

*Future Clan:*

A Visual Investigation into the Dynamics of Adolescence  
and Mothers

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by

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## Abstract

This project is a visual interpretation of my journey of motherhood at the time of my son's adolescence. Adolescence encompasses a reshaping of roles and relationships for both mother and son and these shifts are often accompanied by confusion and conflict. The relationship between parent and child is central, and is presented in this submission from the perspective of the mother. The balance between dependency and independence for the adolescent, and a mother's response to these oscillations, has been central to the overall project.

There are a number of questions that arise from this personal investigation that have a theoretical underpinning, including; How can portraiture explore the complex realm of selfhood and the subject? and What place does such an intimate exploration of a lived experience have in contemporary art? and Why has this aspect of women's lives been so little explored by artists?

The exegesis reviews feminist writing on motherhood and art, such as theorists Marianne Hirsch, Carol Armstrong Rozsika Parker and Andrea Liss. It is significant that as recently as the 2009 publication *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss questions why the perspective of the mother has been under-represented within contemporary art practice. Following this there is a discussion of portraiture and expressionism and how these operate within this research project. Finally there is a discussion of printmaking processes that allow for an expression of the embodied experience of motherhood and how the use of a camera to record poses, expresses the fragmented experience of parenting.

I have located this research within the context of artists working in an autobiographical manner focussing on the intimate relationships with their own children. These include Suzanne Valadon, Käthe Kollwitz and Sally Mann. These artists use portraiture to explore the relationship of the child and the maternal gaze and the conflicted role of the mother/artist. The second contextual grouping is artists who have made work specifically about adolescence: Hellen Van Meene, Rineke Dijkstra and Lise Sarfati. These artists deal with the search for identity in which the adolescent is engaged as well as the adolescent's relationship to his/her changing physical form and awareness of self-image. These artists are all photographers and work with models who are not related to them.

In my final presentation there are five series of prints. The series and their titles do not represent a chronology of events but rather are grouped to reflect discrete psychological states. The printmaking processes of woodcut, collagraph and etching are used, and combined in many cases, to represent these states and reflect an ongoing experimentation. The works use colour, texture and scale as well as an expressive mark making in order to engage with the mother's empathetic view of her son.

The research project is an intensive visual portrayal of one individual over several years. The final works and exegesis contribute to an understanding of what it is to be a mother of a troubled adolescent at this time, with all the ambiguities and anxieties that pertain to that experience. It portrays the anguish of the artist in

revealing the dark side, seldom expressed, of mothering, in exposing frailties in parenting, while still honouring and respecting her son in the process.

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## **Introduction**

This project is a visual interpretation of my journey of motherhood at the time of my son's adolescence. This stage of life encompasses a reshaping of roles and relationships for both mother and son and these shifts are often accompanied by confusion and conflict. Ruptures in usual patterns of behaviour challenge the role of mothers during their sons' progress through adolescence. The balance between dependency and independence for the adolescent and a mother's response to those changes has been central to the overall project. While the subject appearing in most of the images is my son, the works can more properly be seen as portraits of myself as they are primarily about my responses to my son's adolescence.

## **Background**

Since the birth of my son in 1990, my work has explored the relationship of mother and son. Central to the issues driving my research has been the nature of our relationship: single parent and only child and in particular male child. In 1997 my Masters Research project entitled *Mother and Child: An Investigation of Mutual Responses* explored the relationship between a mother and son up to the age of six through the medium of print.



Figure 1: Gabrielle Falconer, *Untitled*, 1995

These images were predominantly etchings and woodcuts and focussed on the physicality of the parent/child relationship. They expressed the intimacy and dependency of early childhood and the close bond that can be shared between mother and child. The images were tightly cropped and close-up. The overlapping of their forms and use of diptychs conveyed a symbiotic relationship (Figure 1).



Figure 2: Gabrielle Falconer, *The Boy*, 2002

Following my Masters Research, I produced two bodies of work for exhibition that explored early adolescence and my relationship to my son entitled *The Tender Years* and *Close Up*. These series were formative in determining my approach to my doctoral research. While these portraits visually recorded the physical changes of puberty, they also recorded the posturing of my son in response to these changes. While modelling for these portraits, my son took on poses of defiance and showed more awareness of his body. At this stage, I started working from photographs of my son. Previously, I had largely worked from my imagination and memory. This was a breakthrough for my artistic practice; photography ensured the focus moved to his gestures and facial expressions. The picture frame cropped his body so that there was a sense of him being close to the

surface and extending beyond the picture frame (Figure 2). The works represented early puberty and signified a growing fissure in the relationship between mother and son.



Figure 3: Gabrielle Falconer, *The Tender Years*, 2003

These series were about the physical changes of adolescence and were portraits of my son; however this research project has adopted a more consistent and dedicated focus to the psychological changes for both the mother and son during adolescence, in an effort to capture the complexity of these experiences.



### Motivation and aims of the project

An important development in my process was to expand my printmaking repertoire and explore techniques that were capable of expressing the overwhelming enormity of my son's presence in our home and the intensity of our interactions. Initially my artistic references included expressive modernist printmakers such as Edvard Munch, Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix and the innovative contemporary printmaking of artists such as Jim Dine, Georg Baselitz and Ken Curry. These artists utilised expressive mark making and the material presence of the printed and painted surface to convey psychological tension. Their processes corresponded directly to their subjects.

I also aimed to find processes that spoke about a violent fracturing. I sought to capture the rawness of human experience through traditional techniques that entail a straining against the limitations of the material surface of metal or wood, capturing an impression of that struggle that closely corresponds to the struggles of parenting. My aim has always been to be fully present in that process. I have sought to represent the complexities and emotions of adolescence without resorting to sentimentality and generalisations. Consequently I have explored my own role as a mother in the process and have made prints that are expressive of the shifts in my own sense of identity.

Most depictions of the experience of adolescence that I had come across prior to embarking on my PhD were in the medium of film and photography. For example the film *Thirteen* (2003) which is an American film directed by Catherine

Hardwicke and written by Hardwicke and Nikki Reed, the film's co-star. It is an autobiographical film based on Reed's life at age twelve and thirteen. Another example is Larry Clark who has been creating photographs and films about adolescent experience for many years. He is most well known for his groundbreaking series of photographs of adolescents involved in injecting drug use entitled *Tulsa* of 1971, and his feature film *Kids* (1995). However it was the controversy surrounding another feature film, *Ken Park* (2002), which brought him the most notoriety. Clark's work focuses on youth sub-cultures and engages questions about masculinity, family relationships, bigotry, violence and more broadly the construction of identity during adolescence in contemporary, suburban, American culture. However, I felt that these works, particularly commercial film, where some resolution is anticipated, did not sufficiently distill the disorientation and dislocation of the mother. Also they failed to capture an embodied experience.

I wanted to explore my son's search for identity and reflect on my own search for a viable position within a volatile relationship through an intense observation of our physical presence in each other's lives. The physical aspect of the relationship differs from the physicality of the mother and son in early childhood. At adolescence the mother and son are at a physical distance and are renegotiating the terms of the relationship as the mother's role of physical caring becomes increasingly redundant. In representing the physicality of the relationship, I wanted to avoid objectifying the male adolescent, my son, by depicting him as a symbol of fleeting beauty and transience. Instead I wanted to work from the

mother's perspective and reciprocate the intimate eye of a mother through a series of portraits.

My investigation into motherhood and adolescence demonstrated the scarcity of research by women artists into adolescence as experienced by themselves as mothers. As a fundamental experience for parents it seems unusual that this transforming experience for mothers has been so rarely depicted. It could be that women artists have found solace in escaping the demands of their adolescents and have chosen other subjects as a form of therapy. There could be a propensity to protect themselves and their dependents from inspection by outside observers when things are not 'perfect' and pretend instead, everything is going well. It could be that our culture's emphasis on women as carers and nurturers somehow dampens any discussion of a time when a mother lets go of the nurturing role and stands back from the role of dominance she has had in her child's life. However, it is most likely that the omission of acknowledging this significant event is due to us living in a patriarchal society. The relationship between adolescents and their mothers is the preserve of women and has therefore been considered largely irrelevant. A successful female artist can not be seen to be addressing domestic concerns.

In a recently published book *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss (2009) outlines some of the reasons for this omission in recording women's lived experiences. Liss states that it is not just the patriarchal rejection of motherhood that has caused women to avoid the maternal in their work but that an anti-

essentialist stance by early feminists meant that motherhood was seen as a taboo topic. Liss writes:

The mother, however, remained a silent outcast for many feminists who strategically needed to distance themselves from all that was culturally coded as passive, weak, and irrational, sometimes repudiating their own mothers in the process (Liss 2009, p. xv).

She goes further by saying that motherhood was therefore seen as an embarrassment.

An embarrassment is something that impedes, confuses, deranges, and complicates. Motherhood within early feminist struggles and still today interferes with retrograde myths of the avant-garde (Liss 2009, p. xvi).

Although upon first consideration these words and reflections of Liss seem an exaggeration, there is also an undercurrent of embarrassment that I identify with. Throughout this research project there is a particular kind of squeamishness regarding making work about the mothering experience. Reading Liss' account affirms the cultural origins of this embarrassment. Motherhood as a cultural institution was rejected by early feminists yet this experience of caring takes up a huge proportion of women's time while being vastly underrepresented within visual culture.

Liss outlines how contemporary feminists no longer need to regard motherhood and feminism as mutually exclusive and that therefore:

a redefined field of possibilities opens up to cultural theory, art history, art practice, and the lived material experiences of women for rethinking the representation of motherhood as more than a sign of codified femininity or as a muted allegory (Liss 2009, p. xvi).

Liss devises the concept of thinking *(m)otherwise* and sees this approach as an important revision of past feminist practices and an important social project. She regards ideas of *reciprocity* and *intersubjectivity* as key to an understanding of this intersection of the maternal and visual art and theory. Intersubjectivity arises from the mother's "watchful maternal gaze" as she engages in the mothering of her child and it is this concept that is implicit in my own attempts at thinking and making visual work, *(m)otherwise*. Liss describes how this attitude can have implications for understanding outside the mother/child dyad toward a greater understanding of human relations.

Working with a feminist concept of intersubjectivity- how to emphatically be in the place of the other and inside one's self, how to care for another and one's self – allows me to challenge patriarchal ideas of dominance over mothers and others (Liss 2009, p. xx).

She also describes groundbreaking feminist works such as the Mother Art projects of the 1970s, Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art* and Renee Cox's contemporary revision of family photographs. These artists have expressed their maternal experience and Liss describes how their art has contributed to our understandings of contemporary women's lives. However, there is still a gap in addressing the mother's experience of her adolescent child.

It is this lacuna that I seek to address in my work.

Chapter 1 outlines and examines my core questions. It investigates the aspects of adolescence that are relevant to my work with some reference to developmental

psychologists such as Eric Erikson and Donald Winnicott. This extends into a discussion of the mother/artist and the complexity of this position. Following this, I reflect on my understandings of the concepts of 'selfhood' and 'portraiture' as they relate specifically to artistic production, and in particular, my printmaking practice. I consider aspects of selfhood and portraiture such as fragmentation, self-expression, gender, narrative and the relationship between individual creativity and social context. The physical processes of printmaking and their centrality to the thesis are highlighted in relation to expressionism and portraiture.

Chapter 2 presents a description of the visual art context for my research with separate sections focussing on artists who have made work about their own children and artists who have made work about adolescence. In the first section I analyse and make connections between my own work and the work of Suzanne Valadon, Käthe Kollwitz and Sally Mann. In each case there are different psychological tensions conveyed regarding their relationship with their children and each artist's body of work informs my own practice in distinct ways.

The second section of Chapter 2 deals with artists who have portrayed adolescents who are not related to them. They include the photographers Hellen Van Meene, Rineke Dijkstra and Lise Sarfati. These artists depict contemporary adolescence and address themes such as the adolescent's integration of body changes, the use of fashion to express identity and the impact of significant events on the individual's psychology.

Chapter 3 presents a description and explanation of the five series that comprise the visual component of the thesis. This chapter outlines the printmaking processes used and describes their relevance to the conceptual underpinnings of the project. I have included visual documentation of the exhibited prints. In this chapter there are comparisons made with artists discussed in Chapter 2. There is also a description of artists and particular works that have been significant for technical and stylistic reasons. These artists have different conceptual directions to my own work but have been significant in influencing the development of my visual practice.

Finally I outline the parameters of this research and how it contributes to the field. The conclusion details the ways in which the research project has achieved the aims outlined in Chapter 1 in both the conceptual process of making work about this time as well as technical aspects of printmaking. I refer back to my original research questions and reflect on how they are resolved in the research.

## Chapter One

### THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

#### Introduction

The three areas that have dominated my research are the experience of parenting an adolescent, the transformation of the relationship and the visual expression of this transformation. There are a number of questions that arise from these areas of investigation that have a more theoretical underpinning, including: what are the ethical dilemmas of the mother/artist?', how can portraiture explore the complex realm of selfhood and the subject?', what place does such an intimate exploration of a lived experience have in contemporary art? and how can the expressive mark convey the psychological tensions of this relationship?

#### The experience of adolescence from the point of view of the mother

This project seeks to make work that not only resonates with other parents of adolescents but also is able to communicate a range of emotions that are experienced by adolescents themselves. The particular type of adolescence important to this research is a male adolescence and how this is perceived by a mother. Rage, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, violence both within and without that relationship and depression are the disturbing and particular experiences that are the context to this project.

However, it is the oscillation between dependence and independence, or said in another way the process of growing up, which I have identified as central to my own, and my son's experience and which I have sought to capture through portraiture.



It is widely accepted that adolescence is more than a time of physical change but also has important social and psychological implications for the adolescent, their family and society. For this project the psychological changes are paramount and those that are particularly important to my understandings are outlined in the following paragraphs.

According to Erik Erikson, the pioneering developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, adolescence represents a crisis for the individual and the most important developmental task of adolescence is the formation of a sense of identity (1968). This identity entails a cohesive set of values and personal goals separate from those of the parents' He termed this stage 'identity versus role confusion'. Study into the process of formulating this sense of identity has been ongoing and contemporary research emphasises the role of parents, care givers, peers and teachers in this process (White, Speisman & Costos 1985, p. 415).

