

# *Vena Casa: The Defloration of Maternity.*

*An exploration through sculpture of ambivalence, abjection and melancholia within the mother and daughter dyad.*

*By*

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*Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
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and melancholia within the mother and daughter dyad.*



*Fig.1*

Submitted to fulfil the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Signed statement of originality

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Kathryn Faludi Ball

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# *Vena Casa: The Defloration of Maternity.*

*An exploration through sculpture of ambivalence,  
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daughter dyad.*

## **Abstract**

This project is concerned with redressing the paucity of representations of ambivalence, abjection and melancholia within the dyadic relationship of mother and daughter. It challenges the tradition of representing maternity as an innate and all-encompassing pleasure and seeks to represent the so far inadequately explored, ‘underbelly’ of maternal experience through the medium of sculpture.

Sculptural representations of the mother-daughter dyad that stray from cultural niceties and norms are essentially *terra incognita*.<sup>1</sup> Although this topic has been addressed to an extent within performance and literature; there is a glaring lack of visual art, and in particular sculptural work, that directly addresses this complex area within such a fundamental human arena of relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning, unbroken ground or never before explored

Within contemporary western culture, the dynamics of the mother and daughter relationship is a difficult subject concealed beneath a saccharine facade of idealised thinking. It gets more contentious still, as the journey into a particularly uncharted area of the dyad is taken - the journey into the 'forbidden zone' of maternal ambivalence and abjection.<sup>2</sup> Recent psychological research has made it clear that the incidence of ambivalence within the mother and daughter dyad is much higher than is popularly imagined. Yet it is a subject which has virtually escaped visual representation within Western art.

Historically in Western society male artists and authors have been overwhelmingly responsible for the presentation of images of motherhood and this has generally followed the format of adoring mother/Madonna with son. This is a patriarchal tradition; a tradition of Christianity - a tradition redolent of systems of social control. Where are the representations of the mother and daughter relationship within our culture that could go some way toward reflecting with integrity and without guile, the wide-ranging actualities of maternity? Where are the representations of maternal ambivalence, of mothers' despair, of the body's abjection<sup>3</sup>?

The research within this project is informed by an understanding of relevant writings of Julia Kristeva, and as such is permeated by the 'darkness' that resides

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<sup>2</sup> When I use the term 'Maternity' I refer to the experiences of both the mother and daughter within the dynamics of this relationship.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Kristeva describes the Aristotelian act of *'poetic purification'* - in itself an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it'.

within this French philosopher's work.<sup>4</sup> To a lesser extent, the writings of Kristeva's contemporary, Irigaray informs the thesis, as do specific threads of thought within Klein's early psychoanalytic theories (particularly issues around ambivalence and the uncanny.). The research also draws on autobiographical experiences and articulates a body of visual predecessors and sculptural influences upon *Vena Casa* – in particular the works of Louise Bourgeois, but also those of Mary Kelly, and artists Kiki Smith, Sally Mann, Cathy de Monchaux and Nina Saunders.

*Vena Casa* is an exhibition of six (gallery sited) sculptural installations. Each installation is contained within its own room or cell. Each cell is a choreographed environment that is intended to evoke an ambience influenced by or belonging to something like a hospital ward, or an institutional type setting. Each installation is accessed by a central passage. Each cell, or space, is lit in a minimal manner, to support the multiple themes of the hidden-object, the melancholic, and of 'intimacy verses intrusion' - dark undercurrents that the sculptures themselves are intended to invoke.

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<sup>4</sup> This point will be expanded later within this text, particularly when I enter into discussion of the installations.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Caroline Ball, Julian Northmore Ball and Assoc. Prof. Lorraine Jenyns.

I wish to dedicate this Thesis to my children Cypress, Ariel and Reuben and my Grandmother O. R. Hine.

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*'Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it and then, if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor.'* Louise Bourgeois

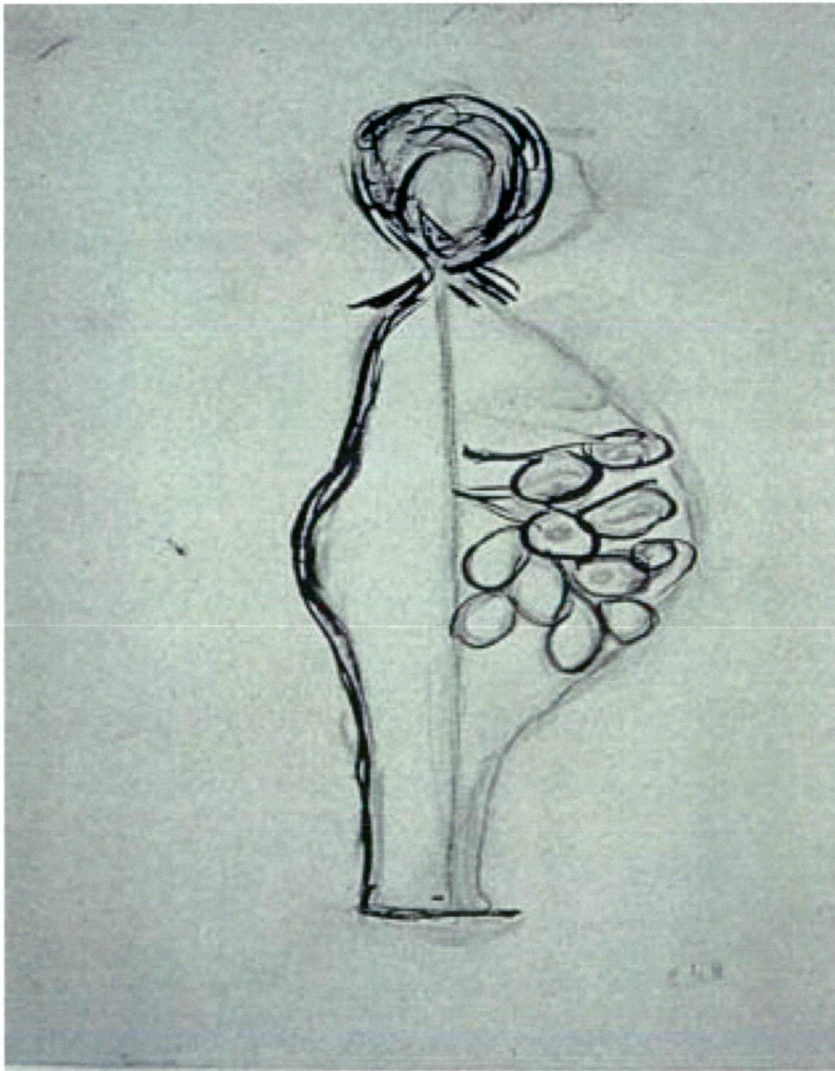


Fig. 2

# Introduction.

## Identifying the project.

The mother and daughter relationship is a difficult and sticky subject concealed beneath a saccharine facade of tradition and wishful thinking. It gets more difficult as the journey into a particularly uncharted area of the dyad is taken - the journey into the 'forbidden zones' of maternal ambivalence, abjection and melancholia.<sup>5</sup> Theoretical exploration has made it clear that the incidence of ambivalence within the mother and daughter connection is much higher than is popularly imagined, but that the subject has virtually escaped visual representation within Western art. This thesis is concerned with redressing the paucity of visual art depicting ambivalence and melancholia within the dyadic relationship. It particularly challenges the tradition of representing maternity as an innate and all-encompassing pleasure.

Historically in western society, male artists and authors have been overwhelmingly responsible for the presentation of images of motherhood and this has generally followed the format of adoring mother/Madonna with son. This is a patriarchal tradition; a tradition of Christianity; a tradition redolent of

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<sup>5</sup> **Sigmund Freud**, 'Mourning and Melancholia (1917)', in *The Pelican Freud Library, 11; On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1984) Freud cautiously noted that the definition of *melancholia* varies widely and that one cannot be certain if the various somatic and psychogenetic forms of melancholia can be grouped into a single entity, however there is an emphasis on two descriptions of a melancholic state; the first is based on interpersonal issues such as dependency, helplessness, and feelings of loss and abandonment and the second, a depression derived from a harsh, punitive superego that is focused primarily on self-criticism, concerns about self-worth, and feelings of failure and guilt.



systems of social control. Where are the representations of the mother and daughter relationship within our culture that could go some way toward reflecting with integrity and without guile, the wide-ranging actualities of maternity?

The most problematic issue for women artists is the manner in which convention has controlled the way female identity has been conveyed. In relation to the woman's experience of being born of woman and, in particular, the articulation of unembellished or negative experiences of motherhood the message is clear; the subject is better not investigated within the art establishment, *let alone* within generic popular culture. The collective cultural shiver felt at the mention of Medea's butchered children betrays the all-pervasive nature of this convention. It is demonstrated by the backlash of criticism from the academic sector concerning Sally Mann's photographic explorations of the mother and daughter relationship<sup>6</sup>. It is shown by the negative reactions to the searing investigation of maternal ambivalence by Adrienne Rich, writer and poet the work of whom I shall reference throughout the exegesis.<sup>7</sup> These repulsions testify to the subject not being open for consideration within either conventions of 'high art' or western culture at large. With the advent of Feminism<sup>8</sup>, women artists have been understandably reticent to turn to what would seem to be obvious sources of

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss this point in the third chapter.

<sup>7</sup> Rich A., (1977) *Of Woman Born*, (London, Virago), p iv (Introduction.)

<sup>8</sup> I use the word 'Feminism' as a term that identifies a social drive within recent western histories that is motivated towards reaching a point of 'equality' within the divisions of both social and intimate structures of gender.

reference: complications inherent in relationships between women as mothers and daughters.

Representations of the mother-daughter dyad through sculptural means that stray from cultural niceties and norms are close to *terra incognita*. Although this area has been explored to some extent through other forms of art, such as dance, performance, literature; and, to an extent, through two-dimensional visual media, there is a glaring lack of sculptural work concerning maternal ambivalence.

The visual research presented here is an exploration of ways in which the dynamics within the dyad may be sculpturally represented. The proposition is that contemporary visual articulation presents an opportunity to cleanse the representation of maternity of its iconic tradition and to offer in its place alternative visual modes of representation.

There is a growing trend within recent psychological research and psychoanalytically based publications, to map out this previously uncharted area.<sup>9</sup> I have, therefore, investigated and utilised this resource as a way to tease out possible explanations for the historical paucity of this subject's visual exploration. The work is theoretically centred on these investigations, and an autobiographical approach has been adopted where appropriate. The autobiographical elements of this project are motivated beyond a simple desire for

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<sup>9</sup> **Rozsika Parker, Estela Welldon and Adrienne Rich** are at the forefront of this group. I was greatly motivated by specific literature written by each of these women, their words fuelled the desire to pursue my topic. Their investigations into maternal ambivalence created a niche of

self-knowledge and the search for identity, and, as in the work of visceral artists Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith, have connections with universal elements of this powerful dyadic experience.

The importance of formulating and using a language that has its foundations within the personal is strongly supported by the writings of principal second-generation philosophers and psychoanalysts such as Luce Irigaray and Adrienne Rich. It may safely be said that communication between women traditionally involves a considerable degree of shared autobiographical intimacy.<sup>10</sup> Despite this arguably innate tendency, few women have felt brave enough, until the last decade or two, to speak in the first person, preferring the patriarchal tradition of personal, and thus emotional, removal. When writer and poet Adrienne Rich, in her seminal 1976 work *Of Woman Born*, presents a provocative and compelling analysis of the cultural amnesia of women's experience in both historical and contemporary cultural discourse, it is with autobiographical insights as well as painstaking and methodical research. In her introduction to the second edition of this landmark examination of the place of women, maternity and patriarchal tradition she reflects as follows:

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articulation that seemed to enfold the intentions of my research and therefore have considerable influence on my arts practice.

<sup>10</sup> **Deborah Tannen** *You just don't understand*, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1998. In the preface of this book, the author observes that "For males, conversation is the way you negotiate your status in the group and keep people from pushing you around; you use talk to preserve your independence. Females, on the other hand, use conversation to negotiate closeness and intimacy; talk is the essence of intimacy, so being best friends means sitting and talking."

*Of Woman Born* was both praised and attacked for what was sometimes seen as its odd-fangled approach: personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both. But this approach never seemed odd to me in writing. What still seems odd is the absentee author, the writer who lays down speculations, theories, facts and fantasies without any personal grounding.<sup>11</sup>

It is one thing to discuss controversial and unsettling issues such as matrophobia (for Rich the fear of becoming one's mother), maternal depression, and deep, dark impulses directed towards one's children. It is quite another to do as she does, illustrating both historical and contemporary accounts of maternal despair and the fantasies or realities of infanticide with excerpts from her own diaries. I see it as an imperative that women lay bare, for others of their sex, the frustration, the furies, and the despairs that are so often an integral part of motherhood.

For my part, over time, autobiographical research and predominant themes and objectives of the thesis underwent the following distinct stages of metamorphosis.

### **Early days.**

Originally the project was focused not upon the mother-daughter dyad but motivated by the compelling objective of understanding what it was about corporeal abjection that could be experienced by the viewer as both seductive and repulsive. Initially my proposition had been that an individual might experience

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<sup>11</sup> Rich A., (1977), p 256

these extremes in parallel with each other, rather than successively. I will refer to Julia Kristeva's compelling exploration of the abject in greater detail shortly. The initial intent had been to produce art objects that embodied the confusion manifested in the simultaneous experience of repulsion and attraction.

### **Influence of Reality.**

Close to this time (1995) I gave birth to my first child, a daughter of undeniably corporeal density. The impact of pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for an infant altered fundamental aspects of my identity. After the end of my 'confinement' and ensuing maternity leave, I returned to the research and found that aspects of its direction were no longer relevant enough in my life to hold my attention. Although the dynamics of experiencing attraction and repulsion continued to be relevant to my visual work, I became aware that I needed to focus my concern on how these elements manifested in maternal experience. I considered the visual art of Helen Chadwick<sup>12</sup>, with works such as her 1991 'Piss Snow', finding them of interest but insufficient depth. I became aware of the multi-talented Mary Kelly's prodigious output, both her visual art installations and written analysis of female desire and experience. I found her ideas incisive, compelling, and in many ways relevant to my own work.

My sculptural investigation manifested itself in visual depictions of the abject experience within maternal realities. I delved further into psychoanalytic aspects of the maternal experience. My reading began to uncover various points.

Motherhood contained contradictions of experience that many women (including myself) were not supposed to express or question. Motherhood did indeed contain experiences that could be manifested as feelings of both attraction and revulsion on the part of the mother towards her child. For some mothers, these early dichotomous feelings manifested in part due to the abject physical nature of the early days of motherhood. Because these contradictions frequently remain unexamined and unexpressed, often what is manifested from this sublimation is a sense of personal dysfunction, guilt and self-recrimination.<sup>13</sup>

Prominent writers such as Luce Irigaray and Adrienne Rich fuelled and validated the investigation towards this point, and it is upon the writings of Rich that I shall focus much of my attention. Because of the lack of sculptural representation of the dynamics of the mother and daughter nexus in general, (and of ambivalence in particular), it became obvious that this was where the research should now be focused.

As progress was made in research into maternal ambivalence, maternal abjection remained, for me, a pressing subject to further explore. With much of my sculpture, abjection was as prevalent a theme as the intended representation of maternal ambivalence. Why was this so? In her seminal work *Powers of Horror*,

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<sup>12</sup> I do not consider the work of Chadwick beyond this point.

<sup>13</sup> **Weldon, Estela V.**, (1988) *Mother, Madonna, Whore. The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. (London and New York, Guilford Press)

Julia Kristeva examines the disruptive nature of abjection<sup>14</sup> from a cultural perspective, particularly emphasising the power of the abject to subvert conventional cultural mores and presumptions. Her very use of maternal metaphors such as her description of this last, convulsive century's 'labour pains' struck a chord with me. Taking the abject (or what exists on the border between the conscious and the unconscious) as an account of the daughter's unity with her mother in the pre-Oedipal stage it follows that the abject also represents the (m)other which the daughter (subject) has to reject- abject- in order to establish a separate self when passing through the mirror stage<sup>15</sup>. Kristeva's work is highly appropriate as a reference unafraid to drag into the light of critical examination areas of female interaction traditionally taboo. Here was a theorist with whom I could commune; someone who understood both a questioning of woman's role *and* the power of abjection.

As an effective and groundbreaking theorist she evokes images of Caravaggio's Judith as she gets on with the job of bloodily breaking down the conservative, and thus sacrosanct, paradigm of the functional daughter-woman-mother relationship. In Kristeva's words I saw the connection made between the apparent dichotomies

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<sup>14</sup> Abjection as described by **Kristeva**. "Through frustration and prohibitions, this [maternal] authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted ... maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body." (1982), *Powers of Horror*, (New York, Columbia University Press) p. 72.

of maternal abjection and desire clearly illustrated with her description of abjection as ‘...the spitting up of milk cream’<sup>16</sup> - the idea that the infant might be simultaneously repelled by what it also most craved. And that the reverse was true; that corporeal abjection could repel the mother from her child. For me, it is significant that Kristeva ‘walks’ where other theorists fear to ‘tread’.

### **A second influence.**

It was just after this time (1998) that I became pregnant with my second child, another daughter. While the work that I had made during the second phase of the research had begun to explore the emotional and corporeal incompatibilities between the role of the ‘ideal’ mother and my own experiences of motherhood, upon the birth of a second daughter it became increasingly apparent that this was the area in which the most determined focus was demanded. With the birth of my second daughter I had come to realise with a sense of urgency the degree to which my own experience of being a daughter was influencing the mothering of my daughters. My sculptural concerns had to more clearly reflect my own life experience. Not only had I been questioning the ‘maternal ideal’ and discovering a pervasive sense of maternal ambivalence, I was now becoming increasingly aware of the silence in both popular culture and visual art of work dealing with complications such as abjection and melancholia inherent in the mother and daughter dyad. Due to physical complications of the pregnancy I was forced to

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<sup>15</sup> It is, using Lacan’s terminology, the subject’s reminder of the pre-Oedipal stage of the infant’s life before passing through the mirror phase, entering into the symbolic order and thereby enabling itself to assert its own individuality by differentiating its self from the unity with the mother.

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva J, (1982), p. 90.



spend the majority of the time in 'confinement'. This physical restraint ultimately delayed the research for over a year and a half. It also provided me with further first-hand experience of corporeal abjection and, at times, enervating states of sadness and despair. The time also, however, provided me with an opportunity to reflect upon the path that the thesis had followed so far.

The focus of my research was drawn once again to the realities of procreation. Concerns of simple attraction and repulsion atrophied; these corporeal concerns coalesced into an increasingly compelling regard for the representation of both synchronous, polarised emotional experience and of states of sadness - perhaps in part a mourning for a motherhood that was never experienced as a child. At times of particular and extreme stresses these states might coalesce, metamorphose in combination with corporeal abjection and merge into the maternal depression, melancolia and deathliness described with such penetrating analysis by Kristeva in her groundbreaking *Black Sun* (1982). As conflicting impulses fight for dominance and the resulting confusion deepens at times into an abject alienation, a mother may become utterly overcome by maternal melancholia. In this state of blackness, of melancholic abjection, she might find, in Kristeva's words, not a sacred dialogue, but rather an existential crisis: 'Life barely resisting death, faced with bodily fluids.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> **Kristeva, J**, (1987) *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press.

Thus the heavy impact of corporeal abjection might catalyse the formation of an unnatural and frightening bridge between the two culturally separated states of life and death - breaking down established cultural mores and traditions, and opening up, in their place, a potentially bottomless chasm of despair. I was encouraged to continue the sculptural representations by references within my theoretical research that highlighted a lack of understanding surrounding this battleground within the mother and daughter relationship, and, for many mothers such as myself, the oppressive and omnipresent nature of maternal abjection. It was with this compelling and, in some ways frightening dynamic in mind, that the third and final focus of the investigation came to rest. The far-reaching influence of my past and the continuing influence and intrusion upon the maternal experience of these powerful emotional extremes were to find their dark fruition later, in the completion of the *Vena Casa* sculptural works themselves.

The structure of the exegesis is as follows:

## **Chapter One**

This section revolves around discussions concerning the presence of ambivalence, abjection, and melancholia integral to the experiences of being a mother and/or a daughter. In order to understand why there is such limited representation of ambivalence in the mother and daughter dyad within contemporary art practice, the greater sociological context must first be examined. The first section of this chapter is essentially concerned with the conflict that arises due to the incompatibilities between the expectations a woman holds regarding the

expectation of motherhood and the realities of experiencing motherhood itself. A discussion of this area's theoretical exploration by contemporary psychoanalysts, along with autobiographical extracts of relevant contributors will further establish the presence and affect of ambivalence within maternity.

I then examine ambivalence arising out of the corporeal abjection of maternity and the potential for melancholia and states of deathliness to overcome the mother. The work of Julia Kristeva is of critical importance here as she outlines the pervasive power of the abject and its nature not simply as an inseparable component of femininity and motherhood, but also as a force of immense disruptive and redemptive qualities. Her first-hand appreciation of the 'black sun' of enduring moods of darkness and despair –of 'the Thing buried alive'<sup>18</sup> is of critical importance here, as is her penetrating analysis of its cultural denial and suppression.

