

**The Mother - Son Relationship;
An Investigation of Mutual Responses**

By

Gabrielle Falconer , BFA (Hons)

**Submitted in fulfilment of
the requirements of the degree of
Master of Fine Arts by Research,
University of Tasmania (February, 1996)**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the university or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the Thesis, and to the best of the candidate's knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgment is made in the text of the Thesis.

This thesis may be made available for loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

Gabriele L. Fabre

| Contents | Page |
|--|-------------|
| Thesis Abstract | 1 |
| 1. Introduction | 2 |
| 2. Methodology | 4 |
| 3. Theoretical Context | 6 |
| 4. Representations of mother and child | 16 |
| 5. My work | 24 |
| 6. Conclusion | 30 |
| Bibliography | 31 |
| Illustrations | |

List of Illustrations

1. Series 1
2. Series 2
3. Series 3
4. Series 4
5. Series 5
6. Series 6
7. Series 7
8. Series 8

Thesis Abstract

This thesis creates a narrative in which a child's growing independence and separation from the mother are dealt with. The importance of this relationship in the formulation of both their identities is exposed. I have identified the emotions involved in the separation such as loneliness, protectiveness, frustration, jealousy, tenderness, isolation, rejection and abandonment.

Accepted notions of the role of the mother have sentimentalised the relationship between the mother and child and this is expressed in much Western art.

My personal experience as a mother has caused me to challenge these assumptions. Through an investigation of my personal experience I have achieved a deeper understanding of this aspect of women's lives. I have developed a concept of the mother as a separate body; a female body. Rather than seeing the child gain his distinct identity with the mother suffering a loss and abandonment, I have understood myself as also independent of my child and my role as a mother.

Feminine sexuality is central to any such considerations and the relationship a woman has with her own mother is crucial to an understanding of motherhood and feminine experience. I have used my mother's participation, both actual and psychological, within my own experience of motherhood, as a case study.

The sexual tension that exists between a mother and her male child and that is usually suppressed in representation, is revealed as an element of our interaction.

I have found in the course of my research that much of the study done in this area is undertaken by those who have not experienced motherhood. I have achieved some fusion of theoretical analysis and personal on going experience in order to expand and evolve our understanding of this aspect of our lives.

1 Introduction

They put her in a bare room with a white bed, a bedside table, a chair, a carafe, and a very small white canvas sling on tubular metal struts, which she only slowly understood, as she climbed docile onto that new bed, to be a cot. And it was only when she saw that small cot that she understood for the first time what was happening; that this was not an ordeal that had gripped her to test her; that two people were here. That this was happening to two people. That someone had to get out. That it was inconceivable that the female body could ever be open or elastic enough to allow anything the size of a baby to come out. That nevertheless there must be an end - it must... ¹

This project investigates the relationship between the mother and son from the perspective of the mother rather than from the point of view of the child or spectator. My approach has been to identify points of contact and moments of significance in the interaction between the mother and child in order to understand how this relationship affects their development as individuals.

My thinking operates on both a theoretical and a personal level. As an artist, I am interested in revealing the significance of emotions and situations and as a mother of a five year old boy, I am very much involved in dealing with these emotions and situations on a day to day basis. I want to comprehend the meaning of my position as a mother as well as to express the often unheard and repressed emotions of my experience.

The impact the mother and child have on each other and the way this shapes and influences their identities is part of a process which is often overlooked and assumed a natural part of growing up that is not worthy of discussion. The mother particularly, is required to behave instinctively without the self questioning which is a feature of all relationships. The writing which deals with mothers and children, such as psychoanalysis, often leaves out the

¹ Byatt, A.S. 1995; p.109

mother's point of view, preferring to focus on the child's acquisition of an identity. Similarly, visual art has had a tradition of focusing on the child while the mother remains a doting backdrop who is subservient to the child and his needs, in the form of the many Madonna and Child images.

My work discloses the mother's reactions as the child becomes increasingly independent of her and gains his own identity. The separation of the mother and child is both social and physical. The physical cleavage of the mother and child precedes the child's acquisition of a separate identity. My prints reveal the evolving relationship using the bodies of the mother and child as metaphors for emotional states. The emotions investigated are varied and shifting as the relationship develops. The mother's perceptions are ambiguous and changeable rather than fitting the perceived notion of endless love and patience. I have not given priority to or assigned values to emotions but deal with the inconsistency and contradiction of emotions that exists in every day life.

The investigation of the responses of one individual to another is always a biased account of the relationship. I cannot know the thoughts of my son or conjecture as to his true feelings towards me. My examination is of my perception of my own and my son's emotions and the impact they have on me. I am not the omnipotent, all-knowing mother who can anticipate her child's needs, desires and thoughts through her deep love and understanding. However, this project does develop a context through which this relationship can be further examined.

2 Methodology

Several years ago I called a sculpture "One and Others". This might be the title of many since then: the relation of the person to his surroundings is a continuing preoccupation. It can be casual or close: simple or involved: subtle or blunt. It can be painful or pleasant. Most of all it can be real or imaginary. This is the soil from which all my work grows. The problems of realisation - technical and even aesthetic - are secondary: they come afterwards and they can be solved.²

My methodology has been to research the theoretical discourse of motherhood as well as to discover my own perceptions of motherhood through introspection on my own subjectivity. My working process involves intuition and thus my visual imagery evolves with my personal experience. I do not make any conscious attempts to illustrate the theoretical debate through my work. Rather, the reading I have done suggests issues that I recognise as relevant to my personal experience as well as providing new ways of interpreting the images produced. I have concentrated on the writing of Julia Kristeva in my theoretical research as she raises many of the issues that interest me. I have also investigated how mothers have been portrayed in Western art. This is not a comprehensive history but is selective. I have discussed those images which have a particular bearing on my work.

I have worked in the medium of etching as I feel comfortable with the directness of the scratched line that is necessary to make marks on a hard surface. Etching involves the scratching of a metal plate usually with a sharp implement,, in order to leave a trace or mark, delineate a form and give depth to the form. I enjoy the making of my plates: the cutting, scratching, painting, rubbing, scraping of the inert metal. The physical nature of this process is aggressive and assertive. In order to make marks one must pour corrosive

²Bourgeois, L. cited by Wye, D. 1982: p15

acid on a metal plate which eats the metal, or else, using a sharp tool, score or make narrow superficial wounds in the dense metal. The strong black line and rich tone of the etching is suitable for expressing the emotions I am examining.