The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott theorised in particular about the relationship between adolescents and their parents during this developmental stage (1965). He stresses that adolescence is a time when individuals experience what he terms "the doldrums", when the struggle between defiant independence and regressive dependence is paramount in the process of individuation.

White, Speisman and Costos (1985) describe this process of individuation as one which involves constant renegotiation between parent and adolescent. They assert:

In contrast to traditional conceptualisations of adolescence as a time of breaking the parent-child bond, recent evidence supports a view of this period as one of gradual renegotiation between parents and children from the asymmetrical authority of early and middle childhood toward, potentially, a peerlike mutuality in adulthood (White, Speisman & Costos 1985, p 415).

Rather than the authoritative relationship of a parent in relation to their adolescent, a more reciprocal relational construct is identified. This relates directly to my own experience at this time. Over the course of this research I have realised how important my own behaviour and attitudes toward my son have been to our relationship and his development. In relation to creating visual work, I see that our creative relationship parallels this psychological process as we have gradually negotiated how to work together.

There is much tension implicit in the position of the parent at this stage as the adolescent seems to walk a tightrope between dependence and an at-times reckless independence. For the parent this induces an oscillation between attentive protective caring and allowing a teenager to take reasonable risks and be responsible for their life's course. When the teenager's behaviour is disturbing and dysfunctional this is a precarious position for the parents. Personally I have found it to be an extremely demanding emotional experience, involving relinquishing control at a time when the dangers from without and within for the adolescent are potentially life threatening. My usual reactions and mothering processes became redundant. These paradoxes associated with the mother's efforts to encourage independence and selfhood while also protecting and nurturing her child are areas that have become central to my thinking and inform my visual representations of adolescence.

This space of confusion and conflict for the mother I have experienced personally and explored in the research. Psychological states include a potent sense of dislocation, the sense of helplessness as my son has engaged in risk taking, or has withdrawn into himself, and the loss of the innocence of childhood. Yet all this uncertainty is contrasted by the excitement and wonder of watching the phenomenon of the individual emerge. Consequently “ambivalence” is a concept that has been important to my understanding of motherhood at this stage. Rozika Parker describes the relationship between motherhood and ambivalence thus:

The French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has observed that motherhood makes passions circulate. I would say that it is ambivalence, in particular, that makes passions circulate, as well as firming boundaries, forcing reflection, provoking separation and unification, and thus providing a spur to both individuation for both mother and child (Parker 1995, p. 20).

In Western culture there are no rituals for mothers or fathers to mark this stage of life. Perhaps our closest approximation to an acknowledgement of the huge changes taking place is the celebration of a son or daughter’s eighteenth birthday. *Cutting the Cord: Stories of Children, Love and Loss*, edited by Debra Adelaide (1995), is an anthology of personal accounts of mothers’ experiences of separation from their children. The book is a useful resource in that the contributors describe some of the contradictions and ambiguities that resonate with my own experience. Overall the accounts reveal that the experience can be a life altering event.

The immensity and inevitability of the change and how individuals adapt to the

change is a dominant theme of the writing of these women. Helen Martin's description of a kaleidoscope is an interesting visual metaphor describing the tensions of parenting. She writes:

Cutting the cord is a gradual experience of mutual growth. There is no preparation for it and no way to avoid it. We can only go through it in our own time and honour our feelings all the way. The process seems to be one of simultaneously relinquishing the cord and expanding it into something new. I think a kaleidoscope with those bright individual pieces of shaped glass interconnecting to form a mandala, a brilliant pattern of reflected light. Turn it again, and the separate pieces re-form. Another aspect is revealed as the individual component parts shift and shape themselves into a new image. The old pattern has gone. We can endlessly mourn its loss or delight in the change and compelling power of the new picture. So it is with our children (Martin 1998, pp. 286-287).

My perceptions of societal expectations meant I questioned my identity as a single mother and whether I was capable of guiding my son into manhood. The expediency of easy judgements could not encompass the reality or make any meaning of the process in which I found myself. I wanted to make art that would adequately describe this experience as well as challenging the assumptions and stereotypes of media commentators.

Although this project involves at times an uncomfortable exposure of both myself and my son, an important overall aim is to account for the often denied and relegated aspects of this time. In openly dealing with this subject, I see this project as a manifestation of the idea of valuing and safekeeping women's lives. Katherine Hoffmann stresses the ability of art to validate and record the experience of the artist and writes:

In the Heideggerian aesthetic, creation and safekeeping, composition and conservation are absolutely indivisible. Even the most revolutionary work of art, if it is authentic, conserve and give to Being a dwelling and sanctuary such as it can find nowhere else (Hoffmann 1996, p. 8).

Carol Armstrong discusses these ideas specifically in relation to women as artists.

I have included this quote as it sums up much of what underlies my work and indeed my feminism. She states:

I think for the figure of the ‘woman artist’ to matter at all now, her art must make some of kind of difference, a difference that has to do with the ethics of and in aesthetics . . . the ethical purpose of art is to make you see, think, and feel anew – not “new” in the sense of modernist novelty, but ‘anew’, in the generative sense, which is to say again but as if for the first time; to move you to those redeeming features of human life, care and curiosity of the noninstrumental kinds; to induce you to respond to the domicile you inhabit- to be receptive to it, to allow it to affect you and be affectionate toward it; to make live what is so often deadened by the doing-time of day-to-day getting-by; even to make you love what is simultaneously the horror, the farce, and the beauty of the flawed world we live in, which would not be if it were not flawed (Armstrong 2006, pp. 13-14).

Here Armstrong delineates the purpose of an art that exposes the seemingly mundane and undoubtedly persistent struggles of individual women. This body of work is an opportunity to stay in contact with the world I inhabit and examine that very profound time of a mother letting go of a child and what that can mean in our contemporary culture. This is something that all mothers experience in one way or another. Equally, a transition of roles and the subsequent displacement and uncertainty that it produces is something we all encounter at different stages of life.

### The conflicted role of the mother/artist

In many ways my position as the artist/mother is a privileged position as I have greater access to my subject, and yet I have found that there are certain ethical dilemmas in a mother making work about the tumultuous period of the adolescence of her son. The exposure through visual imagery, particularly portraiture, of another individual's struggle involves making judgements about what is necessary to reveal and what should be withheld. This is particularly relevant when the subject is a minor and at a crucial stage of development. I have continually juggled my protective role as a mother with an artist's inherent curiosity regarding life's ambiguities.

Overall, the process of creating visual and written work that explores this time and exposes both myself and my son, has been challenging. This process is fraught with the danger of revealing an unnatural dependency on one another, experiences of domestic violence and underlying it all is the ever present question of how responsible I am for my son's difficult adolescence.

This problem of the mother/artist can be viewed more objectively in the context of psychoanalytic discussions of the maternal look: how the look operates in the relationship of the developing child and the mother and what implications this has for the child. Psychoanalytic theory purports that it is the *maternal look* that contributes to the child's subject formation and is therefore central to the child's emotional and social development. Lacan (1977) describes how at an early age, the young child confronts herself as an image in the mirror and thereby acquires

subjectivity. As the child looks toward her own reflection in the mirror, she also faces her mother's reflection as she is held in her mother's arms. Lacan writes:

The journey from the imaginary wholeness and identification of the 'I' to the state of being divided and subjected to the social 'Umwelt,' the journey from the 'specular I' to the 'social I' that is, must be facilitated and encouraged by the confirming look of another, maternal, figure who mediates the child's entrance into the social (Lacan 1977, p. 156).

Marianne Hirsch (1997) considers these theories in relation to artist/mother Sally Mann who has also used her own children as the muses in her work over many years. In 1992 Mann became one of America's most successful photographers known widely for her intimate, challenging and technically brilliant images of her three children. At the time of her initial success, she was accused by critics of exploiting her children in the process of creating her photographs.

In her analysis of both Mann's work and the resulting critical debate, Hirsch asks what sense of self do Mann's children have if instead of seeing themselves reflected in their mother's eyes, they are "reflected in the lens of her camera" (1997, p. 155). Does the mother who is in the position of looking, the mother with a camera (or etching tool), become "the phallic, omnipotent, threatening, monstrous, sadistic, voyeuristic, masculine subject who turns her child into the object and therefore disallows the child's subject formation" (Hirsch 1997, p. 155).



Figure 4: Sally Mann, *Holding Virginia*, 1989

I have asked myself similar questions: what are the implications of this variant of the maternal look for both my child and myself and our interaction? In other words, can taking pictures and presenting my son on the two-dimensional surface of my prints affect his ability to successfully individuate and progress toward independence?

Hirsch asks what then if it is the mother who herself operates the camera instead of remaining in the role of mediating and facilitating? Hirsch suggests that the mother's use of the camera to capture her child's image does not necessarily place her in an omnipotent and threatening position. She draws on the theories of psychoanalyst Daniel Stern in this regard. In Stern's *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985) the mother and child's interaction is renegotiated at different



stages with infants described as regulating the engagement and interaction as much as the mother. The separation of mother and child is not seen as a linear model but operates in a more dynamic manner and is renegotiated at different times. This is significant in relation to my earlier description of the oscillation between dependence and independence observed in my own relationship with my son. This discussion of identification and differentiation offers an alternative to the limiting concepts of the mother's omnipotence and the child's vulnerability and importantly allows for different readings of the role of a mother with a camera.

Hirsch (1997) argues that Sally Mann's photographs are not simply an imposition of the maternal gaze on the child but involve a significant degree of reciprocity between mother and child. This is due to the fact that the photographs are taken as the children play rather than being "choreographed" by Sally Mann.

This concept of play and collaborative processes also applies to this research project. My son and I worked together and discussed constructing poses, facial expressions and clothing. It could indeed be argued that the process of visually documenting my son's life has been assisted by our process of marking his life, affirming our relationship and discussing our difficulties. I would further argue that the use of a digital camera in contrast to a large format camera, alters the relationship between subject and photographer. In contrast to Sally Mann's practice where the children do not see themselves until they are printed on contact sheets or in the large black and white prints on the gallery wall, my son was able

to view the image of himself in the camera and delete images or request different poses immediately. Sometimes I was directing him and at times he came up with ideas and would explain to me why he had chosen certain expressions or poses. The element of performance on his part and his commitment to the project cannot be underestimated. In doing so he was behaving more as a collaborator during this stage of the process rather than the exploited and objectified child. The digital camera has blurred the lines between subject and photographer, where at times the one holding the camera acts as mere tripod and it is the subject that is controlling the gaze.

### Selfhood and Portraiture

While the process of producing images of my son is collaborative in many respects, at the same time, the portraits of him reveal as much about me as they do about my son. My research into adolescence and motherhood is very much an autobiographical approach, even though it is made up largely of portraits of an ‘other’, my son. The images are to be viewed as a mother’s portrayal of her developing understandings of her child. This is of necessity a one-sided account of this relationship. As an artist, I am the one selecting which images best fit with my understandings of this relationship, which colours to use and what to crop and manipulate through the process of printmaking. The resulting images are first and foremost, expressive of my response to my son’s turmoils.

Joanna Woodall cites Michelangelo’s adage that ““every painter paints himself”, a Renaissance formulation of the recognisably modern belief that all works of art

are invested with the presence of their author, and are in effect a kind of oblique self-portrait” (Woodall 2005, p. 17). Richard Brilliant also points to the complexity inherent in the portrait as he writes about the “the authority of likeness” (1991, p. 23). He describes the viewer’s irrational expectation that a photograph or picture should capture the viewer’s personal perception of the subject. He writes:

The immanent power of a portrait image stimulates cognition with such force that the psychodynamics of perception interfere with the comprehension of the image as something different from the image of the actual person (1991, p. 24).

Therefore, portrait images are both compelling and misleading and ultimately dissatisfying if the viewer expects the work to *be* the person represented. This also contributes to my decision to foreground the mother’s visual perception and not title the works with my son’s name. Similarly many of the works portraying adolescents that I respond to do not name the individual portrayed.

Munch’s portraits of his family were also ‘self’ portraits where his reactions to the changes undergone by members of his family were paramount. *The Sick Child* (Figure 5) is a portrait of his sister Sophie, who is gravely ill. In the numerous paintings and many prints of this subject, Munch repeatedly depicted a scene remembered from his own childhood when Sophie was fifteen and he was thirteen. Sophie was suffering from tuberculosis and eventually died from this disease, an event that would have been both traumatic and memorable for the young Munch. This work is a portrait of Munch’s own childhood fears as the adult artist remembers them. Munch has portrayed a small boy’s feelings of helplessness and panic at the sight of his sister’s suffering and mother’s

desperation, rather than Sophie's own bodily or emotional experience of her illness. It is a portrait of his own remembered terror; an emotion that remains potent for him as an adult.



Figure 5: Edvard Munch, *The Sick Child*, 1896

Likewise in Munch's iconic painting entitled *Puberty* (Figure 6), he has depicted a pre-adolescent girl perched on the edge of her bed staring out of the painting toward the viewer or, in a more metaphorical reading, her future. This painting is Munch's only work where he has focussed on adolescence. Munch captures a sense of apprehension in this composition through his use of dark colours, the tense pose of the figure, the terrified expression in her large eyes and the threatening indistinct shadows behind her. *Puberty* is a powerful painting as it captures the anxiety that Munch perhaps perceived in his sister at this stage of her life. Munch is able to locate a point of stillness within this claustrophobic and emotionally charged scene. The subject seems to be striving for communication as she looks toward the viewer for complicity in understanding the impact of puberty that she seems subject to. However, *Puberty* can also be seen as an expression of Munch's fears of the girl's budding sexuality.

