

MOTHERHOOD MOMENTS: CREATING NEW AESTHETIC SPACE

RACHAEL GRAD

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Abstract

Motherhood is mayhem. Since becoming a mother, I carve out space and time for short creation bursts. I observe my children's lack of inhibitions and carefree use of materials and incorporate their habits into my work. Art routines are a way to create in my messy maternal life. This thesis examines: How is the practice of an artist-mother visible, and how is it currently categorized in the visual arts? Concurrently, by what specific modalities do parents carve out space and time for work, art, family, and health, and what tactics might be envisioned?

This paper defines motherwork, a mother's studio practice, mother artist examples, the use of toys and gestures in my *Mommy Mayhem* and *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* art series. I explore my creativity, concluding with future plans involving artmaking and workshops for parents. Artistic play is critical for an artist mother.

Dedication

Dedicated to my three children for providing endless love, frustration, and entertainment.

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Motherhood is mayhem. Working around my children and their messes significantly changed my artmaking. When I became a mother, I could no longer spend long days in the studio. To create art, I had to carve out space and time for short bursts of creation.

An artist needs space and time to play (Huizinga, 1949). While play as expression and experimentation is encouraged for male artists, it is dismissed when practiced by mother artists (Chernick, 1992, p. 20). Play occupies my thoughts, activities, and art practice. Documenting the objects of play, such as toys and stuffed animals, in my drawings, paintings, and writing, I ponder how my children engage with their home and the world. When I play with my offspring, I observe and sometimes record their lack of inhibitions, carefree use of materials, and innocent questions, all of which I take with me and incorporate into my studio work.

Daily repetitive artmaking is a theme for other artist mothers, as I have discovered through research. Art routines are a reassuring way to create amid the quotidian scenes of messy maternal life. My research addresses the question: How is the practice of an artist-mother visible, and how is it currently categorized in the visual arts? Concurrently, by what specific modalities do parents carve out space and time for work, art, family, and health, and what tactics might be envisioned?

This thesis paper first defines motherwork, studio practice, and my version of artist-mother artmaking. Next, the paper describes my use of toys and gestures in my *Mommy Mayhem* and *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* art series. Then I outline some creativity practices of artist mothers and how that relates to my artwork. Lastly, I explore details of my tactics for a mother's artmaking in sketchbook drawing, 2-dimensional painting, 4-dimensional virtual reality immersion, and collaborative curation. I conclude by discussing how I plan to conceive in the

future with a path forward that involves testing a creativity and artmaking workshop for mothers and parents.

1. Motherwork and Studio Practice

Motherwork is a care practice that involves not just the practice of biological mothers, but all people doing mothering work as a central part of their life, as defined by Sarah Ruddick (2002). Immersed in Motherwork for over eleven years, my art practice changed from long solitary studio sessions to artmaking bursts at home in between childcare tasks and among children. This forced evolution as a parent creator is necessary for mothers of babies and small children who wish to persevere with their artmaking. In *How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers* (2022), Hettie Judah explains how mothers must adapt to continue creating art: “Working in short bursts of time while a child is napping, or at night (assuming, that is, that you have a child that naps solidly and sleeps at the appointed hour) makes certain media— notably oil painting — challenging” (Judah, 2022, p. 22). After having my first child over eleven years ago, I too abandoned oil painting in favour of quicker drying media including watercolour painting, ink, and pencil drawing.

In conjunction with my art and studio research, my academic research centers on maternal bodies, including geriatric pregnancy experiences like mine, that “are ignored, stigmatized, or censored” (Epp and Reeves 2019, p. 14). This work needs addressing and amplification because, according to art critic and writer Jori Finkel, “Motherwork is the last taboo in contemporary art” (Artbound, 2018). While once shocking and scandalous artwork is now common and acceptable and wide-ranging minorities and lifestyles are embraced, motherhood remains stigmatized and ignored by the art world. In an Art Basel panel discussion titled *Between Production and Reproduction - Career and Motherhood in the Artworld*, artist and single mother Coco Fusco states that gallerists, critics, and art fairs would rather have drunk, disruptive artists at an art opening than mothers with children and babies (Art Basel, 2019). Even

today, many artist mothers feel compelled to hide their identities as parents, in ways not required by fathers whose careers do not suffer from having children.¹

Women have been creating art for centuries, and mothers' art has been included in feminist movements for over a hundred years (Hessel, 2023). My work does not fit in Eti Wade's (2016, p. 275) established mother-art visual art categories² or with seminal mother artworks as exhibited in Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) and Monica Bock's *Maternal Exposure (or, don't forget the lunches)* (1999-2000)³ that turn repetitive childcare routines and maternal ambivalence into monumental art series. My art evades current denominations because I incorporate play and humour in paint and mixed media from a mother's perspective. I need the space to test out large marks and transcribe monumental paintings into my own ideas.

Through writing and visual work, I concur with scholars that humour and play are urgent (Sillman, 2020, p. 41), and women can both create and procreate (Chernick, 1992, p. 201). A favourite quote from Chernick describes the different reactions experienced by fathers and mothers to their studio work:

I wish it was not quite so difficult in this society for women to both create and procreate.

I have observed that men (fathers or no) have greater freedom to "play" in their artwork, and to be taken seriously as artists for doing so. (Chernick, 1992, p. 201).

Although Chernick's quote was written in the early 1990's, discrepancies between the reception to mothers' and fathers' studio practices and freedoms remain today. The terms used in

¹ "Being an artist is to experience a vigorous, experimental life of the mind and of the senses. Parenthood is another enriching experience: primal, haptic and life-affirming. Why are the two still seen as incompatible" Jeffrey Boloten and Juliet Hacking, June 2022 (Judah, 2022, p. 6).

² Wade categorizes five distinct ways in which artist-mothers work with their "Maternal Material": 1. Maternalist Materiality (employs maternal bodily excretion); 2. Maternal Refraction (employs mother's gaze); 3. Intersubjective Maternalist Trace; 4. Politicized Maternal Multiplicity; and 5. Performance and the Raw (Wade, 2016, p. 275). These categories include portrait photography, performance, and film.

³ See Appendix A.

Chernick's writing make me question why procreations include a "pro" versus creation on its own? The "pro" in "procreate" is deceiving because mothers and parents procreate, but there is no training or professional accreditation for this achievement. The creation of children and art are difficult feats. As one ages, both creation types are increasingly challenging for biological reasons such as declining fertility, reduced dexterity and stamina, and worsening eyesight.

Play keeps artists and parents mentally and physically alert and fit. Play serves to develop a mother's creativity, for according to psychologist Susan Rubin Suleiman (1994), "[t]o imagine the mother playing is to recognize her most fully as a creative subject—autonomous and free, yet (or for that reason?) able to take the risk of "infinite expansion" that goes with creativity" (Suleiman, 1994, p. 280). The studio is my place to play without interruption. Away from children, in my own creative space, I play, make a mess, and review the resulting chaos of gestural paintings. I agree with Claudia Dey that "[w]hen a woman becomes a mother, a set of changes is set off within her; the most altering is that she, as if under a spell, loses her autonomy of mind" (Dey, 2018). My children, their needs and objects are always on my mind, even when I am making art alone in my studio.

In *Homo Ludens* (1938), Johan Huizinga theorizes that play is a necessary, though insufficient on its own, condition for generating culture. One of the most significant human and cultural aspects of play is fun (Huizinga, 1949, p. 3). My children will stop playing when their game is no longer amusing, and they are bored. Play is a voluntary activity (Huizinga, 1949, p. 7). For many parents, playing with their children can feel mandatory and more akin to hard work than leisurely recreation.

Huizinga identifies five characteristics of play: 1. play is a freedom with no fees; 2. play is not "ordinary" or "real" life; 3. in locality and duration, play is distinct from "ordinary"; 4.

play demands absolute order with the slightest deviation spoiling the game; and 5. play is “an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it” (Huizinga, 1949, pp. 8-13). These characteristics remain valid today as I watch my children play daily. Their creativity seems extraordinary and worth documentation and further exploration in my art practice.

