

## All the things we do not finish

### A study in photography and the mental load of motherhood

Motherhood is defined as 'the state of being a mother' (Cambridge), raising the implication that there is both a clear beginning and end to mothering. The very depth of the moral and political debate about when a woman becomes a mother is so crushingly complex, that I cannot even imagine starting a discussion about if or when mothering starts and finishes. The point being, that the very second motherhood becomes the goal, the only clarity comes in accepting that nothing will ever be simple again. In the foreword of Susan Bright's work 'Home Truths,' Clare Grafik (Bright, 2013, p.6) notes that there is a 'growing obsession with the subject' of motherhood, and frankly, so there should be, for there is an awful lot to be discussed.

As a topic it is vast, raw, and often only a difference in interpretation away from searing judgement. This intensity is amplified by the complexities of contemporary western life. Nell Frizzell (2002) writes about the pressure of the biological deadline, Rachel Cusk (2019) debates the heavy weight of societal expectations on a working mother and Hanna Putz (Bright, 2013, p.45) calls us a generation who are constantly 'on air.'

It's a lot, and that's not even the half of it.

The way motherhood is presented in popular culture remains the centre of extensive debate. In an interview with the BBC, producer Sian Robins-Grace suggests that a 'lot of ways that motherhood is depicted is thin and uncritical' (BBC, 2022). To me, the issue is less about whether the coverage of motherhood as a whole is imprecise, but more how we avoid using a catchall representation of 'the state' of any woman who is in possession of a child and that are each able to contribute our own perspective to the overarching narrative.

The decision to focus my research on motherhood came from the acceptance that it was at the core of my personal identity predicament and my driver for making work. It is the reason I first picked up a camera and it was the catalyst for leaving my stable career to return to study. Though it was not immediately obvious in the early stages of the MFA that my work would confirm in this way, from the very beginning my research questions have enquired into the complexities of identity. My final body of work 'All the things we do not finish' was never intended to be autobiographical. In fact, it began as quite the opposite. It emerged with the mother as the literal focus, and as my thinking diverged, she became physically absent from the work entirely. It seeks to reposition the representation of motherhood through photography, moving away from the physical form of the mother within the image, and instead concentrating on the mental load of mothering.

In the beginning, before my research made any inquiry at all into the representation of motherhood, it was curious about identity. The very first artist I became enamoured with on this course taught me a great deal about process, and indeed how to confront myself when faced with the inevitable imposter syndrome of approaching something entirely new. Engaging, albeit one way, with Lorna Simpson, both her work and as a human in the world, levelled me. Simpson's approach to her evolving practice has stayed with me throughout these two years, and I will no doubt take it with me in future. 'At first, I was a little intimidated about working this way.' In both motherhood and in my artistic practice, I could relate. 'And then I thought, aw fuck it. You fail, you fail. So what?' (Vogue, 2018)



(Simpson, Tate, 2016)

Lorna Simpson's work deals with issues of identity and representation. It gave me the 'opportunity to recognise and understand the social and privileged' identity that I have been given' (Watt et al, 2001). I continued to battle internally with this learning and for some time, it hindered the progress of my work. Being faced with Simpson's choices about the scale of the piece and her multilayering of different practices, I was faced with my own 'white fragility' (Di Angelo, 2018, p.8) and it became clear to me the power that artistic choices carry. At the very core of our work is the decision of materials and how we shape them to convey our message.

I travelled to see Simpson's piece 'Then and Now' (Tate, 2016) at the Tate Modern and stood for some time with it. By this point, I had become quite attached to the work and yet the composition of 'Then and Now' put me outside of the piece. It held a mirror to my experiences of the world and to what extent that meant I could not assume the experiences of others. This was a line of exploration that would come to be intensely important to investigate later as my focus settled on motherhood. Her use of a combination of different practices was threatening to me, I found it difficult to make sense of what I was seeing. This was amplified by the scale of the piece, the representation of such a huge and complex

discussion. My interactions with 'Then and Now' pushed me to reflect internally about my intentions for my own work.

