I, Mothership:

Exploring the Maternal Gaze, Intersubjectivity, and Maternal Ambivalence
through Vernacular Technology, Provisional Craft and Painting

A Thesis Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Fine Arts in Painting

by MADELEINE LEMIEUX
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MAY 2021

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined
the thesis entitled

I,MOTHERSHIP: EXPLORING THE MATERNAL GAZE, INTERSUBJECTIVITY,
AND MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE THROUGH VERNACULAR TECHNOLOGY,
PROVISIONAL CRAFT, and PAINTING

presented by Madeleine LeMieux, a candidate for the degree of Masters of Fine
Arts in Painting,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Kristin Schwain

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DEDICATION

To my loving husband and children who have been supremely supportive and instrumental in my ability to realize this degree. You are my rock, my partners and collaborators, and my inspiration. I love you.

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ABSTRACT

'Mothership' is a term of endearment used to describe the condition of 'mother'. The term suggests that 'mother' provides respite and maintenance, and exists as a homebase for the sole purpose of service to its offspring, in perpetuity. It does not account for the subjectivity of the mother or the embodied experience of child-care. From within the position of 'woman' and 'mother,' how does one represent a resistance to the assumptions of essentialist motherhood as natural and inevitable?

I, Mothership is my response to this question. Drawing from a recent history of maternal theory and various feminist traditions, my research uses the maternal gaze, intersubjectivity, domestic space, and maternal ambivalence to map a way through this complicated sociopolitical topography. Topics of maternal subjectivity in photography, women's labor and visible mending in domestic craft, and cybernetics in vernacular technology are explored to reach outward from my own experiences towards a connection that embraces subtlety, complexity, and contradiction.

The culmination of this writing posits that from within motherhood, one's subjective position is often at odds with the 'natural' and 'inevitable' requirement of care-giving. This writing aims to locate some space for motherhood from that position, wherein uncertainty collides with the constructed nature of the mother-child relationship. It does so from within the context of the 2020 global

coronavirus pandemic which, in my experience, only served to illuminate the continued disparity between the expectation placed on contemporary women to “have it all” and the lived experience of having to do it all.

The resulting artworks and their exhibition synthesize disparate themes into image-objects that incorporate cell phone photography, soft sculpture, sashiko stitching, painting and collage. They are visually dense, colorful and dimensional, and present an intimate world of proximity, touch, and movement, glitched together through digital and physical stitch alike.

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INTRODUCTION

“...being a mother and being mothered are both imbued with tremendous social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and personal significance. Everyone has a stake in the social organization of mothering, but these stakes can vary greatly. Although few persons share exactly the same position with respect to mothering, none has an unconflicted relationship to it.”¹

The mothership is a homebase. It is the site of return, of respite, of comfort when no other is possible. It bears connotations of care but also of military operations (naval ships), and of the otherworldly (UFOs). Regardless of its application, the mothership exists for the support of other entities; it does not exist without its dependents.

Perhaps this is why the term ‘mothership’ is also used as one of endearment for human mothers. Her gravid state extends well into the life of her children as they first cling to and then orbit her. With their orbits widening as they grow and change from baby to child, child to teen, and from teen into adult, their states fluctuate while even after they have left home and possibly started families of their own, the woman remains ‘mother’. The condition of ‘mother’ is constant. Even before a woman becomes a mother, there is a societal expectation that this is her inevitable state, that it is her natural place and role to inhabit.

¹ Andrea O'Reilly and P. DiQuinzio, “Chapter 32: Mothering and Feminism: Essential Mothering and the Dilemma of Difference,” in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* (Toronto, ON: Demeter Press, 2007), pp. 542-542.

This of course is problematic because not all women become mothers (15.4% of middle aged women have not become mothers²,) and not all mothers give birth to their children (“In 2011–2015, 1.2% of women aged 18–44 were seeking to adopt a child and 0.7% had ever adopted a child”³) and not all mothers are women (trans parenthood), and indeed not all women who are mothers who give birth come by it naturally (about 2% of all births in the United States now result from assistive reproductive technology.⁴) The assumption that motherhood is the ‘natural condition’ of women is complex and spectral.

There are other facets to this spectrum from within a state of motherhood, that denaturalize the role of mother. For instance, even from a position of “natural” motherhood - in which a female-born woman, gives vaginal birth to a biologically conceived child, the social/cultural/political role of a mother varies greatly across history, geography, and socio/economic class, and may not fit into the assumptive position of what Diquinzio calls “essential motherhood,” which determines that women’s motherhood is natural and inevitable, and extends into other assumptions about the character and qualities of women and mothers.⁵

² StatistaResearch Department, “Percentage of Childless Women, by Age U.S. 2018,” Statista, January 20, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/241535/percentage-of-childless-women-in-the-us-by-age/>.

³ “Products - Data Briefs - Number 315 - July 2018,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 19, 2018), [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db315.htm#:~:text=Nearly%204%20in%2010%20U.S.,%25\)%20had%20ever%20considered%20adopting.](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db315.htm#:~:text=Nearly%204%20in%2010%20U.S.,%25)%20had%20ever%20considered%20adopting.)

⁴ Gretchen Livingston, “33% Of US Adults Used Fertility Treatments or Know Someone Who Has,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, July 31, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/17/a-third-of-u-s-adults-say-they-have-used-fertility-treatments-or-know-someone-who-has/>.

⁵ “Essential motherhood is an ideological formation that specifies the essential attributes of motherhood and articulates femininity in terms of motherhood so understood. According to essential motherhood, mothering is a function of women’s essentially female nature, women’s biological reproductive capacities, and/or human evolutionary development. Essential motherhood construes women’s motherhood as natural and inevitable. It requires women’s exclusive and selfless

As a woman who has inhabited both traditional and non-traditional roles as a mother and prior, as a woman (both as a woman who did not intend to have children, and later as one who did but was having trouble conceiving “naturally”), I have come to find the tenets of essentialist motherhood to have seeped into every crevice of my life and to have had several problematic and oppressive consequences, both for my person and for my gender, socially, politically, culturally and as such is a richly significant position from which to make art.

It is therefore important to me that, through my artwork and corresponding research, these ideas be addressed and pushed against using formal and theoretical mechanisms. To accomplish this in this writing, I consider the position of the relationships between viewer and subjects through an analysis of “the maternal gaze”, the internal relationship between subjects through what could be described as an analysis of “intersubjectivity,” and an analysis of the idea of holding multiple positions simultaneously as “maternal ambivalence”. These ideas are rooted in maternal theory, which works relationally across disciplines, and takes up residence in practices of visual and critical studies, psychoanalysis,

attention to the care of children based on women's psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and self-sacrifice. According to essential motherhood, because these psychological and emotional capacities are natural in women, women's desires are oriented to mothering and women's psychological development and emotional satisfaction require mothering. Essential motherhood also represents women's sexuality in terms of mothering; it holds that the primary goal of women's sexuality is motherhood and that women value sexual activity and pleasure primarily as a means to motherhood rather than as an ends in themselves. Essential motherhood's account of women's sexuality thus requires women's heterosexuality, which it also construes as natural. Essential motherhood dictates that all women want to be and should be mothers and clearly implies that women who do not manifest the qualities required by mothering and/or refuse mothering are deviant or deficient as women. Essential motherhood is not only an account of mothering, but also an account of femininity.” DiQuinzio P. (2007)

and philosophy. Facets of this research address domestic space as the site of my work and this locale's relationship to maternal identity.