## **Chapter two**

This is a discussion of the visual project, and how the ideas examined in Chapter one are expressed in the three-dimensional works. I describe how each component of the sculptural work articulates aspects of the core concerns of my research.

## **Chapter Three**

In this chapter, I discuss the work of other artists which is related in some way to my own.

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<sup>18</sup> Kristeva J, (1987), p. 53.

In a contemporary context, I consider the work of both Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith; these artists work from an autobiographical perspective as well as dealing with issues relating to the feminine experience. I also look at the photographic work of American artist Sally Mann who has received both criticism and praise for the portrayal of her daughters within her work. *Post Partum Document* by Mary Kelly is included, as it is the most widely recognised contemporary investigation of the mother and child relationship. While its focus is not primarily that of abjection, it is resonant with a clinical precision invoking an emotionally distancing ambivalence. Finally I consider relevant works of both Cathy de Monchaux and Nina Saunders, artists for whom concerns with materiality, subjectivity and abjection at times strongly mirror my own.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion presents a re-emphasis of the key elements making up the visual research. The outlined influences, whether theoretical, visual or experiential, have left their impressions upon the development of the work. The conclusion articulates how, through the process of this research, the work has contributed to the presentation of alternative ways of visually imaging the mother-daughter dyad.

# Chapter One

## **Ambivalence, abjection, melancholia and death in the mother/daughter dyad.**

The primary concerns of this chapter are to examine dyadic ambivalence, specifically where it manifests within the mother and daughter relationship, and then to explore associated themes of abjection, melancholia and death. In simple terms I describe what contributes to the experience of maternal ambivalence and the melancholic effect that it may have on both mother and daughter.

When I use the term ambivalence, I refer to its psychoanalytical definition as the co-existence of feelings of love and hate in a single context. It is when the resulting conflict and confusion that arises when the experience of maternal ambivalence is displaced or denied that is most problematic and potentially destructive. In the visual thesis this is particularly considered through the exploration of the persistent brooding that arises due to unexpressed conflict. Ambivalence is an inescapable facet of human existence. Freud is at his most prescient when he posits that 'It might be said that we owe the fairest flowering of our love to the reaction against the hostile impulse, which we sense within us.' <sup>19</sup>

When dealing with the issue of ambivalence specifically within the maternal experience, do we not cringe at the very mention of the word? With so many gender positions in a state of precarious though positive transition, the woman-as-mother idyll remains extraordinarily intact. When very real feelings of ambivalence are denied or ignored, they may powerfully re-emerge as postnatal depression, and, as

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<sup>19</sup> **Freud S.**, (1915) "Thoughts for the times on War and death", Vol. 14, James Strachey et al. Ed. and trans. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., London, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1953-73 p.299.

we shall see, may in extreme cases ultimately manifest as hatred between the child and mother. Rozsika Parker in her book, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, contrasts mothers' often surprised and surprising accounts of their child's responses to contained expressions of maternal ambivalence, with mothers' accounts of how their attempts at a repudiation of their hateful feelings towards their children often ends up imprisoning them in depression, and children in idealising/denigrating fantasy relationships to mothers. As theorists such as Parker have noted, there is no particular starting point for maternal ambivalence. It may manifest in many mothers as the most benign of irritations, while culminating in others as extremes of uncontrollable punitive intolerance.<sup>20</sup> We are all uncomfortably aware of instances involving suicide or infanticide - such is the nature of maternal subjectivity.

It is perhaps human nature to seek to ignore the existence of maternal ambivalence because of our bias towards stability and reliability for the benefit of group cultural survival. I find the condition, however, far too complex and permeating a social issue to be suppressed and merely written off as a simple, occasional aberration.

It has been repeatedly argued that we are a patriarchal society and therefore live by structures suitable for the nurturing of masculinity. As already stated, ideals surrounding maternity have remained relatively static despite the fact that the world is in a state of constant cultural transformation. Mothers are still left with the largest responsibility for the raising of the infant child. The mother of an infant must remain eternally vigilant to its needs. Physically and emotionally, the pressures on

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<sup>20</sup> **Parker R.**, (1985) *Tom in Two*, (London, Virago), p.5-6.

mothers are enormous and complete exhaustion often a consequence. Is it little wonder that ambivalence may arise?<sup>21</sup>

It is imperative to acknowledge that underlying the experience of relative belonging to motherhood is a woman's feelings regarding her own worth. Within a patriarchal western society such as ours, women are still seen as nurturers and not those in need of nurture. Women have historically sacrificed their needs for the survival of their families or for the advancement of their husbands' careers. History has discouraged and de-sensitised women's awareness of what their needs and potential may even be.

Rozsika Parker describes the inconsistencies of women relating to their daughters' needs as a mirroring of their fluctuating ability to respond to their own <sup>22</sup>. With this enmeshing of relationships often comes projection. Projections concerning identity interweave across generations, from grandmother to mother, and from mother to daughter<sup>23</sup>. A mother will identify with her daughter and a daughter with her mother. A mother, however, is more likely to project feelings that she has about herself onto her daughter than the reverse. When the two are together, with the innocent, vulnerable and lively infant dependent upon the mother for love, stimulation and security, the unmet neediness of the mother may rise up in response. In this case, identities of the two may become blurred, leading to confusion for the child and a potential sense of responsibility for the emotional needs of her mother<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> **Welldon. Estela V.**, (1988) p. 88

<sup>22</sup> **Parker R.**, (1985) p. 218

<sup>23</sup> **Flax J.**, (1978) p.147

<sup>24</sup> **Flax J.**, (1978) p. 157

The relationship between a mother and daughter, because of these inward reflections and presumptions may thus induce the dynamic of ambivalence. The co-dependant nature of the structure gives rise to a host of emotional states, including those of love and hate. With the two people attempting to separate from one another, the mother may find difficulty due to the need to retain her identity as an *infant's* mother, rather than the mother of a little girl growing up and in need of a strong and constructive role model. As the daughter seeks to strike out with greater autonomy, so may the mother cling more tightly in response, particularly when her own relationship with her mother is deeply enmeshed.<sup>25</sup>

These issues may prove a potent cocktail – a recipe for ambivalence - on the part of both mother and daughter. The probability of re-enacting emotional stalling and developmental resistance over the women's lifetimes may be extremely high, resulting in long-term emotional damage and the tragic potential for mental illness.

In *Vena Casa*, I attempt to articulate through sculptural form, the emotional experiences of maternal ambivalence that are described by theorists such as Parker, Rich and Kristeva. Decisions of colour, form and surface treatment are all made in relation to the potential 'affect' that can be imbued. The sculptures are intended to become objects or installations that allude to the 'affect' of the subject matter. I intend to discuss this point in a later chapter.

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<sup>25</sup> Flax J., (1978) p. 55



### **Ambivalence: a daughter's perspective.**

Daughters may love their mothers deeply. These daughters are fortunate, as a daughter's primary role model is usually her mother. As Adrienne Rich aptly describes in her groundbreaking book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*:

‘The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other - beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival - a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.’<sup>26</sup>

This bond explains one of the most intense and resilient of human relationships. Further testimony of that connection is very well illustrated by the inclusion of a number of contributions from the book *Mothers by Daughters*, a collection of candid accounts of culturally diverse women writing of their experience as daughters to their mothers. I include these for their simple and strong assumptions of their mothers' love, a luxury of love unknown to many daughters for whom the relationship has been more of a curse than a blessing. As one contributor states: ‘Every memory I have of Mama is full of love’<sup>27</sup>.

In the words of another:

When you are a woman with a close relationship with your mother, who can compete? The comfort, the championing, the humour and familiarity, built for so long upon each other, is a hard game to beat...when you have a good and close relationship with your mother, it allows and encourages others.

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<sup>26</sup> Rich A., (1977), p. 160

<sup>27</sup> Goldsworthy J, Ed (1995), *Mothers by daughters* (London, Virago) p.115

It's against suffocating exclusivity, it breeds belief and trust, it wants its child to grow kind, honest, strong, happy, graceful and independent.<sup>28</sup>

It is this 'suffocating exclusivity' within which many daughters have attempted to develop and mature; their hearts, minds and, sometimes, arguably, their bodily metabolism crippled as a result. Amongst these expressions of gratitude and respect from daughters regarding their mothers, there also lie the chronicles of women who have experienced a relationship with their mothers that is radically different. The extracts which follow serve as a 'teasing out' of the experience of ambivalence within the mother and daughter relationship. They also read tellingly with an Irigaray quotation by which they are followed.

The candid accounts of these women voice the ambivalence at the core of the mother/ daughter relationship, one, which at its best is essentially supportive and enriching, but, at its worst, may cause irreparable damage.

With Mother time lingered, her statuesque body moving slowly, her silences as much a reproach as her scolding words. Her pride and aloofness made me envy friends whose mothers were easy-going with their children, demonstrative in their affection.<sup>29</sup>

... I would be not drawn again into that suffocating room in which the two of us breathed each others stale air...<sup>30</sup>

...Looking back now, in the calm achieved by years and distance, I can only shake my head in wonderment at some of the more baroque lengths she went to keep me a neuter.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Goldsworthy J., (1995) p.112

<sup>29</sup> Goldsworthy J., (1995) p.28

<sup>30</sup> Goldsworthy J., (1995) p. 98

<sup>31</sup> Goldsworthy J., (1995) p.166

The final quotation I find particularly disturbing with its description of concerted denial by a mother of a daughter's femininity

The fear of becoming like one's own mother is a common thread in the negative aspect of how a daughter may feel about her mother. This 'matrophobia' may arise from the mother struggling not to re-create her own oppressive childhood. This struggle against the past, against that which was the mother's own upbringing, may collapse in the face of the daughter's natural quest for autonomy. Irigaray poignantly describes this:

With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less. You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralysing me...imprisoned by your desire for a reflection, I become a statue an image of your immobility...And, if I leave, you lose the reflection of life, your life...and if I remain, am I not guarantee of your death.<sup>32</sup>

When looking at the origins of 'fear of mother' it is imperative to discover what it is that a mother may represent for her daughter that makes her such an undesirable role model. What does it mean to be a daughter in a patriarchal society? From a personal perspective it is still this message that permeates my understanding of feminine identity. While I may strive in my own life to go beyond prescribed expectations, what pervades, because of my personal history and idiosyncratic nature, is the belief that I am not up to scratch. With conversations amongst my peers, many of whom may have histories and ambitions similar to my own, the sentiment of not being a 'real woman' lingers. And there are still aspects within a child's behaviour that we now, as mothers, find very uncomfortable, many of which

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<sup>32</sup> Irigaray as quoted by Goldsworthy J., (1995) p. 50

are related to the child going beyond the boundaries of what is deemed as acceptable within a socially determined gender mould. How hard it is then, for a young woman to forge ahead against the memories of a childhood environment of repression, discouragement and neglect.

As well as experiencing exposure to maternal states of projection, it has been traditionally expected of girls to acquire the skills of understanding, diplomacy and an awareness of others' needs. This, in turn, means that assertions and acts of autonomy by a female child are often deemed selfish. From the infant schoolyard onwards, girls are culturally conditioned to be aware of the needs of others, to the degree that they may lose grasp of their own.<sup>33</sup>

Is it any wonder then, that as daughters start to grow up and mature, they feel a sense of guilt regarding their own needs, whether they be specifically emotional needs or related needs for independence and success? Not only do daughters experience their own guilt; they also experience the repressed anger and guilt of their mothers. 'Guilt is a chain that binds one person to another out of the impossibility of separateness.'<sup>34</sup> I see a long-established history of daughters experiencing anger at their own mothers' passivity within the world. They feel intense frustration concerning their mothers' apparent victimisation and their seeming acceptance of roles defined by their own culture. As daughters are drawn to their own mothers for guidance and knowledge, they may become increasingly aware of how dispirited and degraded the role of mother can be. Luce Irigaray explores this very point when she asks who 'mother' really is when conventional motherhood demands such a continuum of culturally sanctioned gestures that to be

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<sup>33</sup> **Eichenbaum L.** and **Orbach S.**, (1983) *Understanding Women*, (Middlesex, Penguin) p.38

<sup>34</sup> **Eichenbaum I.** and **Orbach S.**, (1983) p.138-139.

a mother is simply to carry out an externally determined series of functions. How is one to form a relationship with someone slavishly aping gender role convention?<sup>35</sup> And how much harder may it be when that person seeking to form a relationship with her mother is a little girl?

Culturally, women are given a strong message that masculinity is dominant and femininity is subordinate. Women are given their social identity by giving birth to and caring for their children. Motherhood provides women with a validation for their subordination.

‘As is mother, so is daughter’ Ezekial ch.1 verse 3. Cultural determinism is seldom so overt. Daughters may strike out with the belief that if they are not like their own mothers then everything will be different. This attitude, however, puts an unfair burden of responsibility and blame on the mother for all things that may be negative in a daughter's life. How can any daughter searching for autonomy attain her value from a cultural environment that devalues a feminine identity? In response to this conundrum, daughters may seek to tear apart blurring identities; to respond to their feelings of matrophobia by taking decisive action in order to convince themselves that they simply *will not be* like their own mothers. Particularly in times of rapidly accelerating cultural change, such as our own, the result may be an over-compensating and complete excision of the mother from the daughter's life.<sup>36</sup>

Because of the biological, cultural and individual connections we share with our mothers, it may, in our quest for our own identity and independence, be wishful

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<sup>35</sup> **Irigaray L.**, (1991) “Women- Mothers, the silent Substratum of the Social Order” in *The Irigaray Reader*, **Basil Blackwell** Ed ( England Oxford), p.50.

<sup>36</sup> **Rich A.**, (1977) p. 236.

thinking to seek to negate or deny such an overwhelming influence. It may be that the predominant outcome is a toxic dose of resentment and guilt.

### **Ambivalence: a mother's perspective.**

As has been described, the daughter often adopts the mothers' feelings. This leads to problems as the mother begins to pick up on a daughter's mirroring; on a daughter's ambivalence. Where a daughter experiences ambivalent feelings towards her mother as an individual, her mother is likely to be unbalanced in her treatment of that daughter.

This places further pressure on the mother already saddled with considerable responsibilities. Patriarchal society sends mixed messages about maternity that make the successful achievement of that role close to unachievable. What is required of a socially functional woman is that she be simultaneously both a subordinate to her husband *and* a competent mother. As the plethora of 1950's marriage guidance manuals attest, this wife-mother balance must be very finely maintained as overt competence may threaten a husband's pre-eminent position as 'head of the household'.<sup>37</sup>

As I delved further into the research I developed a clearer understanding of maternal ambivalence and its historical roots. Based on tradition long preceding recent modern history, the woman's role has been inherently conditional. Confusion inevitably arises with the condition that as women they are linked inseparably with their role as successful bearer and nurturer. The cause of confusion lies in the link being hamstrung by the age-old implication that as women they are never able to be both feminine *and* good enough mothers to provide for the survival and optimal well being of their offspring.

According to prominent American psychotherapist Joan Raphael-Leff, mothers tend either to over-facilitate or over-regulate in the process of caring for daughters. The

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<sup>37</sup> Raphael-Leff in Rich A., (1977) p.91

mother who over-facilitates the needs and wants of her children is likely to be resented by them at some stage due to intrusive 'fussing'. Mothers who have this tendency often have an unclear idea of their own worth. They may fear the rejection of their child and act in an over conciliatory manner to avoid their fear of rejection. This type of overcompensation also indicates confusion between the real and the ideal, self and object. Raphael-Leff suggests that the mother, who is a facilitator, whether at an unconscious or conscious level, is afraid of hating her own children and therefore avoids distance and conflict by appeasing every need of the infant. This action has consequences for both mother and child. The mother who has these tendencies may induce a sense of grave inadequacy, as she is not able to be the all-giving, all-knowing entity she has set out to be. In addition, a feeling of failure and betrayal concerning the well being of her child is a likely consequence. Realistically, the attempts of a mother to facilitate a child's every need are ultimately an attempt at omnipotence. She wants not only to do what is best for the well being of the child; she is attempting to prevent the loss of her belief in her own goodness.

While the mother who over facilitates may be afraid of hating her child, Raphael-Leff concludes that the mother who over regulates in accommodating the needs of her child might be afraid of forming loving attachments with her. Often this arises from an inability to trust in the continuation of such attachments. The motivations of the regulator clearly have foundations in a different way of exercising control over the infant. This woman sets herself up in the role of Omnipotent Mother, keeping passion, intimacy and love at a distance by exercising a form of domination over her child. A regulator is likely to have had to struggle for independence or autonomous recognition before giving birth to her daughter, and sees the strength she has gained being jeopardised by her infant's needs. She may not be able to separate her own unresolved dependency needs, or fears of greed, from those understandable dependencies and demands of her infant. The regulator may ultimately be the



mother who physically abuses her children to the point of their becoming one of the chillingly described 'battered babies'.<sup>38</sup>

It must also be noted that not only may a mother switch from being a facilitator towards her daughter as an infant and then becoming a regulator of her needs as an adolescent, but that daughters in a family may receive varying degrees of regulation and/or facilitation.

Children become aware of this ambiguity in sentiment. Certainly I was aware, as one of three daughters, of my mother's contradictory and haphazard methods of communication with us as children. I felt then, and as an adult feel still, that her tendencies to be inconsistent with our discipline were a reflection of her projection upon us of the relationship that she had had with her own mother. The obverse of this is my own recognition that, as the mother of two daughters, I was more regulatory with my first born and became more of a 'facilitator' towards my second. I explain this through both my accumulating experiences as a mother and an acknowledgment of the unspoken expectations that society has placed upon me to perpetuate the mythos of the ideal mother, at times well against the odds.

Time and knowledge is teaching me the limits of 'omnipotence'; I acknowledge more readily the existence of ambivalence within my experiences of both daughterhood and motherhood. And while I am sure that this is common for many mothers, it is still a subject that is taboo within informal social discussion.

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<sup>38</sup> Weldon Estela V., (1988) p. 79.

### **Ambivalence: within the physical experience of motherhood.**

My discussion to this point has concentrated on some identifiable sociological foundations for the development of maternal ambivalence. The following discussion revolves around the impact of some of the physical experiences involved in mothering and how they can contribute psychologically to the amplification of ambivalence.

Through researching the literature, it became obvious that considered discussion of the corporeal aspects of the maternal experience was largely absent. I began to feel that, like the experience of ambivalence within maternity, experiences of the biological functions of maternity and its cultural representation were considered unmentionable. Once again, Kristeva will stand out as an exception.

Writing in the 1940's, Melanie Klein makes the critical point that pregnancy's physical metamorphoses are expected not simply to be borne lightly, but to be positively celebrated. The reporting to health professionals of potentially distressing symptoms such as nausea and spotting of blood may be seen as a sign of weakness or lack of womanly self-control.<sup>39</sup> The same may be said today of the ubiquitous conversations that may be overheard amongst women as they compete for the title of 'most stoical' (ie drug-free) when in a state of labour.

### **Pregnancy.**

Pregnancy symbolises fecundity, nurture, unconditional love and creativity... or does it? Pregnancy is also the experience of becoming both powerful and powerless at the same time. A woman may feel herself shrinking, even eclipsed, as her body expands. The contradictions of pregnancy abound.

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<sup>39</sup> Klein M, "Psycho genesis of Manic-Depressive States" 1940, in *Love , Guilt and Reparation and Other works* (1921-1945), London Hogarth Press, (1985), p. 288

Julia Kristeva in *Stabat Mater* describes the paradoxical nature of gestation and birth as ‘My removed marrow, which nevertheless acts as a graft, which wounds but increases me’.<sup>40</sup> This reference to the ‘wound’ of pregnancy is reminiscent of Freud’s description of melancholia as ‘wound’, as ‘hole in the psyche’ and as ‘internal haemorrhage’.<sup>41</sup> Surely we see here, for the woman with an abject experience of pregnancy and motherhood, a potent meeting of the two wounds.