3 Theoretical context

I would give up the inessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.³

My work deals with motherhood on a subjective level. Thus, the psychoanalytic account of motherhood and the maternal is instructive to my understanding of motherhood as a discourse. I am interested in this explanation of human motives as it treats individuals as unfinished subjects rather than as preordained and complete. I am also attracted to the notion in psychoanalysis that individuals significantly affect each other. However, I am aware that there are difficulties in adopting a psychoanalytic approach, as much psychoanalytic theory deals with mothers as they affect the child, specifically the boy child. The mother's position is often disregarded and the child's search for identity is of prime importance with the mother seen as a prop in this process.

The denial of the mother as an individual in her own right is prefigured by Freud who virtually ignored mothers and their problems in his research. Although he collected innumerable statuettes of mother-goddesses, this interest in motherhood is largely absent from his work in psychoanalysis. His study of Leonardo da Vinci, in which he investigates the links between artistic creation and homosexuality, indicates the impact of an archaic mother figure on the male child, but does little to further our understanding of the mother's experience. He also discusses Christianity's ties with pagan myth through the recognition of a maternal feminine. However, in his case studies, mothers and their problems are non-existent, as if having a child was a cure or preventative for neuroses, which could be successfully argued against by

³Chopin, K. 1899: p97

anyone who has experienced motherhood. His main contribution to an understanding of what it is to be a mother is his assertion that the desire to have a child is a transformation of penis envy or anal compulsion, which leads to the equation: child=penis=faeces.

Freud argues that the child is a substitute for the penis which the mother/woman lacks. He states that the girl's discovery of the penis gives rise to envy for it, which transforms into the wish for a baby. Freud declared that the wish for a penis and the wish for a baby are fundamentally identical. In the symbolic language of dreams and everyday life, both the baby and the penis have the same symbol; "little one" ("das kleine"). Thus Freud relates that the girl's Oedipus complex culminates in the desire to bear her father a child or gift. Similarly the concepts of faeces (money, gift) and baby and penis are early on ill distinguished and interchangeable. Freud also likens the experience of childbirth to that of defaecation, referring to childhood theories which explain the origins of babies in terms of eating something which transforms into a baby which is then expelled through the bowels. Significantly, in this theory, the child does not see giving birth to be a female prerogative since if babies are born through the anus, then a man could, just as well as a woman.⁴

Freud's lack of awareness of woman's experience is also demonstrated in his attitude to his wife, Frau Martha Freud. Juliet Mitchell states with irony that "Martha, the perfect hausfrau, has certainly made up for all the help she gave Freud during their lifetime, by the deep disservice she has been to him ever since."⁵ In the love letters he wrote to her prior to their marriage he urges her to stay sweet and gentle, as the woman is to be protected from the cares of the world while the husband is expected to protect her and to be the breadwinner and educator.

⁴see Freud, S. 1977: p197

⁵Mitchell, J. 1974: p321

Nature has determined woman's destiny through beauty, charm and sweetness. Law and custom have much to give women that has been withheld from them, but the position of women will surely be what it is: in youth an adored darling and in mature years a loved wife.⁶

As Julia Kristeva points out in the essay *Stabat Mater*, perhaps we should look closely at photographs of Frau Martha Freud, Freud's wife, which tell an entire story in stony silence.⁷

Over the past ten years, feminists working in the area of psychoanalysis have been trying to redress this lack of representation of the mother's experience. The French theorist, Julia Kristeva has dealt with motherhood extensively, and perhaps because she is a mother herself I have found her work stimulating. The birth of her son in 1976 led Kristeva toward an examination of femininity and motherhood and an inquiry into her own responses to the birth of a son. Through her investigations of Western representations of women and mothers and a theoretical inquiry into the maternal, Kristeva has advanced our understanding of an area largely ignored or assumed unworthy of serious research.

Kristeva reveals the inadequacies of the existing accounts of maternity provided by religion, science and lay humanism, to disclose the meaning and transforming potential of motherhood for woman and culture. She is also critical of feminism's attitude to the role motherhood plays in women's lives. She is particularly critical of the writing of first generation feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, who rejected motherhood altogether. De Beauvoir regarded pregnancy, maternity and lactation as limitations to women's equality within patriarchal culture.

I agree with Kristeva that to deny that motherhood can be a rewarding and worthwhile experience is to deny women the potential inherent in the female body. The ability to conceive and sustain another life is a positive avowal of women's

⁶Freud, S. cited by Lupton, J. 1993: p160

⁷see Kristeva, J. 1986

difference. However, I don't believe that it is essential to conceive or nurture a child for a woman to fully experience her femininity. For De Beauvoir, who was writing at a time when childcare was not widely available, her choice to write rather than to have a child may have been due to practical considerations as much as feminist objectives.

Kristeva believes that the rejection of the maternal by feminism is because the accepted ideal and representation of maternity is not the lived experience of mothers, but a fantasy. It is the fantasy of the relationship the child had with the mother. Here Kristeva seems to be using Freud's concept of fantasy.⁸ Freud dealt with fantasy under the heading of primary processes, in contrast to the secondary processes of goal directed thinking. The primary process discharges itself in dreams and day dreams through wish fulfilment. Fantasy is one aspect of the child's mental life but continues throughout life. I would suggest that the deception in society's ideals of motherhood is evident to women very soon after they have a child.

Under close examination, however, this maternity turns out to be an adult (male or female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealised primitive mother as an idealisation of the unlocalisable-relationship between her and us, an idealisation of primary narcissism. When feminists call for a new representation of femininity, they seem to identify maternity with this idealised misapprehension; and feminism because it rejects this image and it's abuses, sidesteps the real experience that this fantasy obscures. As a result, maternity is repudiated or denied by some avant-garde feminists, while its traditional representations are wittingly or unwittingly accepted by the "broad mass" of women and men.⁹

I am interested in Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and symbolic, which are central to her analysis of motherhood. To some extent, Kristeva's definitions of the semiotic and symbolic apply to my own visual work. I have dealt with the child's progression to an independent identity, which could be described as the child's move from the semiotic into the symbolic. My work evokes the emotions of this relationship

⁸Cummings, J. 1972: p367

⁹Kristeva, J. 1990: p99

such as pain, abandonment, protectiveness, vulnerability and affection.

Kristeva follows a Lacanian/Freudian framework but aims to think beyond that framework and develop new concepts of mothers. Her definitions of the semiotic and the symbolic are based on Freud's distinctions between the pre-oedipal and the oedipal; the semiotic being similar to the pre-oedipal and the symbolic being similar to the oedipal stage. However, the pre-oedipal stage was left undeveloped by Freud and Lacan, and Kristeva departs from them in her emphasis on its role and significance. The semiotic is the order of sexual drives and their expression. These drives become the raw material for language and subjectivity. The semiotic is a polymorphous state in which smell, touch, taste, vocalisation and the visual senses are present but must be suppressed in order to establish a stable speaking subject.