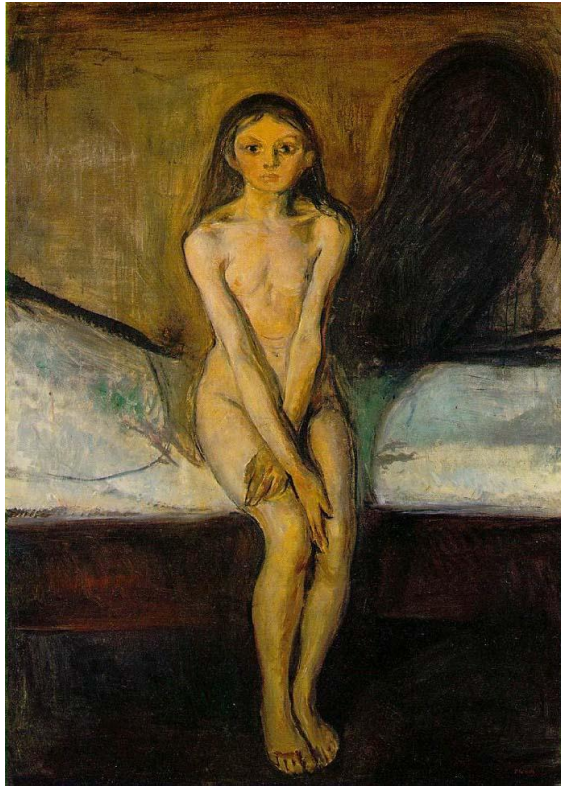


Figure 6: Edvard Munch, *Puberty*, 1895

Munch's depiction of a pale, naked figure within a darkened, gloomy space effectively heightens the emotions and tensions of this image of puberty. One could also interpret the looming shadows attached to the girl's naked form as the threatening female sexuality that in other works by Munch is represented as a destructive vampire. It is through these portraits of other family members and later lovers that we come to understand Munch's own psychological struggles.

In this project, the 'selfhood' I seek to express in my work is always my own although a self in relationship with another. My portraits are accounts of an attempt to empathise with my son. Like Munch, I am contemplating the impact of physical and psychic change and my own reactions are paramount.

Significantly, in every case, the photographs selected to be developed into prints were the ones in which my son's pose was less purposeful. These more candid images captured the vulnerability of the individual in transformation. Even though in some of the images he is self-aware and striking a pose, to me there is clumsiness in these poses that expresses the adolescent's struggle to express his identity. It is during adolescence when we are sometimes best able to express this struggle and it is later that we learn to masquerade our awkwardness with often imposed social roles. In my work, the process of portrayal legitimises this struggle with self-expression.

I think it is a self consciousness with which we all continue to struggle in varying degrees throughout our lives but at adolescence it is acute. In the artistic process, it is me identifying the individual in transition in the photographs and reproduced in the prints. This process mirrors the familial role of parents who reflect back to their child, acceptance and recognition of their emerging selves.

### Expressionism, printmaking and portraiture

The relationship between the material processes of printmaking and the intention inherent in portraiture are central to this project. Printed portraits are different from photographs or written descriptions in that my perception of the subject's emotional state and my own responses are conveyed through the marks made through etching on metal and cutting into plywood. The relic of this expression, the print, is testament to my engagement with the physical presence of another, even if it is mediated through the photograph, memory, the materials of production and my own mental processes and choices as the work is being made.

This expressive approach has been prevalent in Western art since the Renaissance, although we often think of the modern Expressionists as the earliest exemplars of this. Joanna Woodall (2005) discusses portraiture with reference to Renaissance artists and describes the ‘painting’ as the perfect metaphor for the relationship between the abstract mind or spirit and the physical embodiment of the person portrayed in the painting. Woodall describes paintings as physically invested with the artist rather than created by a designing and removed figure. The artist is physically present in the portrait through the physical similarity of the subjects to the artist him or herself, but also through the artist’s physical handling of the paint. Although Woodall is referencing Dürer and the more spontaneous and freely painted works of Titian, I am strongly reminded of the uncanny family resemblance of Rembrandt’s subjects such as the couple in *The Jewish Bride* (Figure 7). His portraits are of disparate unrelated subjects, and yet appear to represent members of one family such is the similarity of facial expression and structure. I see these as humanitarian paintings in that Rembrandt has identified with these individuals to the degree that they start looking like him. He is also conveying something of his own bodily involvement in the act of painting as the paint takes on a feeling of his own bodily presence. I would go as far to say that I feel I know something of Rembrandt, through his portrayals of others.



Figure 7: Rembrandt, *The Jewish Bride*, 1665

During the Renaissance, the invention of the technology of oil painting meant artists were able to “mark the process or progress of creating an image” (Woodall 2005, p 23). The ‘hand’ of the artist and the gesture of that hand as it applied paint to the surface rendered “an active realisation of a personal vision or inspiration through a particular process or manner” (Woodall 2005, p. 23). In modern times, and as an extension to these ideas about rendering the subject through paint, Lucian Freud argues that his heavily impastoed portraits do not look like the sitter as much as they ‘are’ the sitter; the paint standing in for the flesh of the subject ( ). This is evident in an image such as *Sleeping Head* (Figure 8).





Figure 8: Lucian Freud, *Sleeping Head*, 1979 - 1980

For the purposes of this research, printmaking processes can replicate the artist's gesture in an even more physical and symbolic way than oil painting. There is violence in the action of acid on metal and in gouges on wood that captures some of the pent up anger of motherhood. There is the repetitive motion of wiping the plate of ink in preparation for printing that reciprocates the stroking of a child's head to lull them to sleep; the restoration of peace and harmony before laying the plate on the 'bed' of the press under the 'blankets'. The metaphors are well worn but they resonate at the time of printing. For me this is when the disparate elements come together and I come to terms with the work and what it means to me.

These ideas about printmaking and Expressionism intersect in the work of contemporary American artist Jim Dine. Although his work follows a different conceptual trajectory to my own, his prints point to the expressive and symbolic

possibilities of printmaking processes. His woodcuts in particular have been influential to my understandings of Expressionism (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Jim Dine, *The Foreign Plowman*, 1988

The coarseness of his cutting, sometimes with a chainsaw, and the looseness of the markmaking, as well as the connection between images and layers suggest a chaotic state of metamorphosis. Positive and negative spaces collide and clumsily attached and patched together bodies, sculptures, trees and animals float in and out of the picture plane. I admire these images that seem on the brink of collapse and yet express a humanistic struggle for greater meaning. I believe it is Dine's capacity and confidence to draw with these unrefined cutting tools that gives such raw presence to the work.

Although I am awed by Dine's graphic virtuosity, I see a connection with my own tenacity to keep drawing the image of my son; a task that became increasingly hard throughout this research. At that edge of formlessness when shifts in roles and identity make portraiture a continual process of attempting to capture a

fractured relationship with another, Expressionism is the most potent language for emotional experiences.

This process, loosely defined as figurative, expressive portraiture is not original; it is in fact very traditional. However, contemporary critics often view individual self-expression as an outdated and futile attempt to convey psychological depths insofar as it presupposes a conception of the self as fixed and unified. As Berger writes:

We can no longer accept that the identity of a man can be adequately established by preserving and fixing what he looks like from a single viewpoint in one place (Berger 1969, p. 46).

This critique of the authority of the individual artist relates directly to one of my central questions: what place does such an intimate exploration of a lived experience have in contemporary art? I have also asked myself whether this project and indeed whether autobiography is a narcissistic tendency and an attempt at a personal memorial.

Van Alphen takes up this debate in his essay entitled ‘The Portrait’s Dispersal’ (2005). He argues that the portrait has been disparaged because subjectivity has been equated with self, personality or individuality.

Someone’s subjectivity is defined in its uniqueness rather than in its social connections; it is someone’s interior essence rather than a moment of short duration in a differential process. Someone’s continuity or discontinuity with others is denied in order to present the subject as personality. One may ask if this view does justice even to the traditional portrait (Van Alphen 2005, p. 21).

I find Van Alphen's emphasis on the social connections rather than 'personality' within the tradition of portraiture reassuring and allows for a broader and less exclusively personality based reading of portraiture. As humans living in social groups, we are all engaged in this differential project and as such portraits describe moments we can all experience in the presence of another.

In this research I have utilised the idea of 'living with fragmentation' (McRobbie, p. 71) and the 'reality of inventing the self'. In this respect I have drawn on McRobbie's statement:

It is not so much a question of what is left behind, what fragments of the disassembled self can be picked up and put together again, but rather how might the continual process of putting oneself together again be transformed to produce the empowerment of subordinate groups and social categories. This might mean living with fragmentation, with the reality of inventing the self rather than endlessly searching for the self. (McRobbie 1994, p. 71)

So rather than searching for one true self or meaning I have engaged with this concept of fragmentation. The fragmentation I have encountered personally includes clashes between my roles as a mother and artist, the clash between expectations of motherhood and the lived experience, the difference in my perception of myself and my son's perception of me and the difference between how I perceive my son and how he perceives himself. The fragmentation and the attempt to bring the pieces together and to make meaning are part of a long process of selfhood in transition and this is central to an art practice that engages with portraiture and lived experience.

The relationship between fragmentation and artistic processes are important considerations. Walter Benjamin in his influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) discusses the impact of modern technologies such as photography and film on contemporary image making. He compares painters to magicians or general practitioners and the photographer to a surgeon.

The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thorough going permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of which is free of all equipment (Benjamin 1936, p. 59).

The impact of the camera and its capacity to fragment reality and capture a multitude of images has had a significant impact on my methodology and an overall reading of my imagery. Benjamin's describes the surgeon/cameraman's ability to reduce the distance "between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increase it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs" (1936, p59). I have at times felt squeamish in looking so intently through the camera lens at my son and picking over the resulting pictures of episodes in our lives at this vulnerable time in his life. However, the use of the camera for this project seems appropriate, just as working from sketches and memory was right when my son was a small child when the relationship between my son and myself was more physically intimate. The camera enables me to look beyond the composed facade of the subject and access

traces of reality that conform more precisely to my experience of living with an adolescent.

I want to utilise both the fragmenting possibilities of technology as well as use the materiality of printmaking in order to capture an embodied tactile experience. I have seen the process of making work about mothering an adolescent, as one in which I have responded to events as they have occurred and on reflection my initial assumptions and interpretations have been revised. For example, it was not until I created and reflected on certain woodcuts and the marks I had made that I realised my own anger and desperation in response to my events beyond my control. The dialogue between my son and myself continues throughout the making process and this concept of a ‘fragmented communication’ is important to any reading of the work.

In the following chapter these areas of investigation are contextualised with reference to the work of artists who have dealt with similar concerns.

## Chapter Two

### CONTEXT

This chapter is divided into two sections discussing two different groups of artists who have made work dealing with similar issues to my own work. I have outlined how each artist's work has significance to my project, as well as the differences between their approach and my own.

The first group of artists comprises those who have made work in an autobiographical manner focussing on the intimate relationships with their own children. These include Suzanne Valadon, Käthe Kollwitz and Sally Mann. Notably, I have omitted artists such as Mary Kelly, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Renee Cox and the Mother Art projects of the 1970s discussed in Liss's overview of maternity and visual art (2009). Although Kelly was groundbreaking in making work that exposed the maternal experience, her work deals with the stage of early childhood rather than adolescence. The work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Renee Cox more overtly challenge the *institution* of motherhood, domesticity and limiting concepts of family. Therefore artists who have dealt specifically with portraiture have had greater significance to my practice. The relationship to the maternal gaze, the possibility of objectification and the conflicted role of the mother/artist are issues inherent in the production of a portrait of one's child and are more closely aligned to my own research.

The second group of artists have made work specifically about adolescence and the experience of change, both physically and psychologically, for the individual.

I have been intentionally selective when choosing artists who have used adolescent models as there has been much recent work in this area, particularly in photography. I have selected those who have informed my understandings of the relationship between adolescence and the processes of portraiture and image making. These artists have used adolescent models to make generalisations about this specific time of life as well as engaging the viewer in memories of their own adolescence. They are all photographers and work with models who are not related to them. The artists are Hellen Van Meene, Rineke Dijkstra and Lise Sarfati.

### Artists and the intimate portrait

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#### SUZANNE VALADON

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The French artist Suzanne Valadon (1865 – 1938) was self-trained and made many drawings, prints and paintings of her close family as well as the female nude. Her son, Maurice Utrillo (1883 – 1955), himself later to become a celebrated painter, was her model for many early drawings. Valadon's drawings are original and poignant as they represent a departure from the mutuality and loving care represented within traditional images of the mother and child. I have an affinity with her work for her unsentimental approach to portraiture of the child and the mother.

Valadon was a single mother of Maurice and she portrayed him from a young age so that the viewer observes him change over a period of time. In this respect there is an obsessive nature to Valadon's practice as a painter that resonates with my



own processes. At times I have felt uncomfortable with a project that involves the repeated portrayal of one other and the relationship I have to that person but at the same time find it too compelling to ignore. I have in effect been making repeated portraits of my son for over eighteen years and have sought to locate other artists whose focus is similarly reduced to their immediate environment and relationships. In this context I find Patricia Mathew's (1998) comments in her essay on the nude in Valadon's work interesting, as she sheds light on this impulse to repeat an image from one's own life and experience. Mathews discusses how Valadon paints the unmasked body at ease over and over again, suggesting a psychic impulse at work:

The encounter between psychoanalysis and artistic practice draws its strength from... repetition, working like a memory trace of something we have been through before. It gives back to repetition its proper meaning and status: not lack of originality or something merely derived (the commonest reproach to the work of art), nor the more recent practice of appropriating artistic and photographic images in order to undermine their previous status; but repetition as insistence, that is, as the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten – something that can only come into focus now by blurring the field of representation where our normal forms of self-recognition take place (Mathews 1998, p. 105)

It is the 'repetition' that speaks as much as any single image, as it reveals an unresolved and persistent questioning of Valadon's position as a woman and mother. This concept of revealing the hidden aspects of femininity is prevalent in Valadon's images of childhood. She does not create scenes of familial harmony but strives to capture, through the representation of her own child, some of the repressed fears and uncertainties of motherhood and childhood. Her portrayals are notably different from other artists portraying women's lives and working during the same period, such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. Therese Rosinsky writes:

Valadon challenged the myth of these conventions, both morally and psychologically, by presenting children outside the protective care of the family. Their maladjustment and cries for help were unmistakable (Rosinsky 1994, p. 27).