Vernacular technology, provisional craft, painting and processes through which these ideas are mediated are discussed throughout this paper. Mediation here taking on both definitions of the term: *remediation* (the literal representation of media through other media) and *intervention* (to interrupt with the purpose of altering the result) are present in the work. You can see that in portions of the image-objects, photography has been representationally painted, or it has been blocked by stitching, stuffing or painting, and in other locations it has been left to exist as photographic. These combinations of processes serve to convey ideas of maternal practice in formal ways and aim to reposition contemporary maternity as a cybernetic hybrid between natural and artificial.

The following document was prepared and presented to demonstrate my research during the course of my graduate study at the University of Missouri. It includes reflection upon the work I created during this time, a culminating artist statement and a significant buttress of theoretical underpinnings and artistic investigation which throughout my time in this program has spanned issues of bias inherent in social technology, consent and capitalism, assumptions about pleasure and pain, vulnerability and language, anxiety about the future, and finally landed on maternal ambivalence, which seemed to embody all of these ideas.

I present this work as a synthesis of the last 4 years, wherein I allowed myself to experiment and research freely, and with guidance from a team of excellent faculty, graduate peers and friends. I hope to take the reader on a journey, but it is a twisting road with lots of offshoots, because that is ultimately the path I chose, and the road that led me to this culminating document and body of work had many detours.

I would be remiss if I did not qualify the content of this document as my own perspectives, which I produced from the privileged position of my specific socio/economic background. I am indeed a white cisgendered, middle class, queer but passing woman, living in the Mid-western United States. I acknowledge here that I do not speak for all mothers, or even all mothers who are like me, and that the position of motherhood is only a site to launch from in my ideas on feminist identity and art making.

With that said, I believe the decentered character of feminist identity, wherein the social, cultural, political, and physical specificity of an individual can provide insight into any one of its intersectional positions, has value in realizing a truly communicative and expressive valence through art.

Finally, I should note that the bulk of the synthesis of this art and this document occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/21. As a result, my art making

and thinking has been unilaterally affected by both the initial stay-at-home order and the following waves of uncertainty which shifted daily life from relative stability to a modality of constantly responding as our world worked to deal with the virus. While I have attempted to situate my work in a place of thinking about maternity in a broader context than simply from within the confines of this pandemic, there is not a doubt in my mind that the particular mixture of processes and ideas and the resulting work has become a sort of time capsule.

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work consists of mixed media image-objects that push against notions of essentialist motherhood. I use vernacular technology such as the cell phone photograph or personal digital archive, and remix - through painting, sewing, soft sculpture, and found object assemblage - a spectrum of maternal experiences, and embrace the slippage between the emotive/empirical and analog/digital forms.

While the subject matter is personal in that I use images of my own body, children, and home, the work reaches for connection by suggesting tactility in the soft sculptural forms, using playful color and representing intimate scenes.

By exploring ideas of the maternal gaze, intersubjectivity, and maternal ambivalence, the work seeks to question our assumptions about maternity.

The Maternal Gaze and Intersubjectivity

Courtney Kessel, *Performing Visibility: MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Video Still, 2013

At the CAA conference in Chicago in 2020 I had the distinct honor of meeting several theorists, writers, and artists whose works were compiled by mid-western professor-mom Rachel Epp Buller for the visionary book, “Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design, and Maternity” including, the artist Courtney Kessel.

In a chapter written by Niku Kashef, Kessel talks about an experience similar to one I had in a critique: “During my MFA thesis defense, one of my male committee members suggested that one piece could be taken as exploitative. This video was of just my daughter’s head and hair as she lay in the bathtub with water submerging all but her face. None of the work showed any nudity. She gazes at the camera, as she allows the movements of her head to sway her hair

under the water. I edited the video to have a soft cameo circling her head (and allowed the video to play forward then in reverse, creating a sort of otherworldliness). I gaze back into the camera. These are moments that could only happen in the comfort of home with the safety of having mom nearby. I defended my choice by stating that, as her mother, I don't make her do any of this work with me. We are really and truly doing this together."⁶

The maternal gaze, that Kessel talks about here, is a reciprocal yet not symmetrical type of looking. In the scene described by Kessel, her daughter looks to her mother, presumably providing a sense of security and stability - enough to dare put her head at least partially in water - while Kessel with nurturance as well as artistic inclination views her daughter/subject through a lens. The subject is mediated. This type of practice was criticized in Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* (1992) wherein she photographed and presented the iconic images of her children most associated with her name.

*"The art abuse referred to by the critics was an imagined Mann reaching for her camera at a time when she should have been reaching for the child. Instead of cleaning, comforting or even rebuking her children Mann chooses to photograph them (Malcolm, 1994)."*⁷

⁶ Rachel Epp Buller, Charles Reeve, and Niku Kashef, "The Durational Performance of the Parent-Artist and Other Subversive Acts," in *Inappropriate Bodies Art, Design, and Maternity* (Toronto, ON: Demeter Press, 2019), pp. 164-164.

⁷ Eti Wade, "Refracting the Maternal Gaze: Mirroring and Mothering in Contemporary Photographic Practices," *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts* 7, no. 3 (2013): pp. 30-37, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9960/cgp/v07i03>.

It becomes clear that the assumption is that a woman is a mother first - set to protect them from even the *possibility* of harm - and that by mediating that relationship, she somehow has put that role aside. The assumption is that she cannot be both a mother and artist without compromising her most important role as care-giver. This infraction is discussed in terms of child pornography, negligence, and of harm done to children in the act of taking (and having the audacity to present to the public) a photograph.

When watching Lenka Clayton's *The Distance I Can Be From My Son* video pieces described as, "A series of videos that attempt to objectively measure the furthest distance I can be from my son in a variety of environments: a city park, a back alley, a market."⁸ I first respond with empathy. As a mother, I feel the pull of distance that Clayton captures.

⁸ Lenka Clayton, "The Distance I Can Be From My Son," LENKA CLAYTON, 2013, <http://www.lenkaclayton.com/the-distance-i-can-be-from-my-son>.

