

Making the New, Normal: re-presenting mothers' subjectivities and their creative potential against persistent patriarchal models

In fulfilment of requirements for Phd (Visual Arts) Thesis by
Creative Work (exegesis and exhibition of art works)
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School of Art and Design

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Declaration

I declare that:

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Freney', is positioned above the signature line.

Signed: _____

Date: 1/03/22

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In the same time this project has taken to complete it would be possible to conceive, gestate, birth and raise a child to school age. I would like to thank my village of supporters who helped me in nurturing this PhD to fruition.

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This project has been undertaken on the unceded lands of the Kaurna and Peramangk people. I recognise that culture and lore have been practiced for millennia on this Country where I now work. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Abstract

This practice-based research project, given urgency by the impacts of COVID-19, seeks to account for the lived experiences of some contemporary mothers in western society, privileging representation as key in structuring ideologies of motherhood and mothers' behaviours. Through studio practices of drawing and painting, as well as digital photographic and textile processes, the project recuperates images of mothers in contemporary western visual culture, challenging their denigration and exploitation. Instead, motherhood and the domestic sphere are depicted as ethical and generative sites of innovation and potential.

Taking a matricentric feminist stance and responding to Bracha Ettinger's theories of the matrixial and subjectivity in the feminine, the project employs artistic processes to articulate a mother's changing experience of identity and maternal subjectivity. Drawing on my own experiences of mothering, the 'new' that this project seeks to bring to the fore is the new maternal subject, a mother who is changed through mothering, for whom a new identity is born in relation to those of her dependent others, the spaces, situations, and paraphernalia of her work. The artworks produced recognise the real complexities of mothering and depict its catastrophes, ambiguities, doubts, and pleasures.

Anecdote 1: Self/ Portrait (to set the scene)

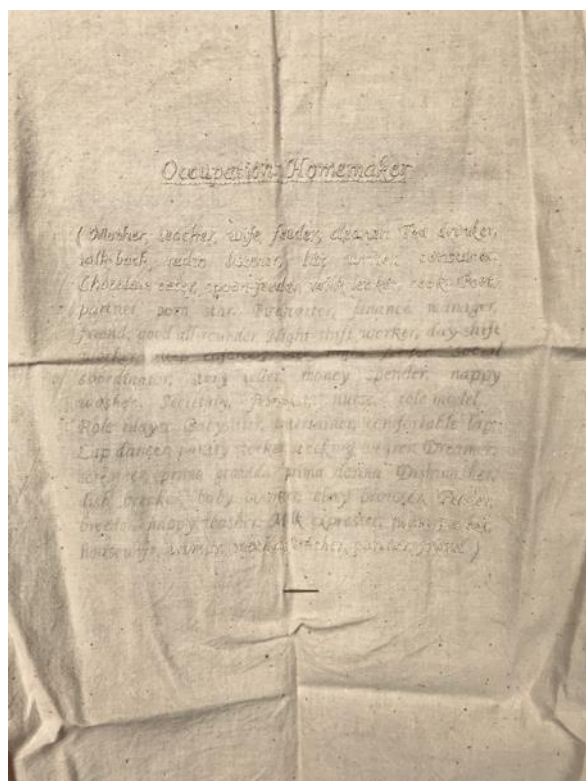


Figure 1. Zoe Freney, *Occupation: Homemaker*, 2003, cotton thread on cotton, dimensions variable.



Figure 2. Aquilo Freney, *Portrait (Mum)*, 2013, pen on paper, 20 x 15 cm.

Two images. Two versions of me and my roles and identities as a mother, with a decade, a pregnancy and a birth, amongst other things, between them. On the left, *Occupation: Homemaker* 2003, is a kind of a self-portrait as mother (fitting then that almost twenty years later it remains to be completed). The work was begun with feelings of frustration, impotence and loss. I was finishing art school, having had my first son, and could see my trajectory as emerging artist would be different to those of my peers. I had to fill out a Centrelink form with a line asking 'Occupation: ____.' This became for me a question of identity that I could only answer in the negative; I was not an artist; I was not who I used to be. Needle and thread are clean and quiet, worked with bowed head as women have worked for centuries before me. Except for its unfinished state, which attests to the stop-start rhythms of mothering, the work is calm and tidy. The verso of the embroidered work tells a more chaotic story, with confusing tangles and knots where the thread runs out. I look back and

think about how I was writing myself through my artwork. I was seeking to re-present myself at that ongoing moment on the cusp.

On the right, my son shows that a mother does not write herself alone. She is constituted by the others in her care and by her situations. A messy drawing made with pen and considerable pressure on paper, it takes me back to mothering in 2013 with two sons, aged ten and five years old. A time of dirty socks and soccer pitches. Of never-ending dish washing, pet rearing and lunch making. Of tantrums I thought we should have left behind. The drawing, in its directness of representation, is both funny and deeply moving. My two sons have called me Zoe since the eldest tried it in his mouth as a toddler and I forgot to correct him. I realised too late that I could never hide in the soft annunciation of the comfortingly onomatopoeic 'Mum'. My name has been spoken, shouted, whined tens or hundreds of times daily, and at night. I feel truly seen by someone so close as to almost be mine, but who is always an other.¹

As a mother usually does, I think my son is good at drawing. He is observant like an artist, and like a child. Here, my hair threatens to engulf my whole body, my left hand has merged with a dish cloth. The zigzags of hair become lines of movement, as I swipe the dishcloth/hand back and forth in a frenzy I thought I had concealed beneath my calm mothering facade. The drawing describes the intensity, pace, and repetition of life at that time. Two views of a mother: me, and of the threads and lines that resonate between ourselves and others.

¹ Griselda Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics," *Studies in the Maternal*, 1.1 (2009): 1. <<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/81179/1/mamsie.pdf>>

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Introductory Chapter

Introduction: Matrescence, Becoming, Beginning²

This research project seeks to describe my particular experiences of mothering, as a white Australian woman with German and British ancestry, through art works which include paintings, drawings, photographs and video. My mothering experiences and this research project are shaped by European-Australian, patriarchal constructs of motherhood, and the western canons of philosophy and art history. I do not attempt to define and depict “the mother,” only a mother: *me*, in order that my work may allow others to likewise explore and visualise their own diverse lived experiences.³ The project is thus interested in bringing to the world, through art and an engagement with sociological, feminist phenomenological and psychoanalytical theory, a view of maternal subjectivity that proves to be richer and more complicated than the flattened, impoverished versions of mothering that proliferate in mainstream media today.

As a white heterosexual feminist living on the unceded lands of the Kaurna and Peramangk peoples I recognize both my position of relative privilege and the inadequacy of previous models of feminism that fail to account and advocate for the rights of women of colour.³ As a mother, I acknowledge the ongoing failings of the patriarchal institution of motherhood.⁴ For these reasons I bring to bear in my readings of feminism and mothering Andrea O’Reilly’s model of matricentric feminism, which, in being a mother-centred feminism, aims to be inclusive of all mothers.⁵ While through my studio practice I examine my own lived experiences of mothering, by taking a matricentric feminist approach I hope the resulting

² Carla Pascale Leahy, “The Maternal Metamorphosis: Becoming a Mother in Australia 1945-2020,” *Reese Lecture* (Melbourne, 2021).

³ Petra Bueskens, “Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World.” In *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*, xi–xvii. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016. xiii; Andrea O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*, xi–xvii. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016; Betty Frieden, *The Feminine Mystique*. London, New York: Penguin Classics, 2010.

⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago, 1981; Elena Marchevska, ‘Maternal art practice: An emerging field of artistic enquiry into motherhood, care and time.’ In Marchevska, Elena, and Valerie Walkerdine, eds. *The Maternal in Creative Work*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Xxvi-9. 2. Irem Güney-Frahm, “Neoliberal Motherhood during the Pandemic: Some Reflections.” *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27, no.5 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12485>.

⁵ O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*. 2016; O’Reilly, *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*. Toronto: Women’s Press imprint of Canadian Scholars Press, 2004.

artworks and ideas will be accessible and empowering to mothers more broadly.

In her 'Foreword' to O'Reilly's *Matricentric Feminism*, Petra Bueskens writes an empowered mother is:

a mother with a community of allmothers or "other mothers"; she is a queer or lesbian mother; a feminist mother; ... a single mother; a mother who integrates her maternal practice with her paid and/or creative work.⁶

This statement acknowledges more fully the intersectional qualities of matricentric feminism.

To further account for diversity of experience and intersectionality in mothering experiences I draw on the matrixial theories of Bracha Ettinger. Ettinger's work examines the development of subjectivity as a series of ongoing 'encounter-events,' where the self is understood in relation to others.⁷ Understanding one's identity as being in flux trans-subjectively offers the ability to counter neoliberalism's individualisation. Furthermore, as suggested by art historian and cultural theorist Griselda Pollock,

re-addressing the feminine through the matrixial prism critically exposes the logic of *I* and *not-I* that underpins phallic socio-psychic processes at work in racism.⁸

Through its compassionate and respectful approach, the matrixial thus can account for the ongoing experience of the mother's changing subjectivity. This model of hospitality and hope also recognises the violence of concepts of individualism and self sufficiency of care that privilege white, western, heterosexual experiences as mainstream. Instead I will consider notions of care and co-authorship as I investigate my own maternal situations.

This study is indebted to feminist art from the 1960s and 1970s exploring motherhood, and it seeks to add to ongoing work that extends these gains in the

⁶ 'What is an empowered mother? Let me count the ways...' Bueskens, "Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World," xiii.

⁷ McCloskey, Paula. "Art and Maternal Subjectivity: An Ongoing Relation." *M/Other Voices*. 20 April (2015). https://www.mothervoices.org/column/2015/9/14/d65ata45l9pm1h3f7laroopr19ci_u4#_edn1.

⁸ Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus." In *Bracha L. Ettinger: Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics. Volume 1 1990-2000*, edited by Griselda Pollock, 1-92. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.11.

twenty-first century.⁹ I argue that mother-artists have an ongoing role to play in changing the prevalent ideologies and representations of contemporary mothering.¹⁰ Defining myself as a mother-artist is a tactic that privileges my mother-knowledge and creativity within my art practice. There has long been a disdain for both the ability of mothers to perform as artists and for the range of experiences they bring to their art practices. The myth that women cannot excel equally in parallel careers of artist and mother is perpetuated by, for example, successful artists Marina Abramovich, Tracey Emin and Judy Chicago, who have variously stated they chose their art careers over motherhood.¹¹ Alicia Eler writes, 'For the mother who is also an artist, or for the artist who is also a mother, compartmentalizing the experience of motherhood away from art is one option; the other is to integrate it into the work itself.'¹²

Becoming mother is often described as a rupturing of one's identity. Subjectivity thereafter becomes newly relational; I am myself, in flux, in relation to a new, dependent other.¹³ When my own mother handed me my newborn son she said, 'you will never not think of him.' And she would know.¹⁴ At art school I was told I would want to concentrate on my baby rather than pursuing a career in art. This is indicative of the discrimination faced generally by mothers in western societies, in their professional fields, and in the visual arts, which remains a male-dominated

⁹ Anne Marsh, "Mother and Child: Discourse and Dialogue since 1979," in *Doing Feminism: Women's Art and Feminist Criticism* (Carlton, Victoria: Miegunyah Press, 2021), 15–82.

¹⁰ Anna Brady, "Bringing up Baby: Making Motherhood Work in the Art World," *The Art Newspaper*, 12 June, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/bringing-up-baby-making-motherhood-work-in-the-art-world> ;

¹¹ Ibid; Anne Marsh quotes Barbara Hall from 1975, 'There cannot be great women artists until culture is redefined. Women's redefinition of culture will be the biggest blood and guts overhaul of a decrepit and decaying institution that's going to make avant-gardism look like child's play.' Anne Marsh, *Doing Feminism: Women's Art and Feminist Criticism in Australia* (Carlton, Victoria: Miegunyah Press, 2021), 2.

¹² Alicia Eler, "On Being an Artist and a Mother," *Hyperallergic*, 14 May, 2013, <https://hyperallergic.com/70312/on-being-an-artist-and-a-mother/>.

¹³ Marie Porter and Julie Kelso, eds., *Theorising and Representing Maternal Realities* (Newcastle UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), xiv-xv; Andrea O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016), 41; Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace (Theory Out Of Bounds)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁴ In her analysis of Chelsea Knight's work, *The Breath we Took*, 2013, in *Hyperallergic*, Alicia Eler describes how it's easier for Knight's mother to describe motherhood, having had longer to reflect on the role. Similarly, by the time my mother handed me my newborn baby, she had decades of mothering experience. Contemporary patriarchal motherhood is seen to devalue this matrilineal mother-wisdom. Eler, "On Being an Artist and a Mother," *Hyperallergic*.

industry that continues, despite important inroads made by generations of mother-artists, to value individual invention and achievements and devalue the insights and creativity of mothers.¹⁵

Contemporary representations of mothers, mothering and motherhood are situated on a spectrum ranging from the divine, perfect asexual Virgin Mary to the sexualised, wholly bounced-back 'yummy mummy'.¹⁶ While philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva lamented the limitations of maternal discourses in the 1970s, the subsequent burgeoning discourse of the yummy mummy and intensive mothering is not to be celebrated.¹⁷ The yummy mummy is a neoliberal model of mostly white, heteronormative motherhood, propounded by the celebrity mother profile, a woman whose children do not interrupt her life, except to bring her wholeness and fulfilment. She is depicted as effortlessly 'juggling' career, children, and body work, and, remaining desirable to men, certainly does not look 'mumsy' at all.¹⁸

The term "intensive mothering" was coined by sociologist Sharon Hays and is "construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive."¹⁹ According to academic and author D. Lyn O'Brien Hallstein, the three central concepts of this model are that it is a mother's duty to be the primary carer for her child; this care requires constant attention and energy; and

¹⁵ In *To Become Two*, most recently exhibited at the Samstag Museum of Art in Adelaide, artist Alex Martinis Roe focusses on intergenerational feminist conversations and believes these ongoing relationships are central to creating feminist futures. In a similar way, I believe generations of mothers must engage in meaningful conversations in order to truly bring into being a feminist motherhood. Alex Martinis Roe, *Artist Website*, <https://www.alexmartinisroe.com/To-Become-Two> (accessed 2/10/21); Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1; Elvis Richardson, Amy Prcevic, and Miranda Samuels, "The CoUNTESS Report," *The CoUNTESS Report*, 2019, <https://countess.report>.

¹⁶ Liz Fraser, *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide* (UK: Harper Collins UK, 2006), [https://books.google.com.au/books?id=PirSvs3oZ00C&dq=The Yummy Mummy%27s Survival Guide&source=gbs_book_other_versions](https://books.google.com.au/books?id=PirSvs3oZ00C&dq=The+Yummy+Mummy%27s+Survival+Guide&source=gbs_book_other_versions).

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1977), 160–86; Liz Fraser, *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide* (UK: Harper Collins UK, 2006), [https://books.google.com.au/books?id=PirSvs3oZ00C&dq=The Yummy Mummy%27s Survival Guide&source=gbs_book_other_versions](https://books.google.com.au/books?id=PirSvs3oZ00C&dq=The+Yummy+Mummy%27s+Survival+Guide&source=gbs_book_other_versions); Petra Bueskens, "Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World," in Andrea O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016), xiii.

¹⁸ Fraser, *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide*; Christina Prinds, Helene Nikolajsen, and Birgitte Folmann, "Yummy Mummy — The Ideal of Not Looking like a Mother," *Women and Birth*, June 6, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.WOMBI.2019.05.009>.

¹⁹ Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 8.

is separated from professional paid work. Together, these tenets of intensive mothering prevent mothers undertaking work outside of the family unit whilst devaluing maternal care that is positioned as natural.²⁰

The disavowal of the Virgin's body is reflected in the denial of the mother's material experience, as contemporary western ideologies structure motherhood as an unattainable site of perfection. The yummy mummy and the undertakings of intensive mothering, both part of a contemporary backlash against feminist mothering, are used by the mass media and advertising to control mothers, their bodies and behaviours.²¹ Mothers who are also artists may be well-placed to upset these ideologies, drawing upon embodied experiences of mothering in opposition to the stereotyped image of the mother seen in mainstream media.²²

In connecting the 'personal to the cultural,' this investigation extends beyond autoethnographic concerns, where an exploration of my own mothering experiences is a means to critique broader western structures of mothering and its representation.²³ Despite progress made in this area by ongoing cultural criticism, mainstream images continue to define motherhood for many women in western society.²⁴ These images are driven by ideology that celebrates women's capacities

²⁰ D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, "Conceiving Intensive Mothering." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 8, no.1–2 (2006).
<https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/5016>.

²¹ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005); This trend is, according to Lyn O'Brien Hallstein, 'a sophisticated and complex backlash and it works rhetorically to simultaneously acknowledge and refute (erode) feminist gains.' D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, "She Gives Birth, She's Wearing a Bikini: Mobilizing the Postpregnant Celebrity Mom Body to Manage the Post-Second Wave Crisis in Femininity," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 34.2 (2011), 111, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2011.619471>>.

²² Iris Marion Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 160–75; Kelly Oliver, "Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation," *Hypatia*, 25.4 (2010), 760–61 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01134.x>>.

²³ Elena Marchevska in *The Maternal in Creative Work* argues that 'by using anecdotal theory and feminist autobiographical writing, [Lisa Baraitser] is capable of discussing (her own) encounter with maternal subjectivity and of keeping the maternal experience in sight.' I incorporate this model into my research project. Elena Marchevska, Marchevska, Elena. 'Maternal art practice: An emerging field of artistic enquiry into motherhood, care and time.' In Marchevska, Elena, and Valerie Walkerdine, eds. *The Maternal in Creative Work*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Xxvi-9. 4.

²⁴ Nicholas L. Holt, "Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2.1 (2003), 18–28; Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk about It*. United States: Penguin Books, 1999; Deidre D. Johnston & Debra H. Swanson, "Undermining Mothers: A Content Analysis of the

to juggle multiple shifts of care work, paid work, and body work, and to bounce back to our perfect pre-maternal selves (that were, however, never framed as perfect at the time).²⁵ Feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie describes this aspiration for perfection as ‘a heightened form of self-regulation.’²⁶ Yet in describing my mothering experiences visually I complicate this socially expedient, oversimplified image, flesh it out, make it messy, and position the maternal as a generative state. The project’s framing in terms of representation is relevant and important. Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore describe how previous generations of artists were motivated and empowered by Elizabeth Grosz’s ‘feminist philosophy of the body.’²⁷ These theories emphasised the role that representation plays in constructing social realities ... In such an understanding of the process of social change, those who imagine and represent alternative realities – among them, artists – become key.²⁸

The examination and representation of multiple realities remains vital as I argue, in many instances the mother still cannot see herself in patriarchal society.

This project has political implications, exploring why and how the gains of second-wave feminist mothering have since faltered or been eroded. Indeed, Andrea O’Reilly writes that even defining feminist mothering remains difficult, ‘Does the mother have to identify as a feminist for her mothering to qualify as a feminist practice?... is there a practice of feminist mothering without a politic of feminism?’²⁹

Representation of Mothers in Magazines,” *Mass Communication & Society*, 2003, 6(3), 243–265; Julie Kelso, “Representing Mothers.” *Hecate*, 32, no.2 (2006): 4-20.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.rp.nla.gov.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=24306884&site=ehost-live>; Petra Bueskens & Sophia Brock, “Introduction. Matricentric Feminism: Abjection and Disruption in Australian Stories of Mothering.” *Hecate* 45, ½ (2019): 13–22. <https://search.ebscohost.com.rp.nla.gov.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=148669831&site=eds-live>.

²⁵ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141–59.

²⁶ Angela McRobbie, “Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30.83 (2015), 9.

²⁷ Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021). Introduction, Kobo ebook.

²⁸ Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, Kobo ebook.

²⁹ Andea O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*. Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2016. Chapter 3.

The advent of COVID-19 and the ensuing social restrictions that occurred during the undertaking of this project give greater urgency to these questions. For me, undertaking studio-led research in art and mother studies is an act of empowered and feminist mothering.³⁰ The resultant images may be seen as activist.³¹ But this project has personal implications too; at its conclusion, two new adults - a woman who became a mother, and her adult son, will emerge and go their separate ways, together. They have drawn each other and made each other new. From the sidelines leaps another child, one who is not quite fully fledged (Figure 3 & Figure 4).

³⁰ 'In patriarchal culture, women who mother in the institution of motherhood are regarded as "good" mothers, while women who mother outside or against the institution of motherhood are viewed as "bad" mothers. In contrast, [Adrienne] Rich argues that mothers, in order to resist patriarchal motherhood and achieve empowered mothering must be "bad" mothers, or more precisely, "mother outlaws." Andrea O'Reilly, "Introduction," in *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto: Women's Press imprint of Canadian Scholars Press, 2004), 2.

³¹ Denise Ferris, "Mary Leunig - The Activist Art of Blood and Guts," *Hecate*, 45.1/2 (2019), 77–100. While my work is not driven by the same 'blood and guts' aesthetic of Mary Leunig, I believe it is quietly transgressive.



Figure 3. Zoe Freney, *Drawing (mother and son)*, 2021, pastel and acrylic on paper, 160 x 1145 cm.



Figure 4. Zoe Freney, *Photo Bomb*, 2021, pastel on primed card, 90 x 70 cm.

Like the teenager, the mother is always never quite arrived, an uncertain place in which to reside.³² Taking observations from the fieldwork of motherhood, this practice-based project has occurred in fits and starts, in my head on car trips to school sports fixtures, late at night in panicked half-dreams, at the dinner table, and in the studio, away from home, with the kids still on my mind.

³² Lisa Baraitser, 'Mothers Who Make Things Public', *Feminist Review*, 93.1 (2009) <<https://doi.org/doi:10.1057/fr.2009.21>>. 12.

Methodology Section

Overview

This project began as one thing and through its undertaking became something else. This is typical of practice-based research, wherein, according to academic and author Estelle Barrett, in her introduction to *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ‘innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined, and “outcomes” of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable.’³³ At its outset this project was an exploration into if and how mother-artists can maintain their art practices whilst undertaking mothering, in the current western ideologies of intensive mothering and the devaluing of care.³⁴ The very doing of the thing has answered that question.

The reorientated project is now focused on defining and depicting alternative representations of mothers and mothering, centred on my own lived experiences, including my experiences of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The dearth of adequate and easily accessible representations of mothers initiated my first question, when I was an emerging artist and first-time mother without access to models of what that could look or feel like.³⁵ The problems of representation broaden out to have universal importance when, through my research into visual culture and mother studies, I identify that images of certain types of mothers create and perpetuate narrow and limiting models for mothers.

Working against the simplification of the mothering experience, I use a variety of tactics to arrive at representations of my particular experience, in the hope they open possibilities for other mothers to imagine themselves.³⁶ In complicating mother

³³ Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London, New York: I.B. Taurus and Co Ltd, 2007), 5.

³⁴ Petra Bueskens, “Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World,” in Andrea O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016), xiii.

³⁵ My experience is similar to that described by McCloskey: ‘over the past 7 years or so there seems to have been a proliferation of groups, conferences, movements, research consortias, exhibition, research, books and so on confidently developing new thinking on maternal subjectivity and exploring ever more diverse maternal experiences.’ Paula McCloskey, “Art and Maternal Subjectivity: An Ongoing Relation,” *M/Other Voices*, April (2015).

³⁶ Bolt writes of ‘[Michel] De Certeau’s analysis of the subtle logic of everyday activities,’ in which he ‘distinguishes between strategies and tactics. Strategy... is the model upon which political, economic and

images I call upon theories of psychoanalysis and phenomenology, in order to situate the mother's subjectivity in relation to dependent others, and within mothering spaces and situations. The research is undertaken as an untidy assemblage of methodologies and frameworks, as no one approach is adequate to capture all aspects of contemporary mothering reality.

Practice-based research

Practice-based research depends upon and values intuitive knowledge, something many mother-artists already deploy in their practices as mothers. This goes against what we are constantly told by the mass media and the tenets of patriarchal motherhood: that our intuitive knowledge is inferior to scientific, medicalised, neoliberal forms of knowledge and control.³⁷

Through embodied practice, mother-artists frequently produce images of mothers that are in opposition to mainstream representation of mothers.³⁸ Maternal thinking, theorised by pioneering philosopher Sara Ruddick, wherein 'thinking arises from and is tested against practices,'³⁹ may be seen as akin to practice-based research where 'the acquisition of knowledge may be ... understood as a cognitive or "sense activity."⁴⁰ Or as anthropologist Tim Ingold writes, it is through working that:

scientific rationality has been structured.' A tactic, on the other hand, "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance." ... According to such logic, opportunities are seized in the heat of the moment. Decisions are made, not according to logical thought, but as a direct and felt response to handling elements.' Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London, New York: I.B. Taurus and Co Ltd, 2004). 7-8.

³⁷ Andrea O'Reilly, ed., *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (Toronto: Women's Press imprint of Canadian Scholars Press, 2004); Andrea O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016).

³⁸ This is similar to the observation of feminist art historian Rosemary Betterton in *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, that 'art offers carnal knowledge: an embodied psychic understanding of how representational practices interact with experiences of the maternal body...' Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, 1st edn (Manchester GB: Manchester University Press, 2014), 7. Reflecting on it now, I can see the tentative, unfinished work *Occupation: Homemaker* represents me thinking through my hands when I couldn't speak. It is a pared back, monotone act of self-representation when the self-help book mothers, and the television sitcom mothers were bold, funny, beautiful, and whole. As Adrienne Rich writes, 'That calm, sure, unambivalent woman who moved through the pages of the manuals I read seemed as unlike me as an astronaut.' Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1981). 36.

³⁹ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Beacon Press, 1989), 13.

⁴⁰ Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, 8.

the worker... is changed through the experience.... Perhaps then, the essence of production lies as much or more in the attential quality of the action.⁴¹

Through practice that is both attentive to moves in the studio and to my mothering experiences, I re-evaluate and bring to the fore what Ruddick, borrowing from Michel Foucault, describes as 'subjugated knowledge,' that is, knowledge arising from the work of maternal labour and care that has been discredited and undervalued by the dominant culture.⁴²

In this project, knowledge and ideas are tested in artworks that represent thinking through making. This aligns with Betterton's belief that art practices can 'anticipate the slower working out of theory.'⁴³ Philosopher, artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger states it was her 'immersion in painting' that allowed her to theorise subjectivity in the feminine.⁴⁴ This validates the notion that, as a researcher implicated in the research, working, as feminist theorist Lisa Baraitser writes, 'between the mundane and theory,'⁴⁵ one may arrive at theory via studio practice that is subjective, reflexive and requires what Barrett calls an 'emergent methodology.'⁴⁶

⁴¹ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 6.

⁴² Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 130; 'By subjugated knowledges I mean two things: on the one hand I am referring to the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence of formal systemisation... On the other hand, I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else... a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated... it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work.' Michel Foucault, Colin Gordon (editor), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon Books. 82. In challenging dominant images of motherhood, my work also seeks to work against the ways that 'maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture.' Ruddick quoted in Ferris, "Mary Leunig - The Activist Art of Blood and Guts," 94; This approach is in line with Barrett's, as she writes that, 'an innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalised or not yet recognised in established social practices and discourse.' Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, 7.

⁴³ Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, 7.

⁴⁴ Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger: Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics. Volume 1 1990-2000*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 247.

⁴⁵ Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters* (Hove, East Sussex; New York: Routledge, 2009), 15.

⁴⁶ Barrett cites Martin Heidegger's notion of 'praxical knowledge,' which 'implies that ideas and theory are ultimately the result of practice rather than vice versa.' In this model, 'knowledge emerge[s] through material processes. Because such processes are (at least in part) predicated on the tacit and alternative logic of practice in time, their precise operations cannot be predetermined.' Barrett and Bolt, 9.

As I go about my research and mothering practices I pay attention to what Baraitser calls 'the ways that motherhood may allow for the generation of new "raw materials" for experiencing ourselves, others and our worlds.'⁴⁷ My experience of mothering has been that it is a demanding, multidisciplinary practice that could be framed as praxical knowledge or reflexive practice. For Barrett and Bolt, this is where ideas and theory eventuate through practice.⁴⁸ Also framed as an emergent approach, this methodology allows the researcher to be agile, adaptable and responsive. Methodologies and outcomes are not fixed and are likely to change throughout the process as required. This way of working acknowledges the insufficiencies of the dominant discourses of motherhood, and instead brings to bear a range of small narratives, adopting an assemblage of methodologies.

Method assemblage⁴⁹

The project is disorganised, interrupted, and necessarily not always to the fore of my attention when, like a dolphin, I have to keep part of my brain constantly concerned with keeping the kids afloat.⁵⁰ To reflect this non-linear but dogged approach I have stitched together a range of methodologies, in a way similar to Baraitser's approach in *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*.⁵¹ Admitting to untidiness in research, Baraitser welcomes John Law's attempt to 'imagine what it might be to remake social science in ways better equipped to deal with mess, confusion and relative disorder.'⁵² In *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, Law calls for 'a kind of spreading or diversification of approaches to method.'⁵³ This is similar to what Ingold is advocating when he asks,

⁴⁷ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 3.

⁴⁸ Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, 6.

⁴⁹ ⁴⁹ John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

⁵⁰ While this is not a scholarly source, it is useful to cite for the stereotypes of mothers' natural and instinctual knowledges and behaviours, for example the section on dolphin mother behaviour is titled 'It's in a Mother's Nature,' and states: 'some species of dolphins are such vigilant "helicopter parents" they don't even sleep for a full month after their babies are born!' "Mother Knows Best, Naturally," *World Animal Protection*, 2019, accessed 18 January, 2022, <https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.au/news/mother-knows-best-naturally>.

⁵¹ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*.

⁵² John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

⁵³ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 12.

Why do we acknowledge only our textual sources but not the ground we walk, the ever-changing skies, mountains and rivers, rocks and trees, the houses we inhabit and the tools we use...?⁵⁴

By opening up my investigations to include my interactions and experiences in the world and in relation to others, to acknowledge and value what Laws calls the ‘unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct,’ I privilege the generative nature of mothering, maternal work and maternal thinking.⁵⁵

Through this approach I bring attention to the real mess of mothering, in defiance of current images of perfect mothering and effortlessly composed super mums. This sometimes feels risky and uncomfortable, as, according to artist and scholar Denise Ferris in her analysis of the drawings of Mary Leunig (b.1950), it is transgressive to admit to ‘being both without control and out of control in a situation where “control” is socially assigned.’⁵⁶ This feels appropriate to a project that has at times been as slippery and ephemeral as a playdough squid, squeezed too hard by clammy hands (Figure 5). These feelings and knowings are as elusive as the ‘*Disoeuvre*’ I have amassed along the way; the playdough creatures, and Book Week costumes. Disoeuvre is a term coined by artist and author Felicity Allen, who writes, ‘Disoeuvre is an alternative to the conventional ‘oeuvre’ produced by art’s heroes.’⁵⁷ It is the work that is made in the spaces between other work, vulnerable to interruption and likely to go unnoticed, like an accumulation of unpublished texts. But like anecdote, the disoeuvre is able to be viewed as a feminist site for theoretical and creative potential. Disorder and untidiness are used as tactics in working against current

⁵⁴ Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Xii.

⁵⁵ Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, 2.

⁵⁶ Ferris, “Mary Leunig - The Activist Art of Blood and Guts,” 82.

⁵⁷ ‘Felicity Allen coins the neologism ‘Disoeuvre’ as an alternative to the conventional ‘oeuvre’ produced by art’s heroes.’ Felicity Allen, *The Disoeuvre* (Ma Bibliotheque, 2019) <<https://mabibliotheque.cargo.site/Felicity-Allen-The-Disoeuvre-2019>>. ‘A neologism meaning and oeuvre not easily recognised as one... She’s wresting the French word *oeuvre* into the English-dominated present dissing it switching it with the French *désœuvré*: out of work idle, with nothing to do.’

rational models of motherhood and mothering ideologies, that I argue are illogical and excessive.



Figure 5. Zoe Freney, *Small hands help build a "giant squid,"* 2019, digital image.

Attending to and un-tidying

My aim in disrupting the motherhood discourse is to mess up and complicate simplistic representations of mothers and mothering, to expose the metaphorical 'blood and guts' involved in care work.⁵⁸ Part of this methodology is paying attention, as Ingold believes we learn and change through 'paying attention to what the world has to tell us.'⁵⁹ This is not to say that as mothers we have intrinsic knowledge when

⁵⁸ Barbara Hall in Anne Marsh, *Doing Feminism: Women's Art and Feminist Criticism in Australia*, 2; Ferris, "Mary Leunig - The Activist Art of Blood and Guts."

⁵⁹ Ingold goes on to say that 'There is no contradiction, then, between participation and observation; rather, the one depends on the other,' arguing for the subjectivity of the researcher. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 12; As Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*, '[a]ttention by itself is an enlarging glass.' Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994), 158.

it comes to maternal and care work. Feminist philosopher and theorist Luce Irigaray, in her theorisation of listening as opposed to the 'phallogocentric' structures of looking, points to the importance of attentiveness, which 'involves more than one sense, and presupposes a move towards intersubjectivity.'⁶⁰ This approach represents 'knowing *from the inside*,' and can generate new, interesting and affective art works.⁶¹

Paying attention has also been theorised as part of maternal thinking and practice. Making work from within mothering brings a focus on attentive love, care and co-authorship.⁶² For Ruddick, 'attention is at once an act of knowing and an act of love.'⁶³ In developing her theories of loving attention, Ruddick draws on the ideas of Iris Murdoch.⁶⁴ For Murdoch, art also 'involve[s] attending, a task of attention which goes on all the time.'⁶⁵ Philosopher Simone Weil writes of love and attention, bound up with desire,

Love is the teacher of gods and men, for no one learns without desiring to learn... Attention alone - that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears ... is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived.⁶⁶

This sacrifice of the 'I' may be misconstrued as aligning with ideologies of intensive mothering whereby the mother denies her own needs to fulfil those of her family. However Weil's consideration of attention is in a spiritual context, and decentering the self can instead be seen to open one up to the possibility of trans-subjectivity.⁶⁷ The devotion of love and attention to both mothering and art practice could be seen as a tension or provocation for a mother-artist. To accommodate the potentially

⁶⁰ Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 78.

⁶¹ Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 15. Italics in original text.

⁶² Siân Miles (editor), *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, London: Penguin Books, 2005; Jacqueline Millner. 'Caring through art: Reimagining value as political practice.' *Art & the Public Sphere*. Volume 8 Number 2. 2019. 163-174; Millner, Jacqueline, and Gretchen Coombs (editors), *Care Ethics and Art*, London and New York: Routledge.

⁶³ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 120.

⁶⁴ Ruddick, 120.

⁶⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, "Love and Attention," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 32 (1992), 59.

⁶⁶ Simone Weil, 'Attention and Will,' in Siân Miles (editor), *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 231-237, London: Penguin Books, 2005. 233.

⁶⁷ Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil*. Routledge eBook. 2022, i.

conflicting requirements of attention and care I propose instead an ethical practice whereby the loving attention I practice in mothering is evoked in my art practice and studio research. This aligns to Murdoch's philosophy exploring 'questions related to the importance of attention in ethics.' In this way the art produced embodies an ethics of care, towards the child and to others in the suggestion of alternatives to neoliberal, individualised motherhood.⁶⁸

Mother-artists, by definition, have more than one area of focus and expertise. But we are not the heroes of the art world. We are not celebrated like the legendary multi-tasking Renaissance Men. Maternal studies scholar Andrea O'Reilly coined the term 'motherhood studies' in 2006 to demarcate a discipline that is 'explicitly interdisciplinary ... and multidisciplinary.'⁶⁹ This project, as an investigation into the possible representations of the experiences of motherhood, looks at the work of motherhood as theorised by Ruddick, as well as the work of sociologists like Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels who, in *Mommy Myth*, investigate how the idealisation of mothers and motherhood adversely impacts mothers' experiences.⁷⁰

I draw on Baraitser's notion that our mothering work is mediated by the things and stuff of mothering - paraphernalia like prams, bottles and change tables, that then make room for 'grown up' equipment like sports gear and computer consoles - and that this affects our physical negotiations in the world.⁷¹ The complex relationships between bodies, space and things is called 'MotherSpace' by Marsha Marotta.⁷² This concern is fleshed out using the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom, according to Baraitser, 'our subjectivity resides not in our consciousness

⁶⁸ Jacqueline Millner. 'Caring through art: Reimagining value as political practice.' *Art & the Public Sphere*. Volume 8 Number 2. 2019. 163-174.

⁶⁹ Andrea O'Reilly, ed., *Twenty-First Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (New York, Chichester West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1-2.

⁷⁰ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*.

⁷¹ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 122-150.

⁷² 'The built spaces and discursive spaces [private like the home and public like the park, the laundromat, the car – anywhere in which mothering work occurs] that contemporary mothers inhabit and that helps shape their subjectivities and their possibilities, define who mothers can be and what they can do at any given point in time.' Marsha Marotta, "MotherSpace: Disciplining through the Material and Discursive," in *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home and the Body*, eds. Sarah Hardy and Caroline Wiedmer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15.

alone but in the lived body.⁷³ Thus in the research I focus on the maternal body, the ways it is bounded by culture and society and the ways I traverse the world in my own mothering body.

