REPOSITIONING THE GAZE: AN AESTHETIC OF CARE

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Abstract

This paper explores, from the subjective positions of mother and figurative painter, the connections and incongruences between the practice of painting and the care practice of mothering. It considers the temporal de-calibration that occurs when engaged in the processes of both practices to shift the focus away from a timely, finished product. Through embodied and autotheoretical lenses, it argues for a reconfiguration of the gaze to look outward from mothering in order to emphasize practices of attunement. It contemplates how artwork might make publicly visible the maintenance and emotional labour of being alongside an other, and posits that painting can be positioned as a form of documentation for the mostly invisible parts of mothering. It considers how engaging with paintings created from the perspective of those who practice care might trouble the boundaries between art and life, public and private, practice and product, and artist and mother.

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Emplacement (Introduction)

It was 2006; I was standing in my kitchen feeling ill-equipped to be discussing art at all. "You ARE creating. A home, a family! You will make art again one day." I'm sure that I'm paraphrasing, but this sentiment was offered by a mother of grown children who was one of the few professional artists in my acquaintance at the time. These words felt profound, but as a new mother and art school dropout, I lacked the experience and confidence to examine them critically. They reinforced both the gendered family values of my white settler working-class upbringing and the dogmatic devotion to artistic practice that had pushed me out of my final year of art college. They were also right in line with what I would learn later as I re-entered the art world: the prevailing notion that one cannot be both a good mother and a good artist. One must sacrifice for one's children, and one must sacrifice for one's art, but certainly not at the same time.

At twenty-eight, I had an infant and a toddler. I had no degree and no career waiting for me; my earning potential was less than the cost of daycare. Though this situation was common in mine and my (second generation immigrant) husband's families, in the white upper-middle-class neighbourhood in which we lived, I was the youngest and least educated of the other mothers. As a result of their influence, the kind of mothering I would learn to provide was of the highly engaged, intensive, child-centered sort. Where my own mother had taught me that cloth diapers were an economic choice, my peers touted their benefits as a natural and ecological alternative that was ultimately healthier for the baby. They also happened to employ a diaper service. [1]

This would be the model for the duration of my time as a stay-at-home mom. The upper-middle-class adoption of intensive parenting had taken up many of the practices of working-class mothering while offloading the additional labour it required. Consequently, I often found myself easily moving through spaces of privilege alongside (mainly racialized, gendered, and classed)

[1] In their essay *Consuming M/otherhood,* Jake Burdick and Jonel Thaller interrogate the consumer drive behind intensive parenting and the economic privileged it often requires. They turn to Mothering magazine as a prominent expounder of natural parenting practices, noting that "What constitutes a good mother in the logic of *Mothering* magazine presupposes a kind of class distinction and a level of cultural and material capital commensurate with the ability to provide your child with the comfort and safety of naturalistic living" (27). They argue that to counter the hegemonic institution of Motherhood "the actual experience of parenthood – and the small, local pedagogies that parenting enacts – might be repositioned to transgress the ubiquitous voice of the market and to recast the imperfect body as its own strong narrative of the self-in-emergence" (31).

paid caregivers. If caregiving can feel isolating, the socio-economic configuration of my particular set of circumstances made this almost certain. [2]

I would have a third child, and our young family would move into my husband's family home, where I would take on care of my elderly father-in-law. I would keep busy fostering community (or building my "village"), creating an intergenerational home, and trying to measure up to the institution of Motherhood. None of it would be emotionally sustainable. It would be ten years before I painted again, and by that time, it would come as a vital reprieve from unpaid care work. In 2017, I would return to finish my degree. I would earn my BFA at forty-one in 2019. In 2020 when the COVID pandemic would lock us all in tight, I would find a stubborn familiarity where others would struggle in much the same way I had years before. But this time, I would be careful to maintain my artistic practice.

"You ARE creating. A home, a family!" What if rather than framing this statement as a reinforcement of tired and repressive societal structures, it reads as a radical reconfiguration of motherwork as artistic project? Can it critique the institution of Motherhood in mass culture, the de facto rejection of sentiment in contemporary art, and the ideology of "artist as genius" as incompatible with caregiving? Can it help to tease out how these patriarchal positions impact the diversity of cultural production, community building, and, ultimately, gender disparity?

What if mothering and other care practices take up public politics as artistic product? How might this radical reframing trouble ideologies around mothering that continue to call back to mid-century tropes (essentialism, feminized care work, the good mother, and self-sacrifice) that ignore the everchanging ecological, technological, socio-economic, and cultural intersections that isolate, exhaust, and undervalue those who nurture?

What can be seen in this exhibition and the discussion that follows is not simply an account of my experiences with mothering but an investigation of, and argument for, mothering as, and/or in parallel to, an artistic practice. This is heavily informed by my location as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied woman who became a mother biologically with the support of a partner. I acknowledge that mothering takes many forms and is not contingent on any of the locations I hold, including (importantly) biology. It must be noted that much of the labour

[2] In the volume *Motherhood and Social Exclusion,* editors Christie Byvelds and Heather Jackson open with the assertion that all mothers contend with the exclusionary practices related to their role and the institution of Motherhood. The collection then demonstrates how isolation and exclusion can be increasingly detrimental to mothers with intersecting oppressions.

associated with mothering, as I may describe it, is often shouldered by underpaid and precarious bodies working the double shift in the caring sector. Given the rapidly shifting social and political contexts of the global north, my work has the potential for some to reaffirm the dominant narrative of the Western heteronormative nuclear family.

During my research for this body of work, the US supreme court overturned Roe vs. Wade, dissolving the right to legal abortion for millions. And while Canadians still have the right to reproductive autonomy, access remains a tool of political posturing across the country. Indigenous mothers continue to fight for both the ability to birth and raise their own children. In this context, there is much debate around birthing bodies and the infants they produce, and there is much more work to be done to ensure access to adequate and equitable reproductive healthcare for all. These issues, however, are beyond the scope of my work. I have elected to omit references to birth and infancy as a means to shine a light on the less visible and consequently less theorized (and arguably less valorized) mothering of non-infant children. I have also refused the literal representation of the mother to create space for the diverse configurations of people providing essential care well beyond the infant years. These moves help to decouple mothering from biology and the essentialist frameworks on which the patriarchal institution of (potentially forced) Motherhood relies.

My experience is not universal, and I cannot attempt to speak to the embodied practice of mothering beyond my own sexual, socioeconomic, and ethnographic locations. I do believe, however, that individual experience can trouble the oppressive and homogeneous institution of Motherhood. And what I hope to offer is a genuine repositioning of the "rational" gaze toward a matrifocal perspective, and in doing so, offer insight into one particular aesthetic of care that can sit alongside those of others who also do this work.