The fact that Valadon allows the viewer access to her personal domestic sphere is also significant. As Mathews argues: “It is unlikely that she consciously chose or constructed these spaces, but rather existed in them; they were the spaces of her experience” (1998, p. 107).

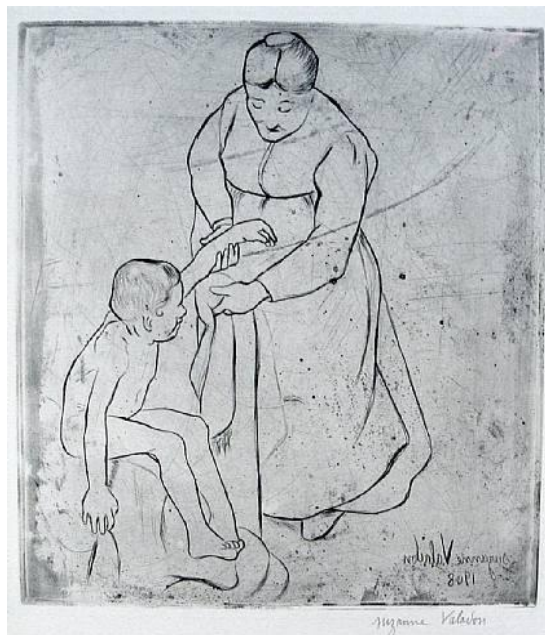


Figure 10: Suzanne Valadon, *Grandmere et Infant*, 1909

The figures of the child and mother or grandmother are often in bedrooms (Figure 10), where the subjects are doing everyday tasks such as washing their bodies, getting dressed or sitting together. Although a single mother, Valadon did not raise Maurice alone as her own mother, Madelaine, was very involved and often the primary caregiver. The grandmother and child shared a special bond and this is evident in the many images of the two together (Figure 10).



Figure 11: Suzanne Valadon, Nude Girl sitting on a Cushion, 1894

There is a seeming simplicity in Valadon's approach to her portrayals. She focuses on the figures and their expressions and poses rather than the technical innovation of her painting or drawing as many of her contemporaries did. Yet this simplicity of means suits her purposes as the viewer is focussed completely on what is happening in the image and any slight distortion of the form is perceptible by the viewer. So, although Valadon's drawings of her son utilise a reductive and confident line, there is an apparent awkwardness about her figures as the limbs, hands and features are deliberately distorted. Rather than striving for anatomical correctness, Valadon uses this exaggeration to signify expressive meaning.



Figure 12: Suzanne Valadon, *Nude Girl Sitting*, 1894

For instance, in the image *Nude Girl Sitting* (Figure 12) the hands of the sitting girl seem overly large. Rosinsky translates this to describe that the hands:

become the receptacle of her sorrow while the unrealistic length of her legs points to the awkwardness and disproportion of the body of a child growing too fast (Rosinsky 1994, p 36).

Similarly, the gesture in *Nude Girl sitting on a Cushion* of 1894 (Figure 11) conveys much of the meaning of the image through the most economical of means. In this image of black pencil and white chalk Valadon has skilfully used the pose rather than facial expression to suggest the mood of a dejected adolescent girl.



Figure 13: Suzanne Valadon, *Crouching Nude Holding Grandmother's Skirt*, 1909

In the conte drawing *Crouching nude holding grandmother's skirt* of 1909 (Figure 13), Valadon depicts the gesture of a child reaching toward the comfort of the maternal represented by the grandmother and the fabric of her skirts. Again, rather than using facial expression as I have in my images, Valadon uses the whole body as a single form to express the tension within the image and between the models. There is awareness in these works of the tensions in the parent-child relationship and the psychological isolation of the child or adolescent. This is particularly significant as it is the mother/artist bearing witness as a keen observer to the child's distress.

The gesture resembles that of a sightless person who needs to touch what she cannot see in order to find reassurance. It is this pathetic reaching out, with its unmistakable request for affection, that is infinitely moving. (Rosinsky 1994, pp. 36-37)

Rosinsky interprets these images of the physically awkward, isolated and naked child as implying parental shortcomings and also as being reflective of the artist's own unhappy childhood where she craved the attention of her cold and distant

mother. Rosinsky asserts that Valadon was projecting onto her portraits of children, her own state of mind from that period of her life. This relates back to my discussion of portraiture and the 'self' that is revealed when painting a portrait of another.

...the youths' sorrow and alienation, as well as their occasional deprivation, are the obsessive themes of her early works. For over three decades she drew representations of small boys and girls. They look pensive, often clumsy, but most importantly, lonely. Eventually, they seem to become resigned to their solitude. It is assuredly the estrangement of the artist's own early years that surfaces in these stark portraits (Rosinsky 1994, pp25-26).

However, for me, these works also express the loneliness of childhood and adolescence for an only child. Furthermore they speak powerfully about a single mother's fear of not being 'enough'. In the case of Valadon, these early images of Maurice, where she depicts him as isolated, are poignant as he was in early adolescence to develop a debilitating mental illness and alcoholism. However ironically it was Valadon's artistic passion that was to prove important in his recovery. She not only depicted her son's distress but taught him to paint in an attempt to give him some manual therapy during the worst bouts of his alcoholism. In fact she threatened him with being forcefully admitted to a mental institution if he did not paint. (Storm 1958)

It is interesting to note that Valadon did not make images of her son during the difficult years of his adolescence. Perhaps it was too painful a time for her or possibly his shambolic appearance would not have been acceptable subject matter at the time and these themes were better expressed through the child.

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## KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

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The German artist, Käthe Kollwitz (1867 - 1945) is significant for this project as her work deals predominantly with the figure of the mother through the medium of printmaking. I have found that her work informs my practice on both a formal and conceptual level.

Kollwitz utilises the expressive possibilities of printmaking techniques such as lithography, woodcut and etching. Her bold and fluid use of line and tone create a strong impression of depth and three-dimensionality. Dynamic compositions are also prevalent within Kollwitz's works and she was skilful in arranging the figurative elements in her images so that they contain subtle yet powerful symbolic meaning. Movement is also something that Kollwitz was able to capture in her graphic works and her figures appear natural and dynamic rather than posed. I have found Kollwitz' fluid and expressive compositions and tonal modelling of figures significant for my approach to rendering the figure.

Throughout this project I have looked at Kollwitz's prints in order to learn how she creates images that succinctly evoke the emotional state of an individual and the relationship between the different figures. In her work there is often an action occurring between the mother and children such as the shielding of a child or children, an embrace or an expression of grief such as a mother rocking a child's dead body. She has also created many self-portraits where she focuses on her own face and posture and often uses her hands to create expressive gestures.

I am interested particularly in Kollwitz's intimate portraits of mothers and children rather than the images of heroic mothers protecting a group of children or images that are suggestive of political and social ideology. Rosemary Betterton (1996) discusses how Kollwitz' work is often interpreted by feminist writers through the lens of her public persona as a socialist activist artist with discussions of the iconography of heroic mothers and resisting workers. However, it is the theme of maternal loss that Betterton views as central to an understanding of Kollwitz' artistic oeuvre.

Like Valadon, Kollwitz focuses the viewer's attention on the darker aspects of motherhood and childhood. These images are compelling as they speak to me about her particular experience of motherhood and the 'letting go' of the child. This is unique in depictions of motherhood and is a complex and murky terrain. There is also the importance of the intersection of her position as an artist and her position as a mother and a woman.





Figure 14: Käthe Kollwitz, *Death, Woman and Child*, 1910

Several of Kollwitz's images of mothers and children suggest a strong physical and emotional bond. In the image *Death, Woman and Child* of 1909 (Figure 14), the mother and child are pressed closely together or rather the mother's hand pulls the child toward herself so that their features merge to create one face. The soft tonal qualities and rounded voluptuous forms of this print suggest an almost amniotic state in which the mother and child are lost to the world; veiled in their own cocoon of symbiosis. The fact that the title suggests that the child is dead heightens our awareness of the mother's tenuous and therefore desperate hold on her child. Although my work is not about the death of a child, I respond to this image as I find it parallels my own research into the conflicted role of the artist/mother and theme of maternal loss within my own work.



Figure 15: Käthe Kollwitz, *Woman with Dead Child*, 1903

This theme of maternal loss is developed further in the work *Woman with Dead Child* of 1903 (Figure 15), in which the mother is almost pulling the child back into herself.

Kollwitz's mother bespeaks a terrible loss: the splitting of the maternal body. In *Woman with Dead Child* we see the violence of separation of the child from the mother in the process of gaining independent identity. In reversal of the passage of birth, the mother absorbs the child into her own body; she possesses and is possessed by it. The intensity with which the mother's face is pressed to her son's throat and chest suggests she is trying to ingest his body, to reincorporate it back into her own, as well as to breathe life into it (Betterton 1994, p. 42).

The death of a child is a recurring theme within Kollwitz' work and there are obvious biographical reasons for this as she lost one son, Peter, in 1914 during World War I and a grandson during World War II. She would also have been

aware of the many working class women who came to her husband's surgery and who routinely lost children.

Another possible reason is suggested by psychoanalyst, Alice Miller in her essay 'The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness' (1990). She describes how Kollwitz' mother lost two older children and was grieving for these dead children during Kollwitz's childhood. Her mother would often express that her attachment to the dead children was stronger than what she felt for her surviving children. Miller interprets Kollwitz' many repeated drawings of dead children as an attempt to stay in contact with her own mother by placing herself in the position of the grieving mother. Similar to Valadon, repressed emotions surrounding her childhood are seen in this interpretation, as the central influence on her imagery.

However, Betterton believes an essentially biographical interpretation of Kollwitz' use of this imagery does not fully account for the importance of this theme within her work since Kollwitz started creating her images of maternal loss before these events and these images were repeated many times throughout her life. Rather, she sees it as the product of a cultural rupture between the role of the artist and the role of the mother during that period. Kollwitz was working in the early 1900s in Germany - a time when there was a cultural debate about women working in the visual arts and many considered the roles of artist and mother to be mutually exclusive. In 1908, in his treatise 'Die Frau und Die Kunst', the art historian Karl Scheffler (cited in Betterton 1994) argued that women lacked "the

will and the talent” to be creative visual artists and were better suited to the performing arts. One can imagine how such attitudes would have to be challenged either consciously or subconsciously by women artists of the time.

Betterton finds Kollwitz’s images of the maternal nude to be the most transgressive of her oeuvre as they do not rely on a traditional notion of motherhood but rather replicate the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the position of the mother at the time. Mastery of the female nude was central to the construction of artistic identity in the nineteenth century and was also symbolic of the gendered relationship between female model and male artist. Kollwitz challenges this, as she equates her visual creativity with her role as a mother. The intensity and power of her artistic vision directly corresponded with the feeling of passionate love for her own children. In her essay, ‘Käthe Kollwitz’s Sacrifice’, Regina Schulte (1996) uses excerpts from Kollwitz’s diary to elucidate on her self-awareness as an artist and mother as she equated the pain she felt for the loss of her child with her motivation to make art. As the children moved away from her incrementally, as is natural as they grow older and gain independence, Kollwitz became scared of losing her passion for life and therefore her creative drive.

The loss of pain meant a return to the mundaneness of everyday life. Everyday life keeps her away from her 'innermost necessity'. Pain was the medium of the love she was able to feel for the people who shared her everyday life; the pain and in it the 'oneness' with her dead son, appear as the catalysts of all other feelings as well. Her strength had been 'stolen' along with the pain (Schulte 1996, p. 209).

Rosemary Betterton develops this interpretation in the context of Kollwitz’s works of dead children and mothers. She outlines how these images of the mother

with a dead child can be read as symbolic of Kollwitz's fear of loss of identity as an artist. Betterton writes:

the image of a child's death stood in this context for Kollwitz's continuing fear of loss of her creative identity, in a transference in which she equated the maternal state with artistic productivity (Betterton 1994, p. 44).

Maternal subjectivity is represented as the condition of artistic production rather than its antithesis. This relationship between Kollwitz's artistic production and her role as a mother is intriguing as I have also wondered whether there will be 'mundaneness' to everyday life after my son leaves home that will nullify the grounds for the creation of art.

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#### SALLY MANN

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Sally Mann's work and the critical response to it have been central to this project as she is a mother making work about her own children and using her children as the models for her photographs. Mann's photographs are rewarding both visually and conceptually as they capture unique moments that express the profundity of motherhood as well as the pathos. I recognise Mann's experience of terror for her child's safety, her joy and celebration of their beauty and composure, her envy and wonder at their physicality and abandon, her prescient fear and worry for their future and her gratitude and tenderness for their participation in her photographic practice. These images also capture these children's experience and immersion in their beautiful environment; the mysterious and wild rural landscape of their home in Virginia.



Figure 16: Sally Mann, *Jesse Bites*, 1985

In order to delineate the deliberate and complex choreography of Mann's photographs, I will describe one image in detail. In the photograph *Jesse Bites* (Figure 16), we can see the impression of the child's teeth on the upper arm of the adult, presumably Sally Mann. The young girl is covered in scrawled lines of body paint with a feather boa wrapped around her naked body. She looks like an American Indian or Papuan New Guinea warrior in war or ceremonial paint. She holds tight to the adult's arm and her eyes appear possessive and wary while the mother's face is cropped from the picture frame. Only the mother's arm and the side of her torso are visible and the angle of her body looks as if she is pulling away from the child's hold on her, on the verge of slipping out of the picture frame completely. Jesse appears to be calming herself with her hand placed above her heart in a reassuring fashion. The impression is of a child branding her mother

in a possessive gesture to keep her close. The bite mark was in fact created by Mann as the real bite had faded by the time the photo was taken. This is not a candid image but one carefully composed to recreate a moment of tension and complex familial relationships.

Sally Mann's photographs suggest the violence simmering at every juncture of the life of the "immediate family," a violence visible to the maternal photographer – bites, burns, bruises, dead animals, stitches, swollen eyes, sibling rivalries, family battles (Hirsch 1997, p. 168).