Phenomenology

The paucity of representations of real, lived mothers in dominant culture has motivated me to draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of Phenomenology.⁷⁴ Iris Marion Young's feminist concepts of space and the body are important too, in order to situate a mother's subjectivity in relation to dependent others and within mothering spaces and situations. In studio research I am conscious of and exaggerate the performative and physical aspects of my mothering in the phenomenological field of the material world. These are put forward against simplified representations of woman as abjected 'maternal container',⁷⁵ or sexualised as bounced-back yummy mummy, unscathed by the mental and physical exertions of mothering.⁷⁶

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues for the validation of embodied experience against Enlightenment mind-body dualism and empirical scientific thought, that fails to account for experiential knowledge and the position of the body in the world. 'Sense experience', *le sentir*, which 'invests the quality [of

⁷³ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 128; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, 3rd edn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁷⁴ Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty theorised a return to the body as a tool for perception. This brings together the mind and body that had been separated by Cartesian dualism. Phenomenology 'substitute[s] for consciousness, as the subject of perception, existence, or being in the world through a body.' A.D. Smith, "The Flesh of Percept: Merleau-Ponty and Husserl," in *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3; Phenomenology has been defined as 'a search for a philosophy which shall be a "rigorous science", but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we "live" them.' Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

This philosophy, in privileging our experience of the world through our bodies is appropriate in this study as I recuperate mothers' lived experiences and challenge the ideals of maternal bodies, through an exploration of my own body's being in the world and its navigation of mothering.

⁷⁵ Kelly Oliver, 'Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions', *Hypatia*, 8.3 (1993), 104, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810407>>.

⁷⁶ Philosopher Moira Gatens uses the term 'imaginary' to refer to the 'images, symbols, metaphors and representations,' which help constitute subjectivity. This is relevant in this study as mothers are frequently exposed to images of a narrow range of 'good' motherhood, which together construct a sense of oneself as a contemporary mother under neoliberal patriarchy. Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), viii.

experience] with vital value' is brought to the fore.⁷⁷ Thinking and making phenomenologically acknowledges the notion that representation, based upon the physical realities of mothering, is key to offering mothers alternative ways to be in the world, and to practice mothering against dominant norms.⁷⁸

Current dominant motherhood ideology focuses strongly on the mother's body and the control of its boundaries. As philosopher Iris Young argues in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, 'patriarchal culture gives women's bodies such variable meanings and submits them to so many controls.'⁷⁹ Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz describes how 'being a body is something that we must come to accommodate psychically, something that we must live.'⁸⁰ The lived experiences of pregnancy, birth and mothering put the body through dramatic physical and psychical changes that can be described through visual art practices and processes.

The studio research attends to the embodied experiences of mothering and the sorts of knowing that can be ascertained through the 'hungers, tastes, discomforts, or pains of our bodies.'⁸¹ Kristeva argues that to counter the lack and limitations of discourses around motherhood, which are damaging to all women, we need to offer representations of specific maternal experiences.⁸² A focus on the body and its experiences in space, with kids and 'stuff,' may thus help bridge the gap between

⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; Furthermore, Gatens argues that the lived body is not passive and that 'our identity is not a mental overlay but rather emerges through the way that a particular body will negotiate within the world.' Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*; Motherhood changes the ways our bodies act in the world, thus this embodiment-as-mother shapes our identity as it is inscribed in the body. Jane Lymer, *The Phenomenology of Gravidity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd., 2016).

⁷⁸ As Kristeva argues, 'it is not maternity or reproduction that is responsible for women's oppression, but the representations of them.' Oliver, "Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions," 106.

⁷⁹ Iris Marion Young, *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 9-12.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1994), xiii.

⁸¹ Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, 2-3.

⁸² 'One needs to listen, more carefully than ever to what mothers are saying today, through their economic difficulties and, beyond the guilt... through their discomforts, insomnias, joys, angers, desires, pains and pleasures...' Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1977), 179.

experience and the reduction of the mother's body to discourses of science, medicine, and mass media consumerist representations.⁸³

In the essay 'Eye and Mind,' Merleau-Ponty writes about the potential of art, especially painting, for embodiment: 'it is by lending his [sic] body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.'⁸⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, seeing is an immersive act, taking into account the thickness of one's flesh in the flesh of the world.⁸⁵ Thus the body is implicated in the artwork, as it is through the body that the artist renders these interior knowledges, the cells as they divide, the blood as it quickens, the pelvis relaxing like a broadening smile, and the subsequent negotiations with the world and its stuff as a mother. But whose body is represented and by whom? The mother-artist must work against the 'unstated gender-bias in the universalisation of "the writing subject" or "the artist." We know that the neutrality of this subject actually masks the "masculine."' ⁸⁶ Feminist academic Julie Kelso writes that 'When a mother speaks, writes, even creates on a cultural level, she is ... attempting to speak from the place of silence.'⁸⁷ Women who have attempted to write from a feminine specificity, like Irigaray for example, have been criticised for their perceived essentialism.⁸⁸ Margaret Whitford in her Introduction to *The Irigaray Reader* argues that 'there might be the possibility of a different, non-masculine discourse.'⁸⁹ Professor of Feminism, Art and Theory Hilary Robinson argues that Irigaray's theorisations could lead to a new appropriate discourse around women's art making practices and processes.⁹⁰

⁸³ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 128.

⁸⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception : And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. by James M. Edie, 8th edn (Northwestern University Press, 1976), 162.

⁸⁵ 'Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world... the world is made of the same stuff as the body.' Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 163.

⁸⁶ Julie Kelso, "Representing Mothers," *Hecate*, 32.2 (2006), 16.

⁸⁷ Kelso, 15.

⁸⁸ Kelso, 16; Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford, Cambridge Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 2.

⁸⁹ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 4.

⁹⁰ Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*.

Psychoanalyst and painter, Bracha Ettinger describes how Merleau-Ponty, 'links the gaze and the enigma of painting to the body of the artist.'⁹¹ Ettinger approaches theories of the gaze through her experience as a painter, stating in her paper 'Matrixial Gaze and the Screen: Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan,' that it is through the process of painting she recognizes what she terms a '*matrixial borderspace* beyond the Phallus in the field of experience and representation.'⁹² This conceptualisation of the matrix offers a 'supplementary symbolic dimension,'⁹³ expanding the realms of psychoanalysis using the alternative metaphor of the womb to counter that of the phallus, which has long dominated theories of subjectivity.

Feminist psychoanalysis

The project draws on theories from feminist psychoanalysis in order to contest the limitations pressed upon the maternal body and the barriers to mothers' self-representation. This gives voice to what Kristeva has called 'the unspeakable in our culture,'⁹⁴ and what Irigaray has defined as 'the murder of the mother.'⁹⁵ This is a silence that goes beyond what is hard to describe. It is a refusal to speak or to let speak, defined by social scientist Susan Maushart as 'the mask of silence.'⁹⁶

Writer, feminist and activist Audre Lorde writes in *When I dare to be Powerful*, that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it ... misunderstood.⁹⁷

Betterton identifies that artists take a considerable risk in making work about the maternal, a place of 'radical silence,' and in doing so they engage in an 'incomplete project,' because maternal subjectivity 'is always in the process of becoming in

⁹¹ Bracha L. Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan," in *Bracha L. Ettinger: Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics. Volume 1 1990-2000*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 247.

⁹² Bracha L. Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan," 246-247.

⁹³ Griselda Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," in *Bracha L. Ettinger: Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics. Volume 1 1990-2000*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1.

⁹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi, 6th edn (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993). 30; Baraitser argues the maternal remains unspeakable because 'the maternal remains haunted by her link with the impossibility of knowing...' Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*. 6.

⁹⁵ Irigaray. Margaret Whitford quoting Irigaray in the Introduction to *The Irigaray Reader*. 7.

⁹⁶ Maushart. Xx.

⁹⁷ Audre Lorde, *When I Dare to Be Powerful: Women so Empowered Are Dangerous*, ebook (Penguin Random House UK, 2020).

relation to a changing other, the child.⁹⁸ The risky business for the mother-artist is to work from this place of joint subjectivity in a culture that privileges individualism.

For decades now, mother-artists have engaged with feminism and psychoanalytical theories in an attempt to think about and describe the elusive mother subject. Perhaps this is because the discipline of psychoanalysis at its inception gave us 'only a massive nothing' in regards to the mother.⁹⁹ Academic and psychotherapist Petra Bueskens writes how 'the paucity of [Freud's] analysis of mothers and his inability to conceive of female, let alone maternal, subjectivity *on its own terms* speaks of a curious gap in Freud's thinking.'¹⁰⁰ Feminist psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose writes that the mother is there in Freud's late work and in his dreams.¹⁰¹ She may hover like a spectre, but since their inception, the phallogentric theories of psychoanalysis have done much harm to the mother, who has been subsumed in order that the other, the child, may gain subjectivity. In Freud's thinking, the mother is left with nothing; even the child is always leaving her.

Kristeva's theories also develop subjectivity as separation. As Toril Moi writes in *The Kristeva Reader*,

For Kristeva, motherhood represents a model of love which ... is at once unconditional and directed towards the final separation of the two subjects caught up in the amorous relationship.¹⁰²

Professor of Religion, Morny Joy, in 'The Challenge of Love,' also writes of the 'extraordinarily strange ambivalence that lurks at the heart of Kristeva's work.'¹⁰³ This

⁹⁸ 'As imaginative practices of making bodies in space, such artworks can give form to the unutterable, reveal ambivalence and contradiction, and create new figurations of the maternal.' Betterton. 8-10.

⁹⁹ Kristeva, *Kristeva Read*. 179.

¹⁰⁰ Petra Bueskens, *Mothering & Psychoanalysis: Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives* (Demeter Press, 2014), 5. Italics in original.

¹⁰¹ For Freud, 'there is no getting away from mothers... her figure haunts the work.' Jacqueline Rose, 'Of Knowledge and Mothers: On the Work of Christopher Bollas', in *The Vitality of Objects : Exploring the Work of Christopher Bollas*, ed. by Joseph Scalia (SAGE Publications, 2002), 108-109.

¹⁰² Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, 18-19.

¹⁰³ Morny Joy, "The Challenge of Love: Kristeva and Irigaray," in *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Morny Joy (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary, 2011), 106; Baraitser writes that 'Kristeva's position seems to destroy the potential for maternal subjectivity at the point that it appears to rescue mothers from their silence.' Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 7.

is the ambivalence of maternal passion.¹⁰⁴ Bracha Ettinger, on the other hand, describes the development of 'subjectivity-as-encounter' rather than the phallic model of 'subjectivity-as-separation'.¹⁰⁵ This represents a concept of transformative subjectivity. Ettinger believes that traditional '[p]sychoanalysis has privileged anxiety, abjection and forecluded ... compassion, hope, and respect.'¹⁰⁶ Pollock writes how, in her matrixial conceptualisation, Ettinger

proposes a radically non-Oedipal theory of subjectivity... very different from what Kristeva posits with her notion of the subject being formed only postnatally in progressive stages of separation from the maternal body, which must be abjected.¹⁰⁷

Pollock writes that Ettinger's matrixial offers us the 'gift that feminine sexual specificity makes to human subjectivity'.¹⁰⁸ Working with the matrixial as a structure of feminine subjectivity may be an approach through which to recuperate maternal subjectivity as a creative and transformative process, rather than positioning the mother as a tragic figure of 'milk and tears'.¹⁰⁹

Pollock believes that the apparent difficulty in understanding Ettinger's text may be due to our culture's unfamiliarity with, or reluctance to accept

the matrixial shifting of established theories, bear[ing] witness to how deeply alienated the specificity of what the feminine brings to human subjectivity has been made by the dominance of the phallic and its universe of meaning encoded in language.¹¹⁰

The unfolding of the structuring of subjectivity in the feminine in Ettinger's work is at once difficult and dense, and at the same time makes inherent sense to me. The subsequent art works are embodiments of this subjectivity.

¹⁰⁴ Passion that is, according to Griselda Pollock, 'pregnant with both madness and sublimity.' Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," 16.

¹⁰⁵ Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," 1.

¹⁰⁶ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Bracha Ettinger: Maternal Subjectivity and the Matrixial Subject* (Switzerland: Youtube, 2012).

¹⁰⁷ Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," 48-49.

¹⁰⁸ Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics," 10.

¹⁰⁹ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 172-173.

¹¹⁰ Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics," 10.

Anecdotal Theory (poetically thinking)

This tangle of theories and ideas is brought together in a structure that acknowledges the importance of representation and of bringing mothers' voices to the fore. Many of the texts within the field of motherhood studies begin with or incorporate first person narratives and anecdotes.¹¹¹ This approach, beginning with narrative, self-reflection, and an acknowledgement of lived experience, that may then lead to theoretical investigation,¹¹² has been described by Jane Gallop as Anecdotal Theory.¹¹³

Gallop writes that “anecdote” and “theory” carry diametrically opposed connotations: humorous vs. serious, short vs. grand, trivial vs. overarching, specific vs. general.’¹¹⁴ Gallop’s strategy is to highlight these binaries in order to produce ‘theory with a better sense of humor ... which honors the uncanny detail of lived experience.’¹¹⁵ Baraitser advocates the use of Anecdotal Theory in her interdisciplinary investigation into maternal subjectivity, asking not what does mothering look like in the ideal, but what do experiences of mothering ‘feel like and do to us?’¹¹⁶

Compared to theory, an anecdote is a slight story, of little consequence. But if we take them collectively, these shared stories may in fact tell us about the things omitted from self-help books and cleaning product advertising, the specificity of lived experience. Anecdote seems an appropriate means through which to bring to the project, against the generalised view of idealised motherhood, the emotions, fears, joys, frustrations and unexpected situations of my mothering experience, and to share these with other mothers. But mothers’ lived experiences continue to be discounted and diminished, as are the creative works of mothering, the countless

¹¹¹ Bueskens defines an aspect of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: motherhood as experience and institution* as a ‘small, indeed whimsical biographical anecdote.’ Bueskens, “Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World,” xiii; ‘Feminist consciousness-raising [from the 1960s] was based around personal story telling... and acknowledged the relative nature of knowledge and its interconnection with power.’ Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge), Introduction, Kobo eBook.

¹¹² Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 12.

¹¹³ Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

¹¹⁴ Gallop, 2.

¹¹⁵ Gallop, 2.

¹¹⁶ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 11.

ephemera made along the way to which the serious artworld pays little heed; the cardboard box installations and the papier mâché costumes (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Zoe Freney, *Cubby*, 2016, digital image.

In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard recognises the importance of the small.¹¹⁷ I imagine he would perceive the whole world within the blanket cubby, as we take tiny tea in the filtered light of the blue sheet ceiling, dipping low over our heads as it sags between its walls of chairs. John Stilgoe in the Foreword to *The Poetics of Space* writes that, for Bachelard, the house is the starting point for the universe.¹¹⁸ By employing the strategy of the anecdote, this project runs the risk of being belittled, dismissed, falling into *disoeuvre*, in its positioning of the domestic as a site of creativity. However, I present this as a challenge to the reader and the viewer, exhorting you quietly to pay attention.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994).

¹¹⁸ John R. Stilgoe, 'Foreword to 1994 Edition', in *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994), ix.

¹¹⁹ As Bachelard insists, 'In looking at a miniature, unflagging attention is required to integrate all the detail. Bachelard, 159.

The tales of mothers' daily minutiae carry meaning, a fact recognised by Pollock when she recommends a reassessment of Freud's 'signing off ... on the question of psychoanalytical research into femininity.' In 1932 Freud wrote:

If you want to know more about femininity, inquire from your own experience of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science will give you deeper and more coherent information.¹²⁰

Pollock argues that while this quote is often read as evasion on Freud's part, it is worth heeding his advice on this matter at least. While poetry and art are often elevated in culture, personal experience in the form of anecdote is frequently discounted.

Anecdote may take us back to reside in memory and embodiment. This project begins with two visual anecdotes, side by side as a kind of starting point. From their position on the periphery they are included here through a looping back of time, and a bringing to bear the brilliant but throwaway creative products of my children. Positioning artworks like these, and the *Mothersuit*, as anecdotes and points in time recognises the power of images, and repurposes them from market commodities to the 'gift of a means of mediation between subjects.'¹²¹ As Ferris argues in 'Mary Leunig—The Activist Art of Blood and Guts,' 'images offer collective and unspoken knowledge, and have a vast capacity to infiltrate perceptions.'¹²² Images may be made as small truths and exhibited as political statements against mainstream models. When a mother looks at my work and chuckles or sighs, I feel like a gift has been exchanged between us.

¹²⁰ Pollock quoting Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity' (1933), New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans., and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), XXII (1964), 135; Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics," 1.

¹²¹ Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, 83-84.

¹²² Ferris, "Mary Leunig - The Activist Art of Blood and Guts," 77.

Anecdote 2: A Sketch

A disoeuvre in playdough, death of a birthday chicken, novelty birthday cakes made at night, stitches in the forehead. Birth into the paradise garden of the woollen rug on the loungeroom floor, then feasting on peanut butter toast. Fainting in the shower after birth, feeling like my work is done and then realising it is only just beginning. Weight of melons, standing days before birth like my pelvis might just sink to the floor. Watching growing boys turn their backs, working together on separate screens at the table during COVID-19 with a parrot shrieking Morning! Morning! all day. If flying with children, put on your own oxygen mask first. Jumpsuit for jumping. Mothersuit for mother work, a coverall, Grandma's handmade apron, tied at the back. Nursing bra and tea towels, linen underwear. The Virgin Mary, the laundromat, nappies on the line, my wedding ring. Dressing boys – no socks, no buttons, no undies. (Sometimes the anecdotes wrap back around to become about my own childhood and I'm still the little girl pinning dolls' clothes on a toy clothesline.) And walking to the dairy for a jug of milk that smelt like cows, a lost pony, daydreams on the school bus. Wild baby rabbits cannot be tamed. Hastily made Book Week costumes. "There's pink in the sky!" at the end of a long sleepless night, or, for the sleepless mother poet,
'The window square
Whitens and swallows its dull stars.'¹²³

¹²³ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, 4th edn (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1981), 157.

Methods: Matricentric Representation

Overview

This project is part of a strong field of work being made today, and in the past, by a diverse cohort of mother-artists who struggle against time, expectations, and physical limits, to make work about what they discover and what patriarchy denies, against the widely held beliefs that children are a 'disaster' for one's work and that good artists with children 'are all men.'¹²⁴

Historically and throughout the dire lockdown situations of COVID-19, mother-artists continue to describe in their work the treasures of mothering as well as its catastrophes.¹²⁵ In their analysis of the politics of representation, Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore argue that work in this field 'arose through feminist attempts to understand women's inculcation of oppressive feminine images and roles,' including models of mothers and motherhood.¹²⁶ In the 1970s, the work of American conceptual artist Mary Kelly (b.1941), *Post-Partum Document*, 1976 (Figure 7), was a breakthrough in bringing the concerns of mothers to a fine art gallery context. American artist Susan Hiller (b.1940) conceptualised maternity and the mother's body in a series of works in the late 1970s. For Danish artist Kirsten Justesen (b.1943), who in the 1970s explored the female gaze and the experiences of mothering, the body was a key site that she used in her work 'in order not to get lost.'¹²⁷ Justesen, Hiller and Kelly use photography and text in conceptual strategies

¹²⁴ Hettie Judah, "'Motherhood Is Taboo in the Art World – It's as If We've Sold out': Female Artists on the Impact of Having Kids," *The Guardian Online*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/dec/02/motherhood-taboo-art-world-sold-out>; Recently, British novelist, daughter of painter Lucien Freud, and great granddaughter of Sigmund Freud, Esther Freud stated on ABC radio: 'I was interested to investigate the ... compulsion to be creative... There are for certain people things that they have to attend to and that comes first...' and in her novel writes, 'If you want to be an artist there can be nothing else important in your life.' Claire Nichols, "The Book Show: 'My Mother Kept This Secret for so Long' - Esther Freud Imagines a Different Path for Her Mother," Radio National, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 26 July 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-book-show/esther-freud-david-allan-petale-jamie-marina-lau/13465284>.

¹²⁵ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 162. Anne Marsh quotes Barbara Hall from 1975, 'There cannot be great women artists until culture is redefined. Women's redefinition of culture will be the biggest blood and guts overhaul of a decrepit and decaying institution that's going to make avant-gardism look like child's play.' Anne Marsh, *Doing Feminism: Women's Art and Feminist Criticism in Australia* (Carlton, Victoria: Miegunyah Press, 2021), 2.

¹²⁶ Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*. Chapter 1.

¹²⁷ "Kirsten Justesen," *Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art*, accessed 31/01/22, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/kirsten-justesen.

that strongly evoke the lived experience of the mother. The use of photography became important for many mother-artists depicting their embodied experiences, and continues to be today, especially as camera and phone technologies have made digital photography more accessible.

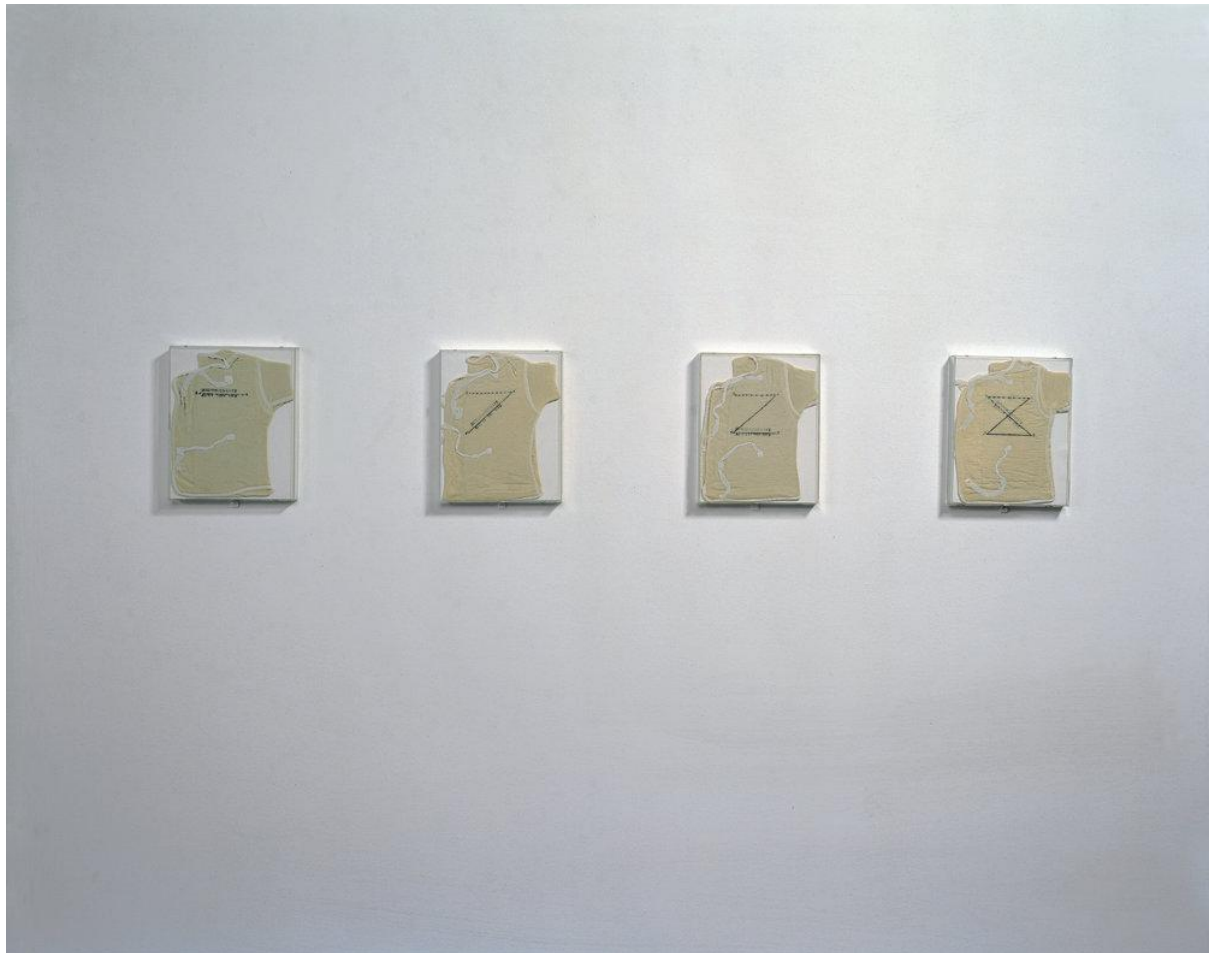


Figure 7. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Introduction*, 1973, *Perpsex units*, white card, wool vests, pencil, ink, 4 units, 8 x 10 inches each, Collection, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. ©Mary Kelly.

Vernacular photography

Images of mothers and their mothering work, alternative to those available in mainstream media, may be powerfully validating for women whose experiences are otherwise dismissed or devalued.¹²⁸ My photographic processes, digital photographs

¹²⁸ Throughout western art history there are examples of women artists who depict their mothering experiences and identities. Since the 1970s feminism has become more inclusive and today feminist art takes into account many aspects of identity and positionality. While it may be argued that all mother-artists are marginalised in the art world, I recognise my privileged position that has allowed me access to education and resources.

and video, are important as works in progress and source images. Even where they are incorporated into the finished work, these photographs are positioned as akin to vernacular photography, described by art historian Geoffrey Batchen as ‘ordinary photographs ... the photographs that preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or the academy.’¹²⁹

Photographers Catherine Opie (b.1961), Renée Cox (b.1960), and Annie Wang use photographic self-portraiture in different ways to depict their diverse embodiments of motherhood as a challenge to oppressive norms. Wang uses various levels of staging and coincidence in photographing herself and her son, presenting images of the viscous temporality and intersubjectivity of mothering.¹³⁰ Opie and Cox both represent Catholic tropes of motherhood and explore notions of maternal desire and pleasure.

There continue to be revisions of and challenges to Catholic iconography in both the visual arts and pop-cultural photography. Artist Deborah Kelly challenges concepts of the nuclear, heterosexual family in her series *The Miracles*, that uses the trope of the Holy Family to depict other models of familial love and care. Music icons, singer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and rapper Nicki Minaj, have been depicted in publicity photographs as the Madonna. English scholar Dr Kinitra Brooks says these photographs challenge ‘notions of race, purity, and motherhood,’ as well as challenging stereotypes of black motherhood.¹³¹ Australian First Nations artist Destiny Deacon (b.1957) presents alternatives to white patriarchal families in her *Frieze Frames* series, 2011, with works like *Mother and Child*. However, contemporary western visual culture overwhelmingly depicts mothers’ bodies as

¹²⁹ Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” *History of Photography*, 24.3 (2000), 262; My own ‘selfies’ merge with photos from the family album. Like ‘disoeuvre’ or anecdotes, family snaps are not seen as serious or high art and are omitted from photography’s history.

¹³⁰ Baraitser writes of the shifting in a mother’s ‘kinetic and sensate experience... [and] in the modes and limits of the body... because of the specific object-related and spatial tasks that motherhood prompts.’ She concludes that motherhood has a unique *viscosity*. I contend that time itself becomes viscous or elastic in mothering as days seem to become stuck at 2pm but the years rush by. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 127-129.

¹³¹ Siobhan Hegarty, “From Nicki Minaj to FrankenMary, the Virgin Mary Keeps on Appearing in Pop Culture. This Is Why,” *ABC News*, 30 August, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-30/sexualised-nicki-minaj-beyonce-catholic-virgin-mary-pop-culture/12598216>.

white, toned, controlled, disciplined, and their identities as superhuman or, conversely, maternal failures.

Body out with the bath water

Elizabeth Grosz, along with feminist phenomenologists, argues against the mind-body dualism of Western philosophy. Grosz calls the body the 'conceptual blind spot' in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory.¹³² Millner and Moore argue the importance of feminist practice that 'reinserted the body and the psyche' into critical contemporary art practices and processes.¹³³ By bringing my own body to the fore, I identify the maternal body as a site for making and thinking. Furthermore, art historian Jennie Klein argues that performance and body art effectively yield 'the grains and crumbs of Ettinger's Matrixial Borderspace.'¹³⁴ That is, performance and body art can provide access to the hidden and unrepresentable Matrixial Borderspace and its 'points of connection and commonality.'¹³⁵

Situating the body in the work has been a tactic employed by early feminist performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b.1939), and later, Janine Antoni (b. 1964), among others. In 1969, concerned with the work of mothering and maternal labour, Ukeles set out her ideas in the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, in which she states, 'my working will be the work.'¹³⁶ While Antoni's work deals with the psychology of the body, consumption and transformation, writer and critic Eleanor Heartney argues Antoni's investigations of birth, motherhood, and the problematising

¹³² Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 3.

¹³³ Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*. Introduction.

¹³⁴ Klein explains that for Ettinger, maternal/Matrixial language 'manifests itself as grains and crumbs,' and that, unlike the pre-Oedipal semiotic of Kristeva, it continues alongside 'the phallic, binary language of the post-Oedipal subject.' Jennie Klein, "Grains and Crumbs: Performing Maternity," in *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist and Everyday Enactments*, ed. by Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, and Terri Hawkes (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014), 275; Jeremy Powell explains that 'Through encounters with works of visual art, human subjects access subsymbolic meanings that comprise the "matrixial sphere." Even if we cannot translate these meanings into language, the encounter with the work of art permits the transference of meanings in a non-cognitive mode of knowledge.' Jeremy Powell, "Review: The Matrixial Borderpace," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 22.1 (2011), 129.

¹³⁵ Klein, "Grains and Crumbs: Performing Maternity," in *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist and Everyday Enactments*, 275.

¹³⁶ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 49.

of the body are also driven by her Catholic upbringing.¹³⁷ My own Catholic imagination and its implications for my mothering identity have infiltrated this project.

Sketching, drawing, painting

Living in a maternal body is a fluid yet highly regulated way of being, a way of experiencing the world that is often easier to describe in visual media than in words; to show and do rather than to say. Drawing is a means through which to directly act in the body, to make an expressive mark that outlasts the frustrated or celebrated moment. As Barbara Bolt argues, 'in the dynamic productivity of material practice, reality can get into the images. Imaging, in turn, can produce real material effects in the world.'¹³⁸ This generative power of drawing is reflected in this description by Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) of her creative process in 1929, 'in drawing there comes by and by the phase where the real "thing" displaces and replaces that which was internally "seen."'¹³⁹ Drawing is capable of bringing thought and gesture into the world, making an idea or a feeling a kind of reality. As artist Paula Rego (b.1935) said of her figurative drawings from the 1980s, 'the drawings are from mind to hand.'¹⁴⁰ My drawings often begin as an image in my mind that embodies an emotion or experience that then becomes real on the page.

Along with Rego, Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) is another key figure in this study, especially in her capacity as an artist who draws and who is seemingly unconstrained by conventions of representation. Bourgeois' series of drawings and paintings *Femme Maison*, 1946-1947 (Figure 54 and Figure 55) is a visual touchstone. Meaning both 'house woman' and 'woman house,' and depicting what appears to be a woman trapped in an austere city apartment building, it is a theme she returned to throughout her career to explore the ambivalence she felt around motherhood and the oppression of women's bodies.¹⁴¹ Through its directness, efficiency and power, drawing is appropriate for this project of considering and representing the lived experiences of mothering.

¹³⁷ Eleanor Heartney, "Thinking Through the Body : Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination," *Hypatia*, 18.4 (2003), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hyp.2003.0078>.

¹³⁸ Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London, New York: I.B. Taurus and Co Ltd, 2004), 8.

¹³⁹ Frances Carey, *From Mind to Hand* (London: Marlborough Fine Art, 2018), 7.

¹⁴⁰ Carey, *From Mind to Hand*, 6

¹⁴¹ Deborah Wye and others, *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait* (The Museum of Modern Art, 2017).

For an artist, sketching may be survival, while painting often seems a luxury to me. With a resurgence in the ideologies of intensive mothering, and especially during COVID-19 social restrictions, mothers are again often confined to the home. The painting studio is outside of the expected territory assigned to 'good' mothers. Rego's adult son, Nick Willing, has said the studio door was never opened to him by his mother. 'You could knock on that door with a broken leg and they wouldn't open it.'¹⁴² Adelaide artist Ann Newmarch (1945-2022) put a sign on her desk in her studio when she was working: 'Bad Mother.'¹⁴³ In her biography of women artists, Jennifer Higgle admits painting demands solitude, but also writes that 'a painting is a pause in life's cacophony. It does not demand conversation or justification. ... She controls it. ... Nothing can distract her.'¹⁴⁴ This romanticising of an artist's work and her mastery over it fails to admit to the multiple pressures on women's time. This is criticised by reviewer Rachel Cooke in *The Guardian* who writes that in Higgle's book, she 'longed for a deeper interrogation of the tensile strength of the artist who practises, metaphorically speaking, in a corner.'¹⁴⁵

Strength is evident in the large-scale works of painter Jenny Saville (b.1970), who explores the 'formal possibilities of the materiality of the human body,' especially in the series *Continuum*, 2012, in which she borrows symbolism from Leonardo da Vinci's Madonna paintings.¹⁴⁶ The Madonna and Child trope is so prevalent as a model of perfect motherhood that, like Saville, other painters, including Badima/Yamatji Australian artist Julie Dowling (b.1969), continue to use the mother and child symbolism to challenge dominant Western concepts of motherhood. Whilst

¹⁴² Juliet Rix, "All about My Mother: The Demons of Paula Rego – by Her Son," *The Guardian Online*, 9 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/mar/09/all-about-my-mother-the-demons-of-paula-rego-by-her-son>.

¹⁴³ Ann Newmarch, personal conversation with the author, Adelaide, 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Jennifer Higgle, *The Mirror and the Palette Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* (Australia: Hachette, 2021), 135

¹⁴⁵ My own paintings are not completed in splendid solitude but rather always feel unassured, rushed and undertaken with an eye on the clock. Despite this I am aware that as I build up layers of oil paint, I have a tendency to tidy and neaten the image, something I can avoid when drawing. It is in the immediacy of drawing that I can convey something of the 'tensile strength' required of the mother-artist. Rachel Cooke, "The Mirror and the Palette by Jennifer Higgle Review – Five Centuries of the Female Gaze," *The Guardian Online*, 14 March 2021.

¹⁴⁶ "Jenny Saville: Continuum," *Gagosian Online*, accessed 31/01/22, <https://gagosian.com/artists/jenny-saville/>.

I work within Western canons of art and theory, I recognise non-Western conceptualisations of mothers and mothering offer crucial alternatives.¹⁴⁷

Due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, painting for me gave way to other more traditionally domestic practices, such as sewing and needlework. In being forced away, again, from the public, professional space of the studio, I bring aspects of mothers' overlooked, private experiences to attention. The resulting hand sewn garments, the *Mothersuit* and nursing underwear, in turn bring the private spaces of the maternal body to public attention, to challenge accepted norms of motherhood.

¹⁴⁷ In arguing white Australian feminists' failure to address race, Anne Marsh quotes Aileen Moreton-Robinson from *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, 2002: 'The disjuncture between representation and self-presentation of both Indigenous women and white feminists means that the involvement of Indigenous women in Australian feminism is, and will remain, partial. This partiality in practice requires white feminists to relinquish some power, dominance and privilege...' Anne Marsh, *Doing Feminism: Women's Art and Feminist Criticism in Australia* (Carlton, Victoria: Miegunyah Press, 2021), 10-11.

Anecdote 3: The *Mothersuit* as preparation for painting, a process

The *Mothersuit* (Figure 8) is planned and made over a period of two weeks, at the end of the long summer holidays. It arrives as a dream or a vivid feeling, of being trapped and frustrated, feeling restricted by something like delicate feminine comportment, but more material than the tight-weave fabric of social norms.¹⁴⁸ The idea of a suit, at once preservative and limiting, revealed itself as a metaphor and a stand-in for a painter/mother. Painting is the hard thing, the thing I can barely justify giving my attention to, the thing it is so hard to free time for. But it is the important thing, a way for me to work counter to contemporary visual representations of mothers and mothering, counter to the Virgin Mary still presiding in my Catholic imagination, her open palms imploring. The suit is a readying for action. The suit is thinking in fabric.

I am not a genius, working autonomously and alone in a studio. It takes as much planning and organisation as getting a child to the doctor, or packing a week of school lunches, with an added overlay of guilt because it is a distraction from these fundamental mothering tasks. I am often thinking a painting when my son is holding a one-sided conversation with me. The ruse is up when I say ‘that’s good,’ when the proper response is in the negative.

Planning and forethought, the mental load, seems heavier at the end of school holidays when I’m worn down by long weeks of managing entertainment and activities, and washing countless glasses. Painting seems beyond reason and beyond reach. Now school has been back for a week and the daily routine is far worse, an unreliable clockwork regime of lunchboxes and school-bus-rushes. Home life is chaotic as I direct my thinking and careful preparations towards the painting. And then I never get to that point at all. I have a head full of paintings but first I need a suit to wear as a mother-painter who is never completely free of the gendered

¹⁴⁸ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality,” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141–59.

burden of care. (Pause now in writing to go and cook pasta for someone who is probably old enough to make it himself.)