"M(y)otherwork"

When the outcome of a task cannot be envisioned, to proceed, there must be a measure of trust or conviction. One must move through process, adapting to the shifting and evolving relationships and connections without a clear view of what might finally emerge as the product of this labour, knowing only that there will be *something*. Mothering, as I have experienced it, requires multiple leaps of faith, a conviction that the work put into this growing human will eventually produce an outcome that is, at best, a meaningful contribution to society. Creating a

painting requires a similar commitment; staring at a blank canvas, I must convince myself that I am capable of producing aesthetic value even if I cannot accurately predict the outcome. Most recently, in my role as a researcher, I find myself once again taking that leap of faith; this labour, too, will evolve into coherent if not relevant thought. I make these comparisons and begin as I have because I have come to realize that the embodied practices of mothering, creation, and research are entangled, interrupted, and always in the process of becoming.

In the following pages, I will consider these entanglements as I contend with the many constructs that position m(y)otherwork (in this case, both the labour of care and the artwork) outside conventional discourse. If I am to earnestly invoke the multiple subject positions I hold (mother/artist/academic), biography, interpolation, and non-linearity must be embraced as methodology. By holding all of these subject positions at once and asserting mothering as embodied, transversal, and reflective, it "shifts our attention from motherhood as biological, selfless and existing prior to culture, to a practice that is always incomplete, indeterminable, and vulnerable" (Springgay and Freedman 5). I will toggle between academic and embodied perspectives, tracing the theoretical grounding that underpins the artmaking alongside a situated investigation of my practice to assert that mothering can and should take up space in critical discourse. This paper provides a container for mothering, research, and painting to collide and coalesce. It is a project that takes the form of process through an unfolding of ideas that open up space for dialogue rather than provide definitive answers. It is explorative rather than descriptive and meant as a complement to the paintings exhibited in M(y)otherwork. Though the act of painting is always already embodied, this methodology necessarily extends to the creation and viewing of the artwork itself. The paintings are autobiographical in construction and form, foregrounding memory, materiality, and process. They are an excavation of a personal archive to recontextualize and reframe the care, labour, and time devoted to raising my three children, and upend the notion that artwork and care work are incompatible.

My subjective gaze becomes the throughline as I attempt to tease out and iterate the embodied practices of mothering and painting and the time they contain. I will turn it inward to contemplate the parallels and incongruences of artwork and mothering, ultimately conceding that they both are parts of a long project that is very much still in process. I will rely on a reconfiguration of the gaze to attempt to aestheticize what it is to be out of sync with productive time alongside an "other." I will posit that care can be visualized outside of the mother and child

canon by shifting the perspective to take up that of the person responsible for the wellbeing of that "other." I will argue for depictions of individuation and intersubjectivity to index a particular form of maternal attunement, a way of looking that feminist philosopher Sarah Ruddick argues is both learned and integral to providing the conditions for growth and development. "Mothers […] train themselves in the looking, self-restraining and empathy that is loving attention [in order to effectively] see a child's reality" (79). And I will consider how this looking has the political potential to become a way of being in the world beyond the scope of m(y)otherwork.

Subjectivity and the Sentimental

> Feminist care and maternal action are at work in loving actions and representations where sentimentality – to be understood as deep, intimate and real feelings not limited to gender – is no longer a cultural embarrassment. (Liss)

The turn to embodiment and subjectivity as a starting point for theoretical examination runs through the many disciplines I have consulted in my research. In her reading of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts alongside painting, artist and author Jorella Andrews points to the importance of sharing perspectives that evidence the many ways "for the world to be a world" or "for our bodies to be bodies" (99). She cites the now generalized conception that "the basis for communication is *not* the assurance of having access to a world that has a single persisting appearance and meaning for all of us. [W]e all perceive, approach and describe the world in ways that are necessarily situated and individualized" (99). Feminist scholar Donna Haraway contends that unmediated perspectives through specific and embodied practices, however particular, are the key to objectivity. "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (583). Particular and located or emplaced perspectives counter the mastering and omniscient tendencies of the modern project and the neoliberal complex (and the institution of Motherhood upon which it depends for maximum (re)production at the lowest possible cost). I might add that partial perspectives leave space for intersubjective connections that can lead to practices of attunement and care. Specificity might be construed as intimacy and, in turn, a space for dialogue within the familiar and the foreign.

Artist and scholar Lauren Fournier notes, "Autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation" (3). Given that I am still seated among undone dishes and piles of laundry and must write amid frequent verbal interjections from the current members of my household, I cannot conceive of a more fulsome and genuine scaffold to think through my academic/art/motherwork. Autotheory "relies on theorizing and philosophizing from the particular situation one is in drawing from one's own body, experiences, anecdotes, biases, relationships and feelings in order to critically reflect on such topics as ontology, epistemology, politics, sexuality and art" (67). An autotheoretical approach embraces in-betweenness, difference, particularity, and embodiment. It provides space for recognition, discourse, affinity, connection, and critical reflection. Moreover, Fournier shows that the integration of theory into autobiography begins to dissolve the boundaries between what is traditionally accessible to specific groups of people, arguing that those (but particularly artists) working through autotheory may begin to break down the "politically harmful divide [between] 'the-elites-who-study-and-read' and the so-called 'every(hu)man'" (132).[3] Autotheoretical approaches to considering motherwork[4] and care work within the fine arts can provide a bridge for those who might not otherwise enter or see themselves represented in art spaces.

Despite a relative ease of accessibility, work stemming from the domestic, practices of care, and/or the maternal is still deemed too personal, sentimental, or emotional to offer anything of value to critical discourse. O'Reilly's assertion of the value of matrifocal perspectives (one that looks out from mother) is echoed by artist Deirdre Donoghue, who advocates thinking *with* maternal subjectivity "to broaden understandings of what the figure of the mother might be and do when defined by real-life experiences and thinking of actual mothers rather than others from outside that experience" (Reinsma). Cultural examples that look *at* mothering rather than *from* mothering tend to perpetuate the ideals of patriarchal Motherhood. Madonna and child and 'supermom' tropes are ubiquitous throughout art history and, most troublingly, in contemporary

[3] As a first generation academic coming from working class roots, it has always been important to me that the work I make is just as accessible to my great aunt as it is to academia. If I'm to be completely candid, I will admit that in fact, the former is more important to the structure of my artistic practice than the latter.

[4] I use the terms mothering and motherwork interchangeably to signify the active labour of caring for a child. Dr. Andrea O'Reilly argues that positioning the terms "mother" and "mothering" as verbs calls to Sarah Ruddick's maternal thinking "as something that someone does—a practice" and as such can be taken up by any individual regardless of gender, sex, or biological connection to the child (Maternal Theory 10).

media. As a re-inscription of patriarchal Motherhood, these representations are "superimposed over the potential of motherhood […] limit[ing] the full range of possibilities and limit[ing] our ability to imagine them" (Biss xiii).

Regardless of the current excess of mother blogs and mommy social media influencers, within the more critical context of the arts, artists like Diana Quinby (who has produced work from the particular embodied point of view of the changing maternal body) have posited that the maternal may well be the last taboo (Buller 153). Similar laments are almost as ubiquitous as the call to subjectivity in the personal accounts of mother artists found throughout my research.