Referring to visual artists, Huizinga defines “plastic arts” to include architects, sculptors, painters, draughtsmen, ceramists, and decorative artists who, despite their “creative impulse,” are ruled by their discipline and subject to the skill and proficiency of the forming hand (Huizinga, 1949, p. 166). The quality, industry, and strenuousness in the work of plastic art obstruct the play factor and fulfill practical purposes “in no way dependent on aesthetic impulse” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 166). Nonetheless, even without an “atmosphere of common rejoicing” that can be found in music or poetry, “it is possible to find traces of the play-factor in the plastic arts” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 167). First written in 1938, this is a narrower view of visual arts than the interdisciplinary and multimedia included in arts today. Contemporary definitions of visual arts include music and communal experiences, as is the case with digital media, film, and other art forms. If one turns away from the “making of works of art to the manner in which they are received in the social milieu,” this social reception can characterize the play (Huizinga, 1949, p. 169). Community involvement, interaction, and reaction have become increasingly critical to contemporary artists and working artist mothers.

In the 2023 book, *An Artist and a Mother*, the editors and artist mothers Heidi Moller Somsen, Kaylan Buteyn and Tara Carpenter Estrada interview mother artists about their studio practice and artwork. The recorded conversations discuss the idea of taking up space for artist mother’s artwork and studio time. A tactic for my research is to delve into the art production

processes of other mother artists and test their strategies and methods. In researching the working methods of other mother artists, I try to discern: How do they manage to find time to create, parent, and research? What kind of childcare, partners, and lifestyle do they have? How can I learn from and emulate their successful tactics?

A forced changing of one's studio practice is an experience typical of artists who become mothers, as explained by Hettie Judah in *How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers* (2022). "The studio is often the first casualty of an artist's new identity as a parent. With less time and less money, an artist can start to feel that a studio is an unjustifiable luxury, particularly for artists in big cities with rents to match" (Judah, 2022, p. 38). The commute to and from a studio is prohibitive to parent artists with limited time because of childcare responsibilities. Many parent artists choose to create at home or in alternate ways. Artist Coco Fusco is open about the limited time that artist mothers have when children are small and how drastically her studio hours were cut due to expensive childcare and time limitations (Art Basel, 2019). Artist and mother Emma Talbot describes her struggles a year after her husband's death:

I was going to give up: I started packing up my studio and throwing everything away. And that's when I started making the work I make now, the drawings. It was a big process, a type of liberation: giving up on who you were before and what you thought your life was, and then having to totally reconstruct everything. (Judah, 2022, pp. 39-40).

Although it was difficult for Talbot to continue making art as a single mother, she adapted her practice to focus mainly on drawings and has since won major art awards and accolades (Judah, 2022, p. 40). Moving from slow oil painting to quicker drawings and works on paper was a choice made by Talbot and me.

Gallerists who are mothers and work with mothers understand the need to shift studio practice and media. When one of the artists she represents becomes a mother, London gallerist Pilar Corrias discusses with the artist how she can change tactics, such as working with different materials or collaborating with a fabricator (Judah, 2022, p. 62). Corrias explains that “[y]ou can’t push someone to do the impossible – it’s better to have an open and conducive dialogue and work around their constraints” and that as children grow families go through different stages (Judah, 2022, pp. 62-63). When working long term with a mother artist, it is logical to remember that each phase of childhood development changes parental obligations and demands.

2. Artist-Mother Artmaking

Over the years of being a mother, I have tested different art methods, materials, and techniques. Daily drawings allow me to generate art while feeding into and nourishing my studio practice. I use pencils, pens, and markers in sketchbooks, paper scraps, and leftover receipts. While a mother's role involves caring for her children, my drawings are a form of active self-care for my artistic discipline and well-being. I witness, document, and engage in play as an artist. Through observing my children playing and exploring, I devised strategies to incorporate play into my studio practice. My children inspire art-making tactics. Sometimes I collaborate with my kids to make artwork, yet the most satisfying art methods and experiments are conducted on my own.

My art practice is driven by an obsessive-compulsive need to document my three kids and their perpetually changing debris (meaning their messes of toys, books, clothing, and crafts). Daily household and art routines, rituals, and schedules reflect my attempt to rein in the chaos of pandemic parenting. Numbers, habits, and repetition are crucial to my sanity and survival.

There are 52 weekends each year when my children's school, daycare, or summer camp are closed for 65 hours in a row. My husband and I count down the 65 hours each Friday afternoon when our offspring are home until Monday morning when they return to school, daycare, and camp. This cynical parenting perspective of spending time with our children is relatable to many other caregivers of children. To symbolize the slow passing of parenting time, I created 52 digital collages, each containing 65 artworks layered together in Adobe Photoshop.⁴ The artwork layers include my pencil on paper postcard-size drawings, abstract colour paintings

⁴ See Appendix B.

of stuffed animals and toys, and paint experiments using toys to make marks on different surfaces.

Colourful abstract paintings are loosely based on combining these collages, my observational drawings, and photographs. This melding blurs the distinction between representation and abstraction. Gestural paint marks use the bright colours found in children's debris (meaning their toys, crafts, books, clothing, and messes). Parenting moments are portrayed in my *Mommy Mayhem* gestural paintings and *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* line art, which employ my children's toys as paintbrushes.

3. Mommy Mayhem: Toys and Gestures

The gestural painting techniques in my “Mommy Mayhem” series reference and mock art history movements such as the machismo of the Abstract Expressionist painters. Visiting *Gets a Thrill When I See De Koo* (1978)⁵ by artist Robert Colescott in the Rose Art Museum (Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts) in fall 2023, I realized that many artists work through their responses to historically dominant male artists like Willem De Kooning. My *Mommy Mayhem* series includes paintings of stuffed animals, including bunny rabbits and elephants,⁶ which are reminiscent of and resonate with Willem De Kooning’s painting *Woman II* (1952).⁷

This is my interpretation of a mother mocking male-dominant, macho Abstract Expressionism. I abstract stuffed animals and toys that serve as transitional comfort objects for children as they grow and learn independence from their parents. The paint marks and lines use the bright colours found in toys and messes. Abstract Expressionism, playful mark-making, and the contradiction between my dream of control and order versus the reality of constant pandemonium and mess at home inform my visual language. The resulting art articulates my experience of motherhood mayhem.

Infusing humour, silliness, and whimsy into my art practice helps me elevate motherhood's drab, demanding, and draining aspects. With the aim of time efficiency and productivity, one tactic is to build up layers of pencil and paint marks. To not overthink or overanalyze my process, I often employ materials that are not precious, such as paper, crayons, markers, and children’s washable paint. These inexpensive and readily disposable materials

⁵ See Appendix C.

⁶ See Appendix D.

⁷ See Appendix E.

allow me to be as uninhibited as my children. When the materials are not precious and easy to clean and dispose of, I find myself more accessible to experiment, make mistakes, and mess up my home, studio, and artwork. Being an artist mother is a form of empowered mothering, which can be personal and different from feminist mothering that aims to impact wider society and external forces.

As a mother making art, I work within the system and feed off of my host, whether the host is my employer, the University, or societal parenting expectations, like a parasite described by Anna Watkins Fisher in *The Play in the System* (2020). This empowered mothering form is also a form of parasitical resistance art (Fisher, 2020). I find moments in between mothering work, childcare and household tasks to sneak in my art practice.

Incorporating art time within my parenting schedule is my method of incorporating *la perruque*, which is more broadly understood to be conducting work for oneself while under the guise of working for an employer. My personal *la perruque* is finding ways to create art around the obligations and responsibilities of motherhood. In comparing tactics versus strategies, Jesuit priest and scholar Michel de Certeau states that strategies are campaigns of the powerful while tactics are for the weak or non-powerful (de Certeau, 1998, p. 37). De Certeau explains that tactics are not subsets of strategy but rather adaptations to an environment that was created by the powerful strategies. As a mother artist, I often feel weak and struggle not to fail to fulfill my self-designed expectations for my art practice and parenthood.

Persistence in mothering and art is a way to continue both silently and intuitively. The concept of *Métis*, meaning “cunning intelligence” in Ancient Greek, is a “form of unreflective knowing, which combines intuition, foresight, feint and a sense of opportunism” (Chia and Holt,

2009, p. 192). Métis, in Greek mythology, was Zeus' first wife, the goddess of prudence, cunning, craftiness, and the most knowing of all beings (Chia and Holt, 2009, p. 192). Jealous of the pregnant Métis' unborn child, Zeus ate her, and then Métis' child Athena sprang forth from his head (Chia and Holt, 2009, p. 193). Chia and Holt explain that "Métis's offspring is thus born under the skein of deception and of a cunning circling back, in which the mother exploits her apparently inactive and stationary originating point to sustain and complete a pregnancy and offspring more powerful than any that would have occurred by normal means" (Chia and Holt, 2009, p. 193). Using the least amount of effort, Métis was able to create the most extraordinary child. This strange story could serve as inspiration for artist mothers looking to create knowledgeable children and artwork.