The *Mothersuit* embodies the failed promise of the mother's liberation as a physical sign of her care, control, restriction, discomfort, endurance, modesty, labour. This heavy, loose-fitting garment is a denial of the 'new momism' as it plays out in visual culture.¹⁴⁹ Since Demi Moore stood proudly nude and shiny-perfect-pregnant on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 1991, the maternal body has been shaped by new and ever more stringent, demanding and unattainable expectations. (In the feature article Moore poses in black lacy lingerie and stilettos. 'Pregnancy agrees with me,' she is quoted as saying. 'I feel comfortable.')¹⁵⁰

While the greater visibility of the maternal body in culture has been celebrated, it has also been noted that culture structures our bodies and behaviours. Images of perfect pregnant bodies and mothers effortlessly in control engender more anxiety in women to conform to new narrow norms of appearance and behaviour. Today's visual media exhort mothers to look sexy, that is, desirable to men, and not motherly at all. The bold text in an ad for a fitness program called *Fit Mom* asks, 'What's your excuse?'¹⁵¹ This not only fails to take into account working mothers working a second shift of housework, but surreptitiously adds another, the third shift, the hours of body work required to not only recover from childbirth but to bounce back better than ever.¹⁵²

This new *Mothersuit* is utilitarian, ugly, in that the rough fabric is unadorned. (Though it is sensual in another way, if you look closely at the satisfying seams, the mother-of-pearl buttons nestling in their hard-won buttonholes, smooth-shiny against coarse texture.) Betsy Greer, author of *Craftivism* believes that by 'making intentionally ugly things, we question conformity to media beauty standards, and we can see how difficult (and important) it is to create without pure aesthetics in mind.'¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ O'Brien Hallstein, "She Gives Birth, She's Wearing a Bikini: Mobilizing the Postpregnant Celebrity Mom Body to Manage the Post-Second Wave Crisis in Femininity," 112.

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Collins, "Demi's Big Moment," *Vanity Fair*, 2018, accessed 20 January, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/1991/8/demis-big-moment>.

¹⁵¹ "Fit Mom: Home Workouts for Busy Women," accessed 31 January 2022, <https://fitmom.online>

¹⁵² Angela McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times," 9.

¹⁵³ *Craftivism. Craft + Activism = Craftivism*, ed. by Betsy Greer (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 2-3

Mothersuit is inspired by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her maintenance coveralls. *Mothersuit* is made of heavy and coarse linen, bought from an art supplies store rather than the drapers; this 10oz Belgian linen is sold off the roll at \$110 per metre. It is a daunting task for a self-taught sewer to take this costly blank canvas and cut it into front bodice, back bodice, legs and facings.¹⁵⁴ I follow instructions I don't fully understand until, turning to back or front, finishing a seam and pressing it to facing, reveal shapes and forms that fit and describe human dimensions. This ground for genius, this blank canvas, is refashioned as a garment, relinquished to a more traditionally feminine mode of creativity: sewing, at home, on the dining table. Head bent, needle moving in and out, I sew for hours, putting down and picking back up as necessary. By contrast, painting is all or nothing. Its poisonous smell permeates the room and somehow there's cadmium yellow from the front door to the kitchen sink.

According to the Wikipedia article on the boilersuit, the word first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1928.¹⁵⁵ This useful item of workwear was so-called because it was first worn by men tending coal-fired boilers. The men would frequently be required to climb into the boilers to clean accumulated soot or to fix leaks. Eliminating the gap between jacket and pants made the suit so much more practical. Boilersuits and similar utilitarian coveralls may also be worn by prison inmates, defence force personnel and cultural icons. The unfashionable cousin of the slimmer-fitting jumpsuit, the boilersuit is a perfect outfit for both mother practice and art practice. Both undertakings may be physically demanding, messy, and hazardous.

Preparing to sew a *Mothersuit* forces me to consider the dimensions of my own body: height, bust, waist and hips, to circle the limits of the body with a tape and imagine it within the picture on the front of the pattern envelope. I measure my body again at each stage, stopping to hold the unfinished garment against my chest, or to slip a limb into a leg or sleeve. There are 46 steps in the pattern. It takes me three

¹⁵⁴ Germano Celant in his essay for *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works*, writes that 'Assembling and sewing together a piece of fabric is connected with cutting, and to cut is to think and to write... (in the past the scissors were preceded by a line traced in chalk).' Germano Celant, *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works* (Milan, Italy: Hauser and Wirth, Skira, 2010), 14.

¹⁵⁵ 'This article is about the loose-fitting protective suit. For tighter and more fashionable suits, see [Jumpsuit](#).' Wikipedia.

days and well into the nights. I think of Louise Bourgeois and her little print at the Tate, *Sewing*, 1994 (Figure 9) in which a scratchy, anonymous figure is hunched behind a sewing machine.¹⁵⁶ A ballooning garment spills from the machine, in the making. The finished dress seems to be a dress of memory or ambition, floating on a coat hanger in the mid-ground beside the figure.

Wearing this garment I made for myself is like assuming a physical manifestation of motherhood. It feels like an armour, like a caress, a hindrance and a sensuous joy. The *Mothersuit* is hanging on the side of my wardrobe, cuffs in pockets, waiting for the next step. It has a presence, full with my own form. It is full of potential.

¹⁵⁶ Elizabeth Manchester, 'Louise Bourgeois: Sewing', *TATE Online*, 2001.



Figure 8. Zoe Freney, Mothersuit, 2020, Belgian painters linen, cotton, thread, shell buttons. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

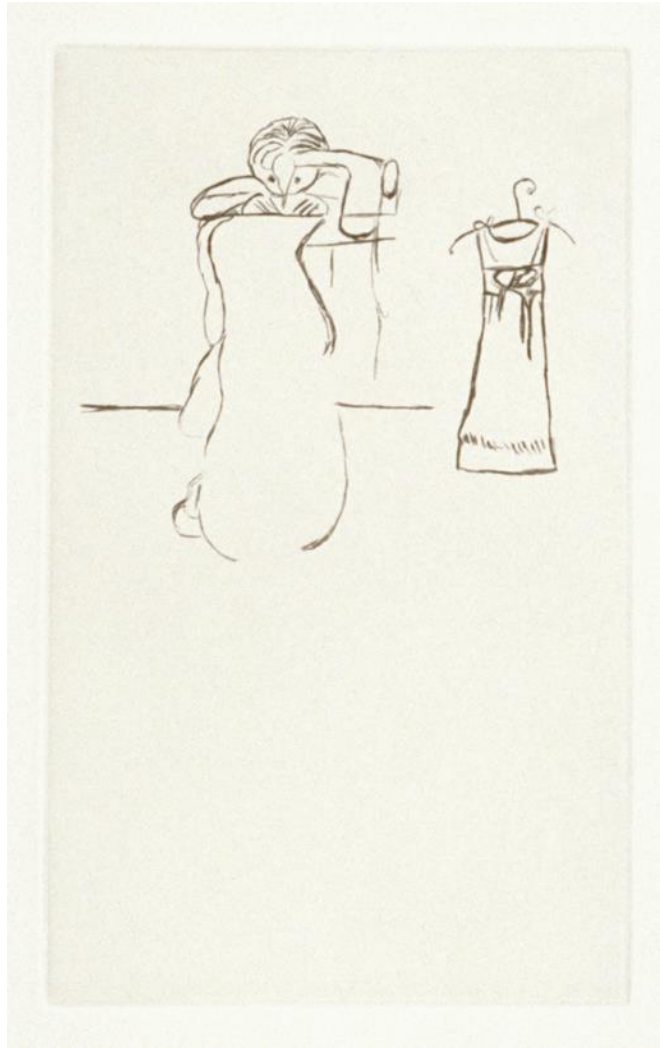


Figure 9. Sewing, 1994, Louise Bourgeois, drypoint on paper, 27.1 x 13.2 cm.

© Copyright Louise Bourgeois. Photo: Tate.

Chapter 1

Yummy Mummies and the Brutality of Images

Overview

This chapter investigates problematic representations of mothers in contemporary western visual culture, as well as my responses to these, suggesting how mother-artists can complicate the representations of their bodies and behaviours as mothers. It explores how models of motherhood are perpetuated through phallogentric visual media and how such representation is powerful in structuring mothers' bodies and behaviours. This work acknowledges what Hilary Robinson, in calling for 'a new syntax of visual language for women,' argues is the unspoken and unquestioned 'brutality towards women often represented by images.'¹⁵⁷ My artworks are necessarily based on my own experiences. I put them forward not as definitions of mothering but in order to allow mothers to reflect on the impacts of images upon their own identities and subjectivities.¹⁵⁸

A new visual language is required now when motherhood remains perhaps one of feminism's enduring failures. The gains of the second wave feminist challenge to the patriarchal institution of motherhood have been eroded by a traditionalist backlash and neoliberalism's 'colonisation' of feminism.¹⁵⁹ Versions of intensive mothering

¹⁵⁷ Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, 64-65.

¹⁵⁸ As Daphne de Marneffe writes in *Maternal Desire*, 'there is no such thing as "the mother"; there are only individual mothers.' Daphne de Marneffe, *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love and the Inner Life*, 2nd edn (New York: Scribner, 2019), 4.

¹⁵⁹ Susan Douglas & Meredith Michaels *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined all Women* (Simon & Schuster, 2005); Catherine A. Rottenberg, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," *Cultural Studies*, 28.3 (2014), 418-37. <https://www-tandfonline-com.virtual.anu.edu.au/doi/full/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>

build on feminist gains of women's individualisation and education, but also co-opt these traits for the raising of children in the home, a responsibility still largely falling to women.¹⁶⁰ Rather than questioning women's extra workload, versions of intensive mothering instead render mothering as endless shift work. The mass media has supported the individualisation of motherhood, selling mothers the ideas of freedom and choice – at a price.¹⁶¹

Images of ideal mothers, mostly white, middle-class women who practice intensive mothering but still have time, money and energy to keep their bodies and homes perfect, appear in advertising, celebrity profiles, mainstream film and on the small screen. But for Bracha Ettinger art 'has a special place because of its ability to work with the affective, that which can barely be spoken but which is nevertheless communicated.'¹⁶² This assertion is supported by Rosemary Betterton in *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, where she investigates art practices through which 'the maternal *becomes embodied* in the visual.'¹⁶³ Mother-artists are well positioned to challenge the patriarchal, capitalist model of the perfect mother, making from positions of 'knowing otherwise ... co-knowing ... ephemeral knowing.'¹⁶⁴

Under the weight of mess

Mess and housework are frequent symbols in my work and the work of other mother-artists, who draw attention to assumptions that the natural place of women and

¹⁶⁰ O'Brien Hallstein. 112.

¹⁶¹ O'Brien Hallstein. 115.

¹⁶² Elena Marchevska and Valerie Walkerdine, eds, *The Maternal in Creative Work* (New York: Routledge, 2020), xxv.

¹⁶³ Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 5. Italics in the original text.

¹⁶⁴ Marchevska and Walkerdine, *The Maternal in Creative Work*, xxvi.

mothers is in the home, and that their work there is effortless. Daniel Gerwin in *Hyperallergic* writes that ‘women are conceived as embedded within domestic labor, distracted, unable to criticize or analyze, and thus lacking a subjectivity from which to formulate ideas.’¹⁶⁵ I argue that the domestic is a rich ground from which a mother’s subjectivity can emerge, and within which it may be expressed. While male painters have often been celebrated for their avant-garde invention in depicting the domestic landscape, women’s ‘embeddedness’ in those interiors may result in more truthfully embodied representations. For example, Mary Leunig, whose transgressive drawings are often categorised as cartoons, perhaps to lessen their power, depicts the work of mothering and care, frequently situated in the home, in a ‘spirit of resistance and radicalism.’¹⁶⁶

Leunig captures most devastatingly the panic and chaos of a mother trapped at home with her small children and pets. One work in *There’s no Place Like Home* shows a mother wading through rising flood waters in the lounge room, while her husband sits on an armchair and the children watch TV from an inflatable dinghy (Figure 10). The wallpaper on the back wall has a raindrop pattern and the doorway is filled with desolate grey. Another drawing of (the same?) lounge room is more direct in its depiction of the excess of stuff that needs to be managed in the home: laundry, crockery, tools, food, toys, furniture, and the cat (Figure 11). Here the door to the kitchen offers only a portal to more of the same and it appears someone – the mother – is digging her escape through the rug on the floor.

¹⁶⁵ Daniel Gerwin, “The Myth About Having Children as an Artist,” *Hyperallergic*, 4 October, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/681300/the-myth-about-having-children-as-an-artist/>.

¹⁶⁶ Dominic Amerena, “One Good Turn Review: Mary Leunig Returns with an Explosive Graphic Memoir,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 2018.

For this project I have chosen to edit and pare back the mess at home, which sometimes threatens to overwhelm me, some of which can be seen in iPhone photographs of my home (Figure 12) and in early drawings like *blur* (Figure 13). The editing of the true physical and emotional mess of some situations at home is due in part to a consideration of those who share the home with me. The home for me evokes the matrixial, a site of creative potential and trans-subjectivity where I coexist in relation to others. Out of respect and compassion for those others I do not wish to present the site of the home as entirely abject and out of control. While I recognise that this may result in a holding back of some intensity of the work I also understand this is a function of my maternal thinking and a caring ethical stance, where I see my role is one of wit(t)nessing. This resonates with Joan Tronto's theorising of the 'moral element of 'caring with,' which highlights how caregivers and care-receivers are mutually, albeit asymmetrically, implicated.'¹⁶⁹

In later works I gesture towards the responsibility of keeping the house tidy through making, photographing, drawing and painting piles of household stuff, works made in the laundromat, and photos of clean baby clothes lovingly washed and hung out to dry. However, more recent works are staged in the studio where I have more control over my surroundings, and selected toys stand in for all of the kids' paraphernalia and mess. I develop a visual language of objects that relate to the work of mothering: pink rubber gloves, a mop, a small plastic child's chair. A wooden dolls' house is an abbreviation for the whole lot, a miniaturisation of the impossible burdens of contemporary motherhood.

¹⁶⁹ Nike Romano, 'Aesthetic wit(h)nessing and the political ethics of care: Generating solidarity and trust in pedagogical encounters,' in Vivienne Bozalek, Michalinos Zembylas & Joan C. Tronto (editors). *Posthuman and Political Care Ethics for Reconfiguring Higher Education Pedagogies*, Routledge eBook, 2021



Figure 12. Zoe Freney, kitchen, January 2018, digital photograph.

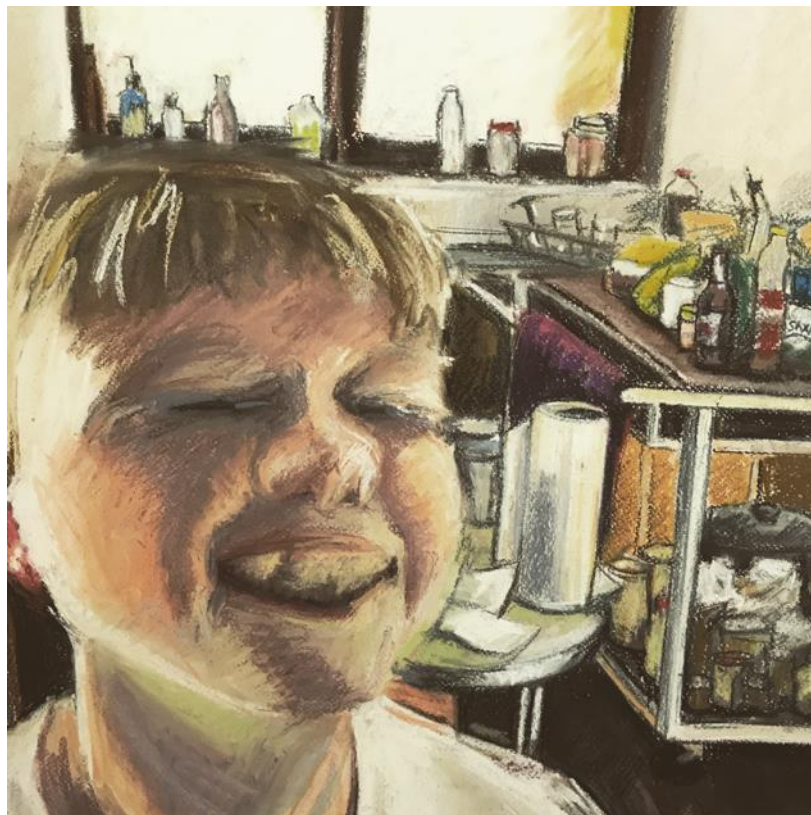


Figure 13. Zoe Freney, blur, 2018, pastel on paper.

Perfect masks

This project was initially motivated by the frustrations of trying to reconcile my dual identities of mother and artist, as well as how to make room for the often-conflicting roles that accompany these split identities. Due to the physical, emotional, and financial needs of the primary carer, the conflicts for my focus, attention and care, my art practice sometimes had to drop away altogether. Instead, I exercised my creativity in ways vital to my new intersubjectivity and my changing sense of self, in relation to my developing children.

Having to relinquish studio practice, I went through a process described by scholar Deidre M. Donohue as turning towards the maternal condition, sublimating my 'maternal subjectivity of severality into [my] art making,' whereby I embraced my 'maternal experience as a generative force.'¹⁷⁰ With maternal labour continually devalued by the art world, as well as within capitalist society more generally for mother-artists a double splitting may occur, when a woman's identity is ruptured by her becoming mother and aspects of her new identity are devalued by her peers and profession.¹⁷¹

The proliferation of images of mothers that adhere to neoliberal ideals in western visual culture reinforces traditional patriarchal motherhood that invokes a model of

¹⁷⁰ Richtje Reinsma, "The Mother as a New Artistic Role Model – in Conversation with Artist and Researcher Deidre M. Donohue," *Metropolis M*, accessed 31 January 2022, http://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/44176_the_mother_as_a_new_artistic_role_model_in_conversation_with_artist_and_researcher_deidre_m_donohue.

¹⁷¹ Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies*; Andrea Liss *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, xix; Millner explores contemporary art practices that provide models of care that by extension may signify potentials for the 'abolition of the (gendered) hierarchy between 'care' – the activities of social reproduction that nurture individuals and sustain social bonds – and economic production...' Jacqueline Millner. 'Caring through art: Reimagining value as political practice.' *Art & the Public Sphere*. Volume 8 Number 2. 2019. 163-174. 163.

heteronormative, white, middleclass, intensive mothering. A clear example of the disjuncture between image and reality is given in *Mommy Myth*, by Douglas and Michaels, as the authors describe how the happiness and success of celebrity mothers is 'assaulting us from every supermarket checkout line.'¹⁷² We maintain our masks of motherhood as the kids lie tantrumming on the dirty vinyl floor, and we stare helplessly past the covers of magazines on the racks, where celebrity mums 'beam from the comfy serenity and perfection of their lives.'¹⁷³ These images are powerful in their failure to admit to the full range of experiences of mothers and mothering.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I kept *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (closed) on my bedside table, but avidly read Susan Maushart's *The Mask of Motherhood: How becoming a mother changes everything and why we never talk about it*.¹⁷⁴ Maushart clearly, and with biting wit, describes the momentous changes becoming-mother brings to a woman's life. More importantly she writes how western society seems to refute or deny these changes, thus women are left silenced and wondering what they themselves are doing wrong.¹⁷⁵ Despite reading Maushart's attempt to unmask the truths of motherhood, I thought that my individual experience would be different; I supposed that I wouldn't 'fail.' I did not imagine myself as the woman peering at me from the cover of *What to Expect*, c2003 (Figure 14), a soft pencil drawing of a 'mumsy' looking woman, hair bobbed, seated in a rocking

¹⁷² Douglas and Michaels, 17.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk about It*, 1st ed. (United States: Penguin Books, 1999).

¹⁷⁵ Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood*.

chair.¹⁷⁶ Her buttery yellow twin set reveals her unoffensive rounded belly, the only sign of her pregnancy in her otherwise unchanged body.¹⁷⁷

Today many women aspire to an ideal of not looking like a mother at all, an ideal that intense media messaging tells women can be achieved by staying 'healthy and energetic.'¹⁷⁸ The image of the fit mother who has 'bounced back' is defined by magazine articles and manuals like *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide*, by Liz Fraser, as the successful version of maternal femininity.¹⁷⁹ On the other hand, tiredness, inactivity and passivity and even failure to lose pregnancy weight is seen to equate to failure as a mother.¹⁸⁰

The pastel drawing on cardboard, *Monster Feeling*, 2017 (Figure 15) is a way of dealing with the masks mothers assume as well as the feeling of being subsumed by motherhood and a loss of identity. I wear a mask, but one of my own making, a Book Week dragon mask, made in great haste, knobbly, misshapen and ridiculously

¹⁷⁶ Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann, "Yummy Mummy — The Ideal of Not Looking like a Mother."

¹⁷⁷ 'Successful femininity' is defined today as being a 'nurturant mother,' and having a 'toned, taut, fit' body. This extends to the control of the pregnant body, which is often seen as unruly and fleshy. The 'correct' kind of pregnancy is one in which the woman experiences 'belly-only weight gain.' This is discussed as a health and moral issue, 'Staying in shape while expecting will help you look and feel your best. It isn't just a confidence boost! You will have fewer aches and pains and get better sleep if you keep your weight gain under control. Labor and delivery may be easier too.' Shari L. Dworkin and Faye Linda Wachs, "'Getting Your Body Back': Postindustrial Fit Motherhood in Shape Fit Pregnancy Magazine," *Gender and Society*, 18.5 (2004), 611; Elisa Cinelli, "The Ultimate Guide to a Belly-Only Pregnancy," *Family Education*, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://www.familyeducation.com/pregnancy/the-ultimate-guide-to-a-belly-only-pregnancy>.

¹⁷⁸ Christina Prinds, Helene Nikolajsen, and Birgitte Folmann, "Yummy Mummy — The Ideal of Not Looking like a Mother."

¹⁷⁹ Liz Fraser, *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide* (UK: Harper Collins UK, 2006), accessed 31 January 2022, https://books.google.com.au/books?id=PirSvs3oZ00C&dq=The+Yummy+Mummy%27s+Survival+Guide&source=gbs_book_other_versions.

¹⁸⁰ Fraser, *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide*.

green. Beneath the mask my body is clearly visible, wearing a cream silk slip that occurs in other works like a costume for a vulnerable body.

Figure 14. Cover, What to Expect When You're Expecting, Sharon Mazel, c.2002. Workman Publishing.

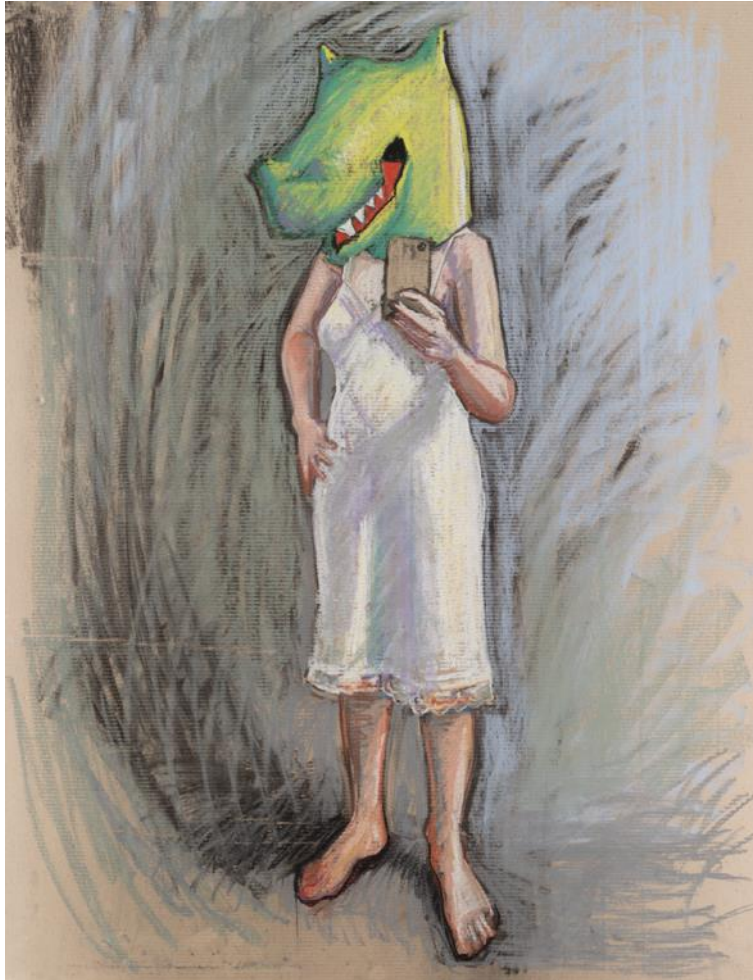


Figure 15. Zoe Freney, *Monster Feeling*, 2018, pastel on cardboard. Photograph by Sam Roberts.

Part of the furniture

Feeling both duped by and complicit in the mask of motherhood, I made an early series of works in which my identity is obscured by various household items or paraphernalia of parenting. In these works, *Part of the Furniture* (Figure 16) and *Monster Feeling* (Figure 15), my identity is subsumed by the home € and the papier mâché monster costume. In *Monster Feeling*, I hold a camera, taking a 'selfie,' an act of self-awareness even within the sublimation to motherhood.



Figure 16. *Part of the Furniture*, 2016, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm. Photograph by James Field.

While drawing and painting remain important modes of representation, equally important are the staging and photographing or filming of these movements in the domestic space. *Part of the Furniture* originated from a series of still photos, made haphazardly and quickly in breaks in my other roles. Generating these performative images requires an engagement with domestic space and the exaggeration of my performance within them. This has similarities to the work produced by Amsterdam-based Hungarian artist Csilla Klenyánski, who draws attention to the gender gap in

housework in a series of black and white photographs, *house/hold*, 2018 (Figure 17).

In this series she uses familiar domestic objects as props in a sequence of yoga poses, as a comment on women's reduced leisure time as compared to men.¹⁸¹



Figure 17. Csilla Klenyanszki, *House/hold*, 2018. Photograph. © Csilla Klenyanszki.

Janine Antoni, In *Loving Care*, 1993 (Figure 18), also pushes her body to extremes, evoking the punishing physicality of women's domestic labour and beauty routines. The performance, in which she soaked her hair in dye and then used it to mop the floor of the gallery, is now preserved in a series of black and white photos that record

¹⁸¹ Emese Mucsi, "What Is Love? A Woman's Work: Clare Gallagher and Csilla Klenyanszki," in *A Woman's Work: Clare Gallagher and Csilla Klenyanszki* (Dublin, Ireland: Gallery Of Photography, 2003), accessed 19 January, 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cde90f0dab8a20001528fe3/t/6001deeaafdb655c00bf43c2/1610735346554/A+Woman%27s+Work+Booklet+2021.pdf>

her actions as she progresses, on hands and knees across the floor, forcing the audience out of the gallery.



Figure 18. Janine Antoni, Loving Care, 1993. Performance with Loving Care hair dye, Natural Black. Dimensions variable. Photographed by Prudence Cumming Associates at Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1993. © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Figure 19. Zoe Freney, Bending, 2021, digital video, 0:40:40.

Like Antoni and Klenyánszki, I'm interested in pushing my body, which can be manipulated beyond the extremes of some other bodies due to over twenty years of yoga practice, in order to exaggerate the physical demands of the labour of care as in the digital video *Bending* (Figure 19). Western modes of yoga are implicated in ideologies of body perfection, as discussed by for example Lynn O'Brien Hallstein in 'She Gives Birth' She's Wearing a Bikini: Mobilizing the Postpregnant Celebrity Mom Body to Manage the Post-Second Wave Crisis in Femininity.'¹⁸² However, regular yoga practice impacts my embodied knowledges of mothering practices and allows for humorous exaggerations of this.

In these works there is an awareness of the way the maternal body operates in the home, in relation to the paraphernalia of motherhood. For Lisa Baraitser, 'motherhood represents a major shift in the modes and limits of the body ... because of the specific object-related and spatial tasks that motherhood prompts.'¹⁸³ Before having children I never thought of standing on a stool with my head under a lampshade to express a sense of loss and frustration, nor of bending over backwards to pick up a large plush kangaroo to exaggerate maternal load. These are specific reactions to and explorations of my ongoing, embodied becoming-mother.

¹⁸² D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, "She Gives Birth, She's Wearing a Bikini: Mobilizing the Postpregnant Celebrity Mom Body to Manage the Post-Second Wave Crisis in Femininity," *Women's Studies in Communication* 34, no. 2 (November 2011): 111–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2011.619471>.

¹⁸³ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*. 128.

Becoming mother/ becoming expert

What to Expect is in the category of expert advice manual, of which there has been a proliferation since Dr Spock's *Baby and Childcare*, 1946.¹⁸⁴ While it should not be assumed that for women, mothering is natural and instinctual, expert manuals have professionalised and medicalised mothering and made women individually responsible for 'learning' how to mother.¹⁸⁵ Today western women enter motherhood with a surfeit of information, giving us a greater sense of control. This sense of control may be misplaced though as pregnancy, birth and parenting are increasingly medicalised.¹⁸⁶

Since Spock's book 'made it clear that a mother required the aid of experts' in order to correctly birth and care for her children, mothers' embodied and experiential knowledges have continued to be undermined.¹⁸⁷ The problem with seeking advice from such manuals, according to Maushart, is that 'the good advice rarely works' and that the manuals 'insinuate ... that mothering is some kind of learnable sequence.'¹⁸⁸ When a mother and/or baby 'fail' to adapt to or comply with expert advice, mothers are encouraged to feel the failure is theirs personally.

This sense of confusion and failure is illustrated in Episode 2, 'Frankenstein,' of the Australian television series *The Let Down*, co-written by Sarah Scheller and Alison

¹⁸⁴ Dr Spock advised women, in the first line of a book that goes on to give precise, detailed and authoritative physical, psychological and practical advice to mothers to 'Trust yourself, you know more than you think you do.' Dr Spock qtd. in Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 48.

¹⁸⁵ Maushart, 136-137.

¹⁸⁶ Jane Lymer, *The Phenomenology of Gravidity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd., 2016), ebook.

¹⁸⁷ Sharon Hays, *Cultural Contradictions*, 48-49.

¹⁸⁸ Maushart, 136-137.

Bell.¹⁸⁹ While *The Let Down* plays these very real experiences for laughs, the authors also clearly empathise with Audrey, the mother who desperately consults multiple manuals for advice on baby sleep training. The results are depictions of the impacts of becoming mother that, according to reviewer, Alexis Soloski, may 'feel so achingly familiar that it's just about unwatchable.'¹⁹⁰ Written and performed by women who are mothers, this series considers the real physical and psychological complexities that mainstream manuals and visual culture overlook, simplify and disavow.

As Baraitser writes, it is not the easily understood, smiling, clean, competent experiences, but to the

moments of undoing... that we need to apply ourselves theoretically, if we are to try to glimpse something we may term maternal subjectivity ... characterised not by fluidity, hybridity or flow, but by physical viscosity, heightened sentience, a renewed awareness of objects, of one's own emotional range ... and a renewed sense of oneself, as a speaking subject.¹⁹¹

It is my intention, in seeking to re-evaluate and depict my mothering experiences, to bring to the fore the unattended and indescribable.

These realities and lived experiences drive my art making throughout this project, from observations of angelic babies in bubble baths, or children unrecognisable in dress-ups, as in *Untitled, Love 1* and *Love 2* (Figure 20 and Figure 21), to drawings

¹⁸⁹ Sarah Scheller and Alison Bell, "The Let Down" (Australia: Netflix, 2017), Episode 2 'Frankenstein.'

¹⁹⁰ Alexis Soloski, 'Mom-Coms Latch On to the Raw Reality of New Motherhood', *New York Times* (New York, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/arts/television/motherhood-comedies-smilf-catastrophe-the-letdown.html>.

¹⁹¹ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 4.

that capture the ambivalence of relationships between mothers and their growing children as in *Teenager* (Figure 22). In these instances I eschew sentimentality. The small painted works are made quickly, with thin layers of oil paint, retaining an unfinished, hasty quality that holds the viewer at arm's length. In the drawings of teenagers I also use blur and a direct drawing style to avoid the trap of caressing, with eye and hand, the jaw as it squares and the skin as it roughens, as children grow and change.



Figure 20. Zoe Freney, *Love 1*, 2019, oil on board.



Figure 21. Zoe Freney, *Love 2*, 2019, oil on board



Figure 22. Zoe Freney, Teenager, 2018, pastel on paper.

The multitude of mothering manuals, along with contemporary visual culture, constitute and visualise conservative patriarchy's backlash against feminism. The 'new momism' is a term coined by Douglas and Michaels for the contemporary 'good mothering' ideology.¹⁹² Lyn O'Brien Hallstein argues that images of celebrity mothers perpetuate the core ideals of the new momism:

The insistence that no woman is complete until she has children; that women are the best caregivers of children; and that "good" mothers must devote their entire physical, emotional, and psychological beings to their children all day, every day.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Lyn O'Brien Hallstein, *Bikini*, 112.

¹⁹³ Lyn O'Brien Hallstein, *Bikini*, 112.

It is in this contemporary ideal of the perfect mother that the gains of equality for (some) women seem to have stopped short of liberating mothers from the demands of domestic labour, or the expectations of romanticised and idealised motherhood.¹⁹⁴

Maushart describes the gap between societal expectations of motherhood and the reality for many women, where the idea of combining professional work and mothering becomes a 'juggle.'¹⁹⁵ Marie Porter and Julie Kelso argue that 'the devaluing of motherwork lulls "becoming" mothers into a false security.'¹⁹⁶ Academic, Clare Johnson, finds that art works that offer alternative views of mothering to those prevalent in mainstream visual culture can increase a new mother's sense of wellbeing, by allowing new conversations to occur outside of medicalised care and the judgement of peer groups.¹⁹⁷ Instead, the maternal experience is continually simplified in popular manuals and in visual culture, and marginalised in the professional art world.

This oversimplification motivates my studio research, which explores ideas of the real excesses and imbalances of contemporary western depictions of mothering. The

¹⁹⁴ O'brian Hallstein, 115; Emily Maguire describes feminism's exclusion of First Nations women in Australia at least until 'Third Wavers' began to see the need for intersectional analysis and challenges to power. This was influenced by American theorists and activists like bell hooks. Emily Maguire, *This Is What a Feminist Looks Like: The Rise and Rise of Australian Feminism* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2019), 7; In *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks writes 'we knew that there could be no real sisterhood between white women and women of color if white women were not able to divest of white supremacy.' Bell Hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, M.A.: South End Press, 2000), 58; Anne Marsh writes of ongoing, unacknowledged racism in white feminism in Australia. Marsh, *Doing Feminism: Women's Art and Feminist Criticism in Australia*, 10-11; Millner and Moore observe a move away from 'the politics of representation and towards a politics of acts,' which accounts for a more activist and inclusive feminism with ties to movements like #metoo and #BLM. Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, Chapter 1.

¹⁹⁵ Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood*, 136-137.

¹⁹⁶ Marie Porter and Julie Kelso, *Theorising and Representing Maternal Realities* (Newcastle UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), xii.

¹⁹⁷ Clare Johnson, "Maternal Art and Post-Natal Wellbeing: Proximity and Separation in Lena Simic's *Contemplation Time* (2007–8) and Eti Wade's *Jocasta* (2008)," *Studies in the Maternal*, 11.1 (2019), 3.

large painting, *The Impossible*, 2017, (Figure 23) and the series of iPhone photographs used as visual sources for the work (Figure 24) exaggerate the physical labour of mothering, by which I am almost entirely subsumed. These compositions explore the unrealistic expectations for mothers to literally balance all aspects of their and their families' lives, single-handedly.

The series of photographs was taken with the self-timer on my phone, setting up a chaotic situation in which the sense of verging on lack of control is real, as I stand precariously and struggle to hold all the toys at once. Iris Young theorises about the expectations of feminine comportment, whereby girls and women are trained to always withhold some of their power, and to be constantly self-aware in their movements. Mother power is seldom recognised. While I teeter on the small plastic chair under the weight of the toys, there is a sense of the required strength of the mother. I want to say something about mother power, but paradoxically it is subsumed by all the stuff.



Figure 23. Zoe Freney, *The Impossible*, 2017, oil on canvas, 198 x 112 cm. Photograph Sam Roberts.



Figure 24. Zoe Freney, *The Impossible* (source photographs), 2017, digital photographs.

Simplified images of strong mothers may also be detrimental. My work is made in opposition to the sort of illustration of mothers seen, for example, on the cover of Sharon Hays' *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Figure 25). While the content of the book critiques the ideology of intensive mothering, the image of the mother on the cover of the 1998 edition of the book assumes a mask that denies the depth of a mother's struggle to integrate and balance motherwork with her established life and identity.

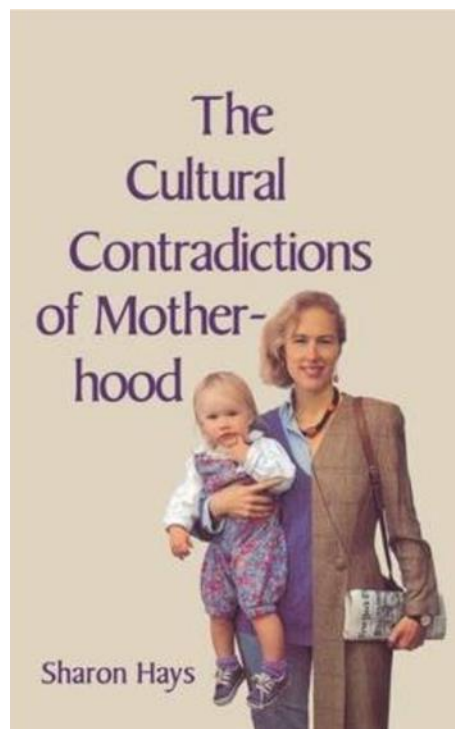


Figure 25. Ann Parks Hawthorne, Luft/Leone Design, Cover art, *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, 1998. © Yale University Press.