Performance and installation work lend themselves well to the goal of making the material conditions of labour (in the sense of care and biology) visible.[5] In two dimensions, photographic work has been more readily accepted, even in the more traditional art spheres; Quinby offers Catherine Opie's *Self Portrait/Nursing* as example when she considers the seeming lack of mother artists working, as she does with drawing and painting. She speculates that the camera or "machine [might] 'objectify' the subject, thus making the image more accessible, or less disturbing, than a drawing or painting of the same subject, in which the emotional charge contained within the lines, marks or brushstrokes comes forth directly from the artist's body" (156).[6] Yet there appears to be slightly more acceptance of maternal subjectivity in painting if it strives to represent ambivalence, described in psychoanalysis as "the simultaneous and contradictory emotional responses of mothers towards their children" or their role as mothers (Adams 556). Saville's *The Mothers* immediately comes to mind alongside Marlene Dumas' *The Painter* as representations of painterly (thus unmediated) maternal ambivalence. I might argue this is perhaps due to a lack of "realistic language in which to capture the ordinary and extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work" that positions difficult emotions as more communicable than the overwhelm of "greeting card sentiment" (Ruddick 22).

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[5] The New Maternalisms (2012, 2014) consisted mainly of conceptual, performance, installation, and photo-based works. The curation and theoretical grounding for the conferences drew from Poststructuralism and New Materialisms.

[6] Indeed, I count photographer Sally Mann as one of the influences for my work. The multiplicity of Mann's positionality as mother/artist/researcher and the ways she has integrated them through the work continue to resonate, but it is also remarkably difficult to find painters grappling with the tensions of mothering within figurative representation. That her work around mothering did not include "the baby days" helped me articulate the need to make work that contends with the nuances of parenting older children who are autonomous, and who simultaneously seek connection and separation. This continues to hold in my own work as I am now mothering teens and I too find autonomy by learning to simultaneously engage and disengage as the mother/child relationship evolves.

I refer back to Haraway's thoughts on unmediated vision and partial perspective as a drilling down into subjectivity. Is the unmediated and embodied, emotive product of a mother artist too specific to be critical? Haraway thinks otherwise, denouncing even relativism, arguing that the opposite of totalization "is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (584). As I understand situated knowledge to necessarily be embodied knowledge, then it must be at least partially biographical in its construction. However, like the maternal, biographic perspectives are complicated by our notions of who "gets" to participate in knowledge creation, which perspectives are privileged, and whose are positioned in the blind spot. By producing work from an autobiographical perspective, I risk reinforcing existing omissions while attempting to uncover others.[7] Still, despite identifying with all of the following social locations, I have attempted to mitigate what scholars Stephanie Springgay and Debra Freedman term "the spectacle of mothering that is normative, white, heterosexual and good" (5) by carefully selecting my reference imagery from within the mundane and the everyday[8] and to consider the ways in which I depict my perspective that does not, as Baraitser states, "build new models for subjectivity that solidify or reify experience, processes to which 'the mother,' as metaphor, figure or trope, is particularly vulnerable" (Ethics 3). I rely on configurations of the gaze as understood in visual theory to instead insert the mother alongside artist/practitioner—a placement that is still very much resisted.

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[7] These blind spots continue and are evidenced by the artists herein. We must consider the social constraints (lack of childcare, healthcare, social support for single-parent families, inequitable division of domestic labour, and so on) that make it nearly impossible to find timely visualizations and accounts of mothering outside of the white middle-class context. While I can and will only speak to my own experience, I suspect that those currently engaged in that work have their hands full.

[8] To find support of my interest in creating images of the quotidian, I look to feminist theorist Susan Fraiman who explains that "Artists as well as social theorists in this tradition [of everyday life studies] set out to register and evaluate the neglected minutia of our daily lives; the way we […] work and recreate, care for ourselves and others slip in and out of self-awareness and interact with people objects and our surroundings" (114). In her article "Everyday Life Studies and Feminism," she describes difference feminism as a means to consider that "no single figure has been seen so plainly coextensive with everyday life as a woman caught up in the cycles of cooking cleaning and caring for a family" toward a goal to "sever domestic practices from a necessary tie to traditional 'family values' and class complacency" (115). But Fraiman notes that "someone needs to feed and clothe us; to clean up the messes we make as embodied creatures in a physical world; to care for us when we are young, sick, old and dying. In an ideal world these jobs would be valued, shared and well remunerated" (119). I would argue, as she goes on to, that although an essential tool to the feminist project of equality, exclusively framing care work as negative, repetitive, and banal impoverishes those who continue to do this work.

Fig. 1, Corynn Kokolakis, *Building Blocks*, oil and acrylic on panel, 183cm x122cm, 2023, work in progress.

Colliding Practice

To consciously move forward (or to become), you must first understand where you are and how you arrived there. Taken up as a means of self-care, my painting practice developed parallel to the already established practice of mothering. Regular studio sessions came out of the need for reprieve and solitude. The two practices naturally took opposing positions and methods. Finished paintings have necessarily taken the form of interruption or exclamation points to the practice of mothering that itself has (relatively) few success markers or delineations. I began painting (mostly at night) in large chunks of (what felt like) stolen time in order to (physically and mentally) remove myself from my household duties. As an oil painter, I adopted a method of painting that progressed quickly but demanded lengthy, intense bursts to be successful.[9] When

[9] My preferred way of painting is alla prima, a direct method or wet on wet application. It does not incorporate dry time or the use of mediums; it requires sustained focus (at times over consecutive days) until the piece is complete.

the painting was complete, I would feel a surge of accomplishment that came from little else in my every day: "For a painter, there is certainly tremendous pleasure in working out a thought in paint. It is a complete process in terms of brain function: an intellectual activity joining memory, verbal knowledge and retinal information is given visible existence through a physical act" (Schor 123). On reflection, I see how even the material handling of paint (through visible brushstrokes and exposed layers) references not only my bodily presence in the movements of my hand but also a physical record of spent time. The finished piece was a documentation of intense effort that had the potential to persist in public.

Contrary to mostly invisible care work, paintings were my outlet to feel seen. If the patriarchal institution of Motherhood[10] demands a complete commitment to mothering, given this oppositional configuration, it might be argued that the painting practice and its products are evidence of maternal ambivalence, the conscious acknowledgment of which has more recently been lauded as central to "good mothering."[11]

But painting also offered an opportunity for reflection and, if I was particularly lucky, mental quiet. Though I did not have a studio to close out the world, in contrast to the isolation of motherwork, the act of painting could produce an insular effect that was regenerative. Though not immune to interpolation, painting became a necessary kindness that temporarily removed me from the timeframe of the mundane.

Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock argues that the work of female artists (for my purposes, mother could replace gender here) must be framed by the complexities of its production by "…considering… the social spaces from which the representation is made and its reciprocal positionalities. The producer is herself shaped within a spatially orchestrated social structure which is lived at both psychic and social levels" (67). My representations are not

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[10] In the preface to the most recent reprint of *Of Woman Born*, Eula Biss notes that those who identify as mothers are still contending with the same structures that Adrienne Rich interrogated nearly fifty years ago. "*Of Woman Born* lays bare the cultural and medical and economic practices that define motherhood and exposes how our everyday experience of mothering is shaped by this enduring institution" (xiii). She argues, as Rich did, that "the institution affects everyone […] though it affects us differently. Nobody escapes it, even those who do not have children. And everyone who cares for children, their own or others', does work that is devalued by the institution" (xv).

