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Towards a Language of Interruption

by

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Sculpture, Performance and Installation

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This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Master of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts.
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Abstract of Research Paper

My research paper is an attempt to begin to articulate and document my lived experience of being both a mother and an artist.

Underpinned by research into the cultural and social history of the experience of mothering and the cultural institution of ‘motherhood’, I revisit and reinterpret some of my earlier works, and explore issues of identity brought up by the relational experience of mothering.

I seek out other women who are, or have been, both mothers and artists – particularly sculptors – whose work relates to their subjective experiences of mothering. From them I select and investigate both works, and reflections, which I feel resonate with my own experience of combining the roles of mother and artist.

Against this background I describe and interpret my own recent body of work, drawn from my subjective experience of becoming, and being, a mother whilst continuing my artistic practice.

Studio Work

In the postgraduate exhibition at Sydney College of the Arts I will present three works, Trace and Grounded (from a body of work collectively entitled Swingworks), and Migratory Objects. These works explore various aspects of my own subjective experience of being both mother and artist, in particular the emotions and mind-states evoked.

The works also re-present experiences and sensations half-remembered from my own childhood, unearthed whilst watching my daughter navigate hers. These partial memories, bringing forgotten fragments of my own early years into clearer focus, underline for me the fleeting nature of childhood, and thus also the ultimately transient nature of life itself.
**Introduction**

On the twenty-first of June 2003, at 12.43pm, I gave birth to my daughter Mo. The prior nine months had been spent in an anticipatory limbo of pregnancy – no longer fully not-a-mother, nor yet a mother. During my twelve or so hours of labour the looming change hanging over my life finally occurred. Like a water bucket on a mill wheel filling to the point at which its weight pulls the wheel forward, my pregnancy tipped over into maternity. From that day onwards I am, undeniably, irrevocably, a mother. But what does this mean? It is one of the givens of life that, whether she is alive or dead, known or unknown, we all have, or have had, a mother; and so we all have ideas about what a mother is. Yet it is only by becoming a mother that one can experience what it is to be a mother.

**The myths of ‘motherhood’**

Poet and author Adrienne Rich, in her seminal work *Of Woman Born* (1976), identifies a disparity between her own experience of mothering and what she terms the “institution of motherhood”\(^1\). In doing so she reveals how the experience of mothering is complicated by a set of pervasive myths. These myths, she argues, make it difficult for any individual woman to freely identify her own feelings, make her own choices and act on them.

Writing over thirty years ago, Rich described how, once she had children, she was haunted by the stereotype of an unconditionally loving mother.\(^2\) Today this myth is still dominant; as recently as 2004 Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels report that most women still judge their own ‘performance’ against unrealistic images of an ever-bountiful, self-sacrificing mother.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) ibid. p. 23.

Philosopher Roland Barthes describes contemporary myth as a ‘reflection’ that is inverted, overturning culture into nature. This leads to hegemony, as a set of cultural practices is naturalised and therefore comes to be seen as unchangeable, as commonsense or as ‘just the way things are’.  

Pope, Quinn and Wyer highlight the intractability of the myths identified by Rich, saying that when reality encounters mythology the mythology tends to prevail, shaping “not only what is thought but also what can be said, not only what is heard but what can be understood”.

Such ‘cultural understandings’ do, of course, change over time; however, a high level of inertia is inherent within this process. Once established, myths endure, and often continue to confound and confuse those who encounter them.

Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, the dominant myth of mothering described above has been subsumed into a perhaps even more unattainable one. Having children and a career is no longer seen as an either/or choice. Mothers are still required to be self-sacrificing and infinitely patient, and of ancient images of a loving and fiercely protective mother idolised as a ‘fertility goddess’, has its roots in the period after the industrial revolution, when life became polarised into public and private spheres and child-rearing became women’s primary responsibility.


continue to shoulder the lion’s share of domestic and childrearing tasks here in Australia; yet most also pursue careers in direct competition with male colleagues, and so must usually effect seamless transitioning of their children between home and childcare, or before-and-after-school care, at each end of the working day. Academic and author Susan Maushart observes in *The Mask of Motherhood* (1997) that the term now used more than any other by women in describing how they manage their lives is ‘juggling’. Nearly half of Australian mothers who work full-time report that they do not have enough energy to be good parents, as compared with just over a quarter of working fathers. It would seem that either the mothers are trying to live up to higher standards as regards childcare, or they are actually doing more on a day-to-day basis. Maushart describes how, in contrast with 1950s housewives who were supposed to ‘have it all’ yet felt empty, today’s mothers find that ‘having it all’ means ‘doing it all’ – “and ‘doing it all’ means doing none of it particularly well.”