Here, while the mother is divided between selfless care worker and shoulder-padded career woman, the two meet in a neat seam down the middle. She is equally both mother and professional. But the child sticks out like an ill-matched accessory that the woman is not quite sure how to accommodate. The homely mother side juts out

her hip to bear the child's weight and her hand gently touches the child's arm, but there's no hint at the conflict or messiness this new severality may inflict upon the mother's subjectivity. This juxtaposition fails to acknowledge 'the great divide' between life before children and life after.¹⁹⁸ And while this image indicates the nature of the first and second shift in a mother's life, it separates them equally: a shift of paid work followed by a second shift of domestic, care work. There is no tension that alludes to a third shift of emotional or body work, even though the woman looks to have regained her 'prematernal body.'¹⁹⁹

Shifting

Theorist Andrea O'Reilly argues that emotional labour constitutes the third shift, but 'shifting' indicates we move from one to the other, with all the energy and concentration that entails.²⁰⁰ The mainstream images discussed above deny the complexities of maternal work and the enormity of the transition to motherhood for many women, a transition that 'remains socially invisible.'²⁰¹ This invisibility is the subject of *Crux*, 2017 (Figure 26). As in the previously discussed work, *The Impossible*, my identity is obscured by the pile of plush toys, a metaphor for all the roles and expectations women frequently assume upon becoming mother.

¹⁹⁸ Maushart, 4.

¹⁹⁹ O'Brien Hallstein.

²⁰⁰ Andrea O'Reilly, "Mothering through a Pandemic: COVID-19 and the Evolving Role of Mothers," *YFile: York University's News*, accessed 6 May, 2020, <https://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2020/04/08/mothering-through-a-pandemic-covid-19-and-the-evolving-role-of-mothers/>.

²⁰¹ Maushart, 105-106.



Figure 26. Zoe Frenay, *Crux*, 2017, oil on canvas. Photograph by Sam Roberts.

Obscuring the mother is a strategy used by many mother-artists to draw attention to the sense of loss of self and identity becoming mother may engender. The photographic series by Kaitlynn Redell, *no€er(e)*, 2017 (Figure 27), also recalls the 'hidden mother' photographs of the nineteenth century. Redell says her images 'explore how life as a care giver is about being used as well as being invisible.'²⁰² Redell is interested in how structures of power are set up to produce this particular dynamic of childcare.²⁰³

²⁰² Kaitlynn Redell, "Artist Website," accessed 12 May 2020, <https://kaitlynnredell.com/section/441858-not-her-e.html>.

²⁰³ Kaitlynn Redell, "Artist Website," accessed 12 May 2020, <https://kaitlynnredell.com/section/441858-not-her-e.html>.



Figure 27. Kaitlynn Redell, *Et her(e) (stuffed animal)*, Digital c-print, 2017. ©Copyright Kaitlynn Redell.²⁰⁴

Within the ideology of intensive mothering, care is made invisible because it is positioned as natural and effortless. Mother-artists frequently counter this with strong visual evidence of the exhausting physical, mental and emotional labour of mothering, showing the importance of working through lived maternal experience. In one of the drawings in Leunig's *There's no Place Like Home*, the mother is merely an outline, an invisible woman stirring a pot on the stove (Figure 28). The child that tugs her arm is coloured in with a pastoral landscape, a missive for the mother to go out in the world to save herself, but the slope of the woman's line-drawn shoulders tell us that she cannot leave the kitchen.

²⁰⁴ Redell.



Figure 28. Mary Leunig, Drawing, *There's no place like home*, 1982. © Copyright Mary Leunig²⁰⁵

The ambivalence and complexity of Leunig's view of motherhood is not admitted to in mainstream visual culture. These drawings are so breathtaking in their honesty, and uncomfortable to look at, because they tell of what women are rarely told before they become mothers. Encountering Leunig's version of mothering, the love and grief, the mask is torn away.

Myths and melons

Since *Baby and Childcare* and *What to Expect* were first released, there has been a proliferation of images of pregnancy and mothers in popular culture, advertising, magazines, websites, and in Hollywood movies. While representation of mothers and mothering is vital in structuring maternal thinking and practices in culture, there

²⁰⁵ Leunig; Mary Leunig, "Artist's Website," accessed 4 November 2021, https://maryleunig.com/publications/no-place-like-home/fe991544-edea-4918-9f14-9f3b82e4dc14-book_0064.jpg.

remains a lack of images of ‘real’ mothers, with representation skewed towards the ideal. These images increasingly engender the ideology of intensive mothering, even while claiming to offer mothers freedom and choice in their mothering styles and bodily comportment.²⁰⁶ Current models of motherhood reflect changing ideologies but they always reinforce versions of ‘good’ mothering, that is, as O’Brien Hallstein says, ‘contemporary intensive mothering is utilizing feminist gains in the service of constraining women’s lives and reconfining women to mothering.’²⁰⁷

In a continuation of this ideology, the focus today is on mothers, their bodies and behaviours, and how these affect their children’s experiences in life. For example, in 2015 Dutch design company Bugaboo released an advertisement for a new jogger stroller that featured model, Ymre Stiekema (Figure 29). The caption on Bugaboo’s official Instagram page reads:

Wow doesn’t model and mother of 2-year old Lymée, Ymre Stiekema look amazing in this @nlvogue shoot! ... read our interview with the real-life Bugaboo Runner.²⁰⁸

The focus here is on Stiekema, a real mother, her fit body, her intensive mothering practices, and her individualised responsibility to care for herself and her child ‘correctly.’²⁰⁹ The act of jogging is not depicted as an arduous ‘third shift’ activity.

²⁰⁶ Back in 1963, when motherhood was depicted as a domestic utopia where a mother, father and clean, happy children lived together in a comfortable house full of gleaming appliances, Betty Frieden wrote in the best-selling *Feminine Mystique*, that ‘there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform.’ Douglas and Michaels in *The Mommy Myth*, survey the changes in depictions of mothers in advertising in America from the 1970s to the 1990s. While in the 1970s mothers were shown mostly without their children, the focus being on their ‘alleged needs,’ in the 1990s ‘images of children were everywhere... exhorting you (the mother) to foresee your child’s each and every need and desire.’ Betty Frieden, *The Feminine Mystique*, 2010.; Douglas and Michaels, 16.

²⁰⁷ O’Brien Hallstein, 132.

²⁰⁸ Bugaboo Runner, @bugaboostollers, 2015, Instagram, accessed 10 May
https://www.instagram.com/p/5ZodJhQArk/?utm_source=ig_embed.

²⁰⁹ Susan Douglas & Meredith Michaels *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined all Women* (Simon & Schuster, 2005; D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, “Conceiving Intensive Mothering.”

In this example, the ‘irregular female form,’ of the mother’s body appears to be contained and managed.²¹⁰ The message conveyed is that mothers must work harder to control the boundaries of their unruly maternal bodies. Artists such as Csilla Klenyanski, Cassie Arnold and Louise Bourgeois transgress ideas of the controlled maternal body.



Figure 29. Bugaboo Runner, 2015, Instagram.²¹¹

In many of my works I use melons as metaphors for pregnancy, motherhood, and the unruly parts of women’s bodies that are unacknowledged in the above imagery (Figure 30). The latent effort of holding the huge fruits also attests to the physicality of mothering; efforts and exertions rarely admitted to in current imagery.

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, 8, no.1–2 (2006).
<https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/5016>.

²¹⁰ Louise Crewe, “The Besieged Body: Geographies of Retailing and Consumption,” *Progress in Human Geography*, 25.4 (2001), 633, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1191/030913201682688986>.

²¹¹ Bugaboo Runner, @bugaboostrollers.

Photographer Csilla Klenyanszki also uses melons in *The reminiscence of being a woman*, 2017 (Figure 31). From an ongoing series of work that explores women's identities, their bodies, and their objectification, in this photograph a woman stands with her head bowed, two different sized melons hanging in the sling of her bra top.²¹² Performance artist Patty Chang (b.1972) substituted melons for breasts in the video *Melons (At a Loss)*, 1998 (Figure 32). Shockingly, she slices into her bra with a large knife, only to reveal a rockmelon, the flesh of which she scoops out to place on a plate balanced on her head. Taking inspiration from Yoko Ono, Chang's video is a comment on the invisibility, exotification and objectification of Asian women in American society.

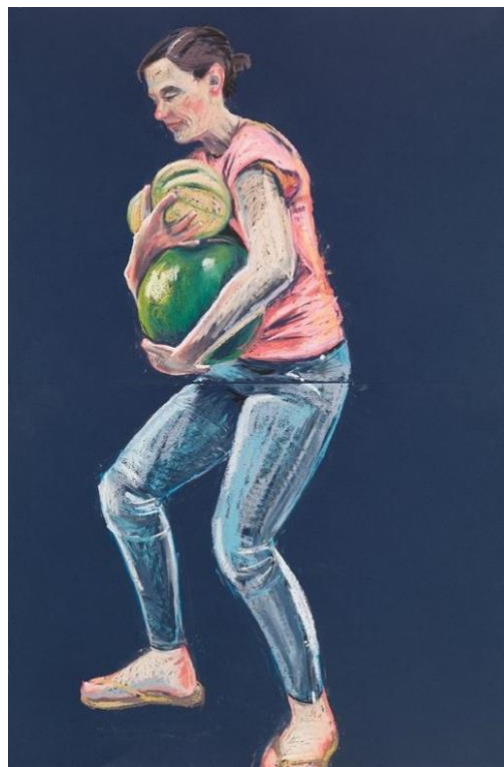


Figure 30. Zoe Freney, *Carry*, 2018, pastel on paper. Photograph Grant Hancock.

²¹² Csilla Klenyanszki, "Artist Website," accessed 27 October 2021, <http://www.klenyanszki.com/projects/the-reminiscence-of-being-a-woman>.



Figure 31. Csilla Klenyanszki, *The Reminiscence of Being a Woman*, Photograph. ©Csilla Klenyanszki²¹³



Figure 32. Patty Chang, *Melons (at a loss)*, Single-channel video with sound. ©Copyright Patty Chang.

²¹³ Csilla Klenyanszki, "Artist's Website," accessed 4 November 2021, <http://www.klenyanszki.com/projects/the-reminiscence-of-being-a-woman>.

These images of women and melons are humorous and poignant in the way they play with tropes of beauty and female bodily expectations and experiences. When I was pregnant I lacked the visual language to convey the sense of ripening and encumbrance that I now revisit, through the use of melons and other props. There is a performative aspect to the generation of these works, as I dramatically hoist and hold the melons in the greengrocer store, to the bemusement of fellow shoppers. This action recalls my feelings of out-of-placeness and embarrassment I felt as a young pregnant woman, when my body's boundaries expanded and strangers touched me with their eyes or even their hands.²¹⁴

In a move that reminds of the always-becoming and ongoing temporality of motherhood, artist Louise Bourgeois returned to the maternal body when she was in her 90s, creating a series of gouache on paper drawings in *Self Portrait*, 2007 (Figure 33). These twenty small works are insistent in their pared back representation of the pregnant figure as a round belly topped by a swinging garland of pendulous breasts. Again, these figures are faceless but, unlike the straight, sombre walls of the earlier *Femmes Maison*, their diagrammatic bodies are highly expressive. The red painted line is a blurry boundary that might leak or bulge even further. Generous and gestural ovoid shapes constitute a body like an ancient Venus charm of fecundity. Looking back at maternity from her late age, Bourgeois has broken the woman's body out of the confines of the cardboard house, to swell balloon-like and brave on the page.

²¹⁴ Iris Young begins her essay "Breasted Experience" by stating, 'The chest, the house of the heart, is an important center of a person's being ... her breasts are also entwined with her sense of herself.' During pregnancy, birth and motherhood the fluctuations in the size and shape of my breasts have caused me some alarm, and as Young states, they are not a neutral territory for me. Young, *Throwing like a Girl Other Essays Fem. Philos. Soc. Theory*, 189.

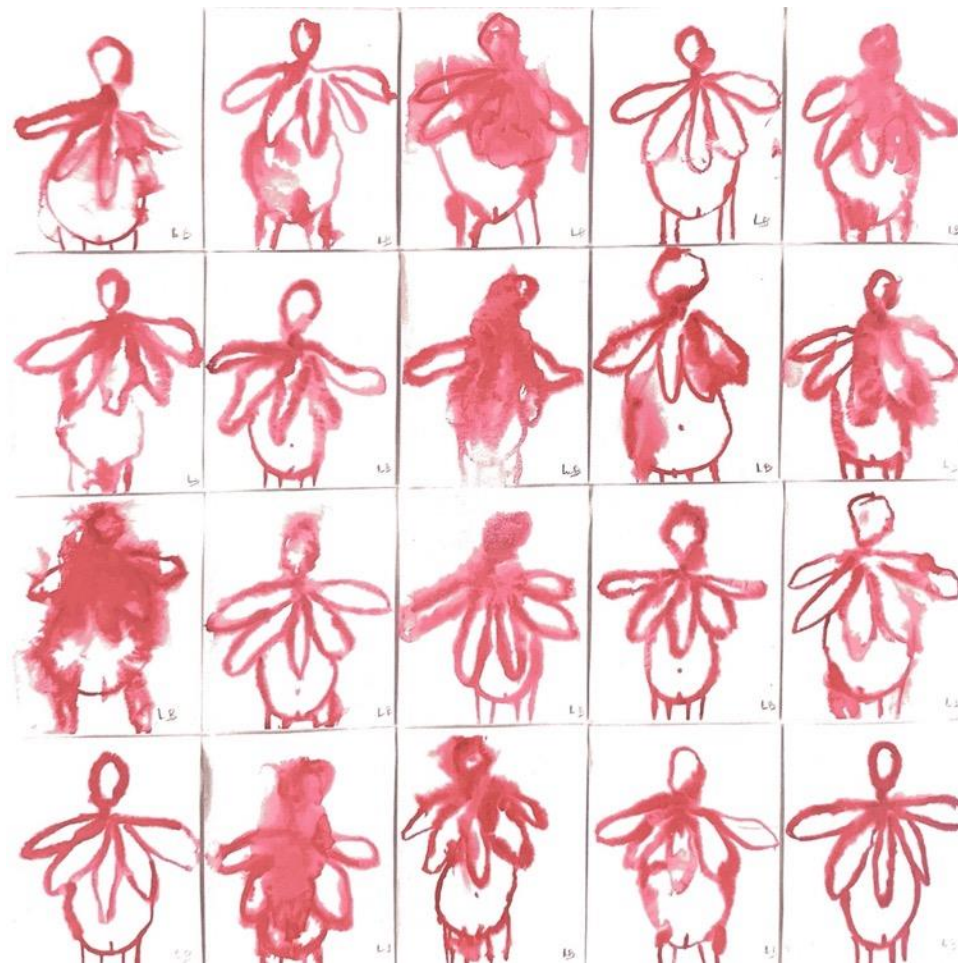


Figure 33. Louise Bourgeois, *Self Portrait*, 2007, gouache on paper, suite of 20, each 36.8 x 27.9 cm. ©The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.²¹⁵

Scholars argue that we should be careful in celebrating the new prevalence of maternal bodies in visual culture today and should closely analyse how images continue to manage bodies, and shape ideals and behaviours of motherhood.

Sociologist Louise Crewe states:

The body – and particularly here the female body – is always inescapably encoded by cultural norms ... and the commodification of the body through the

²¹⁵ Betterton, 148.

fashion and beauty industries presupposes that acutely self-conscious relation to the body which is attributed to femininity.²¹⁶

Today, the western ideal image of the mother is athletic, fit, contained and controlled. The trope of the devouring, monstrous mother has been tamed, reduced to a taut-tummied and tasty little morsel herself, the yummy mummy.²¹⁷ The yummy mummy is 'a highly classed, white, heteronormative cultural configuration of the maternal, tied to practices of consumption and self-grooming.'²¹⁸ She is a 'desired object rather than a desiring subject,' she is 'yummy' for men, her own appetites do not come into consideration.²¹⁹

Hunger

Not only are the mother's sexual desires denied in the yummy mummy model, but so too is her appetite for food. The insatiable hunger of a breast-feeding mother is hilariously and poignantly depicted in *The Let Down* when, in Episode 1, Audrey takes her new baby to dinner with non-parent friends. Not only does she suffer the judgment from the other side of the great divide that becoming mother has wrought, she also has to defer eating until after the baby is fed and then held awkwardly, crying, by an unpractised friend. As soon as her hands are free Audrey stuffs as much food into her mouth as she can before the baby needs her attention again.

²¹⁶ Crewe, "The Besieged Body: Geographies of Retailing and Consumption," 633.

²¹⁷ Jo Littler, "The Rise of the 'Yummy Mummy': Popular Conservatism and the Neoliberal Maternal in Contemporary British Culture," *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6 (2013), 234.

²¹⁸ Christina Amelia Rosa Malatzky, "Australian Women's Complex Engagement with the Yummy Mummy Discourse and the Bodily Ideals of Good Motherhood," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 62 (2017), 26 www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif.

²¹⁹ Littler, "The Rise of the 'Yummy Mummy': Popular Conservatism and the Neoliberal Maternal in Contemporary British Culture," 234.

One of her friends, watching with a look of disgust says, ‘wow, you are shovelling that in.’²²⁰

The depth of a mother’s hunger is also depicted in a scene in the British comedy series, *Motherland*, created by Sharon Horgan and Graham Linehan.²²¹ The Pilot episode culminates in struggling working mum, Julia (Anna Maxwell-Martin), ashamedly eating spaghetti from the bin, to the disgust of the other mothers in the mums’ group. Crewe argues:

This sort of hunger is absent in the sexualised versions of the yummy mummy and in celebrity mum profiles, where ... unruly appetites and fleshy bodies are viewed with revulsion and edited from representation.²²²

The hunger felt by mothers may be physiological, as producing breastmilk requires more energy, nutrients and fluids, and as argued elsewhere, mothering practices are often physically demanding. But there may be a metaphorical hunger too, a desire to be mothered oneself, to be topped up with someone else’s love and care.

In a work that describes my insatiable mother-hunger I depict myself seated on a child’s plastic chair, a tray on my lap piled with pastries and dairy products (Figure 34). I have an oversized linen serviette tied around my neck over a black dress. My red knobbly knees are exposed but my nipples are not. With one hand I feed myself a huge, cream-filled bun, with the other I bottle-feed a baby goat, milk dribbles over

²²⁰ Scheller and Bell. Episode 1 ‘The Let Down.’

²²¹ Sharon Horgan, Graham Linehan, *Motherland*, BBC, 2016, accessed 15 May 2020 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6006350/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_wr#creators/.

²²² Crewe, “The Besieged Body: Geographies of Retailing and Consumption,” 633. Qtd. Gamman, L. 2000: “Visual seduction and perverse compliance: reviewing food fantasies, large appetites and grotesque bodies,” In Bruzzi, S. and Church-Gibson, P., *Fashion cultures: theories, explanations and analyses*, London: Routledge, 61–78.

his tongue. *Manger/Manger* is about feeding and being fed, gorging and topping up. Once I had so much milk the nurses said I could have fed the whole ward. My baby would drink until, when I sat him up, milk would spill from his open lips, his eyes glazed in blissful satiation. I never drew myself as a breast-feeding mother, so now I use metaphor and mnemonic to exaggerate and fill in the gaps of memory.



Figure 34. Zoe Freney, *Manger/Manger (and detail)*, 2021, pastel and acrylic on paper, 160 x 114 cm.

While in this image and others I substitute pets for my children, it is intended that this image of feeding evokes something of what Ettinger calls the '*primary affective*

compassion, ... a primal psychic access to the other,' for both participants in this encounter-event.²²³ Ettinger argues that this connection and contact offers 'a psychic potential for subjective freedom' that does not rely on abjection in the process of developing individual identity.²²⁴



Figure 35. Zoe Freney, *Manger/Manger* (detail), 2021, pastel and acrylic on paper, 160 x 114 cm.

The unruly body

What we can ascertain from mainstream representations of mothering bodies is that visual culture continues to be used to reinforce traditional family values and to keep women in their reproductive places.²²⁵ Researchers Christina Prinds et al find that:

the post-partum body can function as an optical frame through which we can learn about both the individual experience of being a mother, but also societal bodily ideals.²²⁶

²²³ Bracha L. Ettinger, "(M)Other Re-Spect: Maternal Subjectivity, the Ready-Made Mother-Monster and The Ethics of Respecting," *Studies in the Maternal*, 2.1 (2010), 1. Italics in original quote.

²²⁴ 'Primary affective awe arises too during being-with and becoming-with. When the affections of awe and compassion arise in an encounter they counterbalance abjection.' Bracha L. Ettinger, "(M)Other Re-Spect: Maternal Subjectivity, the Ready-Made Mother-Monster and The Ethics of Respecting," 1.

²²⁵ O'Brien Hallstein, 112.

²²⁶ Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann, 267.

The image of the celebrity mum and the yummy mummy are frequently used to convey the idea of empowered mothers, beneficiaries of second wave feminist gains in women's rights. O'Brien Hallstein contends that, rather, images of the 'bikini ready' maternal body continue to 're-establish both mothering and beauty as the most important components of femininity, while reinforcing the domestic division of labor.'²²⁷

In the 1970s feminists fought for equal rights for women and mothers to work, and made some headway into gaining equality, but we had to individually work hard in double shifts in order to have it all. Rather than interrogate the unfair workload women are still doing in the home as a structural issue, women are encouraged to tackle these problems as theirs alone to solve or fail at. Through these means, women and mothers are made individually responsible for their success or failure at femininity, beauty and mothering. Shari L. Dworkin writes that, 'women do not frequently critique larger cultural norms as problematic; rather, many self-blame and internalize a sense of private bodily failure.'²²⁸ While many mothers claim they are immune to images of intensive mothering, most, argues O'Brien Hallstein, are not.²²⁹

Since the fitness movement of the 1980s when the ideals of femininity broadened to include hard, muscular women's bodies, women have been exhorted to adhere to ideals of strength and fitness. These ideals now also signify successful maternity, thus necessitating a third shift of body work. Idealised images and advice for new

²²⁷ O'Brien Hallstein, 111.

²²⁸ Shari L. Dworkin, *Body Panic : Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 109.

²²⁹ O'Brien Hallstein, 116.

mothers conflate health, moral and ideological messages. For many mothers, losing weight is seen as 'an important measure of successful rehabilitation after pregnancy and birth.'²³⁰ In *Body Panic* Dworkin analyses images from the magazine *Shape Fit Pregnancy*, from the 1990s. In this forum, fitness programs are often prescribed as preparation for easy and successful births.²³¹

Today, there is a proliferation of internet sites that sell pregnancy and postpartum fitness programs, such as *Busy Mom Gets Fit*. Research shows that, although women report feeling strengthened by becoming mother, it is unlikely they actually want to look like a mother.²³² Liz Fraser in *Yummy Mummy* makes it clear that successful contemporary mothers need to 'forget the frump.'²³³

There are many images on social media platforms that play on the body anxiety that women may take on during pregnancy, a time when the body is 'particularly resistant to containment.'²³⁴ Women also report being influenced by magazines, books, blogs, mums' groups, and family. The message is that pregnant and postpartum bodies are to be 'corrected and controlled.'²³⁵ Some of the messages conveyed extend to the notion that mothers must make their fitness and their bodies examples to their own children, as in the image that popped up in my Facebook feed, of a mother in a bikini, wading with her children at the beach. This is captioned, 'I didn't want my kids experience of life to be restricted by my fitness'. Here fitness is equated to ideals of

²³⁰ Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann, 269.

²³¹ Dworkin, *Body Panic : Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*, 111.

²³² Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann, 266.

²³³ Fraser, *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide*, Blurp.

²³⁴ Dworkin, , *Body Panic : Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*, 108.

²³⁵ Dworkin, 117; O'Brien Hallstein, 119-120.

feminine beauty and successful motherhood. O'Brien Hallstein sees that 'the right kind of body ... reveals the right kind of post-second wave crisis management for contemporary mothers,' but we are told that it is our choice, and an empowered option, to add the third shift of body work to our mothering workloads.²³⁶

While mothers report feeling 'paradoxes in self-imaging,' where they may feel both strengthened through motherhood but lacking bodily, they also report they often are not sure how they form their ideals of maternal beauty.²³⁷ Mothers may also try to laugh off the effects of these sorts of images, which we can reasonably see demand a ridiculous level of commitment financially, energetically and temporally. Russian social media influencer, Anna Kanyuk, offers an extreme example of images of mothers whose multi-shift work is seemingly effortless and results in strong, flexible maternal bodies and healthy, happy babies. However, 'instead of dismissing these media images as short-lived (and sometimes even stupid),' we must also recognise how they instil anxiety and guilt in women.²³⁸ O'Brien Hallstein argues scholars must understand how and why celebrity mom profiles are being refined in response to women's contemporary split subjectivity if we hope to continue to advocate for ongoing social justice for families and not just for women.²³⁹

Today the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms allow women to answer back to the images that structure and define our behaviour under contemporary constructs of motherhood. Many women use these platforms to share

²³⁶ O'Brien Hallstein, 113.

²³⁷ Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann, 269-270.

²³⁸ Douglas and Michaels, 14. Parentheses in original text.

²³⁹ O'Brien Hallstein, 130.

images of 'real' motherhood and mothers' bodies. Comedian and social media superstar Celeste Barber responds directly to Kanyuk (Figure 36). In this short, homemade video Barber enacts her Australian middle-class version of Kanyuk's gymnastic shoe removal routine. While there are no children evident in either image, the caption, 'When school finally goes back one day a week,' admits what mainstream visual culture does not: a mother's relief that she has the house to herself at last.²⁴⁰ Barber also critiques the unrealistic media representations of women's bodies.



Figure 36. Anna Kanyuk, *Instagram*, 2020. Celeste Barber, 'When school finally goes back...' 2020. © Copyright Celeste Barber²⁴¹

While it is generally celebrated that there is an increased presence of images of pregnancy and motherhood in visual culture, Kelly Oliver warns that many of these

²⁴⁰ Celeste Barber, "When school finally goes back one day a week," @celestebarker, accessed 18 May, 2020. *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CASZuJpHwyj/>.

²⁴¹ Anna Kanyuk, @annakanyuk, *Instagram*, accessed May 18 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAsavW1oTLW/>; Celeste Barber, "When school finally goes back one day a week," @celestebarker.

images 'actually continue traditional values that objectify ... the maternal.'²⁴² This objectification positions the pregnant woman or mother as 'hot,' and sexy. While it is often argued as empowering for mothers, as in the Hot Milk maternity lingerie advertising, where the pregnant woman is allowed to look beautiful in functional, sexy underwear (Figure 37), the desire inherent in the images is not the woman's desire, but men's desire for women's bodies.



Figure 37. Hot Milk maternity lingerie collection, 2009. © Lucire.²⁴³

The pregnant body

In the 1980s and 1990s Iris Marion Young theorised how, because 'our society often devalues and trivializes women, regards women as weak and dainty, the pregnant

²⁴² Oliver, "Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation," 760.

²⁴³ "Being pregnant still means being sexy, thanks to HotMilk Lingerie," Lucire Insider, accessed 10 May 2020, <http://lucire.com/insider/20091109/being-pregnant-still-means-being-sexy-thanks-to-hotmilk-lingerie/>.

woman can gain a certain sense of self-respect' as she grows outside of those narrow boundaries.²⁴⁴ Yet now that pregnant women and mothers are being depicted as sexy and sexualised, as 'momshells,' 'hot mamas,' 'MILFs' ('mothers I'd like to fuck'), and 'yummy mummies,' they too are subjected to 'the leer of sexual objectification.'²⁴⁵ Thanks to images like, famously, Demi Moore, nude and seven months pregnant, on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine in 1991, which was indeed ground-breaking for women's visibility in culture, women are not even freed from the male 'leer' during pregnancy (Figure 38). O'Brien Hallstein writes that 'even though women are now being raised to believe that they can "be anything," they are also taught that being sexy is still central to success as women.'²⁴⁶

Leibovitz's images of Moore are often cited as the beginning of more overt representations of pregnancy in mainstream media. However, earlier feminist artists had explored the physical, emotional and embodied aspects of the pregnant body. *Ten Months*, 1977-79 (Figure 39) by American artist Susan Hiller, and the previously cited *Self Portrait* 2007 (Figure 33) by Bourgeois, are both examples of women's representation of embodied knowledge of the maternal body. Hiller also conceptualises maternity in a strategy that seeks to avoid 'direct personal expression of individual emotional experience,' and thus stereotypes of femininity.²⁴⁷ In *Ten Months* she distances herself from the work by tightly cropping full body photographs of her pregnant body to show only the developing roundness of her belly, which, paradoxically, she says was 'the section of the body you couldn't talk about, the

²⁴⁴ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation'. 166.

²⁴⁵ Kelly Oliver, *Knock me up, Knock me Down* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2012), 50; Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," 167.

²⁴⁶ O'Brien Hallstein, 125; Oliver, *Knock me up, Knock me Down*, 2012, 50.

²⁴⁷ Linda Nochlin quoted in Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, 48.

pregnant part.’²⁴⁸ Alongside the photographs, which in their abstraction could be grainy images of the waxing and waning moon, or the fat end of eggs lined up in cartons, Hiller displays excerpts from her diary where she journaled her observations of physical and psychical changes across 40 weeks.²⁴⁹ This work shows Hiller ‘was fully conscious of her ambivalent position within a culture that categorized “mother” and “artist” in opposition.’²⁵⁰

Figure 38. Annie Leibovitz, Demi Moore, Vanity Fair Magazine, 1991.

²⁴⁸ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 12.

²⁴⁹ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 13.

²⁵⁰ Betterton, 140.

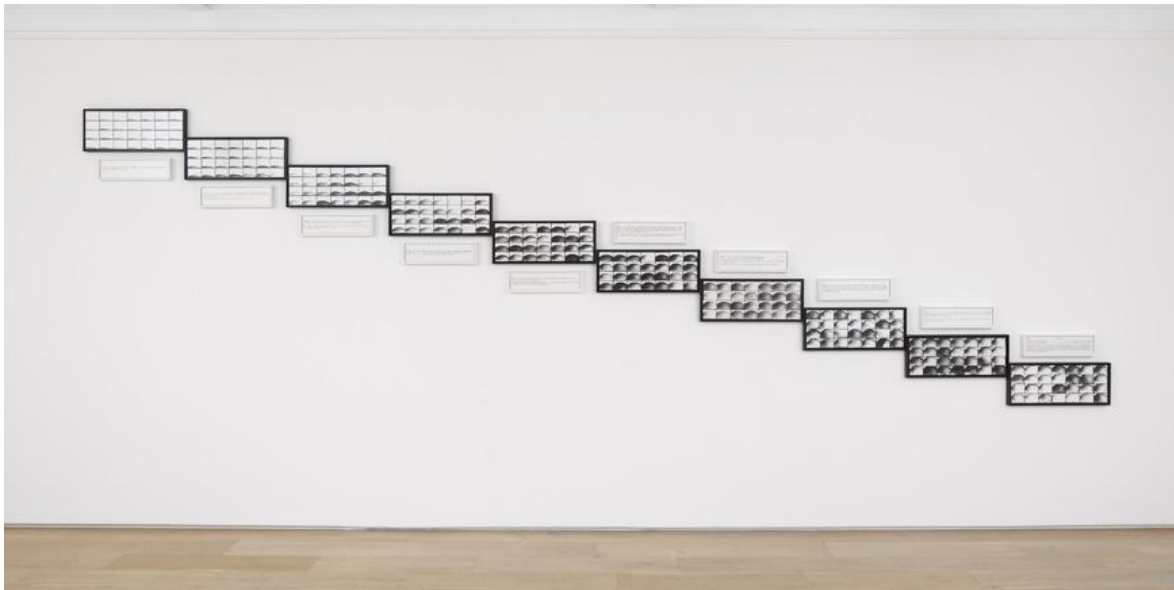


Figure 39. Susan Hiller, *Ten Months*, 1977–1979, gelatin silver print. © Susan Hiller. The Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACS) Copyright Agency 2022

My melon drawings and paintings represent the experience of pregnancy, as I remembered it years after the fact. Melons are heavy and indiscreet, sensations that for me were an enduring experience of blundering ungracefully through pregnancy. In an early painting, *Untitled*, (Figure 40) the view is my own, looking down at a loosely painted melon cradled in my arms. Subsequent artworks depict me confronting the viewer as I heft the melons.

Melons are large, ripe and rude and used as euphemisms for women's body parts. The sheen of the skin of the melon, the way I have caressed it with the pastel or the brush, as well as its placement, renders it somehow sensual, and comedic. Robinson writes that women's bodies and their sexualities are blind spots in the 'omnipotence of the phallogentric gaze.'²⁵¹ In my visual language the melon is a displacement of attention from the body to its action in space. This challenges

²⁵¹ Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, 55.

viewers to understand how it feels to juggle those melons, and thus apprehend how a woman's maternal experience of being in the world might be.



Figure 40. Zoe Freney, *Untitled*, 2017, oil on canvas. Photograph Sam Roberts.

Jane Lymer in *The Phenomenology of Gravidity* discusses how the public view of pregnancy is driven by social, economic and ideological factors.²⁵² In light of falling birth rates Australia, along with other developed nations, has been for some time now echoing the post–World War Two mandate by then Prime Minister John Curtin to ‘populate or perish’ in order to support an ageing population. Yet, simultaneously, there is also the need for women to undertake the production of income (a situation that was, until the late 1900s, seen as conflicting with maternal duties), a side effect

²⁵² Jane Lymer, *The Phenomenology of Gravidity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd., 2016). Ebook.

being that women in advanced stages of gestation are increasingly, and more normatively, visible in the public sphere.²⁵³

It has been necessary for culture to become comfortable with the overtly pregnant woman, whose image otherwise challenges norms of proper femininity and comportment as dainty and contained. The pregnant body expands and leaks and is more than one. The pregnant woman is, says Lymer, 'according to Julia Kristeva, 'abject' in her ability to disturb the patriarchal social order through her ambiguous ontology.'²⁵⁴

Subjectivity in the feminine

The above mass media images, rather than representing mothers as powerful, continue to reinforce ideals of neotraditional, intensive mothering, and this continues to affect a mother's sense of identity. What might be offered to us instead, if representation were derived from Bracha Ettinger's notions of feminine matrixial subjectivity? In theorising a subjectivity that develops intrauterine, pre-birth, and challenges the sovereignty of the phallic order, Ettinger re-evaluates the symbolic womb as well as the feminine in all of our becomings. This model privileges notions of ethics and hospitality, severality, '*wit(h)nessing* and co-affection.'²⁵⁵ Pollock writes how Ettinger's theorisation positions 'pregnancy as a state of being alive in giving life.'²⁵⁶ The maternal subject is thus granted a generative position.

²⁵³ Lymer, *The Phenomenology of Gravidity*.

²⁵⁴ Lymer, 32.

²⁵⁵ Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger Matrixial Subj. Aesthetics, Ethics. Vol. 1 1990-2000*, 3. Italics in original text.

²⁵⁶ Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics," 6.

The mother in public also remains to an extent an affront to public expectations. We know this through witnessing the response to mothers who fail to adhere to the norms of intensive mothering, those who turn their backs on a tantrumming child, or who too easily give in to a demanding child at the grocery store checkout, or otherwise transgress visibly in public. These mothers, it seems, must be managed through the proliferation of images of the 'right' kinds of mother. Such images also appear to show women they can accommodate the demands of mothering along with the other aspects of their individualised selves. Lymer writes, 'the image of motherhood has been given a facelift and a sexy marketing campaign.'²⁵⁷ What this makes clear is that the representation of maternity and mothering is still largely controlled by 'patriarchal institutions within which actual women must negotiate their embodiments.'²⁵⁸

I work against these images as I investigate ways to depict myself as mother, unbalanced and unsure, but most often in relation to others, my sons or their toys and pets that always hover near. Sometimes burdensome, sometimes allowing both parties full autonomy, always in conversation-with as I seek to describe mothering as a generative experience.

Scholars agree there is an ongoing need to analyse and critique images and stereotypes of mothers that 'discipline, constrict and limit women's freedom.'²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Lymer, *The Phenomenology of Gravidity*, 32.

²⁵⁸ Lymer, 32; Oliver writes that 'now that women continue to break barriers in business and politics, images of pregnant women are regular staples of television, movies, and magazine covers at supermarket checkout stands.' Kelly Oliver, *Knock Me up, Knock Me Down* (Columbia University Press, 2012). Chapter 1. Google Play ebook.

²⁵⁹ Oliver, "Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation," 776.

Representation is a key means of structuring individuals who are ‘also formed by structures within the social context.’²⁶⁰ Alternative images of mothers and mothering are essential to allow women spaces to reflect on their own embodied mothering and to engage in contemporary body politics. Christina Prinds et al write that ‘embodiment is the process in which the individual incorporates biologically, the social and material world in which we live.’²⁶¹ That is, the body is more than just one’s physical self in the world, but it also has social meaning.

The ways our bodies are regulated and surveilled, and our behaviours structured, socially and culturally through normative and moral structures, are incorporated into our senses of self.²⁶² Feminist scholars recognise the importance of mothers having agency in their own representation against patriarchal oppression of bodies and behaviours. Betterton argues ‘visual practices not only change perceptions of bodies, they can reshape the body itself and open it to new knowledge.’²⁶³ Mother-artists may come to understand, through practice, the complexities of maternal subjectivity that are frequently unacknowledged in mainstream representation.