Much like motherhood, "Métis is a kind of internalized coping capability involving a 'memory without language' or representation" (Chia and Holt, 2009, p. 196). Using intuition and the path of least resistance allowed Métis to gain advantage and still give birth. Such tactical coping allows mothers to persist in living and parenting. Nonetheless, eventually an artist mother must choose strategies to evolve socially and collaboratively. Coping is not a sustainable or desirable way to reproduce children or artwork. In time mother artists want to share the products of their labour, see them exist their home/studio, and independently flourish in the wider community.

Another Ancient Greek concept, "kairos," means the right time or opportunity for action. Discerning openings or gaps takes practice, knowledge, and attunement to one's life. Only once these are identified can one seize the moment. When I realized that I had a window of several years when all of my children would be in the same school, I timed my MFA studies to fit that

time. For many years, creating on my own served its purpose but after a while I foresee wanting both my children and my artwork out of my protection and out into the world. This growing up as a parent and an artist is a common trajectory for mother-artists. The need for friends and peers arises for many artist parents once their children are in school or the care of others. Some look to work on collaborative community projects with other parents as a way to work on a large scale with limited time (Wade, 2016). Mother artists share studio space, babysitters, and art projects to cope and function as creators.

Since I became a mother, one Métis-like tactic I have used is to have pre-decided-upon ongoing projects to which I can always revert. This narrow studio focus lets me quickly leave and resume creation projects as parenting schedules and constraints. I set up repetitive projects and strict constraints involving daily drawing and painting. With my predetermined rules, I concentrate on the creation actions and processes. These limitations are a deliberate attempt to ignore the artistic pressure of generating new ideas or strokes of original brilliance. In the past, I spent excessive time pondering how, what, and why to draw and paint.

Despite a lifestyle that is constantly subject to unexpected schedule disruptions and interruptions, my tactics and strategies allow me to continue creating art at least weekly and most often on a daily basis. I avoid overthinking the rules and restrictions, being stuck on thoughts, and being blocked from making work.

Play, a vital part of artistic creativity (Huizinga, 1949, p. 169), is the basis of my studio practice in subject matter (drawing and painting my children and their toys) and in techniques.

Play is a way to multitask and meld mothering and artmaking by simultaneously doing both. I bring silliness and play to the artist's statements I write to describe the visual work.⁸

⁸ See Appendix F.

4. *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train Series*

In my current *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* series art series, I repurpose children's toys into paintbrushes.⁹ Toys have overtaken my home and artwork and are always in my mind and in the way. Rolling a toy train across my art is a not-so subtle metaphor for being a mother artist. In writing about my *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* series, I mention my chosen way of working, which is a sweeping motion to make smooth parallel lines.

To express motherhood in body and gesture, I use small Thomas the Tank Engine toy trains with six or four wheels to make fluid marks across watercolour paper. I tested various brush strokes and differing marks with the toy train, including quick pushing of the train to letting it move on its own across the page. Dipping toys like trains in paint, then rolling, dabbing, or smearing them across paper. I decided on a sweeping arm motion as my preferred mark. The smooth, rolling motion is a more satisfying way of using the train than dabbing it like a stamp. This rolling motion requires loading significant water and pigment for each mark run. For the paint colour to show up on the paper, I must heavily press down on the toy train during the entire rolling mark movement. Though I heavily press into the train for the duration of the motion, I am usually unable to equally apply the paint throughout the same mark. I make the large arm movements both while standing over the paper and while sitting or kneeling beside it.

The mark-making for my *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* series has proven unexpectedly tiring for my arms and back. Ironically, working in this way causes the same physical exhaustion, aches, and pains as those I experienced after childbirth as a mother to a newborn. This series requires me to work in short bursts and take many breaks while painting. Resting alone and respite from one's own kids is also highly recommended when mothering.

⁹ See my fine art portfolio: <https://www.rachaelgradart.com/colour-art-portfolio/motherhood-train-paintings>

The playful multicolour works versus dark black images reflect the 24-hour nature of mother duties. The black-dominant paintings from the series represent the many overnights required by parents. I have two sub-sections in the dark night series: “Grey Lines,” black ink on white watercolour paper, and “Overnights,”¹⁰ metallics on black watercolour paper.

Humour and whimsy are integral to my artistic expression amid parenting strain and stress. I try not to demand too much of myself or my art or take the inevitable artistic rejections too seriously. I try to find the silliness in even the darkest, most difficult periods of mothering and art striving. Being surrounded and inundated by my children’s play toys, objects, books, popular culture, and jokes keeps my sense of levity.

A tactic to minimize the intrusion of my children and their belongings into my artistic time and space is to imagine alternate universes and possibilities. All too often, I have daydreamed about my children’s tortured toys, bored stuffed animals, and discarded belongings coming to life in the future. These speculations usually involve funny musings of existential doubt and ambivalence of the toys toward their human owners and sentience. The toys are practical, resigned to their lives, and not vengeful or resentful. I imagine the inner worlds of my children’s toys and stuffed animals and recreate those visions in different formats, including painting, drawing, and research. I project personalities and experiences onto these objects and portray them in my paintings and writing.

My fascination with my children’s objects rose because they overwhelm my home and concerns. I realized that as a child I had far fewer toys and objects than owned by my children. Their attachment to toys and stuffed animals differs from my remembered childhood experience. The fact that many young children form intense and persistent attachments to specific soft toys

¹⁰ Appendix G.

or blankets has long intrigued and at times perplexed parents and child mental health professionals.

In 1954, Donald Winnicott placed the stamp of scientific legitimacy upon this phenomenon which he termed the “transitional object” of the first “not-me possession” (Litt, 1986, p. 383). Transitional objects are a boon and a bane for mothers. Blankets, stuffed animals, and comfort toys serve to soothe children, allowing them to form strong attachments. At the same time, the objects give mothers a respite from the constant, ever-present job of comforting babies and small children.

5. Good Enough Artist Mothering

Rest and relief are critical to a mother artist's ability to parent and create art. Donald Winnicott also developed the idea of the "Good Enough Mother" in his book *Playing and Reality* (1971). This approach to parenting involves being sensitive, responsive, and adaptive to children's needs and developmental abilities (Winnicott, 1971). Such an intuitive parenting approach is reminiscent of the Métis concept. A good-enough parenting style combined with the use of transitional objects allows parents a break from the constant care of babies and infants while encouraging their children to develop healthy independent attachment skills.

Transitional objects and attachments are essential for children's and adult creativity. Litt explains that "the basis for active creative activity in adult life is the capacity for existence in the intermediate space between reality and fantasy and that the child's attachment to an inanimate object represents the prototype of this capacity" (Litt, 1986, p. 387). Litt cites Winnicott's book *Playing and Reality*, which emphasizes that this creativity is universal and not specific to the arts. It is the impetus behind any healthy, purposeful activity (Litt, 1986, p. 387). Play, creativity, and transitional objects have essential roles in child development.

Toys and stuffed animals are omnipresent in my home environment, life, and art. They are always in my mind (do we have each child's favourite stuffie before bedtime?) and in my way (stepping on Lego, beads and doll shoes can be very painful). The objects of play fuel my creativity and inspire my artwork to the point of being an object-oriented ontology.

As defined by Katherine Behar, object-oriented ontology "theorizes that the world consists exclusively of objects and treats humans as objects like any other, rather than privileged subjects" (Behar, 2016, 1). This philosophical movement is compelling for parents of young children who are immersed in our children's play worlds. We engage in pretend play employing

toys and random objects into our children's imagined spaces and scenarios. The ability to engross myself into my children's games enhances my creativity and the possibilities for my studio art. I observe the toys and see how these objects are used in play. Alongside my children, I test the toys' possibilities. I draw the toys and the gestures of play, and then incorporate these remembered moments into my abstract paintings.

My object-oriented feminist paintings portray the stuffed animals and embodies individual stuffie characters, including heroes Squishy Elephant the First, Esquire,¹¹ Dirty Belle,¹² and Chewbacca. Feminism and art have long been engaged with the notion of human objects (Behar, 2016, p. 1). My paintings of my children's stuffies and objects further the three areas of object-oriented feminism of politics, humour, and ethics defined by Behar (Behar, 2016, p. 3).

Children have an acknowledged right to play according to the International Play Association's *Declaration of the Child's Right to Play* (1978, 2014). My research and writing work respects children's play while advocating for a mother's right to play. The objects of play take on vibrant lives as imagined by a mother constantly overwhelmed by toy messes, who both appreciates and loathes them. Good enough mothering and feeding a sense of humour about the dreary aspects of motherhood are integral to my writing and painting.

