

The shape of life to come

Two women are immortalising the body shape of pregnancy through the creation of plaster belly castings. *ANGIE FOX reports.*

When Nicole Shulman created an artistic canvas out of her bulging pregnant stomach, she had no idea she would be giving birth to a business enterprise.

While pregnant with her first child, Shulman, 32, decided to follow in the footsteps of celebrities such as Madonna and have her belly cast in plaster to preserve her shape.

The resulting artwork, cast and decorated with the help of her artist friend Ilana Pincus, served as an inspiration to other pregnant friends and relatives.

The two women formed a partnership and their business, Belly Art, was born.

A Mount Scopus Memorial College graduate, Shulman undertook a business degree and worked in information technology for many years. Adelaide-born Pincus, 32, who has a son and is currently pregnant, is an art teacher at The King David School.

The combination of their skills, said Shulman, has resulted in a "good marriage".

They have since created belly castings for more than 40 women around Victoria, all keen to have a three-dimensional documentation of their pregnancy: bellies, breasts and all.

Aside from immortalising her pregnancy, Shulman said her cast has enabled her son Felix, nearly three, to comprehend the birth process.

"It's something tangible," she said. "He can understand that he was in there and see what mummy looked like. And thankfully, Felix hasn't yet asked how he got inside."

Casts are made around the 35-week mark of the pregnancy when the stomach is very full. Taking only one hour, the torso is wrapped in two layers of artist's plaster, which when set, starts to release and can be painlessly removed from the skin.

When the cast is completely dry, the decorating process begins. The duo suggests designs or work with materials supplied by the client.

One woman decorated her cast with a collage of photos taken at the birth, pictures of the ultrasound and shots of other family members. She also included the birth notice from the *Australian Jewish News*.

The duo painstakingly decorated Shulman's own casts with aboriginal-inspired dot paintings.

Pincus said that pregnant women, although wanting to preserve their shape, are still critical of their appearance.

"Some people have said to us 'Can you make me a little higher here or thinner there?' We tell them we aren't plastic surgeons. The plaster doesn't lie."

This was especially true for one woman, whose baby happened to kick just as the plaster was setting. "If you rub your hand over her cast, you can feel the spot where the baby kicked," Shulman explained. "She was so happy because you can normally never feel that again."

Though not all the women love their pregnant shape, Shulman said many of them appreciate the sentimental value of the cast.

"It's not your whole body, it's not your face, it's your baby. So when the cast comes off, people just love it," Shulman said.

"Once they are painted it takes the focus off the body. It becomes a piece of art."

So far no-one has gone into labour during the casting process. But the pair has a plan of action just in case.

"We ask the women what hospital they are going to and who their doctor is. We know what to do, but we'd rather not be delivering."

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NICOLE SHULMAN, co-director Belly Art

■ Belly Art casts cost \$140. Inquiries: Nicole 0411 405 834; Ilana 0402 159 066.



Top: Nicole Shulman (left) and Ilana Pincus, the creators of Belly Art. Above: Felix Shulman has fun trying on one of his mother's designs. PHOTOS: JUSTIN BERNHAUT