Pioneering artist Mary Kelly’s series, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-1979, (Figure 7) analytically documents her son’s development and their intersubjectivity through a Lacanian lens.²⁶⁴ This approach, which renders the ephemera of child rearing and

²⁶⁰ Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann, 267.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 268.

²⁶² Ibid, 3.

²⁶³ Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, 8.

²⁶⁴ *Post Partum Document* was influenced by Juliet Mitchell’s Lacanian reworking of Freud’s psychoanalysis, which allowed Kelly to explore the mother-child relationship. Betterton writes how ‘Kelly’s concern was with how the maternal-infant relation positions the mother as subject. She explored the process of mapping gendered subjectivity onto language that, according to Lacan, is fixed by the oedipal narrative that produces sexual difference and consequent loss of the maternal body.’ Betterton, 52.

care as artefacts, skirts around the body of the mother, yet still she is ever present in her son's life, even as she traces their separation. Kelly writes:

It is not only the infant whose future personality is formed at this crucial moment, but also the mother whose "feminine psychology" is sealed by the sexual division of labour in childcare.²⁶⁵

Kelly's use of autobiographical writing 'allows the mother the truth of her experiences,'²⁶⁶ asserts art historian and author Andrea Liss. She argues that Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* 'can be considered a strategic assault against the gamut of cultural restrictions put on the mother.'²⁶⁷ Receiving critical, though not always positive, attention when it was first exhibited and published in London, the series also marks an insurgency into the fine art world by art that 'approached the maternal as a crucial site for art making and cultural address.'²⁶⁸

Courtney Kessel's (b.1974) ongoing, semi-annual performance of *In balance with* (Figure 41) shows how mother and child change individually and in relation to each other over the course of years, as they visibly grow and change. However, their intersubjectivity is also apparent as, over its thirty-minute duration, Kessel adds items from their everyday life to the end of the seesaw, checking the balance, and the comfort of her daughter, Chloe, after each addition. In this way Kessel demonstrates 'the struggle to create a balance between work, home, research, and

²⁶⁵ Mary Kelly quoted in Betterton. 52.

²⁶⁶ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. 26.

²⁶⁷ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. 26.

²⁶⁸ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. 34.

play as a single mother and artist.²⁶⁹ As the child grows, the balance changes, as does the paraphernalia of everyday life, but the work of motherhood is a constant.

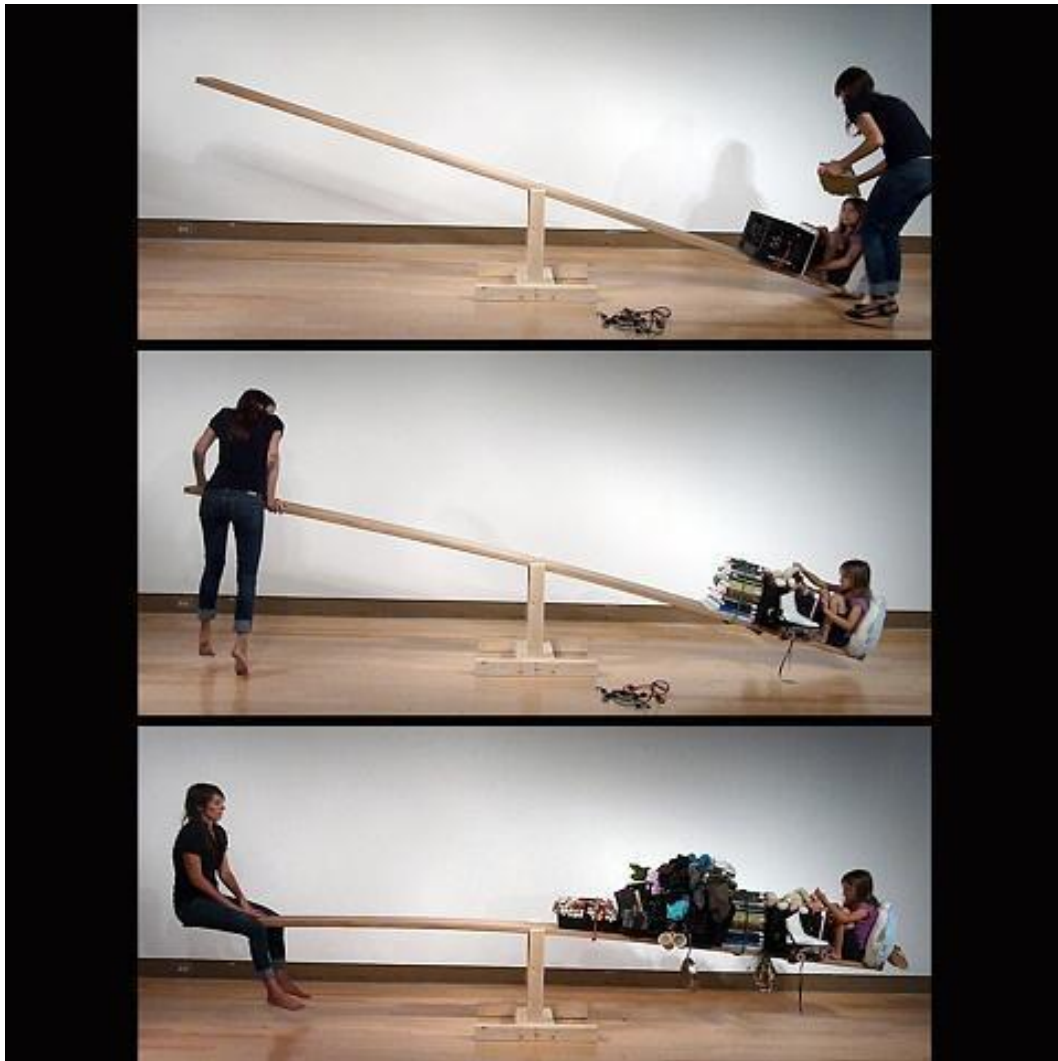


Figure 41. Courtney Kessel, *In Balance With*, Performance, 2011. © Courtney Kessel.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Courtney Kessel, "In Balance With," *Studies in the Maternal*, 2013, accessed 18 May 2020, <https://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/sim.129/>.

²⁷⁰ Courtney Kessel, "In Balance With," 2011, *Artist Website*, accessed 15 May 2020, <https://courtneykessel.com/artwork/2365672-In-Balance-With.html>.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explore the necessity of a continuing critique of neoliberal patriarchal representations of mothers and their work. Despite sophisticated and ongoing work by artists and others in the fields of, for example, mother studies, cultural studies and sociology, images in mainstream media, Hollywood and social media continue to perpetuate ‘the neoliberal discourse that portrays motherhood as an essentially individual enterprise run and managed by one person: the mother.’²⁷¹ Academic Irem Güney Frahm writes that ‘according to this understanding of motherhood, mothers are expected to be multitasking, powerful individuals who can have it all: family, a good job, a fit body, good social relations; in other words, ... “perfection”’.²⁷²

In recognition of what Robinson describes as the ‘brutality’ visited upon women by images, the artworks produced in this project privilege embodiment, ‘co-knowing,’ and ‘knowing-otherwise.’²⁷³ This approach adheres to understandings of Ettinger and others that art can be powerfully affective and has the potential to communicate what is known but unable to be spoken, due perhaps to society’s expectations, limitations, or just the incommensurability of mothering experiences. In seeking means of producing embodied representations of mothering I explore the work of other mother-artists such as Csilla Klenyanski, Mary Leunig, Janine Antoni and Louise Bourgeois. The work of these artists suggests the real breadth of experience and emotion felt by mothers and contradicts visual culture that supports the individualisation of motherhood and the endless shift work it may entail, where mothers often work at work, at home and on their bodies.

The artworks made in this project, drawings, paintings, photographs and video, draw on aspects of my maternal thinking as well as an ethics of care, wherein I am ‘caring with’ my children in the shared space of the home.²⁷⁴ This implicates my children in the project and suggest the possibility of trans-subjectivity, severality, ‘wit(h)nessing

²⁷¹ Irem Güney-Frahm, “Neoliberal Motherhood during the Pandemic: Some Reflections.” *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27, no.5 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12485>. 849.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Marchevska and Walkerdine, *The Maternal in Creative Work*, xxvi.

²⁷⁴ Nike Romano, ‘Aesthetic wit(h)nessing and the political ethics of care: Generating solidarity and trust in pedagogical encounters,’ in Vivienne Bozalek, Michalinos Zembylas & Joan C. Tronto (editors). *Posthuman and Political Care Ethics for Reconfiguring Higher Education Pedagogies*, Routledge eBook, 2021.

and co-affection,²⁷⁵ concepts that can complicate the neoliberal model of the individual, juggling mother.

²⁷⁵ Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, 64-65.; Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger Matrixial Subj. Aesthetics, Ethics. Vol. 1 1990-2000*, 3.

Anecdote 4: Building *Stuff Mother*

In a series of moves in performance, video and drawing, I made piles of stuff in many iterations, trying to order things metaphorically and actually. I filmed myself building the *Stuff Mother*, which I then drew. These exercises were undertaken in response to ideologies of intensive mothering, as described by, for example, Douglas and Michaels in the *Mommy Myth*, that call upon a mother to exert seemingly effortless control in the home, the lives of children and in the upkeep of her own body.

The *Stuff Mother* itself is a kind of a stand-in mother figure who I can leave in charge at home while I go out, go to work, go to the studio, go to bed. In this she recalls the cloth mother of the famous Harry Harlow experiments in maternal dependency and separation.²⁷⁶ These experiments have been criticised not just for their misogyny and cruelty towards the rhesus monkeys involved but also because of the way they were used to support ideologies of intensive mothering where mothers are exhorted to be selfless, sacrificing and ever present for their children.²⁷⁷ In an essay about these experiments, 'Metaphors into Hardware: Harry Harlow and the Technology of Love,'

²⁷⁶ Harry Harlow was an American animal psychologist. His work on surrogacy, attachment and the 'phenomenon of affection,' conducted at the University of Wisconsin in the 1950s and 1960s was important in informing the theories of British child psychiatrist, John Bowlby. Together they 'formulated new ideas on the nature of the bond between child and caregiver.' Frank C. P. van der Horst, Helen A. LeRoy, and Rene van der Veer, "When Strangers Meet: John Bowlby and Harry Harlow on Attachment Behaviour," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 42 (2008), 370-371.

²⁷⁷ Haraway argues that Harlow's ambivalence about the working wife in post war America was built into his misogynist lab experiments. 'We produced a perfectly proportioned, streamlined body stripped of unnecessary bulges and appendices. Redundancy in the surrogate mother's system was avoided by reducing the number of breasts from two to one.' Harlow quoted in Donna Haraway, "Metaphors into Hardware: Harry Harlow and the Technology of Love," in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989), 232-236; van der Horst, LeRoy, and van der Veer, 375.

Donna Haraway describes the control Harlow proudly exerted over the surrogate mothers.²⁷⁸

In the video, *Stuff Mother*, 2021 (Figure 42) the children's belongings and other household things stand in for my responsibility for them, as I try to organise and order them. Rather than balance, as achieved in Kessel's performance work and video, the overriding sensation in *Stuff Mother* is a lack of mastery, as the stuff piles higher with no apparent plan or reason. I first sketched the idea for a pile of stuff that would become a kind of stand-in mother but it took me at least another year to resolve this.

Baraitser writes about the ways mothers negotiate a world populated with paraphernalia of contemporary capitalist child-rearing. Not only do our bodies and perceptions change – after having a baby I could not cross a road as effortlessly or thoughtlessly as before, and I still sway when I'm waiting in a queue – but we are suddenly weighed down physically, too. The *Stuff Mother* is built from these encumbrances, some precious, some soon to be added to mounting landfill.

As mothers we have a stake in our own definition and representation. As artists, who 'think through touching and making,' we have the ability to present a more complicated view of maternal being and thinking, led by experience and embodied knowledge.²⁷⁹ This offers a perspective suggested as 'a missing link into the way we encounter our fellow humans, our society and finally our planet.'²⁸⁰ This view positions maternal experience as central to human experience. Imagining a culture in

²⁷⁸ Haraway, "Metaphors into Hardware: Harry Harlow and the Technology of Love," 234.

²⁷⁹ Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, 7.

²⁸⁰ Marchevska and Walkerdine, *The Maternal in Creative Work*, 8.

which the maternal is the assumed position, is a thought experiment suggested by Baraitser.²⁸¹

Betterton writes:

The visual arts can offer knowledge of the complicated relationship between social ideas and individually embodied experiences in maternal practices of making.²⁸²

That is, mothers can come to knowledge through their embodied experience, and mother-artists through the body and making, and this can be done against and in opposition to images of model patriarchal motherhood, and against the simplification of maternal experience. If we privilege these knowledges in representation, we may satisfactorily complicate images of contemporary mothers and free them from patriarchal definition and control.

²⁸¹ Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters* (Hove, East Sussex; New York: Routledge, 2009), 10.

²⁸² Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, 7.



Figure 42. Zoe Freney, *Stuff Mother*, 2021, digital video.



Figure 43. Zoe Freney, *Stuff Mother*, 2021, pastel and acrylic on paper, 160 x 114 cm.

Anecdote 5: Breast Bags and Yoga Pants

During COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, as the boundaries of the home became firmer, I turned inwards with the studio research, sewing *Intimate Structures*, 2020 (Figure 44), a maternity bra and underpants set, made from Belgian linen I had bought to paint on. In this way, the work refers to the masculine act of painting (that was lost to me at that time through my caring duties at home), as well as the history of undergarments. The bra is underwired and trimmed with commercially available lingerie trimmings, including maternity clips, allowing the front panels of the bra to open, revealing pink silk lining that recalls the intimate, and still somewhat scandalous act of breastfeeding.

Making the bra was empowering in a way that buying one, and buying the messaging, is not. As I measure, cut and sew I have a sense of myself positioned in the world, parts of my body held up with wire, covered with cups of cloth, stitched up and bound.²⁸³ Young argues:

If the chest is a center of a person's being-in-the-world, her mode of being surely differs depending on whether her chest is open to touch, moving in the world, or confined and bordered. ... Many women's breasts are much more like a fluid than a solid; in movement, they sway, jiggle, bounce, ripple even when the movement is small.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Germano Celant, writing about the *Fabric Works* of Louise Bourgeois, states that fabric, as a garment, 'refers to a body. Something on the outside that reflects what is inside. The structure of a language, cut to follow the contours of a person and adapted to his or her physical boundaries can tell us something of that person's significant "traits."' Celant, *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works*, 14.

²⁸⁴ Iris Marion Young, "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling," in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, ed. by Rose Weitz, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 156.

When I was younger, at art school, I modelled for a life sculpture class. The teacher used a wooden pointer to point at my naked breasts and described them as hanging like plastic bags full of water. Fluid, as Young says.

While the Hot Milk campaign claims to provide women with sexy and comfortable maternity bras, the underwear seems to be designed more for the control of women's bodies. The advertising images do not necessarily empower women so much as coerce them into conforming to narrow body ideals.

The history of women's clothing is one of paradox of control and comfort and, while a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this exegesis, it is pertinent to briefly discuss two related points here: the development of the cupped bra, and the more recent popularity of activewear and athleisure wear, and how these garments shape women's bodies.²⁸⁵

In 2008, a medieval-era linen cupped and skirted undergarment was found under the floor of the late 12th century Lengberg Castle in Southwest Austria.²⁸⁶ Historian Beatrix Nutz explains how primary sources from the era describe these cupped bras, or 'breast bags', as necessary both for comfort in supporting women's larger breasts as well as confining such unfashionable appendages within contemporary norms, as

²⁸⁵ 'the entire athleisure phenomenon is much more than simply casual clothing designed for physical activity. It is a complex entanglement of branding, marketing, fabric, skin, sweat, fat, muscle, consumption, capitalism, environmentalism, gender, sexuality, social media, healthism, neoliberalism, and more.' Brice and Thorpe, "Activewear: The Uniform of the Neoliberal Female Citizen," in *Sportswomen's Apparel Around the World. New Femininities in Digital, Physical and Sporting Cultures*, ed. L.K. Fuller (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 20.

²⁸⁶ Beatrix Nutz, "The Lengberg Finds: Remnants of a Lost 15th Century Tailoring Revolution," in *Archaeological Textiles – Links Between Past and Present. NESAT XIII – North European Symposium for Archaeological Textiles*, ed. by Helena Březinová and Jane Malcolm-Davies (Liberec, 2017).

ideal breasts were small, pert and apple-shaped, not large and lumpy rockmelons. Small breasts were also a marker of virginity, thus morally correct.²⁸⁷ Nutz quotes Gilbert of Hoyland (b.1172) in his undated sermon where he describes how to achieve perfect breasts:

I advise you to study the women who take care of their body and attire ...

Because what do they strive more to do in decorating their chests, as that their breasts are not oversized, ugly ... Therefore they bind oversized and hanging breasts together with breast bands so as to cure an error of nature through their artistry.²⁸⁸

This level of judgement is reflected in Iris Young's reading, in her essay 'Breasted Experience,' of contemporary patriarchal culture, in which 'a woman ... often feels herself judged and evaluated according to the size and contours of her breasts, and indeed often is.'²⁸⁹ For women today Hot Milk advertises that larger, pregnant breasts are now acceptable, but still they must be rounded and smoothed, without sign of engorgement, asymmetry, or humiliating milk spouts.

Nutz writes that:

In the past ... liberty of movement was controlled and constrained by morality, gestures and clothing. Close-fitting clothes gave an impression of dignity and nobility.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Beatrix Nutz, "From Soft to Hard: Deliberately Concealed Body Shaping Garments from Tyrol," in *Structuring Fashion: Foundation Garments through History*, ed. by Frank Matthias Kammel and Johannes Pietsch (Hirmer, 2019), 19.

²⁸⁸ Hoyland undated, Sermon quoted by Nutz, "The Lengberg Finds: Remnants of a Lost 15th Century Tailoring Revolution."

²⁸⁹ Young, "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling."

²⁹⁰ Nutz, "From Soft to Hard: Deliberately Concealed Body Shaping Garments from Tyrol," 19.

A similar conversation today surrounds underwear as well as active and athleisure wear. Researchers Julie E. Brice and Holly Thorpe argue that activewear is changing feminine bodies and movement in the twenty-first century, both ‘reinforcing and resisting popular ideas about femininity.’²⁹¹ These garments are marketed as allowing women greater freedom of movement, but they are also ‘designed to accentuate (not just support) particular aspects of women’s bodies, ... [to] promote the idealised female form as being curvy but fat-free.’²⁹² Brice and Thorpe argue that the ideal is still unobtainable for most women. Terms such as control and discipline are used both today and in medieval texts discussing the breast bags. Activewear clearly ‘distinguishes those who choose to live “correctly” under neoliberalism, from those who make poor life and health choices.’²⁹³

Motherhood, as well as health and fitness, is today perceived as an individualised problem, to be solved through commitment, discipline, and wealth. This is ‘emblematic of the contradictory environment of the twenty-first century that combines liberating ideals of empowerment, choice feminism, and strength,’ with narrow ideals of heteronormative sexuality, and women’s bodies and behaviours.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Julie E. Brice and Holly Thorpe, “Sure They’re Comfortable, but Those Leggings and Sports Bras Are Also Redefining Modern Femininity,” *The Conversation*, March 2021, <https://theconversation.com/sure-theyre-comfortable-but-those-leggings-and-sports-bras-are-also-redefining-modern-femininity-156956>.

²⁹² Brice and Thorpe, “Sure They’re Comfortable, but Those Leggings and Sports Bras Are Also Redefining Modern Femininity.”

²⁹³ Brice and Thorpe, “Activewear: The Uniform of the Neoliberal Female Citizen,” 28.

²⁹⁴ Toffoletti et al. 2018. Quoted in Brice and Thorpe, “Activewear: The Uniform of the Neoliberal Female Citizen,” 28-29; In what Jess Butler calls a ‘postfeminist environment,’ women are constructed as ‘both subjects and consumers, elevating consumption as an individualistic mechanism of empowerment and effectively commodifying feminist activism.’ Jess Butler, “For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013), 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43860666>.



Figure 44. Zoe Freney, Intimate Structures: smalls, 2020, painter's linen, silk satin, cotton, wire and trims, coat hangers, dimensions variable. Photo by Sam Roberts.

Chapter 2

COVID Impact Statement: mothering and making art in the pandemic

Overview

This chapter began as a one-page outline of the effects of COVID-19 on my PhD research project. Feeling isolated and unsupported, much like I did when I had a new baby to care for, I sought to reconcile my experience with those of other mothers similarly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the chapter expands to review online magazine, newspaper and journal articles published in 2020 that explore and define the impact of COVID-19 'lockdown,' social restrictions and changes to work for women and mothers.²⁹⁵ This literature is contextualised with earlier texts that investigate and critique trends in contemporary western feminism and intensive motherhood. These texts trace the processes of feminism's supposed depoliticisation and the stripping of agency and solidarity from mothers as neoliberal feminist subjects.²⁹⁶

My own experiences are viewed alongside those of other mothers, along with literature on feminism and motherhood under white, western patriarchy. It becomes apparent that, while we are repeatedly told that life under COVID-19 is unprecedented, and that this is the 'new normal,' there is little new about the gendered division of labour that marks mothering experiences in COVID lockdowns.²⁹⁷ Flexible, home-based work arrangements that have developed

²⁹⁵ Fiona Jenkins and Julie Smith, "Work-from-Home during COVID-19: Accounting for the Care Economy to Build Back Better," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 32.1 (2021), 23.

²⁹⁶ Catherine A. Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113.

²⁹⁷ Ruchi Sinha, "6 Strategies to Juggle Work and Young Kids at Home: It's about Flexibility and Boundaries," *The Conversation*, March 2020, <https://theconversation.com/6-strategies-to-juggle-work-and-young-kids-at->

throughout this period, as mothers have struggled to cope with demands of work and family, are now being celebrated as new ways women can ‘have it all.’²⁹⁸ I argue that COVID adaptations have continued to fragment mothers and domestic care workers, which further individualises mothers and their problems of mothering.

Sociologist Catherine Rottenberg calls for the urgent investigation of the current ideal of the ‘happily balanced woman,’²⁹⁹ as well as

renewed discussion about how we might re-signify the term [feminism] in neoliberal times ... to address the increasing distribution of precarity across the globe.³⁰⁰

I argue that images are powerful in the creation and maintenance of mother subjects and that the imaging of alternative models to the happily balanced mother will be important in re-politicising feminist mothering. While the dominant prevailing and persistent images of mothers in mainstream media produce normative behaviours that are detrimental to many mothers, mother-artists continue to subvert these stereotypes in inventive ways.³⁰¹ Their approaches as well as their alternate

home-its-about-flexibility-and-boundaries-134138; Susan E. Mannon, “The New Normal? Work, Family, and Higher Education under COVID-19,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative Double Issue. Academic Motherhood and COVID-19*, 11, 12.2, 1 (2020), 234.

²⁹⁸ Sinha; Helen Lewis, “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics Affect Men and Women Differently,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020; Brendan Churchill, “No One Escaped COVID’s Impacts, but Big Fall in Tertiary Enrolments Was 80% Women. Why?” *The Conversation*, 2020, accessed 18 January 2022, <https://theconversation.com/no-one-escaped-covids-impacts-but-big-fall-in-tertiary-enrolments-was-80-women-why-149994>; Leah Ruppanner and Sophie Squires, *The Future of Women @ Work*, 2020, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/the-policy-lab/projects/women-at-work/the-future-of-women-@-work>.

²⁹⁹ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 172.

³⁰⁰ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 171.

³⁰¹ Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 4.3 (2004), 255–64; McRobbie, “Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times”; Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*.

representations of mothers are important counterpoints to dominant motherhood ideology that has intensified during COVID-19.

The COVID-19 motherhood fallout literature

My experience of life under the pandemic has reinforced for me, as for other women, how deeply entrenched gendered care roles still are in our society.³⁰² Under the intensification of my domestic duties and invisible mental load, my research was impacted and my focus necessarily shifted again, from studio to home, from easel to kitchen table.³⁰³ My art making changed to fit in with new, homebound routines at this time. The unexpected outcomes, such as the *Intimate Structures* (Figure 44) and *Cook and Kiss* maternal lingerie sets (Figure 45), as well as a shift in focus from painting to drawing, will be discussed later in this chapter alongside the work of other artists who adapted to continue their practices during the pandemic.³⁰⁴ Some of these at-home and collective practices are worth exploring as potential solutions to

³⁰² Darcy Lockman, "Too Often, Working Mothers Do Far More of the Childcare Than Their Husbands. Here's How to Fix That," *Time Magazine*, May 2019; Darcy Lockman, *All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership* (Harper Collins UK, 2019).

³⁰³ 'In a large number of cases, women are doing the vast majority of the caring for small children and the home educating work ... The men seem to be able to lock themselves away in a study, while the women are working at the kitchen table – and also trying to home-educate.' Mary-Ann Stephenson quoted in Donna Ferguson, "'I Feel like a 1950s Housewife': How Lockdown Has Exposed the Gender Divide," *The Guardian Online*, 3 May 2020, accessed 31 January 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/i-feel-like-a-1950s-housewife-how-lockdown-has-exposed-the-gender-divide?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

³⁰⁴ Aseel Tayah, "More than Enough: Balancing Art and Motherhood," *NAVA*, 2020, accessed 23 November 2020, https://visualarts.net.au/news-opinion/2020/More-Than-Enough-Balancing-Art-Motherhood/?utm_source=MASTER+List+-+Email+Subscribers+%2B+Members&utm_campaign=5ccb6f749b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_01_22_01_53_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0001b90ee5-5ccb6f749b.

the individualisation of mothers and their problems, and the invisibility of much of the feminised, unpaid domestic labour in neoliberal times.³⁰⁵



Figure 45. Zoe Freney, *Cook and Kiss*, 2021, cotton tea towels, Chux cloth, wire and trims, dimensions variable.

Due to the COVID-19 social restrictions, all the usually discrete though never really separate aspects of my life are thrust together. I am not alone in this, as across the world ‘family dynamics are re-calibrating, under unprecedented stress and anxiety, to adapt to a rapidly evolving “new normal.”’³⁰⁶ One thing that I and many other mothers

³⁰⁵ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*; Tithi; Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. by Tithi; Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Cinzia; Arruzza, Tithi; Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2019).

³⁰⁶ Ashley Goodfellow Craig, “Mothering through a pandemic: COVID-19 and the evolving role of mothers,” *yFile: York University’s News*. April 8 2020, accessed 10 April 2020, <https://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2020/04/08/mothering-through-a-pandemic-covid-19-and-the-evolving-role-of-mothers/>.

experienced in 2020 though, is that there is little new about this normal. Simone de Beauvoir's claim, that the only way out of 'maternal servitude' for women is their 'liberation from reproduction,' seems to remain stubbornly relevant.³⁰⁷ Since de Beauvoir wrote those portentous words, there have been revolutions in contraception and women's rights, and seeming-equality hard won by the second wave or radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. We may have thought women could be free *and* be mothers.³⁰⁸

Sociological and feminist studies in the 1980s and 1990s explored why, despite the gains of previous generations, women continued to shoulder the burden of home and care work. For example, Arlie Hochschild in *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* in 1989, attempts to categorise and quantify the pressures on women who work multiple shifts of paid and care work.³⁰⁹ Sharon Hays, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, explores the expectations upon mothers to have careers outside of home and still undertake intensive mothering practices in the home, often at the same time.³¹⁰

Since the 2010s, books and blogs on achieving the perfect balance of career and motherhood infer that the work of feminism is now 'accounted for' and that women

³⁰⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1997), 55; Triantafyllia, Kadoglou and Katerina Sarri, "Women. Motherhood and Work," *Brill*, 35, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45170687>.

³⁰⁸ Triantafyllia, Kadoglou and Katerina Sarri, "Women, Motherhood and Work," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 29, 41.

³⁰⁹ Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York; Ontario: Viking Penguin Inc, 1989).

³¹⁰ Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*.

can have it all – or not – depending on the choices they make as individuals.³¹¹ This new turn has been seen as a depoliticised, individualised form of feminism, where women are encouraged to ‘lean in’ to their careers, postpone children until their lives’ trajectories are on track to (their own, economic) ‘success,’ and thence to take joy in the moment.³¹² In these texts, the mother is depicted as a strong, successful woman alone. The child on her hip has been left home with the nanny (Figure 46).

The visual language I have developed over the course of this study employs tropes of balance and control in response to the current ideologies of intensive mothering. In photographs and drawings I am frequently standing in precarious positions, struggling beneath some real or metaphorical burden. In a small painted self-portrait, *Circus Tricks* (Figure 47), I situate myself in the home with a pet parrot on my head, symbolising my lack of control. I take a risk by showing myself in situations of disarray, encouraged by Baraitser who argues for the possibility of retrieving maternal subjectivity by focusing on the moments of our ‘undoing.’³¹³ In contrast to Sandberg’s photo on the cover of her book, where she presents as assured, happy and autonomous, I look tired, and a little bemused by the passenger I must accommodate.

In *Circus Tricks* I have deliberately painted the domestic surrounds in golden light, so the overall impact is not one of hopelessness. Yet the plastic water bottle on the

³¹¹ McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” 255; Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (Random House, 2013); Anne Marie Slaughter, *Unfinished Business: Women, Men, Work, Family* (Random House Canada, 2015); Ivanka Trump, *Women Who Work* (Penguin Books, 2017).

³¹² Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 27.

³¹³ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*.

bench behind me signifies daily household mess and waste and the doorway behind me only hints at a way out. The sharp angles in the painting have a destabilising effect. The painting adheres to the traditional triangular composition of many religious and history paintings, used in much of my work to destabilise the patriarchal power structures. In this case the parrot assumes the hierarchical position at the pinnacle of the triangle, subverting the expected positions of power. The golden light could be read as halo-like, but it encircles the parrot's head, rather than my own.

Figure 46. Cover of Lean In, by Sheryl Sandberg.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ Janet Maslin, 'Lessons From the Stratosphere, and How to Get There', *The New York Times* (New York, 6 March 2013).



Figure 47. Zoe Freney, *Circus Tricks*, oil on board, 2020, 30 x 20 cm.

In 2020 there was a proliferation of texts, from newspaper articles and academic journals to radio broadcasts and Instagram posts, that provided evidence that traditional gendered care roles remain in place within (western neoliberal, heterosexual partnered) families, and shaped women's COVID-19 experiences.³¹⁵

Studies leading up to 2020 consistently show that there has been only a slight increase in the amount of domestic work undertaken by men in heterosexual couples over the last few decades, but that women continue to be responsible for the majority of unpaid domestic labour and childcare. In 2019, Leah Ruppanner noted in *The Conversation*:

³¹⁵ Speaking at a forum of mother-artists in which I took part at The Mill, Adelaide, for *Postcards from Motherhood*, October 20, 2020, one artist related that in her same-sex relationship gendered care roles were not an issue. While this is just one anecdotal instance, I found it interesting and feel this warrants further investigation. *The Mill in Conversation*. Uploaded 21 April 2021, accessed 7 August 2021, <https://anchor.fm/the-mill-in-conversation/episodes/The-Mill-in-Conversation-Postcards-from-Motherhood--Mother-Artist-Forum-evfshm/a-a5b9kvu>.

On average, men have increased the time they spend on housework only marginally ... mothers still spend two to three times more time with children than fathers daily.³¹⁶

Meanwhile, the activist aspect of second wave feminism has been ‘hollowed out’ by neoliberalism and ‘postfeminist’ rhetoric, and government legislation has failed to build upon feminist gains in areas like universal access to childcare.³¹⁷ As a consequence of the failure of the feminist revolution to substantially alleviate the burden of domestic work on women, mothers today are struggling to work multiple shifts, as many families require more than one income to meet the costs of living.³¹⁸

In *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, Petra Bueskens writes that society’s failure to rewrite the sexual contract means many otherwise privileged western women are disappointed to find their domestic roles and relationships revert to patriarchal gender norms with the births of their children. This makes the continuation of one’s career exceedingly difficult.³¹⁹

Evidence continues to show that despite mothers’ increasing involvement in the workforce - in fact most mothers participate in work outside of the home - they also

³¹⁶ Leah Ruppanner, “Women Aren’t Better Multi-Taskers than Men — They’re Just Doing More Work,” *The Conversation*, 2019, accessed 16 August 2020, <https://theconversation.com/women-arent-better-multitaskers-than-men-theyre-just-doing-more-work-121620>; Lyn Craig, and Brendan Churchill, “Dual-Earner Parent Couples’ Work and Care during COVID-19,” *Gender, Work and Organization*, 25 June (2020), 1–14; Kelly Hand, Jennifer Baxter, Megan Carroll, and Mikayla Budinski, *Families in Australia Survey Life During COVID-19, Report No. 1: Early Findings*, 2020, http://www3.aifs.gov.au/institute/media/docs/r1GplwOaS7tS/Covid-19-Survey-Report_1-Early_findings.pdf?_ga=2.88477791.591457223.1603165819-722667713.1603165819.

³¹⁷ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 418; Lyn Craig, and Brendan Churchill, “Dual-Earner Parent Couples’ Work and Care during COVID-19,” 1–14.

³¹⁸ A note about “drop out” language. Women don’t “drop out” – they are pushed to the limit.’

Emma Dawson, “There Are Thousands of Very Credible Women across Australia Fighting for Equal Rights,” *The Guardian Australia*, 8 October 2020.

³¹⁹ Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, 7.

continue to do the majority of domestic labour.³²⁰ Many mothers report their changed roles and identities are harder to accept and adapt to due to the surprise with which they find themselves consigned to the role of primary carer.³²¹

Worlds collide

Even before COVID-19, 'working at home was associated with higher subjective time stress and did not facilitate better work-life balance in the sense of increasing time in leisure and personal activities.'³²² Craig and Churchill find that working from home involves

more multitasking, with many women blurring the boundaries between employment and family demands by performing paid work whilst supervising children at the same time.³²³

Throughout the pandemic lockdowns, images proliferated of families trying to cope with the dissolution of temporal and spatial boundaries.³²⁴ Online newspaper

³²⁰ Roger Wilkins and Inga Lass, "The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 16," Melbourne, 2018, https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2839919/2018-HILDA-SR-for-web.pdf; Leah Ruppanner and Sophie Squires, "The Future of Women @ Work," 2020, <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/the-policy-lab/projects/women-at-work/the-future-of-women-@-work>.

³²¹ Prinds, Nikolajsen, and Folmann; Douglas and Michaels; Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*; Deidre M Donohue, in an interview with Richtje Reinsma gives an example 'of what happened to someone who's daily practice began changing during her pregnancy ... Weronika Zielinska ... used to be a painter. Through her maternal experience, she went from making paintings to investigating forms of hospitality and collaboration. It started with simple things. Weronika couldn't paint anymore like she used to as she couldn't stand up anymore for so long once pregnant. She had to wear a mask because she wanted to protect the baby growing inside of her. Her socio-economic situation changed because of being pregnant and she couldn't afford a studio anymore, she had to start working at home. Her paintings were huge and she couldn't store them there. She also didn't want to have her house filled with paint and chemicals as she now was thinking of the health of this other within her. So care, protection and new, embodied knowledge began forming in between her and the canvas.' Reinsma, "The Mother as a new artistic role model – in conversation with artist and researcher Deirdre M. Donoghue."

³²² Lyn Craig and Brendan Churchill, "Dual-Earner Parent Couples' Work and Care during COVID-19," 3.

³²³ Craig and Churchill, 3.

³²⁴ Craig and Churchill, 2.

articles, blogs and social media posts paired photos of frazzled mothers and fathers looking at laptops, surrounded by children and assorted home mess, with handy tips for coping strategies. My own (small, open plan) home became art studio, research office, work office, school classroom and leisure space for almost two months (a much shorter period than for others elsewhere in Australia and globally) (Figure 48 and Figure 49).



Figure 48. Zoe Freney, Dining table, April 27, 2020, 8:50am, digital Photograph.



Figure 49. Zoe Freney, *Dining table and desk*, June 16, 2020, 8:16am, digital photograph.

Helen Lewis, in 'The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics Affect Men and Women Differently,' argues there is a widespread assumption that childcare work is 'soaked up' by private citizens.³²⁵ This fails to acknowledge the intensity of care work, especially when paid work and care must be undertaken in the same time and place.³²⁶ The above photographs are visual records of the intensity of this experience. While these photos are effective in conveying the sense of claustrophobia and excess I felt in my home during lockdown, I use a range of tactics when transposing this experience to more considered artworks. There is too much to take in, and the specificities of my own home are too overt, so in the artworks I simplify the detail, and set the action in a more generic domestic space.

³²⁵ Helen Lewis, "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics Affect Men and Women Differently," *The Atlantic*, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>.

³²⁶ Helen Lewis, "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics Affect Men and Women Differently."

In depicting images of mess and of me both over-achieving *and* failing at the individualised responsibilities of mothering and housework, I hope to be part of a political discourse on feminist mothering, a discourse that includes the until-now largely overlooked iconoclastic drawings of Mary Leunig. These humorous and often shocking works explode 'notions of family and capital, attack ... bourgeois sensibilities and speak ... of the pains and joys of existing as a woman and mother.'³²⁷ COVID conditions have heightened the need for such powerful, authentic images of mothers, even when they may be hard to look at.

While some of my works investigate MotherSpace as anywhere mothers are at work, including public spaces like playgrounds, like Leunig I focus my works mostly in private, bounded domestic settings. In depicting myself in relation to household mess, toys, pets and children, I hope to convey the embodied experience of relationality, a severality that often tips over into a sense of loss of control and loss of self within this situation.