The symbolic is defined by Kristeva as the oedipalised phase and regulated by the Law of the Father. The semiotic processes are the precondition of symbolic functioning and the semiotic can also return as an interruption or uncontrollable excess within the symbolic. The symbolic, which is superimposed on the semiotic, harnesses the libidinal flows to establish the stable speaking position, but the control is apt to collapse. Kristeva believes that motherhood is one such moment when there is a reversion to the semiotic.

I am particularly interested in Kristeva's reconceptualisation of the mother's point of view during the child's semiotic stage. Her proposal that the mother also experiences a reversion to this pre-oedipal stage, in that her identity becomes fragmented, is a positive statement as it defines for maternity the potential for transformation and renewal. The mother is described as being not fully within culture as the physical relationship she has with the child returns her to her own connections with her own mother's body. This corresponds to my own experience and imagery. I have concentrated on the bodies of the mother and the child to

convey the emotions that they feel and experience through and of their bodies.

Like Lacan and Freud, Kristeva describes the semiotic as a feminine space. It is a phase dominated by the mother's body which defines the limits of the child's body and ego. Nonetheless, the mother is considered phallic by most Freudians as the mother is the result of the boy child's fantasy of maternity.

As the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor takes the place of all narcissistic, and hence imaginary effects and gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus.¹⁰

From the child's point of view the mother is described as phallic but not from the mother's point of view. Nonetheless, I have some difficulty in coming to grips with this terminology and what it implies. To use masculine terms to describe the mother is to deny that maternity is a feminine experience and an emblem of sexual difference. By using the term phallic, Freudians are projecting onto the female body a male status. In my own work, the mother's body dominates, particularly in the earlier images. The mother's body covers the surface of the print and the child is present as a floating hand, eye or ear. His senses are searching for and rebounding off the mass which is the mother's body. I am interpreting this relationship through my perceptions as a woman and refuse to describe them in masculine terms. These images are about my sensory experience of my female body. Thus I would describe the mother's body as "all-powerful" to the child rather than phallic.

For Kristeva, it is the father who intervenes in the union between the mother and child to ensure the child's entry into the symbolic. Kristeva believes it is the real, loving father rather than Lacan's symbolic Father, the representative of the Law, who provides the mediation of the third term. It is the father of the child who also represents the possibility of love and with whom the child identifies. Kristeva makes a

¹⁰Grosz, E. 1990: p165.

distinction between the mother's nurturance and the love that the father introduces.

Here too, my experience and imagery disagrees with Kristeva's assertion. There is no father in the images I produce. Rather it is the mother's refusal and rejection of certain aspects of the relationship with her child that causes the child to find other forms of expression and initiates the child into society. This can be the mother blocking the child's access to her body as she denies him the breast. Similarly, the mother's refusal to respond to the child's crying and screaming to have his needs met may stimulate the child to use verbal language to communicate with the mother. I agree that the child adopts a masculine identity outside his relationship with the mother. However, my personal experience does not indicate that the father must be present for the child's identification and consequent entry into the symbolic. The oedipal triangle scenario is perhaps representative of Kristeva's own experience but it seems too simplistic to assert that it is true of every situation.

In her essay "Stabat Mater", Kristeva describes a woman's experience of motherhood as important for her discovery of herself and her feminine experience. She calls for women in general to re-conceptualise motherhood on a personal level.

Those interested in what maternity is for women will no doubt be able to shed new light on this obscure topic by listening with greater attentiveness than in the past, to what today's mothers have to say, not only about economic difficulties but also, and despite the legacy of guilt left by over existentialist approaches to feminism, about malaise, insomnia, rage, desire, suffering and happiness. At the same time we can also try to gain a clearer picture of the Virgin, that prodigious structure of maternity that the West has erected.¹¹

Kristeva juxtaposes her own account of her experience of motherhood with that from the Scriptures in the form of two columns, side by side. I find the passages of Kristeva's writing in which she expresses herself from her position as a mother, in the left column, to be incredibly evocative of her

¹¹Kristeva, J. 1986: p113

experience as a woman and quite beautiful for their use of language to describe an often misrepresented part of our lives. Kelly Oliver, author of Reading Kristeva, believes that through the poetical account of her own experience of childbirth, Kristeva re-introduces what has been left out or repressed in the Catholic discourse of maternity; the semiotic body.

The fleshed mother with her jouissance, her sexual-intellectual-physical passion of death replaces the Mother God. We no longer need goddesses says Kristeva when we have mothers love and music. Her left column is some of this mother's music.¹²

I find Kristeva's references to her body and the senses are charged with the heightened and intense experience of her physicality. I can recognise similarities with my own experience, as reading her words brings back recollections of sensations I felt at the time of my child's birth.

The smell of milk, dew drenched greenery, sour and clear, a memory of wind, of air, of seaweed (as if a body lived without waste): it glides under my skin, not stopping at the mouth or nose but caressing my veins, and stripping the skin from the bones fills me like a balloon full of ozone and I plant my feet firmly on the ground to carry him, safe, stable, un-uprootable, while he dances in my neck, floats with my hair, looks right and left for a soft shoulder, slips on the breast, swingles, silver vivid blossom of my belly and finally flies up from my naval in his dream, borne by my hands. My son.¹³

Oliver discusses Kristeva's notion of herethics. This ethics proposed by Kristeva, is a feminine ethics and requires the participation of women. The love that founds herethics is the daughter's identification with her own mother; a reunion with her own mother as herself. This union with the mother satisfies and makes one complete. This love which is defined as a narcissism and an inability to love within traditional analysis, is the foundation of Kristeva's herethics. It provides an ethics of love that operates outside the Law of the Father. Unlike Freud, who maintains that in order to develop normally, girls must deny their original love objects and

¹²Oliver, K. 1993: p53

¹³Kristeva, J. 1996: p107

erogenous zones, Kristeva suggests that females must admit and embrace those original loves and pleasures. She must love her mother's body and her own body as the body of a woman.

Oliver points out that Kristeva's mother is present in her own experience of motherhood, as "Stabat Mater" reveals Kristeva's union not only with her own mother but also with the Virgin mother.

Recovered childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks,
flash of cells, instant of laughter, smiles in the blackness of
dreams, at night, opaque joy that roots me in her bed, my
mother's, and projects him, a son, a butterfly soaking up
dew from her hand there nearby, in the night. Alone: she, I
and he.¹⁴

Contemplation of my role as a mother has revealed the depth to which my mother is involved in my perceptions and emotions, not only in the way I react to my child but also in my self image. I feel that the relationship with one's own mother is relevant to many aspects of femininity and identity and that this is an idea that I could pursue outside my investigation of the experience of motherhood.

