

TIERNEY GEARON:
THE MOTHER PROJECT

A Film by Jack Youngelson & Peter Sutherland



Tierney Gearon's photographs have been called manipulative, disturbingly ambiguous, even perverse; the London police demanded that the Saatchi Gallery which first showed the offending photos of her young children take the pictures down. Tierney has always maintained she loves her subjects deeply and understands them better than anyone else. How could she not? They are her family.

The documentary follows Tierney over the course of three years as she assembles her new body of work, a project that promises to be even more provocative than the photos that originally made her career.

The film documents an incredibly tumultuous period in Tierney's life, from her move from London to Los Angeles to having a third child at age 41. Tierney is famously reclusive and has always wanted her work to speak for itself, for her audience not to have any preconceived ideas about what motivates the photographs. As Tierney says, all of her photographs are portraits of herself.

American-born Tierney Gearon began her career as a dancer and a model; she honed her photography shooting backstage at fashion shows and on the runways of Europe. At the same time, Tierney began taking photos of her children without any real intention of sharing them with an audience. Ultimately, Tierney's personal photos were brought to the attention of art collector Charles Saatchi who featured her work in the "I Am a Camera" group exhibition alongside works by Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham and other established documentary-style photographers.

Tierney was virtually unknown when her photographs were first shown in 2001. Her intimate, ground-breaking portraits of her two children, what she calls the genesis of her "family series," were a window into Tierney's family life – spare, revealing, mordantly funny. But what the London police seemed to care most about were her children's state of undress. Critics of the work and visitors to the gallery were deeply divided. Were the

photographs fair to her young subjects – Michael, age four, and Emily, age six? Or were they somehow cruelly manipulative? Ultimately, major papers in London published Tierney’s photos in their pages in support of the artist and her work. The situation was diffused, and no charges were filed.

Today, Tierney is a star in her own right, firmly established as a top commercial photographer. On the surface, she lives the life of a celebrity, jetting between London, St. Barths, New York, and Los Angeles, often with her children in tow, taking on one photo assignment after another.

But in truth, Tierney’s career is at a crossroads.

Torn between the worlds of commercial and art photography, Tierney is once again returning to the work that put her on the map – the intimate, personal photos of her family. This time, she is turning her lens on her mother who lives alone in a small town in upstate New York.

Their relationship is complicated – her mother has suffered from mental illness for much of her adult life. Through the process of making these photographs, Tierney has struggled to understand how her mother lives now, as well as coming to grips with how her illness affected Tierney as a young girl. By extension, the process of taking the photographs also reflects Tierney’s struggle to be a good parent to her own children. Tierney describes her pictures as a form of therapy – a means of healing herself. The truth is never what it seems in Tierney’s world, however; the eerie tableaux at the heart of her work always hide a deeper meaning just beyond the edges of the photographs.

The documentary addresses the questions that have long been associated with Tierney’s controversial work, and by extension, questions that face all artists who draw on their family for inspiration. Are the photographs as therapeutic for her subjects as they are for her? Is the camera Tierney’s way of communicating with her family, or is it a protective shield?

The documentary goes beyond the pictures, revealing how Gearon works, her inspirations, and the unconventional family relationships that inform her world. The film is more than just a portrait of an artist at work, however; it is a meditation on the complexities of parenthood and the bonds that keep a family together against overwhelming odds.

When we began filming Tierney Gearon: The Mother Project over 4 years ago, we were not exactly sure where the journey would take us. Geographically, we traveled the globe with Tierney – New York, London, Los Angeles, St. Barths, India, France. Over time, however, the documentary revealed itself to be more intimate in scope. A meditation on the mysterious workings of family, the film explores what bonds hold people together and what pulls them apart.

In Tierney, we had the ideal subject for a documentary. She is honest and raw in front of the camera. We chose not to adhere to the usual conventions of films devoted to artists: talking-head interviews; criticism both for and against; a filmed visit to a studio, gallery or museum. We chose instead to let the story evolve organically within the nucleus of the family which is – and will always be – essential to the photographs Tierney takes.

Tierney was virtually unknown when contemporary art collector Charles Saatchi included her in a group show at London's Saatchi Gallery in the spring of 2001. But she became the center of controversy when the British police threatened to shut down the show, claiming that the nude photographs of her children were pornographic.

We began filming with Tierney shortly after the Saatchi show. She was tired of taking pictures of her children and tired of the media attention. Nonetheless, she was ready to pick up where she left off. In this new series of photographs, Tierney chose to focus on her mentally ill mother and their complicated relationship. But it may be too easy to say she “chose” her subject. Like so much in her life, it was as much a matter of instinct and compulsion as anything else.

Our first shoot was split between St. Barths and upstate New York, a sequence that became the raw material for the opening scenes of the film. The contrast could not be more pronounced – the azure sky and sea of the Caribbean, followed by the brutal, numbing cold of February in upstate New York. Toward the end of an emotionally exhausting two days in New York, Tierney walked out onto an ice-covered pond with her mother to get the shot she wanted. There were cracks in the ice; in the distance, a fisherman had dug a hole and was waiting for the fish to bite. We all felt in danger. The ice could crack at any moment. But at the same time, held in the balance was the possibility that nothing could go wrong. Tierney got her shot. The ice held. “Goodbye sun,” said her mother. And then we all made it back safely to the shore.

Directors Jack Youngelson and Peter Sutherland

Jack Youngelson has worked as a writer, producer and field producer on documentary projects that have been shown by numerous broadcasters in the United States and the UK. Over the past 5 years, he has collaborated as a writer/producer with the award winning production company, Moxie Firecracker Films, on various documentary projects, including *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* which premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival before being broadcast on HBO, and *The Nazi Officer's Wife*, which screened at various international film festivals and had a theatrical release before its television premiere on A&E. That same year, Jack also wrote and produced *Connecticut: Seasons of Light* about the American Impressionist art movement. The film, narrated by Brian Dennehy, won a 2003 Regional Emmy for Outstanding Cultural Affairs Program. Jack graduated in 1990 from Princeton University.

Peter Sutherland was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan and raised in Colorado. A move to New York City in 1998 prompted his first feature documentary, *Pedal*, a film about the city's bike messengers that premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in 2001 before airing on Sundance Channel. Along with numerous other television credits, Sutherland worked as a director of photography on *Stoked: The Rise and Fall of Gator*, a documentary about a famous skateboarder who was convicted of murder. Directed by Helen Stickler, *Stoked* premiered at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival and was also released theatrically. Sutherland has published numerous photographic works through publishers such as powerHouse Books, Nieves, Art Beat Press and P.A.M. Books.

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