These intentions became clearer to me when I encountered the work of Diane Arbus, though I also found her work uncomfortable to engage with. I recognised this as a personal conflict, that often my connection with another artist's work was awkward. It struck me that this was the complete opposite to the type of encounter that I wanted to create between my own photography and those who viewed it.

I was first drawn to look at Arbus's work when I came across the picture 'Woman on the street with her eyes closed' (Art Institute of Chicago, 1956). The composition of this photograph transfixed me. The woman, lower centre and in focus, eyes closed but head tilted upwards, almost preemptive of a sigh, and shallow depth of field framing her softly. The light shines directly on her face, highlighting her as the subject. The wide range of tones from black to white, shading lighter at the top to the darkest at the bottom, giving a sense of scale comparing the woman to the size of the city behind. This creates a feeling of the world towering against her and it resonated with my reading around intersectionality and the sheer challenge so many women face. She is dressed in black, there is no transparency in her outfit, suggesting mourning and raising a question of loss, or perhaps regret. The opaqueness carries a sense of finality - there is no going back.



(Arbus, 1956)

My interactions with both artists coincided with a confusion about the work I *should* be making, and whether or not I could identify with being an artist at all. My allocated thought experiment 'Practice make believe everywhere' (Droit, 2003) gave me the opportunity to establish a foundation to my practice. As I moved through the process I relaxed and became more closely aligned with Simpson's approach of 'you fail, you fail. So what?' (Vogue, 2016). The title of my thought experiment was apt as it allowed me to play out my presupposed conclusions about myself.

My experimentation led me to explore charcoal drawing, which initially felt like a safe material to work with due to its blurred edges and lack of certainty. It did not have the finality of pencil, or even paint and could be moved and manipulated on the page in a way I found both incredibly satisfying but also reassuring. I came to recognise that the movements made with my hands to create the marks were in many ways similar to the handling of my camera. Each gesture, in this case the pressure, allows in more light or creates more shadow. Working with this new material in turn built me an infinitely more stable foundation as a photographer. It taught me that anything could be learned and was the first turning point for me to realise that I could take my practice in the direction of my choosing. As I continued to

work with charcoal, I could see that my acceptance of the imperfection of the marks on the page very closely mirrored my love of imperfection in my photographic work. That the power of light to create tone and depth brings infinite meaning to the way the work communicates. This derived for me from an interest in the everyday, the documentary of our regular interactions with and experiences of the world. I became especially drawn to charcoal images that used lines - cityscapes and buildings such as Dennis Creffield's drawing of Durham Cathedral's central tower (Tate, 1987). They reflected for me how uncomplicated marks, in this case lines, and then blurring of these marks produces a work that tells a story. It is simple, yet carries the imperfection beautifully, which is a concept relevant to documentary photography. As a photographer it can be challenging to align with the idea of being an artist, but at this point I began to appreciate my camera for the tool it was and to really consider the process of managing light and shadow to form a picture.



(Creffield, 1987)

Alongside my thought experiment, my first piece of writing formed after researching intersectionality and bell hooks' exploration of the silencing of black women. hooks builds her key argument around how black women were forced to make choices that enabled them to identify with only either their race or their gender, despite both bringing significant

challenges. She further states that to speak out against the treatment of their gender would be at a 'detriment to the struggle for racial equality' (hooks, 2001, P2). Like charcoal drawing, my study of intersectionality was significant to the trajectory of my practice - not because it was a direction I would move my research in, but because it brought stretch and challenge to my appreciation of the experiences of others in the world, and how the struggle of identity raises so many questions. Much like the contrast of dark and light coming from the application of different levels of pressure when working with charcoal, the interconnection of our experiences leaves varying marks on our identity, the pressures of which sit differently for some rather than others.

