

## MATR: the experience of Motherhood in the Visual Arts

*"There are good artists who have children.  
Of course there are. They are called men."*

Tracey Emin, interview (2014)

Since the birth of feminism in the 1970s, the question of motherhood has been addressed in relation to its impact upon the career progression (or personal fulfilment) of women beyond that of the role of mother. However, with ongoing remarks from prominent artists including Tracey Emin and Marina Abramovic about their view of the impact of motherhood on the ability to be an artist, it feels that this is still a much-maligned topic with mother artists themselves not being given the chance to speak on the subject.

The topic of the mother artist seems to be gaining traction; more work about what it means to be a mother artist as opposed to an artist making work about *being* a mother. The global Covid-19 pandemic brought this topic to the fore, as mother artists sought to create communities in which to thrive without being able to leave their homes or children. Examples include <https://artistmotherpodcast.com/> and <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-mothers-pandemic-1933403>

Pre-pandemic, Dr Kate McMillan (Kings College Longon), said, "65 per cent to 70 per cent of art school graduates were women; yet they only account for around 30% of the artists represented by commercial galleries. This number is similar across developed economies, she said. A factor in those numbers, according to Dr. McMillan, is that the art market views women of childbearing age as a risk and therefore makes commercial galleries hesitant to invest in their careers. "As one gallerist said, 'Women might move off to the countryside and never make art again,'" Dr. McMillan recounted."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/26/us/mothers-artists.html>

Mothers are increasingly visible and the tendency to have children later in life means that many women have established or emerging careers as they become mothers – there is an expectation that this should continue beyond the boundaries of caregiver to a child or children, and rightly so. In the wider realm of feminism and gender equality, it feels that voices are emerging yet culturally we have not accepted the pertinent role that mothers can play in the art world. I will look to contemporary research and writing by Hettie Judah (in particular the publication *How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers (and Other Parents)* 2022)

Our culture publicly celebrates motherhood to such an extreme that any form of ambivalence-mother-toward-child especially-is difficult to express... The conflicts of the mother-child relationship are compounded for the deeply committed artist. She finds herself in a continual struggle to meet the demands of her art and her family, as well as those of the dominant culture... The visual art world appears particularly ambivalent toward mothers, who have been known to conceal the existence of their children. This is a serious lack in a culture that reproduces itself on many levels through visual imagery, for both women and men need to see expression of these complex issues as well as read about them.

Chernick M, *Maternal Metaphors: Artists/Mothers/Artwork* (2014)

### **Research Questions:**

- How does one continue to make work as a parent artist, and is this more impactful on female rather than male artists?
- How does motherhood impact the nature, practicality and production of the artist mother's artwork?
- How does motherhood impact the type of work produced when mother artists are excluded from conventional arts communities and networks, and often make work that exists in predominantly unseen communities, such as social community practice focused sectors?
- How can the cultural and creative sector adapt to ensure more equitable opportunity for female artists that have the additional responsibility of caring for children?

Since becoming pregnant and giving birth to my daughter during my MA studies (2011-13), my role as artist mother has become all-encompassing; being a mother, and trying to find the time and energy and inspiration to make work has changed my methodology to progress my practice. Now that my children are a little older, I want to dedicate time to research and making my own work again. I want to advance my work further for exhibition and publication, and to gain a higher academic qualification that will enable me to progress into HE teaching and open up opportunities for further work and career progression, as well as fulfilling my personal desire to advance my knowledge and understanding of the topic.

My MA work was very much directed by my pregnancy and the birth of my daughter; from photographing abandoned and repurposed buildings (as an exploration of the ways in which communities can make use of these spaces), I became physically unable to continue the work and segued instead into an investigation of my own community, making my work hyper local and focusing on the ways in which my community created an environment suitable for mothers and children. I have never focused specifically on my children within my work as an artist, but much of the work I do is connected to the sense of being a mother and existing within a space that also includes and is shaped by my children. During lockdown, the domestic realm came to the fore and my personal experience led to the amalgamation of motherhood and creative practice; from anecdotal evidence and through research, it is clear that this experience was not unique to me.

The mother remains the family linchpin in constructing narrative and weaving memory into the lives of those around her. This role has shifted for the contemporary visual storyteller; how does my work continue this path? Looking back to my work on *Traces* (Levenshulme) and *LVE* (community/narrative), and to ongoing current work online, I create an archive of domesticity, albeit through the contemporary narrative curation of Instagram/social media. These images form a matrilineal thread, much like the stories told over time. Mothers continue to pass on social stories and information throughout generations.