Lenka Clayton, *The Distance I Can Be From My Son: city park*, Video Still, 2013

As a viewer, the first 10 feet do not bother me, then at 30 or so the first urge to get up and collect the child is present, but it can be ignored. At 100 feet the urge becomes persistent. As the child nears a location wherein they can no longer be seen the urge is a compulsion. As I watched Clayton's son close in on the vanishing point (a location he could no longer be seen in any of the locations) my fear grew with hers. Her poignant running at the end of each video, rushing to catch up her young child before he makes it out of view, followed by the measured distance at which she had to run to him, is a visceral end to a suspenseful experience.

My second response is that of someone else's judgement. I mean, while I as a mother respond with empathy, I can hear and almost feel the admonishment of others - those more distant from the maternal experience - adults who do not have children, and those who have children but for whom it has been a long time since they had young children. "How irresponsible of that woman to allow her child to be so far away that she cannot protect him from danger."

But is it dangerous? In the park the child could likely continue running until an active city street before encountering any objective danger. In the alley, who knows what lies beyond view, but probably not a tiger? A child snatcher? A well? In the grocery store, a pedo? A sharp knife? A serial killer? Possibly so, but probably not.

In 2016, NPR did a piece on the judgement of parents when putting their children in perceived risk.⁹ The study prompted 1,300 individuals through 6 different studies, with different scenarios in which parents left children unattended - varying the reasons they were left unintended (go to work, relax, meet a lover to name a few) and to rank the morality of the action (1 being nothing was done wrong - 10 being the worst of all immoral actions). What came from the study was that parents who left children alone unintentionally were less judged as doing something wrong (although always perceived as having done *something* wrong - a 3 on the scale), and specifically, when mothers left children alone

⁹ Tanya Lombrozo, "KBIA," *KBIA* (blog) (NPR, August 22, 2016), <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/08/22/490847797/why-do-we-judge-parents-for-putting-kids-at-perceived-but-unreal-risk>.

intentionally to do something for their own benefit (like meet a lover,) they were more likely to be judged harshly. While the result of the child being left unattended did not change - the perceived risk faulted parents even when no real danger was present and increased when parents acted in self interest.

“Additional analyses suggested that it was indeed participants' judgment of the parent's immorality that drove up their assessments of risk. The authors sum up their findings like this: "People don't only think that leaving children alone is dangerous and therefore immoral. They also think it is immoral and therefore dangerous.”

Based on the study, one could say that a mother's act of asserting her separation from the child is an immoral act through the perspective of our society. An assertion which is rarely scrutinized when it is made by fathers. So, of course critics reacted negatively to Mann's work when she intentionally put space between herself and her children, for the purpose of examining that relationship - and for her own professional fulfillment no less. It is dangerous for women to assert their own subjectivity so closely to their essential roles.

In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger defined the different ways in which women and men internalize the mechanisms of appearance. He suggests that because women have had to concern themselves with how they appear to and are

perceived by men, they gain some control from internalizing their position as appearance vs. men who have internalized their position as actors in the world.

*“Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it...”*¹⁰

*One might simplify this by saying : men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”*¹⁰

One could argue that this over-simplification objectifies as well. Of course women throughout history, existing within an imbalanced power dynamic, out of necessity and safety, have had to be conscious of the way they are seen by men, but their existence as “a sight” an object of vision, does not preclude their inner experiences of also being actors in the world.

The maternal gaze is wrapped up in terms of morality and subjectivity like other considerations of gaze, but ultimately it is a look owned by mothers, as mothers

¹⁰ John Berger, “Chapter 3,” in *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972), p. 47.

and women as the makers of meaning, and differs from the type of gazes described by John Berger, and later examined by Laura Mulvey and bell hooks.¹¹

Eti Wade's *Refracting the Maternal Gaze: Mirroring and Mothering in Contemporary Photographic Practices* discusses maternal subjectivity through the lens of the Lacanian mirror-stage in the works of Sally Mann, Ana Casas Broda, Katherine Bosse, and her own.

"The camera as object, intervenes between the mother's face and eyes, and the child, with the mother needing to hide her face behind the device (obscuring the mirror), in order to be able to create photographs...A mother who is occupied mentally and emotionally in the process of art making, is perceived as being concerned with the self in a way that may be incompatible with negating her subjectivity to the level required by Winnicott, of having no need to "be seen or recognised in her own right". (Hirsch 1997 p. 157). In making maternal photography, Sally Mann made images that articulated her subjectivity with mirroring reversed so that "the children reflect a maternal subjectivity, one she projects onto them" which can be thought of as exploitative (Hirsch, 1997 p. 162). We may want to reconsider how problematic Mann's photographs are, taking into account that they articulated maternal subjectivity "which is anxious for her

¹¹ NOTE: Laura Mulvey coining the idea of the "male gaze" through the lens of Lacanian mirror-stage psychoanalysis and bell hooks discussing "The Oppositional Gaze" of the black female spectator.

children's safety, in awe of their beauty, identifies with their freedom, urgent and longing to capture something evanescent". (Hirsch, 1997 p. 162)¹²

The maternal gaze positions 'mother' as actor, as meaning maker. It is also reciprocal and interdependent. Reciprocal in that gazing at a subject that is also your child carries with it a confirmation of acceptance - see Clayton's son turn

Sally Mann, *Immediate Family*, Photograph, 1992

and check to make sure his mother is still there and looking at him, or Kessel's daughter looking at her mother/into the camera with certainty that her actions are safe. And interdependent in that maternal looking cannot happen in the absence

¹² Eti Wade, "Refracting the Maternal Gaze: Mirroring and Mothering in Contemporary Photographic Practices," *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts* 7, no. 3 (2013): pp. 30-37, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9960/cgp/v07i03>, 31.

of care-giving, one does not simply shut off her role as mother when looking through a camera lens but does so knowing her child is safe and, so inspired, is able to make work about the perceived harm that is part of mothering on a daily basis. This act of the mother's, to take up her artistic work alongside her maternal practice, is a sign to the child that mothers are more than care-givers and in turn helps to secure maternal subjectivity in the eyes of the child and in the eyes of the art audience as well. It is also an act of opposition - to embody an active position that does not accept woman/mother as image alone.

As a theme present in the work of *I, Mothership* and corresponding research, the maternal gaze manifests by locating the viewer central to the positions of the subjects in the artwork. Different from traditional family portraiture, where the viewer may still occupy the position of the artist (and that artist may be central to care-giving), the fish-eyed perspective created by the image stitching and photo sphere effect centers the viewer within a vortex of frenetic movement in which self (also viewer/m/Other) is confused with children subjects and is also combined with domestic space subjects. The things of space and borders of self and other are fused, glitched together, to the point where the ambiguity of who and what becomes content.