From my encounters with Lorna Simpson and Diane Arbus, I could see that their work challenged the idea of what society accepts as the norm, the appropriate identity or the typical and expected. In 'Diane Arbus: Family Albums,' Lee and Putz (2003, p.3) note that Arbus 'as a woman and a photographer, was a double outsider in the world of art.' She is said to have rebelled against her middle-class upbringing and sought images of those marginalised by society and noted that her 'favourite thing is to go where I have never been' (Aesthetica, 2022) suggesting she explored her own identity by highlighting differences in others. Through my interactions with Lorna Simpson's work, I found myself challenged to consider my own perceptions, and whether they were as open minded as I believed they were. I learnt how my own actions and reactions were driven by the systems in which I had grown up, and that their influences were far longer reaching and subtle than I had originally known.

From each of these avenues of exploration I took something which led to a pivotal moment for my work. From Lorna Simpson, I took how the choice of materials and interweaving of discipline in our practice is vital to growth as a maker. She also opened my mind to the use of found materials, though this would take some time to fester in the background before becoming useful to me in my exploration of the presentation of motherhood. Experimenting

with charcoal lifted me from the mental silo of believing I could only be one thing. From bell hooks, I took a much greater appreciation for the choices women face as a result of their experience and driven by those they are, or they feel they are responsible for. Once I realised that motherhood was key to my practice, Diane Arbus taught me that it was important to pursue that idea regardless. As she said prior to her death, 'I mean, it is very subtle and a little bit embarrassing to me, but I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them' (Photoworks, 2023).

Elinor Carucci states that she has 'never seen as much' (2013, Introduction) as she does now she is a mother. More often than not, mothers find themselves at the bottom of any list. Their health, wellbeing and happiness become irrelevant in comparison to that of everyone else they assume responsibility for, which can result in total annihilation of their identity as they knew it pre-parenthood. Diane Arbus's work was known for representing those who society disregards, which led me to reflect on how the marginalisation of mothers can impact greatly on their mental health. It is a common narrative that mothers are regularly faced with impossible choices, finding that they simply cannot keep everything moving forward at a steady pace. I realised that all this time, my work had been searching for answers about identity, because since having my own children I no longer felt like I knew who I was. As Carucci goes on to reference in her research, 'like most parents I am constantly surrendering and resisting, failing and succeeding' (2013, Introduction).

And so, my research and practice around identity settled to focus on motherhood. I was keen to respond to my growing awareness about the relationship that mothers have with photography and the overarching issue that so many mothers lament that they just do not feature in imagery with their children. However, it was not as simple as making mothers the subject of photos. The challenge was far reaching, from the issue of who took the photos, and how that was instigated, through to the result of mothers seeing themselves in the photos and the impact this had on their self-confidence. In the foreword of Eleanor Carucci's



book 'Mother,' Francine Prose discusses the 'range of intense and even overwhelming emotions' (2013) just a single day of motherhood can bring. The very process of parenting feels like a huge experiment, that every day is an effort to 'keep on making make believe' (Droit, 2003) in the hope that it will make sense and that there will be some form of confirmation it is going in the right direction. In her book (M)otherhood, Praya Agarwal suggests that "guilt is part and parcel of motherhood" (2021, p.91). During discussions with mothers I found that this guilt was no less prevalent when talking about family photography and was a direct product of the fear of time. Unlike Roland Barthes, who states in 'Camera Lucida' that for him 'the noise of time is not sad' (2000, p.15), Elinor Carucci talks of her 'need to photograph' becoming intense when she 'realised how painfully apparent the passage of time is in the life of a child' (2013, Introduction).