Contemporary commentators on this issue fall roughly into two camps. Those in the first, having identified the impossibility of the tasks required of mothers, suggest they lower the standards they apply to childrearing. Those in the second camp, in contrast, identify the impossible demands made on mothers as symptomatic of a wider issue, the increasingly untenable position of women within Western culture.

This second group of commentators advocate a radical overhaul of legal and social structures to, as philosopher Luce Irigaray describes, accommodate

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7 ibid. p. 7.
9 Maushart, op. cit. p. 7.
10 ibid. p. 260.
women living “an identity in feminine mode”.\textsuperscript{12} Christine Battersby, for example, calls for new models of identity based on the idea that “a ‘person’ could normally, at least always potentially, become two”,\textsuperscript{13} whilst Sharon Meagher and Patrice DiQuinzio highlight the need to re-conceptualise need, care, and even protection as normal, rather than as anomalous.\textsuperscript{14} Such an overhaul would, needs must, dispel many of the unrealistic and repressive myths that cloud and complicate individual women’s experiences of mothering today.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Mining my own experience}

I grew up in Lancashire, England, in a coastal area notorious for its quicksands – treacherous muds that, once they take hold of an unsuspecting foot or hoof, are tenacious and unyielding. They rarely relinquish their grip; indeed, any struggle only serves to speed the slow but inexorable sucking of the unlucky captive downwards. Reading about the myths surrounding mothering, I recognised the invisible quicksands that I had been wading through since becoming a mother, pulling at my ankles as I moved, resisting, exhausting and frustrating me.

In this paper and in my studio work I am attempting to explore and articulate, from many perspectives (but all of them, to some extent, my own), what it means to me, first, to be a mother – and further, to be both mother and artist. In doing so I continually rub up against the various socially constructed myths that circumscribe this experience, and through them the wider issues from

\textsuperscript{12} Luce Irigaray, \textit{Democracy Begins between Two}, London: Athlone Press, 2000, p. 34.
which they stem. This is first and foremost a personal journey through which I am trying to unplug my ears, to prevent the stifling of my voice, to wrench my ankles from the mud. In my attempts I may, in some small way, also help other mothers to identify and challenge the myths of motherhood and to find their own voices; however, I do not see this work as being only by a mother, for mothers; I am interested in exploring mothering as a model for being in the world. For me art arises from human existence, from the experiences and reflections of the artist as s/he engages with the world. Mary Belenky et al, investigating (in mid-1980s USA) the specific ways in which women learn, concluded that they do so not only in classrooms, but “in relationships, by juggling life demands, by dealing with crises in families and communities”.\(^{16}\) If this is so then mothering, in the richness and enduring quality of its engagement, and the inconceivable variety and scale of its demands, can be seen not as a barrier but rather as a stimulus for critical and creative practice.

In 2002 I completed my BVA in sculpture, intending to commence studying for Honours the following semester. Days after the opening of the degree show, however, I discovered that I was pregnant, and decided to defer my studies for a year. In my first semester I flew to Berlin with my 10-month-old daughter in tow, to spend three months on a study exchange. Six months after completing Honours I resumed my studies, enrolling in a 2-year full-time Masters program. As is evident from this brief chronology, my daughter’s early years (she is nearly three as I write this sentence\(^{17}\)), complete with their developmental milestones, myriad illnesses, and (for me) times of joy, amazement, confusion, frustration, anger and exhaustion, have been interwoven with my postgraduate studies. I find mothering both exciting and


\(^{17}\) N.B. References to my daughter’s age within the text may appear confused – on one page Mo may be described as three, on the next as two and a half, and so on; these anomalies, arising from the working and reworking of the paper over the two years of my candidature, remain as testimony to the organic and non-linear manner in which the paper (mirroring my studio work) has evolved.
engrossing. When contemplating applying for my Masters, it presented as an obvious focus for my studies.