In *Family Bathroom* (below) the operation discussed in Michel Foucault's account of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* occurs to some degree wherein my own figure is a

stand-in for Velasquez's and the back of my cellphone constitutes the unseen subject of the painting itself.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Family Bathroom*, digitally printed canvas, acrylic paint, spandex, polyfil, thread, and grommets, 2020

"In appearance, this locus is a simple one; a matter of pure reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us. A mere confrontation, eyes catching one another's glance, direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross. And yet this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints. The painter is turning his eyes towards us only insofar as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it,

replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange."¹³

The primary difference between the exchange Foucault discusses in *Las Meninas*, and that of *Family Bathroom* is the remediation between painting and subject. In *Family Bathroom*, I have to some degree replicated the scenario - a young girl in fancy dress is the foregrounded subject (on the toilet), however looking beyond we notice a mirror and figure captured within that, which has been muted with a flat color treatment and raised paint texture to simultaneously subdue and assert its presence, capturing my own portrait in the process of making the image that viewers see. Different from *Las Meninas*, in *Family Bathroom* I present the image shifted first from what would normally be seen by the eye as the photo taken from the cellphone in that it is digitally stitched and warped and glitched, and second, shifted further through manual application of paint, fabric, and physical stitches.

This action of shifting and shifting again, pushes against the assumption that what is seen is the only possible visibility of the subjects while retaining the reciprocal character discussed by Foucault. The possibility of simultaneous

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," in *The Order of Things an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 3-18.

seeing or of seeing and then seeing again becomes present in the glitched bodies of my subjects, their movement evident in the slippage of optical data transferred to register the inhabitation of multiple spaces at once.

Artist and theorist Bracha Ettinger describes a *matrixial gaze* which is not completely indistinguishable from the maternal gaze I aim to capture in my work.

*“With the matrixial gaze that approaches me in painting, I am transformed by it only insofar as it is also transformed by me. The metamorphosis through which borderlines between subjects and objects and borderlinks between partial-subjects become thresholds is a process of bringing into being-together or becoming-woman-with -- inasmuch as any “becoming” is a “becoming-woman-with.”*¹⁴

*...The work of art we create, and the work of art in which we take part as viewers, is not only the gaze approaching us. The matrixial gaze is what metamorphoses us into partial-objects and partial-subjects in a matrix larger than our separate one-selves.”*¹⁴

The maternal gaze employed in *I, Mothership* is reciprocal, interdependent, asymmetrical, spectral and intersubjective. It pushes against a static understanding of maternal morality, wherein a woman's character is pinned to her

¹⁴ Bracha Ettinger, “The Matrixial Gaze,” in *The Matrixial Borderspace: Out of Bounds* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 41-89, 87.

position and performance of maternity. It corrects for the position of maternal subjectivity as mother-as-other, and aims for the viewer to have a spectrum of experiences in relating to the image-objects.

Domestic Space, Nostalgia, and Identity

Megan Wynne, *Inheritance*, Photograph, 2015

*“Home is a complex ideal, I have argued, with an ambiguous connection to identity and subjectivity. I agree with those critics of home who see it as a nostalgic longing for an impossible security and comfort, a longing bought at the expense of women and of those constructed as Others, strangers etc, not-home, in order to secure this fantasy of a unified identity. But I have also argued that the idea of home and the practices of home-making support personal and collective identity in a more fluid and material sense, and that recognizing this value entails also recognizing the creative value of the often unnoticed work that women do. Despite the real dangers of romanticising home, I think that there are also dangers in turning our backs on home.”*¹⁵

It’s mid-March of the year 2020 and I am sheltering in place. Stuck at home. My 5 year old daughter has been moved from her kindergarten classroom to our dining room table. Until this moment, my husband and I had limited her screen time because when she doesn’t use up her energy in a physical way, she gets wild. We both had active careers prior to this and have always believed in the importance of external fulfillment from the marriage and home so that both partners have independent identities. He has always made more money than me. Such is the world of technology (his field) and art (my field) but such is also the social disparity that women make less money than men (\$0.74 to the dollar in the US at this time) largely because significant portions of their adult lives are given over to child rearing.

¹⁵ Kathy Mezei, Chiara Briganti, and Iris Marion Young, “Gendered Spaces: House and Home: Feminist Variations,” in *The Domestic Space Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 190-193.

My own education and teaching responsibilities have been moved online as well. So my daughter and I are home, learning together, while my husband works downstairs in his office, as he always has. My almost two year old son is home with us too. A factor of chaos takes over our home and it can only be quelled by my almost constant maintenance and attention.

Lots of things have screeched to a halt. Parties, concerts, date nights, public playgrounds, play dates, casual hang outs with friends... But lots of things have to continue - education, work, chores, life - they are just made to be done without the safety net of socialization, without respite. My husband continues to work downstairs in his office, as he always has, and my whole life has become care-giving. I am helping my daughter learn to use unfamiliar technology while my young son hangs from my breast, having completely regressed from our slow progression on weaning. Most days I do not get dressed because that simply means more laundry, more work.

Prior to the pandemic my home was a place where, after my family went out into the world for the day, we would reconvene to eat, love, and rest together. At this moment my home seems to be shrinking, and I feel as if I am a celestial body, floating aimlessly in a dark place, with many moons in my orbit. I feel nostalgic for the home of before Covid-19 and *nostalgia is medicine*. A remembering and longing, that is also a promise of a future to return to. It is the only thing that keeps me going. I know we don't have it too bad but it still feels like a prison of

sorts. One that my husband has largely been spared (although, to be fair, not completely.)

All this exposition simply to set the scene: my home, once a place of connection wherein the separate identities of my family members, would come together for sanctuary, now a miasma of enforced domesticity. The boundaries of my being no longer seem to be contained within my skin, my children are always touching me, always demanding of me, always creating biological responses in my brain, like an appendage with an aggravating scrape.

Nostalgia is so often considered ignoble. As if a desire for something past somehow undermines the present. But if we think about how actions of resistance often form from within the contexts of their existing restraints, we can imagine a world in which nostalgia can act as a point of departure towards acts of resistance.

From within the confines of the pandemic, the intimacy of continuous care became central to my life and artwork, to my own acts of resistance. The materials of caregiving began making their way into my work - outgrown clothes, discarded packaging, toys.

They seemed to lend themselves to reconsideration. What was once a favored shirt became a representation of a specific moment in time, and as such, entered

into my work as a character. During this time, I had repaired a favored pair of my son's pants using a type of visible mending. The running stitch used was similar to the stitching I had already been using to adhere fabric to my work for stuffing and creating soft sculptures.