[11] Author Sarah Lachance Adams who has written extensively on what she terms the "maternal tug" notes that the complex and conflicted intersubjectivity of the mother child relationship can only be interrogated when not actively engaged in care. She cites creative projects as "helpful to understanding ambiguous intersubjectivity as they confront the irony that reflecting on motherhood requires a step back from it" (562). She posits that the acknowledgment of maternal ambivalence benefits both mother and child. If a mother has "the ability to think through ambivalence […] she can begin to understand herself and her actual child as a particular and concrete other with distinctive needs, desires and perspectives" (563).

produced by a single genius in the vacuum of a studio; as such, they are embedded with the conflicts and congruencies of my multiple roles. My research, like my paintings, shows my hand as it hinges on an autobiographical perspective that pursues theoretical frameworks that argue for the visibility and valuation of care work. Despite my attempts through research and creation to escape the practice of mothering, it remains the locus of my public expression. It is difficult to imagine how this might be otherwise, as most, if not all, of my tacit knowledge (outside of painting) stems from my many years as the primary caregiver. Mothering or caregiving is the space in which I am most practiced.

Fig. 2, Corynn Kokolakis, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 122cm x76cm, 2023, work in progress.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

> I'm working on the feeling of always running out of time, of feeling rushed yet impeded at the same time…I'm working on what it is like to wait, and go on waiting, and whether watchful waiting has anything to do with gender, and with care. (Baraitser, Enduring Time 2)

By thinking through mothering alongside notions of the project as proposed by art and media theorist Boris Groys and the time of maintenance as described by Lisa Baraitser, a psychoanalyst and academic working in psychosocial theory, I can begin to reconsider motherwork within the long project. Groys describes what can be referred to as the loneliness of the project as a purposeful self-alienation from society in order to manifest a future through the implementation of a project. He points to a social expectation of constant communication that is tied to the rhythms of the everyday, which is amplified by events (natural disasters, for example) and in which the refusal to participate results in being "rate[d] as difficult, antisocial and unfriendly" and subsequently "social censure." Projects, then, provide an opportunity for "socially sanctioned self-isolation and renunciation of any form of communication" (2). The expected result of the seclusion one maintains while immersed in the project is a timely, finished product. He notes the fields of science and art as creating conditions for the possibility of a long project while acknowledging that "infinite projects such as […] building a better society […] irrevocably remove people from their overall communicative contemporaneity and transfer them into the time frame of a lonely project" (2). It is this removal, whether elected or forced, that speaks to the isolation and invisibility that is often associated with mothers and motherwork.[12] Ripe with disruption (and barring recent family-friendly initiatives to integrate it into the social public), mothering remains incongruent with maintaining constant communication and engagement with the social, and despite the paradoxical slowness of the maintenance practices of motherwork, the means is always toward a rapidly approaching end. The time frame of childrearing is encompassing, repetitive, and often cyclical, with little opportunity for the

[12]Though it is tempting to explain maternal social exclusion through the lens of the temporality of the project, it is more likely a tool to maintain inequity. As Colombian academic and mother of eight Maria Piedad Quevedo-Alverado notes, "Social exclusion is important when thinking motherhood. It is hard not to notice the many and sophisticated ways motherhood serves to discipline and marginalize women and other subaltern subjects in order to reproduce the status quo" (71).

recognition of visible progress toward the expected "finished product" (an adult human capable of integrating into the social sphere) and a futurity that is both promised and unimaginable.

Referring to Groys, researcher and educator Simon Bayly notes that "a condition of undertaking a project is that it takes over one's whole being. Life in the project leaves little time for life elsewhere, even at night or in one's dreams" (165). These too are the material conditions of being in maternal relation with an unpredictable, demanding, and ever-changing other. Baraitser aptly describes the maternal condition that undoubtedly leaves little time:

> Maternal subjectivity […] involves relations with a particular and peculiar other whose rate of change is devastatingly rapid, who is always, by definition, 'developing,' shifting, changing, and yet it is another to whom one is 'linked' in an equally particular and peculiar way, a way that has something to do with larger issues of responsibility and care but played out in the most seemingly ridiculous forums; those of the daily 'thinking' about feeding, sleeping, dressing, manners, routines, good stuff, bad stuff, schools, friendships, more stuff, influences, environments, time, responsibility, freedom, control and so on. (Ethics 19)

Both Groys and Baraitser suggest a shift in temporality is at least partially responsible for the isolation experienced in what I will begin to describe as "the project of mothering." There is a similar disengagement with productive (capitalist organization of) time and the shift toward a parallel time which Groys describes as constantly moving toward resynchronization and which Baraitser refers to as maintenance time or the "time of mattering." Groys argues that "in order to induce […] a new future, one first has to take a period or leave of absence for oneself, with which the project has transferred its agent into a parallel state of heterogeneous time. This time frame, in turn, is undocked from time as experienced by society: it is desynchronized" (3). For Groys, this parallel time is simply a condition of project execution that places the agent into a 'virtual future,' one that creates distance by remaining 'incommunicable' to those existing in the present. Undertaking a project of undetermined length maintains the state of living in a project.

Concerned with the ethics of maintenance, Baraitser explores the hidden qualities of this temporal rupture in "relation to the trapped time of disavowed durational activities that sustain people, situations, phenomena, institutions and art objects and thereby underpin the maintenance of everyday life" (Enduring Time 49). Maintenance labour, the repetitive, banal tasks that provide the necessities of living, is only one aspect of the execution of the project of mothering.

She argues for maternal labour as "affective, invested and intersubjective" (Sanford); it is "deeply attached" to both the matters of labour and the matters of attachment (Enduring Time 74). She situates this attached labour in opposition to the banal labour of the maintenance of life's processes as the "time of mattering: […] in which repetition may come to matter. This time can be felt as obdurate, distinctively uncertain in its outcome, both intensive and 'empty,' and tethered by the pace of the development of another, figured within the maternal relation as a 'child'" (Enduring Time 75). Maternal time is not that of the "virtual future" but embedded in the present waiting in a suspended time "*which is the time the child's futurity requires of her*. [A parallel] time of maternal waiting as a certain kind of ethical labour" (Enduring Time 91). The maternal project, it could be argued, is one of durational ambiguity and temporal misalignment, the completion of which may never come to pass and thus be deemed successful. It is a life in the project that unfolds alongside another. It cannot be effectively planned, imagined, or communicated, but as Groys notes, unfinished projects are not "excluded from social representation […] they can, after all, still be documented" (4).