Kristeva firmly links aspects of a corporeal maternity with concepts of the abject. She sees this abjection as not simply a wound, but as

...[W]hat the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain. The abject is what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject’s necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality - those relations which consciousness, and reason find intolerable.<sup>42</sup>

In Kristeva’s terms, the abject, therefore threatens its subject’s identity. (That of the mother). The abject does not respect borders( in the same way as the semiotic order<sup>43</sup>), and cancels out the borders between the subject and the (m)other. The abject is continually challenging the subject with its presence and thus threatening the subject with annihilation. Babies and infants do not respect borders. There is a physical spillage of substances such as urine, regurgitations, excrement and saliva. There is an invasion of emotional demands that must be met and show no

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<sup>40</sup> **Kristeva J.** “Stabat Mater” in T Moi Ed. (1989), *The Kristeva Reader*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell)

<sup>41</sup> **Freud S.**, in Kristeva J, *Powers of Horror* (1982), New York, Columbia University Press

<sup>42</sup> **Grosz E.**, (1989), *Sexual Subversions*, (St Leonards (NSW), Allen and Unwin), p.73

<sup>43</sup> **Kristeva** sees abjection and the abject as “the primers of our culture” (*Powers of Horror* p.13) The repulsion of the abject is what enables the subject to deal with and join in with the other and the abject without disintegrating. Abjection becomes the way in which the subject can maintain the integrity of its self when confronted with the other and the semiotic order.

consideration. Babies are chaotic and messy. When pregnant, consciousness may recoil, for the experience of being bodily invaded felt as abjection is understandable; the other or the alien is an unborn foetus. The body is no longer singular or separate, but conscripted in the line of duty. The female body performs a service to the human race by becoming a receptacle for the development of the foetus and later providing comfort in the form of sustenance. In today's society, an embryo only weeks old is imbued with importance as doctors probe the mother internally, measure the foetus, and extract bodily fluids through skin and tissue with a twenty-centimetre long needle to check chromosomal readings. A woman may understandably harbour feelings of not merely ambivalence but hatred and despair towards her own pregnant state. Kristeva describes this fear as simultaneous experiences of life and death<sup>44</sup> but works against stereotypes that reduce maternity to nature. Kristeva suggests that the maternal function cannot be reduced to mother, feminine or woman<sup>45</sup>. Kristeva uses the maternal body with its 'one within the other' as a model for all subjective relations. Like the maternal body, each of us is what she calls a subject in process. As subjects in process (mothers in pregnancy) we constantly have to negotiate the other (or infant) within, that is to say, the return of what is repressed.

In combination with explicit expectations for the woman in modernity to tread her own autonomous path, to fulfil her creative urge, to carve out her distinctive niche, anger, frustration, and even outright rejection of motherhood are no mystery. I see the tragedy lying in the apparent necessity for some women to feel that they have one of two implicit options; to seek to realise their talents or to become mothers.<sup>46</sup> Again, a melancholic woman may be particularly susceptible to what Kristeva might

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<sup>44</sup> **Kristeva K.**, (1989), p.89

<sup>45</sup> **Kristeva** discusses this in depth in "Motherhood according to Bellini" in *Desire in Language* Edited by Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1980

<sup>46</sup> **Rich A.**, (1977), p. 160.

see as an apparently 'borderline' choice, that is, not being able to clearly discern that the compromise may be a matter of degree rather than of absolute principle.

A growing foetus gets all its nourishment from its incubator, or mother. Calcium, iron, indeed all of the elements needed to re-create life come from the mother via the placenta. The womb becomes a maternal matrix, the foetus a gem that embeds itself within the uterine wall. The unborn infant is an organism living in another, benefiting at the expense of the other. This entity is by definition a parasite. And after birth a psychic form of placenta manifests, with the child continuing to draw corporeal as well as emotional sustenance from its mother.<sup>47</sup>

Some women clearly project elements of the acculturated nuclear family-as-fairytale and they may in fact experience a sense of security and reliance for the first time during pregnancy. However, the woman, who, prior to pregnancy was an independent and autonomous member of society, may deeply resent this loss of control and inadvertently turn that resentment onto her unborn child. Feminist pressure and social changes have opened up a world of opportunity for today's women, yet, within the functioning realities of child raising, little has changed besides an increase in childcare opportunities. Women take into themselves the conflicting experiences aroused during pregnancy, and such things eventually materialise and have visible effects.

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<sup>47</sup> **Parker R.**, (1995) p 204.

### Childbirth.

Children do not enter the world *par Avion*. For many women, childbirth is one of the most painful experiences they will ever endure, perhaps only comparable with the pain of serious injury or death itself. Ultimately, all women endure pain alone. For a woman with an already strong fear of death, the prospect of birth may loom not so much as a powerful initiation into womanhood, but as a source of dread. The experience of childbirth is moulded not only by a multitude of emotional contradictions that are felt by the woman, and by the degree of pain experienced, but also by the nature and experience of the woman upon whom the pain is visited. For the fortunate few the experience may be as euphoric as it is frightening.

Since pre-historic times, the anticipation of labour has been associated with fear and awe, surrounded by superstition and a miasmic cultural taboo. Kristeva writes of the historical need for men in societies to elaborate complex pollution rites, seeking in some way to match the awe-inspiring childbearing nature of women. Kristeva sees the men concerned as ‘baleful schemers’<sup>48</sup> - with their own arcane systems of ritual control. The masculine, while culturally posited as victor, runs a relentless campaign to keep the feminine under control, thus revealing the potency of the systematically oppressed ‘passive object’. I see this systematic oppression exemplified in the arcane rites of the medical fraternity. A conglomerate of ancient but tenacious structures put in place to deny women’s reproductive power is combined, for Western women, with a good dose of medical neo-religious conditioning. In short, all women have been taught what it is that they should be experiencing during pregnancy and childbirth, as dictated through the modes of the mediating patriarch.

Pain, like love, is similarly embedded in the cultural ideology of motherhood. The ‘high pain threshold’ of women is a phrase constantly bandied about as a self-

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<sup>48</sup> Kristeva J., (1982) p.70

evident truth, but experience of, and tolerance for pain may be strongly inscribed by a childhood of emotional pain in combination with maternal melancholia. In this case the two may become inseparably connected, and the result a particularly *low* pain threshold – a threshold perhaps akin to Kristeva's concept of the 'borderline', where long-associated but differing states may collapse one into the other when either is triggered.<sup>49</sup>

The experience of pain has a particular centrality to women and for women's relationships both as mothers and daughters. Pain has been a term indelibly bestowed upon the range of sensations experienced during labour, a label that approximates or denies the complexity of the individual woman's distinctive physical experiences. Words such as 'labour' and 'confinement' and their implications need drastic reconsideration, for maternity is by its very nature highly subjective.

Fear, like pain, is present in the experience of both pregnancy and childbirth. If a woman is bearing her first child, the fear of the unknown is ubiquitous. All her life she has listened to tales concerning the experiences associated with parturition. From infancy onwards a woman is inundated with cultural mores and myths surrounding childbirth; she is exposed to fictional accounts in popular culture media of having a baby. If she is fortunate (or unfortunate, depending upon the circumstances), she may have witnessed first-hand either a sister or a friend giving birth. It is undeniable that women suffer in childbirth. Apart from the fear of the pain of childbirth, many women fear that they are bound to experience a loss of the control that they would normally hold over their lives. After all, it is desirable within our culture to maintain a balance in favour of order; the Apollonian ideal has more social appeal than the Dionysian option of chaos.

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<sup>49</sup> Kristeva J., (1989) p.49

Physiologically, the body goes into powerful, involuntary contractions. The body is possessed by these contractions for the sake of expelling the baby before it dies within the woman. A woman may resent necessary medical intervention at pivotal points of her labour; up to this point in her life she may have successfully acted with autonomy and independence; now it appears that she is no longer in control but at the mercy of the medical profession.

This loss of control is particularly threatening to the depressive mother who grew up in a household in which control was purely externally determined. Visitations of childhood brought on by the loss of autonomy inherent in childbirth may be utterly overwhelming to the woman who grew up with a melancholic mother and a life only tenuously separated from death. I see the inability to withstand loss in *this* instance supported by Kristeva when she describes the depressive's inability to withstand loss – that any loss 'entails the loss of my being – and of Being itself.'<sup>50</sup> Is the face of the pregnant woman in the mirror her own or that of her mother? When Kristeva writes as someone not only familiar with states of depression and despair, but also with the awareness of specifically maternal melancholia, the words 'When meaning shatters, life no longer matters'<sup>51</sup> are words the melancholic mother understands.

### **Lactation and nurture.**

Like the abject, maternity is the splitting, fusing, merging, fragmenting of a series of bodily processes outside the will or control of the subject. Woman, the woman-mother, does not find her femininity or identity as a woman affirmed in maternity but, rather, her corporeality, her animality, her position

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<sup>50</sup> Kristeva J., (1989) p. 5

<sup>51</sup> Kristeva J., (1989) p. 6



on the threshold between nature and culture. Her 'identity' as a subject is betrayed by pregnancy; and undermined in lactation and nurturance, where she takes on the status of the part object, or breast for the child.

- Elizabeth Grosz <sup>52</sup>

Pregnancy may be technically over at birth, but in reality, the physical changes continue post partum. For a woman, the early weeks are dominated by the birth experience, by the strangeness and vulnerability of the infant, and by regaining the balance of her body, which does not return to its pre-pregnant state instantly if at all. This is where maternal abjection may really set in.

Some women have to recover from surgery after childbirth. They may have had an episiotomy or delivered their child by caesarean section. Both require stitches and the pain continues beyond the time that it takes to visibly heal. Even without medical intervention, a natural birth causes some discomfort well beyond birth. The lochia, or post partum bleeding continues for several weeks and is likely to cause physical unease for a couple of days. If a first-time mother is breast feeding her new infant, she experiences a number of daunting physical discomforts.

When the nursing infant feeds during the first few days post birth, hormones automatically released into the mother's blood stream cause involuntary contractions of the uterus. These may manifest as painful abdominal cramps. A newborn baby may need help attaching to the breast properly. Every time an infant attaches to a new mother's breast it may become increasingly painful, as sensitive nipples become chafed cracked or blistered. This usually lasts for about three weeks with a newborn baby feeding every two to five hours. Kristeva's consideration of the ambiguous nature of 'mother's milk' has already been addressed.

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<sup>52</sup> Grosz E., (1989) p. 79

New mothers may find that a frequently crying baby impedes their recovery from childbirth. They spend the majority of their time and energy taking care of the newborn infant and use their body to serve the needs of their dependent child. Every baby needs to be close to a comforting body, and the mother is biologically equipped to offer hers.

And what of the needs of the mother? Irritability, fatigue, concentration problems and low self-esteem may now befall her. All of these possibilities are in contradiction to the paradigm of the ideal mother. From my own experience the first six weeks to three months following may be a non-stop ride of chaos and mixed emotions.

It is around this time, that issues regarding the gender of the infant are more likely to appear. A mother's ambivalence towards either herself or her daughter is likely to find its foundations within some aspect of her relationship with her own mother. A woman who has experienced her own mother as a destructive force may dread the possibility of becoming a mother equally destructive. When ambivalence is present within a mother and daughter relationship it is likely that the mother is projecting either her childhood identity or her mother's identity onto herself and her infant daughter. She may see herself re-enacting the approaches and attitudes of her mother, and identifying her daughter with herself as an infant. Or she may see the demands of her infant daughter being similar to those she expressed, and was denied, as a child with her own mother.

As the above discussion has demonstrated, the bearing of children and ensuing weeks is not as glamorous as Hollywood would have us believe. Women may experience ambivalence, abjection and in pregnancy, childbirth and with the raising

of infants. There is the potential that their relationship with themselves, their mothers and their daughters may suffer as a result, for clearly delineated reasons. The denial of this ambivalence and subsequent melancholic repercussions may have serious consequences for all concerned.

The following chapter discusses my sculptural work, which seeks to express this experience of maternal ambivalence, abjection and profound melancholia. Within the visual body of work, the elements of corporeality, maternity and states of deathliness are reflected in many of the forms and shapes, and are also reinforced through the use of colour or lack thereof. I describe how this body of work developed, along with an explanation of where the visual research has been informed by my own history as both mother and daughter, and by the theoretical research that I have discussed in this chapter.

## Chapter Two

### The Works.

As described in the introduction, the project developed over time and changed through a need to acknowledge aspects of my own development following the birth of my three children (particularly the births of my two daughters Cypress and Ariel). During the earlier stages of the project, I conducted sculptural experiments. These pieces were given the titles *Sleeping Beauty* (Fig. 3) and *Dynasty Domestos* (Fig. 4). I have included a brief description. They are included as support material, and as such are relevant in a consideration of the visual origins of the work made this project.



**Fig.3**



**(Detail Fig.3)**

The piece, *Sleeping Beauty* 1997 (Fig. 3) (100x600x1500) was constructed from shellac-stained and upholstered canvas, glass, French porcelain, brass wire, sardine heads, silk damask and hardwood. These eclectic ingredients allowed a diversity of interpretive possibilities. The contrasts between the two elements operating within the piece are overt and jarring. The upholstered base alludes to a stained and sullied mattress or padded bed-head. The surface conjures up a connection between the domestic interior and filth; it presents the uglier side of maternity. The colour mirrored a hue that remains when layers of sweat, urine, blood and semen if left unwashed are allowed to accumulate. It was Dionysian and chthonic. The internal

panel contained porcelain vulval forms bound and pierced with copper stitching. These resembled pieces of jewellery, either a broach or a pendant - forms that also alluded to the surgical procedure of episiotomy. The forms were attached to a smaller, central upholstered panel, this time with a surface of silk damask that was buttoned with fish heads and preserved behind glass. This inner panel was clinical, pale and ordered and suggested femininity bordering on asceticism.



**Fig. 4.**

*Dynasty Domestos*. 1998 (Fig. 4) (100x500x500) was a boxed form that contained interior panels of upholstered and stained canvas surrounding a preserved stillborn piglet. The piglet had a crocheted red-wire umbilical attachment connecting its cranium to the top panel of its container. The piglet was a horrible form; its eyes tightly closed and its mouth gaping open. My intention in choosing this particular form was that it seemed to embody the emotional anguish that can be caused by unexpressed desperation.

Both pieces related to how I felt as a new mother. Amongst an array of other emotions, I felt cheated and somewhat angered. My idea of what motherhood was supposed to be like was shattered; I had absorbed over time a cultural ideal that surrounds the concept of mothering. In retrospect, both of these pieces were an obvious purging of my discontent.



Upon returning to the project after giving birth to my second daughter I had a clearer idea of what I intended the visual language of the project to convey. It was not just to express disillusionment with the maternal role *per se*. It came to focus more specifically on the ambivalent nature of the mother and daughter dyad. I conducted visual experiments, continuing the use of preserved animals, which came to me from various sources.<sup>53</sup> I constructed several installations (now destroyed) using the preserved ex-laboratory mice.

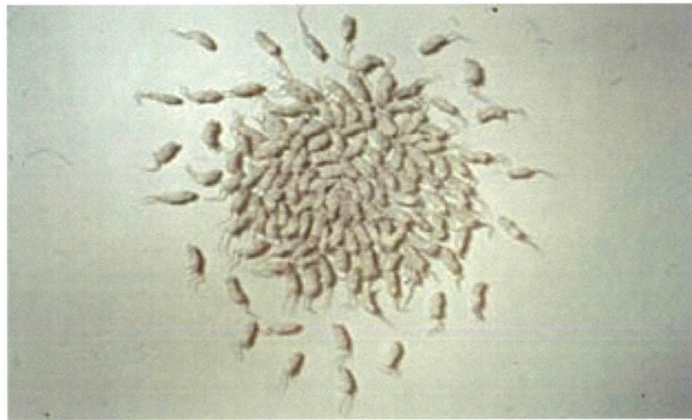


Fig. 5.

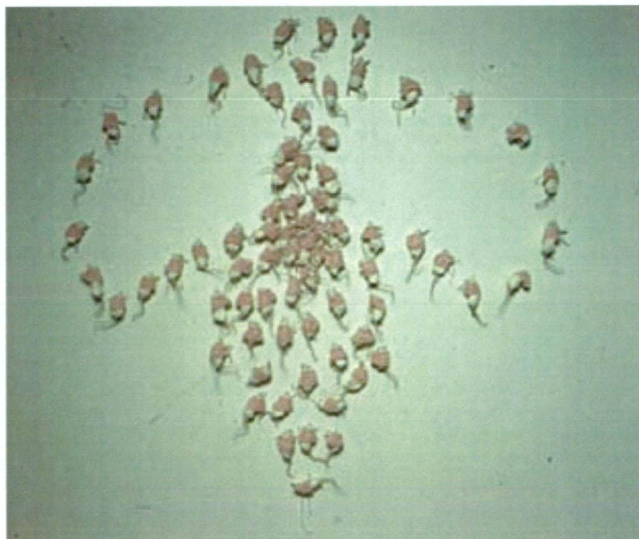


Fig. 6.

I constructed two installations, using approximately two hundred, preserved mice. These works were titled *Mothers Little Helpers I* (Fig. 5.) and *Mothers Little Helpers II* (Fig. 6.). Each installation consisted of around one hundred mice pinned to the gallery wall, half of them in hand knitted pink capes. The mice were arranged in a cluster, a shape that was suggestive of a feeding frenzy. This formation suggested that the mice (like women in their relationships with their daughters and mothers) lacked emotional nourishment and that when any appears it is pounced upon and quickly devoured due to its apparent rarity.

I was pleased with the visual result of these works, which were exhibited in a show titled *IntraVenus* (Moonah Arts Centre, August 2000). The strong interest in the pieces and the theme behind their conception indicated that I was heading in the right direction. It became clear that women could relate in some way to the lack of public recognition regarding the experiences of being both a daughter and a mother of daughters.<sup>54</sup> These pieces acted as a starting point for the body of work produced for this project. As the work evolved, it became apparent that I needed to approach this contentious topic in a way that would effectively communicate the emotional intensity of the experience of maternal ambivalence. This point of interplay between the work and the viewer's potential emotional reaction is, and always has been, an important element of the visual work. To help achieve this connection between the work and the viewer, close consideration has been given to the following:

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<sup>53</sup> These animals either died through natural causes or were euthanased 'by-product' of conventional laboratory based experiments.

<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, while I was on maternity leave after the birth of my last child, this piece was destroyed in the studio by a moth infestation.

- 1) Consideration and inclusion of forms that allude to the domestic environment.

This environment acts as the most common incubation space for the mother and daughter relationship as it broods and ruminates. Within visual consideration of the domestic interior lies the opportunity to include elements of the feminine traditions of craft. A detailed discussion on how I have worked towards these within each of the six major works will be presented in this chapter.

- 2) The inclusion of forms, surfaces or objects that relate to the physical aspects or the corporeality of the maternal experience has been an important feature within this visual research.

First it is necessary to note the historical elements underlying my works.

## **The Historical**

*Vena Casa* can be identified as sharing in the sentiment expressed by the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970's. Since the 1970s, feminist artists have been disputing and pushing the boundaries that divide art from craft, public from domestic, and masculine from feminine by including embroidery into their work. By appropriating this traditionally feminine and domestic form of creativity, artists ranging from Kate Walker and Judy Chicago to Elaine Reichek<sup>55</sup> have called

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<sup>55</sup> Reichek's 1999 installation in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, consisted of twenty-five samplers that encourage viewers to consider embroidery in relation to both the history of women and the history of modernism. Speaking of her choice of materials, Reichek explained, "It is deliberate that for tools historically associated with 'male' art--paint, brush, canvas--I substitute media usually seen as related to 'female' activities," Elaine Reichek and Laura Engel, "Commentary: Mother/Daughter Dresses," *Fiberarts* 20, no. 3 (November-December 1993): 9, and cited in Beth Handler, "Projects 67: Elaine Reichek," exhibition brochure (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).



attention to the complex history of women's needlework. Their sewn objects, canvases, and samplers critique the tradition that has classified sewing as hobby, craft, or ornament, in opposition to the 'high-brow' professional arts of painting and sculpture.

In *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Rozsika Parker locates these artists in the context of English sewing practices from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century. "Embroidery," she points out, "has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness.... Paradoxically, while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity."<sup>56</sup> Feminist artists who have incorporated embroidery into their work are operating within this maze of social meaning; using a traditionally feminine endeavour to forge new models of womanhood and claiming high-art identity for an activity usually consigned to the rank of craft.

In the 1970s Kate Walker and Judy Chicago called on the domestic and communal connotations of women's needlework to foster a new model of collaborative art practice. At the Women's Art Alliance in London, Walker took part in a postal art project known as *Feministo* that questioned whether the categories of public and private, home and work, were separate, gendered, and irreconcilable spheres.<sup>57</sup> The artist members of *Feministo* were women scattered throughout England who created works of art in their homes and sent them to one another by mail. Walker contributed a sewn work entitled *Sampler* (1978) that featured the embroidered text,

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<sup>56</sup> **Rozsika Parker**, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press, 1994), II.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-9.

"Wife is a four-letter word." One year later, Chicago first exhibited her *Dinner Party*, for which more than four hundred men and women had created a table with thirty-nine place settings, each devoted to a woman from the past or to a mythological female figure.<sup>58</sup> Embroidery, used to decorate the place mats, was coupled with other traditional crafts, including pottery and china painting.

The historical element within the visual work is the feminine medium of embroidery and stitching on traditionally used fabrics. This tradition is an obvious example of how feminine identity is largely represented as existing within a domestic domain. Sewing has traditionally been associated with sexual diversion and, astoundingly, this sex-based division of labour is still prescribed in many school curricula.<sup>59</sup> Needlework is a skill tied up in the feminine. More often than not, this skill is one that is handed down from mother to daughter, or from grandmother to granddaughter. Needlework, embroidery, crocheting and stitching are all encompassed within the category of craft, and not fine art. The cultural significance of craft is downgraded within the high art community as much as the role of both mother and daughter is within patriarchal society. Masculine contributions within the structural hierarchy of Arts, traditionally painting and sculpture, hold an elevated position, as does the priority given to things deemed masculine within society in general.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, embroidery came to symbolise a feminine ideal. The image of a woman bent over her needlework is impossible to disconnect from concepts of Victorian femininity; quiet, withdrawn, giving, docile

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 209--10.