These photographs express much of the powerful emotions of motherhood in a direct and unapologetic way. They are more than snapshots of family members as Mann has an awareness of the tension within a scene that contains something unspeakable but something that reverberates with our own memories of childhood. The troubled emotions we have as viewers are due to Mann's intentional manipulation of the image and reciprocate a mother's own tension as she looks on, never dispassionately, at her children. In this respect, Mann is as exposed as her children as the viewer observes her maternal focus. In fact, we see what she sees when looking at her children as she manipulates the images to reciprocate her anxious look. Mann's works are not so much representations of children but operate as studies of the figure of the mother/photographer, or as Mann's own "allo-portraits" (Hirsch 1997).





Figure 17: Sally Mann, *Emmett, Jesse and Virginia*, 1989

Mann's photographic practice has particular relevance to my own practice as I employ the maternal look in my prints. Hirsch writes:

Sally Mann's photography is 'disturbing' precisely because it brings together two equally intense cultural obsessions: the vulnerability of childhood, on the one hand, and the idealisation and fear of maternity, the fantasy of maternal omnipotence, on the other (Hirsch 1997, p. 153).

What makes these images appealing is not voyeuristically looking at the nude child's body but the chance to contemplate the look of mothers. Nor do they solely express a mother's joy and pride in her children's beauty and existence. Mann's images such as *The Terrible Picture* (Figure 18) contain a particular, and often hidden, tension and apprehension that mothers experience when they look at their children.





Figure 18: Sally Mann, *The Terrible Picture*, 1989

### Artists' portrayals of adolescence

While the artists in the previous section have a close personal relationship to their subjects, none of them have examined adolescence in any depth. In this respect their work has a different focus to mine. There are however a significant number of artists who have dealt with the theme of adolescence, though, unlike my work, they have used models rather than actual family members. Within this broad field of artists who have dealt with adolescence I have selected those who focus on the aspects of adolescent experience most congruent with my own concerns.

I have omitted Larry Clark who has been creating photographs and films about adolescent experience for many years such as his photographic series *Tulsa* of 1971, his feature films *Kids* of 1995 and *Ken Park* of 2002 because of his focus on youth sub-cultures and adolescent sexuality. Similarly Thomas Zielony's photographic works on adolescents focus on the level of the social rather than on

the individual. Cherry Hood is an artist who makes large-scale watercolour portraits of adolescents but her work deals with our adult nostalgia about the fragility and beauty of this stage of life rather than an actual lived experience. Bill Henson's images of adolescents again are used as a means to convey broader themes about the frailty of human existence rather than focusing on adolescence per se. The three artists whose work is most relevant to my practice are Van Meene, Dijkstra and Sarfati.

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#### HELLEN VAN MEENE

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Hellen Van Meene (1972 - ) is a Dutch artist who has been creating images of pubescent girls and androgynous boys since the mid nineties. Van Meene's work has been important to my research in that she evokes an embodied experience of the changes of adolescence. In this respect there is a close relationship between her work and the images of Suzanne Valadon as the awkwardness and physicality of adolescence is something both artists focus on; both using the whole body as a metaphor for psychological states.

The physical demands and changes of puberty are represented in Van Meene's images as dramatic and at times even grotesque and humorous; it is a time when body parts grow disproportionately and boys and girls develop overt and threatening sexual characteristics. Their bodies are out of control. Van Meene is interested in adolescence less in a sociological way, but more so for the heightened awareness of living in a changing, uncontrollable body that

adolescence brings about. Kate Bush describes Van Meene's work as a "striving to make things *visually felt*" (Bush 2004, p. 93).



Figure 19: Hellen Van Meene, *Untitled*, 2002

This corresponds with my project, as it is often the physical manifestations of adolescence that have been important to signify psychic changes for my son.

There is a potent sense of isolation, interiority and self-containment that Van Meene attains in her photographs. The gaze of the adolescent never meets the viewer's gaze. The subjects remain self-absorbed with their eyes averted, shut or void of expression as in the image of a boy with his eyes closed receiving a dusting of powder over his face and torso (Figure 19). This creates a distance between the viewer and the adolescent depicted. Similarly, there is a sense that the

adolescent is cut off from the normal interactions of parent and child in some of my images. The devices that Van Meene uses, such as the shallow pictorial space and cropping of the figure within the picture frame which causes the viewer to focus on the interiority of the adolescent, have been instructive to my image making. We are confronted as viewers by the adolescent's presence.

Yet Van Meene's approach differs to my own as her images are highly constructed and are reflective of her imagination rather than a collaboration between model and artist. Van Meene's work is distinctive due to her ability to select models that successfully express a particular psychological tension. When choosing her models, Van Meene selects for a visual 'presence' and the model's ability to efface their own personality. "Too much 'expression' – or beauty, or ugliness – and the balance tips" (Bush 2004, p. 92). The model is treated as just one element among many being choreographed by the photographer and is the equivalent to the windowsill or chair within the image. During the photographic shoots, Van Meene decides precisely how the models will look and what they will wear right down to the colour of the girl's nail polish.

Bush (2004) describes how Van Meene uses the figure within the image to dramatise an idea. The models in Van Meene's work always remain in the role of an actor rather than expressing their individuality. This is very different from my approach which is to document an individual. However, Van Meene's works have a sense of believability; they are composed on the edge of fantasy. Bush traces this approach back to early photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron in the

1860s, Claude Cahun and Stanislaw Witkiewicz in the early twentieth century and Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Francesca Woodman in the seventies. Kate Bush writes:

What characterizes this tradition is the delicate equilibrium achieved between actuality and imagination, between the world observed and an emotional, existential, or spiritual world conjured in the mind of the artist. The directorial stamp of the photographer remains light, never devolving into the pure fictions or extravagant fantasies of a Joel-Peter Witkin or a mid-career Cindy Sherman. (Bush 2004, p. 91)

In relation to my own work this element of “directorial stamp” occurs not at the stage of the taking of the photograph but later when constructing the image as a print. The manipulation of my images at this stage also allows me to incorporate or emphasise symbolism and objects in my images that may not have been present in the original photograph. Objects and setting are also highly significant in Van Meene’s photographs as there is a strong symbolic element to her work. Flowers, whether actual blossoms or buds, or represented by printed fabric such as bed linen and curtains, symbolise the temporality of adolescence. In the image *Untitled, 1999* (Figure 20), a plump Japanese girl blows a huge bubble. Bush reminds us that Romantic painters also used flowers and bubbles to emphasise the fleeting innocence of childhood.



Figure 20: Hellen Van Meene, *Untitled*, 1999

The positions held by the models often look uncomfortable and awkward with body parts often stuck in various objects. In one image, a girl's hair is tangled in the branches of a tree. In another, a girl is stuck inside a boy's T-shirt, while in another, a boy's head lies inert within a wire basket. These images of body parts caught up and movement restricted strongly call to mind an experience of puberty as one of physical and psychological constraint or frustration. This theme is expressed more directly in Van Meene's image of a girl with her nipples covered with bandages representing a repression of her growing sexuality.

This sense of restriction is also emphasised by the composition of the images. The pictorial space is usually shallow and the figures are set against a flattened

backdrop whether it is a wall, plants, a curtain or a window pane. These flattened surfaces act as barriers. The window, which is commonly suggestive of an opening onto the world, instead evokes an overriding feeling of isolation and entrapment. The barrier also serves the function of focussing the viewer's attention on the sensual experience of the subjects who are self absorbed and isolated within the image.



Figure 21: Hellen Van Meene, *Untitled*, 2000

Although Van Meene is expressing the psychic isolation of adolescence, at the same time the viewer gains a strong sense of individuals working out how to live in their new bodies, how they fit with the world and how at times the person is unsure of the parameters of their physicality. This more optimistic reading is emphasised by the rich and bright colours she uses in these works. The photographer has used sunlight to emphasise this saturated colour and thereby express an overriding hopefulness beyond the darker themes of adolescence.



For example, in the image of a boy's head trapped in the wire rubbish basket (Figure 21), the bright green grass that suggests childhood play is just beyond the boy's head. This image is poignant as the viewer feels sorry for the entrapped individual but there is also humour and a sense of the ridiculous in this unheroic pose. The leprechaun and squirrels on the boy's shirt emphasise this seeming dislocation from nature and the natural scheme that adolescence throws up while at the same time the viewer feels complicit in mocking the boy. In this image and others, Van Meene reveals a fascination with the bodies of her models that are actually engaging with the world albeit clumsily.

I believe Van Meene's work makes a significant contribution to an understanding of adolescent experience, as her images do not conform to an idealised, romanticised or classical notion of the youthful 'nubile' body. In this respect, I find these images inspiring and moving. She has identified the position of the adolescent who looks at himself or herself and falls short of perfection or merely no longer recognises the perceived body as their own. Yet rather than treating these imperfect and individual figures as 'freaks' Van Meene's work expresses empathy towards their awkwardness.

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#### RINEKE DIJKSTRA

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Another Dutch artist, Rineke Dijkstra (1959 - ) has created various series of photographic portraits of young people in different locations around the globe.



Dijkstra's images are fascinating and important to my research, as there is an unguarded and highly emotive quality that she captures in the faces of her models.

Each of Dijkstra's series portrays youths who have undergone transformative experiences such as teenage mothers holding their newborns straight after the birth, recent conscripts to the Israeli army, young toreros fresh from their struggles with the bull or adolescents standing self-consciously on the beach in their swimwear exposing their pubescent bodies. In a monograph on Dijkstra, Hripsimé Visser states:

These are moments when a person enters into a new, different community, but before all else, into a new emotional phase: that of a nourisher and protector, an erotic being, or potential killer (Visser & Stahel 2004, p. 14).

Dijkstra's photographic technique focuses on strong compositional devices and particularly dramatic lighting effects, which result in rich colours and tonal values. Her photographs often resemble classical paintings. In an image such as *Kolobrzcg, Poland, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1992* (Figure 22), we can see evidence of these painterly qualities where the contrapposto pose of the model is reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus*.



Figure 22: Rineke Dijkstra, *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1992*, 1992

In the beach series the background of each photograph is reduced to strips of sand, water and sky, which function like a backdrop in a studio portrait rather than including any extraneous detail that could compete for our attention. This reductive approach emphasises the movement and drama of these natural elements and the contrast with the stillness and pose of the figure. In this image we can observe how this tightly controlled compositional device highlights Dijkstra's classical referencing where the figures possess the gravity of statues placed in a setting. The sea and beach are significant references that emphasise the vulnerability of the adolescents in their unfamiliar skins much like crabs that have lost their shells.



Figure 23: Rineke Dijkstra, *Julie*, *Den Haag, Netherlands, Feb, 29th, 1994*, 1994

Similarly, the bare walls in the portraits of the new mothers such as Julie (Figure 23) allow for a shallow pictorial space much like a stage, against which the figures are located. These bare clinical walls of the hospital carry associations for most viewers. When other objects are present in her images they always refer to the figure and are there for a specific purpose. Dijkstra is able to suggest associations with limited detail.

Dijkstra frames her figures within these backgrounds in order to approximate the same background in various locations and thus ensures a comparison is made between the different figures. It is this highly orchestrated control over the composition that focuses the viewer's attention on the model's nuances of expression. Dijkstra does not reveal much contextual detail about each individual.

Rather, it is through their eyes, their facial expression, how they hold their bodies and the detailing of their clothes, that we read what is their experience on this particular day. These people command a presence within the image that is unusual in our visually saturated times.

Initially the models appear composed, self-possessed and almost restrained. However, it does not take long to start registering the expressive qualities of these figures and faces and vulnerability is the prominent impression. It is vulnerability that is also the paramount emotion in Dijkstra's portraits of young mothers and in their expressions one can interpret a potent memory of the pain of childbirth but also pride in their achievement.

The toreros (Figure 24) are photographed in their costumes straight after the struggle with the bull. Rather than focussing on their whole figure, Dijkstra has composed them as busts. Their slightly veiled eyes convey tiredness and collapse and their clothing reveals the effects of battle with ties askew and rips and blood stains that have destroyed their beautiful costumes. As Urs Stahel comments:

The portraits reflect the events in their faces, their eyes, their auras and the energy in their features. Their clothes symbolise the extent of their self-exposure: naked, in theatrical costume, in combat uniform (Visser & Stahel 2004, p. 150)



Figure 24: Rineke Dijkstra, *Forte de Casa, May, 20th, 2000*, 2000

The adolescent experience most significant to Dijkstra is the moment of frailty; the acceptance of vulnerability and the consequent process of transformation. Her bullfighters and new mothers and even the exposed swimmers have been through a physical ordeal that has changed them. She captures this through photographing her subjects at this critical moment. Significantly Dijkstra has chosen to show the moment after the event, not the moment leading up to it or the climax of the fight, but the exhaustion after the will is spent. These images are about experience rather than will and reflect the changes that all adolescents confront psychologically even if they do not go into actual physical battle. As Urs Stahel writes:

the 'human being' as will, as intention has for an instant forfeited its power to act and, although triumphant, is wounded and scarred and succumbs to relaxation. She seeks this soft, almost flat situation. The persons portrayed open up, allow themselves to be themselves, ceases to strike a pose in the fight against the almost

automatic and inevitable act of having their picture taken (Visser & Stahel 2004, p. 152).

The subjects lose control over their representation and they simply exist as human beings not as images. The mask is taken off after physical exhaustion or an intense experience and the subjects are more themselves. Van Alphen writes about Dijkstra's work:

Dijkstra is often said to succeed in catching, I would say, releasing, the 'real' inner selves of people whose identity is far from solid (Van Alphen 2005, p. 45)



Figure 25: Rineke Dijkstra, *Olivier, The French Foreign Legion Camp Raffalli, Calvi, Corsica, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2001*, 2001

He suggests that Dijkstra's subjects are portrayed as "beings in time" (2004). She shows the viewer a glimpse of her subject's innerness, not as individuals but rather as something universally shared. In this, she is reconfiguring our contemporary view of portraiture through the concept of the "family of man". The fact that the portraits are of young people experiencing these life changing events

for the first time is significant. Dijkstra reveals the first scarring or the first achievement and she portrays it as the first sign of maturity and depth, which is revealed in the traces it leaves on her subject's faces. Stahel (Visser & Stahel, 2004, p. 152) asserts that this is not a confirmatory ritual but a point of balance between the individual and the group and an entry into a universal human existence.