Mother painters Tala Madani and Ulala Imai have unique approaches to mocking motherhood and presenting the "good enough" version of parenting in their artwork. In *Shit Moms* (2019), Madani showed funny though destructive and violent paintings and animated

¹¹ See Appendix H.

¹² See Appendix I.

videos. The art exhibition title references both the colloquial term for women who fail in their role of “good mothers” and also the blurred, shapeless, brown mother figure forms in Madani’s art that are made of excrement. Through tenderly painted scenes with poo brown mom figures, Madani mocks the idea of an ideal mother role and the idea of a parent being “shit.”

In the art show *AMAZING* (2021), Japanese painter Ulala Imai juxtaposed toys and food in beautifully painted, though silly, still lifes. The exhibition title came from her daughter’s elementary school project to create a new country. Imai extended her child’s school project to her own art practice with a painting series that narrates the interior lives of figurines, foods, and objects of her home life. Imai treats minor objects and domestic experiences as major events in these still-life paintings, capturing sweet and silly intimate parenting moments. I look to these mother painters and others who critically infuse lightness into otherwise heavy, serious, and relatable, yet simultaneously amusing and absurd, depictions of parenthood.

6. Tactics for a Mother's Art Making

After researching the working methods and artistic approaches of other mother artists, I tested and devised my own artmaking tactics. Which tactic I use on a given day depends on the constraints of my schedule and family needs. Being in a full-time art program allows me more opportunity to try new media and vary the scale of my art. My chosen tactics include traditional portable sketchbook drawing, labour-intensive digital painting in virtual reality, co-curating in-person exhibitions and art experiences, and paintings that express mommy mayhem.

a. Sketchbook Drawing

Writing, drawing, and painting are ways to create in-between mundane mommy moments. I have long had an active drawing and sketchbook practice. As a mother of multiple children, I batch my cooking, baking, child-rearing errands, and artmaking. This means that I work on between four and fifteen paintings and drawings each time I paint. During an individual studio session, I paint a layer or make a few marks on the painting or drawing surfaces that are in progress. This tactic of tackling numerous art surfaces every time I work enables me to build up a related series of artworks or complete bodies of artwork, even with limited studio hours. I have learnt to snatch and capitalize on the art-making moments as they present themselves. I employ materials and techniques adapted over time for easy portability, quick drying, and cleanup. These materials include pencils, pens, and quick-drying watercolour and acrylic paint. Sometimes, I strategically finish a painting with longer-drying oil paint to emphasize layers, colours, or texture in an artwork.

These compulsive habits turned tactics have resulted in a significant accumulation of many minor marks, gestures, and experiences. Over 11-plus years of mothering, I have managed to conduct small experiments in the studio. The acknowledgement that great works can be built

up with tiny actions is encouraging, as expressed by Vincent van Gogh, “[g]reat things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together” (Van Gogh, 1882).

Finding moments within parenting chaos to make art is an ongoing challenge that shifts with each new school term and schedule change. I am limited by the demands and needs of multiple children and adults living in the same home. My shared calendar with four family members is now like a Tetris game, slotting in the correct number of pieces in the form of activities and attention for each person. Nevertheless, despite my children’s messes, illnesses, and time demands, I can usually start (not always complete) at least one daily drawing. Between mundane “mommy” moments, i.e., feeding my children and driving them to school/playdates/programs, I carve out minutes at minimum for an art practice. Great days occur when I have undisturbed hours for painting. Drawing or artmaking, however, can be interrupted, often when my children draw on my work.¹³

I carefully hide sketchbooks, pencils, sharpeners, and erasers around my home and in my purse to be easily accessible. Typically, I sketch with pencil on paper, observing my children while they watch TV, read, or play. Often, I draw their clutter of toys and belongings before cleaning up. I make quick sketches of these domestic messes, clutter, and chaos. Before drawing, I ponder a series of questions: What is around me that I feel compelled to draw? Should I leave the toys as they are or rearrange them? Will this be a multi-day or month-long project? Or a specific idea that I explore only one time?

This art habit and tactic is easy to start and stop and involves minimal preparation and cleanup. Sketchbook drawing is a mobile and flexible practice. I am able to draw while waiting for my children at school pickup, after school and weekend programs or medical appointments,

¹³ See examples of collaborative drawings with my children in Appendix J.

and at home. Sometimes I write notes about the drawing, my mood, or the environment. When I have more space and time, as in my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program, I have enjoyed working larger and testing new media in different formats including in virtual reality and in gallery spaces.

b. Virtual Reality Immersion

During the luxurious long studio days of my MFA program, I took my painting practice into the fourth dimension and learned how to create worlds in virtual reality (VR). Before this experience, I had conducted digital experiments through iPad and laptop drawing and painting. The VR painting in Multibrush, Openbrush, and other applications was new to me and required many hours to grasp. The 4-dimensional worlds require consideration of all sides of the objects and feel more related to traditional sculpture than painting techniques.

When painting in VR, I must remember and address all sides of the objects, including the tops and bottoms. Yet even these object angles are not usually viewed in traditional sculpture. VR visitors or viewers to my painted worlds may get lost and transport themselves above, below, or even inside the painted objects. Therefore, all of those views and angles must be preconceived and designed when creating the VR objects. If not, the viewer or visitor may be confused, and glitches may occur in the digital world.

VR painting allows me to create without the mess and expense of oil and physical art materials. Sometimes, I work to bring a VR idea, scribble, gesture into real life after digitally testing it. In VR, I can easily and quickly expand or shrink the scale and change the colours of marks and features. Playing with scale and relationships allows for experimentation and easy multiplication. I can save different versions and multiple copies of my digital marks, objects, and scenes.

VR involves no paint or canvas and is thus physically cleaner than traditional painting or drawing. Nonetheless, the digital VR experience mentally impacts me with headaches and nausea after several hours of being online. Within a few hours of virtual painting time, I typically long for the tangibility and tactility of actual paint, physical paint brushes, scraping, applying, and erasing mushy colour. I yearn for the real-life mess of paint that I can physically feel and move around. There are often annoying glitches and time-consuming technical hurdles in VR, which also cause me to flee back to working with 2-dimensional art materials.

Digital experiments are a way for me to relate to and connect with my children and their love of screens and digital experiences. When I take my children and their friends to art galleries and museums, they gravitate to digital media such as videos, screens, projections, and tablets. A tactic or draw of the digital is to get my children and their peers interested in my art and ideas. Nonetheless, screens and extended time on the computer digitally editing and animating my VR worlds and imagined objects frustrate and exhaust me. After testing VR and various other digital media and applications, I still prefer 2-dimensional tactics and approaches to artmaking and have chosen flat surfaces as the focus of my thesis exhibition.

Toward the end of my first year of my MFA program, I began combining imagined, virtual, and real worlds. Bringing the digital/VR movement, gestures, and feeling of 4-dimensionality back into 2-dimensional paintings is a new feeling and consideration. Painting objects and spaces from multi-views has changed my approaches to 2-dimensional painting. I push the sense of 3 and 4-dimensional space in my flat artwork through the use of repetitive lines.

In my *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train (Triptych)*,¹⁴ I used a rolling motion to sweep my children's toy trains that painted parallel marks of watercolour pigment on paper. The built-up layers of lines create an optical illusion of space on the flat surface. Extending staring at medium to large size *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* paintings force viewers to refocus their eyes afterward, a similar feeling experienced after VR. Rolling a toy train across my art is a not-so subtle metaphor for being a mother artist.

Remnants of gestures, feelings, and forms is a common theme throughout my art series. In both my *After the Plague Party* and *Mommy Mayhem* series I layer lines of paint, ink, or graphite to create *pentimento*, meaning the presence of earlier images, constructions, or strokes that I have changed and painted over. These art ghosts give my paintings and drawings an ethereal sense of moving shapes, space, and figures. Viewers are left wondering which presence or forms were actually depicted, and which were imagined or perceived.

After working in VR, I think about bringing more angles into the new artwork. When working with paint and pencil on paper and canvas, I consider how to create the illusion of space and depth through line, shape, colour, and form. I am relieved to return to real life drawing and painting, putting pencil to paper and paintbrush to canvas. Experiencing the various works in a white cube gallery space changes the context and meanings for viewers.

c. Collaborative Exhibition as Testing Grounds

At the beginning of my second MFA year, I worked with a Master of Arts in Art History student to display my various art series and experiments in a show titled “In-Between: Perspectives on Artist-Motherhood.”¹⁵ The show ran during the last week of September 2023 and

¹⁴ See Appendix K.