<sup>59</sup> **Parker R.**, (1984), *The subversive stitch. Embroidery and the making of the feminine*. (New York, Routledge Press) p.,1

and submissive. There is an irony inherent, however, in an act at once so pleasurable and, to an extent powerful, in that for something to be stitched or embroidered, only a 'powerless' person may have the knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

The link between the history of needlework and maternal ambivalence is profound, for both are expressive of the simultaneously powerful and powerless position of the mother in patriarchal society. The association between maternity and embroidery came to be perceived as natural rather than as the product of cultural conditioning. Thus the mark of a woman naturally feminine was her embroidery practice; it symbolised her devotion to her husband, to her home, and, of course, signified her comfort with a role of domesticity.<sup>61</sup>

Because of its obvious links with maternity and the feminine condition, the feminine tradition of needlework plays an important reference point within the surface and surface treatment of my installations. I use thread, stitch and fabric in the sculptural work as a vehicle aimed at articulating the emotional experiences of maternal ambivalence. I join ranks with my artistic 'foremothers' as an articulator of those experiences unique to our gender, and as such enunciate those experiences that have historically been subjugated to the realm of the unspoken. In a later chapter I deal at length with both the general and specific decisions that I made in relationship to the process of choosing fabric, thread and so on. As a woman, my personal need for a cultural acknowledgment of the 'lived' experience of being a mother is the same kind of motivational substance that gave women artists in the 70's the drive to reclaim feminine 'crafts'. Value in acknowledgment of this subject matter can be sought and gained through incorporating clear references to feminine traditions in its sculptural manifestation, (and thereby into mainstream art practice.)

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<sup>60</sup> **Parker R.**, (1984) p., 11.

<sup>61</sup> **Parker R.**, (1984) p., 11

## **The Visual Work.**

### ***Materfamilias***

The table is a structure of over generous proportion. It stands 1300mm high, is 1300mm wide and 3000mm long. (Fig. 7) Seen with the table form is a long linen-covered cord that lies strewn on the floor. (Fig. 8) The form was constructed from solid oak, padded with rubber and then hand upholstered in white linen, using cream cotton thread for the stitching. The surface of the 'table-top' is indented with multiple button forms. Each of the indentations in the upholstery holds two hand-covered buttons that are raised away from the surface of the table by multiple upright pinning. (Fig. 9) The umbilical like form that accompanies the table in this installation is approximately fifteen metres long. It was constructed from cotton cord that was hand covered in the same linen and thread motif belonging to the table.

In essence the table form is representative of the mother. The proportions of the table are larger than life in an attempt to reflect the weighty expectation that society has of maternity. The over-sized nature of the table also represents the gravity of my own childhood memories that I have of being a young daughter and my childhood relationship with my mother. Children absorb messages given to them by their mothers. Often such experiences seem larger than life to a child: when they become adults such things appear to be of much less importance. It was not until I became a mother of daughters myself that I relinquished part of the gravity of feeling contained within the memories I still held concerning my own mother and the relationship that I as a child had shared with her. It was, however, impossible to have an objective or sympathetic perspective as a child.

The table form was chosen and developed because of its obvious links with the domestic environment. Dining tables have a function as a place for the consumption of family meals, and as a gathering place for visitors in both formal and informal settings. Our huge white laminex table was certainly a central point within our family home, and its significance is firmly etched in memory with marks belonging to both the love and hate I felt for my mother as a child. Concepts of consumption are synonymous with certain aspects of feminine identity. In the myth of the omnipotent mother, she is all giving and all loving as well as one who consumes through suffocation and control. She gives life from herself and takes it back into herself to provide fodder for the creation of new life. Mother Nature gives birth to life and then reabsorbs that life after death.

We depend upon our mothers. It is usually mother who first and most consistently provides for us, who shapes our psychological strength, who feeds us, clothes us, forms our impression of the world and the nature of the people who inhabit it. The world that she provides, with its predominantly pleasurable or painful aspects, becomes our own.<sup>62</sup>

A daughter is likely to have an unconscious foundation for her feminine identity that is informed largely by her own mother's feelings of self worth. Issues of self-worth are indelibly linked to our attitudes towards the food that we consume. An interesting point that runs parallel to this is that within western culture daughters are less nourished than sons. Approximately 66% of nursing mothers are likely to breast-feed their daughters whereas 90% of nursing mothers breast-feed their sons. The 66% of mothers nursing their infant daughters are likely to spend half the feeding time with the baby on their breast compared with their contemporaries

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<sup>62</sup> Orbach S., Eichenbaum L., (1984) *What do Women Want?* (London, Harper Collins) p. 22.

feeding sons. The message is clear. Girls grow into women who have historically been less nurtured than their male counterparts. Food, love, hunger and emotional nourishment are all interconnected. Food and consumption are arguably contentious topics for all women. It is little wonder to me that ambivalence within maternity is mirrored neatly within the love/hate relationship that women have with food. Women's fat has been described as a communication from mother to daughter steeped in ambivalence regarding mothers' feeding and nurturing of daughters.<sup>63</sup>

The table's form in *Materfamilias* (Fig. 7, 8, & 9.) also developed out of a generalised notion of a medical examination bench. It is intended to act as a reminder of the lived body. It shares the height and appearance of a crisply dressed doctor's table, a place for procedures or examinations - gynaecological or otherwise - common to conditions of maternity. The table in this setting is a place of discomfort, scrutiny and intrusive examination that may make you wish that you were not a woman. The pin/button ticking mimics the scrutiny of dissection, each layer of the corpse being pinned back with deliberation to more easily expose the inner hidden world. Gynaecological examinations can resemble dissections. A woman can come out of an examination feeling completely dehumanised after being strapped into obstetric stirrups, her genital area neatly masked off by sheeting, a light pointed directly onto her nether regions ready to be probed and tortured by a generally male obstetric doctor. Any woman past puberty can confirm the discomfort of even routine examinations.

The pinning used in *Materfamilias* (Fig. 7, 8 & 9) also shares obvious connections with the feminised pastime of needlework, as does the linen fabric and the running

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<sup>63</sup> Wolf N., (1990) *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, (London Vintage), p.188

blanket stitch. The labour-intensive process of covering the table is parallel to the intensity of labour devoted by women to this pursuit.

The umbilical cord form (Fig.8) is partly representative of the endlessness and inevitability of maternal influence upon the feminine identity. Irigaray talks about the symbiotic aspects of this relationship:

If there is no cutting of the cord and of osmotic exchanges with the maternal world and its substitutes, how could sublimation of the flesh take place? It continues becoming in closed circuit, within sorts of nourishing relationships to the other. Does it sublimate itself in order to accede to the alliance with the other? It does not seem so.<sup>64</sup>

It was with Irigaray's sentiment in mind that the umbilical form developed as part of the table installation. However, the cord in this instance is detached from the table (or mother), lying redundant on the floor. It remains attached only to itself suggesting the experience of abandonment and alienation that is a common thread of the maternal dyad.

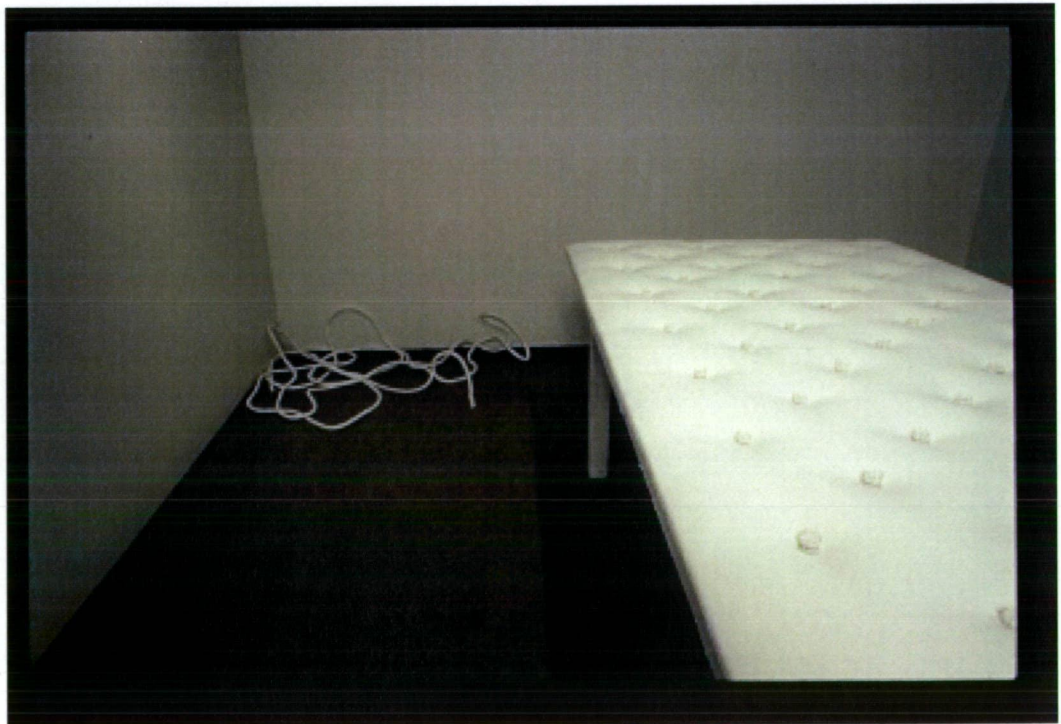
The table is dressed in white linen commonly associated with culinary formalities, the surface of the table composed of crisp white embroidery linen. It is stuffed and upholstered to allude to aspects of the domestic interior. The upholstery is edged with a medical suture-like stitch in a matching sombre tone similar to that used in the tableware embroidery of Victorian England. The development of this piece, with its deliberate borrowing of form and surface from realms of the domestic, the surgical, and the traditions of needlework, acts as a reflection of the complex layering of experiences that influence the mother and daughter dyad.

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<sup>64</sup> Grosz E., (quoting Luce Irigaray in,) (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a corporeal Feminism*, NSW, Australia Allen & Unwin p., 107.



**Fig.7.**



**Fig.8.**





**Fig.9.**

***Ainigma-matos dualis.***

This piece has two components, each measuring 200cm x 90cm.

It is constructed from fabric pulled and stitched over padded light metal armatures.

The armatures are constructed with thin gauge steel rod that was bent and curved into place. The rods were then welded together. Canvas was then hand-stitched over each individual segment until the entire surface area of the forms was covered in this manner. Once the canvas was in place I then hand over-stitched with lightweight cotton velvet. The black velvet fabric was then adorned with loosely formed stitched black thread that became ornately patterned in places. The truncations that connected the dome forms to their rubber umbilicals were made by compacting fabric tightly by stitching it together and sewing it into large tail-like shapes. At the end of each black fabric tail I placed a large satin and shellac-covered bow. One dome remains velvet and the other is covered thickly with a combination of waxes and pigment, giving it a slightly reflective surface. To do this I used a combination of heated beeswax, petroleum wax and paraffin waxes. When the waxes were combined through heat I added black pigment. I then brushed this mixture onto the surface of one of the velvet forms. In pushing the hot wax into the surface of the fabric in a circular motion, a viscous layer was built up.

The Dome truncation and its connected appendages are forms that are intended to be suggestive of the physiological and psychological effects that cultural messages have upon identities of both mother and daughter, and how, as women, we remain connected to these influences. Irigaray describes the psychology of the mother and daughter relationship as ‘the Dark Continent of the Dark Continent, the most obscure area of our social order.’<sup>65</sup> Her penetrating metaphor neatly shores up the intention of the sculpture, providing as it does a theoretical framework for the emotionally motivated work.

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<sup>65</sup> Grosz E., (1989), p. 120-121.

For me, *Ainigma-matos dualis* (Fig. 10, 11 & 12) is representative of all that is inert, suffocating, abject and immovable about the conditions of maternity, all that remains unrecognised when woman is confined to the reproductive role. It has the form of mute permanence. Both ends hold smaller truncations that hang flaccidly and are tied off with crisp bows.

It became important for aspects within this particular piece to allude to a phallogentric form. The piece has loose symmetry within the main body as well as equally resolved exit points in the form of truncations. It sits in a dark cultural space, vast yet self-contained. The suture-like stitching is once again a reference to thread within both a medical and domestic context. The forms look quite repulsive, like an exit point of some kind of abject substance (particularly the waxed form). The use of velvet arose from the need for the piece to be both seductive and absorbent. It was important that its surface be luxurious in nature to include an element of attraction. I started using fabrics that were connected with the domestic interior - linen, calico and upholstery grade damask - as a means of adding to the idea of both the domestic interior and luxury. The two large sculptures allude to forms of both flesh and function. In both contexts, the stitching pierces the surface to both decorate and hold together the inside. The stitching is a type of scarification on the surface of the 'body' on the waxed form as its knots and lumps are hidden beneath the surface of the wax skin. The wax form is at once mother who has been stretched and sewn back together as well as newborn, wearing its dark, rather than pale vernix still on its surface. The velvet form is more 'formed' in many ways when compared with its twin. The velvet form has a crispness and formality that has been unsullied with a coating like that of its twin's surface. The two forms allude to inverted self-hatred. The precision of the stitching is akin to self-harm rituals such as those of depressed and desperate young women who feel unaccepted or shunned

by their mothers<sup>66</sup>. Carefully a chosen site, which is hidden from view by clothing, is surreptitiously sliced, moving emotional agony outwards towards corporeal pain. The stitching on the two sculptures slices open or pierces the surface of the skin/fabric but also pulls it back together tighter than it was before. This too is the experience of a woman submerged in the ritual of self-harm. The wound is shocking in its 'felt' penetration both physically and emotionally, the experience is one of shame. Like the blackness of the sculptures, shame both absorbs its victim, yet reflects back like the repetition of a self-loathing cycle.

Blackness is rich with emotion and is often linked with loss, abjection, mystery and death. In *Ainigma-matos dualis*, (Fig 10, 11 & 12)) the use of black is symbolic of meconium, the primary excrement of the newborn infant or of a distressed infant in utero. It is viscous and black. If, during labour there is a show of meconium, it is considered to be an obstetric emergency, as the infant is in distress and needs to be removed from the maternal body either through an emergency forceps or caesarean delivery. It indicates that the infant needs to separate from its human incubator.

Within the dynamics of the mother and daughter relationship, there also exists the overwhelming need for autonomy or distance from each other. But also there is the inevitability of biological symbiosis, which understandably leads to experiences of ambivalence. In these forms, nothing is movable; mother and daughter remain mostly the same, one slightly reflective and the other absorbent.

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<sup>66</sup> **Dusty Miller** in her book *Women who hurt themselves* BasicBooks, New York, 1994, concentrates on the increasing phenomenon of women in self harm cycles, she suggests that the source of this appalling compulsion lies in childhood trauma and in particular dysfunctional relationships primarily with Mother

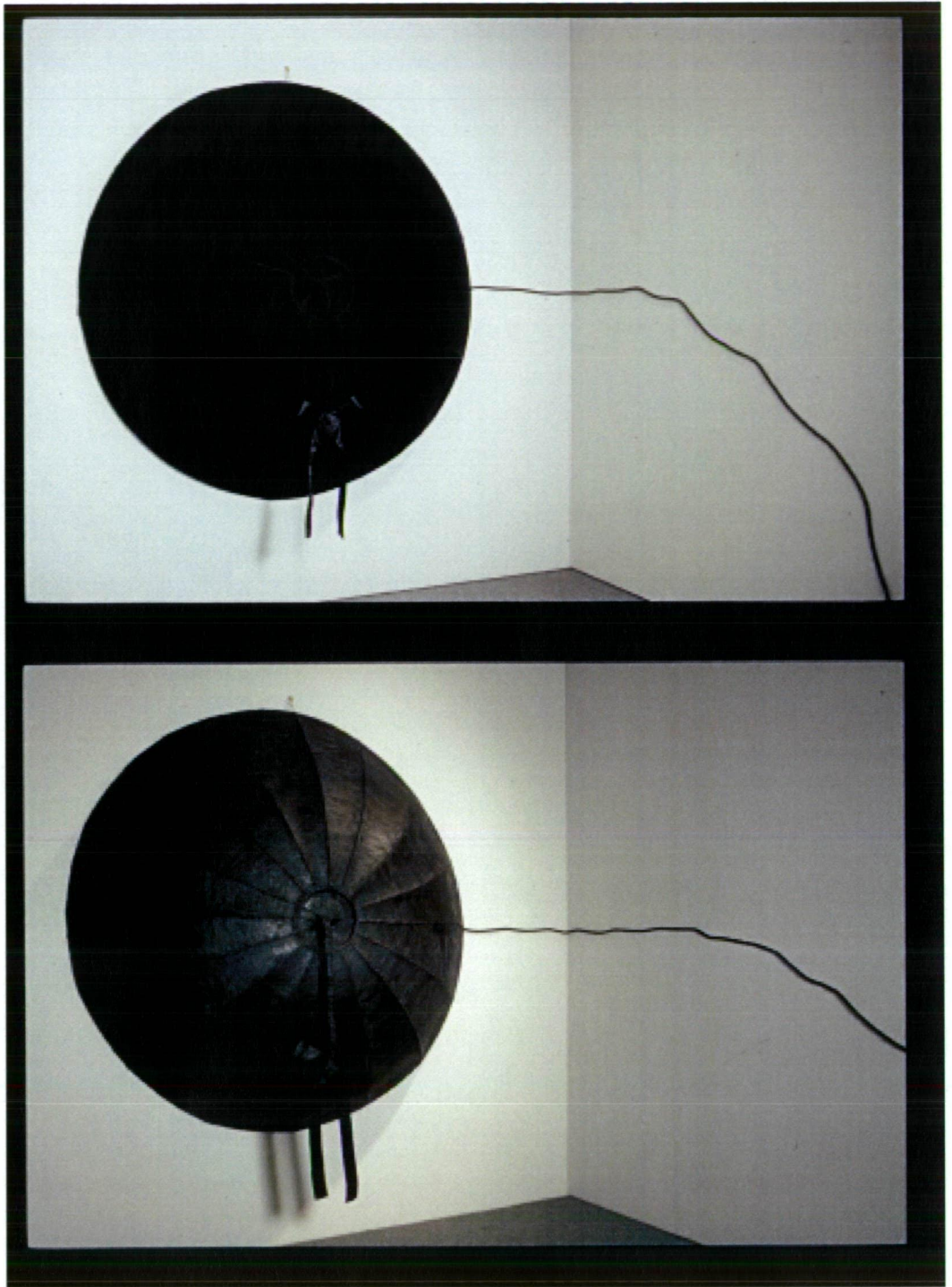


Fig.10&11





Fig.12

***Two fold, twice told.***

There are two cocoon forms in this installation: the largest, or grandmother/mother cocoon, 3000mm x 1200mm and the grand-daughter/daughter cocoon, 1200mm x 400 mm. (Fig. 15.)

The 'offspring' is lying prone on its table/bed and fine capillary-like wire threads attach the forms to one another. (Fig. 14.)

The largest, covered in white damask, is lying horizontally on a trolley/table; this form is upholstered in matt black velvet fabric; these two forms are also attached to one another with the same material. She is the Grand Dame (the mother of all mothers). Hanging from one end of her is an udder like form that is created from wadding, linen and cotton thread.

The cocoon like forms were both constructed by welding together an armature of metal rod, covering the rod with rubber, upholstering them once in canvas and then in the pale damask design fabric using hand stitching.

The tables are both constructed from oak. The top of these table forms were covered in rubber and upholstered in black velvet. The surface of these table forms were indented with velvet covered pins and the legs of the forms were painted black and each table had small wheels. (Fig. 13.)

Connecting these table forms is a four-metre hand stitched black velvet 'umbilicus' that was made by covering resin tubing with stitched fabric.

The colours settled around hues connected with the maternal biological experience: ivory, white, cream, flesh, red and black. These colours are reminiscent of skin, milk, mucus, urine, blood and excrement and are also laden with emotional content and symbolism. They are resonant with abjection. Traditionally, white is the colour of purity, cleanliness, sterility and spirituality.

The sentiment behind this particular installation is a message that is arguably one of the most common within the mother and daughter dyad. That message is from mother to daughter: 'Be like me...Don't be like me'. This message is also culturally fostered, and is repeatedly reinforced by comments like 'mother's little helper', or situations where a grandmother seems to exact spiteful pleasure from saying that her grand daughter is just like her daughter when she was younger, and so on. The result of this pressure fostered through lack of autonomy often leads to resentment. The daughter may find herself driven to break free of the cycle, thereby rejecting the mother who in turn tries to hang on desperately despite this feeling of rejection. Where there is a grand daughter, the grandmother may have an easier relationship with her grand daughter than her own daughter. The grand daughter, in turn, may be anarchistic towards her mother yet embracing of her grandmother.

Once more I chose the cocoon form as a visual means to illustrate this dynamic within the mother and daughter dyad. It is suggestive of the cycle of life, yet also represents a stage of the development of a parasite and so, may be seen as the antithesis of life.<sup>67</sup> The cocoon forms in this installation, though ballooned in proportion, loosely mirror the Bot Larvae. The size relates to human proportions. Each form could represent either a child or an adult.