The writer Luce Irigaray, also discusses the relationship a mother or any woman has with her own mother. She regards a woman's relationship with her own mother as the most neglected area of psychoanalysis. Irigaray relates that the mother must abandon maternity suffocating her possibilities as a woman. The daughter must abandon the sheltered position and protection of the phallic mother in order to see the mother, and thus herself, as a woman. This implies a rejuvenation and rediscovery of the identities the mother and daughter share which may enable the mother to resist patriarchal exchange within which she functions as an object. Instead of being objects exchanged between men, the two women take on an active subject to subject relation. She suggests that the mother should not only give food to nourish the daughter, but also words with which to speak

¹⁴Kristeva, J. 1986: p108

and hear; the gift of language in place of the suffocation and silence imposed by food.

The gift of words is reciprocated as the daughter learns to speak to rather than at the mother. The fantasy of the phallic mother is abandoned and the mother ceases to be represented by the father's or husband's name and place. A new mode of language is invested with this new model and identity is not seen as the separation of the mother and child.¹⁵

For myself, the prospect of a new way of conceptualising mothers is the most positive assertion of the theory presented. Kristeva's expression of her own experience of motherhood is one example of a new understanding of motherhood. For women to express their own perspectives on motherhood means a rejection of the stifling assumptions that limit the individuality of women. Similarly, new visual representations are needed, as much of the representation of mothers in Western art is depicted from an idealised view point.

¹⁵Grosz, E. 1989:p124

4 Representations of mother and child

I have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raphael, with the blond faces and the somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity undisturbed when their strong-limbed, strong-willed boys got a little too big to do without clothing. I think they must have been given to feeble remonstrance, getting more and more peevish as it became more and more ineffectual.¹⁶

The prevalent images of mothers and their progeny in Western culture are the many depictions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus commissioned by the Catholic Church. I am interested in accounts of the role the Virgin plays in society's perception of motherhood because I find these images to contain strong messages about the way we are expected to behave and feel, even though I am not Catholic myself. The docile and placid expression of the Virgin who seems to have found peace and harmony through her child now seems ludicrous in the light of my own experience, yet I once felt completely in awe of these images and the promise of serenity that they offer.

In Alone of All Her Sex, Marina Warner investigates the cult of the Virgin Mary and challenges the meanings and assumptions attached to Mary, and consequently to Western perceptions of femininity. She suggests that the construction of Mary and the development of meaning through representation and symbolism have closely followed the social positioning of women throughout history. In the late Middle Ages, the growth of a prosperous middle class meant that the wives of merchants and tradesmen became increasingly restricted to the domestic sphere. To protect women from evil outside influences, their education was limited to the gentle arts, such as embroidery and music. Ignorance was equated with innocence. Childbearing was regarded as the sole purpose and role for women. Within the church this was encouraged and supported by popular religious text and visual imagery. Women were seen to embody the Christian virtues of charity, prudence, humility,

¹⁶Eliot, G. 1991: p10

patience, obedience, compassion, purity, truth, praise and poverty, whereas faith, hope, fortitude, justice and temperance were designated as masculine ideals.

Although Jesus and Mary exemplified the virtues of poverty, humility and obedience in equal measure, and although Christians of both sexes were exhorted to imitate them, the characteristics of these virtues - gentleness, docility, forbearance - are immediately classifiable as feminine, especially in Mediterranean Catholic countries. The more fervently religious the country - Spain, for example - the more the menfolk swagger and command, the more the women submit and withdraw and are praised for their Christian goodness. Machismo, ironically enough, is the sweet and gentle Virgin's other face.¹⁷

Thus, Warner concludes, the cult of humility and female submissiveness to the head of a house eclipsed the reign of the Virgin as a strong, matriarchal symbol. This was extenuated as Joseph rose in importance as a Christian symbol towards the end of the fourteenth century. Marina Warner believes that modern images of the Virgin are insipid and dull compared to the early Christian art of an exulted matriarch. Warner maintains that as long as the Virgin's femininity is represented as passivity and sweetness, she is permitted to serve as a goddess in a patriarchal society.

I am interested in Marina Warner's discussion of the lactating virgin as this bears some relationship to my own work. In my images, milk and the lactating breast have symbolised the mother's willingness to give of herself. Also the intimacy and closeness of the mother and child during the child's suckling are represented by the warmth and goodness of breast milk. In later images the mother's refusal to give her milk to the child indicates their changing relationship.

Marina Warner's analysis of the symbolism of the milk of the mother identifies the many shifts in meaning attached to milk, and consequently reveals the changing attitudes toward the physicality of the female body. Warner relates that breast milk carries ancient and complex symbolic meaning. It was exulted in Greek times and continued in early Christianity to

¹⁷Warner, M. 1990: p183

be seen as a magical gift of life, particularly as there were no alternatives such as baby food. Milk came to be associated with paradise, wisdom and healing.

When the medieval mystic mediated on the incarnation, he saw not only a mother nursing her baby - an event in historical time - but an eternal mystery whereby the Christian soul is perpetually nourished and sustained by grace, of which Mary's milk is a sublime epiphany.¹⁸

Margaret Miles analyses the meaning of the nursing mother in Tuscan early Renaissance paintings.¹⁹ She states that the image of Mary offering her body as shelter and nourishment to the Christ child was an intentional message of the male commissioners and painters. The power to conceive, to nurture and to shelter and sustain human life was well understood and appreciated by the contemporary audience, who were threatened by famine, plague and social chaos. Breastfeeding was worshipped as a power derived from the body.

However, with the humanisation of the Renaissance, the nursing Virgin became a simple human mother and lost her metaphysical powers. In a misogynist move, religious doctrine decreed that as a result of the Fall, Eve and all women became subject to their biology. Womankind was regarded as punished for Eve's sins through the sufferings of child bearing, including menstruation and lactation. Thus breastfeeding became an act of humiliation. Suckling was seen as an example of lowliness and the Virgin was often portrayed sitting on the ground barefoot, breastfeeding the new-born baby.

As the Renaissance advanced, images of the nursing Virgin declined further. Clouet's painting of the King's favourite, Diane de Poitiers, depicts her displaying a small, rosy bosom, while in the background a coarse wetnurse, smiling, gives suck to the child from her swelling breast. Images such as this reveal the snobbery and social stigma attached to breastfeeding.