As a result, one of the most repeated gestures in the work of *I, Mothership* is the stitched panel. As with all of my stitching, I consider the lines created with thread another type of mark-making - likened to drawing. Sometimes, the marks made by stitches serve as outlines - practically and literally - defining the forms created through attached fabric and stuffed with poly-fil. In the cases of the panels (pictured below) the lines are also cross-contours - giving shape to the panel through shifting colors and concentric repetition.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Detail of House (from diptych House and Home)*,

Digitally printed linen, acrylic paint, spandex, polyfil, found materials, thread, grommets, 2021

This type of mark-making was adapted from the act of mending clothing. Clothing itself plays a significant role in my work: representationally - in that patterns and characters of clothes are repeated in the glitching of the underlying photographs, and laundry is a recurring subject matter; symbolically - in that fabric and stitch and bodies collide to locate figures; and physically - in that repurposed items of my children's clothing, specifically printed patterns, icons, and logos are used as imagery within the work to signal (yet another) replicating signification of my subjects.

The visible mending of clothes can be likened to the idea of wabi-sabi often deployed in the medium of ceramics. The practice is called "sashiko" in Japanese culture. Decorative stitches cover patches and mend tears to give articles of clothing a longer life, create something unique, and generate material investment in the mender/wearer.

*"...it is not only a RE-pair (towards a past that was once whole), it is also a transformational process, not only for the garment, but also for your soul. A move into a 'new' future." Visible mending offers us hope that we can transform our broken present into something better, not by reaching across the aisle or glossing over division, but by building something new from the rubble."*¹⁶

¹⁶ Meghan Racklin, "Vox," Vox (blog) (Vox Media, March 25, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/3/25/18274743/visible-mending-sashiko-mending-fast-fashion-movement>.

This type of material engagement with my image-objects lends visual weight to the created connections between commercially fabricated materials/images/colors, and those that are hand-made, personal and unique. There is also a connection to my considerations of nostalgia - here the idea of the past is used as material for making something new, it is regenerative.

The multiplicity of the sashiko practice is what compelled me to use it in *I, Mothership*. Being both a mend of something broken, and a creation of something new. Both a stitch, and a contour. The stitches added to the ability of the work to hold multiple things to be true at once. Though these materials and processes, I reach toward expressing the psychic tension of ambivalence.

Maternal Ambivalence

Janine Antoni, *Inhabit*, Photograph, 2009

*"I equated the spider and its web with my daughter, and myself, the mother, with the support structure. Suddenly I thought of turning the spider's cage into a doll's house, as a way of incorporating the spider into the photograph. I now have an image that is a web within a web, a house within a house."*¹⁷

Maternal ambivalence is a common theme in maternal theory. The idea is discussed from an embodied account of many mothers, expressing grief at the loss of individual freedoms and simultaneous joy at the birth of a child or anger/hatred at the child for their annoying or dangerous actions, and fierce

¹⁷ "Art in America," *Art in America* (blog) (ARTNews, October 23, 2009), <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/janine-antoni-62815/>.

protectiveness in ensuring the safety of that same child. Holding two (or more) conflicting ideas or emotions at once is often at the heart of mothers' experiences - a subjective past which longs for independence and control, and a selfless responsibility directed toward care-giving.

The house within a house imagery that Antoni employs in *Inhabit* (2009) is one employed in my own work, in the *House and Home Diptych*. The diptych is two images of the same cardboard play house, which I am sitting inside of while my children move around in the restricted space, and in and out through various cardboard portals. My own view sees beyond the cardboard structure through cut-out shapes which both resemble windows, and playful shapes such as clouds, suns, and stars, and peer into my living room.

The repeated house (a cardboard house within an actual house) presents a visual metaphor for maternal ambivalence in as much as a house can represent the self, and a self can contain other characters, with different dimensions and attributes, both identifying as the proverbial "you."

Madeleine LeMieux, *House and Home Diptych*, digitally printed linen, acrylic paint, spandex, polyfil, found materials, thread, grommets, 2021

I argue here that a natural 'you' is also constructed like a house - built and customized to be made "home." That it is being made and remade moment to moment by experience. To illustrate this formally, I have pushed against assumptions of "natural" and "inevitable" in painting - the discipline in which I am trained and most familiar. This means a number of things. I am not making easel paintings, framed and at an easily salable scale.

Paint, while it plays a part in the work, stands on level ground with photography and stitching/soft sculpture, even when the other materials take on a painterly character of color or texture. I am allowing processes and hanging apparatus to be visible as to move away from illusionary image making. The individual pieces each have a painted mural background which cannot leave the exhibition space and therefore will never augment the piece exactly the same way again.

My pieces, as I describe them as image-objects, defy singular consideration as photographs, paintings or sculptures and instead occupy all these spaces at once. Simultaneity and multiplicity are both form and content - the work itself embodies a kind of ambivalence. As such, the picture plane is not flat, nor is it even static, it moves and changes as it is allowed to be fabric. My subjects repeat and glitch and own their digital characteristics as much as their analog

tactility through their mediation. Pixels are pigment, pigment is form, form is photograph, photo is paint and so on.

There is an embrace of the “synthetic” - color, material, and processes complicate the maternal subject matter. Fluorescent acrylic paints (polymer), spandex metallic fabrics, and the inclusion of faux fur, candy and toy wrappers, and other pre-fabricated found materials further situate this work as not natural but a hybrid of “by hand” and “by machine” alike.

In a way, we are cyborgs. Ninety six percent of all Americans own a cellphone and 81% of Americans own smartphones¹⁸ giving them access to the vast capacities of the internet and all of her tangential possibilities for data collection. The average smartphone is exponentially more technologically advanced and with more storage and computing power than my first home desktop in 1990. While the cyborg did not come about quite as expected: the man replaced by prosthetic, robotic enhancements for the purpose of space travel, as initially envisioned by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960¹⁹, there can be no doubt that we are enhanced by technology nonetheless to perform beyond our biological capabilities.

It is through the daily integration of technology that we have become such cybernetic hybrids. These daily technologies, cell phones, temperature controls,

¹⁸ Pew Research Center. “Mobile Fact Sheet,” April 7, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/> .

¹⁹ Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, “Cyborgs and Space,” *Aeronautics*, 1960, pp. 26-76.

voice controlled home and personal assistive devices, personal computers, electronic books, RFID chips, etc. affect the ease of access to information, the scope of our collective memory, and the expediency of our ability to recall, enquire, express, and connect.

It is then no surprise that we artist mothers are claiming our cyborg capabilities not only to interact with our world and care for our families but to theorize and make art as well. Indeed an entire subset of feminist theory addresses the idea of cyborgs and net-based interactions within feminist theory.

Lauren Frances Evans uses printed photographic images that are stuffed and sewn, referencing the body and her role as a mother, but also pushing further toward a more symbolic connectivity between our origins and our futures. *Thinly Veiled* is another representation of a body-house in which the interiority of the womb and its relationship to home is realized through photography and soft sculpture. The body interior is brought out into public view.

“Just as the human belly button marks both a connection to and a separation from our physical origins, the work that I make points to a similar simultaneity of opposites, referencing the body’s attraction and repulsion but also the immaterial void of human longing in us all.”²⁰

²⁰ Synthetic Meatball, *Lauren Frances Evans*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.syntheticmeatball.com/post/lauren-frances-evans>.