Figure 26: Rineke Dijkstra, *Almerisa, Asylum Seekers' Centre, Leiden Leiden, The Netherlands, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1994*, 1994

Dijkstra has made at least three series where she has photographed one subject over several years within the same composition so that subtle shifts in the subject's appearance over the time period can be observed. For example, in her portraits of Olivier, a young contractee of the foreign legion, we observe changes in his expression, eyes and stance that reveal the transformation of the apprehensive boy into the confident young soldier (Figure 25). The same is true of Almerisa, a young asylum seeker, who poses in the same position on a chair in a room over several years (Figure 26). In these series a relationship to my own work is apparent as I too have followed one individual over a period of time.

An analysis of Dijkstra's work explains why I have selected certain images to work with. These images reveal the moment where my son's mask has slipped and something that seems more akin to his 'innerness' surfaces. These images are in sharp contrast to images where he comfortably composes his face and poses to represent himself as a certain 'type'. Dijkstra's work provides me with an appreciation as to why I was fascinated with images of my son following an assault where he was bruised and bloody. This was the moment when his defences were down and a sense of Dijkstra's transformative moment is revealed. I see strong correlations between my image entitled *Hoodie I* and Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of youths, where someone has gone through a physically challenging ordeal. Dijkstra does not focus on the event and the action. Rather, the image reveals how the event has affected the individual. Dijkstra relates this to a common humanity whereas I focus on how this change and growth for the adolescent affects the relationship dynamics of the mother and child.

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#### LISE SARFATI

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Lise Sarfati (1958- ) is a contemporary French photographer who portrays the intensity of the adolescent's struggle to find meaning in his/her life. She works to address a completely different aspect of adolescence from Dijkstra's, with a focus on the adolescent's propensity to dress up and experiment through clothes and image in order to try on different personalities. Her photographs include portraits of youths in shops, the street, their bedrooms and living rooms. In Sarfati's images



there is a contrast between the apparent “normalcy” and safety of the suburban backgrounds and the crisis of adolescence. Alicia Miller writes:

It suits her subject, making monumental the psychic struggle for self that adolescents endure. A boy sitting on his bed, lost in thought, is much more than a captured passing moment. His clenched hands and curled feet belie an underlying tension, as if this is actually a turning point or crisis, easily missed in the banality of his surroundings. It is easy to dismiss the intensity of experience; the scale of the emotions of adolescence Sarfati reminds us (Miller 2005, p 46).

In her series *The New Life*, *Austin, Texas*, *Immaculate* and *She*, Sarfati has photographed youths in the smaller, humbler cities of America such as Austin, Portland and New Orleans. Most relevant to my research is her series *The New Life* of 2003, where she has focussed on two teenage sisters, Sloane and Sasha. Sarfati used these models again with another series *She* of 2006, which include images of the girls’ mother and aunt. In these images Sarfati has followed the girls over several years as they adapt to a new bohemian life with their mother in California. Initially, she is an observer who does not focus so much on the biography of the models but pays particular attention to details of their clothing and hairstyles and how the adolescents present themselves for the camera. In her article on Sarfati’s photography Sandra Phillips quotes Sarfati: “I am not interested in biographical details even if they could be informative,” she says. “Indeed, they are not central to my approach. When I started working with [these women], I was not aware of their family story and their relationships” (cited in Phillips, S 2009).



Figure 27: Lise Sarfati, *Sloane no 30*, 2003

Through these images of Sasha and Sloane (Figure 27, Figure 28), Sarfati seems to suggest that personality is inconsistent, as though the adolescent can change their mood, and their identity, with the same ease with which they change their clothes. In her images Sarfati plays with these ideas about identity and masquerade in a similar way that teenagers do.



Figure 28: Lise Sarfati, *Sasha and Sloane no 21*, 2003

The girls are photographed in the street and in their home in a range of costumes including colourful wigs, heavy makeup and a range of differently styled clothing. However, the process of taking photos of individuals over time reveals to the viewer of the series a stable and underlying attitude to the individuals that resists change. The girls can have pink hair or blond hair or dark hair and yet something in their expression and demeanour remains static. They can be dressed as seductive vamps in high heels or grungy street kids or Alice in Wonderland but we are still aware of the adolescent girl dressed up. As Sandra Phillips writes:

We sense in these pictures, as we often do with adolescents, that they are hiding themselves, concealing something, playing at being someone, even though Sarfati is open and sympathetic to them. Many of the young girls she photographs have made themselves up with ingenious and colorful makeup and hair, a disguise as much as an expression. Or they recline in their rooms like voluptuous odalisques-but privately, just for themselves (Phillips 2009).

The models project a persona that is meaningful to them. The models and Sarfati share the process of creating the image and unlike Van Meene's highly choreographed models, Sarfati's subjects participate fully in the choices. Sarfati describes it as a more spontaneous approach that can be very different depending on the model and context. The clothes function to suggest a possible narrative for the viewer. The changes of costume are not about metamorphosis as the subjects are not in disguise. Their personalities are not meant to disappear underneath the clothes. Bajac writes:

Shoes with exaggeratedly high heels, a slightly too sophisticated blouse, a print that's not quite appropriate, a little too much makeup - all these are furtive signs that serve, for the attentive viewer, as signals, as punctums, to use Barthes' term, that render the real slightly uncertain. Here clothing is never more than an accessory, literally and figuratively (Bajac 2008).

Sarfati skilfully photographs these girls in a respectful and non-invasive manner in their private realms of bedroom, house or street, while somehow avoiding voyeurism. We are in effect given a glimpse into their private imaginings about who they are. This leads us also to contemplate who we are ourselves beyond what appearance, social standing and expectations suggest. These images therefore are not about fashion but are about identity and self. Quentin Bajac draws our attention to the sense of adolescence as a “constant state of becoming” that is prevalent in Sarfati’s work. She asserts that Sarfati’s adolescents are chameleon-like in their ability to change depending on the mood and context.

If all portraiture can be conceived as a confrontation between various selves (the social self, the private self - here we recall Barthes' words, “In front of the camera I am simultaneously who I think I am and who I'd like people to think I am”), with teenage models this confrontation takes on a unique dimension. Adolescence is a period of constant role-playing, of being traversed by multiple, contradictory and fleeting identities assumed one after another depending on the interlocutor, often dramatically contrasting. Teenagers are insincere by definition, and how they dress is a privileged mode of expression of that insincerity. Sarfati knows that and plays with it. Sheathed in new clothes, these models are no longer completely themselves. Now they're acting, undoubtedly a little more today than at other times. They're not just wearing a different pair of shoes, blouse or dress. They've slipped into a different skin - they become someone else (Bajac 2008).

I respond to Sarfati’s ability to reveal adolescence through the use of costume and sense of trying on different appearances in which adolescents engage. She reveals this aspect of adolescence without hiding the individual beneath the clothing. Her subjects evoke a sense of game playing with their identities and are suggestive of the possibilities of adolescence at the same time as revealing the struggle and

tension in their poses and expressions. As Javier Panera Cuevas writes, Sarfati's works reveal:

*the concept of immaturity - a secret revolt, a silent refusal, a game played with life and reality, and especially the idea of a subject both malleable and yet elusive, who always, in the end, slips away ( ).*

On the surface, Sarfati's work is very different to mine in that the spaces these youth occupy are very specific to a time and place: contemporary middle class American suburbia. However the role playing that she portrays is also a concern in my work where different roles are played out through the use of clothing, hairstyles and even facial hair. Adolescent experimentation with self-image can be viewed as a creative process. Sarfati records these processes and provides her subjects with opportunities to experiment and create their own personas. Concurrently there is a fine tuning of their own identities that are ever present behind the makeup and wigs. In my own work this aspect was particularly relevant to my early series *Hoodie*.

Overall these artists have been important for an understanding of the scope of my own research and the areas of investigation that are most significant to me at this stage. In reflecting on their work and what I find resonates within it for me, I have gained a greater understanding of what it is about adolescence and motherhood that is significant and original in my own research. In Valadon's images of her son and other children I have found an unsentimental observation of the gap between herself and the other, her child. I view her images as accounts of the inadequacies of inevitable mother-guilt as she can not be everything to her son and observes his

isolation and vulnerability. In Kollwitz's work I identify with her obsessive need to hold on to the child equated with her creative life and the loss encountered as part of this experience. Her portrayal of the mother's emotional evolution and the intensity of her expression inform my own practice. In Mann's work I respond to the concept of the allo-portrait as her photographs operate to put the viewer in the shoes of the mother and we gain a privileged front row seat in her drama of motherhood.

While my work is not photographic the role of artists who have photographed adolescents has been important for an understanding of how contemporary adolescence is represented and what it is about adolescence that is so compelling for artists and adults generally. In Van Meene's works I respond to her awareness of the subtle nuances of feeling and self-awareness of the adolescent. In Dijkstra's work the portrayal of the moment of transition of the adolescent as the individual confronts an obstacle and we observe the changes and stress upon the face. In Sarfati's work it is the immediacy of emotions such as vulnerability and self-creation that makes her images of adolescence compelling.

In the third chapter I will describe my own imagery and how it was created.

## Chapter Three

### PURSUING THE WORK

In this chapter I will discuss the work produced for this research project under the headings of the various series: *Rage*, *Hoodie*, *Facing In*, *Anyway the Wind Blows* and *Head Shots*. The titles of the series reflect a particular psychological state that is expressed in that series. There is an analysis of how these series address the themes and theoretical context of the project as outlined in Chapter 1. There is also a description of how the prints were produced as well as why certain materials and printmaking technologies were chosen for particular works. With each series I have also referred to significant artists and their works that have influenced my technical and stylistic approach. Often it is not until later that I see the correlation between other artists' works and my own and realise that their imagery has either subconsciously or coincidentally been reflected in my own. However, it is just as important to reference these visual inspirations as it is to reference academic sources. Finally there is a connection made between the formal choices and the overall intent of the project.

Although there are five discrete series in the final exhibition, these series were not produced sequentially, and nor do they represent a strict chronology of the relationship between my son and myself over the years of the project. Rather, the tensions of the mother/son relationship I was concerned with in particular series are best expressed through those colour relationships and marks. The various titles of the series loosely describe the state of my mind while I was creating that series. The exhibition is installed in order for the viewer to best comprehend the various emotional states expressed through the imagery of the different series. In other

words there is no overall visual journey where mother and son slowly emerge as individuals or encounter and resolve dramatic crises in a sequential manner. Much like our lived experience the work is haphazard in its reflection of my son's progress toward individuation.

Initially I envisioned a narrative retelling of the events of our lives and imagined a trajectory of conflict, growth and resolution. However, the concept of 'narrative' is something that I have questioned throughout the process of making and reflecting on this project as it seems too easy to equate narrative with illustration. I am aware that a narrative reading is suggested when making work about a particular time in life and about two particular people. The fact that the work is presented in series, triptychs and diptychs is similarly suggestive of this sequential reading. Yet, I would prefer the work to operate in a more immediate way rather than a simplistic retelling of life events that does not account for the complexity of lived experience.

Van Alphen writes about 'narrative' in relation to Francis Bacon's painting and refers to Bacon's denial of a narrative interpretation of his work. Bacon states:

Narrative is boring because it precludes the direct actualisation of a painting via the viewer's perception. Story-tellers are seducers, diverting the audience's attention from what there is to see (cited in Van Alphen 1992, p. 21)

I agree with Bacon that it is important to experience the work viscerally, especially if the work is intentionally expressionist. If a viewer was to stand in front of a print and try to gauge what is happening by reading it as series of events, the work would have, in my opinion, failed. To succeed, the work has to



operate on a more subconscious level by immediately putting the viewer into the emotional register of the artist's imagining. Ideally the image can situate the viewer in a position of empathy and communication with the particular felt experience. I think there are cues within the separate pieces that divulge aspects of real events but these do not override the importance of the immediate expressionistic intent of the work.

Therefore throughout this project and particularly in the writing of this chapter, I have wavered between divulging the biographical details on which the work is based and withholding this information. The work should be able to exist without the necessity of an accompanying biography, much as the individual pieces have to operate without a narrative framework. However, in order to effectively communicate how the imagery was sourced and used in the work I will refer to some of the events that inspired the work.

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## **Rage I and Rage II**

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The large-scale multi-plate etchings *Rage I* and *Rage II* have evolved over several years and represent a growing confidence with working at this scale while still maintaining the intimate portrait as the subject. It was necessary to make works at this scale in order to create an experience of confrontation in the viewer. I aimed to put the viewer off balance and in doing so, represent the monumental and at times overwhelming experience of mothering an adolescent.

## RAGE I

Explosive anger is the emotion explored in this print. During the years of my son's adolescence, he was subject at times to fits of uncontrollable rage. These outbursts were disruptive and confronting to those around him as well as to himself. At the time I experienced extreme confusion and distress when dealing with the angry boy that had materialised before me. It appeared that he had completely swallowed up the gentle and loving child my son had been. I was unprepared and did not know how to react to these emotions. My intention in this work was to engage with this rage, in a way that reveals the complexity of the experience of rage for both the subject and object.



Figure 29: Support photograph for Rage I

My starting point for this work was a large, red and angry boy's face. My son posed for this image (Figure 29) and I rendered his head and shoulders much larger than life size on 4 steel plates. The image was later developed to include text and expanded horizontally to incorporate a background detail of red veinlike lines behind the figure.



Figure 30: Gabrielle Falconer, *Rage I*, 2009

Initially I found the slight mismatch between the pieces of the paper distracting. However, when I viewed the work pinned to a gallery wall, I found that the subtle shifts in etched and printed tone and colour between the tiled pieces suited my understanding of adolescence as a fragmented experience. I am satisfied with the effect of the tiles, where it looks as if the rage within has split open and distorted the face where the joins do not quite match.