Parallel Practices

In "Promise of the Practice," Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine cite the Aristotelian notion of praxis as "an action that is valuable in itself, in contrast to those actions whose goal is making or creation (poiesis). The Greek praxis had an ethical dimension, concerned with self-shaping or a decision as to how to live, as well as a political dimension, concerned with the form in which one lived with other people" (13). It is interesting to note that both praxis and poiesis, at least at first glance, can be applied to both motherwork and artwork. I have argued here for the reframing of mothering as *life in the project*, but it has already been well theorized as *practice* by contemporary feminist scholars, who continue to build on the framework of Sara Ruddick's "Maternal Thinking." Ruddick argues that those engaged in the care work required to rear a child apply reflexivity and innovation toward their discipline. She argues that "actual mothers have the same relation to maternal practice as actual scientists have to scientific practice, or actual believers have to religious practice" (Maternal Thinking 71). While I would replace 'actual mother' with primary caregiver, this is a critical assertion as it both uncouples motherwork from essentialism and signifies agency in those who do or do not engage in the practice of mothering. Not all mothers choose to participate in, are capable of, or have the privilege of mothering; a

practice of motherwork can be adopted by both paid and unpaid caregivers to varying degrees and results. However, regardless of who cares for a child, Ruddick posits that there are three interests that 'govern maternal practice,' which are broadly categorized as preservation (providing the means for a child to survive), growth (fostering an everchanging mental life), and acceptability (preparing the child to integrate into society). I propose that motherwork that engages reflexively and repetitively with these interests takes up Aristotle's practice of creating or poiesis in the maintenance of life and the ethics of praxis in the fostering of a mental life and integration into a social public.

Mothering can take on a political dimension. Mothering scholar Andrea O'Reilly points to feminist mothering as a means to dismantle patriarchal Motherhood,[13] and Baraitser notes that mothers can elect to raise children to interrupt dominant systems but warns that they may not follow through. "One might engage in practices of child-rearing that one hopes will not reproduce the dominant order, only to find that the other, in this case 'the child', will make what they will of the care that is offered, may desire to be recognized by the dominant order just as the unfolding of a maternal life desires its opposite" (Enduring Time 91). I am struck by how well this caveat applies to intention in the creation of artwork. Despite my best efforts to predetermine the conveyed meaning, my paintings could be subsumed into the dominant order, avoidable only by refusing to create them at all.

Boon and Levine note that the ongoing reconfiguration of practice and the continuous engagement with material conditions of life within the territory of art history in the last century has ensconced the ethical dimension of artwork more generally.

> [It] has resulted in a splintering of art into more and more diverse objects, events and engagements – with the paradoxical result that basically anything that could be considered a practice might be considered art. Consequently, we find ourselves at an impasse in which art – as practice – oscillates between a reduction to ethics on the one hand, and an infinite proliferation of seemingly random repetitive actions on the other. (14)

[13] O'Reilly has developed a theory of "empowered mothering" that aims to unsettle "normative discourses of motherhood" to include myriad familial configurations and practices. She argues that "the task of antisexist childrearing foregrounds the political-social dimension of motherwork to emphasize how traditional practices of gender socialization may be challenged to raise empowered daughters and empathetic sons. (Empowered Mothering, 611)

This oscillation rings true to the configurations of practice as they are implemented across the different subject positions I currently hold. If caregiving contains the action that "is valuable in itself," then painting is the action of "making." Yet the two can easily be reversed. What becomes clear is that, in my case, the practices run parallel. To actively engage in one, I must disengage with the other, if only on a physical level. What is less clear is which practice (painting or mothering) and which configuration takes the position of art.

If mothering is recontextualized as an indefinite practice of caregiving comparable to what Groys posits is "life in the project," then painting may be considered "an attempt to use artistic media […] to make direct reference to life itself: to a form of pure activity or praxis as it were; indeed, a reference to life in the art project, yet without wishing to directly represent it" (5). My paintings can then be interpreted as documentation of my life in the project of mothering. As documentation, they can engage in dialogue within a public sphere in a way that mothering does not. If the self-imposed contrast between mothering and painting or praxis and documentation were evident only when reflecting on the evolution of my parallel practices, this oppositionality becomes more complicated when considering the enduring dichotomies of labour and work and the public and private spheres.

In the paragraphs above, I have touched on the maintenance work of motherwork, which I implied is both poiesis and praxis. As the labour that provides the necessities of life, it could be argued (and has by Marxist feminists) that this labour creates a product (a functioning society) and has an ethical dimension (a functioning society.) But I will turn to Hannah Arendt's conceptions of labour, work, and action in *The Human Condition* to interrogate how my practices are contextualized outside of the domestic (or private) and within the public. The labour devoted to sustaining the biological process of life (what Ruddick might term preservation) is consistent with Arendt's conception of labour: "It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as effort is spent" (87). Arendt describes labour as ephemeral, urgent, futile, and absolutely necessary. This is the undervalued, invisible cyclical labour most often associated with the domestic or the marginalized. Work for Arendt always goes into the production of a durable object that (most often) exists for use in the human world. The end of labour or the potential for a product is the signifier of work. The process of making is itself entirely determined by the categories of means an end. "The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an

end in it […] and that it is only a means to an end. Labour, caught in the cyclical movement of the body's life process, has neither a beginning nor an end" (163).

Artworks are held above the daily use object for their permanence, durability, and stability. "Works of art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things. [W]hat actually makes the thought a reality and fabricates things of thought is the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of human hands, builds the other durable things of the human artifice" (188-189). Arendtian work does not have an ethical or political dimension beyond its manufacture of use products. For Arendt, one can enter into the public sphere or the *vita activa* through political action or "sharing of words and deeds" (176). Philosophy and ethics scholar Andrea Veltman frames this as a transcendence of sorts. "In revealing the unique and irreplaceable nature of individual human beings, action bestows significance upon the life of the individual while also realizing the *raison d'être* of social and political life and all spaces of appearance" (67). Artwork, defined as a "thought thing," enters into the ethical or political realm and communicates the specificity of individual experience.

I have turned to Arendt to illustrate the specificities of my relationship to painting[14] and, in turn, what it means to mount an exhibition and justify it in these pages. This configuration of labour, work, and action personally resonates with the ways in which my painting practice has related to that of my mothering, made even more relevant by my continuing choice to paint children and create public discourse around the mostly private labour of motherwork. Taken together, these notions of mothering as praxis, painting as documentation, and Arendtian action have profoundly shifted the way I think about my practice. They have reconfigured my understanding of art and life, or life as art, to signal something in-between.