¹⁵ See Appendix K for installation photographs of the “In-Between” art show.

the first week of October 2023. Installing fifteen individual *Mommy Mayhem* series paintings turned the separate paintings into a single work on one wall. Order was formed out of the painting chaos. The artworks related to one another and simultaneously became one larger, cohesive artwork.

Collaborating with a curator to hang my work in a gallery space changed my perception of my paintings. The fresh eyes and perspective of the curator led me to reconsider my work and its possibilities for scale. Together the curator and I changed the direction of some artworks to interact better with each other and as a whole. We found methods for the divergent media and styles to converge and relate as expressions of motherhood.

The “In-Between” art show included a video wall projection of the VR-painted world for people uncomfortable in VR Meta headsets. The physical gallery display included my black ink on white paper studies from my *After the Plague Party* series. These paintings show my studio process of transcribing gestures from photographs or historic artworks. They are studies and part of my inner thought process, but not work that I feel is necessarily finished. After displaying them in the “In-Between” show, I decided to focus on my *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* and *Mommy Mayhem* series for the remaining time of my MFA program.

d. Mommy’s Mayhem: A Culmination of Experiments and Experiences

I have gone through multiple pregnancies and the baby, toddler, and early childhood years for three children. During this time, I have continuously made art. My strategies for creating have undergone subtle, unexpected Métis-like evolutions and adaptations as my children and schedule have changed. I have become more adept at identifying Kairos, the critical moment to alter my studio art approaches. From my quick sketches and painted drawings, I can capture, remember and reuse observed moments of my children and our home environment. The

drawings allow me to record gestures, light, and shapes that I can reincorporate into my paintings.

My gestural painting techniques abstract parenting experiences and beloved toys and objects. The paint marks and lines echo the haziness of raising children, where many memories are a blur of multicoloured rooms, toys, and messes. I draw the toys, use some of the toys as paintbrushes, then recreate the toys in a visual world that hints at their existence. Aspects of specific toys are evident, for example, a stuffed elephant's trunk or a cat's ears. Other toy elements are unclear and open to interpretation. Viewers often see different characters or figures than I abstracted. The result is a jumble of lines, colours, and forms that can have multiple meanings. Even when individual elements are reinvisioned, the artwork still evokes playfulness, whimsy, and movement.

The toys are personal objects known intimately because I have watched my children enjoy them and play with them. I have also played with my children and their toys. I have documented my children at play and the toys in my life drawings. Some toys have been employed as my paintbrushes. The *Mommy Mayhem* paintings represent the culmination of my various play and art experiences and experiments. While the paintings represent the chaotic nature of parenting, the full meaning behind the artwork may not be obvious to some viewers. Nonetheless, the artwork elicits sensory impressions of quirkiness, levity, fun, and energy.

Having taken modernist art history classes at Brandeis University and other schools, my studio painting intentionally channels and responds to Abstract Expressionism. With my academic background and family life, I initially felt compelled to respond to such Western canonical artists, artworks, and methods. My *Mommy Mayhem* series allude to Abstract Expressionist artists like De Kooning. My *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* paintings invoke

minimalist line artists, such as Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt, and Ellsworth Kelly. As an artist with an active imagination and love of speculation, my chosen aesthetic for each series is a reaction to a specific art movement. Thus, each series' chosen painting technique may vary widely and appear divergent. I am not an artist with a set aesthetic or style (previous series have involved photograph image transfer, collage, and realistic painting). The aesthetic of my current series (*Mommy Mayhem*, *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train*, and *After the Plague Party*) reflects my reaction to and frustration with Western canonical art historical art movements that ignore mothers.

With its gestural marks, distorted figures, and messy lines, the work of male artists like De Kooning gives the appearance of speed and fluidity. At first glance, the line art of Martin, LeWitt, and Kelly may seem simple and easy. Based on extensive study of these works and attempts at transcription, I am convinced that both the Abstract Expressionist and minimalist art are the result of extensive trial and errors and a strongly developed intuitive studio practice. While the gestural marks in my art appear to be quickly painted, they are usually the result of considered planning, long deliberation, and many painting sessions. The feminine, subversive *Métis* was at work even if not recognized.

In my painting, the drawn and painted lines are hectic, the forms in motion, and the figures joyful, tired, or confused. The colours in my paint marks are taken from the bright colours found in my children's favourite toys, books, clothing, and belongings. Neon yellow, cadmium red, grass green, bubble gum pink, and cobalt blue are frequently used in my paintings. The primary, neon, and other vibrant colours recall memories and objects associated with childhood and play. The loose, often unfinished forms and space capture hurried, harried circumstances. Multiple overlapping figures and shapes show situations and environments that

involve connections and relationships with others. While the overall appearance of each series may seem familiar and reference Western canonical work, my artwork creates a new aesthetic space that includes the experiences of mothers and caregivers.

7. Conceiving in the Future: A Path Forward

My birthing days are over, and the only babies I will be bringing forth into life will be my original paintings and artworks. As part of my final thesis exhibition in 2024, I am running two workshops: one for mothers, parents, and caregivers to explore play and artmaking; and the other for kindergarten children similarly play through art. I originally designed a two-hour program to encourage caregiver adults to creatively experiment with alternative toy applications of mark-making and expression. The class will be offered only to caregivers in an enclosed art space. No children will be allowed to invade or interrupt during the workshop time.

This workshop will lead the attending caregivers in asserting that they take personal time to reflect on their lives and roles. The class will provide tools and tactics for caregiver self-care. I will guide the mother/parent participants in a series of directed breathing, movement, and mark-making exercises to loosen their inhibitions. The art making time will expand attendees' understanding of what objects and tools can be incorporated into creative output through painting and drawing. The focus will be on the artistic process, not on the final resulting paintings or artworks. Before the workshop, I will ask the caregivers to bring in their most and least favourite toys and other small objects from their home lives. I will also bring a selection of toys, stuffed animals, and personal objects that I have tested and know to be effective for mark-making. I will encourage the attending mothers and caregivers to experiment with their personal objects and those that are foreign to them.

When I described this workshop to the kindergarten teachers at my children's school, they asked me to run a version of it for their classes. Thus, I am now scheduled to conduct two different versions of experimental play in artmaking in March 2024. Comparing the caregivers' approaches to kindergarten children's will be a fascinating endeavour.

I received a SSHRC Michael Smith Foreign Supplement grant to study in New York City beginning April 2024, immediately after my thesis show. I look forward to intense studio creation, immersion in research, attending lectures and shows, and participating in dialogue with New York based mother-artists. This time will allow me to make connections within an international community and make this invisible mother modality visible to the general public. Building on my *Pandemic Parenting* curatorial project and art series,¹⁶ I will continue my investigation and development of theoretical frameworks in contemporary visual arts and feminist studies that include needed play for mother-artists and aesthetic spaces for motherhood experiences so that mothers can continue their art practice post-childbirth.

My intended research activities at the New York Studio School are to engross myself in drawing, painting, art exploration, learning, and networking. I will visit New York galleries and museums that feature artist mother's work and expect to gain a better sense of the contemporary New York art world and the place of mother artists within the international art field. My research will occur through a studio art and educational experience participating in the New York Studio School's immersive drawing and painting marathons. Expected outcomes from the research include collaborations between New York based artist mothers, new art series, and art exhibitions.

¹⁶ *Pandemic Parenting*, 1 Aug.–7 Sep. 2022, Museum of Motherhood, St. Petersburg, Florida; *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train Series*; *Mommy Mayhem series*.

8. Conclusion: Playing to Persevere

Learning from my children and the stolen minutes of artmaking between childcaring, I bring play, silliness, and experimentation into my studio practice. With my children's daily influence, I am compelled to incorporate humour, whimsy, and colour into my painting. As a time-saver tactic and a respite from bright children's colours, I often choose to work in pencil and ink on paper. Black and white drawings that I later turn into painting is one fallback method to creating my art. Using my children's toys to make paint marks is another tactic. Thus, I conceived tactics to draw and paint amidst my children's dribbles and crawls. Though they may be scribbles and scrawls, their aggregation has led to my daily drawing series and various bodies of paintings and other artwork, including my *Mommy Mayhem* and *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* series.