The colours used relate to my son's descriptions of his anger as well as Western conceptions of anger as fiery and heated. I worked to create intensity in the colour utilising the layering of areas of red, yellow and orange transparent inks. These colours reflect the symbolism of fire especially when contrasted with the black background. The black smudged layer on the face creates a distortion and imbalance to the face's features that resembles his expression during fits of rage. The smudgy blackness also operates within the metaphor of fire as a charcoal blackened presence.

I experimented with different forms of markmaking including walking on the soft ground plates to create impressions of my shoes so that they are barely visible on his chest. There is the layer of woodcut emboss that resembles a scar to suggest that he is marked by this moment or that the impulse to rage is embedded already, a shadow beneath the surface.

Additionally, there is a layer that contains text in some of the tiles. The text is part of a story written by my son about a young man burning down a house. This story describes my son's experience of rage as well as revealing a fascination with fire as an outlet for anger.

An artist whose work has particular significance to *Rage I*, is the contemporary Australian painter Peter Booth. Booth has created apocalyptic images evoking the symbolism of fire as a force within the Australian landscape and psyche. While his work has little to do with the essential themes of this project, his use of colour, composition and a ghoulish quality to his figures and claustrophobic backgrounds were influential when I created this particular work. The distortion of the features of his figures is something I wanted to bring to this portrait of my son while still retaining a resemblance to his actual face.



Figure 31: Peter Booth, *Painting*, 1977

The faces in Booth's works such as *Painting* (Figure 31) have a mask-like quality that was also influential to my work. I recognise that in this work I perceive my son very much from the outside. His rage appears like a mask to me, as I experience disorientation, panic and a subsequent dislocation from his underlying emotional state. This work is a revelation about my own confused and ineffectual responses to my son's rage.

## RAGE II

The image directly opposite *Rage I* (Figure 33) is a self-portrait and implicates myself in the experience of rage as I endeavour to express my own quiet, simmering rage. In this image my face is looking back at the image of my son in *Rage I* thus revealing a direct and physical relationship between these two works. This work expresses the feeling that I am being absorbed back into the darkness of confusion, as my son emerges phoenix-like in a fiery and angry inferno.



Figure 32: Support photograph for *Rage II*

In this self-portrait I have worked to create an etched image that has a dark and sombre quality to contrast with the portrait of the adolescent. The surface of the print is almost velvety and lacks the slight lustre and luminous quality of the inks in *Rage I*.



Figure 33: Gabrielle Falconer, *Rage II*, 2011

In tandem, these works function as an engagement between two people. The anger and hostility that is expressed in our faces is looped back between us. These

works also represent a powerful moment of recognition of one another. He is asserting that he is separate and individual. It is as if the conversation runs “you are not me and I am not you”.

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#### HOODIE SERIES

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The works in the *Hoodie* series are expressive of an adolescent’s experimentation with clothing, style and poses. These works reflect changes in the physical appearance of my son. The hoodie he is wearing in this series with the words ‘future clan’ printed on it was significant as a symbol of his aspirations and interests at the time when he wanted to become a rap artist. The words ‘future clan’ are actually my misreading of the image as the text on the original hoodie was ‘future classic’. This misreading is endemic of my many misunderstandings of the time. It is interesting to me that even something as straightforward as the text on an item of clothing can be construed in different ways and this gap in our understandings represents our differing contexts as well as significant frustration for my son.





Figure 34: Support photograph for *Hoodie I*

#### HOODIE I

In June of 2006, my son was assaulted. Initially my son asked whether I would take pictures of his bruised and swollen face. Although this seemed macabre and inappropriate, in retrospect I am grateful he asked me to photograph him as such was my initial shock that I did not think about art making and may have felt that photographing his injuries was exploitative.

The first photograph I chose to work with was the one of my son in his 'hoodie' (Figure 34). There is an element of self-protection that is exhibited by the big clothes typically worn by gangster rappers. At the time he revelled in a sense of heroic survival, much like the stories of rappers he had read, but also was visibly scared. The hoodie in one photograph looked almost like a giant cape. This particular photograph was representative of his confusion at the time as he



has a defiant expression and looks directly at the viewer while at the same time his puffy childlike face seems vulnerable and innocent. The resulting print exaggerates this and is expressive of his behaviour at the time as following the assault, my son looked and behaved younger than he previously had. The swelling meant that his face took on the chubby cheeks and vulnerable eyes of a much younger boy and indeed the nursing needed was like that of a small child. There is disjointedness between the clothing, pose and the childlike face that makes this image work on a different psychological level.



Figure 35: Gabrielle Falconer, *Hoodie I*, 2006

This contrast between wanting to be adult and regression to a childlike state represents his confusion at the time. On one hand, prior to the assault, he felt that

the clothing created a perception of maturity and masculinity as he looked like a rapper and felt that he wanted a life on the streets. Yet after the assault he experienced insecurity and a regression to a more dependent state, and felt anxious about even leaving the house. This image is intended to accommodate these contradictions and does not suggest a resolution for young men through their adoption of a predetermined masculinity. Rather, I wanted to capture the gap between the external tropes of self-image such as clothing and the lived social experience.

This image also reflects the psychological state of the parent. I was contending with my son's oscillation between independence and dependence in this most visceral and threatening event. While my son was experimenting with dressing up as a gangster rapper and jumping out the window to walk around the streets at night, I felt he was still a child and needed my protection. This image represents an event that caused my son to change his own understandings of the relationship between representation and reality. It also revealed my own powerlessness as he engaged in behaviours outside my control.

Scottish painter and printmaker Ken Curry's work was also influential to some degree at the time of creating this image. He has created paintings and prints that have a strong emotional charge with a minimum of contextual detail (Figure 36). His work is strongly evocative of violence and terror while focussing mainly on the injuries sustained rather than on the actual event. His use of the damaged

figure, particularly the male figure, is challenging to our preconceived notions of the heroic male.



Figure 36: Ken Curry, *Five Male Heads*, year unknown

There is an ironic beauty in a work such as *Five Male Heads* (Figure 36). Curry has represented beaten and damaged male heads that are beautiful in their repulsiveness. He achieves this through an atmospheric painterly treatment of the surface and strong yet simple compositions. This element of beauty beguiles me as a viewer and I am drawn to contemplate the disturbing presences in his work. He is also able to create extreme pathos in his paintings as the viewer recognises their own vulnerability in the destroyed faces. This sense of pathos is something I have also tried to express in my image of my son in his hoodie through the face and pose.

#### HOODIE II

This work is an extension and distillation of *Hoodie I*. *Hoodie II* (Figure 37) is more closely cropped with only the chin, neck and nose exposed beneath the hood. At this stage, as well as testing his physical boundaries outside the home, he was fascinated by the many permutations and expressive possibilities of his facial hair and it seemed that every time he emerged from the bathroom there was a new style created with the razor through a precise handling of this expressive tool. In

*Hoodie II* the hood hides his eyes and instead it is his facial hair that he flaunts proudly and that expresses his individuality.



Figure 37: Gabrielle Falconer, Hoodie II, 2010

In posing for this portrait my son has experimented with his self-presentation and presents his facial hair as an artistic creation to be photographed and recorded, carefully composing himself beneath the hoodie so only his lower face is revealed. In contrast to the disturbing quality of *Hoodie I*, this image is a celebration of facial hair and the physical changes that it represented. He expresses a difference from childhood and a willingness to embrace this change.

However, in my reinterpretation of the original photograph through the print, I have inserted coloured patches that were created on another plate. I intentionally wanted the yellows to express toxicity. The celebration of my son's facial hair for me was laced with the fears I had at the time emanating from his experimentations

with drugs and drinking. At the same time as he was creating new images with his changing body, I perceived the potential destruction of the health of that body due to harmful drugs and excessive drinking.

#### PISSED

I found the photograph for this image on my camera. My son had used my camera and taken photographs of himself and his friends while on a drunken binge. There is an out of control quality to the composition in the cropping, lack of focal point and extreme close-up viewpoint. These photographs were interesting as a starting point for this work as they portray the anarchic attitude of my son and his friends that at the time was confronting.



Figure 38: Support photograph for Pissed

The photograph for *Pissed* (Figure 38) was developed into a large scale etching to emphasise the chaotic and confronting aspects that I perceived. The underlying element of aggression and defiance in the image is important in this work. There is also the presence of his peer group with the smaller face of his friend looking out of the picture frame as well.



Figure 39: Gabrielle Falconer, *Pissed*, 2010

There is a contrasting relationship between this work and *Hoodie II* as they are representative of a different attitude. In *Hoodie II* there is the outward and overt physical change and the representation of control, self-awareness and acceptance through the posing with the facial hair carefully manicured whereas, in *Pissed* there is evidence of a lack of control; the flip side for the struggling adolescent, where drinking and drug taking represent a denial of responsible adulthood. The capturing of the moment of drunkenness in the photograph by my son is a poignant signal that different aspects of his experience as an adolescent should be acknowledged. For a mother, these two images together represent a point of conflict as there is a balancing act between acknowledging the young man's independence and the threat of the chaotic force of adolescent experimentation.



The Australian painter Ben Quilty's work is relevant to the *Hoodie* series as he has made paintings that investigate male aggression. In 2009, Quilty curated an exhibition about young men's angst entitled *On Rage* in response to a perceived absence of imagery that deals with male aggression in contemporary Australian art. Quilty's work has been described as expressing by curator Lisa Slade as "the death wish of the Aussie male played out in paint" (cited in Sorenson, R 2009). His work *Self-Portrait Smashed* (Figure 40) has a similar theme to *Pissed* as he too focuses on the drunken lopsided head of the subject as a vehicle for expression of angst as well as the obvious similarity of subject.



Figure 40: Ben Quilty, *Self-Portrait Smashed*, 2008

The large scale he utilises for this oil painting forces the viewer to confront his expressive painterly technique and become immersed in the materiality of the paint, only seeing the image of the double head from a distance. The Rorschach-like blobs and impastoed painted surface mean the image wavers between a chaotic oblivion and a discernable head of a delirious youth: Quilty himself. There is only a tenuous hold to the recognisable form of the self-portrait and Quilty seems to suggest an inevitable falling into chaos that my work does not approach

to the same degree. Likewise the position of the head swinging out of the picture frame emphasises collapse. Although the images in my series do not waver on such an edge, with the form of the figure in my work always dominating the surface, there is a relationship to Quilty's painting techniques. In the image *Pissed* there is a suggestion of movement as the face is tilted and I have endeavoured to convey a vomit-like quality similar to *Self-Portrait Smashed* through the use of colour and smeared marks.

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## Facing In

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This series focuses on my son's face either directly or in profile and is based on photographs taken of my son after his assault when he was in hospital recovering from a subsequent plastic surgery operation to repair damage to his eye socket. The images in this series are addressing different aspects of the adolescent experience and represent more abstractly the psychological state of my son and myself at this stage.

These images also represent more experimentation with the technical processes of collagraph and etching to achieve textural surfaces. I used a more reductive approach to the image and focussed instead on the surfaces and layering of textures and colour to resemble the colourful stages of healing bruises. In many of the images my son's face is enlarged and the identifying detail is eliminated. I was capturing my perception of my son's face as he lay in bed in hospital. The images represent a softening of his face and expression as his usual defences were down. Consequently, he had lost the mask of himself that he presented to the world.





Figure 41: Support photograph for *Facing In* series

This series also addresses my fears at the time that there was a chance his appearance would change permanently. My intention was to place the viewer in my shoes as I looked toward my son's face and tried to make sense of it. This is an exaggeration of a more general fear of motherhood as the child disappears and becomes a man as he changes physically and mentally. At the time, my son spoke about his own generalised fear of having no face, where symbolically he is not recognised because others cannot read his expression and interpret him.



Figure 42: Gabrielle Falconer, *Facing In I*, 2008

These images are also about his healing and the colour red here is significant for its relationship to blood and the fragile body. There is also a repetition of forms within this series as the image of my son's face with his eyes closed, representing

a looking within and a retreat from the world is reworked over several images. In the red print (Figure 44) there is a very faint background image of his face in detail behind larger gestural marks.



Figure 43: Gabrielle Falconer, *Facing In II*, 2008

The image of his face is reworked in the grey image (Figure 45) where the surface has been burnt and is pitted through the process of aquatint and aggressive biting. The faded collagraph marks and the washed out greys in this image represent a retreat from the world almost like a shadow presence. This image is quieter and reflects a sadness and retreat experienced by the teenager. There is a similarity to Quilty's process where there is a doubling of the form through the process of the Rorschach monoprint that signifies in this work a shadow presence or doubling within the psyche. These images relate to a teenager's search for identity where the concept of loss and being lost is confronted in a very direct and threatening manner.



Figure 44: Gabrielle Falconer, *Facing In III*, 2008

In making these works, it is important to stress the concept of empathy again as it is the artist/mother who looks toward the son's face and tries to understand the processes the son is undergoing.



Figure 45: Gabrielle Falconer, *Facing In VI* (detail), 2008



Figure 46: Gabrielle Falconer, *Facing In IV*, 2008

Technically, the prints of Jim Dine were particularly influential on this series. Dine has worked predominantly in printmaking for several decades and has experimented extensively with etching, drypoint, woodcut, lithography and hand colouring. He has been innovative in his approach to combining different printmaking techniques within an image. In *Facing In* there is experimentation with hand colouring including using enamel paint and dyes (Figure 43) that is suggested by Dine's prints. Additionally, there is the combination of different techniques such as collagraph, drypoint, etching and woodcut and a reworking of plates and forms that is a very Dinesian approach to printmaking.



Figure 47: Gabrielle Falconer, *Facing In V*, 2009

Dine has engaged in much experimentation in both the creation of plates and the printing process through a continual application of differing layers and techniques. The compositional devices also owe much to Dine's images as his work often has a central image that is reworked and repeated across the series. The pictorial space is shallow and there is a focus on the textural qualities of the printed surface. In this series these textures replicate the physicality of skin, blood and bone that make up a human being and that become paramount when one is injured or unwell. This reinforces a reading of the images as tenuous portraits where the identity of the portrayed is far from secure.