Several key issues were at the forefront of these discussions, the first being that the majority of mothers feel the responsibility of ensuring the family album is up to date and in order. In addition to the recording of the photographs, they often consider the way they capture the other person, and this is typically with a positive aesthetic in mind. Many mothers feel aggrieved that this is not reciprocal and when they do request a picture is taken, it is rarely to their liking. This can be a result of two things: Firstly, personal issues with body image and ultimately lack of control over technical considerations such as angles and lighting resulted in lack of confidence to allow themselves to be captured in imagery. Secondly, they question the authenticity of this image once it is requested, and long to have imagery taken of them interacting spontaneously with their child, rather than being forced to stage it. This results in additional mental load for mothers who worry that they will not feature in the imagery that tells the story of their family, and that they will later very much regret this. Lee and Putz (2003, Introduction) state, 'often the family portrait marks the passing of time' and no one feels this as acutely as a mother. It is evident in Nicholas Nixon's work 'Forty portraits in forty years,' (New York Times, 2014) that the passing of time carries the weight of change. Nixon

captures the Brown sisters as they age, and he notes that the longer the portraits continue, the starker the fear that 'everyone won't be here forever.'

Curiosity about the mental load faced by a mother became the key driver of my practice. At this stage in my process, it manifested as a desire to challenge the idea that mothers felt that they could not have input into how they were captured with their children because it resulted in a staged version of themselves. As Barthes notes, "I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing" (2000, p.10). My work sought to challenge this and to explore how having input into the process could result in women having an all-round positive interaction with their family imagery, ultimately by giving them as much control as possible. Barthes' reference to the 'sensation of authenticity' (2000, p.13) he feels when being photographed is a major challenge for someone working with women whose identity is in question, who's relationship with the world has changed inexplicably since entering motherhood. In Nathan Jurgenson's writing around social photography, he focuses on photography as an experience rather than an object. He explains that 'cameras are never purely neutral windows to the world' (2019, p.21). Instead, he claims, they are 'collaborators that encourage new ways of seeing, new performances of vision.' At this stage in my practice, I worked collaboratively with five women to try to understand and give voice to their desires for their family imagery - to allow them to direct what Jurgenson calls the 'performance of vision' in a bid to lighten the responsibility of them having to ask to be represented in the family album. Barthes discusses his famous winter garden photograph, saying 'it exists only for me. For you it would be nothing but an indifferent picture' (2000, p.73). I was curious in my practice to see if it brought relief to the mental load of the mother to empower her to craft her own 'punctum' (Barthes, 2000, p.27) by giving control over some of the technical aspects of the image. Barthes continues to explain that we 'all have our secret chart of tastes, distastes, indifferences' (2000, p.18) and questions the need to keep them quiet. This felt like a particularly important aspect to consider when working with mothers because the line between personal opinion and perceived judgement is so fine. When talking to the mothers

prior to each shoot, I was conscious of Bence Nanay's (2019, p.1) statement that 'engagement within art can be very rewarding, but it can also go wrong very easily.' I worked to lay strong foundations to each collaboration by investigating not only their desires for the way the images were presented, but also looking back into their relationship with photography and encouraging them to explore the value of photography to them, and where that originated from.

My research led me to the work of Linda McCartney who captured her family life on camera. There is a level of intimacy in her images that undoubtedly comes from her relationship with them and I found this difficult to reflect in my work with the other mothers. It came through for me much clearer in my work with my own children, which came down to the flexibility of space and time with them. It was a hard lesson for me and challenging for my practice, that you can't really create spontaneity, as much as you want to believe you can. McCartney said 'you've got to click in the moment, not before or after' (Inside Imaging, 2021) which is evident in this image of her husband Paul and their child. There is an impression of freedom and lack of contact with the camera which works to give the image a sense of the depth of their relationship. This reminded me of my connection Diane Arbus' 'Woman on the street with her eyes closed' - the lack of eye contact and the underlying sense of movement.