I have recreated the speculations of my children's toys and stuffed animals in paint, pencil, written, and VR formats. I have tested various formats to see which materials and experiences best convey the ideas of motherhood and play. Forcing creation amidst chaos, whimsy, silliness, complexity, confusion, stumbling, and striving, I aim for consistent artmaking, writing, and good enough mothering.

Making ambitious plans for my studio creation, I am simultaneously ready to adjust my entire family's complicated schedule at a moment's notice. This ability to quickly pivot and adapt is often triggered when a child is sick, my partner is in need, or other issues related to family care and household emergencies surface and must be immediately handled. So, my mini moments of creation are crucial to sustaining a consistent sense of artistic well-being and ongoing, long-term art practice. I make lots of marks, gestures, and brushstrokes. I accumulate drawing and painting studies and gestures, most of which I later decide to redraw, paint over, collage, or repurpose.

Eventually, over an extended amount of time, with many marks, revisions, and failures, I deem some artworks worth saving and reflecting. I am persistent even when most of my efforts appear inadequate or need improvement. Despite times when I feel sick, tired, apathetic, or exhausted, I am inspired and driven to continue making art. The tactics of editing, reworking, reusing, and collaging can later lead to better work. This stubborn Metis-like persistence allows me to be an independent artist, not solely a caregiver with dependents. Playing in studio with art materials connects being a mother and a visual artist. Artistic play enables humour and levity into the mundane motherhood moments. I am bringing my home and studio-based art experiments and ideas into the community through art exhibitions and workshops. These separate classes for caregivers and children enable connections with others. After my thesis exhibition, I will bring my research, artwork, and ideas to other communities to form networks with artist caregivers and revel in mommy mayhem. In this way, I work toward larger projects and goals to elevate and create new aesthetic space for the work of artist mothers.

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Appendix A

Monica Bock's installation artwork *Maternal Exposure (or, don't forget the lunches)* (1999-2000).



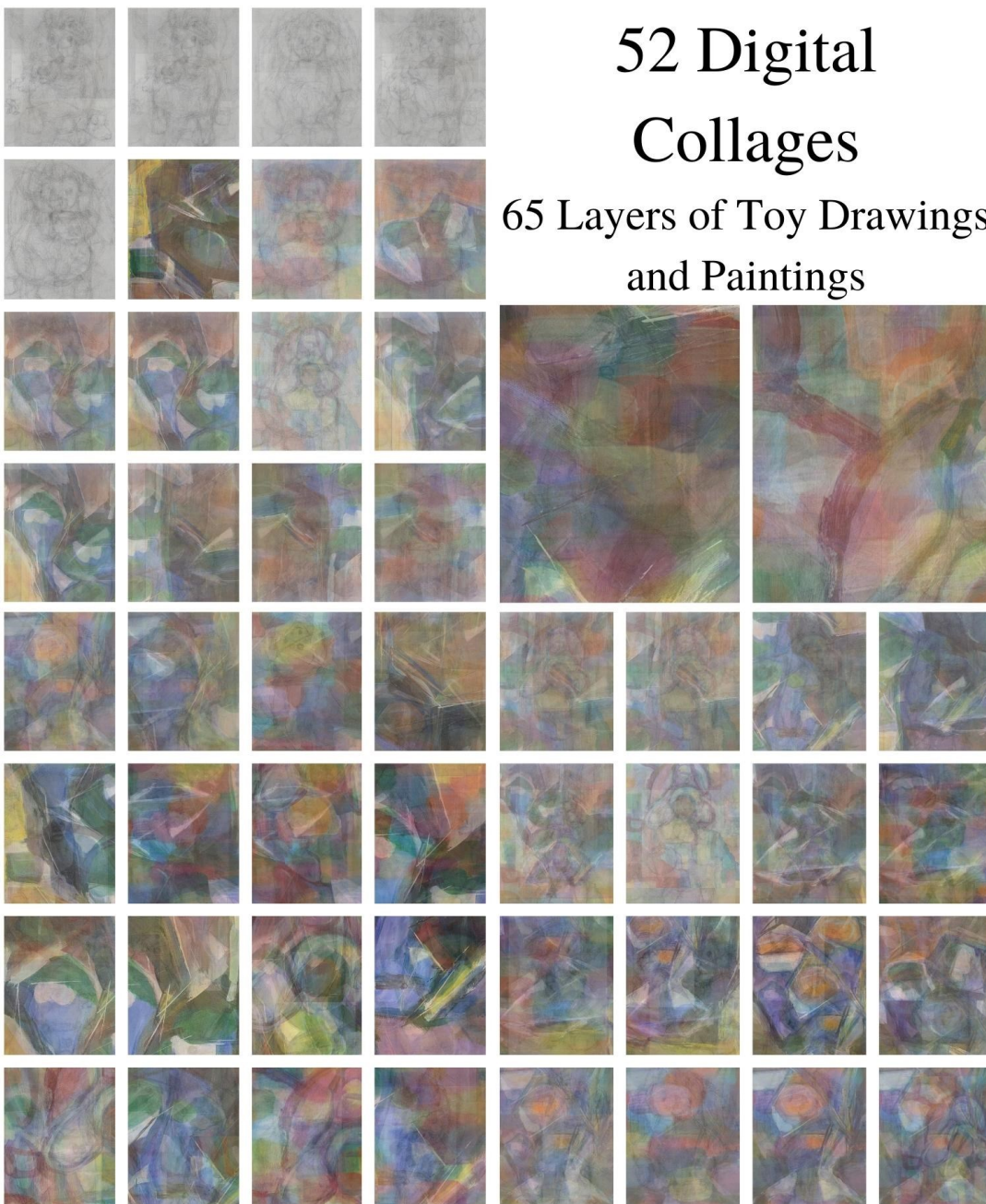
*Maternal Exposure
(don't forget the
lunches)*, 1999–
2000. Folded sheet
lead, cast glycerin,
hand-chalked wall
text by Zofia Burr.
Bags @ approx.
11 × 5 × 3 inches.
Detail, left.

Appendix B

52 Mommy Mayhem Digital Collages.

52 Digital Collages

65 Layers of Toy Drawings and Paintings



Appendix C

Gets a Thrill When I See De Koo (1978) by Robert Colescott shown at the Rose Art Museum,

Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts in fall 2023.



Appendix D

Mommy Mayhem: Bunny Landscape #1 (2021), Oil on Canvas, 3 feet x 7 feet.



Appendix E

Willem De Kooning's *Woman II* (1952) painting.



Appendix F
An example of my non-typical artist statement from 2022.

Artist Statement: Mommy Mayhem

Motherhood is MAYHEM.

my abstract expressionist paintings stem from documenting my kids and their

P.E.R.P.E.T.U.A.L...M.E.S.S.E.S...

Digital collages containing 65 Photoshop layers of observational *drawings* and *paintings* inform my artwork. *Gestural* marks in oil and acrylic are built up on canvas through **REPETITION**. The bright, vibrant colours come from T.O.Y.S.

playful abstracted representational imagery

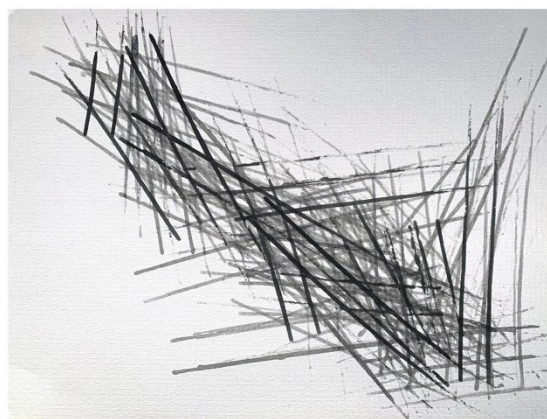
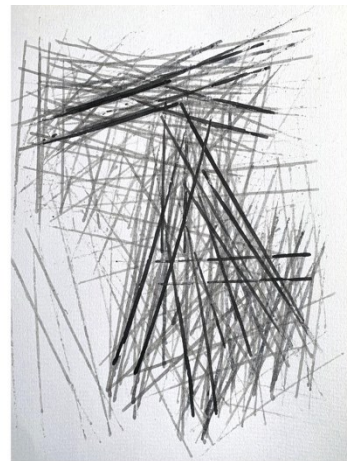
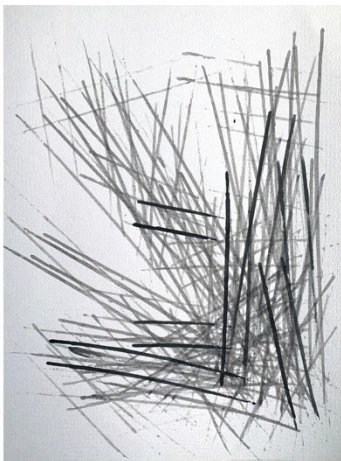
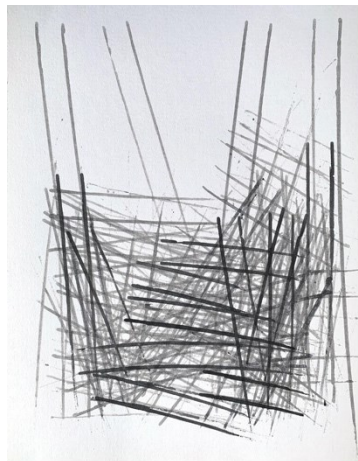
(((echoes))) the
((()))

C H A O S

of MOTHERHOOD.

