. Then there's an octopus, a tightrope walker, text spilling over the pages. How important is form to you in relation to content? Which do you find first, and how does it relate to the story of the book?

Mimi: I first wrote the poems without a defined shape. But often, when I have trouble finding a form, I realise there is something wrong with the content too. So after the first drafts, content and form became intertwined. The book tells of the first year of a baby, of being with a baby — and just like the baby's radius grows and it starts to crawl and walk, the poems become less contained too. I also like to play with abstract shapes in the poems, where the space between lines depict time, or the scattered words on a page represent a mess on the floor.

Christina: You write about ordinary, universal things, like breakfast, sleep, or clapping. And the universality of these experiences is underlined by the fact that — except for the occasional mention of a toe — there are no specifics. The baby could be any baby, the parent any parent. We could be in any place. Is this abstraction deliberate?

Mimi: Yes, and it's similar to my approach to painting — except for posture portraits. I don't paint individuals, but rather the movements and interactions we all have in common. The topic of the book is so universal, and speaking with parents I find that the mix of wonder and fear is nothing uniquely personal, but a shared human experience we can all relate to.



"Mother Tongue" by Mimi Kunz

Christina: I'd like to touch upon the perspectives and relationality of your poems. Many of them start with "you," containing observations. There's the "we" and "you and me," capturing shared relationships. And then there's an "I" reflecting on the rapidity of change. How

did you perceive the changes in your identity in the process of writing this book?

Mimi: That's a good question. I had a very positive experience in relation to my identity. I am grateful that I get to still be the artist / poet me, the couple me, the mother and daughter me, the family me — all at the same time. From the beginning, becoming a parent grounded me in my identity. It made me feel rooted in time.

I used to overthink a lot and the physicality of being with my daughter helped me spend less time running around in my head. It simply became easier to focus, to know what to do. I think, and this was something I didn't expect, becoming a parent made me a better artist.

And likewise, being able to stay engaged in my work while parenting feels like always having "a room of my own" — even when I rarely go to the bathroom by myself. It balances me and gives me a lot of energy when sleep is rare. So somehow, these roles that seem to divide the self and time, actually helped me grow.

Also I love my new family, and the way my husband, daughter and I interact. I had no idea what kind of parents we'd be before she was born. This is a theme in the last poem of the book, called "Congratulations." It deals with the fact that everything we do in life and all our experiences help us navigate these new adventures and enable us to be there for a new person.

Christina: Beautifully true words to end this interview on. Thank you, Mimi, for your time. Where can people follow your work?

Mimi: Thanks, Christina. And yes, the best way is to subscribe to my monthly "letter from the studio" under mimikunz.com, or follow me on Instagram @mimi.kunz