The Gaze of a Mother/Painter

> To write a paper, is to leave mothering, or, rather, it is to leave the type of subjectivity I engage in while mothering. A clean break is neither possible nor desirable, mothering being my topic, and so integral to my identity. Indeed, to leave it would be to become someone completely different […] The process is one of traveling between an individuated and separated subjectivity which allows me to write, and an actively in

[14] Of course, I connect less with Arendt's concept of labour as I strongly disagree that motherwork is futile, or lacks ethical dimension.

relation subjectivity which is born of mothering. It is an existence fraught with tension, for while each demands my attention […] neither allows me to inhabit the other adequately. (Chandler 271)

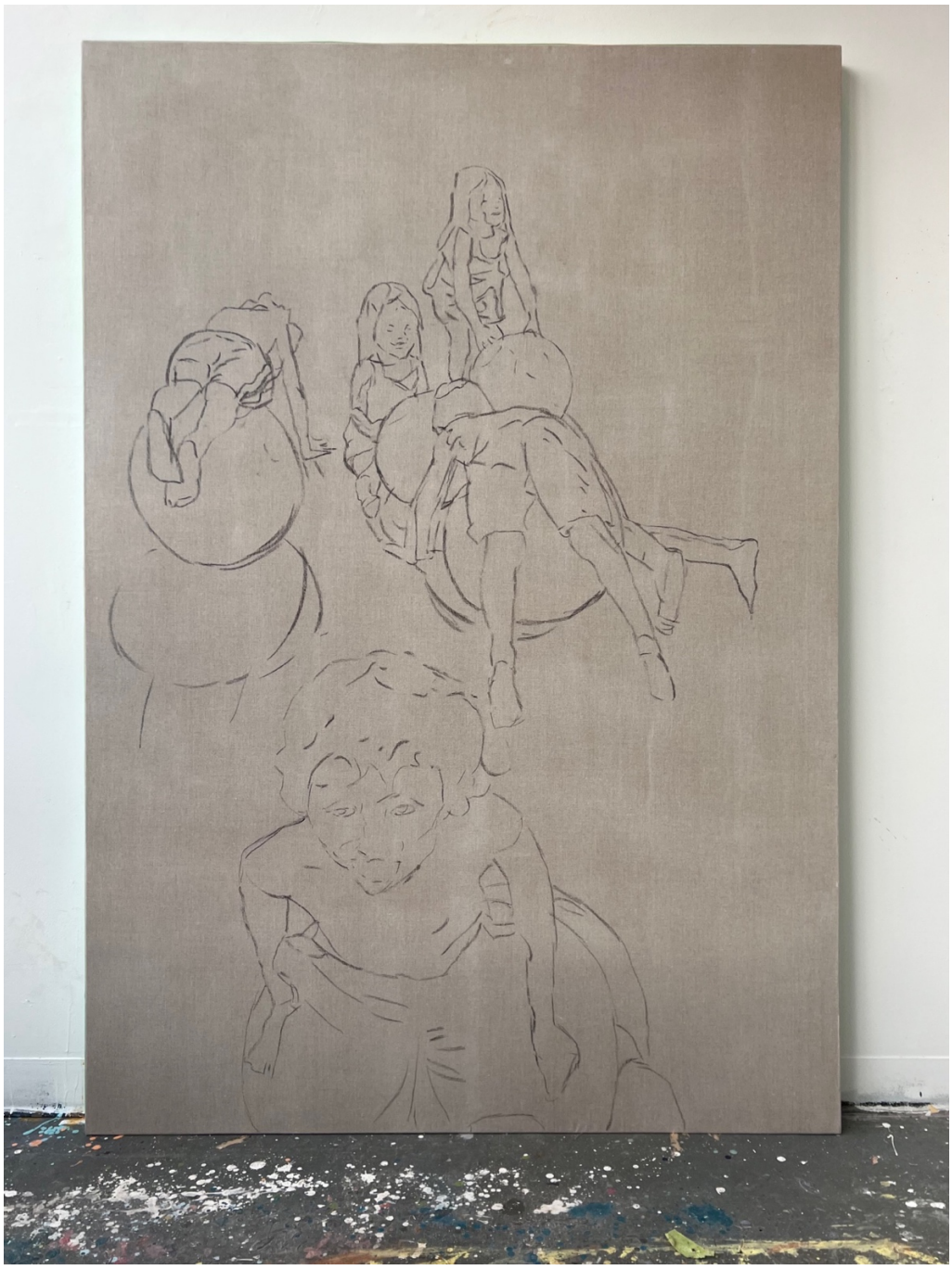

Fig. 3, Corynn Kokolakis, *Minafesto*, oil and charcoal on linen, 127cm x183cm, 2023, work in progress.

Mothering as I have practiced it (and depict it) rejects the grand "Madonna and child" narrative imposed by patriarchal Motherhood. It most often takes the form of stilted time and perpetual interruption with little opportunity for prolonged (let alone divine) contemplation. In *Ethics of Interruption,* Baraitser takes up the form of the anecdote to mimic both the disjointed and nonlinear quality of motherwork and to interrogate the autobiographical, private, and overlooked narratives that stem from it. My paintings, too, could be defined as anecdotal. The images, each excavated from my digital archive, were taken (with few exceptions) by me at moments when I could, however briefly, disengage from literal "hands-on" motherwork. These images were, by virtue of their existence, instances of negotiated autonomy and a splitting of the mutuality[15] demanded of someone who holds alongside a developing other. Only in retrospect have I begun to see the urge to document them as a bridge (however flimsy) to my creative practice and, consequently, my negotiation of competing identities rather than a description of my children or their growth and development. Revisiting these images in paint becomes a physical reclamation or resurrection of an artistic inclination that was always in tension with my maternal labour. For feminist artists, Pollock asserts that "to avoid the embrace of the feminine stereotype which homogenizes women's work as determined by natural gender, we must stress the heterogeneity of women's artwork, the specificity of individual producers and products" (55). Despite the imaging of my children, the narrative I have chosen to depict is equally mine. It is signalled through my mothering gaze and my painter's hand.

Ruddick argues that "what are you going through?" is central to maternal practices (80). It could be argued that a similar attunement is required to paint a portrait or create artwork. Thus, my attention and attunement can be filtered, assessed, and represented through painting in a way that mothering cannot by carefully reconfiguring the gaze outward in order to create the conditions for intersubjectivity as opposed to the objectivity or possession associated with scopophilia and the sexual politics of looking.

[15] Characterised by the "intertwining of self and other" (556), Adams describes mutuality and conflict as the "two opposite orientations" of ambivalence. She cites "temporarily forgetting oneself, yielding to the needs of a child, being swept away by passionate love [as] experienced in the body and can occur with children of various ages" (557).

Fig. 4, Corynn Kokolakis, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 122cm x122cm, 2023, work in progress.

Griselda Pollock asserts that the compression of space and tight proximity to the subject negates the “rational” overseeing mastering gaze and acts instead as a “locus for relationships” in

the works of the female impressionists (87).[16] This intimate gaze is one that I apply across my work, opting to amplify the potential for relationality through the use of a life-sized scale and placement within the picture plane. As a result, the viewer is positioned in my shoes, arguably a body beside the painted body of the child, who may (or may not) return the gaze. Pollock references Mary Kelly to illustrate how female artists have continued to mitigate the objectifying gaze: "Different strategies have emerged to negotiate the fundamental contradiction [of female artists working from the position of the male gaze] focusing on ways of either repicturing or *refusing the literal figuration of the woman's body"* (86). Kelly has already applied the refusal of the literal figuration of mother in (among many other works) *Post-Partum Document*, perhaps the most renowned (and most often referenced in conversation) work on motherhood in a contemporary context. This tactic can be read as an uncoupling of the mother from biology while similarly making the mother visible in her absence. Cultural Theorist Zoë Sofia points to the object relationality of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott: "without (m)other's activity in creating a 'facilitating environment' for the nurture, emergence, and exploration of the self, the person cannot come into being. […] Aside from its facilitating context the infant [child] is not" (183-184).[17] A child, then, cannot subsist without care and I argue where the "facilitating context" is no longer in the picture, one must consider where/why it has gone, how to replace it (both processes of attunement) or simply ignore the predicament (evasion).