Figure 48: Jim Dine, *Woman on Fire in Vienna*, 1993

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### **Any way the wind blows**

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This series is an attempt to show the presence of sadness and loss as an aspect of adolescents' maturation process. These images are a means of capturing this bleak and challenging time and encompass portraits of my son and myself and an image of us together.



Figure 49: Gabrielle Falconer, *Mother and Son*, 2009

In *Mother and Son* (Figure 49) my son's head rests on my lap while I caress his hair. This image describes the intimacy of the relationship between mother and child that continues throughout adolescence. The image also refers to Renaissance images of the Madonna and child. In this image the son's body is cropped out and just his head is visible. While there is a feeling of tenderness that is intended in *Mother and Son*, there is also the idea that the mother is meditating on her child's head in her hands and represents my propensity for constant worrying about his emotional state. This exposes my insecurity at this time when I would constantly be wondering what my son was thinking in an overly protective manner.





Figure 50: Gabrielle Falconer, *Torso*, 2009

Torso (Figure 50) is an image of the anguish and frustration experienced during this time. The twisting of the arms and the hidden face are emblematic of this almost tortured experience. The composition also refers to J.D.Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) as the tortured and hidden figure is beneath a field of rye. Within this darkened space he writhes just as I interpreted Holden Caulfield's writhing and frustration within the darkness of cultural and familial ambivalence toward the young and their needs.



Figure 51: Gabrielle Falconer, *On the Couch*, 2009

The image *On the couch* (Figure 51) is a portrait of my son lying curled on our couch. He chose the pose and he had already shaved his head which gave the image an added dimension. While my aim in developing the original image into a print was to express the vulnerability of my son's adolescent experience, it was also an attempt to express the anguish and grief we have all experienced in varying degrees as part of our movement into independence and the consequent separation from parental protection and the certainties of childhood.

The foetus position symbolises a stage of life where retreat and withdrawal from the outside world are paramount. Yet at the same time, we can observe a connection to the outside world and contemporary culture through the remote control.



The title of this series, *Any Way the Wind Blows*, is a line from the pop song *Bohemian Rhapsody* written by Freddie Mercury (1975). There are contrasts within this song between operatic high key emotion and the softer passages of resignation that are also evident in this series. *Any way the wind blows* is also the title of the self-portrait in the series (Figure 52). In this image my hand rests on the dog lying on my legs. This image signifies a resolution of the overly protective and anxious mother in the image, *Mother and Son*. This work depicts some resolution through acceptance of this time. The dog portrayed is the family dog but is also symbolic of a source of strength and stoicism. My face is not present in this image as it is this gesture of touch and the absence of looking and analysing that is more important in this image. The warm colour and voluptuous forms of the figure in this image signify a withdrawal from an analytical, anxious motherhood and a reclamation of the mother's body.



Figure 52: Gabrielle Falconer, *Any way the wind blows*, 2010

There is a similar composition used by Lucian Freud (Figure 53) where a young woman poses with a dog resting on her leg but unlike the evident fear that haunts the eyes of the girl in Freud's image, this self-portrait conveys resilience.



Figure 53: Lucian Freud, *Girl with a White Dog*, 1950-1951

The copper plates I used to make these prints allowed me to rework the figure and the surrounding space. Although etchings are made with seemingly hard and unyielding materials such as metal and acid, the process can also be very tactile. The soft copper in particular is responsive and sensitive to a variety of mark making implements and approaches and enables the artist to create the thick painterly marks of sugarlift, the blurry blacks of drypoint lines and the crisper lines of etching. In making these images I underwent an almost sculptural process. These prints were created after viewing an exhibition of Otto Dix images (Figure 54) and although the work is conceptually removed from Dix's images of war, his methods of working the copper plate were important while creating these images.



Figure 54: Otto Dix, *Mealtime in the Trenches*, 1924

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## Head Shots

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Figure 55: Gabrielle Falconer, *Head Shot I*, 2009

This series is made up of large scale woodcuts created on plywood panels and printed on Japanese paper. These works are larger than life portraits of my son's and my own face. The use of the woodcut technique for this series replicates the frustration of the experience of motherhood at this stage. Woodcut at this scale is



Figure 56: Gabrielle Falconer, *Head Shot II*, 2009

a very physical technique and the marks suggest a ragged expressiveness as well as repetition and an almost overworked quality. In these works there is also an element of aggression where the artist's struggle with the tough and splintery wooden surface is evident. At times my cutting was frantic and

physically painful. The force and determination of this cutting reinforces a perception of myself as riling

against the strictures of motherhood. In this series the layers of saturated colour create a simplicity of form and intent and a distillation of the expressive markmaking.

The photographs for this series were selected from many taken over a four year time period. In some of the images I can recognise the emotion expressed while in others I have tried to understand the

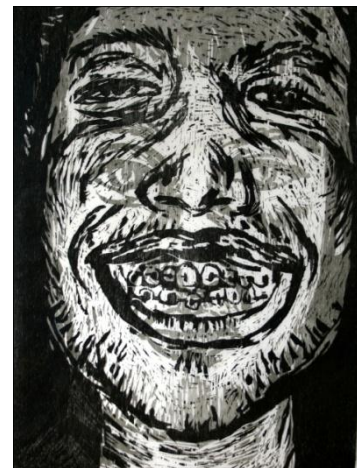


Figure 57: Gabrielle Falconer, *Head Shot III*, 2009

expression through the process of making the print. The notion of time and the length of time it takes to create one of these images is important for this series particularly but also for this whole project. While the image captures just a fraction of time in the life of my son and myself and drawing these faces onto the boards was similarly speedy and gestural, using large brushes and Indian ink. Often I would have to wait until the right moment to draw onto the boards or scratch into plates in the case of other series. The tension and excitement of

cutting into a fresh and already beautifully textured wooden board or scratching a laboriously prepared steel or copper plate combined often with cups of coffee created the required mental state for this work. Similarly the challenge of drawing at that scale a face that I knew so intimately put me in a nervous and highly alert mood where I could work extremely fast and focussed. This was appropriate for this work that approximates a mother's highly charged looking and hyper-alertness.



Figure 58: Gabrielle Falconer, *Head Shots IV, V, VI*, 2011

However, ironically it often took many hours to cut the image into the board. During this process I concentrated on the type of cuts made and how they expressed my emotional response to that image of my son. The cutting was also a particularly intense experience and cathartic to a degree. The time taken to do the cutting meant also that I could really focus my attention on what I felt about this image of my son and in turn resolve some of the confusion I felt when initially looking at his expressions. Although this sounds like therapy, in an artistic sense, I was gaining an insight into how the intimate portrait can express the insights of the artist gained through the process of making. When I compare the original



photographs to the final images I can see how implicit my response is within the markmaking. For example in figure of a happy and goofily smiling boy in braces, the joyful and exuberant marks and ease of cutting are evident. This is also expressed through the composition that exaggerates the mouth and seems to be pushing outward from the picture frame.

In Head Shot VII his neck jaggedly ends as if his head is severed and although this was accidental to a degree, it remained without change as it represents a movement away from more controlled and refined processes to the bluntness and brutality of cutting into the stubborn grain of plywood sheets. Towards the final stages of making this series I would select particular sheets of plywood that were harder to cut. Instead I was required to awkwardly chip at the wood with little cuts as the tools couldn't run smoothly.



Figure 59: Gabrielle Falconer, *Head Shot VII*, 2010

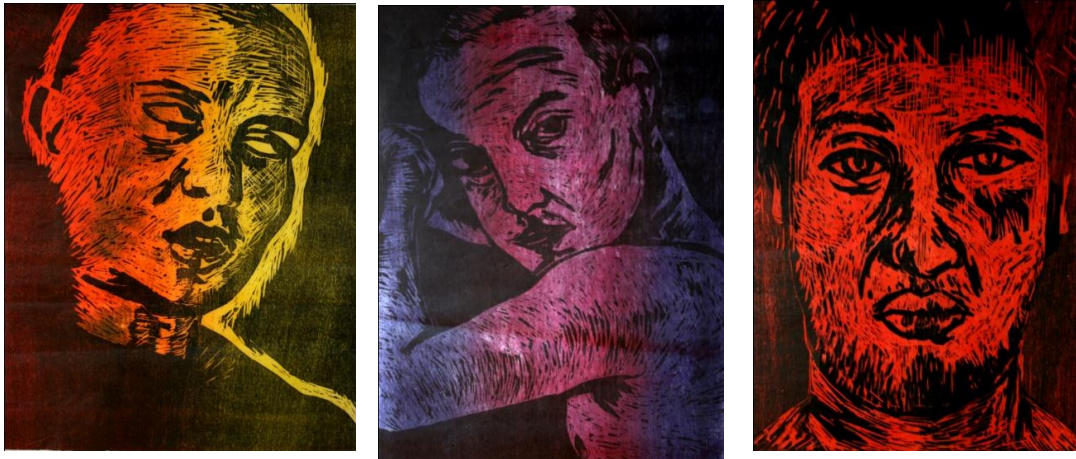


Figure 60: Gabrielle Falconer, Head Shots IIX, XI, X,  
2011

The final image of this series (Figure 61) is a reworking of one of my son's drawings. He created this image as a self-portrait and it was then drawn up on the plywood and made into a print. This image is intended to capture the collaboration between my son and myself. The style of drawing is different from all the other images in the exhibition and represents his taking control of the project of representing his life and indeed control over his life generally. The image is of a tentative and large eyed creature alone in a landscape with mountains in the background. The image poignantly illustrates the vulnerability of the individual leaving home and facing the challenges of being in the world without the protection of childhood.



Figure 61: Gabrielle Falconer /Hugh Falconer, *Head Shot XI*, 2011



## Conclusion

The research undertaken has fulfilled my personal aims to create work that reflects this difficult time of mothering during a disruptive and confused adolescence. At times during this research project the material from which I was making art was painful and revealing and I felt as if I was indeed too exposed. However, I am happy that I continued despite these doubts. The project overall has resolved my question: what are the ethical dilemmas of the mother/artist? The work has done justice to my experience while still honouring my son and his journey. The prints created and the contextual research have developed a deeper understanding and awareness of this experience of motherhood for myself and for others.

The tightrope walk between revealing too much, and therefore disrespecting the privacy of my son, and giving a personal and meaningful account of this time was solved through the use of expressionism. This approach has resulted in engaging the viewer in a more immediate and empathetic experience of the work while preserving private biographical details. During this project I have looked at a number of strategies that artists have used in their visual work to express their personal family life. The visual work I have created is indicative of an approach where the narrative imperative is subordinate to expressionism. The anger and threat of the adolescent toward the parent is clearly suggested in this style of work.

This experience is of course not every mother or adolescent's experience and does not account for every possible emotional state of mothers and sons at this stage. Instead, it portrays moments. I have answered my question: what place does such an intimate exploration of a lived experience have in contemporary art? The work contributes to the field where there has been a dearth of art about mothering adolescents. The work is significantly different to other mothers making work about their children, as the stage of adolescence is a particular one and involves a separation of mother and child and a movement away from the supremacy of the mother and child dyad toward the child's independence. Perhaps Kollwitz's images depicting the loss of grieving mothers are the most salient examples I have seen of this separation and the resulting conflicting emotions. My own portrayal of adolescence differs too from the work of Dijkstra, Van Meene and Sarfati insofar as it originates from my relationship with my son rather than being based on models not directly related to me.

The use of portraiture to reflect my perspective and my reactions to my son's behaviour has been a significant aspect of this project. I have explored through theoretical research and my working practice how portraiture can explore the complex realm of selfhood and the subject. Portraiture has been intentionally used not in order to express the personality of the sitter but rather to capture the experience of focussed and emotionally loaded looking toward my child that I engage in. The aspect of originality here is perhaps also in the intensity of this vision over time. Although this project has been over several years I have been making portraits of my son since he was born and this sustained portrayal has

gone on to be the subject of research that has culminated in this project. This obsessive representation of one individual over such a long time is reflective of the real passions of motherhood, especially when the child is troubled. Constant worrying and looking toward that face and body to register an emotional state before it explodes or implodes for the child is not uncommon. However, the visual recording of a mother's obsessive looking toward her child is what is important in this project. Here I respond again to Carol Armstrong's call for artists "to respond to the domicile they inhabit - to be receptive to it, to allow it to affect one and be affectionate toward it; to make live what is so often deadened by the doing-time of day-to-day getting-by" (2006, pp. 13-14). I feel this project does respond to Armstrong's appeal.

The prints that have been exhibited as well as the experimentation carried out have greatly increased my awareness of the potentialities of printmaking and through using print processes I have seen how the expressive mark can convey the psychological tensions of this relationship. Formally, I have manipulated the printed surface with layering of different textures, colours and transparencies in order to create prints that emit light and colour rather than relying solely on line and contrasts of black and white. The printed surface has become more sculptural throughout the project culminating in the woodcuts that embody anger and frustration. The use of scale has also been important and has contributed to an appreciation of adolescence as an overwhelming experience for some parents and children.

The layering of saturated colour and the intensity of colour gained with the gestural marks in black, although similar in ways to the prints of Jim Dine, give the viewer an impression of being close up to faces. The scale suggests a sculptural and statue like form however the viewer is forced to observe the image close so a distorted perspective is created in reference again to the perspective of motherhood.

The combination of these processes with a personal markmaking gives my work a formal continuity and originality. However, throughout this project it has been exciting for me to discover connections with other artists work and to appreciate their motivations and solutions.

I have been fortunate enough to have had an opportunity to resolve a project I have been working on for 20 years, and the intensity of this research project has forced me to confront issues and go deeper than I would otherwise have done. It is now unnecessary to continue making work about my son – the project concludes with an image made from reworking one of my son's drawings (Figure 61). He is a creative person and is now responsible for continuing this project of the portrayal of his life and living it without his mother's camera or prying eyes observing him. I can think of nothing sadder than me popping around to his flat to get shots of him, his friends and girlfriend, while he is trying to get on with his life. His moving away from home has coincided with the resolution of this project; my role in his life has changed and the project has concluded. This is both

a relief and a challenge. New subjects that revolve around women's lives and portraiture are beckoning.

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