To overtly choose mothering as my research focus, however, I had to overcome two major psychological hurdles. Firstly I had to believe that I, as a mother, could think. Mothering is commonly perceived as requiring action, rather than thought. Secondly, I had to reassure myself that mothering, this activity that has become so central to my life, is a worthy topic of investigation. Perhaps neither of these assertions appear to be provocative. However, to address them I have had to delve deep into what it means to be an individual, a woman, and a mother, challenging some of the main tenets of ‘motherhood’, within both myself and the culture in which I live. My research has afforded me the support that I needed to do so, particularly through the writings of Sara Ruddick, Susan Maushart, Christine Battersby, Adrienne Rich, Sarah Dowse, Luce Irigaray and Iris Marion Young.

**Initial research and narrowing my focus**

‘Mothering’, of course, is a topic as broad as a mother’s lap appears to her infant. 18 At the beginning of my research, I set out to wade through the plethora of books, papers, websites, and so on that relate to mothering, claiming authority on, variously: how to do it; why women want to do it; why women don’t want to do it; why not to read books giving advice on how to do it; how to be a ‘good’ mother; why it is impossible to be a ‘good’ mother in this day and age … and so on. Before long, I began to feel that I was drowning. How was I to narrow my focus?

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18 My initial choice of this broad theme for my Masters research was intentional – I wanted to find a focus as I went along, learning through my experiences, both of mothering and of researching.
Whilst acknowledging the value of objective observation and statistical analysis,\(^{19}\) I intuitively adhere to the idea that the lived experience has an inalienable primacy.\(^{20}\) Therefore from early in my candidature I began to seek out, firstly, any and all writings on mothering by mothers; and secondly, other artists, particularly sculptors, whose work relates to their subjective experiences of mothering. As journalist Jill Ridington says, “Mary Cassatt never did it for me. She was not a mother; it shows.”\(^{21}\)

I found a number of texts concerning maternal subjectivity from the 1970s and ‘80s, and initially assumed that subjective accounts of mothering would therefore be plentiful now. However, this proved not to be the case. Many texts gave voice to something that I had already sensed – that, although there is a huge amount of material on how one should mother, and also on the effects that mothering (good, bad or indifferent) has on the child, there has until recently been very little published about the effects that mothering has on the mother – and particularly on the individual mother. In other words, we have heard little of individual women’s subjective experiences of mothering.

Maushart, examining the lack of subjectivity attributed to mothers, argues that “scholarship, philosophy and virtually every other form of public discourse” have been so silent on ‘motherhood’ because it is not experienced by men, and “what we call public discourse is a forum for what men know.” According to Maushart, ‘motherhood’ is not perceived by male researchers to be a ‘primary experience’ because “men do not mother. Men get mothered”, and therefore “motherhood has usually been examined as something that happens to

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\(^{19}\) For an investigation of how objective statistical analysis can really be, see Steph Lawler, *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects*, London; New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 6-12.


people, and almost never as something that people do.”²² For this reason I have specifically avoided using the term ‘motherhood’ throughout the paper, referring rather to ‘mothering’, a practice that someone (arguably exclusively a woman²³) engages in; that she can, to some extent, choose to engage in,²⁴ and choose how to do so. In contrast ‘motherhood’, in the words of philosopher and academic Patrice DiQuinzio, is “an essential identity or state of being”,²⁵ defined and bound by myths and expectations that mask the myriad and widely differing experiences it involves for individual women. As psychiatrist and author Ann Dally puts it, “There have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented.”²⁶

And on questioning many artists and academics regarding relevant artists, the only name that readily came to most minds was Mary Kelly, with her 1970s work Post-Partum Document. Why are there so few contemporary artist-mothers that anyone knows about? I don’t doubt that mothers are making art, but they don’t seem to be attracting much attention.