(Mccartney, Herald, 2019)

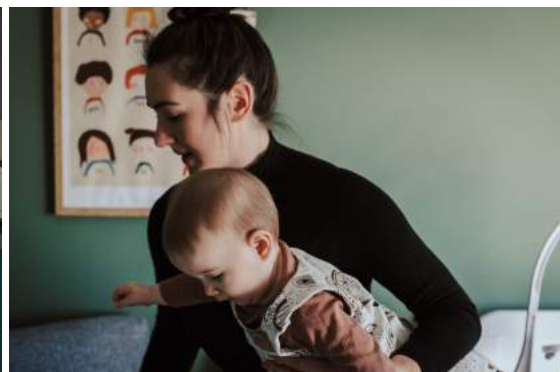
Discussing her body of photography about her sons Nicholas and Adrien, Martine Fougeron tells us that she found 'photographing other kids a lot easier' (B & H, 2023) than making pictures of her own sons. My experience is quite the opposite of this: I have found as my practice develops that catching this moment has become easy with my own children. As Francine Prose writes about Elinor Carucci's documentation of her own family life, the camera has become an 'additional member of the household' (2013, Introduction). This is the case for my own family, who show no aversion to the camera being present. The feeling of movement I crave in my pictures brings back the feeling of experimenting with charcoal in the early stages of this process, the beautiful imperfection and the leaning into the light and shadows of everyday life.



During my interviews with the mothers, this documentary ease was one of several common themes which carried throughout. Each independently confirmed that they placed an extremely high value on photography and all of them referenced historical experiences with physical family albums growing up. For most, these were now replaced as archives moving forward by social media profiles and all of the mothers had a strong preference for a documentary style approach, rather than a posed portrait. Nathan Jurgenson continues that it is the 'banalities of life, that together weave the rich texture from which special moments emerge and on which they depend on the stand out' (2019, p.16). This was entirely reflected in each interview, with the mothers talking of their pleasure of seeing a documentary style capture of them with their children, the 'everyday' as opposed to specific milestones and events. They were most curious about this because it felt the hardest to obtain. It was also the hardest to translate through my work with them, because the very act of me being there challenged the normality of their experience.

This sought-after ease came through in the imagery most noticeably when the mothers were engaged in something with their children, such as learning a skill or baking - typically rituals that they follow normally as a family. There is little surprise that these were the most successful, and the ones that the mothers connected with when viewing the images. They offered them the opportunity to view their involvement in the 'banality' (2019, p.16) from an

outside perspective, there was acknowledgment of their appreciation for some distance between themselves and the sensory overload that can come from mothering.



I enjoyed the making of this work; it gave me a great deal of satisfaction to present the mothers who had offered me their time with images that they valued. However, it is clear to me now that I was playing it safe and avoiding something deeper. Many of us struggle to vocalise our experience because we are afraid of taking up the space that others may need. From very early in this process, my practice had been hiding behind a crippling fear that I should not use my own experience to form work because it would ultimately be representative of a privileged white, middle-class experience. In a film for the Tate, Martin Parr said that 'part of the process of being a photographer is it's a form of therapy' (Tateshots, 2017) and this resonated with me in a huge way. At this point, it dawned on me that through my practice I had been transferring my own guilt about taking up space by working for others, when in fact I had things to say for myself. Nan Goldin spoke of her

support for photographers who 'seek to express their own truths' (Guardian, 2009) and I knew the final module was an opportunity for me to draw the strands together and apply them as a foundation of experience, leaning into my work in a way that gave me both satisfaction, and some internal peace.

'All the things we do not finish' is my contribution to the way motherhood is presented and a reaction to the depictions of motherhood I have observed in my research over the past months. It grapples with the identity struggles of a mother, as she tries to keep any part of herself whilst dedicating the very most of her to raising her children. Until the making of this final work, I had struggled with the idea that my photography would need to be disruptive to have meaning. Through my research and the constant evolving of my practice, it became clear to me that I needed to disassociate this in my mind with it needing to be radical or offensive. Barthes writes that 'photography is "subversive not when it frightens, repels or even stigmatises, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks' (2000, p.38). Until this point, I had been doing all of the thinking and investing that into the work before it was presented in a bid to keep tight control of the reaction, instead of creating work that offered the opportunity to observers to think for themselves. As soon as this realisation hit, my work developed an immediate lightness that reflected this thinking and that brought relief.