During COVID-19 lockdowns there were instances when mothers' professional lives collided with their mothering roles live on national television. In one case, Dr Clare Wenham, Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy at the London School of Economics, was interrupted by her daughter holding a drawing of a unicorn and asking the interviewer's name (Figure 50). Wenham continued talking as she

³²⁷ Dominic Amerena, "One Good Turn Review: Mary Leunig Returns with an Explosive Graphic Memoir," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/one-good-turn-review-mary-leunig-returns-with-an-explosive-graphic-memoir-20181105-h17i03.html>.

responded to her daughter and lifted her off the desk and out of view of the computer's camera, showing what The Guardian Newspaper calls 'heroic levels of patience and professionalism.'³²⁸ In another interview on Sky News, foreign affairs editor Deborah Haynes was interrupted by her son bursting in to ask for biscuits.³²⁹ Host Mark Austin was criticised as, 'instead of leaning into the comic nature of the moment, [he] wrapped up the interview, saying: "We'll leave Deborah Haynes there, in full flow with some family duties." In his handling of the situation many saw that Austin "failed to "normalise childcare" in the time of lockdown.'³³⁰

In both these instances, the mothers, each professionals in their fields working from home during lockdown, were interrupted by their young children who failed to respect the arbitrary boundaries between work and MotherSpace. Each woman was required to publicly solve the problem alone, with the balancing of mothering and professional roles played out on live television.

Another, pre-COVID, 'viral' instance that exposes the 'perils ... of juggling home working with childcare,' occurred in 2017 when academic and expert on Korean relations, Robert Kelly, was interrupted by his children during an interview from his home office with the BBC (Figure 51).³³¹ However, in Kelly's case, he was somewhat rescued by his wife, Jung-a Kim, who rushed in desperately to again contain the

³²⁸ Guardian Staff, "'Mummy, What's His Name?': Expert's Daughter Invades BBC Interview," *The Guardian Online*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jul/01/mummy-whats-his-name-experts-daughter-invades-bbc-interview>.

³²⁹ Guardian Staff, "'Mummy, What's His Name?': Expert's Daughter Invades BBC Interview," .

³³⁰ Jacob Stolworthy, "Sky News Criticised for 'Graceless' Handling of Reporter Whose Child Interrupted Interview," *The Independent*, 2 July 2020.

³³¹ Guardian Staff, "'Mummy, What's His Name?': Expert's Daughter Invades BBC Interview"; Simon Osborne, "The Expert Whose Children Gatecrashed His TV Interview: 'I Thought I'd Blown It in Front of the Whole World,'" *The Guardian Online*, 20 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/dec/20/robert-kelly-south-korea-bbc-kids-gatecrash-viral-storm>.

children in the domestic space behind the closed door. While Kelly may have been embarrassed by his ‘family blooper,’ and the unwanted attention it brought him and his family, the traditional gender norms of the neoliberal family unit remained unshaken.³³² These examples show how the mass media and social media are implicated in constructing and maintaining stereotyped images of mothers coping in COVID.



Figure 50. Dr Clare Wenham, Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy at the London School of Economics, interrupted by her daughter while being interviewed by the BBC on live television.³³³

³³² Osborne, “The Expert Whose Children Gatecrashed His TV Interview: ‘I Thought I’d Blown It in Front of the Whole World.’”

³³³ BBC News, “Child interrupts BBC News interview,” *YouTube*. July 2 2020, accessed 31 January 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG_5ZmpR3zo



Figure 51. Prof Robert E Kelly keeps his cool during an interview about South Korean politics when his two children interrupt him, live on air, on BBC World News.³³⁴

COVID-19 restrictions made clear that in many families 'it's still expected that women will make their jobs fit around childcare and home schooling, while a man's job comes first.'³³⁵ Jane Caro, quoted by Andrew Taylor in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* critiquing the depiction of mothers in mainstream advertising, believes women are construed 'as essentially the servant gender and that our fulfillment comes from helping others to live large lives.'³³⁶ This may be in part due to a phenomenon psychologists and family researchers Phil and Carolyn Cowan call

³³⁴ BBC News, 'Children interrupt BBC News interview.' *Youtube*. March 10 2017, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mh4f9AYRCZY>.

³³⁵ Ferguson, "'I Feel like a 1950s Housewife': How Lockdown Has Exposed the Gender Divide," *The Guardian Online*.

³³⁶ Andrew Taylor, "'Knowing Mothers,' Inept Fathers: Advertising Clings to Gender Stereotypes," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 12 January 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/consumer-affairs/knowing-mothers-inept-fathers-advertising-clings-to-gender-stereotypes-20200103-p53om8.html>.

women's sense of 'unentitlement' whereby, 'often without being aware of it, women seem to feel they deserve to do most of the work.'³³⁷

These ideas are constantly reinforced in advertising. In food advertising, mothers, who are seen as powerful product users and consumers, are most often shown in models of traditional motherhood, serving and nurturing their children.³³⁸ These adverts utilise and perpetuate the ideas of 'caring consumption' and 'intensive mothering' as society dictates.³³⁹

The pressures of intensive mothering during COVID-19 are central themes in the pastel drawings *Stuffed*, 2021 (Figure 52) and *Play House*, 2021 (Figure 53). Both use a small timber dolls' house as a symbol for the home. In the former, a stuffed torso shape slumps on a child's plastic chair, with a stuffed arm and rubber glove resting on the house's roof. The sense of exhaustion elicited by work in the home is heightened by the title, also a pun on the pillow-like form.

The second image borrows from Louise Bourgeois's symbolism in her many *Femme Maison* works (Figure 54 and Figure 55), where the mother is subsumed by the structure of the house. In the drawing I stand behind a tantrumming child, holding the house over my own head, the dark windows and doors making a kind of blank face. Both figures are separate and alienated, positioning the child as an unknowable

³³⁷ Lockman, "Too Often, Working Mothers Do Far More of the Childcare Than Their Husbands. Here's How to Fix That."

³³⁸ Jinhee Lee, Ji Mi Hong, and Hyuk Jun Cheong, "Perfect Mothers? The Description of Mothers in Food Advertising," *Journal of Promotion Management*, 26.4 (2020), 605, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2020.1719959>.

³³⁹ Lee, Hong, and Cheong, 597.

other.³⁴⁰ Baraitser explains poetically that it is our response to this dependent yet unreachable being that ‘calls us, as maternal subjects, into being.’³⁴¹ In this drawing then, I attempt to depict my maternal subjectivity in the undrawn spaces between us.



Figure 52. Zoe Freney, *Stuffed*, 2021, pastel on card, 90 x 70 cm.



Figure 53. Zoe Freney, *Play House*, 2021, pastel on card, 90 x 70 cm.

³⁴⁰ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 8.

³⁴¹ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 9.



Figure 54. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1946-47. Oil ink on linen. ©The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022



Figure 55. Louise Bourgeois. *Femme Maison*, 1984, photogravure with chine colle. ©The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022

In my large drawing *House and Hold* (Figure 56) I hold at womb height a pink chair, upon which sits the small wooden house, in its repetition becoming a shorthand for the home and all the responsibilities of care required therein. Unlike Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* works, and previous works of my project, here I have stepped out from behind the home, and now seem to loom over the viewer, pictured perhaps from a child's point of view, tired but strong.



Figure 56. Zoe Freney, *House and Hold*, 2021, acrylic and pastel on paper, 200 x 114 cm.

The social changes in the times of COVID-19 saw the multiple shifts of motherhood all converge in the home, a site that researchers Fiona Jenkins and Julie Smith argue policy-makers and employers ‘took ... for granted as a background support of economic life.’³⁴² While switching the brain from one mode to another has been found to be physically tiring, having to think and do everything at once in the same temporal and spatial location is mentally exhausting. Psychologists have likened multi-tasking ‘to choreography or air-traffic control, noting that in these operations, as in others, mental overload can result in catastrophe.’³⁴³

The ideal of the happily balanced mother propounds the myth that women, especially mothers, are better at multitasking than men, when in fact studies consistently show that ‘human brains cannot manage multiple activities at once.’³⁴⁴ Professor Leah Ruppanner explains that women do not have ‘a biological edge as super-efficient multitaskers,’ and instead are simply doing more work than men.³⁴⁵

The way my own family’s labour so easily divides back down gender lines – even as I engage in research in mother studies and matricentric feminism - attests to a broader cultural and structural backlash against feminist motherhood in the west.³⁴⁶

³⁴² Fiona Jenkins and Julie Smith, “Work-from-Home during COVID-19: Accounting for the Care Economy to Build Back Better,” *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 32.1 (2021), 22.

³⁴³ American Psychological Association, “Multitasking: Switching costs Subtle ‘switching’ costs cut efficiency, raise risk,” March 20, 2006, accessed 30 October 2020, <https://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask>.

³⁴⁴ Ruppanner, “Women Aren’t Better Multi-Taskers than Men — They’re Just Doing More Work.”

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ At first, I was surprised that even supporting my older children led to a reduction in my work time. However my experience is reflected in a new study on workers in the United States that finds that while fathers’ time at paid work remained little changed in the first months of the pandemic, mothers ‘even those with high-school children — who are expected to be independently completing assignments while building TikTok empires — reduced their work time’ Leah Ruppanner, Caitlyn Collins, and William Scarborough, “COVID-19 Is a Disaster for Mothers’ Employment. And No, Working from Home Is Not the Solution,” *The Conversation*, July 2020.

My experience as a mother during the COVID19 pandemic is reflected and intensified in many accounts from mothers around the world. Andrea O'Reilly asks 'why is no one talking about this in the mainstream media? And why is there no public policy being developed ... to support mother?'³⁴⁷ Triantafyllia, Kadoglou and Katerina Sarri add that:

There appears to be an assumption that, during periods of economic crisis, women should be encouraged to return home to do what they know how to do best: bear and raise children.³⁴⁸

Mother knows best

Mass media and advertising continue to create and propound the image that mothers do know best, naturally, and that this knowledge should be used in the home. Andrew Taylor cites a study that tracks six decades of advertising in Australian and British women's magazines that shows 'advertising continues to reinforce gender stereotypes from the 1950s ... [telling] women to prioritise their family.'³⁴⁹ In a recent advertisement for Dettol hand sanitiser (Figure 57), a man in a café hands a child the toy car that rolled towards his table. The mother takes the toy and disinfects the child's hands. Green 'germs' are depicted transferring from the man's hands to the child. The clear message is that the mother's role is to protect her child, even from invisible dangers, and even whilst taking leisure time.

³⁴⁷ Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Joy Green, eds., *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2021), 17.

³⁴⁸ Kadoglou and Sarri, 40; In Britain, where many women have endured over twelve months of working from home, the forced return to work represents yet more challenges, as employers refuse to consider flexible working options for women with care duties. Miranda Bryant, "'A Kick in the Teeth': British Mothers and Pregnant Women Fear Return to Workplace," *The Guardian Online*, 5 September 2021.

³⁴⁹ Taylor, Andrew Taylor, "'Knowing Mothers,' Inept Fathers: Advertising Clings to Gender Stereotypes," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 12 January 2020.



Figure 57. "Help stop the spread of germs this winter with Dettol Instant Hand Sanitiser." May 30 2019.³⁵⁰

In their study of food advertising, Jinhee Lee, Ji Mi Hong & Hyuk Jun Cheong find that images of mothers can be divided into three categories: the mother as a nurturer, a self-actualized mother, and the mother as a multitasker. ... The third category of the mother as a multitasker is a combination of the traditional and self-actualized mother. Advertising portrays this mother as both a nurturer and a worker; hence, the mother is presented as a supermom.³⁵¹

This depiction of the mother who effortlessly straddles professional and domestic realms, her individual and maternal selves, represents a problem that Petra Bueskens defines as 'a central dilemma in late modernity.'³⁵² Furthermore, Irem Güney-Frahm writes that because neoliberalism relies on individualisation, 'the responsibility to manage one's daily life and to make the right choices is largely left

³⁵⁰ Dettol Australia, "Help Stop the Spread of Germs This Winter with Dettol Instant Hand Sanitiser," *Youtube*, 2019; Taylor, "'Knowing Mothers,' Inept Fathers: Advertising Clings to Gender Stereotypes,".

³⁵¹ Lee, Hong, and Cheong, "Perfect Mothers? The Description of Mothers in Food Advertising," 598.

³⁵² Mariana Thomas, "Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract," *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 3.1–2 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5923>.

to each individual.³⁵³ Thus mothers must labour individually without taking into account the structural issues that result in their individual problems.³⁵⁴

This is borne out in contemporary western feminism wherein each woman is positioned as responsible for creating her own happy balance in home-work life.³⁵⁵ Bueskens argues that this 'structural legacy acts to simultaneously constrain and liberate women.'³⁵⁶ In this case liberation does not mean the 1970s model of Women's Liberation, but rather the freedom to make the right choices to be a 'good' mother. This dilemma is evident in advertising that continually shows women having agency and acquiring knowledge that is to be prioritised in the home, in the care of the family.

Fathers, on the other hand, are shown in many advertisements as incompetent but able to outsource the labour of care so the "hero" product helps to save the day.³⁵⁷ In a recent television advertisement for Hungry Jacks 'Feast Bundle,' a father looks helplessly in the fridge, unable to find food to serve his family. In a twist this time the mother does not have to cook but still comes to his rescue, ordering a meal from Hungry Jacks.³⁵⁸

³⁵³ İrem Güney_Frahm, "Neoliberal Motherhood during the Pandemic: Some Reflections," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27.5 (2020), 847.

³⁵⁴ Alexandra Kisitu, "Viral Loads and Immunities: Reflecting on Neoliberalism, Motherhood, and Academia during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative Double Issue Vol 11, No 2/Vol 12, No 1 (Fall 2020/Spring 20201) Academic Motherhood and COVID-19*, 11, 12.2, 1 (2020), 221.

³⁵⁵ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*.

³⁵⁶ Thomas, "Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract."

³⁵⁷ Taylor, "'Knowing Mothers,' Inept Fathers: Advertising Clings to Gender Stereotypes."

³⁵⁸ Hungry Jack's. *Feast Bundle – Delivery*. July 20, 2021, accessed 31 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H_JlGlaDIA.

Mothers internalise the message that we can individually work to nurture our families, and to balance these duties with those other aspects of our lives that an earlier feminism has allowed us to achieve. This form of messaging bears out cultural theorist Angela McRobbie's observation that the ideology of 'post-feminism' is based on the idea that 'equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.'³⁵⁹

Jenny Morrison's pandemic puzzles

Our kids are at home now, as are most kids, and Jenny went out yesterday and bought them a whole bunch of jigsaw puzzles. I can assure you over the next few months, we're going to consider those jigsaw puzzles absolutely essential.³⁶⁰

In 2020-21 the Australian Liberal government continued to reinforce gender norms through budgetary and legislative levers and the public statements of its ministers, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison, above.³⁶¹ This should not be surprising,

³⁵⁹ McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture', 255.

³⁶⁰ Hannah Paine, "Coronavirus Australia: Scott Morrison Calls Jigsaw Puzzle 'Essential Item,'" *News.Com.Au*, 21 March 2020.

³⁶¹ Many experts and commentators write that while the pandemic has 'shown the extent to which the country and the economy rely on women's work,' women and mothers' newly precarious situations are not being fully accounted for by government responses. Craig and Churchill argue that 'balancing work and family can be assisted by government and workplace policies such as subsidized childcare, paid maternity and paternity leave ... [and] options to work from home,' for example. Georgie Dent, "That Women Are the Losers in *this* History-Making Big-Spending Budget Is Shameful," *Women's Agenda*, 2020.; Many commentators perceived the 2020 'pandemic' Morrison Government budget as bad for women and mothers. Dawson; Dent; Wendy Tuohy, "Triple Whammy: 'Budget Overlooked Women When They Needed It Most,'" *The Age*, 11 October 2020.

given the ongoing struggle for women to gain equality in government in Australia.³⁶²

In *This is What a Feminist Looks Like: The Rise and Rise of Australian Feminism*, Emily Maguire charts women's inclusion in Australian politics from women's suffrage to the ongoing discriminations they still face.³⁶³

There still exists the belief that women who are successful in politics forsake their natural duties to their families. Those women who, like Australia's first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard, do not have children, are viewed with suspicion or scorn, as 'one dimensional.'³⁶⁴ Gillard was criticised in ways that were 'far more personal, gendered and even violent,' than criticisms faced by male politicians who remain in the majority today.³⁶⁵

The representation of Gillard in the media often centred on her lack of softness and domesticity,³⁶⁶ but at its extreme she was 'attacked, vilified or demeaned in ways that [were] specifically related to her sex [or gender].'³⁶⁷ Anne Summers states that it may not be surprising that Australia largely did not accept a female Prime Minister when 'for all of our history a prime minister has been a man in a suit who has been

³⁶² Since I began my research, the Australian Parliament has been revealed as not just an unfair workplace for women, but also an unsafe one. Kate Thwaites and Jenny Macklin, *Enough Is Enough* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2021).

³⁶³ 'More than 40 years ago, Margaret Guilfoyle was asked at her first preselection who would look after her three children if she became a senator. Today, women who seek Liberal preselection are routinely asked exactly the same question by delegates.' Victorian Liberal MP Margaret Fitzherbert in a lecture at Parliament House on 31 August 2012, quoted in Emily Maguire, *This Is What a Feminist Looks Like: The Rise and Rise of Australian Feminism* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2019), 38.

³⁶⁴ Michelle Grattan, "Liberal Targets Gillard's Childless Status," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, 28 January 2010).

³⁶⁵ Maguire, 46; Summers, Anne, "Her Rights at Work: The Political Persecution of Australia's First Female Prime Minister," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 23.4 (2012), 115–26.

³⁶⁶ Maguire, 45.; Jody Day, "Julia Gillard and the Fear of the Childless Woman," *The Guardian Australia*, 25 October 2012.

³⁶⁷ Anne Summers, "Her Rights at Work: The Political Persecution of Australia's First Female Prime Minister", 122.

married (to a woman) and who has children.’³⁶⁸ With Scott Morrison’s leadership the image of the besuited man in charge, with happy wife and children by his side, has been reinstated.

At the same time as mothers have had to find new strategies to balance paid work and intensified childcare and domestic duties, women are crucial workers in their professional capacities as teachers, nurses, cleaners and aged care workers. As a result, with the advent of COVID-19, ‘Australian women are feeling the “compounding” economic, physical and emotional tolls of the pandemic.’³⁶⁹ Emma Dawson, Executive Director of the think tank Per Capita, believes the 2020-21 budgetary policy shows ‘a woeful lack of attention to women’s workforce participation, economic security and safety,’ and an ignorance of gender issues in Australian society.³⁷⁰

The new normative

In mainstream media the model of woman as mother ‘remains very powerful, especially in times of economic crises,’³⁷¹ during which women are relegated once again to care roles, in the domestic sphere or in a professional capacity. It has been noted that while there seems to be a resurgence in feminism in the west, in its

³⁶⁸ Anne Summers, “Her Rights at Work: The Political Persecution of Australia’s First Female Prime Minister,” 116.

³⁶⁹ Tuohy, “Triple Whammy: ‘Budget Overlooked Women When They Needed It Most.’”

³⁷⁰ Dawson, “There Are Thousands of Very Credible Women across Australia Fighting for Equal Rights”; As the 2020/21 budget was decried by female scholars and feminist thinkers, Liberal party Members of Parliament, such as Employment Minister Michaelia Cash, stepped forward to defend it, ‘as a woman, if you’re in the workforce you pay tax, you get a tax break... If you drive on roads as a woman... you will benefit from our investment in infrastructure.’ Also, ‘Social Services Minister Anne Ruston said “every single measure in the budget is available for women.”’ This shows a failure to recognize that women in Australia are already disadvantaged compared to men. Tuohy.

³⁷¹ Kadoglou and Sarri, 35.

mainstream form it is most likely based on concepts of post feminism or ‘a hybrid of contemporary feminism and neoliberalism.’³⁷² Art historian Ann Marsh writes:

The suggestion that we are in a post-feminist world can only be voiced from a position of privilege, one that either has no concern for human rights or excludes women and children from humanity.³⁷³

In opposition to this kind of post feminism, Baraitser takes a ‘leap of the imagination’ by suggesting we think of maternal subjectivity as the normative position.³⁷⁴ This resonates with Irigaray’s belief ‘that women as mothers are the unacknowledged foundation of the social order.’³⁷⁵ This understanding may allow us to take into account

the staggering complexity of what happens for a mother after “birth” ... what would happen if we took seriously the notion that a “person” was someone who lived in an ongoing relation to that peculiar species known as a child.³⁷⁶

This thought exercise does not essentialise the feminine nor the maternal, and does not aim to replace one restrictive norm with another. However, I do think it allows us to imagine an alternative to the current damaging, patriarchal motherhood discourses, an alternative where our starting point is from within mess, interruption, exhaustion, anger and love.

³⁷² Linda Colley, and Catherine White, “Neoliberal Feminism: The Neoliberal Rhetoric on Feminism by Australian Political Actors,” *Gender Work and Organization*, 26 (2019), 1087.

³⁷³ Anne Marsh, “Art and Feminism: Generations and Practice,” *Artlink*, 1.December 2017, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4638/art-and-feminism-generations-and-practice/>.

³⁷⁴ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 8-9.

³⁷⁵ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 7; Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*. 3.

³⁷⁶ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 8-9.

Anecdote 6: *Ankle Snipers*, subjectivity in the feminine and caring-with

In the large drawing, *Ankle Snipers* (Figure 58), I enact the physicality of mothering, struggling alone, though always in trans-subjective partnership with my children, as primary carer, a solo performer, balancing a huge melon on my hip that may be equivalent in weight and slipperiness to a child.³⁷⁷ The never-ending work is described by the utilitarian rubber gloves and the *Mothersuit*, the literal structuring and control of the mother's body in the hand-sewn maternity bra cups. It is gritty and felt, slightly absurd and never properly completed, with part of me remaining merely an outline. The storm trooper figurines fight around my ankles like tiny children, requiring discipline and care. The by-now ubiquitous wooden dolls' house sits on blue stool stilts. The overall effect is one of a mother in domestic captivity, harassed by metaphorical children and chores.

Ettinger formulates subjectivity in the feminine, using the conceptualisation of the matrix to offer a 'supplementary symbolic dimension.'³⁷⁸ As previously described, her theories expand the realms of psychoanalysis, replacing the dominant phallus with the metaphor of the womb. This concept of 'transformative' subjectivity proposes, as Pollock writes,

a way to think both encounter and transformation at the psychological level.

Co-emergence and shareability can be extended to the ethical and social reflection on self, other, alterity and difference.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ New routledge books

³⁷⁸ Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," 1.

³⁷⁹ Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," xi.

In *Ankle Snipers* I make myself an object of the gaze, but, more powerfully, I am also a subject.³⁸⁰ Pollock explains how the concept of the ‘male’ gaze is not a specific gaze belonging to a man, but ‘a structural masculinization’ of the position of the viewer.³⁸¹ Ettinger writes that while Jacques Lacan established the gaze as phallic, ‘an-other space opened up’ to her, partly through her work as a painter, partly through reading Merleau-Ponty’s work on the gaze.³⁸² She calls this alternate experience ‘a *matrixial encounter within feminine sex-difference*.’³⁸³

Ettinger argues that Merleau-Ponty’s work uncovers this space of encounter, calling it an ‘*écart*,’ wherein there may occur openings and ruptures within the psyche.³⁸⁴

Lacan himself suggests a ‘supplementary’ feminine experience could exist but Ettinger argues that, far from being just an afterthought, this feminine experience ‘traces, speaks, and creates its desire and gaze.’³⁸⁵ My drawings, driven by my embodied experiences of mothering, operate beyond the masculinised gaze.

³⁸⁰ Daphne de Marneffe writes of de Beauvoir’s argument that in a love relationship we ‘accept and even embrace the struggle to see ourselves and the other as both subject and object .. It is difficult ... to take pleasure in being the object of another person’s desire and to maintain a stable sense of being a fully desiring subject in one’s own right. [de Marneffe] contend[s] that this difficulty also characterises how hard it is for a mother to stay connected with her identity as someone in the world while also fulfilling the essential, of temporary, need to constitute the “whole world” for her baby. de Marneffe, 44-45.

³⁸¹ Griselda Pollock, “Editor’s Preface,” in Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan,” 242.

³⁸² Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan’. 246.

³⁸³ Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan’. 246. Italics in original text.

³⁸⁴ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan,” 246. Italics in original text; ‘*écart*’ translates directly to ‘difference,’ however in this sense it means ‘non-coincidence and divergence.’ This occurs in the chiasmic structure of the body, as it separates during self-touch into sensible and sentient aspects – touching and being touched. The gap between sensible and sentient aspects is termed *écart* by Merleau-Ponty. M.C. Dillon, “Preface and Caricature to *Écart & Différance* : Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing,” in *Écart & Différance : Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*, ed. by M.C. Dillon (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1997), ix-xii.

³⁸⁵ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan,” 246.

I employ this positionality in opposition to the mainstream depiction of mothers who are stripped of their particular subjectivities, shown instead to adhere to masculinist models of being in the world. These structures place women, as Irigaray describes, as merely the 'other of the same,' the 'negative' of the male subject.³⁸⁶ Instead, Irigaray theorises the potential for a different, non-masculine discourse, 'a possible alterity in masculine discourse.'³⁸⁷

I use tropes from dominant discourse and western art traditions to upset the masculinist depiction of mothers and their natural, easy, effortless individualised mothering practices. I replace this version with images of the mother compromised, exhausted, loving, frustrated, invisible, burdened, triumphant. Margaret Whitford in *The Irigaray Reader* writes that Irigaray herself recognises that 'big shifts in society and culture will be necessary if transformations in language are to come about.'³⁸⁸ While mother studies and matricentric feminism have continued to theorise against patriarchal structures of motherhood, the situation for many mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown western society remains little changed in its expectations of mothers.

Hilary Robinson also argues that Irigaray's '*parler-femme* and the witnessing-woman... are as yet hardly realised.'³⁸⁹ Grisleda Pollock believes it is through 'inscriptions in the feminine' that artists, working in the feminine and against

³⁸⁶ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 3.

³⁸⁷ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 4.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 4.

³⁸⁹ Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, 199. Italics in original text.

phallographic culture, may reveal what has so far been 'unarticulated, unrepresented, unsigned, unrecognized.'³⁹⁰ She goes on to suggest:

Artistic practices can be a kind of semiotic interruption, a renovation, a revolution even, that draws upon the negativity of the feminine – its alterity and place as the repressed of phallogrism – in order to create new possibilities for meaning.³⁹¹

In her essay 'Metaphors into Hardware: Harry Harlow and the Technology of Love,' Donna Haraway cites Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic reading of cinematic imagery, where anxiety is evoked by 'the body of the (real) mother [that] signifies the threat of powerlessness' through the threat of castration.³⁹² Haraway explains how this discomfort 'can be deferred by the production of an ideal image, ... a spectacle.'³⁹³ In this reading we understand that creating and perpetrating ideal images of mothers takes power from real mothers.

In Ettinger's theories of the Matrixial I have found a model of subjectivity in the feminine, where subjectivity is cast as encounter, in joining with another, between an *I and a non-I* (the becoming-child and the becoming-mother), a model that privileges

³⁹⁰ Robinson. 202.

³⁹¹ This seems to me a fitting description for the ways artists like Louise Bourgeois, Mary Kelly, and Paula Rego are revolutionary in their explorations and depictions of maternity and mothering. Pollock. *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005) e-book, Preface.

³⁹² Haraway, 234. Freud's phallographic theories of subjectivity are based upon severance and separation. Castration anxiety is a psychoanalytic concept that was developed alongside the Oedipus complex. Freud uses this framework to describe the fear a little boy may develop of the loss of or damage to his penis as punishment for his incestuous desire towards his mother and his rivalry with the father for her affections. These fears are apparently validated by the discovery of the mother's lack of phallus, and the physical differences between male and female.

³⁹³ Haraway, 234.

compassion, hope and respect.³⁹⁴ The figures in the later drawings are always in relation-with, children, pets, toys, spaces, that resonate with the notions of trans-subjectivity and severality, privileging co-existing and ‘webbing’ links over the individualised heroic (or tragic) self.³⁹⁵ The work explores what Ettinger calls an ‘art-encounter’ as a re-activation of a ‘primordial encounter-event’ that may occur for the artist and for an attentive viewer of art.³⁹⁶ This ‘affective encounter’ involves two partial subjects: the maternal subject, the becoming-mother and the pre-natal subject, the becoming-child.³⁹⁷ We all have skin in this game. If we are born, we have a primordial encounter with a mother.

The above strategies also evoke notions of caring-with and wit(h)nessing.³⁹⁸

Academic Nike Romano summarises Joan Tronto’s five phases of care by way of defining care as ‘a disposition and a practice.’³⁹⁹ The drawing depicts both my caring stance and the related undertakings of my care, especially the fifth phase of Tronto’s care model, ‘caring-with.’ This aspect of care is relational, recognising the development of trust within care relationships, and that caring is most effective when

³⁹⁴ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Bracha Ettinger: Maternal Subjectivity and the Matrixial Subject*; The two partial subjects in this ‘affective encounter’ are the maternal subject, the ‘becoming-mother,’ and the pre-natal subject, the ‘becoming-child,’ offering both a new model of subjectivity as trans-subjectivity in the feminine as well as a new conception of maternity. McCloskey, “Art and Maternal Subjectivity: An Ongoing Relation.”

³⁹⁵ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 44-45.

³⁹⁶ McCloskey, “Art and Maternal Subjectivity.”

³⁹⁷ McCloskey, “Art and Maternal Subjectivity.”

³⁹⁸ Nike Romano, ‘Aesthetic wit(h)nessing and the political ethics of care: Generating solidarity and trust in pedagogical encounters,’ in Vivienne Bozalek, Michalinos Zembylas & Joan C. Tronto (editors). *Posthuman and Political Care Ethics for Reconfiguring Higher Education Pedagogies*, Routledge eBook, 2021. 66.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Romano summarises Tront’s phases of care,

The first is caring about and its associated attentiveness that emphasises the importance of becoming aware of and paying attention to the needs of the care receiver. The second phase is responsibility that calls on the caregiver to respond to the need of the care receiver. This is followed by the third phase – competence – that calls for the provision of good care by responding to and meeting the needs of the care receiver. The fourth phase – responsiveness – refers to how the care receiver responds to the care given.

it occurs between the carer and the receiver of care together.⁴⁰⁰ While the children are not present in the image I depict myself in relation to heavy and unruly others, signifying trans-subjectivity in the realm of caring.

The idea of wit(h)nessing as developed by Bracha Ettinger extends beyond bearing witness *to* the other to being *with* the other to 'offer compassionate co-response-ability and risk vulnerability.'⁴⁰¹ Ettinger writes that an artist engaged in co-emergent wit(h)nessing is rendered fragile, makes herself 'a fragmented and partial interlaced trans-subjectivity...'⁴⁰² Romano further explains that this co-emergence 'reveals the foundational relationship between co-responsibility and compassion in the formation of subjectivity in the matrixial realm, one that involves both risk and trust.'⁴⁰³ The sense of wit(h)nessing and caring-with sometimes prevent me from being more explicit in my imagery, through compassion and care for my children who accompany me on the project. Furthermore, within the matrixial my subjectivity is constituted as compassionate, respectful and generative as opposed to abjected and lacking.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. 73

⁴⁰² Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event,' *Theory Culture Society* 2004; 21; 69-94. 91.

⁴⁰³ ibid



Figure 58. Zoe Freney, *Ankle Snipers*, 2021, pastel and acrylic on paper, 150 x 130 cm.

Artist lockdown in motherhood: toppling COVID and care

In many ways the restrictions of the lockdown reminded me of my experience of parenting newborn babies, but this time people across the world, including men and non-parents, were also enduring the limiting of their freedoms and the turn to the home. Curator and art historian Lisa Slade suggests hopefully that this experience will bring ‘our domestic world, our intimate world ... closer [to the surface] than it has ever been,’ and that this may lead to

renewed power in the domestic. A perilous domain for women artists, it has ostracised and kept them from the canon. But now, the domestic finally gets to be charged as the locus of human endeavour and the locus of creativity.⁴⁰⁴

Hearing this is like a revelation, but of something I have already recognised during my mothering.

The domestic, care and maintenance of home and family, is time consuming, sisyphytic, creative and central to human experience. My studio research during COVID-19 has been sporadic and sometimes surprising. I have often felt frustrated with the slow pace and family interruptions, but I have also participated in various collective projects that may present novel solutions to the individualisation and privatisation of mothers and their problems. These projects may present the turn towards the domestic that Slade gestures towards.

⁴⁰⁴ Nick Mitzevich and Lisa Slade, “Nick Mitzevich in Conversation with Lisa Slade” (National Gallery of Australia, 2021), accessed 2 February 2022, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CKQfrp7Bc8t/?utm_medium=copy_link.

The need for the reassessment of priorities of care and capitalism are elucidated by professor of women's studies and political science, Joan Tronto who argues,

When our public values and priorities reflect the role that care actually plays in our lives, our world will be organized quite differently.⁴⁰⁵

This is still not occurring as Petra Bueskens and Sophie Brock argue,

even as women have gained access to all domains of social life as civil equals, becoming a mother continues to generate entrenched structural inequalities, including, in particular, a pronounced wage, wealth and leisure gap.⁴⁰⁶

There are many artists working against individualisation of mothers and their problems, and the invisibility of much of the feminised, unpaid domestic labour in neoliberal times.⁴⁰⁷ Art historian Andrea Liss writes in support of projects that are 'based on ideas of maternal ethics,'⁴⁰⁸ such as *Artist in Residence in Motherhood (ARiM)* by artist Lenka Clayton (b.1977), which enacts 'loving respect for the labour of others.'⁴⁰⁹ This sort of work, as well as other collaborative practices arising during COVID-19 lockdown, can be compared to the tradition of earlier feminist work, such as *Dinner Party*, 1979 by Judy Chicago (b.1939).⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁵ Joan Tronto, "An Ethic of Care," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1998, 15–20. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44875693>. Accessed 14 Aug. 2022.

⁴⁰⁶ Petra Bueskens & Sophia Brock, "Introduction. Matricentric Feminism: Abjection and Disruption in Australian Stories of Mothering." *Hecate* 45, ½ (2019): 13–22. <https://search-ebscohost-com.rp.nla.gov.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=148669831&site=eds-live>. 14

⁴⁰⁷ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*; Tithi; Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. by Tithi; Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Cinzia; Arruzza, Tithi; Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2019).

⁴⁰⁸ Andrea Liss, "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy: The Performance of Wonder and Respect," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 22.4 (2017), 128; Zoe Freney, "Artist Mothers and Virtual Collectives: Making Art and Community from Home," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement.*, 11.1 (2020), 157–66.

⁴⁰⁹ Liss, "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy: The Performance of Wonder and Respect," 128.; Lenka Clayton, *Artist Website*, accessed 2 February 2022, <http://www.lenkaclayton.com/new-page-1>.

⁴¹⁰ Chicago's practices have been called 'authoritarian,' and her role leading the *Dinner Party* project has been resisted and critiqued by, for example, Australian artists Frances Phoenix and Marie McMahon, who worked on *The Dinner Party*. Julie Ewington, "Unfinished Feminism, Unceasing Activism: Australian Art Over Five

Artist and historian Jude Adams writes that ‘collaborative feminist art practices of the 1960s and 1970s were deliberately democratic, supportive and anti-hierarchical and sought to break down patriarchal structures of art working and gendered workforces.’⁴¹¹ An important Australian example of an authentic collaborative project is Vivienne Binns’ (b.1940) *Mothers Memories, Others Memories*, 1979 (Figure 59), which brings together images and texts from participants’ personal histories in a series of silkscreen printed postcards. Binns writes of the importance to her of working collectively, and of facilitating the self-expression of those in the communities with which she works.⁴¹²

Decades,” in *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on Art and Feminism*, ed. by Max Delany and Annika Kristensen (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 22; Jude Adams, “Looking from with/in: Feminist Art Projects of the 70s,” *Outskirts Online Journal*, 29 (2013).

⁴¹¹ Jude Adams quoted in Freney, 160.

⁴¹² Anne Marsh argues Binns is ‘clearly a pioneer of the pop avant-garde and enmeshed in the sexual revolution of the 1960s.’ Marsh, *Doing Feminism*, 5; Vivienne Binns, “‘Mother’s Memories, Other’s Memories’: A Project Combining Creative Expression, Memorabilia and Oral History’, *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 3 (1980), 54.



Figure 59. Vivienne Binns, *Mothers' memories, others' memories: postcard rack*, screenprints on vitreous enamel on steel, steel postcard rack, 90.4 x 27 x 27 cm. © Vivienne Binns/ Copyright Agency, 2022 ⁴¹³

Artist Lenka Clayton's project, *ARiM*, in honouring the maternal as a generative and novel site of production, recalls ground-breaking work from the 1970s by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles' maintenance works, and her *Maintenance Manifesto 1969!* focus attention on the repetitive, invisible labour of mothering as well as the work of 'nurturing and maintaining natural and psychic life systems [and] the undervalued labor of people who keep those systems alive.'⁴¹⁴

⁴¹³ Collection National Gallery of Art, Canberra, accessed 25 November 2021, <https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object?uniqueId=30868>.

⁴¹⁴ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 44.

