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Arts &amp; Culture

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## Artists As Parents Inspired By Choices

By [LAURA SPENCER](#) (@PEOPLE/LAURA-SPENCER)



[http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kcur/files/styles/x\\_large/public/2014/10/the\\_big\\_hug.jpg](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kcur/files/styles/x_large/public/2014/10/the_big_hug.jpg)

"The Big Hug" by Jason Needham is featured on one side of a billboard, an ARTBOARD, atop Missouri Bank in the Crossroads. It's on display through November.

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courtesy: the artist

Making art requires dedication and time – lots of it. Add a child to the mix and having a career as an artist can be a challenge. Some put their art practice on hold to raise a family; others adapt to making art when they can. And, sometimes, a child can lead to inspiration.

### Artwork changes from edgy to uplifting

Two large double-sided billboards, [ARTBOARDS](http://www.charlottestreet.org/2014/09/call-for-artboards-2014/) (<http://www.charlottestreet.org/2014/09/call-for-artboards-2014/>), sit atop Missouri Bank along Southwest Boulevard in the Crossroads Arts District. On one side, two cartoonish figures extend their arms, across the space between, in a work called *The Big Hug*.

"They've kind of broken through this barrier," explains artist Jason Needham. "There's this gap maybe keeping these figures apart."

Needham is in his early 40s. He studied painting at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. And for years, he and his wife, Michelle, lived in Colorado. Now, they're in Kansas City, Kansas. He says his work used to be edgy – but as a stay-at-home-dad with an almost four-year-old, now, it's more uplifting.

"I mean, after my daughter was born, I don't think I've drawn so many flowers," Needham says. "During this time, on some of these small-scale drawings, I was doing a lot of just figures coming together in embraces whether it was high-fives, hugging, hand shaking, reaching out to each other."

This hug that looms large on the billboards was once the size of a thumbnail. Drawings like this – sketched quickly with a ballpoint pen in a book or on an index card - have

helped Needham keep up his skills, a few minutes at a time. But he says applying for this project, and planning to show his paintings again in galleries or restaurants like Eden Alley, have required a leap of faith.

"I realized at a certain point, I think I had read somewhere about not waiting for things to be perfect. I think I was waiting for things to be perfect, and you know, you put a show on the schedule, and start lining things up, you know, you got to get back out there and see what happens," Needham says.

### **A network of support helps maintain momentum**

Choreographer Andrew Simonet is the director and founder of Artists U, a professional development program run by artists in Baltimore, South Carolina, and Philadelphia.

"When I talk to artists who are thinking about having kids, they worry about time and money. When I talk to artists who already have kids, all they talk about is time, they never talk about money," Simonet says. He knows this first-hand; he and his wife, also an artist, are raising two sons.

For about a year, Simonet has been doing research, through surveys and conversations, about the challenges of artists raising kids. And Artists U [created a booklet about it](#)

(<http://static.squarespace.com/static/53767189e4b07doc6bf4b775/t/5388abffe4b02f7f94909052/1401465855677/Artists%20Raising%20Kids%20Compendium.pdf>)

. Simonet says he wishes he and his wife had this guide. Instead, it was their friends who provided an example – that having kids and making art was possible.

"People saying, it gets better, and put that little bit in every day, put your 20 minutes in, get a little time in the studio, carve out a couple of days in a residency," he says, listing advice from other artists. "Whatever you can do, you can maintain the momentum, if you keep feeding it little by little."

### **Embracing potential challenges**

But some artists make a choice: between participating in the art world or having a family. And Simonet says it's still often more challenging for women. "I think a lot of moms really go through a really challenging period at the beginning," he says. "And some don't emerge from it."

"We're calling this series of exhibitions, [Holding Pattern](#) (<http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/holding-pattern.shtml>). It's like a plane waiting to land, it's anticipating big change," says Kris Ercums. He's the global contemporary and Asian art curator at the [Spencer Museum of Art](#) (<http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/>) in Lawrence, which is gearing up for a major renovation project.

Ercums points to the delicate shades of threads, blues, greens, purples, in a work in the gallery called *Ode to Sprout II*. He first saw it in artist Kee-Sook Lee's studio – and it's now in the museum's collection. Ercums says the installation process opened up new possibilities.

"She dyed about 100 new nests of thread – they're spools and they look like nests," says Ercums. "And the threads are rising up and creating little loops as they go up."

Artist Kee-Sook Lee describes it like this: "*Ode to Sprout* is about woman's potential trapped inside and then struggling to grow out of it and become individual, as a person, as an artist."