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[16] The work of Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot have undoubtedly influenced my work as I apply many of the same visual strategies and consider the same subject matter. Nevertheless, what I hope to avoid in my work is the affirmation of normative bourgeois motherhood. Cassatt was not herself a mother and as a painter, was not actively engaged in care work. It has been argued that Cassatt's paintings worked to reinforce the cult of domesticity even as they pushed boundaries between public and private and women's positions in the art world (see Norma Broude). I might identify more with Morisot, as her favoured subject matter was her daughter Julie. She rarely painted herself, and even rarer are images of mother and daughter together. However, the maternal care that Morisot portrayed was enacted by paid carers, including in what Linda Nochlin posits is perhaps "the most unusual circumstances in the history of art." Morisot paints "another woman nursing her baby" in *The Wet Nurse Angele Feeding Julie Manet*, 1880 (230). Having the means to do so, Morisot seems to go to great lengths to maintain the separation of her subject positions, thus contributing to the misconception that mothering and art are incompatible.

[17] A perfect visual example of this theory and a genre of image I think alongside frequently is Victorian-era portrait photography, where due to long exposure times, mothers or care workers were photographed with fabric draped over their bodies while physically supporting young children; the women's faces might also be removed in postproduction. "These 'hidden mothers' are easy to miss in pictures – yet, as soon as you spot them, it becomes impossible to unsee the head and shoulders, knees and legs of the adults beneath the brocade. And once you can no longer ignore her, you cannot believe you ever did *not* register that, of course, the infants are ensconced on their mother's lap" (Kaston).

Fig. 5, Corynn Kokolakis, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 102cm x102cm, 2023, work in progress.

Though often staged, Sally Mann's photographs of her children in the series *Immediate Family* rely on relationality, intimacy, and the gaze in many of the ways expressed above to speak about the "grand narratives" of childhood (Parsons 129). Reiterating the inescapable connection between mother and mothered, art historian Sarah Parsons notes that "*Immediate Family* is not just about children and childhood; it is also about motherhood. [M]otherhood cannot be separated from children in life or in representation. To tell a mother's story is to tell a child's" (129). Of course, there were those who read the images outside of the mother-child relationship (sometimes from very sinister positions), and Parsons notes how "subjective any reading of *Immediate Family* is, how tied to one's own experience of and relationship to the

subjectivities and events in the photographs" (129). While Parsons details much debate about which parts of childhood and what kind of mothering the images represent, there seems to be little confusion about the relationship between the images and their producers. Parsons describes the troubling of the uncrossable divide between public and private evident in Mann's images but it is also clear that the authorship of the images is where at least part of the meaning (and controversy) is derived.[18]

If the authorship of the *Immediate Family* images could not be sidelined even with photography's purported capacity to produce "an automatic inscription of the object [subject] without presupposing an author" (Graw 92), the authorship of a painting created by a mother, of her children, with her own body must become a central focus. The very act of putting paint on a substrate creates an indexical sign, according to art historian and critic Isabelle Graw. A brushstroke has the "physical power of a pointing finger… once they appear in the context of painting they forcefully point to the absent author who seems to be somewhat physically present in them" (Graw 80). She argues that the physicality or "emphatic materiality" of any style of painting necessarily points to the "life and work time of the respective artists," resulting in a "liveliness" (81). She notes that though a "painting contains this living labor, it cannot be reduced to it since it withholds labor as well" (82). Given the material qualities that are intentionally evident in my painting process, the "labour that is withheld" can become an index of the life outside of painting or maternal labour. Graw underscores this point, claiming "brushstrokes alone can be read as tracing labor and life activities" (99). A child cannot exist without mothering; a painting cannot exist without painting. Therefore, the painting and the child are (doubled) containers for "living labour."

Creating Space (Conclusion)

If painting can be experienced aesthetically to "generate the illusionary impression that it is possible to grasp a fiber of the living labor that was mobilized for it" (Graw 99), then the specific configuration of my embodied practice conveyed through paint might produce the spark

[18] Conversely, removing the author from imagery that might be considered vernacular (as family imagery often is) "neutralizes the affective and political possibilities of bringing [it] into the public sphere" (Zuromskis, 118). See Catherine Zuromskis considerations around the elevation of vernacular photography through major exhibitions in contemporary museums. She argues that taking an image out of its private context and into the public purview of the museum both valorises and abstracts, emptying the image "of its particular cultural relevance" (120).

of attunement or the conditions for intersubjectivity. From this perspective, painting takes a phenomenological role, one of generosity or hospitality that creates the space for intersubjectivity. Andrews thinks alongside Merleau-Ponty to lay bare the potential of his conditions for communication: "to gain understanding of each other we must pay attention above all to how we relate to the wider environment and interact with one another" (151). Paintings, she argues, provide the ground for the perception of hospitality and generosity even when

> thematically unconcerned with questions of the social and political[...T]hey nonetheless may be seen to play an essential role in terms of emphasizing the aesthetic realm — understood in terms of activating appropriately flexible sensibilities, perceptual orientations and emotional capacity—for motivating real social and political change. (153)

Painting has the capability to shift one's perception, to invite embodied looking that has the potential to make space for other visual perspectives. There is no durational expectation; it can be taken in all at once, traced over time, or walked past; this is its technological genius. Painting is a container through which one can, should they wish to, create meaning intersubjectively.

In *Container Technologies*, Sofia posits that there is potential in bringing "to the foreground that which is designed to be the background" (188). Containing, she argues, is an active participant in emergence, holding, preserving, supplying, and making space for "belongingness to and interactions […] with entities, both human and non-human" (193). I would argue that this connects with Ruddick's attunement and her assertion that "what are you going through?" as a cornerstone of maternal thought can be self-consciously included within the dominant culture to great benefit (80).[19] Learning how to see and be with others, to hold space

[19] Activist and writer bell hooks critiques much of Ruddicks "Maternal Thinking" as romantic and bourgeois. And as I mentioned earlier, many of the intensive parenting practices encouraged today rely on paid caregivers to provide the kind of "attentive love" outlined by Ruddick. hooks calls for a shift in thinking around childrearing that redefines the paternal as equal to the maternal in its configuration and implementation. She argues for community care as a vital component in alleviating the burden of childrearing most often solely shouldered by mothers. Through what she terms "Revolutionary Parenting," those without children can and should participate in childrearing to the benefit of the entire community. She argues that "[b]efore there can be a shared responsibility for childrearing that relieves women of the sole responsibility for primary childcare, women and men must revolutionize their consciousness. They must be willing to accept that parenting in isolation (irrespective of the sex of the parent) is not the most effective way to raise children or be happy parents" (97). I argue that this shift in consciousness is connected to attunement, that demonstrating attunement more widely (or aesthetically in the case of my paintings) can provide opportunities for others to understand how to insert themselves in care practices to "ensure that all children will be raised in the best possible frameworks" (97). However, care practices and attunement do not begin or end with childrearing; they can be applied anywhere humans interact with others, be them human or non-human.