This focus on labour adheres to philosopher Sara Ruddick's framing of the 'discipline of motherhood,' in which the mother develops appropriate practices and attitudes through the rigours of childrearing.⁴¹⁵ This pragmatic view of the labour of care avoids the idealisation of the mother and reflects D.W. Winnicott's theorisation of 'ordinary devotion,' wherein mother work is described as the very banal work that ensures the growth and preservation of children.⁴¹⁶

In my interrupted art practice I have made surprising connections that may have implications for feminism and care more broadly, as well as revisiting earlier feminist collective practices. In a 2017 article in Artlink Magazine, Anne Marsh observed in Australian art, a

resurgence of process-orientated methodology that has its roots in the small group processes of the early women's liberation movement ... [that sought] avenues to bridge the gap between art and life.⁴¹⁷

The effects of the new global pandemic have seen many of us become more isolated in our homes and with our individualised problems. Yet avenues have opened up using the internet and social media to make connections and collaborative and ongoing art works.

Feminist art history laments that women have long been oppressed by traditionally feminine practices such as needlecraft, yet these skills have also been deployed in

⁴¹⁵ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 44.

⁴¹⁶ D.W. Winnicott, "DW Winnicott, 'The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby: Nine Broadcast Talks,'" *Wellcome Collection*, 1949, accessed 19 January 2022, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/sc6kkb4n>.

⁴¹⁷ Marsh, "Art and feminism: Generations and practice."

subversive strategies.⁴¹⁸ In Australia, artist Frances (Budden) Phoenix (1950-2017), an early proponent of the Women's Art Movement, was quick to harness the 'housewifely sewing skills' of doily making, repurposing the traditionally feminine craft for provocative central core artworks.⁴¹⁹ Phoenix, along with artist Marie McMahon (b.1953), was a founding member of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group and the D'oyley Archive, which sought to recognise the skill and value of overlooked domestic craft such as embroidery, knitting and lacemaking.⁴²⁰

Clayton also uses traditionally feminine sewing and quilting skills to apply the maternal ethics of care to diverse strangers who participate in the relational transactions of *Two Itinerant Quilters*, 2017 (Figure 60), a collaborative work with Joanna Wright.⁴²¹ First performed in 2015 in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Clayton and Wright solicited passers-by to cut diamond shaped swatches from their clothes. These were pieced into a quilt, and participants' clothes were then patched with contrasting fabric, thus in a way taking a myriad of tiny quilts away with them into the world, becoming part of something. Today, Anne Marsh observes a contemporary renewal in 'consciousness raising' groups and actions, with more women again participating in 'craftivism.'⁴²²

⁴¹⁸ Rebecca Evans, "Life Forms Opening Speech" (Adelaide, 2020); Greer, *Craftivism. Craft + Activism = Craftivism*.

⁴¹⁹ Adams, *Outskirts*.

⁴²⁰ Adams, *Outskirts*.

⁴²¹ Liss, "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy: The Performance of Wonder and Respect," 129.

⁴²² Marsh, "Art and feminism: Generations and practice," 19.



Figure 60. Lenka Clayton and Joanna Wright, *Two Itinerant Quilters*, 2017, performed in Wales and Cornwall. © Lenka Clayton.⁴²³

As the walls closed in around us during COVID-19 restrictions, opportunities opened up to collaborate and share our making on social media. While these Instagram COVID art communities represented a real connection with others across the world, due to their mediation by social media corporations, and monetisation through paid advertising, they are more problematic perhaps than earlier women's liberation consciousness raising groups.

Sociologist Kara van Cleaf writes about how mothers use online connections as 'real time manuals of motherhood, detailing both how to do motherhood as well as how to interpret the shifts in identity that accompany it.'⁴²⁴ Mothers' use of the internet as a democratising platform on which to share their experiences with one another is

⁴²³ Two Itinerant Quilters website, accessed 25 November 2021, <https://www.twoitinerantquilters.com>.

⁴²⁴ Kara Van Cleaf, "Our Mothers Have Always Been Machines: The Conflation of Media and Motherhood," in *Digital Sociologies*, ed. by Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom (Bristol, Chicago: Policy Press, 2017), 449.

problematised by the neoliberal monetisation of social media.⁴²⁵ However, *The Covid 19 Global Quilt Project* and other online collective projects that arose around the same time, like *survivalistsampler*, a project initiated by Adelaide artist Sera Waters (b.1979), and *Stay Home Gallery*, an international exhibition program curated by Texas-based Kaylan Buteyn and Pam Marlene Taylor, have become like virtual iterations of earlier craftivist groups, bringing together artists and makers online and eventually in real life.⁴²⁶ These projects, often based in textile practices, have a political aspect in their call to community action and thus align with Betsy Greer's definition of craftivism. Greer coined this term – a merging of two words with somewhat negative connotations - to 'strike out into a new territory.'⁴²⁷

Launched in early April 2020 by artists and academics Kate Just (b.1974) and Tal Fitzpatrick, call on 'participants to illustrate their Covid-19 experience through craft,' to make, photograph, and share with us a textile square that reflects your thoughts, feelings and experiences of Covid-19. The accruing of squares of this Instagram feed will join the hands of crafters, artists and makers around the world in a continuous quilt.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ Freney, "Artist Mothers and Virtual Collectives: Making Art and Community from Home," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 11:1, 2020.

⁴²⁶ Sera Waters, "#survivalistsampler," Adelaide: Instagram, 2020. Adelaide artist Sera Waters invited artist to join her survivalist sampler project, which she sees as reaching back into the past to make work for a difficult present an uncertain future. Survivalist Sampler was later shown in *Embroidery: Oppression to Expression* at The David Roche Foundation, Adelaide 17 June - 25 September, 2021; Kaylan Buteyn and Pam Marlene Taylor, "Stay Home Gallery and Residency," 2020. Stay Home Gallery strikes out from the home territory to a global audience via the social media platform of Instagram. I had two artworks selected for the online exhibition, both of them depicting scenes from the intimacy of my home world. As restrictions lifted, the gallery, situated in Paris, Tennessee, was able to show works in real life. The exhibition *Everything is Different Now* included a drawing of mine, and can be viewed online: <https://www.stayhomegallery.com/exhibitions/everything-is-different-now>.

⁴²⁷ Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (Boston, London: Trumpeter, 2008), 127.

⁴²⁸ Kate Just and Tal Fitzpatrick, "Covid19quilt," Instagram photo, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/covid19quilt/>; Briony Downes, 'Quilting together at a distance,' *Art Guide Australia*, 12 May 2020, <https://artguide.com.au/quilting-together-at-a-distance/>.

In a Webinar hosted by the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute at the University of Melbourne, Just and Fitzpatrick quote Greer in describing their deployment of collective craft as a way of bringing disparate voices together.⁴²⁹ Thus they situate their *COVID-19 Quilt Project* in the broader field of craftivist projects and global quilt projects including the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* (1987–ongoing) and reflect on the ways community craft projects can privilege people’s individual experiences.⁴³⁰ In 2021 aspects of the *COVID-19 Quilt Project* were shown in *The National: New Australian Art* in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Thus the personal histories of crafters and makers were situated within the fine art museum context, in some cases realigning the works from the position of *disoeuvre*, or handicraft, to fine art.

Researcher Alison Mayne’s study of how connectivity can alleviate isolation and loneliness shows how members of an amateur crafters’ Facebook group support each other, and ‘highlights how both the acts of making and of sharing making online contribute to participants’ sense of positive wellbeing.’⁴³¹ By sharing images of their textile works, the members of the group receive ‘positive strokes,’ which improve their self-esteem and link them to a community of makers with shared interests.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ Kate Just and Tal Fitzpatrick, “The Global COVID-19 Quilt Project,” *Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, Webinar*, 2020.

⁴³⁰ ‘Weighing 54 tons and composed of more than 48,000 panels dedicated to more than 94,000 individuals, The AIDS Memorial Quilt is the premier symbol of the AIDS pandemic, our greatest HIV prevention education tool and the largest ongoing piece of community folk art in the world.’ *The National AIDS Memorial Quilt*, accessed 1 September 2021, <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>.

⁴³¹ Alison Mayne, “Feeling Lonely, Feeling Connected: Amateur Knit and Crochet Makers,” *Craft Research Journal*, 7.1 (2016), 11.

⁴³² Freney, p. 162.

In a similar process to that described by Mayne, from deep in lockdown I uploaded a photograph of a sampler I had begun in thread on painter's linen to the @covid19quilt Instagram page (Figure 61). This work aligns well with the *Mothersuit*, undermining the traditions associated with painter's linen by turning it instead towards the feminised activities of sewing and stitching. The subsequent comments on my post bear out Mayne's findings of the positive impact of online sharing. One response came from a local artist, whom I have never met, but who lives only twenty kilometres from my home. We chatted about dogs and the weather, normalising our experience and drawing solidarity through material and geographic familiarity. Most importantly, sharing the image of my small sampler embroidery allowed me to be seen, as a maker, engaging in an ongoing feminist practice.



As explored above, the impacts of COVID-19 social restrictions on my research and practice were acute and varied. Also impacted was my sense of self, as my maternal subjectivity was once again thrust into intense relation with my dependent others, and the gendered expectations of care meant my research was often subsumed by domestic labour. As the multiple shifts of mother work again came together as they had not since mothering very young children, the daily locus of my work became the kitchen table, which was also the centre of activity for the rest of the family.

Lenka Clayton, in her model of the *ARiM*, recognizes the richness of home life and the domestic experience as a new terrain or an exciting new site from which innovative creative practice is possible. This was true for me in 2018 when I first undertook an *ARiM*, the result of which was a body of small paintings celebrating the beauty and intimacy of home life. Paintings like *Built from the inside*, 2019 (Figure 62) show corners of messy rooms, where sun gleams on domestic mess and falls on warm walls. They describe the quality of seeing the pinkening sky in the morning, a small joy for a tired mother who feels the rest of the world is finally waking up to meet her and her restless baby.

⁴³³ *Her Work*, 2020, references the *Sampler*, 1789, made in England by Mary Ann Body, aged 9. *Victoria and Albert Museum*, accessed 2 February 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70384/sampler-body-mary-ann/>.



Figure 62. Zoe Freney, *Built from the inside*, 2019, oil on board.⁴³⁴

During lockdown in 2020 I used Clayton's model of *ARiM* as a tactic for continuing my work alongside and within my mother work and paid work, adapting to the kitchen table studio, seeking the new within the domestic, re-evaluating the quotidian as the point from which the universe might extend. This enabled me to at last define and depict the 'generative potential of maternity.'⁴³⁵ It is only in the looking back to the intense period of early mothering, afforded by the recent lockdown, that I grasp it as a vast new and limited landscape, a forced intensifying of the maternal situation, a wide opening of the heart within the close confines of the home, the birth of creativity and productivity in long tedious hours of exhaustion when nothing is ever finished.

⁴³⁴ Gaston Bachelard describes domestic maintenance and housework as rebuilding a house from the inside. Bachelard, 106.

⁴³⁵ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*. 7.

Chapter 3

Extremely Perfect, Extremely Bad. The Works⁴³⁶

Overview

In composing and making art works within this project - photographs, video, drawings and paintings - I draw strongly on notions of Ettinger's Matrixial. According to Pollock, 'the Ettigerian Matrixial is sensed and affective.'⁴³⁷ The Matrix 'radically redefines both femininity and maternity while placing both as formative "on the human condition."⁴³⁸ Working within these frameworks it may be possible to present my lived experiences of mothering as a generative experience, counter to the dominant phallic models where 'subjectivity is premised only on severance and split, and the feminine thence appears as lack, or is formed only as the result of the splitting of the subject.'⁴³⁹ This framework allows me to develop images through processes of *feel-thinking* and *feel-knowing*, through an awareness of my body in the spaces and actions of the studio and with/in mothering.⁴⁴⁰ I intuit a sense, emotion or

⁴³⁶ This term has been central to my thinking throughout the project, and for a long time formed part of the project's title. The notions of 'extremely perfect' and 'extremely bad' come from Melanie Klein's theorising of Object Relations, whereby 'Object relations... arise with the first feeding experience.' In this conception the (male) infant projects his joys and frustrations onto the breast, which he 'splits... into a gratifying breast and a hostile breast.' His 'destructive impulses' are projected onto the extremely bad breast, whilst idealising the perfect breast. For Klein, in the child's development, 'all emotions attach themselves to their first object,' thus the infant's experience of the breast represents the 'core of his ego.' Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast* (California: University of California Press, 2008), 2; My use of the terms relates to the representations of mothers in the mainstream media, as the binaries of extremely perfect mother and the extremely bad mother. The perfect mother is often celebrated in the celebrity mum profile, as identified by Douglas and Michaels, for whom the new momism is a 'set of ideals, norms, and practices... that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond the reach of most mothers. Douglas and Michaels, 4–5; Examples of bad mothers in the media operate similarly, to affect behaviour through evocations of disgust and social and moral judgement. Imogen Tyler, "Chav Mum Chav Scum," *Feminist Media Studies*, 8.1 (2008), 17–34.

⁴³⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Introduction," In Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger Matrixial Subj. Aesthetics, Ethics. Vol. 1 1990-2000*. 6.

⁴³⁸ Griselda Pollock, "Introduction," In Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger Matrixial Subj. Aesthetics, Ethics. Vol. 1 1990-2000*. 6.

⁴³⁹ Griselda Pollock, "Introduction," In Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger Matrixial Subj. Aesthetics, Ethics. Vol. 1 1990-2000*. 6.

⁴⁴⁰ Bracha L Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," *Studies in the Maternal*, 1.2 (2009). Italics in original text.

situation within my mothering experience and cast myself in tableaux which are metaphors of these remembered feelings and moments.

Self. Portrait

I use sketching, video and iPhone photographs to capture myself in these performative actions and re-enactions. This way of working with the body and through the body recalls a long and rich tradition of intersectional feminist and maternal artwork.⁴⁴¹

The relevance and vitality of the photographic medium can be seen in the work of Gurindji/ Malngin/ Mudburra peoples; Anglo-Australian/ Chinese/ German/ Irish Heritage artist Brenda L. Croft (1964). *The Ingrams: (back row) Norma, Sylvia, Jarin and Millie; (middle row) Shanae and Jemiah; (front row) LeeAnne, Jayden and Sue*, 1993 (Figure 63) from Croft's *The Big Deal is Black* series, reads like an amateur photograph of a family group. However, while Croft does not include herself in the image, art historian Hetti Perkins argues that 'the series is a form of intergenerational self-portrait,'⁴⁴² where the notion of family is extended to include the artist's peers and fellow activists.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴¹ Feminist artists working in representational modes explore the intersections of 'gendered codes and conventions of art history or mass culture.' They do so 'with the specificities of the individual and multiple corporeal body... as sexed, sexualised, abled and racialized.' Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*. Chapter 1; artists also considered here include Rineke Dijkstra and Sally Mann.

⁴⁴² Hetti Perkins in *Know My Name*, ed. by Natasha Bullock and others (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2020), 87.

⁴⁴³ Croft states, ... it all comes down to being black and living in the city, and all the roads that lead you here... All this BIG DEAL is about letting you see something of us on our own terms. This is about being a Black woman – you might be a mother, sister, aunt, cousin, daughter, friend... Hetti Perkins in Bullock and others, 87.



Figure 63. Brenda L. Croft, Gurindji/Malngin/Mudpurra peoples, *The Ingrams*: (back row) Norma, Sylvia, Jarin and Millie (middle row) Shanae and Jemiah (front row) LeeAnne, Jayden and Sue 1993, dye destruction photograph, 99.4 x 99.0 cm (sheet). National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1994 © Brenda L. Croft.⁴⁴⁴

Queer American photographer Catherine Opie (b.1961) positions herself in close relationship with her infant son, in her photographic *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004 (Figure 64), challenging stereotyped images of maternal femininity and sexuality and thus calling into question accepted norms of motherhood. Staged as a traditional Madonna and Child double portrait, Opie's pale skinned, blond-haired son is latched onto her exposed breast, cradled in her strong arms, which are darkened by exposure and hard work. Opie's nudity exposes her tattooed shoulder and upper arm, hair emerging from her armpits, and her scarified chest, which upon close inspection reads 'Pervert.' Opie's short dark hair frames a careworn face, her gaze, as with traditional Catholic imagery, is downward towards her son.

⁴⁴⁴ Brenda L. Croft. 'Know my Name.' *National Gallery of Australia*, accessed 25 November 2021, <https://knowmyname.nga.gov.au/artists/brenda-croft/>.



Figure 64. Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/ Nursing*, 2004, C-Print, 40 x 32 inches. ©The artist, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

In *The Yo Mama*, 1993 (Figure 65), Jamaican-born American artist Renée Cox (b.1960) provocatively photographs herself holding her child in an image that becomes a direct challenge to western, Christian constructs of the mother/child relationship. Her imagery also challenges feminist criticism of using images of the female figure to evoke pleasure and desire. Cox herself says she wanted to insert her own experiences as a black woman into the tropes of religion and culture, from which she felt excluded as she was growing up.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁵ Heartney, "Thinking Through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination."

In this larger-than-life size photograph, Cox stands nude except for high heeled shoes, in a stance that challenges normative representations of women's bodies as passive, and black women's bodies in particular as submissive and controlled. She holds her son firmly yet not in the traditional position of nurture seen in images of the Madonna and Child, where the mother is merely a passive support for the son. Rather, Cox's smiling son is held perpendicular to the mother's body, a position that demands strength and action to hold him safely.

Figure 65. Renee Cox, *The Yo Mama*, 1993, Archival Digital Ink Jet Print on Cotton Rag, 213 x 122 cm⁴⁴⁶

Art historian Frances Borzello, in *Seeing ourselves : women's self-portraits* writes of her surprise to find so many self-portrait paintings by women throughout western history, and furthermore how they differ from those painted by men.⁴⁴⁷ Borzello argues that, while traditionally self-portraiture can be considered to fulfil many

⁴⁴⁶ Renee Cox, *Artist Website*, accessed 25 November 2021, <https://www.reneecox.org/yo-mama?lightbox=i21sj9>.

⁴⁴⁷ Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves : Women's Self-Portraits* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), 21-22.

functions, including self-promotion, women's self-portraits differ in that they are often quieter, less assured and less dramatic.⁴⁴⁸ For many women artists, their self-portraits are vehicles for making the personal political. Millner and Moore describe the importance of photo-media in providing feminists a means through which 'to call out stereotyped mass media images of femininity, and then create more nuanced analyses of visual representational systems.'⁴⁴⁹ In the above examples, photography is a direct and affective means through which to challenge narrow norms of western motherhood and family life.

Mother-artists' contributions to fine art, which are often necessarily small and inconsistent, are too often marginalised in art history and its discourses. In the article 'A Photographer's Vision of Being a Mother and an Artist, Year After Year,' Andrea DenHoe, exploring the work of Taiwanese artist Annie Wang, writes how 'in the eyes of the world, pregnancy and motherhood can turn a woman into a mere vessel, subsumed by the sacrifices she makes for her children.'⁴⁵⁰ In photographing herself and her son over a period of years as they grow together, Wang takes power from her creative and procreative practices, initially signing her tautly rounded pregnant belly, the way an artist signs a canvas (Figure 66). Wang describes staging photographs sporadically, each time with the previous photo in the background, so that in 'each successive photo, the viewer is looking down a lengthening "time-tunnel." ... The past provides a visible anchor of the present, and the present is continually recontextualizing the past.'⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ Borzello, 20.

⁴⁴⁹ Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, Introduction.

⁴⁵⁰ Andrea Den Hoe, "A Photographer's Vision of Being a Mother and an Artist, Year After Year," *The New Yorker*, 5 June 2019.

⁴⁵¹ Den Hoe.



Figure 66. Annie Wang, *At the Same Height*. 2014. © Copyright Annie Wang.

Time and time again

When I returned to the studio after Adelaide's relatively short lockdown in 2020 I started by drawing the linen maternity lingerie set, *Intimate Structures* (Figure 44), as though I was drawing my own body (Figure 67 and Figure 68). This exercise led to a new focus on drawing as the means to represent my mothering experiences, and continued the kind of reflexive practice I maintained throughout, where actions, objects and symbols reappeared to be scrutinised, considered and caressed multiple times within the body of the work. This intertextual conversation evokes the temporality of mothering. One day it feels like the clock will never reach 2pm, then

suddenly five years have passed and I'm crying in the car after the first school drop off. As I neared completion of this project, my first son finished his year 12 exams.

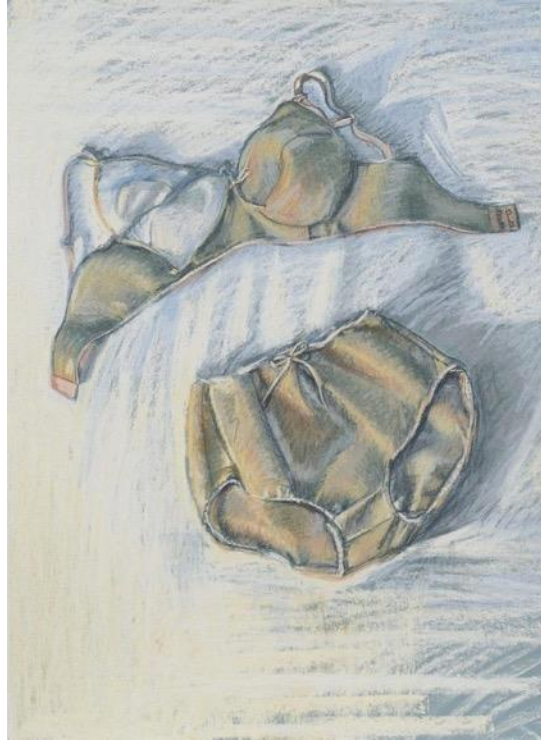


Figure 67. Zoe Freney, *Intimate Structures (blue)*, 2020, Pastel on primed paper 75 x 55 cm. Photo by Sam Roberts.

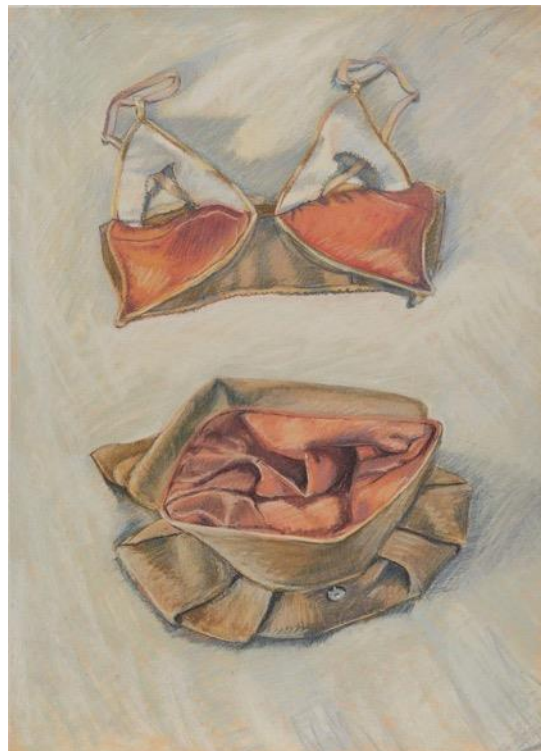


Figure 68. Zoe Freney, *Intimate Structures (pink)*, 2020, Pastel on primed paper 75 x 55 cm. Photo by Sam Roberts.

My photographic processes also describe a particular sense of time, the constancy and interruption, the duration and endurance of motherhood. Taken in the home, or later in the studio, digital photos and video document the accrual of family memories and paraphernalia that define family life and home space. Also evident are my repetitive art processes, the working from photograph, to drawing, to sewing, to painting, and the ageing of the children and myself in a layering of images through time. This layering is evident in the digital source image for *Manger/Manger* and, more subtly, in the final drawing of the same name (Figure 69 and Figure 34). Many of the objects appear and reappear throughout the entirety of the project. Precious objects from the period of my mothering and some from my own childhood attest to the ways, when we mother, that we are reminded of being mothered.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵² 'In the process of fashioning her own sense of herself as a mother — her maternity — a woman's own infancy and childhood is emotionally revisited and re-evaluated. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, she is drawn into a re-evaluation of her relationship with her own mother and her mother's parenting style. Whether willingly or reluctantly, the process of becoming a mother necessarily invokes the spectre of one's own experience of being mothered.' Carla Pascale Leahy, "The Mother Within: Intergenerational Influences Upon Australian Matrescence Since 1945," *Past and Present*, 246. Supplement 15 (2021), https://academic.oup.com/past/article/246/Supplement_15/263/6101630, 264; Leahy, "The Maternal Metamorphosis: Becoming a Mother in Australia 1945-2020."

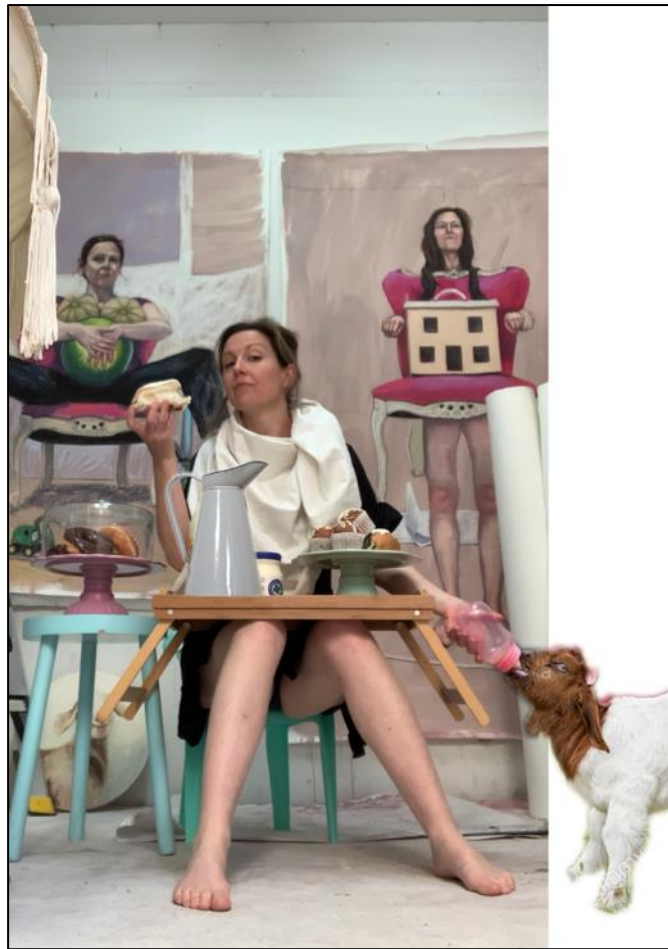


Figure 69. Zoe Freney, *Manger* (source image), Digital image 2021.

Perhaps it is this sense of the past returning in the present that Kristeva perceives as ‘women’s time,’ that is ‘extrasubjective ... cosmic ... cyclical and monumental.’⁴⁵³ For Kristeva, monumental time is ‘necessarily maternal,’⁴⁵⁴ associated with ‘biological and natural rhythms.’⁴⁵⁵ In gendered readings of time, linear time is characterised as masculine, progressive and with purpose.

⁴⁵³ Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine, and Harry Blake, “Women’s Time,” *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), 16-17.

⁴⁵⁴ Kristeva, Jardine, and Blake, 17.

⁴⁵⁵ Betterton, 141.

For both Betterton and Kristeva, current ‘forms of temporal consciousness are ... linear,’ proceeding from one event to another, giving us a sense of moving forwards through space.⁴⁵⁶ The western canon of art is structured as similarly progressive, with each generation of heroic fathers begetting those subsequent, who are then triumphant in surpassing all that went previously. Researchers Rachael Haynes and Courtney Pedersen quote Meaghan Morris in her argument that feminism ‘is not easily adapted to heroic progress narratives.’⁴⁵⁷ Furthermore, through mothers’ disempowerment, the matrilineal inheritance is broken and the feminine gift of knowledge and wisdom denied. Conversely, for mother-artists working with time and *in* time, senses of ‘embodied temporalities’ of maternity and child rearing are frequently invoked.⁴⁵⁸

As far back as 1981 Kristeva apprehended that time now, with ‘the contemporary media revolution, ... implies an idea frozen or exploding according to the vagaries of demand.’⁴⁵⁹ Betterton also sees that we are currently undergoing a revolution in our perception and experience of time, as we move from operating in clock time to ‘the instantaneity of digital codes that offer an interconnected and interdependent simultaneity of time and place.’⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁶ Betterton, 141; The western art canon is also structured as linear in its development.

⁴⁵⁷ Meaghan Morris quoted in Rachael Haynes and Courtney Pedersen, “Acting out: Performing Feminisms in the Contemporary Art Museum,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2016), 203.

⁴⁵⁸ Betterton, 142.

⁴⁵⁹ Kristeva, Jardine, and Blake, 18.

⁴⁶⁰ Betterton, 141; Michael Pollan, argues that the current experience of temporality that we work in requires coffee, writing that ‘caffeine’s big contribution to human progress has been to intensify spotlight consciousness – the focused, linear, abstract and efficient cognitive processing more closely associated with mental work than play. This, more than anything else, is what made caffeine the perfect drug not only for the age of reason and the Enlightenment, but for the rise of capitalism, too. Michael Pollan, *This Is Your Mind on Plants: Opium-Caffeine-Mescaline*, (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2021).

The power of caffeine to keep us awake and alert, to stem the natural tide of exhaustion, freed us from the circadian rhythms of our biology and so, along with the advent of artificial light, opened the frontier of night to the possibilities of work.’ Michael Pollan, “The Invisible Addiction: Is It Time to Give up Caffeine?” *The*

The intensity, collapse and suspension of time became more apparent for many during the COVID-19 social restrictions and lockdowns. This contradictory state ‘where people, things, biological agents, and technical devices are held together in a state of constant readiness ... waiting for their world to move on,’ has been conceptualised by authors Laura Kemmer, Annika Kühn and Vanessa Weber as ‘standby’ mode.⁴⁶¹ In an interview with Lisa Baraitser they ask, how does this ‘constant alternation between “radical suspension” and “back to the new normal” affect the ways we inhabit pandemic times?’⁴⁶² Baraitser equates COVID time to other forms of ‘stuck’ time which include the time of care, which also ‘involves waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting.’⁴⁶³ Maternal time has likewise been equated to suspended time where mothers are exhorted to return as soon as possible to the new normal.

In public life and contemporary constructs of motherhood, mothers are cast as interrupted subjects, taking time out of work, dropping out of public life, failing to move forwards and progress, positioned as being in domestic standby mode. According to Baraitser, the mother ‘finds herself embedded in certain durational experiences from which she is disturbed.’⁴⁶⁴ While mothering is durational and the mother a subject always in-process, there are things left forever unfinished: an

Guardian Online, 6 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/food/2021/jul/06/caffeine-coffee-tea-invisible-addiction-is-it-time-to-give-up>.

⁴⁶¹ Laura Kemmer, Annika Kuhn, and Vanessa Weber, “Pandemic Times. A Conversation with Lisa Baraitser about the Temporal Politics of COVID-19,” *Ephemera Theory and Politics in Organization*, 21.1 (2021), 23.

⁴⁶² Kemmer, Kuhn, and Weber, “Pandemic Times. A Conversation with Lisa Baraitser,” 23.

⁴⁶³ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 75.

embroidery, a garden bed, a painting. This cyclical yet interrupted time is conveyed in my video works and drawings.

Video is a useful media as it describes duration and the unfolding of an action through time. In one video, *Tumble*, I perform a headstand in the laundromat for the duration of the dryer cycle (Figure 70).⁴⁶⁵ As in *Bending* (Figure 19), here I take the physical actions of domestic and care work to an extreme, playing on the trope of the supermum. The seven-minute video is looped, giving the sense of being without end. While I filmed the whole of the process of building the *Stuff Mother* (Figure 42), the finished video only shows aspects that culminate in me ascending the finished assemblage. To give a sense of the extended process, I have sped up the video. The effect is a heightened sense of busy-ness and activity. In many of the videos the music box soundtrack, as well as the low viewpoint, evokes childhood and memory, fracturing a sense of linear time.

⁴⁶⁵ The repetitious work of the family laundry occupies some of this project and it is not without precedent. Andrea Liss writes of Mother Art, a group of artist-mothers active in Los Angeles from 1974, and particularly, *Laundry Works*, 1977: 'a series of site-specific performances in Laundromats ... in which they hung their art and poetry on clotheslines and discussed with women doing their laundry the work involved in domestic tasks.' Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2; In 1979 Jude Adams performed *Washing Performance* at the EAF in Adelaide as part of The Lovely Motherhood Show. 'The installation included a twin tub washing machine, cloth nappies, polaroids of nappies... and photocopied pages from sociological texts on the nature of work.' Sandy Kirby quoted in Marsh, "Mother and Child: Discourse and Dialogue since 1979," 66; I was in the minority in my generation in Australia in continuing to use square cloth nappies in the 2000s and my days were punctuated by the cycles of washing and during them.



Figure 70. Zoe Freney, *Tumble*, digital video (still), 7:0:0.

Drawing threads and strings

In my drawing processes I am influenced by Paula Rego, who in 1994 moved from painting in acrylic to making large scale pastel drawings, a process that she saw as tactile and allowing ‘layering and flux.’

Process is part of it, I don’t want to get exactly what I want the first time ... the changing it, the pushing it around, shoving it, makes it come alive.⁴⁶⁶

While Rego draws from life, I mostly use source photographs and video stills with some elements drawn from life in the studio. However I rarely grid or trace an image, scaling the composition up freehand, adding or subtracting elements as I go. Thus the entire process of the drawing is a struggle to get it ‘right,’ to make it alive. I never approach a drawing with confidence that I know the outcome, or that I can even realise it.

⁴⁶⁶ Quoted in Amy Tobin, “War: Paula Rego,” *TATE Online*, 2014, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rego-war-t12024>.

Elements in most works remain ‘unfinished,’ to signify both the ongoing, unfinished project of becoming mother as well as the frustration of feeling like nothing in mother work is ever finished. Rather than try to pick up where I left off, the unfinished parts represent what Baraitser terms ‘becoming unaccommodated,’ that is, interrogating the experiences of living with a child and the child’s needs. Unlike the uninterrupted studio time of professional artists without care responsibilities, this practice refers ‘to a specifically maternal subjectivity,’ which must be understood ‘as a transitory state, revealed through numerous “hiccups,” or unaccommodations in the daily lived experience of mothering.’⁴⁶⁷

Rego says that pastel drawing is ‘like painting with your fingers.’⁴⁶⁸ What she surely means is that, without the mediation of the paint brush, or even the pencil, the gesture of drawing is a direct translation of one’s physical actions onto the paper. In *Love and Authority in the work of Paula Rego: Narrating the Family Romance*, Ruth Rosengarten writes that in Rego’s work, ‘the body not only mediates the inside and outside, subject and world, but is also the site of their mutual impact.’ This meeting of self and other is described by Ettinger, for whom art making is *poiesis* and *co-poiesis*, that is, a working alone and together, subjectively and *trans-subjectively* to bring something new into the world.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 11.

⁴⁶⁸ ‘How to Draw Like Paula Rego’, *TATE How To, Youtube*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAZimVk7IG>.

⁴⁶⁹ Griselda Pollock, “Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metamorphosis,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21.1 (2004), 26.

Furthermore, Ettinger situates art viewing as ‘co-emergence in “implicated critique.”’⁴⁷⁰ That is, the artwork has affective potential for an engaged viewer, for whom it may represent an encounter-event, recalling the primordial, intrauterine encounter between the *I* and *non-I*, the becoming-child and the becoming-mother.⁴⁷¹ Pollock quotes Ettinger, ‘I took the intrauterine meeting as a model for human situations and processes in which non-I is not an intruder, but a partner in difference.’⁴⁷² In the later drawings, to reflect this being together-in-difference, I situate myself alongside my children and pets, who are deeply implicated now in my process of becoming.⁴⁷³

The level of interruption to studio time, compounded by COVID-19 social restrictions and changes, ultimately saw drawing, digital photography and video chosen as the modes most conducive to describing and representing my mothering experiences. It is through these means that I can most directly translate my ideas and feelings. However, paintings also feature in the final body of work and will continue to be part of my practice, recognising, as do Bolt and Ettinger, painting’s affective potential.⁴⁷⁴ My paintings explore the complex roles mothers are called upon to fulfil, and the

⁴⁷⁰ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Bracha Ettinger: Maternal Subjectivity and the Matrixial Subject*.

⁴⁷¹ Bracha L. Ettinger, “The Becoming Threshold of Matrixial Borderlines,” in *Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics, Volume 1 1990-2000*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 141.

⁴⁷² Pollock, “Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger’s Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics,” 5.

⁴⁷³ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 8-9.

⁴⁷⁴ In a 2012 lecture Ettinger analyses Da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, declaring the painting in the collection of the Louvre an original, and the painting owned by the National Gallery London, a copy, ‘a decoration, like an image of the original... If art tells us some kind of truth, or if there is any passage from art ... to ethics or politics, ... then it is important to see that Leonardo had the capacity to see beyond seeing, to see the movement of light ... also with attention to the way the vibrations and intensities enter things, which is not himself.’ Lectures. She elaborates on this idea in the essay “Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other Than Phallic and Beyond Late Lacan,” ‘in the field of painting, the act of looking becomes a “stroking” from with-in-out, for both painter and viewer.’ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrixial Gaze and Screen Other than Phallic and Beyond the Late Lacan.” 279.

ambivalence they may feel in doing so. These pressures are conveyed through the depiction of the body in extremis, as in *Twister*, 2019 (Figure 71), and *Gentle Hum*, 2018 (Figure 72).