As author and journalist Anne Summers details in The End of Equality (2003), the ground gained by the first and second waves of feminism seems to be being eroded in the current day.²⁷ Perhaps this trend accounts for the lack of relevant material, both writings and art, available to me today.

²² Maushart, op. cit. p. 42.
²³ This exclusivity is debated – see Sara Ruddick, Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002, p. xi, where Ruddick attempts to separate out ‘mothering’ from ‘birthgiving’, construing mothering as “work rather than as an identity or a fixed biological or legal relationship”; and Sara Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth” in Bassin et al, pp. 34-38, where Ruddick discusses and adapts the stance she took in Maternal Thinking.
²⁴ Whether women are free to choose to mother is debatable – see p. 30, footnote #63.
²⁵ DiQuinzio, op. cit. p. xv.
The neglect of mothers’ subjectivity led to my decision to ground my writing and studio practice in my own experiences of motherhood, and also to focus on ‘primary sources’ in my research – that is, to investigate the work of other artists, principally sculptors, who are mothers and whose work relates to their own experiences of mothering. Having selected a number of relevant artists, I have then used a largely intuitive process to choose both works, and reflections by artists, which I feel resonate with my own experience of being both mother and artist.

Finding myself steered repeatedly towards Mary Kelly and her *Post-Partum Document*, I decided that this work must be tackled first. Already familiar with the *Document* from my undergraduate years, it was not without a sense of trepidation that I approached my attempt to delve deeper into the (for me) dense and unyielding text version of this work. I recently had to move a large, heavy and unwieldy futon. Floppy and inert, and lacking any protrusion or texture that might afford a grip, it was almost impossible to manipulate, slipping repeatedly from rapidly numbing fingertips and subsiding sulkily onto the floor, stairs and pavement. Kelly’s *Document*, for me, loomed as the mental equivalent of that futon.

However, a colleague had given me a useful piece of advice: “When you find a relevant book in a library, check the works each side of it.” Taking the *Document* from a library shelf, I recalled her words and did so. Bassin, Honey and Kaplan’s *Representations of Motherhood* (1994) caught my eye. Containing both Sara Ruddick’s chapter “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth” and Marianne Hirsch’s “Maternity and Rememory”, this find provided not only valuable research material, but also validation of my desire to re-visit and re-interpret certain works made prior to my becoming a mother.

**Rememory**

I spend a considerable part of this paper re-visiting earlier works, considering them in the light of my experience of pregnancy, giving birth and being a
mother. In doing so I have derived support from Toni Morrison’s description, in her novel *Beloved*,\(^{28}\) of a “peculiar maternal memory”\(^ {29}\) for which she coins the term ‘rememory’. Rememory is described by Hirsch as “a ground of resistance and opposition ... neither memory nor forgetting, but memory combined with (the threat of) repetition”.\(^ {30}\) Its purpose, she says, is to replace traditional maternal memory, “never good enough to remember the good ... and never bad enough to forget the pain”,\(^ {31}\) with something that “like the weather ... is always there”, affording a new kind of memory where trauma renders traditional memory impossible.\(^ {32}\)

Since long before my daughter’s birth, my understanding of mothering has been, and will continue to be, shaped and constrained both by cultural myths, and by my own particular circumstances and position within this culture.\(^ {33}\)

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\(^{30}\) ibid. In *Beloved* Sethe, an escaped slave, has murdered Beloved, her baby daughter, to prevent her from being enslaved. Rememory allows Sethe to revisit, understand and learn to live with the horror and confusion of her past. Hirsch states that “in *Beloved*, time is neither linear nor cyclical; memory and forgetting are replaced by ... rememory: repetition + memory, not simply a recollection of the past but its return, its re-presentation, its re-incarnation, and thereby the re-vision of memory itself. Through the rememory of Beloved, the past again becomes present but its presence does not re-engulf, it does not kill. It can be survived.” (ibid. p. 107.)

\(^{31}\) ibid. p. 108. This description of maternal memory relates to another myth of motherhood, namely, that a mother can never do enough and is always wrong, leading to ‘mother-blaming’ and ‘motherguilt’. Hirsch describes a “hierarchy of motherhood over selfhood.” (ibid. p. 99.)