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<sup>67</sup> One such parasite is the Bot larvae, an equine gastro-intestinal parasite in its larvae state of development. (This particular parasite has personal relevance for me because of my life long relationship with horses.) The Bot fly is a large, black fly that irritates horses in the late summer months. It flies with deliberation around the horses legs and stomach where it squirts its eggs that attach them firmly to the hairs on the horse's legs. The horse scratches the spot with their teeth thereby ingesting the eggs. The eggs grow in the horse's intestine, and if left can burrow through internal organs causing severe damage. Usually the eggs grow to larvae size and are then deposited on the ground, hidden inside the faeces. In the warmth the fly hatches out and the entire cycle is repeated ad infinitum.



Like the similarities between the two cocoon forms, a daughter may be aware of feeling that she, for various reasons, will eventually become like her own mother. Or a mother may feel as if her daughter is like a parasite, which has taken her youthful identity. To some degree ambivalence is sure to be the outcome for mother and/or daughter. Each new generation holds the potential for starting afresh, but in some ways must carry the scars of the previous maternal generation. The smaller cocoon too, although young, resembles her female elder. The cocoons are replicas but they are also individuals. The following quotation from Irigaray speaks for an articulation of the sentiment of frustration that may be reflected within the cocoon forms and their interaction:

So what is a mother? Someone who makes the stereotypical gestures she is told to make, who has no personal language and who has no identity. But how, as daughters, can we have personal relationship with or construct a personal identity in a relation to someone who is no more than a function. <sup>68</sup>

The need to change the mother/daughter relationship is a steady theme in Irigaray's work. While she concludes that women's social and political circumstances have to be reconsidered at global level, she also believes that transformation begins in individual relationships between women. Consequently she stresses the need for mothers to represent themselves differently to their daughters, and to stress their daughter's subjectivity. For example, in *Je, Tu, Nous*,<sup>69</sup> Irigaray proposes recommendations for nurturing mother-daughter relationships such as exhibiting images of the mother-daughter dyad, or consciously highlighting that the daughter and the mother are both subjects in their own right. *Two fold, twice told* (Fig., 13, 14

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<sup>68</sup> Irigaray as quoted by Whitford M (Ed,) (1991), p.50

<sup>69</sup> Irigaray, L. *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a culture of Difference*, Trans. A. Martin, Routledge, New York, London 1993. In this book, Irigaray, among other issues, discusses why only mothers can educate daughters, and how women need to find their own subjectivity. Irigaray feels that only

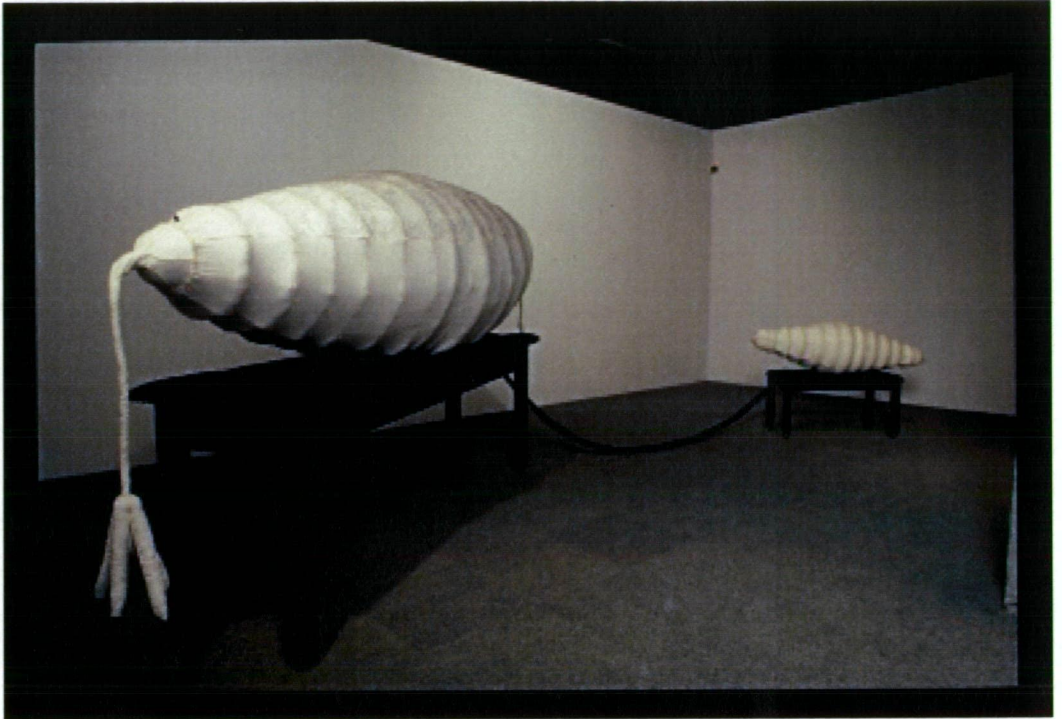
& 15) offers an accentuation of the lack of subjectivity within feminine identity, and in particular the role of mother and daughter. The cocoon forms are 'semi-clones'; the elder pulling along the younger, tied to one another the opportunity for subjectivity and splitting does not appear to be an option.

Irigaray maintains that, since ancient times, mothers have been allied with nature and instinctive substance. Further, Irigaray believes that all women have historically been conjoined with the role of "mother" such that, whether or not a woman is a mother, her identity is always defined according to that role. The cocoon forms resemble each other intimately although there is a contrast in their size. Reading the smaller cocoon as the fledgling it is apparent that she has been cast with the same identity as her 'elder'. They are, as Irigaray describes conjoined with the role of mother.

Once again, each form is covered in domestic grade damask. As well as being a contemporary fabric, damask historically held a place of importance within the traditions of religious needlework; imported damask was a preferred fabric for fourteenth century ecclesiastical garments. Damask designed fabric is still favoured within a domestic setting where interior style is based on tradition. The colour of the surfaces is a pale, flesh-like tone. Each piece is hand-stitched and covered either wholly or in part with similarly toned embroidery thread. The thread is used to stitch into wide medical-like sutures covering the entire surfaces of the forms. The choice of colour is based on the desire to stay close to hues that reference skin and the intimacy that resides within the maternal experience. The table forms again are a visual and structural cross-reference between a domestic piece of furniture, such as a bed or table and a clinical prop such as a medical bench slab or bed.

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in that recovery will women create a female identity and discover the cultural means to live in accordance with "their" needs, "their" desires, "their" rights and obligations.



**Fig.13**

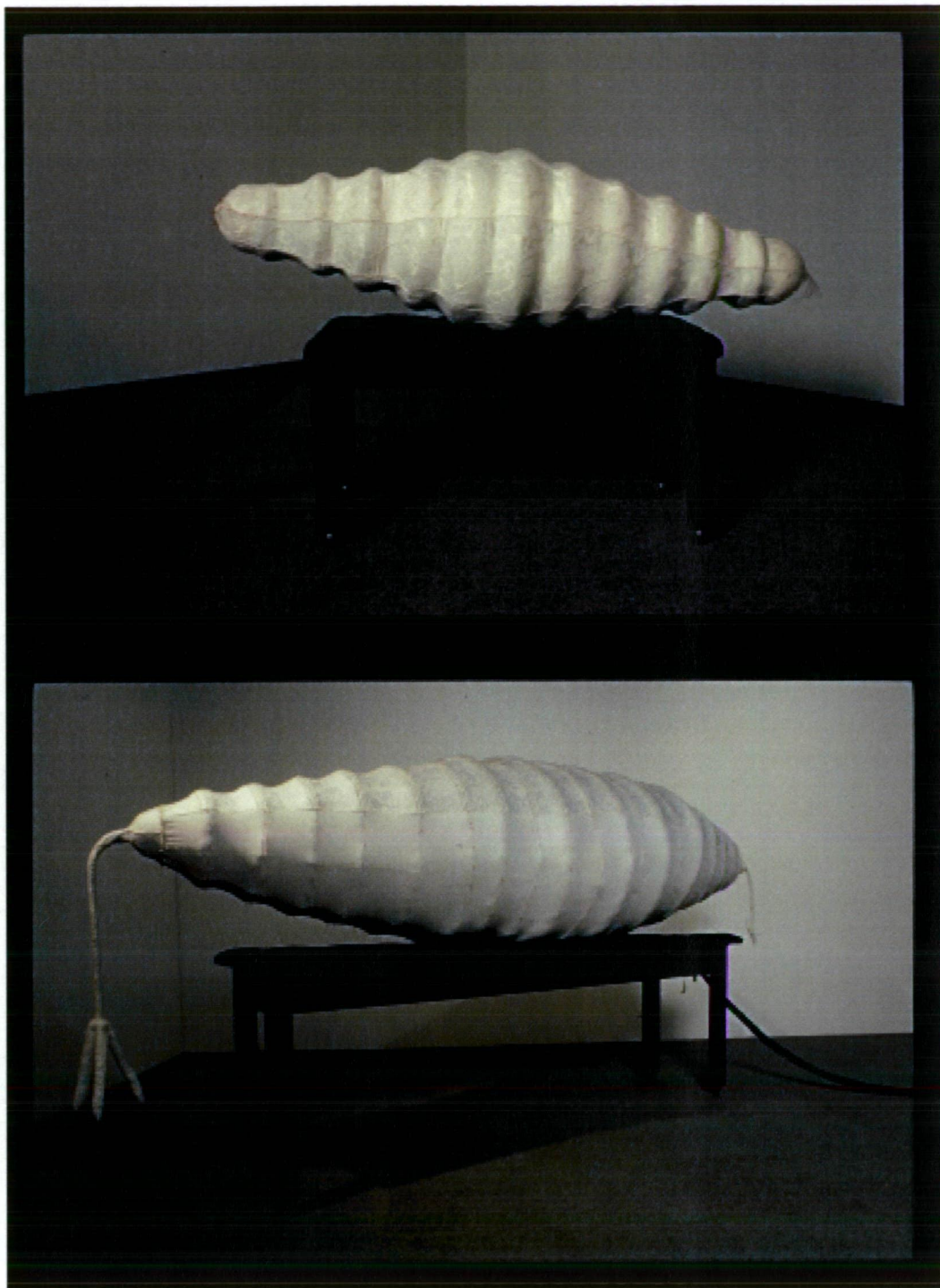


Fig.14 &15

### ***My delectable darlings.***

This installation consists of three preserved mice, sewn into a heart shaped white linen cushion. The cushion sits on a red upholstered chair upon which is perched, a single preserved owl. Around the owl's neck is a pink crochet ruffle. In front of the chair sits a red footstool. ( Fig. 17 & 18). Adorning the walls of this room are multiple circular shapes, that are arranged in an even line at torso height. (Fig. 16 & 18).

Materials used are preserved animals, cotton, wadding, silk, and glass, linen, wood and metal. The dimensions are variable.

The chair and footstool forms were fabricated by hand re-upholstering found originals in red damask with red stitching. The footstool was embossed with circular 'rose' in red thread and fine cotton wire. Protruding from the surface of the footstool is an oversized needle.

The owl is preserved through the freeze drying process. The cape that adorns her wings and neck is made from pink knitted cotton.

The three waxed and dried mice sit inside a heart-shaped white linen cushion. The mice are visible through a muslin overlay that is stitched into the cushion.

The multiple wall pieces are fabricated from timber veneer that has been covered by cotton wadding and upholstered. The fabric used was white and cream damask . In the centre of each of these pieces a tight coil of copper wire indents the upholstery. Each of these pieces are attached to the gallery wall using numerous oversized pins. Like the pins of the table form in *Materfamilias*, they hold the form away from the surface.

The mice are 'good little girls', who are captive and ordered. The owl is mother who devours through both love and hatred; she is both good and bad.

Irigaray refers to the consequences of a mother who over-facilitates the desires and needs of her daughter, in other words, a mother who adapts herself totally to the needs of her child. Unfortunately in some circles this type of mothering is still regarded as an ideal, whereby a mother can provide love without authority. The owl in this way can be seen to represent the consequences of this 'good' mothering style, whereby, through her over protectiveness and continuous nurturing she has rendered her charges (the mice), mute and passionless, to the extent of suffocation. The owl too is left inert and motionless, subservient to her overwhelming function as provider. A quotation from Irigaray acts as illustration of the sentiment provided by the owl and mice from this perspective.

You have made me something to eat. You bring me something to eat. But you give yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up with what you bring me. You put yourself into my mouth and I suffocate. Put less of yourself in me and let me look at you. I'd like to see you while you are feeding me. Not to lose me in your sight when I open my mouth to you. But continue to be on the outside, as well. Keep yourself, and keep me just as outside too. Do not swallow yourself up; do not swallow me down in that which flows from you to me. I'd like it so much if we could be there, both of us. So that one does not disappear into the other, or the other into the one.

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The owl is also representative of the 'bad' mother who devours through hatred, rather than love. A bad mother is one who exhibits authority without love, who is neglectful through selfishness, deprivation or abuse; it is a situation that provokes a social outcry of horror and hastily made judgements of accusatory shame.

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<sup>70</sup> Irigaray as quoted by Grosz E., (1989) p. 122

The mice are the innocent prey. Children are born into this world innocent and helpless, completely dependent upon their mothers for their immediate survival. The mother is left in isolation to rely on a supposedly innate skill to raise her children. She is the one delegated to care for infants, the one who is condemned and blamed for all the various neuroses that become apparent in her charges over time; she is the predator, the children her prey. Due to the constructs of our culture, the infant's ongoing survival is largely left in the hands of its mother. The mother may be isolated, at home with only malleable young children for company. In this environment it may be tempting to wish away responsibility and opt instead for rigorous control.<sup>71</sup> The owl has, through whatever means, created a small ordered world in a society that abhors chaos. Whatever the outcome, she is still the guardian of her children.<sup>72</sup>

The mouse pillow is stitched with a style of needlework that is synonymous with both embroidery and surgical sutures. The pillow is once again indicative of the cultural construction of femininity through the crafts associated with the domestic space. The labour intensive nature of hand stitching which is required for pieces such as the pillow brings enjoyment and loathing. At times, when the process is enjoyable, each individual stitch comes to symbolise a move towards the creation of the finished piece; however, when patience is at a low ebb, each puncturing of the fabric's surface by the sharp needle is done with the sentiment of resentment and loathing. In general, because the entire thesis has elements that employ large

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<sup>71</sup> Rich A., (1977) p. 279

<sup>72</sup>The owl and mice also hold personal significance for me. I recall as a child that, one night in the bedroom of my sister and myself, an owl settled on the windowsill carrying a mouse in its beak. I awoke. It frightened, but also intrigued me, as it seemed to have woken me with deliberateness. As a messenger, it held my gaze with sustained directness. This image and the attached emotional recall, has stayed with me, and I realise that it is a possible birthplace for this particular installation.

amounts of arduous and labour intensive hand stitching, a pattern begins to emerge within the style of stitching, and this pattern in itself acts as a visual symbol of ambivalence within maternity. The task of stitching together pieces of fabric bears the marks of both love and hate, as do the feelings between most mothers and daughters.

The structure of a domestic chair was used in this piece. It is as much a place of sanctity as it is of purgatory; it is a domestic prop imbued with the function of helping to sustain us by its ability to support our corporeal bulk. It is as a prop within the domestic interior that this prosaic object may act as a witness to a wide variety of family trials and tribulations. Mother may sit in it, held captive in it, whilst her daughter feeds from her breasts. Mother may sink into its comfort to help ease her exhaustion. Mother may be held captive by it as she is lulled into the mind numbing trivia of midday TV dramas that somehow ease her experience of isolation. Mother may loathe it as a relic that is redolent of far off childhood angst. Mother may cherish it, keep it covered in plastic as it is hard-earned evidence of her material worth. The footrest is covered with the same red damask fabric that covers the chair. On the top of the rest is a raised area of stitching that protrudes from the footrest like a scab or scar. This form is resonant of proud flesh<sup>73</sup> that may develop for various reasons where a wound is not left to heal in peace. It is similar to the way in which a mother raises her daughter (who is more likely than not to become a mother herself one day) with vivid knowledge of the pain that must remain unspoken within the maternal experience. Mothers are aware that their role is generally regarded as a subordinate position within society - yet they must prepare the next generation of girls to take their place. This is cruel and ironic, for in mothering daughters, women are in an almost impossible position.





Fig.16

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<sup>73</sup>Proud flesh is a name given to excess scar tissue that grows on wounded tissue.



Fig. 17



Fig.18

### ***Keeping Mum.***

This installation contains three major components: a black painted single bed that holds a white painted mattress, gauze sheeting and a black shelf like form that holds six freeze dried crows. A child's single bed frame was painted black for this piece, and a single mattress was painted using plaster, wax, shellac and pigment. The crows each have black ribbons tied around their feet and are attached to the black painted timber shelf. (Fig. 19, 20, 21 & 22)

The crows are the forms chosen to represent the familial messages and secrets that lie as the 'whispers within the walls'. All that is difficult or secretive is more likely to remain unspoken. These things ruminate within the heart and mind. This installation alludes to that brooding element that is present within the mother and daughter dyad where a daughter absorbs many unspoken messages from her mother.<sup>74</sup> This can be the case in issues of feminine sexuality and how a daughter is heavily influenced by her own mother's pivotal messages regarding her feelings and attitudes towards her gender and herself. Our culture has some questionable attitudes towards women's bodies. We are told that they are mysterious, sexual, out of control, and in fact, responsible for instigating the experience and ensuing consequences of masculine sexuality.

Feminine sexuality is a commodity that can sell us anything, and as such is defiled, degraded and objectified. It is little wonder that women feel that they have been disenfranchised; feel a lack of confidence with their sexuality; and little wonder that they lack a healthy level of true self worth. A daughter replaces her mother as the woman of tomorrow, and if the cultural messages that we send regarding feminine identity stay entrenched in the same cultural mould, the women of tomorrow will be just as insecure as the women of yesterday.

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<sup>74</sup> Jung called these unspoken messages silent facts and the whispering of the walls; he felt that within the confines of the family, nothing influences children more than these mute messages.

The bed is the place of the daughter and she is looking outwards, watching silently. Its mattress is starched white and loosely waxed with an ornate pattern. (Fig. 21). Its frame is the hue of all things dark, sad, mysterious and deathly. I seemed to spend parts of my childhood on my own bed as a place where I could happily dream of a world in which I would be a princess; or recover from some kind of childhood drama, trivial or otherwise, saturating my pillow with self indulgent floods of tears.

The space within and around a child's bed should be sacrosanct. However, frighteningly, statistics suggest that it is within this space that a young girl is most likely to be physically violated. The shelf above the bed houses creatures that bear witness to all kinds of nightmares. Fear is inescapable. A girl-child, who is the victim of sexual abuse, experiences betrayal in an infinite variety of ways, both from within her own family (who allowed it to happen) and from society at large. It is well documented that a daughter who has been molested by her father sees her mother as equally culpable; ignorance is *not* bliss. Incest certainly does occur, but it is the aspect of betrayal of the daughter by the mother that is most relevant to this thesis. Betrayal causes the absence of trust. Although it is not constructed from solid matter, trust is tangible; it forms the very foundations of a person's sense of security. Mothers are supposed to protect their offspring. The ideal mother is omnipotent, all-giving, all-loving, and all-protecting. If she is not these things then, she is not the ideal or good mother. (And who can live up to such expectations?)

A close companion to betrayal is shame. Shame arises from an experienced contradiction - a gap between that which is ideal, and that which is real. Shame is given form within this installation as semi-transparent fabric that covers and holds all of the other visual elements. Like shame, this fabric clings and isolates.



A life-long 'hangover' experienced by survivors of sexual assault is a deep feeling of shame and self loathing and deathliness; it permeates and poisons; like a crow's laugh, it is lying in wait to mock and cackle when happiness turns sour. The six preserved black crows sit on individual shelves. Each shelf surface mirrors that of the mattress. The crows are the shapes of shame and death. Crows are scavengers; they steal the offspring of other species of birds from their nests (beds). They take and consume these innocent nestlings, and the parent bird is unable to stop them. They gather around the dead, first plucking out the eyes, then pecking at the rest undeterred.<sup>75</sup> The installation as a whole represents a childhood melancholia to the point of deathliness- a childhood in which even the haven of the child's bed is a place of misfortune and shame.

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<sup>75</sup>As a child, I lived in a big, shallow fertile valley. Giant pine trees planted by the rural pioneers (one of them my grandfather) surrounded our house. The pine trees acted like an amphitheatre in which we were the performers and dozens of crows the ever-commenting audience. Each time I fell and scraped my knees on the concrete, a mocking vindictive 'CAW CAW CAW' could be guaranteed by the crows in their pews/pines.



Fig. 19

Fig. 21



Fig. 20







Fig 22

### ***Periodicity.***

This installation is made up of a number of forms. The walls are adorned with multiple, waxed and stuffed ovoid shields that average the dimensions of 200mm X 150mm. (Fig. 24). The wax figure that is covered in a black dress-like form has an approximate height of 1500mm. (Fig. 23). The figure was fabricated by painting bees wax over a plaster cast of a child/doll and positioning it onto a steel pole. The garment and head-dress are hand stitched black fabric. The multiple ovoid shields were constructed by upholstering fabric over timber veneer and painting with bee's wax. Around the edges of each ovoid form sits gathered satin flocking.