Lauren Frances Evans, *Thinly Veiled*, printed lycra fabric, sewn and stuffed with fiberfill, on masonite, 2019

In my own work I have adopted a combination of technological processes which extend out of my daily life through use of my cell phone and the cloud-based image storage, Google Photos. I began using Google Photos around the same time I gave birth to my daughter, and as a result, the images serve as a historical archive of my children's lives from my perspective, through the lens of my phone. I have taken over 15,000 photos of my family since 2014 and continue to add to the archive daily. Beyond the traditional point and shoot character of the smartphone camera, there is also the ability to add filters, quickly edit, create videos and gifs, produce panoramic and virtual photographs, and share these images instantly - to build and share worlds.

Without a lot of access to studio time during the pandemic, I found myself looking for creative outlets during the day while caring for my children, photoshoots with my phone became a daily game and at some point early during the shelter-in-place order, I came across the photo-sphere function of my phone.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Ana Everywhere*, digital photograph, 2020

The photo-sphere function is not new technology, originating from the panoramic which dates back to the 1840's²¹. The tool was originally applied to photographing expansive city-scapes and larger scenes. Today tool is often used for static interior space - like houses for sale by realtors attempting to give potential buyers a more real experience of the space, virtually. The tool takes a series of images and digitally stitches them together so that when used in conjunction with 3D photo viewing software, you can use your phone to "look

²¹ Washington Libraries, University of. "History of Panoramic Photography." Tacoma. Accessed April 30, 2021. <https://content.lib.washington.edu/panoramweb/history.html>.

around” the virtual space. However, when flattened, it provides a kind of inverted fish-eye perspective.

In Diane Haraway’s 1991 *Cyborg Manifesto*,²² she conceives of a feminist cyborg identity which rejects traditional (and Western) mythologies of self. This identity, both natural and constructed, does not yearn for an idealized wholeness but embraces it’s multifarious components as its strength. Haraway’s cyborg moves away from the masculine individualist hero/ego of psychoanalysis, and towards a diversity of experiences, an embrace of ambivalence as embodied experience.

*“...a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters. Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling.”*²³

Nearly a decade later, and at the doorstep of the most significant global pandemic, which brought about a year(+) long forced domestic internment filled

²² Donna Jeanne Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 149-181.

²³ Donna Jeanne Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 149-181, 5.

with political upheaval and self-realizations, Legacy Russell publishes another manifesto, In many ways, Russell's manifesto takes up Haraway's positions and modernizes them in a piece of post-internet art/critical literature, *Glitch Feminism*.

Russell positions the glitch - a digital error manifesting in denaturalized machine interpretations of the AFK ("away from keyboard" instead of the 90's IRL "in real life" expression of the lived experience outside of your avatar self - positioning your avatar self as much as your "real life" as important as any other lived experience) as an empowering tool for the marginalized.

What a world of possibilities has opened to artists who are natives to this global, hybrid, and spectral digital landscape! Russell simultaneously positions the political potential in this (not so) new terrain as exploding the assumptions of a corporeal supremacy.

"The current conditions of the world, however flawed, ought not to preclude glitched bodies from the right to use imagination as a core component of mobilizing and strategizing with care toward a more sustainable futurity."

Both Haraway and Russell envision a cyborg/digital body/avatar (a trans-cybernetic identity) which resists the hegemonic confines placed on individuals and communities to conform within a system that does not serve us.

Christina Quarles, *Grounded By Tha Side of Yew*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2017

One of my favorite examples of this playing out in art right now is in the work of Christina Quarles. Quarles is somewhat of a traditional painter in the sense that she uses paint and brushes on canvas. However, her imagery and subject matter present distinct breaks from fine arts traditions in that her designs are created through both physical techniques and digital ones.²⁴

Her paintings depict glitched bodies which have moments of merging or definition which defy the places of floors, walls and windows by existing simultaneously above, below, and through them. Her patterns and brush work shift constantly between painterly and mechanical, using machine cut vinyl stencils while allowing drips and brush strokes to remain. Even her titles define language by

²⁴ Christina Quarles, "INSTALIVE with the TATE" (The Tate Modern Instagram on February 19, 2021)

adopting slang and abbreviated vernacular - queering the textual character of her work.

Taking up the mantle of some of these strategies, my own work shifts fluidly between digital and physical manifestation. Digital photograph pushes against paint and fabric, stitch and sculpture to resist notions of painted illusion, naturalistic space, and the wholeness of the subject.

In *Nom* my daughter's figure appears as a straightforward portrait in the center of the piece, but is truncated. She glitches in all directions. In one spot, her perspective as subject views me, her audience, and the viewer of the piece alike, ominously looking down from above. In another, her head takes shape (bottom left corner) only for her face to dissolve into a pile of books on her bedroom floor. The pillows on her bed, and the window on the back wall, present and re-present in partiality. The materials of her bed sheets are literally replicated with pieces of the actual bed sheets and other representations of the unicorn theme, across the shifting bed-space. Patterns on her clothes in the photograph are painted and ruffles from an incorporated tutu are mimicked in cut shape, paint, and sculpture alike.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Nom*, digitally printed fabric, acrylic paint, spandex, found materials, polyfil, thread, and grommets, 2021

The doubled house, the cyborg, the glitch all point to a self that is multiplicitous, that carries with it complexity and nuance. That cannot exist as one thing for one purpose - as mothership alone.

REFLECTION

At the beginning of 2017 I joined the program with a strictly painting portfolio. Having been out of art school for 10 years, my production in my personal practice had dwindled, and my most recent work had been life-like portraits of children (my own and friends) with some slightly more abstracted treatments of pattern

and paint application. This is not what I wanted to do in my MFA program. I didn't want to be that woman artist who had kids and then suddenly couldn't make work about anything else.

I was interested in socio-political content having worked on several murals with social themes and had a general interest in technology and its effect on our daily lives but I knew I did not want to use painting as a crutch. So with my first work in the program I attempted to take a conceptual approach. From there I experimented with restrictive project parameters, the non-art materials, the blurring of media processes, and through experimentation, eventually themes began to materialize.

Feminism, particularly in the realms of body image and invisible labor, and forms of institutional critique as it applies to these ideas, has emerged as a common thread across my time at the University of Missouri.

In my second semester, I became pregnant with my second child, and finished the first half of my degree 8 months pregnant. I then took a year of maternity leave. In my final semester before leave, and while on leave, my focus shifted from generalities about feminist notions to more specific expressions of maternal subjectivity. And, upon my return, this theme took on only a greater character in my work, eventually culminating in my thesis exhibition, which was conceived at

the onset of the shelter-in-place order, and labored on for 13 months of pandemic before being exhibited in April, 2021 in partial fulfillment of this degree.

