

## **MOTHERSHIP (Group show) — The Sawmills, London**

MOTHERSHIP is a group exhibition curated by Elizabeth Byrne and Caro Halford exploring and celebrating the theme of the 'mother artist', inviting fourteen artists with varied practices in drawing, film, installation, painting, photography, print, sculpture, sound and textiles, each of whom is a mother. The artists collectively express a rich diversity across form and theme, from sound to sculpture, and contemporary to colonial experience. The show's unity arises from the challenges they have faced in order to realise the work they make.

Co-curator Elizabeth Byrne in interview with [Curating the Contemporary](#) says "being an artist and a mother both involve physical often unwaged work, as well as forms of immaterial affective labour that require emotional connection, intelligence, love and caregiving. They both demand that your soul to be at work, turning yourself inside out, where the body and mind are sites of production in the same way as in the studio; as a consequence, the two are intrinsically linked through their similarities."

This synergy at abstract level is reflected in subjects explored by individual works. It's a commonplace that mothering involves being pulled in all directions. Co-curator Caro Halford's sound installation *I Keep Losing Balance* dramatises the internal conflicts of the mother-artist as both a parent and as a child herself with teasing humour. A bedraggled rug of tufted wool with embroidered lettering "I KEEP LOSING BALANCE" sites a three-hour recorded monologue, an oneiric sonic texture of childishly probing questions ("Is this disobedient?"), telling adult-Freudian comments ("Examine... the father!"), and self-reflexive touches ("an obsessive is informing us about useless objects"): the id, ego, and superego of artistic development. It presents the uneasy formation of the artist's self through her family relationships: "you... comment... others... shy away. And I look at myself and repeat again and again..." There's a pause so long I never hear what it is she's repeating, but the process itself is agonisingly familiar. A crucial difficulty in both creating art and bringing up children is the conflict between critical and creative impulses. Being a mother corresponds to being an artist; both constantly question themselves, watch their own process and deal with a range of forces that would fragment their identity.

It's also, frankly, a grind. Motherhood and artistry involve ploughing on thanklessly through sometimes tedious, repetitive practices. Susan Martin's *Breast Express* is a recording of the pulsating beat of a breast milk expressing machine, an unfamiliar rhythmic sound like a didgeridoo or a Jew's harp. It is an artistic expression of motherhood literally through the expression of milk.

Other works express further synergies. Just as artists sometimes mine mythic archetypes to express new truths, a mother will sometimes find herself reading fairy stories to her child to teach it about the world. Julia Warr's painting *Pram* pits myth against art history itself as represented by the 'modernist grid'. The flat pixellated lily-white single silhouette of mother and child fuse together with a blood-red pram in a dark wood, recalling Paula Rego's updatings of folk tales via Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber stories, which both explicitly engage with what academic Sarah Bonner in "Visualising Little Red Riding Hood" calls "Freud's patriarchal metanarrative". The psychologist Bruno Bettelheim analyzes fairy tales in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, asserting that the darkness of the stories is important for the development of the child, to prepare them for the future. It's scary for a parent to let their child confront scary things. For both child and adult, you make and consume art to brighten the interesting darkness inside you: to both illuminate it and to dazzle it into abeyance.

There are shared and recurring elements and symbols throughout MOTHERSHIP which suggest a traditional material and psychological daily experience of mothering - prams, wallpaper, ladies in pink, flowers, often tweaked or subverted. Elizabeth Byrne's sculptural installation *Slotted Disc Lanterns* sets imagery traditionally represented as 'soft' and 'feminine' against the hardness of modern materials. Brightly coloured images of flowers are projected against multiple revolving sheets of perspex, which has the effect of fragmenting them, playing with ideas of solidity, ephemerality and mutability. Photographic flowers never wither, but as the discs spin around each other the work is never the same from moment to moment.

A disturbing recurring theme is the distortion and erasure of the female form, particularly the face. Nadine Mahoney's photograph *Girl* refigures the 'green goddess' as literally a human stalk of sprouts on legs. The torso has exploded into a cluster of green grape-like piles in a green room. In the solid colour fields of her canvases *Rogue* and *Quiet Revolution* the female forms within are hard to discern. *State of Mind* outlines a very pregnant figure in bright pink, with another face sketched over her face, perhaps the face of the child about to be born: expressing the possibility of his identity erasing hers. Hester Finch's Painting series *The Portrait of a Lady* has flat paintwork and a subdued mid-century palette of greens and browns and soft pink for flesh. It is many views of a woman, but in only one view does she have a head, and in that her face is covered. It's a depiction of how we tend to depict women: to be soft and subdued is as much as to be decapitated.

Elsewhere the articles and ephemera of motherhood and of growing up are exploded and displayed. In Sarah Longworth-West's *Painting Floor Assemblage* bits and bobs are spread out on a recycled blanket like finds from an archaeological dig. The four large canvases of Janet Currier's

*Big pink bed sheet 1, 2, 3 & 4* figure the domestic gone wrong, arranged in a cube in the middle of the gallery as if following a food-fight the pink wallpapered interior walls of a room had been exploded to form the outside of a room with no way in or out.

As Caro Halford notes in her interview with [Curating the Contemporary](#) the art world's rounds of evening private views and irregular hours can exclude artists who have children. These exclusionary processes are reflected throughout MOTHERSHIP. Thus, Julie Miranda's *Two Doors* confronts us upon our first entry into the gallery space. Two doors hinge off each other, leading nowhere, covered in photos of female domestic staff and indeterminate fertility symbols. Suki Chan's *Obscura*, an upside down projection onto the wall, has a claustrophobic vanishing point reflecting those moments in which motherhood can seem like a dark room looking out on an image of a distant world. The single channel video loop of Annamaria Kardos's *Reel Time* fixates endlessly on an empty children's roundabout. Exclusion also forms the basis of Karen McLean's *Empire*, a striking intersectional encounter bringing home the banality of evil in our history: thirteen metres of Giclée print on archival paper appearing at first as rather stuffy domestic Imperial wallpaper. Closer inspection reveals radical alterations to the stock Imperial imagery showing colonial oppression (particularly of women) in the Caribbean: scolds bridles, stacked bodies of slaves in ships, branding tools.

The vital but never overstated theme of MOTHERSHIP is the continuing gender imbalances in society and in particular the art world: the gender pay gap and the domination by men of the top levels of pay remuneration and recognition. The role of a mother is a form of labour not highly valued or considered an important process. The show also poses an implicit question: do fathers experience their art through the prism of fatherhood, and if not why not? Perhaps the answers are uncomfortable. Our traditional archetype of an artist is not only probably a man, it's a man with no family ties. Centuries of bad boys, roués, sequestered geniuses taking drugs and creating Art in towers, studios, sheds and garages whose ecosystem - food, childcare, cleaning - is supplied by offstage females. Here we have artists not only kicking back against the disadvantages their status as mothers brings, but exploring its art-enriching synergistic properties. The vitality and variousness of the works on display at MOTHERSHIP are a welcome recognition of the commitment, courage, organisation and resilience required to be a mother artist.

IMAGES: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/i3phzgwkbucs2jw/AABiuPyULcTu54gWdVubp2KZa?dl=0>

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