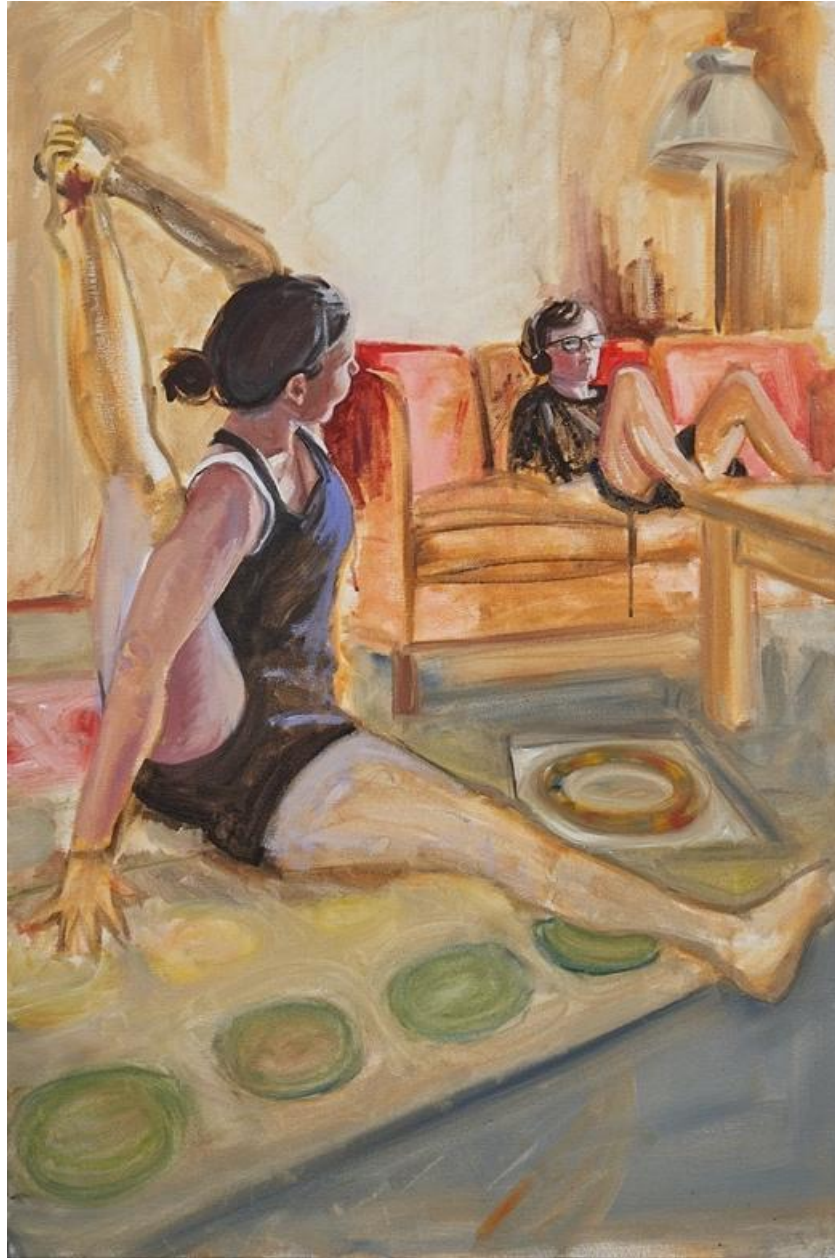


Figure 71. Zoe Freney, *Twister*, 2019, oil on canvas.



Figure 72. Zoe Freney, *Gentle Hum*, 2018, oil on canvas, 70 x 90 cm. Photo: Grant Hancock.

Painting's affective potential is evident in the series *Continuum*, 2012 (Figure 73) by Jenny Saville, investigating mother/child relationships. The quality of line work, the application of paint as well as the composition, which borrows from Leonardo's Madonna paintings, describe the chaos of the maternal situation, where the mother may feel subsumed by the clammy, inescapable maternal love and care, cleverly contrasting to the still calm of Leonardo's images.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁵ Art critic and historian Simon Schama compares Saville's paintings to those by Lucien Freud. In his assessment, the former 'reflect Saville's preference for intimacy over inspection; spontaneity over control,' while Freud's figures 'remain trapped in the pose ... in every sense remain subjects.' He puts this down to Saville's attention to 'the physical truth of the sheer muscular energy of the infants. They are not so much drawn as bodied forth; and in one of the most powerful of the series the animal action comes right at us from between the powerful thighs of the mother ...' Simon Schama, "Small and Mighty: Jenny Saville, Whose Work Is on Show at the Gagosian in New York, Is a Masterly Painter of Children," *The Financial Times*, 24 September 2011; While Saville is unquestionably a highly accomplished painter, the power of her work lies in her relinquishing of control over the subjects she depicts. Perhaps the experiences of motherhood allowed Saville to admit to the unpredictability and difference of the Other that makes these works so dynamic. Freud, on the

In her paintings and studies for the mother and child works, the swirls and lines, the blurs of movement of wriggling limbs and sticky hands, it is as though Saville has embodied in the work what Ettinger perceives in Leonardo's paintings:

Leonardo had the capacity to see beyond seeing, to see the movement of light ... also with attention to the way the vibrations and intensities enter things, which is not himself.⁴⁷⁶

Saville draws out the vibrating strings and threads of trans-subjectivity that are not severed with the umbilical cord but 'borderlink' us in the matrixial.⁴⁷⁷ The works depict the physicality and out-of-control-ness of relating to squirmy babies, but in another register they depict the viscosity of subjectivity in the feminine.

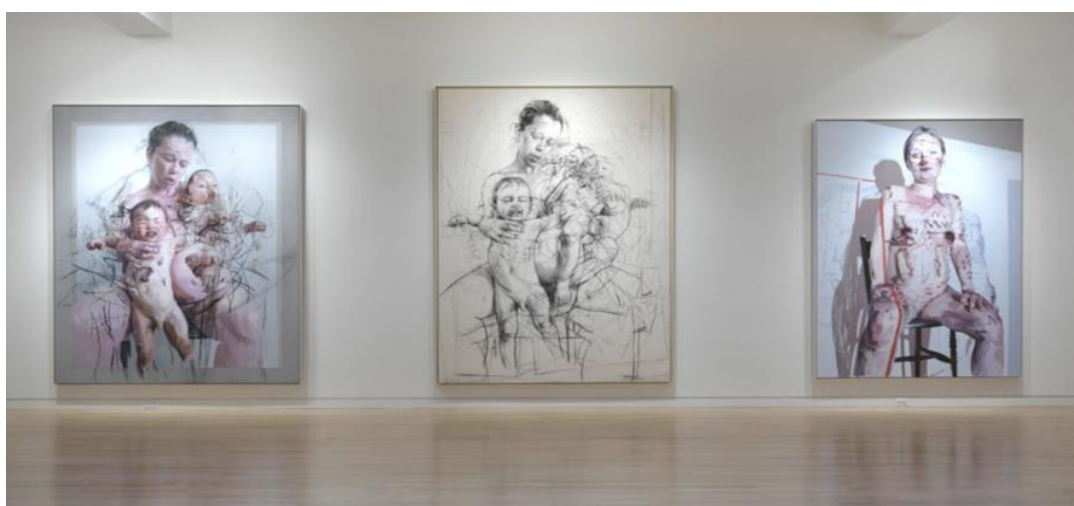


Figure 73. Jenny Saville, *Continuum*, Installation View, 2011 © Jenny Saville. The Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACS) Copyright Agency, 2022.⁴⁷⁸

other hand, 'put his creative life absolutely first,' working alone and undisturbed by his family for hours at a time in his studio, according to his daughter, Esther Freud. Nichols.

⁴⁷⁶ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Bracha Ettinger: Maternal Subjectivity and the Matrixial Subject* (Switzerland: Youtube, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdkbYsjlMA8>.

⁴⁷⁷ Unlike earlier theories of subjectivity that are based on severance, lack and loss, Ettinger's Matrixial develops the idea of 'borderkinking,' where the borderspaces of the I and non-I touch and merge, resulting in the development of 'subjectivity-as-encounter.' Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace (Theory Out Of Bounds)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1.

⁴⁷⁸ Jenny Saville, 'Continuum.' Gagosian, New York online: <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2011/jenny-saville-continuum/> (viewed 25/11/21).

Barbara Bolt writes of 'the intense and furious state' required for painting, a state that often seems to elude me in interruption.⁴⁷⁹ Drawing for me is similarly performative, but, to be honest, is easier to recover from and clean up after. Scale is important in these later drawings. They are large, requiring me to work on a ladder or a stool. They allow me to express the limits of my body, and the extent of my power, against discourses that continue to diminish women's and mothers' power.

Griselda Pollock argues that women 'desire that privileged space of imaginary freedom called the studio,' but this creative space has long been gendered male.⁴⁸⁰ Rego's works are often set in the studio, which is 'more or less disguised ... [and] several paintings thematize the making of art, the labour in the studio.'⁴⁸¹ In *The Artist in Her Studio*, 1993 (Figure 74), the central figure is seated at a table surrounded by the paraphernalia of the artist's studio, images on the wall behind her, cabbages arranged as a still life in the foreground, referencing hundreds of years of painting's history. The artist herself is the focal point. She sits with her legs wide apart, her long red skirt revealing manly black boots. One hand firmly presses a knee, the other holds the pipe she's smoking, looking like Gustave Courbet with her strong profile and confidence.⁴⁸² She looks autonomous, powerful, creative and unladylike, challenging the notion of the artist as male in 'an assertion of female agency in the cultural field.'⁴⁸³

⁴⁷⁹ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, 1.

⁴⁸⁰ Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History," in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. by Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), 145.

⁴⁸¹ Ruth Rosengarten, *Love and Authority in the Work of Paula Rego: Narrating the Family Romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸² Rosengarten, 120.

⁴⁸³ *ibid.*

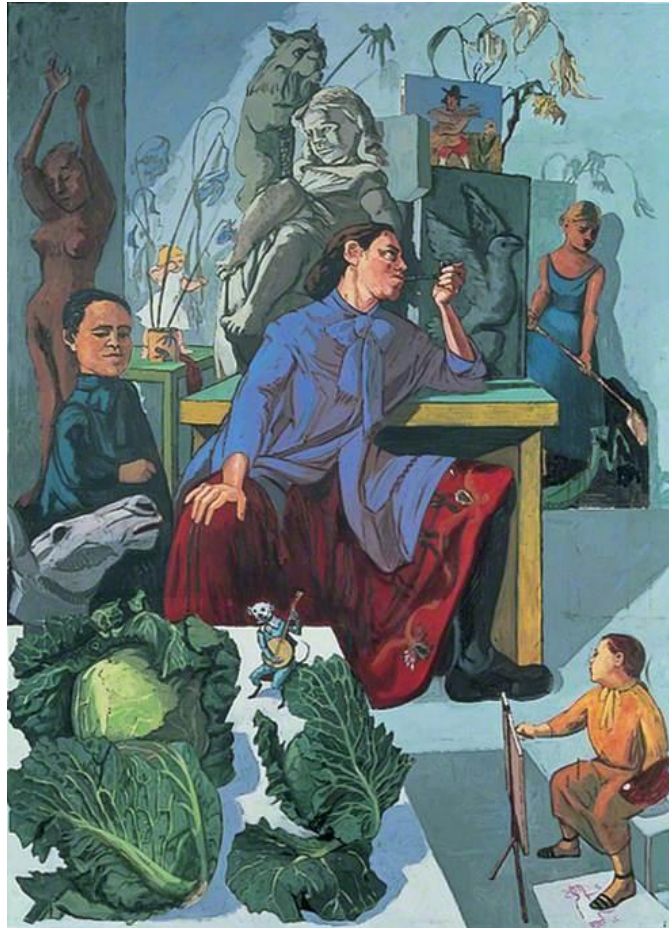


Figure 74. Paula Rego, *The Artist in Her Studio*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 180 x W 130 cm. © Paula Rego. The Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACSA) Copyright Agency, 2022

As my children have become older and I have more studio time, I have naturally transitioned to setting more of my compositions in the studio. Like Rego, I blur the lines between the studio and domestic spaces, bringing symbols of the home into my studio, as in *Self With Melons and Toys*, 2021 (Figure 75). The small space is suitable to stage a sense of the claustrophobia of a mother confined in the home and in family duties. However, within the public, professional space it seems easier to imagine and depict challenges to maternal norms that are otherwise positioned as private and domestic.



Figure 75. Zoe Freney, *Self with melons and toys*, 2021, acrylic and pastel on paper, 155 x 114 cm.

Lockdown sewing

Artists have frequently turned to textiles in conceptual and activist practices, and to explore notions of gender and domesticity. In her book *Craftivism*, Betsy Greer suggests craft is a form of 'quiet activism'.⁴⁸⁴ This quietness has accompanied much of women's work in western history, but rather than being a sign of submission or powerlessness, Greer argues, 'the creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy, because it reminds us that we have power.'⁴⁸⁵ Artists Anne Graham (b.1949) and Cassie Arnold (b.1986) both draw on ideas and

⁴⁸⁴ Greer, *Craftivism*. *Craft + Activism = Craftivism*, Kobo ebook, Introduction.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

experiences of matrilineal legacy and the practices of traditional techniques, to 'change the cultural narrative of "women's work."'486

In a similar move to mine, from painting to sewing, artist Anne Graham 'found she enjoyed the sculptural possibilities of canvas more than painting on it.'⁴⁸⁷ Works such as *Joni and Bacon* 2014 (Figure 76), in which the artist makes garments felted from the wool and fur of her friends' pets, investigate issues of gender and labour. Graham's gestures in textile are also driven by her past experiences. Her mother was a tailor and so she 'remembers being surrounded by the construction process that turned flat fabric into fully dimensional clothing.'⁴⁸⁸

Fibre artist Cassie Arnold in her *Mom Bra* series 2020 (Figure 77), uses traditional craft practices to create works that seek to 'change the cultural narrative of "women's work"' and to challenge 'the unrealistic portrayal of the female form in today's media.'⁴⁸⁹ While my sewn nursing bras are constructed with wires and other mainstream trimmings that both support and structure acceptable bodies, Arnold's *Mom Bras* conflate the garment with the unique physical qualities of each woman's body.

⁴⁸⁶ "Cassie Arnold," *Procreate Project*, accessed 29 September 2021, <https://www.procreateproject.com/cassie-arnold/>.

⁴⁸⁷ Anne Graham, *Collections*, Art Gallery of NSW, online, accessed 26 November 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/610.2014.a-e/#about>.

⁴⁸⁸ "Art Sets: Exploded Textiles," Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2019, accessed 26 November 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/artsets/2ttwdq/print>.

⁴⁸⁹ "Cassie Arnold," *Procreate Project*.

Figure 76. Anne Graham, Joni and Bacon, 2014, pigment print on unbleached cotton rag paper, dog hair felt coat, trousers and fez, installation dimensions variable.⁴⁹⁰

Figure 77. Cassie Arnold, Tired and Overworked (Nursing During a Pandemic), 2020.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ Anne Graham, Collections, Art gallery of New South Wales, online <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/610.2014.a-e/> (viewed 25/11/21).

⁴⁹¹ Cassie Arnold, Artist Website, <http://www.cassiearnoldart.com/mom-bras> (viewed 25/11/21).

In *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray*, Hilary Robinson seeks to establish new discourses around women's art to help make legible its content and materiality. Robinson writes how Irigaray's usage of the term 'gesture ... as being in some way performed,' enables us to analyse 'the gesture of women artists in their studios, certain gestural structures they build into their work.'⁴⁹² The gestures of hand sewing are both physical and metaphorical. They carry the muscle memories of my childhood, and the knowledge and skill handed down through my matrilineal line. Through gesture I bring to fruition new, three-dimensional forms, a process which for me embodies the generative practices of mothering. In being forced away, again, from the public, professional space of the studio, I bring aspects of mothers' overlooked, private experiences to attention. The resulting hand sewn garments, the *Mothersuit* (Figure 8) and nursing underwear, *Intimate Structures* (Figure 44) and *Cook and Kiss* (Figure 45), in turn bring the private spaces of the maternal body to public attention to challenge accepted norms of motherhood.

My frustration at persistent, unspoken gendered expectations led me to reach for the sewing machine, to employ a traditionally feminine mode of expression to explore the ways mothers are confined by societal norms that structure our experiences and bodies. The linen underwear, *Intimate Structures*, 2020 led to the work *Cook and Kiss* in 2021. Fashioned from cotton tea towels and Chux cloths, this second work conflates the body of the mother with her expected chores in the home. The original tea towel's message, 'Kiss the Cook,' in pink and white has overtones of Virginia

⁴⁹² Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 131.

Woolf's *Angel in the House*.⁴⁹³ Now the text is emblazoned on the cups of the bra, 'Cook' and 'Kiss,' like a litany of chores she must undertake.

⁴⁹³ '... I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing... It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.' Virginia Woolf, *Killing the Angel in the House: Seven Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 2-3; Baraitser, in *Maternal Encounters*, writes: 'This is an image of the charming, sympathetic, unselfish woman who has neither a mind nor wishes of her own, but feels totally fulfilled by thinking always of other people.' 27.

Anecdote 7: Hokey-Pokey with the Virgin Mary

As a kid in a Catholic family I went to Church every Sunday. The lasting result of this is what art historian and critic Eleanor Heartney calls a Catholic Imagination, something she sees in the practices of, for example, sculptor Janine Antoni and photographer Renée Cox. The Virgin and Child trope is used by other artists, like Badima/Yamatji artist Julie Dowling, whose painting, *Black Madonna: Omega*, 2004 (Figure 79) situates the sacred within traditional Aboriginal cultures and narratives. Here, Dowling depicts an Aboriginal mother and child, in a highly decorative and layered image that conveys maternal power and enduring cultural tradition, to challenge western colonial views of motherhood.⁴⁹⁴ My own haunting by the Virgin Mary is embodied by the apparition of the Madonna in the William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905) *Madonna and Child*, 1888, in the collection of my local Art Gallery of South Australia. Early on in the project I realised I had to deal with this

⁴⁹⁴ Dowling replaces the Madonna's blue mantle, a tradition that conflates the preciousness of the pigment lapis lazuli with Mary's high status in Catholic tradition, with a Boogka, a traditional kangaroo skin cloak, 'one of the most personalised items owned by a Badimia or Noongar woman.' This shift attests to the enduring traditions of Dowling's people. The boy child in the painting is dressed in western clothes, but holds a stone axe, thus marking both the western influence on First Nations children, as well as enduring ancient traditions. The figures are haloed, signifying both their divinity as individuals as well as the honour due to Australia's First Nations peoples, and their Country. Carol Dowling, "Julie Dowling," in *Know My Name*, ed. by Natasha Bullock and others (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2020), 110.

Madonna, as she still lurks in western patriarchal ideals of motherhood, and in much of my own artwork.

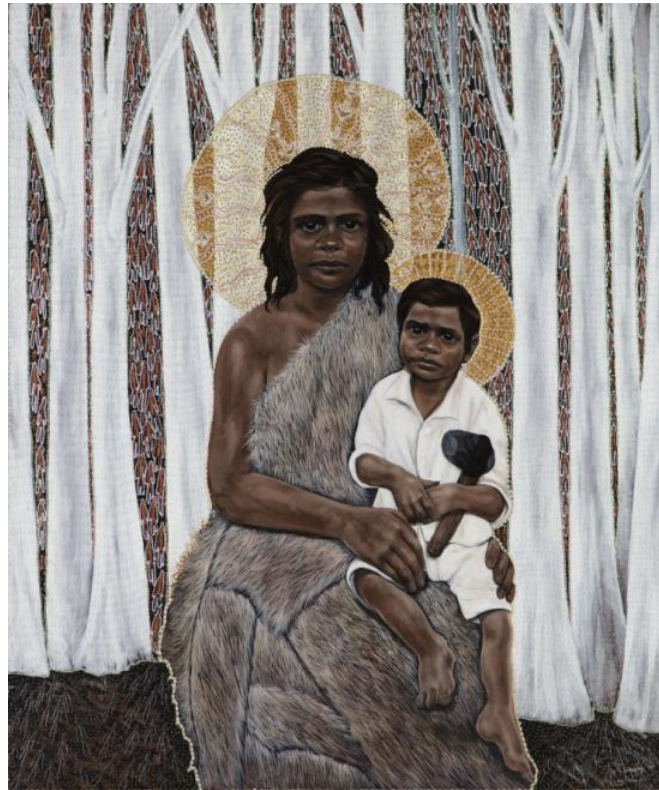


Figure 79. Julie Dowling, *Black Madonna: Omega*, 2004, synthetic polymer paint, red ochre, glitter and metallic paint on canvas, 120 x 100 cm © Julie Dowling/ Copyright Agency, 2022.⁴⁹⁵

In the video work *Music Box* (Figure 80), I performed the Hokey-Pokey in front of Bouguereau's painting, slowed down with a soundtrack of Ave Maria on a music box. It felt naughty and transgressive to behave like a child in the serious, grown-up space of the gallery. Mothering is such a physically demanding undertaking, and I wanted to juxtapose this with the serene stillness of the Madonna. She is passive, eyes downcast, as I turn my back on her and dance. But she remains unmoved, a background to all my subsequent incursions into the western motherhood canon.

⁴⁹⁵ State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, accessed 20 November 2021, <https://sc.artgallery.wa.gov.au/20170030-black-madonna-omega>.

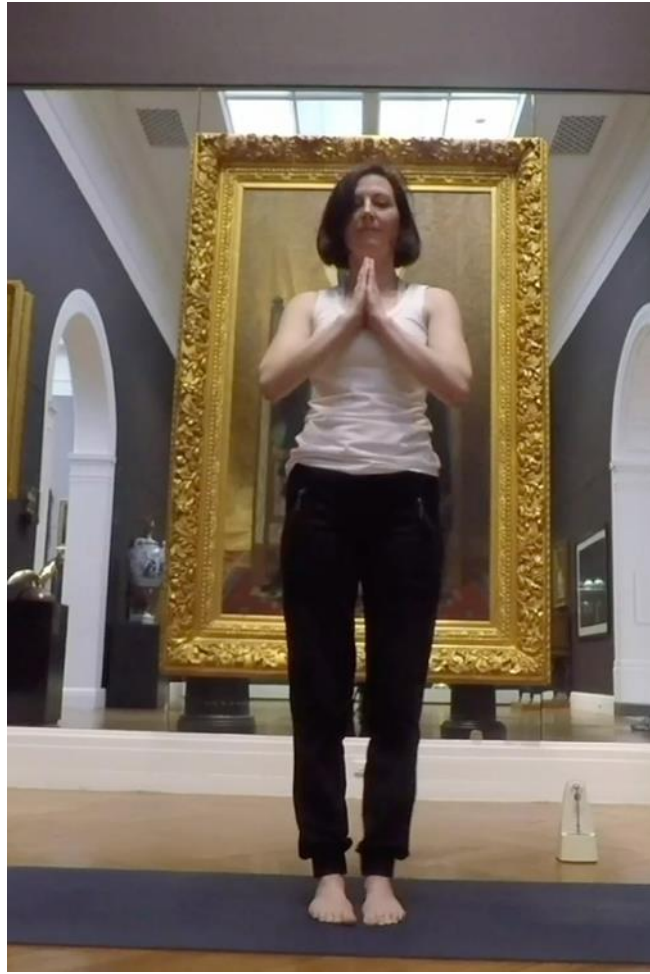


Figure 80. Zoe Freney, *Music Box*, digital video, 3:40.

One day in COVID-19 lockdown, unable to access my studio, I quickly pasted a row of my sister's washing over the top of a photo of the Bouguereau *Madonna*. The result is the digital image *Bouguereau with the Washing* (Figure 81). Finally in this quick, poorly executed photoshop move, I had exorcised her, by bringing together something of the cyclical, never finished, repetitive, loving, physical labour of care with the painted mother's lack of action and autonomy. I can say with some level of certainty that Bouguereau knew nothing of hanging out rows of clothes and nappies. All he gives us are the perfectly painted tenets of the religion that deifies the mother in order that the son is divine.



Figure 81. Zoe Freney, *Bouguereau with the Washing*, 2020, digital image.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁶ I always meant to draw (or paint) this composition but still haven't had time. In a way it has come to represent a direct artistic intervention, and reworking it now seems superfluous. I feel like I have 'dealt with' Bouguereau and his Virgin.

Anecdote 8: A Second Sketch

Tiny hands hang out tiny clothes with tiny pegs. Sisters carry baby chickens in baskets on their trikes. A stray cat is home because we fed him, a puppy stung by a bee. A little boy falls asleep on the floor with the dog, waiting for the mother to finish work and take them both for a walk. The baby, blocking all the amniotic fluid, born in a sudden gush of tearing effort, of wetness and splatter, and a nurse says they've just cleaned this room. Little hands grip the fence between us, little face screwed up in fear or anger? Something tearing but they tell me he's always happy as soon as I've gone. It feels like the toddler kicked my belly as I picked him up but it was his little brother pushing from the *inside*. Recognising the starfish of a tiny hand through the taut skin of my belly, and the curve of a fresh heel. Uncanny somersaults between my diaphragm and yielding pelvic floor. "Jelly tum!" laughs the big brother as he pats his mum's post-partum abdomen. He puts his hand inside the neck of my t-shirt and falls asleep.

Concluding Chapter

The exhibition

The exhibition, *Making the new, normal*, reflects the development of this research project, by showing the early work describing my lived experiences of mothering, along with the later, more resolved drawings that depict my maternal subjectivity in process. The intention of showing these large, two-dimensional works, conventionally displayed within the gallery, is similar to the strategies of Mary Kelly and other early mother-artists, who made incursions into the masculine, public, cultural space of the art world with hitherto ignored or silenced images of mothers, motherhood and the experience of living and making with children. However, Haynes and Pedersen observe how the ‘museumification’ of feminist practices may intensify the reading of such work ‘as the quaint but archaic habits of an earlier generation.’⁴⁹⁷ I hope to avoid this historicising through my insistence on the ongoing, generative nature of the maternal position.

The unfinished and evolving nature of the maternal experience is further described through the inclusion of two works made late in the project, *Incubator*, 2022 (Figure 82) and *Studio Self Portrait*, 2022 (Figure 83). In each of these works ideas and motifs from earlier in the project return to evoke the nonlinear time of mothering and the constancy of dwelling in the maternal situation. *Incubator* is an augmented *Mothersuit*, this time replete with silk lining and one dozen egg pockets. Most mornings I visit our chickens with my son, to feed them and collect their eggs, with which I fill my pockets. The preciousness and vulnerability of the eggs as they nestle into my pockets recalls the ways a mother moves about in the world when her body

⁴⁹⁷ Haynes and Pedersen, “Acting out: Performing Feminisms in the Contemporary Art Museum.” 205.

acts in relation to that of a baby. Wearing *Incubator* is more restrictive than even the original *Mothersuit*, as one must take into account the babies on board. The eggs arranged in two rows down torso and thighs are gently reminiscent of Louise Bourgeois's multi-breasted figures, such as *Nature Study*, 1984-1994, and their inherent readings of fecundity and fertility.

The large painting, *Studio Self Portrait*, marks a move away from the kitchen table office/studio and resolutely into the artist studio, that serious, professional space. Whilst I have identified drawing as an ideal means through which to describe my maternal experiences, painting marks a temporary surmounting of obstacles. Yet the composition, in which the drawings are pushed back by the pile of stuff in the foreground, shows that I still do not have the kind of autonomy of the heroic artist who labours single-mindedly, unfettered by care. The hen and her chicks symbolise my daily routine of home and pet maintenance, where the chickens are dependent on my care. I feel an affinity for the hen, the vigilant bird-mother, beady eyes always keeping watch over her chicks.

Drawing on tactics of Anecdotal Theory, that focus attention on the small, the alternative, the overlooked and unaccommodated, aspects of the exhibition design highlight the parallel narratives, the diversions and interruptions that are integral to my experience of mothering. The viscous, non-linear temporality of mothering is also signified in the insistence and repetition of certain objects, ideas and symbols across the body of work. These ideas are embodied in the *Family Portrait* wall. This arrangement consists of a salon style hang of framed and unframed images that include vernacular and family photographs, source photographs and video stills, as

well as small paintings of family members and pets. To reiterate the importance of the small, the hurried and spontaneous, this grouping includes small sketches, working drawings and precious tokens.

Touchstones of the project feature here: the never-completed embroidery

Occupation: Homemaker and the precious portraits of me made by my children.

These artefacts attest to the ongoing, inter- and trans-subjectivity, the relationality and severality of subjectivity in the feminine, the acceptance and accommodation of the 'unknowable other for a mother,' the child.⁴⁹⁸ Standing in for the child, a talisman, a symbol of the years of interruption, Alfie the green wooden digger sits on a plinth before the *Family Portrait* wall. He is tiny, insignificant, lost and found, a footnote in family lore, an anecdote, a memory.

Alfie's image is picked up and resonates in the drawing *Self with Melons and Toys* (Figure 78) and the painting *Studio Self Portrait, 2022* (Figure 83). Metaphors are similarly repeated throughout the exhibition, in video works with music box soundtracks, in paintings, drawings and sewn garments. The inclusion of a variety of media is important in reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of mothering. These come together in a busy jumble, not to present a unified display of a mother effortlessly doing it all, or even managing the juggle, but in order to express the scale and diversity of responsibilities of love and care. These works build an insistent argument for a mother's generative and creative power, and of the importance of mother-artists' self-identification in visual culture.

⁴⁹⁸ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*. 9.



Figure 82. Zoe Freney, *Incubator*, 2022, painter's linen, silk, shell buttons, thread, chicken eggs.



Figure 83. Zoe Freney, *Studio Self Portrait*, 2022, oil on linen, 220 x 115cm.

For the future: 'let me count the ways'⁴⁹⁹

Through my research it has become apparent that western patriarchal traditions and ideologies have failed to fully account for a mother's experience of identity and maternal subjectivity. This research has drawn on and responds to Ettinger's theories of the matrixial and subjectivity in the feminine, ideas that offer real alternatives to phallogocentric constructs of identity. The matrixial's privileging of compassion, hope and respect opens space for others, and for ethics and hospitality.⁵⁰⁰

While early texts on feminist mothering have been criticised for advocating predominantly for white, middle class women at the expense of women of colour, Andrea O'Reilly's model of matricentric feminism is inclusive of all mothers.⁵⁰¹

Pollock suggests

re-addressing the feminine through the matrixial prism critically exposes the logic of *I* and *not-I* that underpins phallic socio-psychic processes at work in racism.⁵⁰²

In her Foreword to O'Reilly's *Matricentric Feminism*, Petra Bueskens writes an empowered mother is:

⁴⁹⁹ 'What is an empowered mother? Let me count the ways...' Bueskens, "Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World," xiii.

⁵⁰⁰ Ettinger, Lectures; McCloskey; Bracha Ettinger, *Bracha L. Ettinger Matrixial Subj. Aesthetics, Ethics. Vol. 1 1990-2000*, 3.

⁵⁰¹ O'Reilly, *Matricentric Fem. Theory, Act. Pract.*; O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering.*; Bhattacharya.

⁵⁰² Pollock, "Introduction: Matrix as a Sensing-Thinking Apparatus," 11.

a mother with a community of allmothers or “other mothers”; she is a queer or lesbian mother; a feminist mother; ... a single mother; a mother who integrates her maternal practice with her paid and/or creative work.⁵⁰³

My contribution to this field is just part of the story, and important in depicting the diversity of models of empowered mothering ‘beyond the prevailing model of intensive motherhood or ... the neoliberal model of self-sufficient which denies the centrality of care.’⁵⁰⁴

There are many artists - mothers and non-mothers - depicting motherhood and maternal subjectivity against dominant western patriarchal norms. Their artworks are often activist in their presentation of alternative modes of parenting and care, and non-conventional family structures. These include, as discussed in this paper, Australian First Nations artists Julie Dowling, Brenda L. Croft and Destiny Deacon, whose images present mothers who challenge colonial stereotypes. Queer artists Catherine Opie and Deborah Kelly use photography to present images of intentional families, counter to prevailing heterosexual norms. These other models are more important than ever as traditional western, patriarchal gender roles have been extended and re-entrenched during the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My practice will continue to convey the complexities of making as a mother-artist, as well as highlighting the importance of making work from the vital maternal position. As my children grow to adulthood, I would like my work to offer support to mother-artists still in the thick of the hard slog of the early years, when care and creativity

⁵⁰³ Bueskens, “Foreword: Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World,” xiii.

⁵⁰⁴ *ibid.*

collide, in ways that can enrich one's practice. This matricentric feminist position extends to my role as an academic, where I support mother-artist students and include the work of mother-artists in my feminist art history courses. Through my research, but beyond the scope of this project, I have become aware of recently established artist residencies and other opportunities for mothers and their families, such as funding for childcare; opportunities that were unavailable to me in the early years of my art and mothering careers.⁵⁰⁵ In the future I would like to explore these models and their viability in my local context.

Concluding statement

The COVID-19 fallout literature shows clearly that mothers in western neoliberal societies are struggling more than ever before to maintain their multiple shifts. The temporal and spatial shifts of lockdown life, as well as the ongoing and exaggerated gendered division of labour, mean mothers' care work and paid work can no longer be seen as existing separately in an ideal, happily balanced mother identity. For mother-artists, it is even more challenging to maintain a third or even fourth shift of art practice without a significant adaptation of practice. However, this intense pressure may result in a turn, not only towards the domestic as a site for creativity, but also to the matrixial as a framework through which to explore and articulate mothers' subjectivities.

⁵⁰⁵ As previously mentioned, Lenka Clayton's Artist Residency in Motherhood was inaugurated as a way for mothers to reimagine the home as a novel site for inspiration, in the way a residency program may be. Lenka Clayton, *Artist Website*, accessed January 18, 2022, <http://www.lenkaclayton.com>.; Sibyls Shrine was set up in Pittsburgh, USA, by artist and academic at Carnegie Mellon University, Alisha B. Wormsley in collaboration with Naomi Chambers and CMU alumna Jessica Gaynelle Moss. Sibyls Shrine 'gives residency opportunities to Black women who are mothers and identify as artists, creatives and/or activists.' The inaugural Artist in Residence in 2021 was Renee Cox. Heidi Opdyke, "Artist Creates Opportunities for Black Mothers," Carnegie Mellon University News, 2020.; Alisha B. Wormsley, *Artist Website*, accessed 31 January 2022, <https://alishabwormsley.com/sibyls-shrine>; It has proven difficult to find any Australian Residencies that specifically welcome mothers and families.

For me, the collapsing together of multiple shifts and identities has resulted in a reassessment of the home, and domestic work, as a site of novelty and invention, ideas that have generated intimate and surprising sewn works and videos as well as large, powerful drawings and paintings. The final effect is of a mother in her divided subjectivity, never finishing anything, surrounded by creative chaos and frustration. This feels like the real image of a mother I am looking for. A mother who exists not alone but in relation to others, children, pets, and ensconced in sticky situations.

In seeking to depict maternal subjectivity, the research responds to philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's call for '[a] completely different set of perspectives – this time based on women's specificities, experiences, positions.'⁵⁰⁶ Irigaray argues that 'women as mothers are the unacknowledged foundation of the social order,' and Christine Battersby and Lisa Baraitser suggest positioning the maternal as the normal subject position.⁵⁰⁷ It is in the matrixial theories of Ettinger that I have found what Pollock calls the 'gift that feminine sexual specificity makes to human subjectivity.'⁵⁰⁸ The matrixial encounter is 'profoundly ethical,' and being in the feminine offers 'that human possibility which consists in saying that the life of another human being is more important than my own.'⁵⁰⁹ In light of this it may be hard for a mother-artist to continue to make work within the masculinist structures of the art world. However, for Ettinger 'art, poetry, and music originate in the Matrixial

⁵⁰⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, xii.

⁵⁰⁷ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 10.

⁵⁰⁸ Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics," 10.

⁵⁰⁹ Ettinger quoted in Klein, "Grains and Crumbs: Performing Maternity," 275.

sphere.⁵¹⁰ It is art that has the affective potential to transmit the ‘grains and crumbs’ of a maternal language.⁵¹¹

This project recuperates images of mothers in contemporary western visual culture, challenging their denigration and exploitation, by presenting motherhood as an ethical and generative site of innovation and potential. However, at all times I am aware of the dangers of celebrating motherhood and ignoring or failing to admit to ‘the profound psychological, emotional, relational, and financial crises (to name but a few) that it so clearly provokes in so many of our lives,’ and essentialising maternity as natural, easy and joyous for all women.⁵¹² In working from what Baraitser describes as a maternal subject position, against dominant tropes in visual culture, the artworks depict the full, complicated, contradictory range of my embodied experiences of mothering.⁵¹³

The images are not about mastery of vision or of handling of media.⁵¹⁴ Instead they evoke and account for maternal love as well as motherhood’s hardships and catastrophes. They describe my embodied experiences of being a mother in the world, and the development of my changing subjectivity as mother. In this I hope they go some way to counter the socially expedient images of mothers within current western ideology and visual culture. I am not defining all mothers, and recognise my specificities, but encourage other mother-artists to add their own stories so that

⁵¹⁰ Klein, “Grains and Crumbs: Performing Maternity,” 274–90.

⁵¹¹ Klein. 275.

⁵¹² Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 7.

⁵¹³ *ibid*

⁵¹⁴ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 9.

culture recognises that the 'new' of mothers' experiences is both normal and remarkable.

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