Appendix G

Examples of my *Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train* painting series.



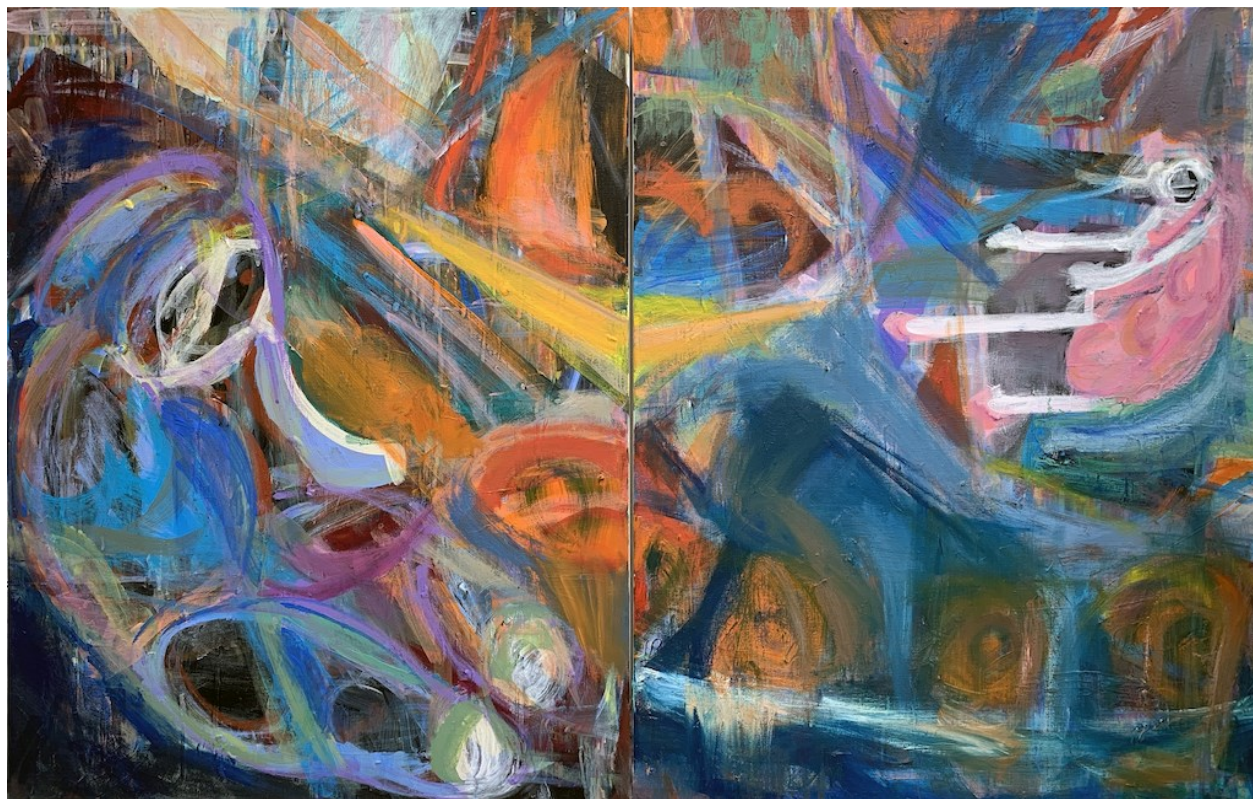
Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train: Grey Lines (2021), 11" x 14."



Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train: Overnighter #2 (2022), 10" x 10."

Appendix H

Mommy Mayhem series paintings based on my son's stuffed elephant toy.



Mommy Mayhem: Elephant and Doll (2022), Acrylic and Oil on Two Canvases, 36" x 24."



Mommy Mayhem: Abstract Elephant (2022-23), Oil and Acrylic on Paper, 22" x 30."

Appendix I

Artworks based on my daughter's stuffed toy Disney Princess Belle.



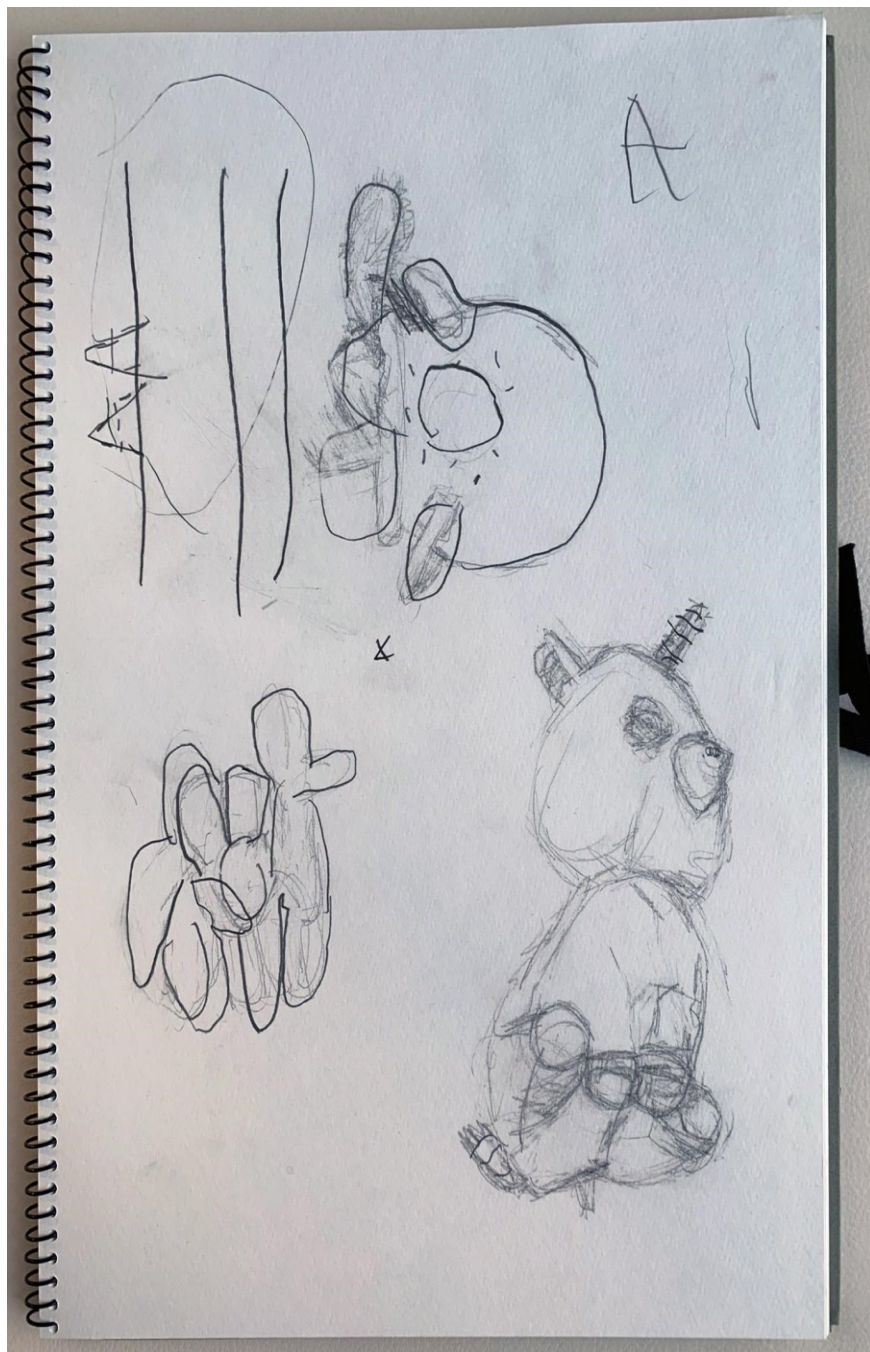
Abstracted Belle #2 (2023), Acrylic on Paper, 22" x 30."