The portrayal of motherhood in photography is shifting constantly and quickly, as Susan Bright notes 'the mother appears in dramatically different guises, and in ways less easy to categorise' (2013, p.8). There is still a great deal of reference to the classics. Simon Watney writes that 'the image of the Madonna and child continues to inform much contemporary work' (2013, p.59) around the presentation of motherhood. He goes on to reference the sense of 'care, the gesture of nurturing maternal love' in an image that drew on the conventions of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. These notes provoked me to consider my work with the mothers and their children, and how so many of the images had eventually morphed into variations of these classic poses I intended to avoid. This process has led me to understand

that even though my intentions were to take a different approach, I was still subconsciously driven by my acquired understanding of how care, connection and relationships are portrayed and how that portrayal is received. In her book 'Heidegger Reframed,' Barbara Bolt claims that 'We can't know how to act through other people's advice to us. We have to live it' (2011, p.22). This was true for me at this moment, to discover through my own practice that in order to create imagery that does justice to the struggle of motherhood in my context, I would need to reconsider my approach.

Through this process I have found it notable that I have often aligned with the writings of other photographers, but then found that our representation of those common feelings has diverged in the work we make. Elinor Carucci is a clear example of this, her introduction to her work 'Mother' is much quoted in this report and I echo so many of her sentiments as a parent. However, her images often put the body front and centre, with Francine Prose noting that 'Carucci is well aware the image of the naked body has a complicated and fierce effect on us' (2013, Foreword). Her work did indeed have a 'fierce effect' on me and in a similar way that I learned through my encounters with Diane Arbus, it was awkward and at times I felt outright appalled by her imagery. For example, her image 'Showing my pregnancy to my parents' (2014) challenged my boundaries of what is 'appropriate,' no doubt arising from my own culturally specific 'dealings and handlings of the world' (Bolt, 2011, p.5). For me, this piece by Carucci offers an example of photography that 'repels' rather than 'thinks' (Barthes, 2000, p.38). This experience with Carucci's work was a stark reminder that even when we appear from the outside to be experiencing the same thing, our processing of and reflections on that can be quite different.





(Carucci, 2014)

My most significant development of my process at this stage was to shift from making the mother the subject of the photographs and to remove her in any recognisable form from the picture. Susan Bright highlights two main pieces of work in which the mother herself is in some way absent. These works, she believes, are significant in diverting the artistic representation of motherhood. Alongside a 19th Century tintype, Bright also identifies the work of Mary Kelly as pivotal to proving that the mother figure could 'exist in a space of critical and conceptual practice' (2019, p.8), that it could move away from the well leant on Madonna and Child. In her work 'Post-Partum document' (1975), Kelly pushed against the movement to use her body in a discussion about motherhood, and 'instead chose to focus on the more domestic experience of womanhood' (Tate, 2018). Kelly explains that her decision to deviate from the expected portrayal of motherhood was seen as controversial at that time, and it is clear that since then so many women have used the space created by Kelly to make more radical art about motherhood, breaking down barriers in thinking and expectation.

My decision to make the mother absent from the work came firstly from a realisation that the deep complexity of the representation of motherhood resulted in it being easy to become distracted by the nuance of the debate. Having worked through the process to this point, I

concluded that collaborating with mothers to try and ease their mental load was more attempting to solve the problem, that it was making work representative of the issue itself. Secondly, I wanted to move away from presenting motherhood through the impact on the body and make work that conveys the impact on the mind. When working with mothers on their family photography, and in my own experience, on seeing photos of ourselves, our first instinct is to observe our bodies with a critical eye. In this work I endeavour to remove that focus, so that it does not distract from the main issue of the mental load.