### **Parenting provides stops and starts in making art**

Lee creates mixed-media installations, mostly out of thread, recycled fabric and fiber. She's had nearly 20 solo shows, and more than 60 group shows in museums and galleries. This includes in Seoul, Korea, where she grew up, and earned an art degree. But – for many years, in Kansas, while she was raising her two children, her art practice was on hold.

"I realized that by raising children and homemaking, I put away my art career," she

says.

Much of her work is personal, about the experience of women. At the Spencer Museum, there's *Green Hammock*, a large hanging sculpture made from U.S. Army nurse uniforms, and *Awakening in her Garden 3*, stitched fabric and rice paper with calligraphic writing. The "awakening," she says, took place when she returned to her art when her children became more independent.

"I worked hard to push myself, you know, pull myself out of the comfort of my home, to push myself into the art world, start learning again, start going to school and all that," she says.

Lee and her husband, a retired doctor, moved to Berkeley, California last year after 40 years in Kansas. They're closer to their two grown sons. But Lee says their small condo is more working studio than living space. So she'll continue to explore the possibilities of her art and push the boundaries.

As the Spencer's curator Kris Ercums puts it, "She says she has this seed inside her to be an artist - and it's like a mouse tail; she can't hide it, it's just there."

**TELL KC:** *If you're an artist, how has having a child or children affected your work?* Click [here to tell your story](#)

<https://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/source/en/TELLKC/insight/3599a13c64d9/artist-types-how-does-parenting-change-your-art>. Or [become a source for our Tell KC network](#) (<https://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/source/en/insight/1d24cf7d1d19>), a collaboration of KCUR and KCPT in Kansas City.

*Resources from Artists U's Andrew Simonet and Creative Capital, plus a few more:*

- [An Artist Residency in Motherhood](http://residencyinmotherhood.com/) (<http://residencyinmotherhood.com/>)
- [Artist INC](http://www.artistinck.com/artist-inc-programs) (<http://www.artistinck.com/artist-inc-programs>) (based in Kansas City, Mo.)
- [Artists U](http://www.artistsu.org/) (<http://www.artistsu.org/>)'s [Artists Raising Kids Compendium](http://static.squarespace.com/static/53767189e4b07d0c6bfab775/t/5388abffe4b02f794909052/1401465855677/Artists%20Raising%20Kids%20Compendium.pdf) (<http://static.squarespace.com/static/53767189e4b07d0c6bfab775/t/5388abffe4b02f794909052/1401465855677/Artists%20Raising%20Kids%20Compendium.pdf>)
- [Baie Sainte-Marie Residency](http://baiesaintemarie.wordpress.com/) (<http://baiesaintemarie.wordpress.com/>)
- [Creative Capital](http://www.creative-capital.org/home) (<http://www.creative-capital.org/home>) Webinar, "[Artists Raising Kids: Thoughts On How to Have it All](http://blog.creative-capital.org/2014/09/artists-raising-kids-thoughts/)" (<http://blog.creative-capital.org/2014/09/artists-raising-kids-thoughts/>)"
- [Cultural ReProducers](http://www.culturalreproducers.org/) (<http://www.culturalreproducers.org/>)
- [Feature Shoot](http://www.featureshoot.com/2013/03/how-we-do-both-art-and-motherhood/) (<http://www.featureshoot.com/2013/03/how-we-do-both-art-and-motherhood/>)
- [Life's Soundtrack](http://www.lifes-soundtrack.com/) (<http://www.lifes-soundtrack.com/>)
- [MOMTRA](http://hellomomtra.wordpress.com/) (<http://hellomomtra.wordpress.com/>)
- [Reconciling Art and Mothering](http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/0781409426134) (<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/0781409426134>)
- [Roswell artist-in-residence program](http://www.rair.org/) (<http://www.rair.org/>)
- [Studio Mothers](http://studiomothers.com/) (<http://studiomothers.com/>)
- [Sustainable Arts Foundation](http://www.sustainableartsfoundation.org/) (<http://www.sustainableartsfoundation.org/>)
- [Strong Hearts, Inspired Minds: 21 artists who are mothers tell their stories](http://www.amazon.com/Strong-Hearts-Inspired-Minds-Artists/dp/0965372405) (<http://www.amazon.com/Strong-Hearts-Inspired-Minds-Artists/dp/0965372405>)
- [The Creative Mother's Guide: Six Creative Practices for the Early Years](http://www.mirandahersey.com/ebook.php) (<http://www.mirandahersey.com/ebook.php>)
- [Thou Art Mom](http://www.thouartmom.com/thouartmom.com/Welcome.html) (<http://www.thouartmom.com/thouartmom.com/Welcome.html>)

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