\(^{32}\) For example, for Sethe, allowing her to remember both “the beautiful trees of [the farm on which she was a slave] and the bodies [of her husband and other would-be escapees] hanging from them.” (ibid. p. 108.)

\(^{33}\) Hirsch describes “hegemonic familial structures dominated by patriarchy and capitalism and therefore oppressive to women and children.” (ibid. p. 95.) Despite the progress that can be attributed to the second wave feminism in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s, with its focus on addressing issues of power and ending discrimination, I assert that these structures still prevent women, and particularly mothers, from freely apprehending and laying down their own memories as they go through their lives, thus generating a need for the process of rememory. For more on the problematic relationship between mothering and feminism, see: Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001, p. 7; Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, eds., *Representations of*
Rememory, for me, involves what I anticipate will be an endless process of examination and reinterpretation, both as an artist and as a mother. It allows me to revisit my own experiences and actions and understand them from a position of greater knowledge, clarity and honesty.

**Structure of the text**

I have structured my paper in the form of two interwoven texts. The first text, addressed to my daughter Mo, consists of reflections on my own experiences of mothering, whilst the second is the result of more conventional theoretical research. Thus I cast my maternal experiences as a backdrop against which my research is set, attempting to illustrate the manner in which my experiences are fuelling my research, and reflecting the way in which I believe all artists, whether consciously or unconsciously, work – by experiencing, internally synthesising, and then producing. Specific connections between individual experiences and research are not always overtly stated. Although some of the interconnections can be simply articulated, others are multiple and interwoven, and I can find no effective way to articulate this complexity from within the linearity of the written page.

Italics are used to distinguish the two texts – partly to simplify the reader’s task, but also to highlight the ongoing interplay between these parallel strands of my life. They cannot be blended into one piece of writing, yet neither are they parallel texts that sit alongside each other, complete within themselves. Like conjoined twins that share certain vital organs, at every stage they inform and rely upon one another. They are not independent, but are rather two means of reflection on the same phenomenon, two lenses held up to examine it from different perspectives.

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My decision to address the first text to my daughter, Mo, I interpret in retrospect as an unconscious attempt to reconcile two desires – firstly, to mother Mo well; and secondly, to continue my studio practice – necessitating a turning away from her, a repeated, albeit temporary, disengagement from my relationship with her.  

The intertwined texts do not combine neatly and predictably, tidily sharing each page. Several pages of personal notes and reflections may be followed by a small section of research, then a couple more pages of personal text interspersed with hefty chunks of research. This pattern, or lack of, closely mirrors my Masters candidacy, in which the balance of ‘research’ and ‘parenting’ has varied wildly from day to day and week to week.

The realities of mothering leave only relatively short periods of time in which to engage in other work – in my case, currently, making art, reading, writing, or thinking. For this reason I began to write initially in note form, jotting down observations and reflections as they occurred. Over the period of my candidacy I have returned many times to examine, reflect on and refine the expression of the memories, sentiments and so on recorded in the notes, and to link and expand my ideas as I deepen my knowledge of the field.

In both my reading and my writing I continually find, and make, references to what has traditionally been called ‘women’s work’ – knitting, patchwork, weaving, mending. Contemporary Western women, the writers of virtually all of the texts I have turned to, are largely ‘liberated’ from such activities; yet what is inherent in ‘women’s work’ – the making do, the salvaging, the multi-tasking, the integrating of hitherto separate substances – evokes the intersubjectivity that is at the root of my, and often their, subject matter.

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34 See Chapter Three, pp. 38-40, for author Adrienne Rich’s description of this dilemma, and impressionist painter Berthe Morisot’s and sculptor Monica Bock’s strategies for solving it.
Artist Frances Joseph, employing the technique of patchwork in her installation work (see Chapter Three, pp. 49-50), is interested in how ‘women’s work’, not requiring “the sort of obsessive solitary focus of more heroic art media”, allows for the expression of a “language of interruption”. The main goal of my Masters research, I now realise, has been to develop my own language of interruption.

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