This final piece of work employs the use of the family album as a presentation method. In her book *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch references E. Ethelbert Miller who states, 'The family is an image we seek so desperately' (1997, p.41) and this work does not deny this is the case. However, it also strives to bring depth to the presentation of family and the weight of responsibility on the mother. It aims to challenge but also celebrate the family album that we desire so much, and to simultaneously address the concept of balance, capturing the zeitgeist of western motherhood in 2023. As a photo essay, the arrangement of the images strives to capture the tension that sits with the mother. The mental load is often underpinned by the sheer volume of decisions that require making. Emphasising the concurrence of the contrasting light and darkness is an important part of this body of work, both literally in the aesthetic choices of the images, and metaphorically in ideas they represent. Hirsch goes on to discuss how family photographs have become 'an image to live up to' (1997, p.8) and I respond, what if this is not the case. What if they are not to look up to, or down to, but simply to be allowed to exist. You do not have to forsake celebration of the easy in order to do justice to confessing the hard. Motherhood is a consolidation of the unwavering love, the fear of time, the instagrammable aesthetic and the poleaxed identity. It is the 'banalities of life' (Jurgenson, 2019, p.16) leant against the times we surpass survival and enter the joy.

I chose to present the work as a family album that would be seen in the context of a middle class 2023 home. The walls are painted 'Chiswick blue' as a nod to the aspiration of a farrow

and ball lifestyle - aesthetically pleasing in an Instagram world. The frames are selected from a Scandinavian style store and are mixed in size and style. Initially, I presented them informally using picture ledges. However, after some consideration I rearranged them into a classic salon hang to ensure the images could be clearly viewed in the exhibition space available.

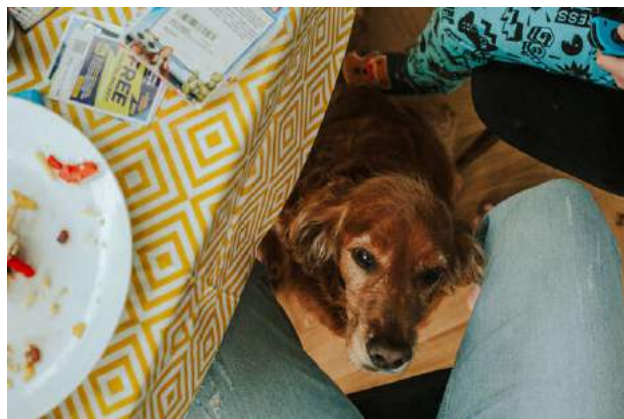


See

By removing the mother from the images, the work is able to lend itself more deeply to Barthes' space to 'think' (2000, p.38). The image that sits at the centre of the final body of

work is 70 x 100 cm framed. It focuses on a jar of wilted tulips with a child moving quickly past. The bright colour of the flowers contrasts with their wilted posture; they are both beautiful and overwhelmed. However, despite the pressure, like the mother they are the anchor point that holds everything else together. The movement within this picture holds reference to both the passing of time, as Carucci describes as 'painfully apparent' (2013, Introduction) and my love for movement and imperfection in my work. The faded silhouette of the child in the background mimicking the spread of the charcoal across the page.

As I learnt from Lorna Simpson at the very beginning of my research trajectory, there is great value in repurposing. For this photo essay I opted to use found scenes from my own experience of motherhood, as I felt that was representative of both my passion for documentary photography and also respectful of the authenticity that many mothers hope for in their imagery of themselves and their children. In his writing 'The social photo', Nathan Jurgenson (2019, p.10) identifies that social photography is 'a cultural practice; specifically, as a way of seeing, speaking and learning.'