It turns out that, my ideas at the beginning of my time at MU - which, now in hindsight I see as steeped in patriarchal machismo, shunned the idea of maternity in art and aimed only to suppress its presence in the act of art making, were also the problem I would come to mount my thesis against.

Algorithm Bias Series, 2017

Algorithm Bias features the first 25 or 100 images returned from Google Image Search using generic searches for terms for, 'man,' 'woman,' 'thug,' 'immigrant,' etc. and then digitally composites them aligning the pupils to generate an uncanny portrait representative of algorithmically reinforced biases.

This work was the first serious project I took on at MU. Working with appropriated imagery and algorithmically reinforced biases felt fresh in the wake of the still confounding election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency. There was a lot of talk about social bubbles and how they reinforced existing ideas and biases to everyone's detriment. Curious about how that would play out if all of the returned Google images were treated as a typology using similar thinking as Idris Khan or Jason Salavon in their treatment of the Becher water towers and Playboy Centerfolds respectively.

Idris Khan, *Homage to Bernd Becher*, Gelatin silver prints, 2007

Jason Salavon, *Every Playboy Centerfold, The Decades (normalized)*, Digital C-prints, 2002

What emerges is an approximation of features present in all the images. With pupils aligned, eye, brow, nose, mouth, and general head shape are generalized to the most common features, leaving a ghostly image that is neither one image

or another, but all the images averaged. What is apparent is that when we search for the term 'woman' a smiling, conventionally attractive, thin, white woman with dark eyes and a sort of Diana Prince/Wonder Woman paradox, where both exist as one and the same in the same moment, appears.

What does this say to anyone who does not look like this? From my somewhat limited understanding of the return of results from Google Image search, is that it is predictive. It predicts what it thinks you want to see based on other searches (and clickthroughs) for the same term, both in your own search history and regionally. So, what it is actually saying is, Google thinks that I want to see a smiling, conventionally attractive, thin, white woman (and possibly I'm interested in watching the recently released Wonder Woman movie) when searching for this term. It may end up being more of a snapshot of its pop-cultural moment (early 2017) than anything else. A quick search of the same term today, three years later, and the results are noticeably more diverse.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Algorithm Bias Series: Woman and Thug*, digital composite image, 2017

The *Algorithm Bias* series consisted of 9 images: woman, man, citizen, immigrant, terrorist, thug, criminal, celebrity, and activist. The same algorithmically biased imagery was produced for each term with some having more ambiguity than others. Moving toward the borders, where text and other signifiers, hand gestures and design collide in traces of abstraction is where the individual images within the composite claim some identity while the images taken as a whole remain indeterminable.

Impressions Series, 2018

Impressions is a collaborative photographic project in which self-elected female-identifying models shared stories about when, in their most vulnerable moments, an individual in a position of power or authority, undermined their experience through language.

Madeleine LeMieux,
Impressions Series: The Problem
With Most Women Is,
digital photograph, 2018

Through storytelling, the subjects reclaim the power of the experience by identifying the phrases which have stayed with them, and have influenced their thinking about themselves and the structures with which they interact. The text is pressed into their flesh and the resulting embossment is captured photographically to hold the text to their body indefinitely for the viewer to see, making visible the effect of our language on others.

The images are cropped flesh, with signifiers of the individual – body type, hair and skin color, a mole or freckle – and subtle text located on sites related to the context of the offending phrase. As a whole, the sequence of bodies shows the frequency with which the weight of the words is carried beyond the moment and internalized to become our own.

Making the Other, 2019

From May, 2018 to September, 2019 I was on maternity leave. Having given birth to my son in June 2018, I spent much of that time working on trying to get back

to my own work. Out of school, I allowed myself to play and experiment again with painting. It was also during this time that I became aware of Lenka Clayton's *Artist Residency in Motherhood*, a self-guided, self-defined residency, in which

artist mothers could create work within the confines of maternity, viewing it as a generative resource for art-making instead of an obstacle to overcome.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Making the Other Series: Lipstick*, digital photograph, 2019

It was out of this Artist Residency in Motherhood that *Making the Other* came about. *Making the Other* is an ongoing photographic series which explores how the intersubjective mother/child relationship is built by performing and documenting the teaching of social and domestic actions that allow for collaborative exchange, play, and humor while questioning the role of these actions in the development of identity.

Figurative and Abstract Paintings and Soft Sculptures, 2018 - 2020

Upon entering the program I had promised myself not to use “painting” as a crutch. I wanted to approach this degree as an opportunity to expand as an artist, not just as a painter. As a result, I questioned material choices at every turn - leading to appropriative, photographic, and even sculpture work. At the end of my first semester, I had made only one painting, as the product of an assignment.

Entering into my second semester, I had been uncertain where to go next and not having to participate in review that semester, had decided to take a breath and return to what was comfortable and rewarding. I was teaching oil painting at the time and so I made *#laundry*. A close-up, somewhat loose oil painting of the pile of laundry on my guest bed, which had sat there for the better part of a month.

I was thinking about how so often Instagram provides the illusion of people living perfectly curated lives and then looking at my own guest bedroom and this enormous pile of unattended laundry and wondering if I could somehow turn that into a critical project. But also just wanting to not take it too seriously and paint something colorful and fun. I ended up blocking out the laundry basket in a teal blue amorphous shape that further abstracted the pile of clothes. It does point to one of my first considerations of laundry as subject matter, and that would play a significant role in the work to come. It also turns a lens to the relationship of

photography and social media to painting, and to the domestic complexities of

parenting. Early investments in what would become *I, Mothership*.

Madeleine LeMieux, #laundry, oil on canvas, 2018

While on leave, I kept painting to keep up my practice. I started using acrylic paint because I was working from my home

studio and didn't want to have the fumes of oil paint and solvent around my kids. It freed me up to be less analytical and explore the materials of tyvek paper and acrylic more. I ended up painting and collaging a lot of maternal figures dripping with milk and blood, featuring big bulbous and luscious bodies.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Boobie Pillows*, tyvek, acrylic paint, thread and rubber bottle nipples, 2019

At one point I had accidentally bought the wrong tyvek - a more fabric-like material - and couldn't get it out of my head to paint it and sew it into three dimensional forms - forms that mimicked the bulging bodies of my painted figures without being quite as representational.

The soft-sculptures that came from that experiment were tubular, convoluted, bodily, and colorful. I began combining flat painted surfaces and sculptures, traditional paintings and photographs in installed presentations. It felt like a swift and acute break from the straightforward studio photography I had been working on prior to my maternity leave.