This fifth installation is intended to represent the intertwined physical realities of being female (from menarche to menopause) that affect the mother and daughter relationship and the psychological influence of these hormones and cycles. The sculpture also explores women's awareness of having their bodies scrutinised by others, as well as by themselves and, is, as such, a further exploration into experiences of shame. From a purely physical perspective, a girl may be able to have a child when she is still a child herself. From a social point of view, she is taught to mother while still a child. The child doll in this work is child as well as mother to the brood that surrounds her on the walls. A daughter is raised to mother, whether it be her own children or the people with whom she forms relationships as adults. Daughters are raised to care and nurture, and spend a lifetime trying to get the balance right between self-preservation and putting others first. When a woman gives birth to her daughter, it is like giving birth to a miniature of herself - another woman.

As discussed previously, it is very common for the type of relationship that the mother had with her own mother to affect her relationship with her daughter. The woman was taught how to feel about her own body from the attitudes and responses

of her own mother towards her. If she felt rejected or ignored by her mother in relation to her body image, it becomes difficult for her to develop a late sense of ease with and confidence in, her body, opposed to the messages that she was given. Also if her gender was in some form, a disappointment to her mother and father at birth, she is likely to absorb this sentiment and as a result begin to dislike her own body. Women have to deal with the inescapable aspects of their own biological functions.

From the onset of menarche to the inevitable conclusion of menopause, a woman is regularly subjected to a cycle that has the potential outcome of pregnancy. How a woman deals with this reality is often decided by her feelings of self worth.

Menstruation is still largely a taboo subject within western culture. A young girl feels anxious about dealing with this inevitability, especially if her own mother has chosen to neglect discussing the subject with her. The process of menstruation is still seen as dirty, as abject, and has some connections with other abject bodily fluids such as excrement and urine. Historically and mythologically, a woman menstruating was shunned, labelled unclean and therefore physically and sexually undesirable. This sentiment still pervades the subconscious of contemporary women. Menstruation is seen as an undesirable feminine affliction that acts as a reminder of her shameful place within the patriarchy. Elizabeth Grosz comments:

Women's bodies do not develop their adult forms with reference to their newly awakened sexual capacities for these are dramatically overcoded with the resonances of motherhood... For the girl, menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood. The idea of soiling oneself, of dirt, of the very dirt produced by the body itself, staining the subject, is a normal condition

of infancy, but in the case of the maturing woman it is a mark or stain of her future status...<sup>76</sup>

The oval shields (Fig. 24) that adorn the internal walls of this piece are wax covered, cotton stuffed pads, which are punctured centrally and edged with hand stitched flocking. The forms resemble both faces and abdomens and act as a constant reminder of the biological pressures belonging to femininity. They are crowning fledglings.<sup>77</sup> There is a loose connection between their placement on the wall and the use of mirrors within the domestic space, in that each invites reflection. The contrast of the starched black ovoids and pale threads by which they are connected to the figure may be compared with Kristeva's description of the Greek tradition of melancholia in which 'froth' (aphos) is seen as the euphoric counterpoint to 'black bile' (melaina kole).<sup>78</sup>

The wax figure is clothed in a black dress and a headdress of Victorian influence. (Fig. 23). Black is the colour of dirt, stain and death; the fabric is stitched once again in a style to reference traditions of feminine craft as well as the corporeal aspects of the maternal condition. The child is disproportionately tall – a dead child with a woman's stature perhaps - and has stumps for arms and is postured in a demure manner; a symbol of the disablement of regret, shame and sadness, that invades the darkest corners of cultural feminine identity. The deathly shame that is represented within this piece concerns the gap, the mourning that exists between the self and a culturally constructed ideal.

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<sup>76</sup> Grosz E, (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a corporeal Feminism*, (NSW, Allen & Unwin), P. 205

<sup>77</sup> Crowning is the term used to describe the top of a baby's head (or crown), as it becomes visible through the woman's stretching vulva during birth.

<sup>78</sup> Kristeva K., (1989) P. 7



Fig.23





Fig. 24

Throughout the process of research or construction, the installations were in a continuous state of evolution. The style of construction employed, the materials used, and the treatment of the surfaces of each element within each installation, were extremely labour intensive. Each part became a participant willing to gradually show its form, individual intent, and story. The layout of the final exhibition again evolved through a process of both planning and intuition.

The final exhibition, having each installation contained within its own room or cell, came about through the desire to choreograph an environment that would evoke a generic hospital ward, or institutional setting. Each installation was accessed by a central passage via a long hallway. Each cell, or space, was lit in a minimal manner, to support the multiple themes of the hidden-object, the melancholic, and of 'intimacy versus intrusion' - dark undercurrents that the sculptures themselves were intended to invoke. I felt that it was important for each installation to have its own compartment in which to articulate its intended 'affect'. The emotional intention in the content of each individual installation varied slightly, each telling its own story, some more obviously than others. The narrow hallway that provides access to the viewer (in one direction only), has the intention of making the viewer walk through the exhibition, viewing each installation in progression, one after the other. (This idea was borrowed from history, whereby affluent Victorian era society members are said to have walked the corridors of insane asylums viewing the inmates with the same curiosity as one would an exotic curiosity or creature at the zoo).

Within both a historical and contemporary context, this body of work shares some similarities with the work of other artists. The following, final chapter of this exegesis deals with this consideration.

## Chapter Three.

### Contextualisation of the visual work.

Within a contemporary context, I have long drawn inspiration from the work of Louise Bourgeois. When standing before the work of Bourgeois, I am mesmerised and emotionally overwhelmed. It is through this perspective of emotional confrontation; her dedication to representing difficult complexities within intimate human relationships, that she has influenced this project.

More recently I have also followed the work of Kiki Smith with interest. Her sculptural and installation works comment on fundamental features of widely shared experiences of the human condition. The works of American photographer Sally Mann and English artist Mary Kelly are also relevant in that both challenge traditional notions of maternity in their work. I also refer to the work of Cathy de Monchaux and Nina Saunders, in particular commenting on how their work, is connected with my work through aspects relating to psychoanalytical notions of abjection and the uncanny.



## Louise Bourgeois

*It is not an image I am seeking. It's not an idea. It's an emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, or giving, and of destroying.*<sup>79</sup>



**Fig. 25**

Bourgeois has used her chosen materials and forms like an existential writer would use the written word. Her sculpture, and the emotion that clearly lies at its core, renders me mute. In many ways, the work of Bourgeois inscribes, through its effect, significant influence upon my visual research and arts practice. Bourgeois has courage, and her sculpture is the legacy that will remain to remind us of that. This petite *femme* does not hold her cards closely to her chest; she is unashamed about the somewhat self-descriptive nature of her creative approach. Her work has foundations within the autobiographical and is her method of reconciling difficult memories of experiences, but it speaks to its audience within a universal context. As Wye argues:

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<sup>79</sup> **Bernadac M.L.**, (1996) *Louise Bourgeois* (London, Flarrion Press) p. 7

...Her work expresses a personal and deeply autobiographical content. It is bound by life, and her life in particular... through portraying a single life, it is able to give form to more general and widespread aspects of humanity. An encounter with a Bourgeois reminds one, and makes one vividly feel, what it is to be human.<sup>80</sup>

Bourgeois' ability to work successfully in this manner inspired this project's working process. Although much of her work focuses on her relationship with her father, when one considers her *Cells* it becomes clearer that there was an ambivalence in how the artist felt towards her mother.<sup>81</sup> Although she candidly describes her father's adulterous betrayal, her mother must have been complicit in some form within the menage-a-trois.

Bourgeois is very candid in her descriptions of the relationship she had with her parents. She seems convinced that her birth caused a great disappointment to her father because he had wanted a son as his first born. She subverted this knowledge later by becoming a successful artist, something uncommon for her gender at the time. Bourgeois depicted the 'Mother', and in fact her own mother, in the form of an arachnid.

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<sup>80</sup> Wye D., (1992) *Louise Bourgeois* (New York, Eastern Press) p. 33

<sup>81</sup> Bourgeois's father had a lover who also lived with his own family, an obvious source of unhappiness and loathing for Bourgeois. This point is discussed at length by Irigaray analyst Hilary Robinson in her essay published in N. Paradoxa issue 2. The discussion of this point has heavily influenced Robinson's perspective.



**Fig. 26**

The particular point of this representation that I find interesting is that the form of the spider has been long associated with fear, death and loathing.(Fig. 26 & 27). It is an innate fear. Spiders lure their prey by their beautifully spun webs, then pounce upon, poison and consume their unlucky victim. Female spiders are generally vastly larger than the male spiders, with some types such as the Black Widow devouring their mate after copulation. Perhaps Bourgeois hoped that her mother was a spider, so that she too could consume her adulterous mate. However while the spider conjures up images of the mother as an all-consuming and somewhat threatening creature, Bourgeois herself apparently saw the spider-mother in much more benign terms. As she said: 'The friend (spider, why spider?). Because my best friend was my mother, and she was...(as) clever, patient, neat, and useful as a spider. She could also defend herself.'<sup>82</sup>

At the same time it is evident that ambivalence definitely featured within the artist's relationship with her mother. This is best illustrated by directly quoting an excerpt from an interview from *October* magazine, where she is discussing the process of making, *Bad enough Mother*,

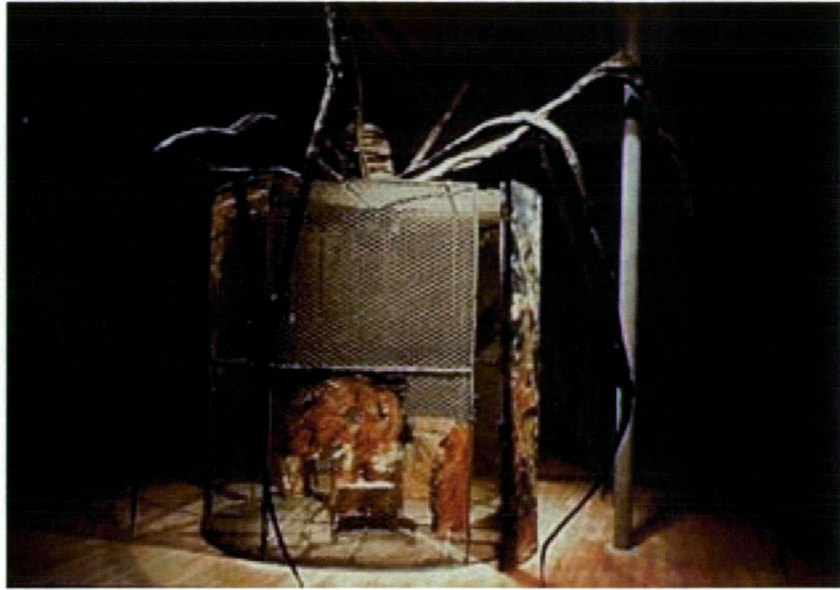


Fig. 27

...And somehow the idea of mother came to me. This is the way mother impressed me, as very powerful, very silent, very judging, and controlling the whole studio....I was going to express what I felt toward her...First I cut off her head, and I slit her throat...And after weeks and weeks of work, I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, then she did not like me. How could she like me if I treat her that way? At that point something turned around. I could not stand the idea that she wouldn't like me. I couldn't live if I thought that she didn't like me. The fact that I had pushed her around, cut off her head had nothing to do with it. What you do to a person has nothing to do with what you expect the person to feel towards you...I became very, very depressed, terribly, terribly depressed.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Wye D., (1997), p. 147

<sup>83</sup> Nixon M., 'Bad enough Mother' *October* No.72 Winter 1995 p.87





Fig. 28

In a less dramatic way, Bourgeois alludes to her mother through the use of either forms or materials that suggest links to the feminine crafts of her mother's creation. This is best illustrated by *Needle*, 1992 (Fig. 28) and *Spider* 1997 (Fig. 27). The form in *Needle* is larger than human height, and, as representative of the mother, is given an element of power and importance. As a metaphor for her role within the family, the needle-mother is the one who binds the fabric or family together. Bourgeois takes the inclusion of this to monumental proportions. This is largely due to early associations with feminine crafts that were pursued by her mother. Bourgeois' mother has always been associated with tapestry restoration – she managed a workshop where tapestries were restored, and everything either directly related to it (needles, thread, distaff, weaving) or metaphorically linked to it (spiders and the webs they spin).<sup>84</sup>

Within many of her later installations, Bourgeois also includes traditionally crafted antique tapestries. An example of this can be seen in the *Spider* 1997 installation. Here a tapestry is draped neatly over the mesh sides of the form; imbued with a sense of resurrected importance; precious and protected by the spider-mother; it is almost as if Bourgeois is paying homage to her mother, as both protector and keeper of things of preciousness.

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<sup>84</sup> Nixon M., (1995), p. 144



Fig. 29

Like Bourgeois, I use the feminine crafts of needlework, knitting and crochet as central to my work, referencing both the autobiographical and the 'feminised'. The construction of 'things' began for me as a child, who wanted to create a space, autonomous from the family environment. I also obsessively made objects to dress my playthings (usually dog, cat or pony) to cosset and protect them like a mother. Alternatively I made objects of fantasy for my own entertainment and exploration. The process became an important feature because cotton wool and materials were in short supply. Anything made stayed complete only briefly.<sup>85</sup>

My mother did not teach me how to do any of these things; I had a couple of sessions with my paternal grandmother, and just found my own way from there. The skill of feminine craft has historically been linked with the pleasures of affluence, and this pastime was a way many leisured women could gain recognition within their peer group. I experienced this pressure and expectation of accuracy

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<sup>85</sup>These objects are worth mentioning because they were important in so much as they were the outpouring of emotion as much as they were ludicrous in form, for example I recall at one stage a recurrent theme of a six, seven, eight etc finger glove!

within the craft, during the sessions I had with my grandmother. My lyrical explorations were rejected, my clumsy fumbling with the stitches, punishable...this was indeed serious stuff.

Robinson suggests that if we see Bourgeois as the daughter, she had to deal with the absence of her mother 'in a holistic sense' because of her father's adulterous relationship with his daughter's nanny. The role of mother as 'Woman' in the household was displaced. While Bourgeois' mother gave birth to, and emotionally nurtured her children, it was the nanny who cleaned and fed them; as well as having a physical relationship with Bourgeois' father. This had to have a detrimental effect upon Bourgeois' relationship with her mother. As Donald Kuspit discusses in an essay in *Art Forum*:

Bourgeois' s entanglement with her mother, not her father, is becoming clear as the inner content of her work. She has filled the void of mother/artist as well as substance, an Oedipus replacing the mother instead of the father, a Sphinx whose Secret is that story about a relationship to a mother.<sup>86</sup>

Bourgeois is well known for her use of 'cells'. These contained areas are an effective recreation of domestic spaces. It is once again hard not to invoke the presence of Bourgeois' mother with the domestic nature of many of the cells, though it must also be considered that the family homes and rooms therein were spaces occupied by her father's partner in adultery – Bourgeois' nanny.

Bourgeois' apparent protectiveness towards her mother may be partly an awareness of the deep loss that her displaced mother must surely have felt.

Bourgeois' *Cells* can also be seen as a visual expression of Irigaray's assertion that a daughter must deal with the absence of her mother. Irigaray held the theory that

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<sup>86</sup> Kuspit D., 'Louise Bourgeois: Where Angels Fear to Tread' *Artforum*, 1987 p. 120-121

the way in which a daughter organises her space indicates her relationship with her mother. If this relationship shows evidence of maternal ambivalence it is a '...space which is both a defensive space which speaks of the experience of loss, and a display at the same time...' <sup>87</sup> Take for example Bourgeois' *Arch Of Hysteria*, (Fig 30). 'The object' the marble figure is placed in an environment or space that is juxtaposed with other materials. The size of the space as defined has a connection with spaces within a domestic setting. Within *Cells* Bourgeois fills her created spaces, to fully occupy the void of experienced ambivalence.



Fig. 30

The same, too, can be said of the spaces created for my project. They are similar to a domestic interior. The 'objects' in those spaces are treated in a manner that alludes to the functions they normally have in such a context. Examples are the chair, bed and table forms. In the spaces constructed for this project, I have been methodical in my attempt to articulate **specific** areas within the mother and daughter relationship

<sup>87</sup> **Robinson H.**, (1996) "Louise Bourgeois's 'Cells': Looking at Bourgeois through Irigaray's Gesturing Towards the Mother." *N.Paradoxa* Issue 3 May This ref, [www.N.Paradoxa.com](http://www.N.Paradoxa.com)



that are conducive to ambivalence. The installations are as much deliberately based on these (domestic) 'themes', as they are the result of an intuitive process.

I now wish to focus briefly on Bourgeois' relationship with her father and how the obvious ambivalence within that relationship is illustrated within her work.

Her relationship with her father, according to Bourgeois, was much more fraught with ambivalence than that with her mother. Within her work Bourgeois attempted to exorcise the love and hate she felt for him and it is a constantly revisited theme. Her father was a trader of both antique craft and furniture, props whose appearance becomes more frequent within her later work (especially the *Cells*.) However, the reference to her father is strikingly obvious in *The Destruction of the Father* (Fig. 31), an installation created by Bourgeois in the mid 1970s which also had the title of *Evening Meal*. Bourgeois made this installation shortly after the death of her husband in 1974. Her father had already died and the death of her husband meant a kind of liberation for Bourgeois for it heralded the beginning of a new lifestyle for her, free from masculine censorship. She set out to exorcise any lingering pain that had resided within her memories of her father. *The Destruction of the Father* is a mixed media installation, in a space defined by numerous bulbous or tumour-like forms in a cave-like formation that is bathed in a fleshy light. It has the appearance of a resting-place for the dead because of the enclosed and claustrophobic space in which the forms reside. It also suggests a place for consumption due to the rectangular central part that contains numerous small mounds, and is surrounded by larger mounds (looking as though they are about to ingest the smaller). It is a frightening space. Due to the titles given it by Bourgeois it could be considered that the dead and consumed was the father. In her discussion Bourgeois states:

The piece is first of all a table, the horrible and terrifying table presided over by the father, who pontificates from his chair. And what can the others - the wife and children - do? They sit there silently. The mother, obviously, tries

to appease her husband, the tyrant. The children get restless... My father was overcome with annoyance when he looked at us - he was usually telling us what a great man he was. So much so that we became exasperated, seized him and threw him on the table, tearing his limbs apart and devouring him.<sup>88</sup>



**Fig. 31**

The autobiographical element within Bourgeois' work is apparent but it can never be relegated to pure 'navel-gazing'. In being so self analytical, Bourgeois has defined a creative space within her visual space, which enables other artists to pursue work based on similar intentions. Keeping this 'space' created by Bourgeois in mind, my intention throughout the research for *Vena Casa* has been to stay true to the value of candour. I have endeavoured to do this within the formation of the installations as well as be mindful of the contribution that emotion or 'affect' and self-analysis can make within contemporary visual art. Rather than shy away from the chaos that is inherent within the subject matter (maternal melancholia and

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<sup>88</sup> **Fremont J.**, *Louise Bourgeois*, exhibition catalogue, (Paris: Maeght, 1985)

ambivalence) I have chosen to explore this 'messy' human experience and attempt to create sculptural installations based on its disorder and darkness.



**Fig. 32**

**Fig.33**



Fig.34

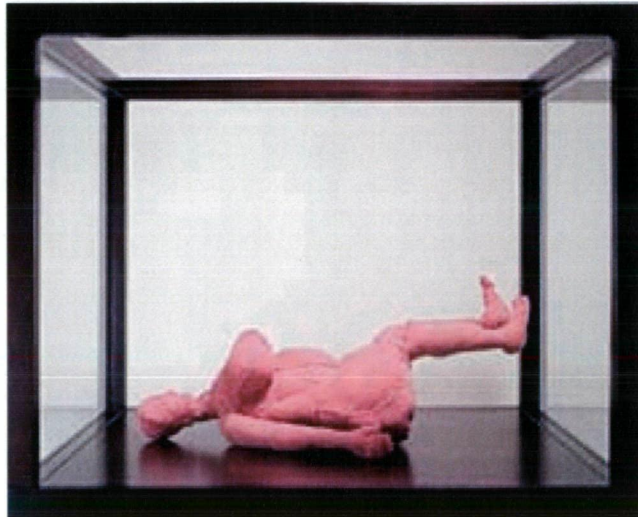
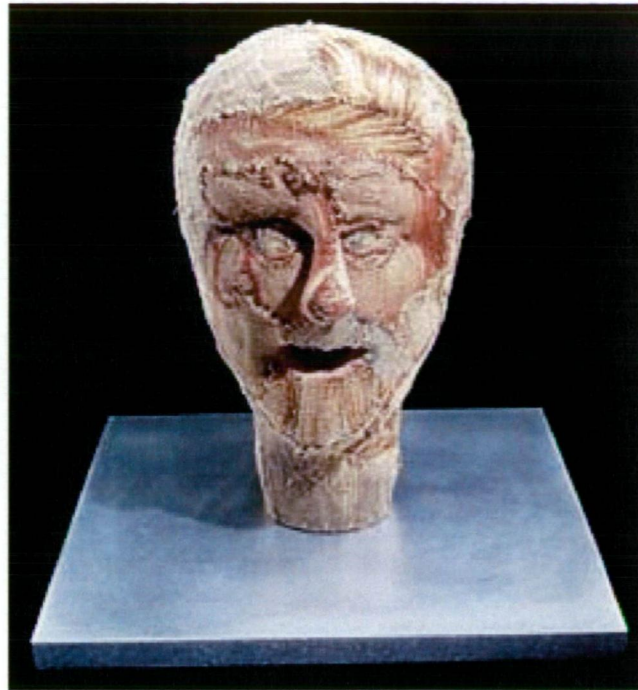


Fig.35



### **Kiki Smith.**

Kiki Smith could be considered one of the most influential three-dimensional artists currently working. Smith's work has centred largely upon broad sweeping issues of Westernised culture; she marries issues from Catholicism and ancient Mythology by representing elements of the human dynamic within her figurative installations and objects. Smith largely concentrated on this dynamic within her rendering of the male and female body before moving more recently towards incorporating animals and forms of animals within her work. Besides her subject matter, what I have found stimulating as an arts practitioner, is her ability to stir the audience (emotionally) through both her sense of aesthetic and her need for personal expression. Smith, like Bourgeois is using visual art to exorcise her demons.