¹⁸Warner, M. 1990: p194

¹⁹Miles, M. 1986: p193

In "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini"²⁰, Julia Kristeva discusses the work of two Renaissance artists; Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini, and their representations of motherhood. She sees these artists as defining motherhood in quite dissimilar ways as a result of their different relationships with their own mothers.

Kristeva uses Freud's analysis of Leonardo, as Freud believed the precocious seduction of the young boy at the hands of his doting mother and then step-mother, meant that in women he never stopped looking for fetish equivalents. The mother in Leonardo's paintings is the caring, gentle, self-effacing mother, always turned toward the child; the object of her desire and the focus of the paintings.

However, Kristeva regards Bellini's paintings of the mother as operating in a different way. Bellini was an artist obsessed by the image of the mother and child, and he produced these images long after they lost their popularity as a genre. Rather than painting, as Leonardo did, the mother's solicitude and devotion to her child, the maternal function for him seems to be beyond discourse, narrative and psychology. According to Kristeva, his mother Anna was not his biological mother, and thus he had no access to the maternal space. The Madonna's face is drawn away from the child and she seems intent on something else although her hands clasp her straining infant. Kristeva suggests that the painter as well as the child never reaches this elsewhere and that Bellini senses a loss of identity where she is not. In many of his paintings the mother crushes the child against herself and the child seems to struggle from the grip of the possessive mother. Kristeva suggests this could be a memory of maternal seduction, a recollection of the hand whose caresses are more threatening than comforting. In later works, the mother's aggressive hands prod the stomach and penis of the frightened baby while the mother's face reflects a strange peace.

²⁰see Kristeva, J. 1980

“ The Presentation in the Temple” represents the mother and child’s separation as she must give him up to the old man who stretches his arms out to receive the child which she refuses to proffer, revealing the possessive mother. Later paintings reveal the guilty mother as the child grabs her by the neck as if to strangle her. In these later works the background landscapes become more prevalent as the maternal embrace loosens. Kristeva suggests that through his use of colour, and the positioning of the mother and child, the pulsations and rhythms of the semiotic are produced.

It seems paradoxical that while Kristeva calls for women to express their experience of motherhood, she discusses the artistic output of two male artists. Kristeva’s interpretation of the images and history of these Renaissance artists sheds light on the relationship these men may have had to the maternal semiotic and their consequent attitudes to mothers and femininity. However, I do not think this analysis brings us closer to an understanding of motherhood. Rather, it highlights the misconceptions that we have inherited from masculine representations of an imagined maternal and feminine experience.

Throughout my investigation of motherhood and my portrayal of the affect this role has had on me, I have been inspired by the work of women artists, some of whom are mothers, others of whom are not, and their attempts to express both honestly and courageously their experiences. It is not only that through their experiences I have found a correspondence with my own, although this is often true, but that there is a shared experience of disclosure of the repressed and excluded aspects of our lives. I have been interested in artists that challenge the accepted and restricting ideas of mothers and femininity as represented by images of the Madonna and child. These women artists produce images that enlarge our understanding of motherhood and refuse to sentimentalise.

Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot ²¹ were active in the late 19th century and the early 20th century and worked alongside the prominent male artists of the time. They had no active affiliations with women's movements and yet their work reveals they had a sense of the creative self as a woman. These artists produced many images of mothers and children. Their work expresses a greater awareness and appreciation of the domestic than does that of their male contemporaries who also aimed to depict homelife. The loving union and naturalness of the bond between the mother and child was reflected in images of mothers feeding, bathing, caressing and nursing their children. They have been criticised for their sentimentality. However, the sensitivity with which they treated their subjects conveys the deep emotions felt by the mothers observed.

Kathe Kollwitz²² often portrayed the mother as a noble, heroic figure. Kollwitz depicted the mother fighting for the survival of both herself and her children. The mother shields the children with her body. Kollwitz produced images that assert an active rather than a passive role for the mother. Similarly, Paula Modersohn-Becker²³ represented the strong physical bond between the mother and child. Painted in earthy colours, her images reveal a respect and admiration for the often monolithic figure of the mother. However there is an element of detachment in Modersohn-Becker's admiration of maternity as she herself did not experience it when completing the works, tragically dying nine days after childbirth.

Joy Hester's work, which often deals with the dark side of our nature, constitutes a very individual and confronting view of motherhood.²⁴ She produced some startling ink drawings of a mother and child hanging like corpses. Her own ambiguous relationship to her son, who was later adopted by Sunday Reed, perhaps explains the disturbing imagery that Hester

²¹ Parker, R. 1989: p38

²² See Klein, M. 1972

²³ Parker, R. 1989: p121

²⁴ See Burke, J. 1989

produced about motherhood. However, I believe that these images also portray the strong and uncontrollable emotions that are experienced by many women directly after the birth of a child.

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary artist to produce work about motherhood is Mary Kelly.²⁵ Her involvement both theoretically and politically with the feminist movement has influenced her work immensely. Her work is radical, as she challenges issues within patriarchy as well as challenging conventional notions of the art object. Her 1976 installation piece "Post Partum Document"²⁶ deals with and challenges pre-conceived notions of the maternal, while at the same time refusing to objectify the mother. Her notes, diaries and chosen objects reveal the process of socialisation in the first few years of life and its significance for both mother and child. The work cannot be viewed as purely objects but as documentation. Her work brings together the traditionally separate roles of mother and artist, as well as bringing the domestic into the professional sphere. Her work also serves to expose the duplicity of the myth that women have a natural capacity to care for and nurture children. She reveals the mother's frustration as her femininity is assessed through her capacity to care for her child. Although my work is quite different to Kelly's, my methodology has some similarity. I have sought to identify the aspects of my experience that are not represented by society's definitions of motherhood.

Marlene Dumas²⁷ is a contemporary Dutch artist who uses images of babies and children, and her own pregnant body, to expose our preconceptions and expectations of depictions of motherhood and children. She confronts the viewer with babies and children that display none of the immaculate purity and innocence usually associated with such images. "The First People" of 1991, displays four newborn babies. Their bodies seem terrifyingly vulnerable and they remind us

²⁵Parker, R. 1989: p162

²⁶See Kelly, M. 1985

²⁷See Brouwers, A. 1992

of our mortality as they reveal themselves to be utterly human and defenceless. Marina Warner sees these images as "extraordinary, unflinchingly refusing any hint of maternal caress or hold - yet their untender gaze touches depths paintings of the madonna and child have not even achieved."²⁸

"Fear of Babies", another series by Dumas, is essentially a depiction of an emotion that many people feel but will not openly admit, and one which many women are made to feel guilty about. The "bad mother" is a notion challenged by Dumas' work. "When artists make work from the point of view of themselves as mothers, rather than as children, they enter a dangerous new world - one with very strong defences of convention and prejudice. Articulating feeling as a mother in any medium is tough: policemen and voyeurs of all sorts are patrolling, on the alert for signs of badness."²⁹

Other artists whose work has influenced this thesis include Sally Mann, Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel and Frida Kahlo. These women artists, like the ones already mentioned, reveal interesting and extremely challenging aspects of motherhood. Often the work produced is disturbing and unsettling, and reveals how the emotions surrounding motherhood are suppressed and ignored. My own work follows this tradition of evoking the repressed emotions of feminine experience.