There exists a social dilemma for women when they become mothers, between dedication as a mother focusing on raising a family, alongside the creative urge they have as artists. This urge does not dissipate upon the birth of one's child; mother artists have to carve out time and space between the all-encompassing physical and emotional role of motherhood in order to continue their art practice. It can be challenging to women artists with parenting responsibility to have their work seen in the public sphere, and they can remain excluded from the established artworks

networks. I am interested in the situation that leads to the exclusion of mother artists in the wider art world, and in giving a voice back to these artists who also happen to be mothers.

- I will research the availability of facilities and opportunities for mother artists in the Greater Manchester area and North West in particular. What opportunities are on offer outside of the conventional gallery – Castlefield Gallery, Islington Mill (where I am a Trustee), Community Arts Centres? Where facilities and opportunities do not exist, why is this and how can I be involved in bringing them about?
- I intend to undertake a series of case studies with other mother artists to learn about individual and collective experience. This will include interviewing mothers about their practice and experience as a mother artist, as well as bringing together groups of mothers to discuss ideas for improving the situation. I have access to many networks of parents through my job roles and community, and multiple avenues of communication via local galleries, groups, colleagues and acquaintances. I am well-practiced in liaison and will use the contacts I have to further my network. I am interested in the current personal experience of artist mothers such as Ciara Leeming and Marjolaine Ryley, as well as those mother artists who have journeyed through motherhood, such as Sian Bonnell. I am also particularly interested in the experience of the single mother and intend to undertake a case study with Jennifer Vickers to further my understanding outside of my personal realm.
- I will create my own practice-based research as part of the PhD, inspired by and based on the practice I am already creating and evolving in accordance with the findings I make and my own feelings about being a Mother Artist. My work already explores the way that becoming a mother changes one's practice, giving a more grounded basis in local geography. Observations, insights, fragments of days, memories and small details of everyday life form the basis of my image-making. There is a sense of priority and importance in the work, forced by a lack of time for work and sense of familial obligation. This is work that roots my experience in a temporal and geographical sense. I focus on community-facing photographic practice but am also keen to develop my practice to incorporate other methodologies in which I work, such as collage and bookmaking

## **Timeline:**

**Year 1:** researching and networking with mother artists, whilst making my own practical work alongside. Developing a network of interested individuals and groups who are willing to help develop and participate in a mother artist community. Developing my artistic practice through practical workshops and development phases.

**Year 2:** developing ideas for mother artist provision – fundraising/bidwriting to raise financial support to set up provision. Further consultation with the mother artist community. Working with the mother artist community (and beyond) to create participatory and socially-engaged project work that successfully narrates the mother artist experience. Interim exhibition/publication of work to develop interest in the project.

**Year 3:** finalising resources and details for provision. Marketing and setting up a trial period of provision for a select group of mother artists. Working with this group to create artwork (including my own personal work) for exhibition/publication. Evaluating trial period of provision for development.

**Year 4:** a year long (?) provision for mother artists – this may encompass multi-platform opportunities, resulting in exhibition and publication of the work. Development and creation of personal work for inclusion in this exhibition/publication.

## **Training and preparation**

As an artist mother, who has studied through the onset of motherhood, and continued to both make work alongside (and influenced by) being a mother as well as teaching art and facilitating/enabling others to make art I feel I am well placed to research, write and make practical work on this topic. I have a BA (Hons) in Photography with Philosophy and an MA in Photography, which inform my practice. My work is also informed by the ongoing development of my skills and influence through teaching Fine Art, Photography and Graphic Design at A-level as well as Art Foundation – this requires continual research and professional development, which further enhances and inspires my own work.

## **Motherhood research**

Judah H, *How Not to Exclude Artist Mother (and Other Parents)* 2022, Lund Humphries

Gordon M, *LABOUR* (2011), Linco Press, New York

[https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/may/18/parent-trap-why-the-cult-of-the-perfect-mother-has-to-end?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/may/18/parent-trap-why-the-cult-of-the-perfect-mother-has-to-end?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-women-artists-shaping-way-motherhood>

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-why-motherhood-won-t-hinder-your-career-as-an-artist>

<http://www.artistresidencyinmotherhood.com/kit>

*“Though there’s not much data explicitly focused on artists who are moms, female artists in general lag behind their male counterparts in representation and share of the market”*

<http://www.artist-parents.com/>

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0212852>

<https://www.procreateproject.com/about/#>

<https://www.creategloucestershire.co.uk/opportunities/2017/4/11/it-takes-a-village-models-for-mother-artists>

<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/models-mother-artists-maintain-practice-parent/>