My work was very autobiographical. In the pieces about birth I was trying to reconcile an ambivalent relationship to being here on earth because earth is a difficult place to be sometimes. Individually the pieces are about other things, but I know they're basically about me saying I have to learn to be here.<sup>89</sup>

Generally speaking, Smith deals with aspects of living as a woman that are often shunned within visual representation. The aesthetic of her work walks a fine line between repulsion and seduction. Her ability to produce this work within a mainstream has inspired the visual work for my project; she has the strength of confidence regarding the validity of her work, which is autobiographical in part. 'My work is about my life, and it protects my life. I trust my motives for doing things because I know they are deeply connected to me, that the more I look after them, the more they will look after me.'<sup>90</sup>

Smith has taken her dialogue with cultural ideals and expectations of behaviour to many levels. Through her art she replies to the demands of her culture by asking it questions. Smith's use of the female figure within her work prompts a re-examination of what are culturally prescribed models of behaviour. She rejects the ideals that have been ascribed for women within western culture concerning feminine identity. She removes the structure of the idealised feminine, by investing elements of reality in her female figures. These figures threaten Apollonian ideals and represent a transgressive portrayal of Dionysian chaos. They are not contained bodies, 'They are bodies that refuse to behave.'<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Posner H., (1998) *Kiki Smith*, (Canada Bullfinch) p., 35

<sup>75</sup> Posner H., (1998), p., 28

<sup>91</sup> Posner H., (1998), p. 20

**Fig. 36**



Fig. 37



Fig.38



Fig.39

In *Milky Way* (Fig. 39), *Pee Body* (Fig. 37), *Tale* (Fig. 36) and *Train* (Fig. 38) the female forms are doing what woman's bodies do; they leak milk, they pee, they pooh and they bleed. The portrayal of these feminine realities conflicts with an historical rendering of the ideal female, such biological functions make it undeniable that these are feminine forms. They are not behaving in a way that befits an object of male



desire. These are not sex objects, however they are not sexless either. The figures hold poise and vulnerability within their pose. They seem reticent. Their bodily actions appear to be involuntary. They simply seem unable to continue holding in, what must come out. Their humble insistence is that the truth of femininity is finally being revealed. The represented leakages in both *Train* (Fig. 38) and *Pee body* (Fig. 37) are constructed with long glass bead trails. They are simple yet opulent. In truth, they are reminiscent of long strings of beads worn by many women. The strands of beads are seductive because of the nature of the medium, yet repulsive through what they represent.

The duality of meaning within Smith's work carries significant influence for the motivations and methods of my research. The work within this project puts forward ideas of abjection as much as it does enticement. Many of the forms constructed for this project suggest aspects of the abject. The surface treatment and the fabrics that cover these forms are seductive in appearance. It is a project motivated through the need to explore an area that has lacked visual exploration and, in doing so, it transgresses the cultural ideal of maternity.

Animal forms play an increasingly important role within more recent work of Kiki Smith. This started as a way of exploring visually her feelings towards the connections that exist between humanity and other living creatures that share their living space with us.



Fig. 40

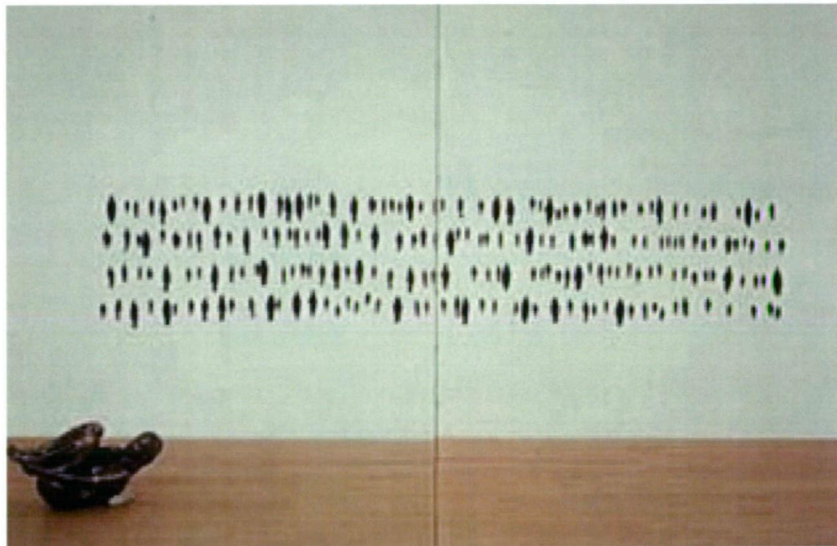


Fig. 41

In *Jersey crows* (Fig. 40 & 41) for example, Smith, upon hearing of the death of twenty-seven crows caused by pesticide poisoning, started to produce work that used cast forms of the crows as its focus. Smith went on to create a multitude of works that include both animal and human forms together and establish a dialogue between the subjects. The dialogue is redolent of the vulnerability and fragility of our existence. While Smith continues to use the forms of animals, they are, more

recently connected with mythology or fairy-tales such as hares, owls, deer, rats and wolves. For Smith there is a familiarity or comfort in the use of animal forms.

When I was a kid I'd go find dead animals, like little squirrels, or birds, and I'd put little necklaces around their necks and make little caskets, making them into mummies. I'd dress them up and I'd put all my treasures in with them and bury them.<sup>92</sup>



Fig. 42

Animals have long acted as my companions too, and as described earlier had particular relevance for me as a child. Like Kiki Smith, I have used animals as a stand-in for humans, representative of both adult and child, (mother and daughter). The use of animal forms within my project is an attempt to articulate human behavioural inconsistencies, such as love and hate (and the ensuing ambivalence that is created). We imbue animals with humanistic traits and motivations, and many animals have become symbolic of some of those particular traits.

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<sup>92</sup> Reilly M., "Notes on Kiki Smith", *Art Journal*, winter 1999.

### Sally Mann.

I should now like to explore briefly the work of American photographer Sally Mann. Mann's work has long concentrated on her relationship with her children, particularly her daughters. The subject of her previous work and the concerns of this thesis are therefore connected. My intention is to discuss how the work of Mann received negative criticism and to use this to illustrate how the subject is still very much taboo within the mainstream contemporary art world. The photographic documentation evolved over the period of around fifteen years. The following work that is considered is from both *Immediate Family* (Fig. 43) and *Twelve* (Fig. 44). The images of Mann's daughters, as portrayed through her position as both mother and artist, are rife with contradictions, and are as repulsive as they are seductive. Mann's *Wet Bed* is a good example of this duality. In this particular work, Mann has photographed her young daughter Virginia. The girl is asleep on a stained mattress; it is obvious when considering the title, that the stain is urine. What is endearing within the image is the innocence of childhood that it contains. We have all 'wet the bed' at some stage. It is a part of normal childhood development and we are endeared to the girl because we do not want it to cause her trauma. The child is positioned with her legs slightly apart and this along with other features evokes ambivalence. It triggers an innate mechanism of taboo. We know that it is 'wrong' and because it is forbidden it has an edge of appeal. According to the artist though, 'Many of these pictures are intimate, but most are ordinary things every mother has seen. I take pictures when they are bloodied or sick or naked or angry.'<sup>93</sup>

Is the understanding of the day to day realities of child rearing so obscured by the facade of cultural ideal that pictorial language cannot express its truth? Images by Mann such as the one mentioned above, have received such harsh criticism that it

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<sup>93</sup> Sally Mann writes in the introduction of her book *Immediate Family*, Aperture Press New York

seems likely to be the case. Mann's work seems to have been filtered through the lens of an outmoded patriarchal notion. Because Mann walks around the edge of controversy *and* jumps into the deep end with her picturing of her daughters, she has been attacked from a very personal perspective and labelled as a 'Bad Mother'. In delivering of one of his lectures at Mount Holyoke College, Christopher H. Pyle asks:

How could a mother, of all people, record her daughter naked, lying on a urine soiled bed, her son with blood dripping down his chest, or her daughter seemingly impaled on a meat hook? Mann's pictures offend our conventional wisdom, both about what childhood should be and how mothers should protect their children.<sup>94</sup>

Mann maintains that although there is nothing untoward within the content of her work, some of it is an exaggeration of reality; her children really enjoyed the process of documentation, having their injuries of childhood captured within their mother's images.<sup>95</sup>



Fig. 43



Fig. 44

<sup>94</sup> **Christopher H. Pyle**, "Disturbing Images", adapted into essay form from a lecture at Mount Holyoke College, April 22 2002., U.S.A. this ref <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/offices/comm/oped/Disturbing.shtml>.

<sup>95</sup> My own experiences as a mother of two very imaginative daughters definitely ratify this claim.

What becomes most evident within the above criticism is that Mann has ‘jumped the traces’ by combining her role as mother with the role of photographer. She subverts the ideal of All Giving All Loving and Selfless Mother; she has her own agenda to address as an individual. ‘Mother (sic) must not dream of activity beyond the domestic sphere until their families are grown.’<sup>96</sup> Mann however maintained her stance, and continued in the portrayal of her children pursuing the documentation through their adolescence in *Twelve*. This body of work once again received both rave reviews and harsh criticism. Again the attack was more centred on Mann as mother, rather than photographer. Criticism that tends to be personalised tends to be defensive criticism based on insecurity. High art seems to reflect the cultural shiver that is felt upon suggesting that its ideals are less than ideal.

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<sup>96</sup> **Helene Duetsch** quoted in Suleiman, S.R (1994) *Risking Who One is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* p.19

## Mary Kelly.

Since the early 1970's, Mary Kelly has managed a prodigious and iconic creative output of visual art and semiotic theory examining changing social structures and the foundations upon which they are laid. This work has taken such forms as installation, actions, film and the written word – dating from her involvement with the late 1960's feminist 'History Group' through to works such as the 1974 *Post-partum Document* and her powerful and brutal 1992 installation *Gloria Patri*, an examination of the masculine ideal. This body of work is the result of a great deal of planning and subsequent hard work.

Mary Kelly truly challenged the ideal image of maternal woman in her work *Post-Partum Document*. Kelly dedicated several years to the documentation of some of the more prosaic elements of her relationship with her growing child, in her case, a son. She started the documentation soon after his birth and continued for several years. The documentation developed in tandem with her son's developmental milestones. The project starts with *Documentation I, Analysed faecal stains and feeding charts* 1973 and develops through the years as *Documentation II, III, IV, V* and ends in 1978 with *Documentation VI Pre- writing alphabet, exergue and diary*.

Kelly articulated her intentions in the introduction of the *Post-partum document* catalogue:

In the Post-Partum Document, I am trying to show the reciprocity of the process of socialisation in the first years of life. It is not only the infant whose future personality is formed at this crucial moment, but also the mother who's 'Feminine Psychology' is sealed by the sexual division of labour in childcare.<sup>97</sup>

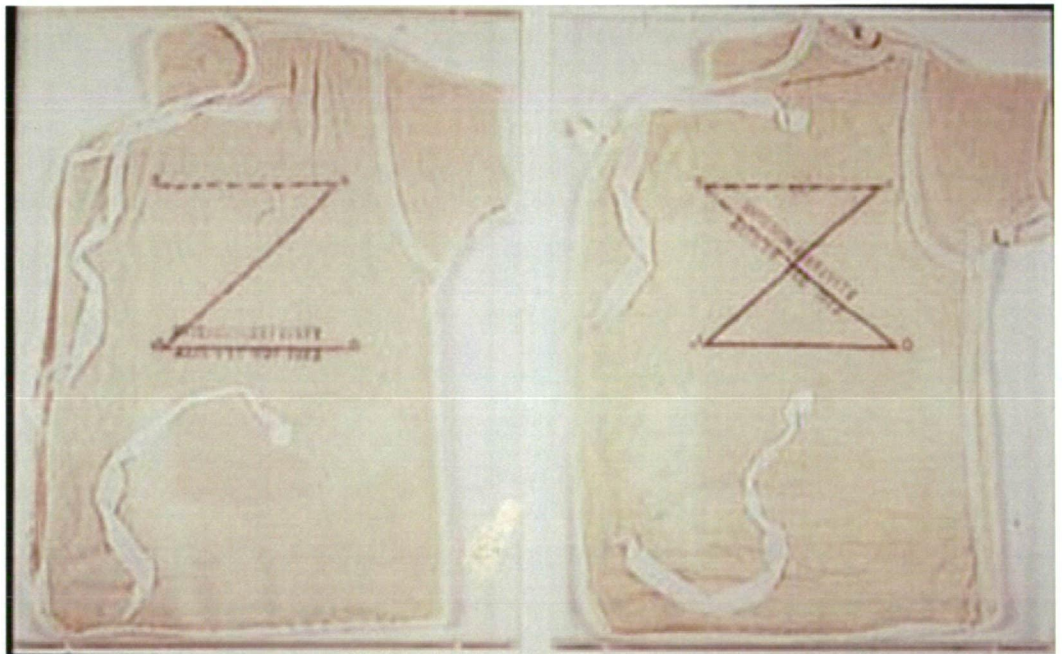
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<sup>97</sup> Kelly M, (1983) *Post-Partum Document*, (London, Routledge), p. 1



The work within *Post-Partum Document* is intended to question culturally idealised notions and conceptions of motherhood.

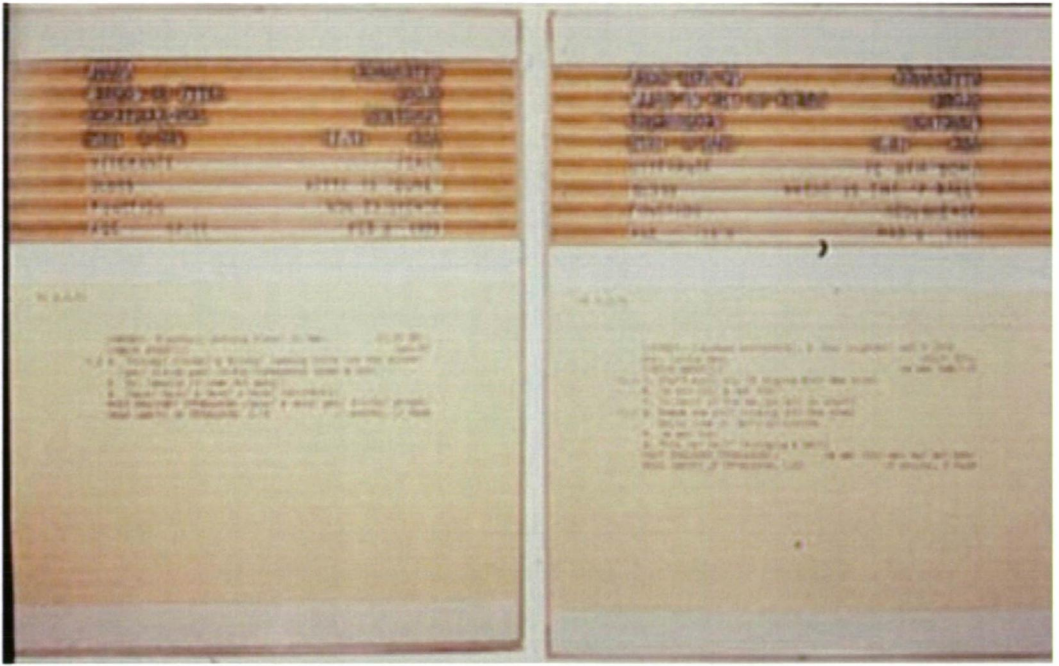
Kelly utilises a number of strategies to this end, one of which is the articulation of the psychological effects which the raising of a child may have on the mother. She suggests through her work that motherhood is not an innate role automatically accommodated by women, but rather that it is culturally encoded. Like *Vena Casa*, *Post-partum Document* is an exploration of a woman's psychic life supported by psychoanalytically sourced insight and research. Both works seek to question woman's 'pre-ordained' role as all-providing mother. It must be noted that Kelly's work has a tenderness also, in that the painstakingly recorded development of the child is seen from the concerned perspective of the mother.<sup>98</sup>



**Fig.45**

<sup>98</sup> Iverson, Crimp and Homi K Bhabha, (1997) *Mary Kelly*, (London, Phaidon Press), p.41.





**Fig. 46**

Within the visual work of my project, *Vena Casa*, motherhood is not represented through the direct depiction of the maternal body, but rather, as with *Post-Partum Document*, is alluded to through traces or abstract forms. This shared corporeal absence is significant; avoiding direct representation of the female body circumvents the possibility of objectification. Kelly describes the absence of the represented maternal body in *Post-partum Document* as a strategy designed both to avoid reinforcing ideas of an essential femininity and to explore notions of female fetishism. This too was generally a consideration within the process of visual research for *Vena Casa*. What is interesting though is that both *Post-partum Document* and the work of *Vena Casa* become caught up in a fetishism of process; Kelly obsessively records all aspects of her son's routine, and I consider the stitching and 'over-stitching' in the work of *Vena Casa* to develop fetishistic type characteristics. A point of serious concern to Kelly is the 'socially and economically circumscribed' rift that separates two camps of *social* and *personal*. To Kelly the social upheaval heralded by the sixties (the personal is political stance), has been in

a continual state of convulsion ever since,<sup>99</sup> and, in many ways, I see this ongoing generational 'convulsion' mirrored in my own work.

There is a further connection between the two - the links between abjection and maternity that are also articulated. In *Post-partum Document*, Kelly uses the impressions of her son's soiled nappies in conjunction with text to demonstrate the realities of the maternal experience as they shape both mother and child. When viewing the links between *Post-partum document* and *Vena Casa* the connection becomes more apparent when viewed through a Kristevian lens. In both cases, the abject is evoked through the traces of bodily fluids and substances which transgress the body's boundaries. Boundaries are breached and the 'abject' becomes apparent; Kelly carefully renders diagrams and charts of her son's existence to create a dialogue with the abject. My intention is to develop both forms and surfaces that form a dialogue and description of the abject within my own experiences of maternity.

While *Post-partum Document* utilises abjection, and a certain sense of maternal ambivalence, neither are expressed as of overriding significance. In *Vena Casa* however, the ambivalent, abject and melancholic can be seen in form, texture and choice of hue, and, unlike *Post-Partum Document*, the depiction of the abject and of deathliness permeates the entire body of work.

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<sup>99</sup> Kelly M., (1996) *Imaging Desire*, (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press)

## Nina Saunders and Cathy de Monchaux

There is a joke saying that 'Love is home-sickness'; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself... 'This place is familiar to me, I've been here before', we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix 'un' is the token of repression.<sup>100</sup>

At this stage, in reference to the element of Freud's 'uncanny' in my project, (with particular reference to post Freudian ideas of the uncanny by Melanie Klein), I wish to refer to the work of Nina Saunders and Cathy de Monchaux. A sense of the uncanny amounts to a return of the repressed<sup>101</sup>. According to Klein, arousal of the uncanny reminds us of the primary power the archaic mother over us all. The maternal body provides our earliest 'home' inside her warm, strong and enigmatic

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<sup>100</sup> **Sigmund Freud**, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Ed. & tr. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953) In his landmark essay, "The 'Uncanny'" (first published in 1919), Freud identifies the phenomenon of the double as "the most prominent theme of uncanniness." In Freud's view, what makes the double so disturbing is that its appearance signifies a reconfirmation in either depicted or experienced reality of our infantile belief in the existence of a second self, a belief that has long-since been abandoned or "surmounted."

<sup>101</sup> **Melanie Klein**, post Freudian psychoanalyst concentrated her work on child development. In the introduction to her book *Love, Hate, Reparation*. W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 1964, Klein comments, "...feelings of love and gratitude arise directly and spontaneously in the baby in response to the love and care of his mother. The power of love - which is the manifestation of the forces which tend to preserve life - is there in the baby as well as the destructive impulses, and finds its first fundamental expression in the baby's attachment to his mother's breast, which develops into love for her as a person. My psycho-analytic work has convinced me that when in the baby's mind the conflicts between love and hate arise, and the fears of losing the loved one become active, a very important step is made in development. These feelings of guilt and distress now enter as a new element into the emotion of love. They become an inherent part of love, and influence it profoundly both in quality and quantity." Keeping this 'Kleinian' concept of ambivalence in mind it is evident that potential exists for the later development of experiencing the uncanny.