²⁸Warner, M. 1993: p79

²⁹Warner, M. 1993: p79

5 My Work

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,
Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?
He is looking so angrily!
He flew into the room, a shriek at his heel.
The blue colour pales. He is human after all.
A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;
They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a
material.³⁰

My work for this project has centred around the bodies of the mother and child; my body and my son's body. I have concentrated on their bodies, as the physicality that is shared is an important function of the relationship. The child is not only conceived and carried in the mother's body, but his first entrance into the world is through her body. After the initial separation of birth, the child is still dependent on the mother's body as she feeds him milk through her breast. He is also dependent on the support she gives him for warmth, cleanliness and movement. As the child becomes mobile himself, the mother's body is still important to him as it is through her that he learns how to use his own body. However, my prints are not attempting to deal with the many facets and feelings of the pregnant body or childbirth. Rather, I am looking at it from a few years later and relating the changes in perception that have developed. I am also interested in the mother's relationship to the child's body as well as her relation to her body.

My prints deal with the child's cleavage from the mother's body. I am also aware that the bodies in my prints are the vehicles for emotions. The view of the bodies shifts throughout the series of prints as they become increasingly separate from each other. The development of meaning through series has always been a feature of my work. I have used colour and the spatial relation of the prints to each other to convey meaning through the series. Each print relates to the prints in that grouping as well as to the project as a whole. There is an overall development through the series as

³⁰Plath, S. 1981: p181

the child and mother gradually separate from each other, and the physical proximity of the viewer to their bodies is diminished. The images toward the end of the series also start focusing on the mother as being separate from the child. This is achieved through the use of colour and the type of imagery used. I am aware that my description of the series is not the only interpretation applicable to the work and that there is intended ambiguity in much of the imagery.

Series 1 (refer to Illustration 1), represents the mother and her mother. It is a memory of the relationship that preceded the mother and son relationship, but which is still present in the mother's psyche. The daughter is wanting the nurturance and body contact with her mother. She wants the reassurance that the mother is all powerful and protecting. These prints describe the shared experience of birth and motherhood. Their relationship is about mutual acceptance of each other as individuals.

Series 2, Series 3 and Series 4 (refer to Illustrations 2, 3 and 4) deal with the articulation of touch, sensation, movement, sight and sound. These prints are intended to be an evocation of these senses as they occur in a space of time, as well as introducing aspects of the mother and child's interaction. The intimacy that is between the mother and son is suggested through the close view we have of their bodies. The viewer is jammed up against them. The surface of the print reproduces their skin as it is embedded with the lines and contours of their surfaces. There is no background as the images recede to black in the shadows. This is a revelation of the physical proximity of the mother and child, especially in the early years. The prints reproduce for the viewer the warmth of the other body as well as the threatening body coming too close; enclosing the viewer, imposing themselves on one and suffocating. Some of the images are blurred and the physical difficulty of seeing someone so close is simulated. The imagery is of eyes, ears, hands, mouths and breasts.

The eye in Series 2 (refer to Illustration 2), is the mother looking and watching her son as he moves in the world. The

difficulty of eye contact between a mother and her son as the child averts his eyes from her is depicted. He is always looking out and she looks at him. She wants to retain him and still him with her gaze and to stop time. The reflection of light that quivers in her eye is the life of the child. The print immediately next to this is the mother's hand touching her breast in what seems like modesty. The mouth of the boy as he cries out is a demanding, insistent mouth and is claustrophobically close to the viewer. It is hot and the boy is flushed with anger and need. His breath is felt and smelt by the mother on her face. His voice is too loud and hurts her ears.

Series 3 (refer to Illustration 3), focuses on the hands that cross the border between them and provide them with the pleasures of touch, as well as nourishment and care for the child. The hands also define them as separate as to touch the other one the hand must touch the body and go beyond itself. These hands are gentle, caressing hands and their purpose is to touch rather than grab, twist, pinch, push or tug. The child's hand reaches up to the mother and the safety of her body.

The side of the face juxtaposed with the ear in Series 4 (refer to Illustration 4), reflects the interconnectedness and closeness of their relationship as they are almost making up a whole face with their separate parts. The relationship of their senses and their responses to each other is also highlighted through the juxtapositions of these series.

The colour of the images in Series 2, 3 and 4 is red. Red signifies the closeness of the mother and child as they are bound by blood. It also suggests the warmth of their bodies close together. The depth of emotion is symbolised by the colour red, yet it is hard to describe in words the affect of this colour on me and why it so rightly matches the emotions I am striving to depict. The depth of red varies and shifts throughout the series.

Series 5, (refer to Illustration 5), consists of two prints depicting the breasts of the mother. The breasts are clogged, hardened breasts which were once fecund and sprouting. The choked veins are swelling. There is an over-abundance and an oppressive presence. They are bulky, large and unwieldy. Their movement is slow and clumsy. She no longer feeds the child and the milk is congealed inside. There is no relief as nothing is released. The mother's body is giving too much; is too much. She is not needed for the child's sustenance any more.

The sixth series is about the mother's search for identity as well as the sexual aspect of the relationship of the mother and child. Both heads seem to be responding to the middle image of the mother's pubic region. The heads reflect the different aspects of the child's awareness of the mother. The first head is the child who feeds upon her and is physically dependent upon her body for nurturance and life. The mouth and tongue recall the suckling of the child. The second head is the blue boy; the child who gains his own identity. He is not anymore the hand that gropes toward the mother, nor the mouth that wants, but a multi-faceted personality. In Kristeva's terms this would be an image of the boy who is a speaking subject and a symbol of his entry into the symbolic. The child has relinquished the mother and he is separate from the mother's body. Their relationship operates on a different level. These images relate to the child's perception of the mother's sex. However, I am not merely reiterating Freud's proclamation that the Oedipal conflict is central to the child's acquisition of an identity. These images centre on the mother's awareness of this relationship. She is reflecting on herself as an object for the child. Her hand touches her thigh in an almost defensive move from the mouth of the child.