Belle Gets Buzzed (2023), Mixed Media Assemblage.

Appendix J

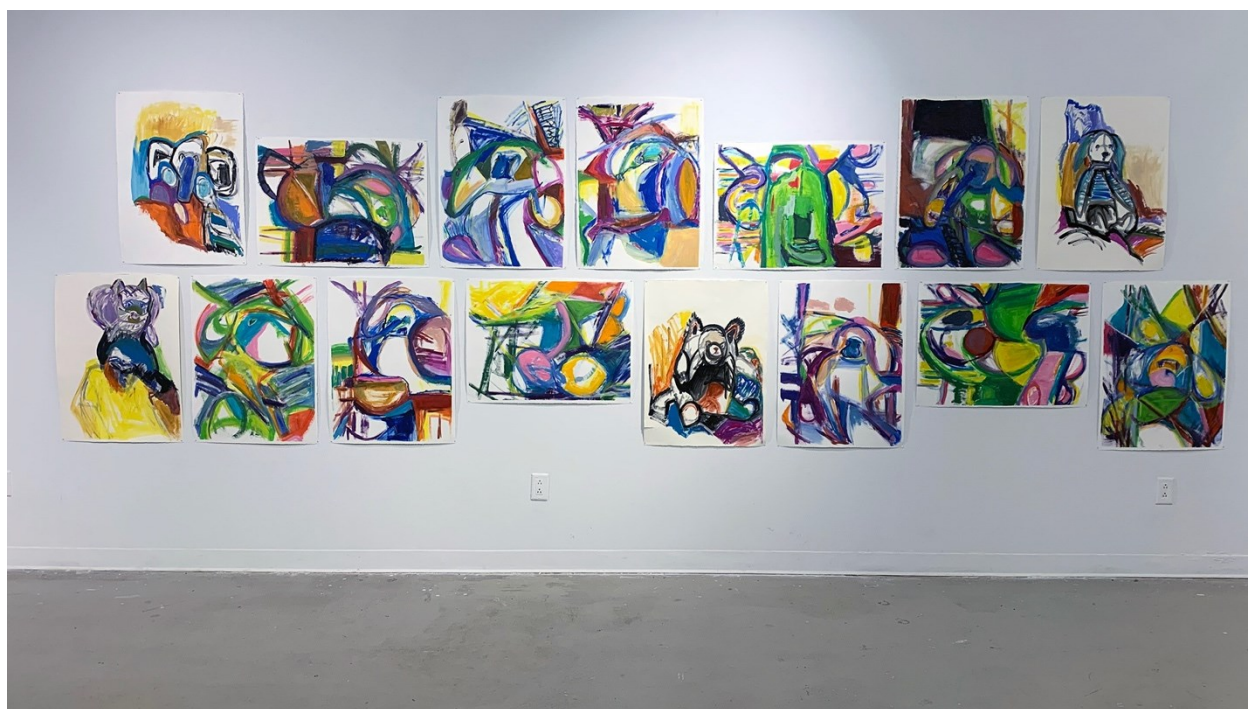
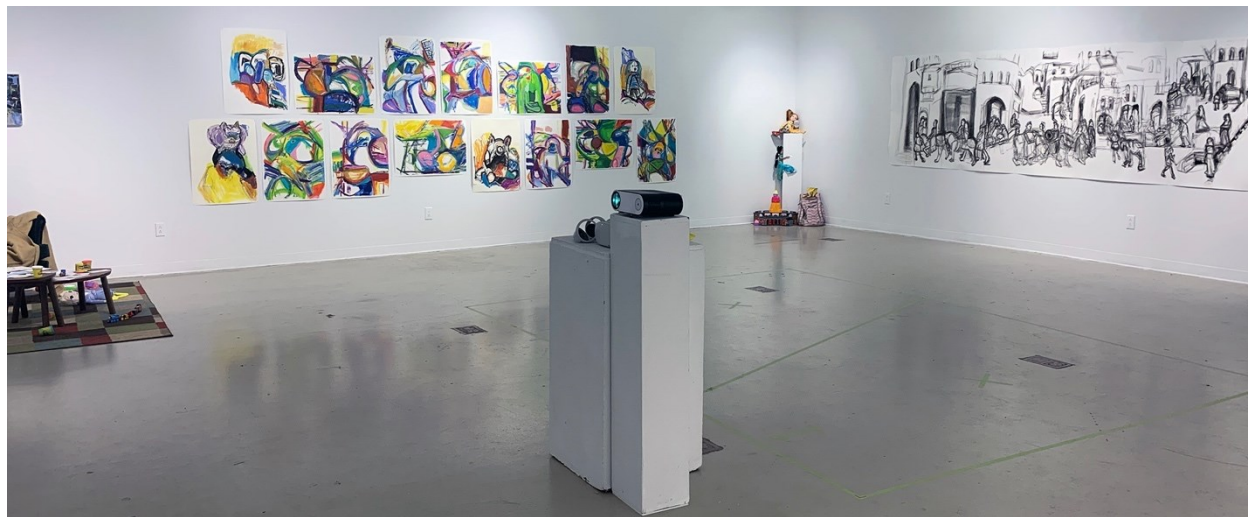
Sketchbook drawings from March 2023 and 2022 with collaborative drawing marks made by my children over my observational drawings of their toys.





Appendix K

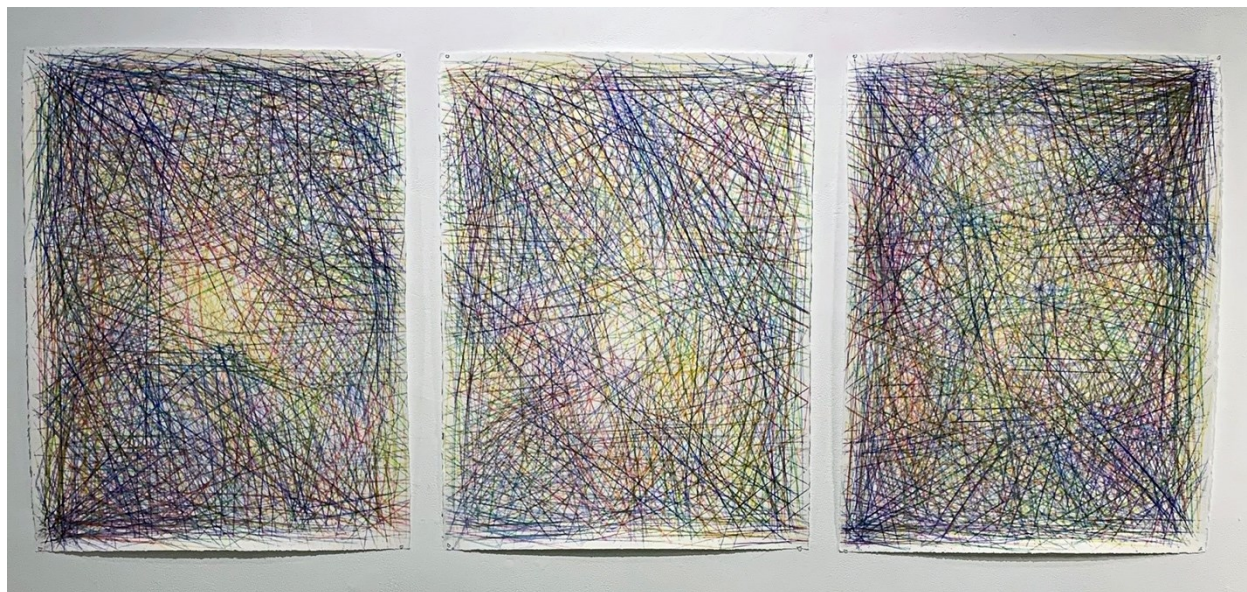
Installation images of “In-Between: Perspectives on Artist-Motherhood” art show from September 5 to October 5th, 2024, in the Gales Gallery, York University. Curated by MA Art History Student Abbey Humphreys-Morris of artwork by Rachael Grad.



Mommy Mayhem (2022-23), Acrylic and Oil on Paper, each 30”x 22.”



After the Plague Party (2023), Ink on Paper, each 30"x 22" and Toy Trains in Acrylic Boxes.



Motherhood Hit Me Like a Train (Triptych) (2023), Watercolour on Paper, each 22" x 30."