and time for unfolding, is a radical reconfiguration of the gaze that puts care at its centre. Interdisciplinary feminist theorist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa thinks through Harraway to consider how we enact this holding; that

> insisting on practice brings us back to the hands-on side of care in the purpose of thinking with others. That is looking at care as a practical everyday commitment, as something we *do*, affects the meaning of thinking-for. […] Creating situated knowledge might therefore sometimes mean that thinking *from* and *for* particular struggles requires *us* to work for change *from where we are,* rather than drawing upon others' situations for building a theory, and continue our conversations. (86-87)

This is what I hope to have done here. By illustrating that painting and motherwork are connected, contingent, iterative, and always in process, I have troubled boundaries between art and life, insisted that motherwork is work, and questioned what kinds of representations might take up space in public discourse and to what end. I have offered one specific embodied perspective and held as much as possible all at once in order to create space for dialogue and connection. I have begun to reclaim and reintegrate my often-conflicted subject positions by unabashedly placing the motherwork out front alongside the artwork.[20]

[20] As a final note, I want to toggle back toward the personal. It is not lost on me that the children are (mostly) grown, and I am no longer providing the kind of intense caregiving I once did to my three teenagers, who are (more or less) happy to stay out of sight. I now find myself rarely in need of an escape. I have been given the time and space to cultivate my own autonomy and ambitions. My social world has widened to (once again) include academia, which (at least in post-graduate studies) imbues nearly the same intensity as childrearing. But as I move ever more quickly toward another reconfiguration of my subject positions, I have become acutely aware that the practice of mothering extends far beyond the walls of a home or the bodies of grown children. Once you learn how to see it, this kind of caring can be applied nearly everywhere. I took on this project to try to understand and perhaps even convey how I see the world in hopes that others may find something of value in it. While I certainly hope that this is the outcome, what I have learned is that I have still much to learn about how see, consider, and practice care. M(y)otherwork is thus still very much in process.

Appendix A: *M(y)otherwork*, Artwork Images

Fig. 6, Corynn Kokolakis*, Kitchen,*122cmx122cm, oil on canvas, 2008 to 2023.

Fig. 7, Corynn Kokolakis, *Ferris Wheel,* 101.6cmx122cm, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2023.

Fig. 8, Corynn Kokolakis*, Dining Tent,* 101.6cmx101.6cm, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2011 to 2023.

Fig. 9, Corynn Kokolakis*, You look like no one loves you,* 122cmx122cm, oil & charcoal on linen, 2023.

Fig. 10, Corynn Kokolakis*, They might think we're broke,* 122cmx122cm, oil & charcoal on linen, 2023.

Fig. 11, Corynn Kokolakis*, Good moms have messy houses,*122cmx122cm, oil & charcoal on linen, 2023.

Fig. 12, Corynn Kokolakis*, Manifesto,* 183cmx127cm, oil & charcoal on linen, 2011 to 2023.

Fig. 13, Corynn Kokolakis, *Building Blocks*, 122cmx183cm, oil and acrylic on panel, 2014 to 2023.

Fig. 14, Corynn Kokolakis, *Praxis,* variable, acrylic on canvas, 2023 -.

Appendix B: *M(y)otherwork*, Installation Images

M(y)otherwork
2104 Dundas St.W.
Toronto, Ontario
M6R 1W9
May 22nd – 26th, 2023

Fig. 15.

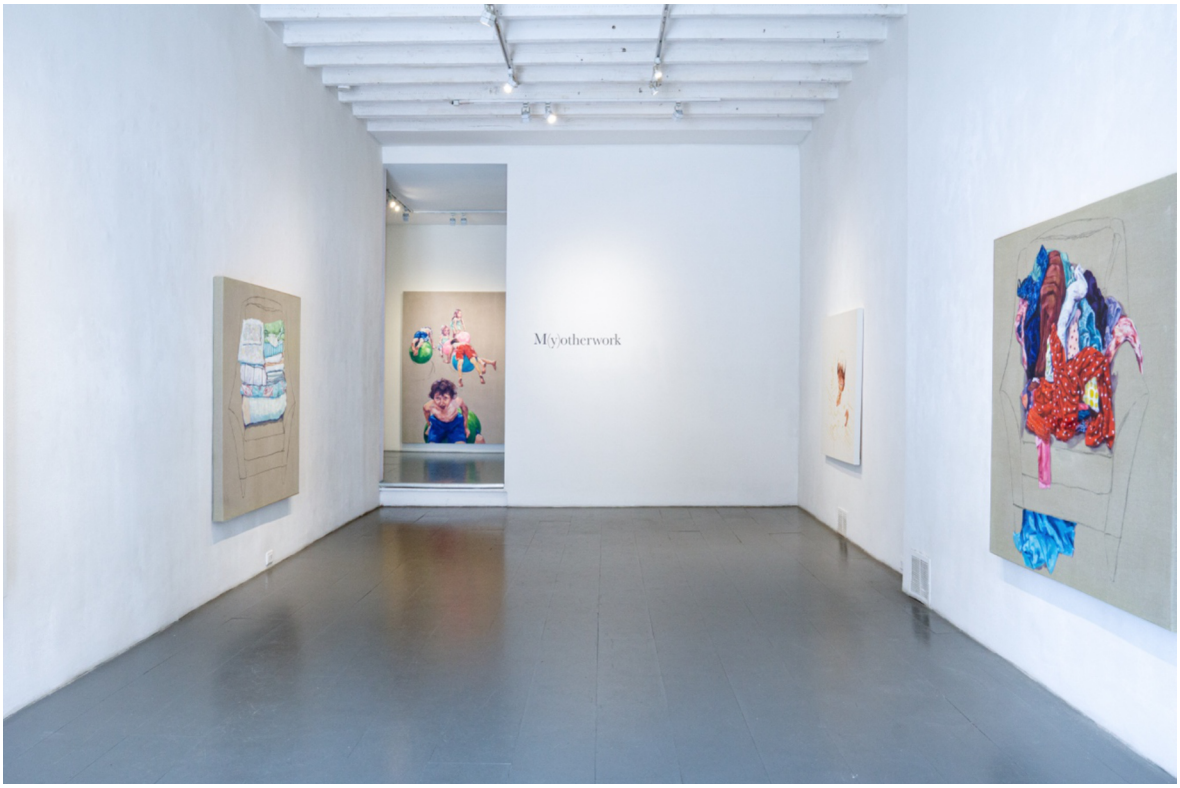

Fig. 16.

Fig. 17.

Fig. 18.

Fig. 19.

Fig. 20.

Fig. 21.

Fig. 22.

Fig. 23.

Fig. 24.

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