The mother's femininity and her awareness of her body as a sexed body is developed further through the images of the mother's pubic region in Series 7 (refer to Illustration 7). They represent the mother's acknowledgment of herself as a woman. They also relate to the birth of the child as it was

from her vagina that he entered the world. These prints are a self-discovery and an intimate examination of my own identity as a woman. They are about the mother's acceptance and avowal of her body as a woman. They are also about the mother's body as separate to that of her child's and depict a woman asserting her sexuality. The colours represent different moods of self-contemplation. These prints are also a statement and declaration of the mother's individuality not only to herself but to the viewer.

The last series; Series 8 (refer to Illustration 8) consists of prints of the mother and child with drips falling from them, covering and smearing their naked torsos and recounts the physical bonds of the relationship. The blood recalls the blood that coated each of their bodies when they left their mother's bodies. This blood not only relates to the son's birth but to the blood spent in the mother's birth. It is the blood of the mother's mother; it is the blood handed down from generation to generation; the matrilineal line and the connection with their past. It pours from their breasts, their belly buttons, their genitals and their hands. It is the pain that is birth and giving life, but it also a strength. The child has inherited this pain of living from the mother and is marked by it.

The pain and the blood of childbirth is the initiation of both the mother and child. The mother's blood flows to and over the child, sticking to him. The body of the boy is slightly feminised in this image and it is his relation to the mother which makes him so, with his nipples echoing those of his mother.

These two prints work as a pair or couple. They are both headless, legless and they have only the use of one limp arm. They are debilitated. They are not two halves of the one whole. They do not complete each other. Rather they are represented as two bodies that are operating under difficulties. They share some of the same problems and joys but one body does not foreclose the other one. They remain separate.

The installation of the final work was extremely important to an overall understanding of the body of work exhibited. The individual prints were pinned to the wall with two pins in the top corners, while the bottom of the prints was not secured to the wall and was free floating. The thickness and stiffness of the paper meant that the prints did not buckle but remained like parchments with the bottom corners curling slightly. This emphasised the materiality and physicality of the paper which would have been diminished with the introduction of glass and frame between the viewer and the surface of the print. The surface of the prints became increasingly important to the project as colours, marks and textures took on symbolic meaning. Thus the thick and bulky sheets of paper took on the presence and weight of a skin or hide. The absence of any white paper around the edge of the prints also contributed to this. Lighting the prints was important as the subdued warm light of the spotlights suited the warm colours of the prints and the reds and oranges were intensified.

I aimed to create a separate space to display my work with two walls marking the ends of the space. This was agreed upon in consultation with the other candidates. It was not our aim to integrate the different components of our individual projects and so separate spaces were decided upon. The long, narrow space which was separated from the gallery by walls on two sides and several pillars on the fourth side, meant that the work could be viewed sequentially through the series. However, the pillars did not prevent the body of work being viewed almost as a whole from a distance.

On the first wall was placed the triptych of the mother and her mother; Series 1. Facing this on the end wall was the diptych of the mother and child; Series 8. In a way we see the two relationships operating in this investigation at either end of the space. It seemed appropriate that these two series should be facing each other as they deal with the two relationships operating within the work. In the middle of the main wall were the two breasts placed slightly higher than the other prints, while the remaining series were displayed sequentially along the main wall.

6 Conclusion

The knowledge that I have gained through this investigation of responses and through identifying the way my identity is shaped by my immersion in this relationship, has also lead me to discover aspects of myself and my motives. I am not assuming that I have discovered the essence of the relationship that mothers have with their children, nor that other people's experience is identical to my own. Using myself as a case study, I feel that elements of my experience are shared with other mothers including my own mother. I have also developed my understanding of myself as a woman. The theoretical research I have undertaken has combined with my emotional investment in my thoughts and work. It has provided me with ideas with which to evaluate my experience. In some cases it has provided me with something that strengthens my convictions. My initial fear that I would analyse myself proved unfounded. The theory has balanced my work and the work has been free to take me where I instinctively travel, often with results that surprise me. For example the strong physical bond and sexuality that is present in my prints, and how this is expressed through the body imagery and colour, has developed my thinking to realise the strength of this aspect of our lives. Similarly, the exposure of the mother and myself in the pubic images has developed my understanding of my self image, and awareness of myself as a woman, despite and even because of my role as a mother.

This project has not only developed my own thinking and investigation of motherhood, but contributes to a general knowledge of this aspect of women's lives. Motherhood has been depicted in traditional Western art through the male spectator and in Freudian psychoanalysis through the child's point of view. This project serves to further an area of knowledge that has often been neglected or misrepresented in traditional accounts, and extends current theoretical discourse into the visual domain.

Bibliography

Browers, A. 1992

Miss Interpreted. Marlene Dumas. Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum

Burke, J. 1989

Joy Hester. Melbourne: Greenhouse Publication

Byatt, A. S. 1995

Still Life. London: Vintage

Chopin, K. (1899) 1986

The Awakening and Selected Stories. New York: Penguin

Cummings, J. 1972

Encyclopedia of Psychology. New York: Herder and Herder

Eliot, G. (1860) 1991

The Mill on the Floss. London: Penguin

Freud, S. 1977

On Sexuality. Harmondsworth: Penguin

Grosz, E. 1990

Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction. Melbourne: Allen and Unwin

Kelly, M. 1985

Post-partum Document. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Klein, M. 1972

Kathe Kollwitz: Life in Art. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

Kristeva, J. 1980

Desire in Language: a semiotic approach to literature and art. Oxford: Blackwell

Kristeva, J 1986

"Stabat Mater" in *The Female Body in Western Culture.* S. Rubin Suleiman; ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Lupton, M. J. 1993

Menstruation and Psychoanalysis. Chicago: University of Illinois Press

Miles, M. 1986
"The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture" in *The Female Body in Western Culture*. S. Rubin Suleiman, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Mitchell, J. 1974
Psychoanalysis and Feminism. Harmondsworth: Penguin

Oliver, K. 1993
Reading Kristeva: unravelling the double-bind.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Parker, R. and J. Broude, eds. 1989
Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology. London: Pandora Press

Perry, G. 1979
Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her life and Work. New York: Harper and Row

Plath, S. 1989
Sylvia Plath Collected Poems. Ted Hughes ed. London: Faber and Faber

Raadyiki, J. 1980
The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker.
London: The Scarecrow Press

Warner, M. 1990
Alone of All Her Sex: The myth and cult of the Virgin Mary.
London: Picador

Warner, M. 1993
"In the Charnel House of Love", in *Parkett* No. 38: 76-79
Zurich: Parkett Publishing