Madeleine LeMieux, Installation of various objects in mixed media, 2019

A breakthrough came when I combined several of the processes in a singular piece. *Ana with Boobie Pillows* (2020) combined photographically printed canvas, with a photograph taken from my cell phone, oil paint, glitter, and soft sculpture forms. With its perspectival shifting, striking imagery, and materiality, it immediately felt as if I struck the note of tension I had been aiming for, and ultimately it led to several works which prefaced the work in *I, Mothership*.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Ana with Boobie Pillows*, digitally printed canvas, oil paint, glitter, spandex, polyfil, thread, 2020

EXHIBITION SIMULATION

The exhibition *I, Mothership* was realized through a series of choices. For example, I knew that I did not want to simply hang my work on the white walls. Initially, when dreaming of what my exhibition would manifest as, I imagined an all encompassing experience, that engaged several of the senses, possibly having a performative or participatory component. I had thought I might cook a communal dinner in the gallery, which incorporated storytelling in some way.

Under the pandemic lock down, planning and testing such an experience, in addition to the work became impractical. With the spread of the virus and the required social distancing, dinner with strangers became unsafe.

The audio component of the show was my solution. By including multisensory information, I hope my work will have a more significant impact on viewers. The audio brings another level to the image-objects by lending them a temporal dimension to their expression.

Last Feed (4:22) is a recording of my son's final nursing session on January 2, 2021. The listener hears a melodic lute-like sound jingling dissonantly in semi-rhythmic fashion, wet suckling and the breaking of suction, fabric jostling, small coos and bits of speech from my son, and my daughter's off the cuff singing in the background. It was created with a tool called Touch Me by Playtronica, wherein one can connect the tool to a computer, call up an online

synth to program the sound, and create an audio response based on the haptic feedback of touch between two conductive materials, assuming the circuit continues unbroken.

For *Last Feed*, I asked my children to choose a synth sound that best represented “nursing” and they chose a soft lute-like synth. I then instructed her son to hold the tool, as I held the other end to create, and to breastfeed, informing him that this would be our last time. He mostly held on, and when he would let go, I would nudge his hand with the tool to remind him, until finally he informed me that he was done with his words (the end of the recording).

My daughter grew bored when she was no longer the focus of the audio experiment, and went off to sing to herself in another room. The resulting sounds are both a representation of the touch present in the nursing session, and a collection of the ambient sound in my home. As the final nursing session between me and my son, as well as likely the last I will have in my lifetime, it marks a special shift in maternal time. The shift is one from the moment of literally providing nourishment and comfort through the body, to a bittersweet split from that intimate relationship - one that marks the end of my role as a mother of babies.

The recording is played on repeat within the exhibition to lend aural stimulation to the sensory experience of the show. You hear the sound before you enter the gallery.

Upon entrance to the exhibition, you see the title wall, and directly to the left, the piece titled, “Mommy Pile.” Mommy Pile is the only piece in the exhibit that is made from a static photograph. It’s a selfie, including most of my body and some of my face. My children and pets piled on top of me. This piece anchors the rest of the exhibition in domestic space, rooting the viewer in a decorated interior where families interact intimately.

The mural behind this piece is the most detailed of the murals included in the exhibition, while still remaining pretty simple. The frame suggests a far wall or floor. The window (which breaks the frame) looks like the ones most commonly found in home interiors. The table, which has legs that extend to the floor of the gallery, confuses space a bit, in that it is in front of the figure spatially, but the drop shadow falls behind it. The house plan then also breaks the frame of the table by appearing both atop and behind it. The plant, which would naturally be in front the figures in a photograph taken from this angle, falls behind the image-object.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Mommy Pile* and Title Wall, *I, Mothership*, 2021

Taking cues from Daniel Gordon and Tshabalala Self, the murals augment the space of the art-objects. While in some of the murals, elements of the image-objects are replicated in the mural (like the window mural in *Nom*,) in other murals the imagery situates the viewer within the same space as the original photograph. This adds to a sense of what I'm thinking of as an interior/exterior shift. Where the two spaces in the work and on the walls, shift positions frequently and confuse the location of the viewer.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Pink Undies*, and *Nom* Installed, *I, Mothership*, 2021

Madeleine LeMieux, *Nom*, Installed, *I, Mothership*, 2021

Perhaps this is the most interesting thing to come out of the installation of the artworks in *I, Mothership*. The combination of the shifting space of gallery/artwork, and shifting perspective in the works, as well as references to portals (windows and doors,) houses within houses, all point to a conversation about the private and intimate space of the domestic family home, being made public in the gallery. It is further augmented by murals which are typically a public art practice. Add the digital drop shadow against the real life shadows of the dimensional image-objects and you extend both spaces into the virtual.

Madeleine LeMieux, *Family Bathroom*, Installed, *I, Mothership*, 2021

The accent walls, initially imagined to be lighter versions of CMY(K) digital print colors, now read as nursery walls. The pastels played with the more vibrant

versions of the colors in the details of the *House and Home Diptych* and related more directly to colors in the work.

*“Against the backdrop of forces joy-killing, color is a wildcard, a powerful force, a feminine or anarchistic other who is resistant to the language of law. Walter Benjamin writes that color is the very essence of childhood imagination, a powerful form of innocence that can subvert the logic of capitalism.”*²⁵

Madeleine LeMieux, *Laundry*, Installed, *I, Mothership*, 2021

The majority of the 2020 pandemic felt like a cage. People resisted the initial stay-home order, the recommended social distancing and mask wearing ordinances - politicizing the health and lives of ourselves and our loved ones. It

²⁵ Isabelle Graw, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, and Amy Sillman, “On Color,” in *Painting beyond Itself: the Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), pp. 103-116, 111.

also became a boiling point for resistance action surrounding police violence against our neighbors of color. And, conspiracy thrived. It was a time of forced introspection for many of us and continues now to be a shift in our cultural perspectives on many things.

While the imaginations of my children were often what kept me and my husband going through this altogether dire situation, the collective imagination of global culture shifted wildly. So much of becoming, and of becoming a mother, is a shifting in perspective from that of a narrow solipsistic view/experience of the world to an expanded holistic one. While the artists and theorists explored in this paper have tended toward highlighting the multiplicitous and multivalent character of our current climate, there is a wholeness to be discovered. The wholeness I envision in my work is not one thing but a collection of many, where boundaries and borders are not fixed and opaque but permeable and moving.

The exhibition *I, Mothership* lent some fixity of a sort to this moment of my completing this degree but ultimately its deinstallation has marked a transition to match our current cultural moment. Here, in the early part of 2021, parts of the world are reopening, slowly, while many countries are still very much in turmoil, and the state of the pandemic and its impact on our future remains uncertain. This cultural shift is not an end in itself but the start of the next movement, the next resistance.

If I was able, through this exhibition, to extend outward from this moment which was hard and complicated and enlightening, to connect with others about the very specific topic of maternal subjectivity for even this brief moment, then perhaps it is possible that the experience of the 2020 global coronavirus pandemic can be contextualized not as one of captivity, but of the slow opening of a door.

Madeleine LeMieux, *House & Home Diptych*, Installed, *I, Mothership*, 2021

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