(‘canny’) body. When we are forced from her body at the moment of birth we remain totally dependent on her for survival. We are at her mercy for food, shelter and warmth. At some point we begin the fight to procure a ‘psychic’ life of our own, and with an increasing awareness of our own distinctness, mother becomes our chief point of reference for our sense of autonomy. She is known and yet not known (‘uncanny’). As we become aware of our detachment we either forget or repress, our earliest memories of being merged with her soul, psyche and body. We begin to feel estranged from her. A sense of the uncanny remains to remind us of our ambivalent relationship with her. (Yet we have an awareness that she was the provider of our existence). The experience of the uncanny arouses something like distress as soon as we get a feeling of something ‘other’ and unseen threatening to ‘make strange’ an otherwise familiar environment. A sense of the uncanny threatens us with the archaic mother’s return. Emotions such as fear at the sight of the naked woman-mother, implies a deep-seated belief in her power and potency; fear of her radical differences and her autonomous sexuality. A son soon learns (through the influence of a phallogentric society) to reject (mother) love through fear, and this split means that he forgets his earliest lessons in love and vulnerability. A daughter learns this too, but she must somehow find a way to identify with mother as well. The remnant of this paradox is a wound at the very centre of her being. The consequences for her range from a sense of inferiority because she is a woman to self-abnegation and self-alienation. Klein explains how this contradiction inhibits confidence by distancing us from knowledge of and intimacy with the mother (which, if female, also means ourselves). Daughters are estranged from a comfort in, and knowledge of their mothers. Nuances of intimacy with mother are somehow familiar (through the sharing of one body) yet full of fear (fear of suffocation and annihilation).

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It is through this 'Kleinian' lens that the 'uncanny' becomes apparent in the work of de Monchaux, Saunders and the work of *Vena Casa*.

Pennina Barnett explores a psychoanalytical reading of the work of these artists (and that of Chohreh Ferdijou) and, in doing so, uncovers associations with the maternal body. In reference to Saunders' *Pure Thought II*, (fig. 47) Barnett quotes the artist's taped description that it is:

...something that could contain hidden things, growing and bursting...as if something has grown out of all proportion and isn't quite right...It has some terrible, destructive element to it that's contained, on the edge...I've spent a lot of time wondering if I could make fear visible, what would it look like?<sup>102</sup>

In explaining Saunders' intention with the piece, Barnett refers to Freud's definition of the uncanny which he traces to the German word *Unheimlich* (unhomely) which has the complementary meanings of intimacy and domestic comfort as well as that which is withheld or hidden. The maternal body then is a good example of Freud's idea of *Unheimlich*; it is the most familiar of places yet represents all that is hidden. Barnett explains:

In psychoanalytical terms, the maternal body is the primary object from which the infant defines its own boundaries, to differentiate between inside and outside, a me and not me. The scale of *Pure Thought IV*, would easily allow it to accommodate an adult, and stepping tentatively around its bulk, it

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<sup>102</sup> **Nina Saunders**, taped interview with Pennina Barnett, "Purity and Fear", *Make: the magazine of women's art* no.74 March 1997.

contains a sense of both the intimacy and claustrophobia associated with the maternal body.<sup>103</sup>

Saunders uses leather exterior perimeters for the containment of the 'maternal body' in the series *Pure Thought IV* (Fig. 56). The chair forms bulge forward preventing anyone from mistaking its 'dysfunction' for any kind of 'function' ... no-one else can inhabit the space but the form itself. The use of leather on these chair forms have obvious connections with status, there is a kind of authority or power around them. Leather furniture that is elaborately upholstered is more commonly found in the homes of people who have some kind of significant social position/money. Standing in front of Saunderson's chair forms must take the viewer back to some part of their childhood when they must stand before their mother after committing some naughty act, waiting for their punishment. Similarly, de Monchaux has used the domestic interior in her work *Confessional* (Fig.51) and has used the leather on the seating of this particular work in a manner that allows the couch's surface to take on the appearance of delicate fresh entrails. The paradoxical elements of inside/outside are made ever apparent. The chairs/couches take on the 'affect' of familiarity like the body 'mother'. A chair's familiarity in terms of its function is obvious, but the chairs also wear an endearment... of sorts. The chair's forms become loosely anatomical and this suggestion is at once familiar and frightening. They are homely yet hideous, mother yet monster.

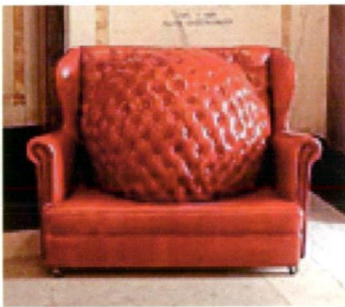
The mother/ monster dichotomy is also apparent in the work belonging to *Vena Casa* (Fig.50) and other illustrated examples of de Monchaux. (Figs. 49, 51 & 52). The owl in *Vena Casa* (Fig. 50) is mother as she provides protection for her 'offspring' (the mice) yet she could devour her coddled and bound babies if she desired. The sculpture of de Monchaux (fig. 52) is like a deity that has 'gone wrong'. The work has the stance and energy of a statue of feminine worship but it

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<sup>103</sup> **Barnett P.**, 'Materiality, subjectivity and abjection in the work of Chohreh Feyzjoui, Nina Saunders and Cathy de Monchaux', *N.Paradoxa* Issue No9, 1999.

seems to have slipped 'inside-out' wearing its raw hide and flesh externally.

Largely speaking, de Monchaux's sculptures have a highly evocative visual language and yet seem strangely familiar. They seem to retain the vestiges of some functional object, or adornment yet they have no identifiable practical application. The illustrated piece (Fig. 48) could almost be a number of small objects belonging to a domestic interior (perhaps a sort of fire poker wearing a cape!) She says 'They remind you of something you once saw somewhere else, as you passed it by in the street or in a dream'<sup>104</sup>. Much of her work suggests some kind of anxiety, perhaps even bordering on hysteria (the over pinning, folding stitching and so on). In her sculpture, Cathy de Monchaux incorporated elements that are paradoxical. Hard and rough are in opposition with smooth and soft. Brass and steel in direct contact with leather and velvet. Spikes or sharp edges contrast with luscious curves and padded surfaces. The harshness and softness of nature which simultaneously attract and are both present in the unspoken danger. The added ephemeral elements such as patterns of powder or dust add a sense of history and of decay.



**Fig.47**



**Fig. 48**

<sup>104</sup> **Barnett P.**, (1999). [www.N.Paradoxa.com](http://www.N.Paradoxa.com)





Fig. 49



Fig. 50



Fig. 51

In continuing with a discussion of the maternal body as motif in terms of its connections with the abject and the uncanny, mention must be made of the similar use of the egg or parasitic like growth forms in the work of Saunders (Figs. 47 & 52), de Monchaux (Figs. 56 & 57 ) *Vena Casa* (Figs. 53 & 55).

The larvae forms of *Duplicates* (Figs. 53 and 55) are ‘attractive’



Fig. 52



Fig. 53

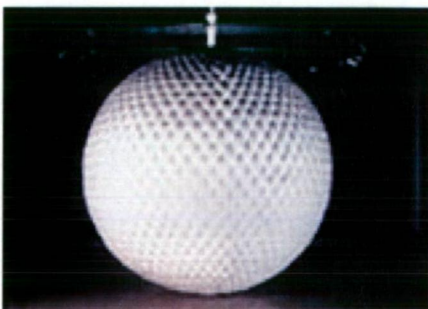


Fig. 54

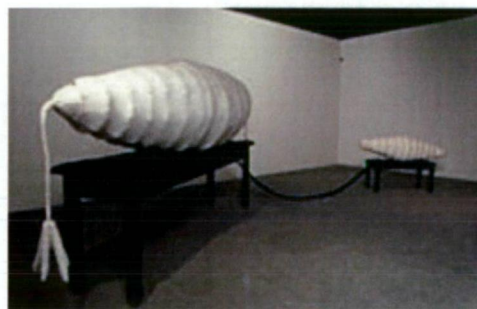


Fig. 55





Fig. 56



Fig. 57

because of the ornate quality of their surfaces yet their forms clearly indicate parasitic tendencies. The forms inhabit luxurious trolley/tables each. The forms might therefore be either food for consumption or cadavers for mortuary inspection. In Saunder's work (Figs. 52 and 54) the egg like growths too, are ornately and fastidiously upholstered. De Monchaux has used an ornate approach for one of her works shown above, (Fig. 57) whereby a stitched and upholstered surface covers a wall mounted form that looks part parasite/ part domestic coat rack. De Monchaux's other piece (Fig. 59) seems to be in contrast with her typical decorative style, but the form still bears resemblance to both an object belonging to a domestic interior (an Ottoman of sorts) as well as a shape that seems corporeal somehow. All of the afore mentioned works seem to mutely contain 'something'. It seems strange to comment on the possibility of the forms being containers of sorts, but they do indeed hold 'something' inside and what that is has connection with emotion/affect and nuances of the uncanny. The message of mute containment (egg like) or even benign threat could move more easily towards overt threat if it were not for features or conscious choices around aesthetics (aspects such as colour, surface material, decoration and form).

Within the body of work developed for *Vena Casa*, this psychoanalytical idea of the maternal body being a place of both comfort and fear has been utilised. Klein's idea that experiences of the uncanny are connected with fear/repulsion of mother and its connection with an instinctive 'death drive' (upon experiences of identity separation from mother) have been utilised. The paradoxical experiences of both



Fig. 58



Fig. 59



Fig. 60

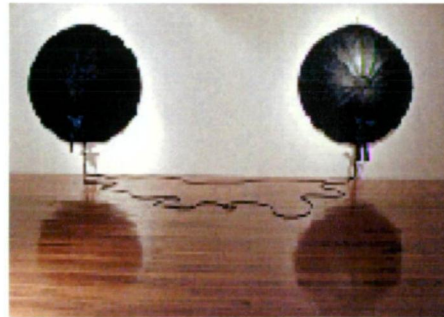


Fig. 61

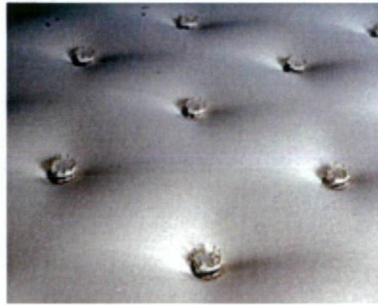
fear and comfort are articulated throughout all of the installations belonging to *Vena Casa*. The protuberances of *Ainigma* (Fig. 58 and 61) have contrasting sensory impact because of the surfaces that cover each form. One is covered in comforting velvet that seems to be absorbent of thought in some way, the other has a surface that is murky, shiny and quite repulsive to look at. The pieces have a kind of domestic familiarity to them; they echo both function and ornament as they hang from their brass hooks. The rubber umbilical cord that joins them together is reminiscent of electrical cord that might be a conductor of energy between them. The forms seem 'oversized' somehow alluding to elements of the monstrous mother. Once again Saunder's work (Fig. 54) also seems to embrace maligned concepts of fear and comfort. The artist has once again utilised the form of the domestic armchair in a paradoxical manner. The armchair above (Fig. 60) is traditionally upholstered in dark leather, but once again its form is misshapen and

slightly tortured. The 'nest' form in de Monchaux's sculpture (Fig. 59) is attractive in terms of wanting to get closer through curiosity but also seems to be threatening to envelop and capture any unfortunate intruder.

The giant table form in *Mater* (Fig.63) is undecided in its intentions. The form signifies conflicting messages of both good and bad. Its surface is white clean and heavily stitched suggesting sterility and formality. The top of the table is padded and could be a place of comfort were it not for its spiky protuberances that exhibit a sinister sentiment. The multiple button forms that upholster the top surface each contain several autopsy pins that project the buttons away from the surface of the table.



**Fig. 62**



**Fig. 63**

The work of Cathy de Monchaux also evokes a duality of experience. Her work is stunning in its beauty, yet it is also gut wrenching in its darkness. *Dangerous Fragility* (Fig. 62) resembles a splayed autopsy specimen that has been immortalised somehow through a ritual of decorative fervour. Barnett connects this duality of meaning or aesthetic within de Monchaux's work to Kristeva's theories on abjection and the maternal body. As Barnett suggests:

For me, Cathy de Monchaux's work elicits both disgust and horror precisely because it explores the boundaries of the body. To achieve autonomy the infant must cross the border into life; but the mother is an



ambiguous figure; she is both life giving and death dealing, for to be born also means one must die.<sup>105</sup>

Having discussed the works of a number of artists which have had a significant connection with the concerns of my project, I now turn to the conclusion to sum up the objectives of my work and its contribution to the field.

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<sup>105</sup> **Barnett P.**, (1999). [www.N.Paradoxa.com](http://www.N.Paradoxa.com)

## Conclusion.

Ambivalence, abjection and related themes of melancholia and death are dimensions of the mother and daughter relationship with few visual representations, even in the arena of contemporary art. The motivation to redress this imbalance arose from the need to illustrate in three dimensions specific contradictions that had become increasingly obvious within my own life.

As mother, daughter and artist I could see that a cultural dialogue was absent for both mothers and daughters concerning the ambivalence that was an inescapable component of their relationship with each other. Similarly, I saw a long-standing concern with the nature of abjection relevant to the corporeal and often melancholic nature of motherhood and femininity. As an individual, I had felt the unwelcome presence of ambivalence within my relationships both with my mother and, later, with my daughters, and the dynamic was unavoidably apparent within the mother and daughter relationships of women I knew. Why was it not something that was socially accommodated or generally acknowledged? Abjection and melancholia were constants that I felt formed a connection with elements of my less than ideal childhood on an isolated farm where cycles of death were an integral routine analogous to my melancholic emotional life. In addition to this personal awareness I recognised that many women's current melancholic states were linked with issues of their maternity and with relationships with their own mothers.

The feminist catch phrase the 'personal as political' (circa 1970's), provides a space within visual art practice for the valid inclusion of self-reference. The visual work contains several layers of articulation that have relevance to my personal journeys as

both daughter and mother. What became evident throughout the process of developing the thesis is that our own stories are as relevant for other people as they are for us. They contribute to a collective understanding that we share. When researching psychological and psychoanalytical literature several widely shared experiences of the mother and daughter relationships were described with clarity. These points are referenced within the body of visual work.

Even less conventional contemporary art practice seemed, with few exceptions, to be complicit in its lack of representation of the mother and daughter experience. While there exists in video/performance art and, particularly in photography, articulation of some aspects of the mother and daughter relationship, instances are rare. Sally Mann focused on her own children as her source for visual investigation within the bodies of work *Immediate Family* and *Twelve*. This work consists of portraits of her three children who were often nude; they are brutally honest in their exploration of the complexities of childhood. The work received both praise and sharp criticism. What is interesting within the context of this thesis is that the criticism was not so much about the work itself, but rather, due to its images of ambivalence and culturally designated maternal abjection and defilement, about her being a 'bad mother'. She had documented aspects of her daughters' development that were apparently supposed to remain hidden from scrutiny. The images call to mind Kristeva's descriptions of rituals of abjection as 'tearing the veil of communitarian mystery' designed to screen dissent and effect in its place the illusion of a cohesive collective consciousness.<sup>106</sup> The negative reaction to Mann must be considered one of the consequences then, when a female artist 'jumps the traces' and enters a forbidden zone of maternal representation. Mann had subverted a patriarchal ideal of motherhood and was thus admonished for her transgression.

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<sup>106</sup> Kristeva, J., (1982), p.86

I uncovered further examples of some contemporary three-dimensional artists whose work touches on normally suppressed aspects of the maternal role. Since the 1970's, the art theoretician and visual artist Mary Kelly has explored a side of maternity that has been generally ignored. In the process of documenting the developmental journey of her son in early infancy, she gave to the 'trivial' or unpleasant sides of motherhood a sense of formal recognition. While there was certainly a sense of love, as well as of abjection, in Kelly's work, it was the accompanying air of cool detachment and ambivalence that I found to be of greatest interest. The day-to-day chores of motherhood became material for a meticulously documented developmental journey in contemporary visual art.

The sculptures of Kiki Smith, while not dealing directly with the mother and daughter relationship, certainly offer an opportunity to bring the biological and abject aspects of femininity 'out of the closet'. In doing so she represents the 'forbidden feminine' of abjection through works often enchanting, as well as unsettling, in their portrayal of bodies and their inherent various leakages and smears.

If the *Cells* of Bourgeois are placed under the lens of Irigaray, the work can be interpreted as Bourgeois' attempt to deal with her childhood experiences of being mothered. This interpretation comes as no surprise to me; is it not in the very nature of transgressive states of maternity that they be hidden – even from the artist's own view? Nina Saunders' work, on the other hand, becomes concerned with the representation of the maternal body according to the Freudian concept of the Uncanny or *Unheimlich*. When viewed once more through the lens of Kristeva's concepts of the abject and of the melancholia of maternity, the work of Cathy de Monchaux becomes a strangely domesticated dialogue between infant and mother. These discussions are in close relation to the concerns of this thesis for they bear a

connection, rare in art, to some aspects of its representational and theoretical drive. Despite these aforementioned examples however, there remains within contemporary art a general lack of sculpture dealing with maternal ambivalence, abjection and the related themes of melancholia and death.

Whatever else may be true, we live in a society still enmeshed in patriarchal structures. The province of visual art is no exception. Historically male artists have been responsible for the depiction of motherhood. In a society that has its foundations within Christian religious belief systems, Western representations have generally focused on the mother (Madonna) and son relationship. It is understandable therefore that women have been reluctant to explore a fundamental influence within their own lives.

From a contemporary perspective, both literature and psychology delve into an exploration and possible understanding of the mother and daughter dyad. Psychological readings offered particular intimations of reasons underlying the general lack of acknowledgment of the concerns of the thesis. Through understanding the structure that supports the suppression of the experience of ambivalence, abjection and melancholia within this relationship, research and construction of possible sculptural forms were initiated to articulate these elements from both an autobiographical and universal perspective.

The work, *Materfamilias* is representative of the mother. This mother is beautiful, pure and austere, as well as disturbing, censored and pained; she is neither good nor bad but both. She is a place for consumption and an object that consumes. According to the stereotypes in our culture there are either good or bad mothers, (Fairy God Mother / Wicked Witch) rather than a mother who is both good *and* bad. My work seeks to challenge and upset these assumptions.



*My delectable darlings* also illustrates the mother who is simultaneously good and bad, being 'guilty' of both 'over facilitation' and 'over regulation'<sup>107</sup> Do not most mothers alternate between the two? Here the 'mother' has both over-protected and over-controlled her offspring to a point of implied suffocation. The mother, too, through the constraints of her function has herself been rendered mute.

Constraint is also evident in my work *Periodicity* - this time arising from the shame and melancholy that women may feel concerning their biological functions. The wax child is bound and connected. Unable to move from the threads that hold her to her destiny, she is in a dark deathly space on a periodic countdown to her own demise. Women have been made to feel abject and unclean. Their reproductive/biological functions are socially anathema despite the fact that the denial of the body's true, flowing nature can lead only to shame and despair.

The message contained in *Two fold, twice told* is a development of the idea of the ties that bond together a mother and daughter. Mothers know that their daughters follow in their footsteps, for one replaces the other. 'Be like Me, Don't be like Me'. The cocoon forms mirror each other across their generational divide: grandmother, mother, daughter and grand daughter. They are connected both through their form and through the texture of the fabric of which they are composed, and although they complete two generations they are all still in the form of pupae.

Both *Ainigma-matos dualis* and *Keeping Mum* speak of the psychological shadow that cultural expectation and its inherent contradictions throw onto the mother and daughter relationship. *Ainigma-matos dualis* is representative of the shame and

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<sup>107</sup>Both **Raphael-Leff** and **Weldon** refer to this definition. It is referenced in length in the first chapter of this exegesis.

abjection that resides within feminine identity, from both the macrocosmic social perspective and within suffocating and harmful imitative familial reproductions.

It is the idea of ‘whispering in the walls’ that is the focus of *Keeping Mum*. The cultural messages in this sense exist within the confines of the family. This piece deals with perdition, suppression and complicity in familial betrayal.

In all of the work, visual information is delivered via referencing of the feminine traditions of craft and needlework. This pursuit is intricately interwoven with historical narratives of feminine identity. In its method the work is extremely labour intensive - a labour of love - as is child-rearing itself. In much the same way that child-rearing has lacked the cultural recognition that it so richly deserves, so has the ‘craft’ of needlework lacked acknowledgment of its importance within the domain of visual art. Few women artists have focused upon or invested time in these marginalised and therefore unappreciated areas in their creative work.

This thesis has sought a sculptural articulation of ambivalence, abjection and melancholia within the mother and daughter dyad outside those favoured by conventions of visual art. I offer this submission as a body of work that is intended to move a step closer towards redressing the paucity of representation that is so clearly identified.

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(45) **Mary Kelly** *Post-Partum Document: Introduction*. This reference [www.usc.com/mireille/Thinker/Kelly](http://www.usc.com/mireille/Thinker/Kelly)

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