Wye, D. 1982
Louise Bourgeois. New York: The Museum of Modern Art



Illustration 1. Series 1 (70 cm x 60 cm each)



Illustration 2: Series 2 (60 cm x 48cm each)



Illustration 3: Series 3 (60 cm x 48 cm each)



Illustration 4: Series 4 (60 cm x 48 cm each)



/ Illustration 5: Series 5 (65 cm x 58 cm each)



Illustration 6: Series 6(42cm x 38cm, 40cm x 26cm, 60cm x 48cm)

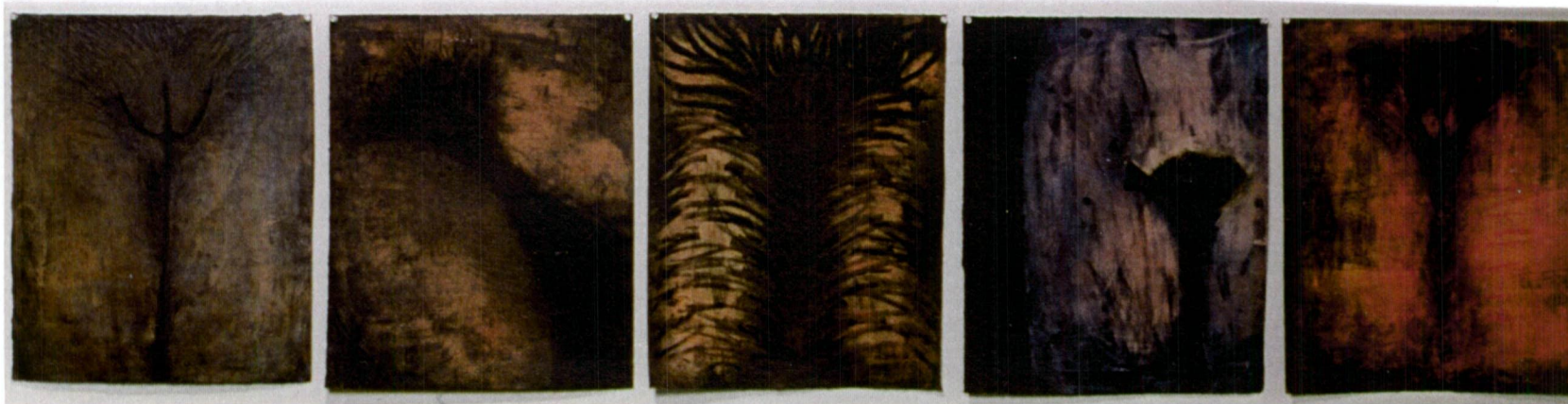


Illustration 7: Series 7 (60cm x 48cm each)

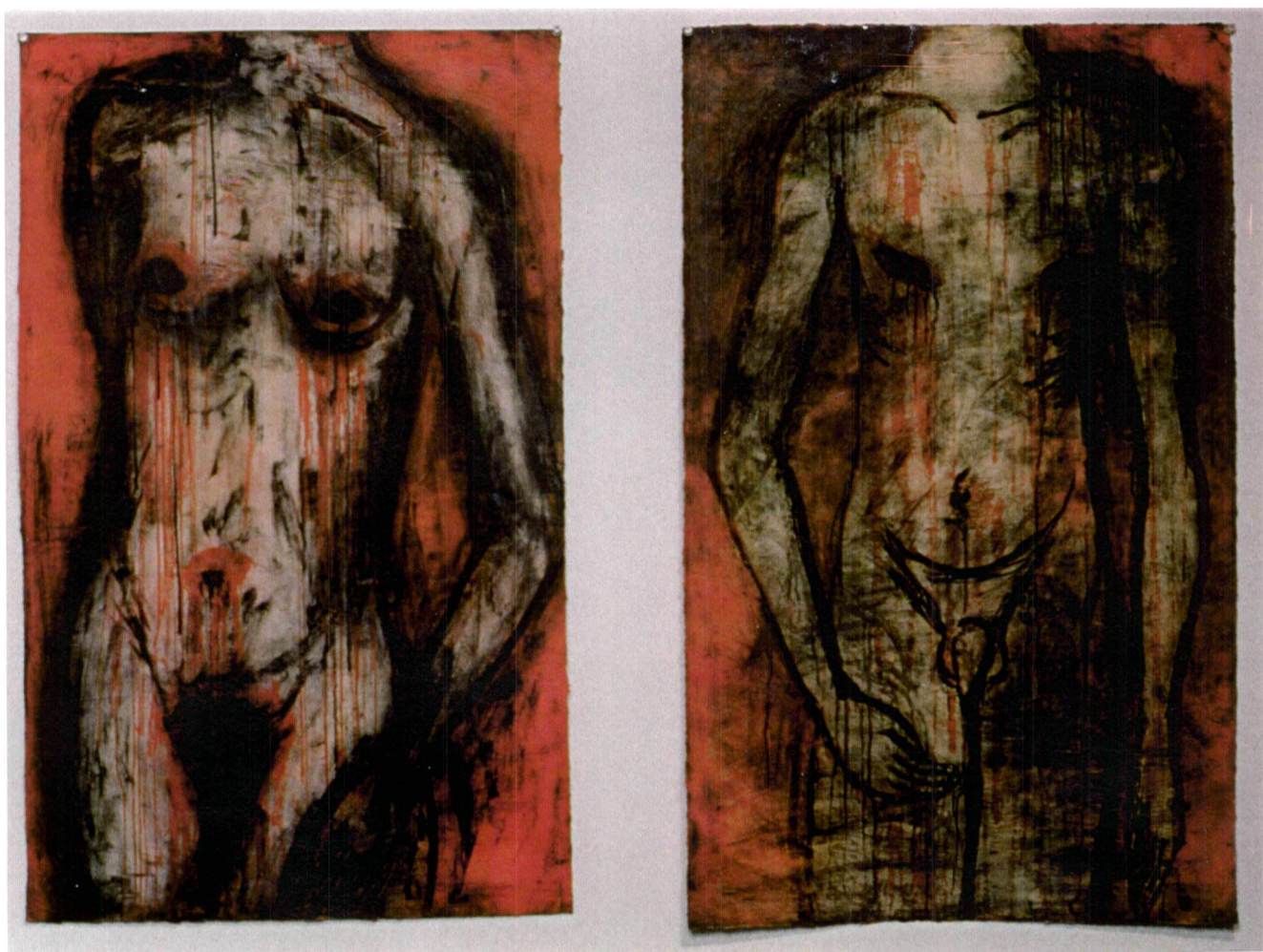


Illustration 8: Series 8 (98cm x 60cm each)