This image of the kitchen table offers a glimpse into the chaos of mealtimes and the constant need for the mother to be offering herself in some form of service. The picture remains aesthetically loyal to its context - the yellow tablecloth and the herringbone floor giving reference to the time and place. Like the tulips, there is beauty in the image, but also there is

overwhelm in the layers of life within the shot. This picture is placed in the bottom corner of the final salon hang, as a reference to how the family looks up to the mother to provide the response, the care and the answers. As noted by Clare Grafik, a mother's identity battles with change when she becomes a parent. This offering herself results in both a 'sense of loss and gain' (2019, p.6).

The everyday aesthetic of imperfect, blurry and often awkwardly angled images is used to articulate the complications that come with motherhood and intended with a communal spirit of, it's also a shitshow over here too. Don't be fooled. The practice of using documentary photography as communication of experience is evolving at rapid speed given the rise of the 'Instamum.' Women are using social photography to emphasise multiple experiences of motherhood and as a tool to empower social change on issues such as flexible working, running a business as a parent and hyperemesis. Images used by women such as Anna Whitehouse, Steph Douglas and Susie Verill (Instagram, 2023) address hundreds of thousands of followers and are typically shot on iPhones.

My thinking sits somewhere in the middle, that this shitshow is definitely something that should be documented, and also easily accessible in the way that Instagram is. However, this body of work looks to catalogue the images in a way that elevates them from a social media dialogue to a more permanent contribution to the cultural debate around how motherhood is presented. Martin Parr discusses his observations of the UK through his photographic work and he reflects on experience of the 'love hate' extremes of his relationship with his country. He suggests that a picture is successful when 'you've got a bit of tension between those ideas within it' (Tateshots, 2017) which is completely reflective of where my thinking has come to for this final piece of work. Motherhood is the light and the shadow; it is the value in the "banality" of life juxtaposed against the celebrated milestones. My final image selection looks to honour documentary photography as a communication method, but to allow images of contrasting energy - the very tension referred to by Martin

Parr - to coexist as they do in real time experience. Each photograph ruminates on the experience of the mother, referencing Carucci's statement 'through my work I considered all sides of our relationship' (2013, Introduction).



At the inception of this project, I asked others to tell me the things that went unfinished for them since they became mothers. The list (Appendix A) grew at speed, and encompassed the things that are obvious - the hot drink, the washing, and evolved into deeper, more considered responses - self-care, career ambitions, and in fact, once children were grown, the very act of mothering itself. As one mother said to me, "I will always have something I want to offer, to give, but he doesn't need to hear it anymore and I am not sure what to do with that energy." In the top right corner sits an image of a child running into the distance, which for me encompassed this conversation. I considered for some time whether to be explicit about which statement for me links to each image. Although each picture holds a link to a response from this list, I concluded that I would leave them open to consideration. Everything I have learnt through my research process has taught me to be wary of believing I know what others think and feel. I offer this body of work an invitation to a conversation - a welcome note to a village - rather than to state a fact.

Early in my research I came across a quote by Irina Nevzlin, who said 'Identity is a process that entails continuously asking, 'who am I?' (2019, p.22). This question is as relevant at this stage of my research trajectory as it was at the beginning. Despite my progress, the tension

remains. I am this far, but I still have a way to go, because much like everything else, my thinking on the matter, and therefore my making of work, remains unfinished.



## Appendix

(A)

All the things we do not finish

A hot drink  
A sentence  
My own food  
My career aspirations  
A thought process  
The washing  
The work day  
Drying my hair  
A sleep cycle  
Repairing my core  
The food shopping  
My personal hygiene  
Decisions  
Self care of any sort  
A conversation  
Feeling sane  
Sorting outgrown clothes  
A bath/shower  
Worrying about the kids  
Worrying about most things  
A book  
Anything linked to personal hobbies  
A whole film  
Keeping family admin up to date  
A workout  
Feeling mum guilt  
Checking in on my own friends  
Organising our home  
Keeping up to date with news / politics / anything important  
Any sense of me time  
The things we need to say to them  
Trying to protect them  
Being their mother  
  
Loving them



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