

Things pregnant with meaning should be saved for posterity

PERSONAL SPACE
SHARON GRAY

We were raised among bushfires, taught from an early age that everything can disappear, fast! Like so many women, my mother said the first things to save were the photo albums. Naturally, I grew up thinking that I would save the photo albums, too, because, obviously, life without baby photos was intolerable. So now I own a sacred, hand-tinted portrait of we three siblings, the pink-cheeked girls smirking politely in matching dresses with velvet posies, the darling boy in precious pale-blue smocking. Frankly, I could throw rocks at it.

I never did make a baby book for my son, but kept a lock of hair and a plastic vial of his baby teeth, precious as diamonds. "They're mine!" he said once. "Milk teeth!" I replied. "They're mine!" A chicken and egg argument, but he didn't really want them and I really did, because I once saw a beautiful ring made out of teeth and thought — well. Would I rush to save them in a fire? No.

I never got his little hands cast in plaster, either, or his baby shoes bronzed. His voice had broken before I thought to tape the lovely, piping notes of youth for all eternity.

Back in 1980, pregnancy was still fairly hidden. There's just one photo of me, naked and huge, sitting in a river. Now, pregnant women proudly wrap their bodies in lycra, or even stick the whole balloon out in the air between the crop-top and the low, low pants. All a lot more fun, comfortable, honest and independent than my discreet swathings. They can also get that magnificent, great, golden, preggy belly cast in plaster, just before budburst. Decoupage it with memorabilia, enamel it with mandalas, footy colours. Brighton mum Nicole Shulman loved her own casts so much, she went into the business. The process takes about an hour, then the cast is sealed and wired so it can be hung on a wall.

"Each pregnancy is a completely different shape," says Nicole. "My two boys love playing with 'their' belly. They sure know where they came from. No cabbages here."

We've got quite good at birth, unlike the Victorians and Edwardians who specialised in memorialising death rather than babyhood — maybe because of the high infant mortality rate then, and, of course, pregnancy suggested sex, which was unthinkable. My mother had some mourning jewellery made of jet, and locketts with neatly plaited hair clipped from deceased relatives. Enough to make a modern girl shiver. We're not good at death. We all expect to live forever, and stay looking young while we're at it. Our ancestors were fond of taking death masks of faces, but a wall of brightly decorated, preggy-belly casts would have done their heads right in.

Somehow, I don't believe the "bring it all out in the open" generation is quite up to displaying preggy casts on one wall and death masks on another. Too much information?