Maternal Subjectivity in Painting: A Response to the Idealization of Artists and Mothers

Heather Lea Reid
Wright State University - Main Campus
MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY IN PAINTING:
A RESPONSE TO THE IDEALIZATION
OF ARTISTS AND MOTHERS

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By

Heather Lea Reid
BFA, Wright State University, 2005
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Valerie Stoker, Ph.D.
Committee on Final Examination:
Director, Master of Humanities Program

Penny Park, MFA
Project Director

Karla Huebner, PhD

Nicole A. Carter, PhD
The focus of this project thesis is maternal subjectivity in contemporary art. Despite the embedded theme of mother and child in the history of Western art, the subject of children and motherhood has become taboo. Likewise, a stigma exists in the art world about mothers being artists. This thesis explains the historical context that created the current art world paradigm—one that still embraces romantic notions of who can be an artist, based on limiting traditional ideas of “greatness” or “genius.” Such a model suppresses the voice of the outsider. This essay examines the mother as an outsider in artmaking by considering the idealized beliefs that being an artist and being a mother are each singular, all-consuming, and mutually exclusive endeavors. Deconstruction of these perceptions makes room for maternal influences in artmaking and helps to create an alternative episteme for evaluating visual art. *Intact*, the project exhibition that corresponds to this essay is part of a new episteme that allows for meaning to be discovered in works of art that deal with everyday experience and motherhood.
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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Moments in time do not happen in isolation, but are a product of larger cultural and social movements, family dynamics, histories, and more. These structures also work to shape the individual’s subjectivity—defined as an individual’s way of perceiving and understanding. I use my subjective understanding to represent the dynamics that help to shape the everyday moments that have inspired my paintings. In this essay, I examine how my paintings are influenced by my experiences as a mother—my maternal subjectivity—and how maternal identity and subject matter corresponds in an art world that continues to romanticize an ideal of the all-consuming nature of both art making and motherhood. To do that, it is important to grasp how the grand narrative of artistic genius has defined art and artists in the Western world. My research demonstrates that this romantic notion still has considerable influence. It operates as the current episteme, or collective body of knowledge, that culture relies on to evaluate visual art. Significant works of art exist in spite of this narrative. Reactions to these works and to the artists who created them serve as examples of the limiting nature of the genius paradigm and the need for a new episteme to evaluate art based on meaning and authenticity. Establishment of an alternative body of knowledge allows for diverse and dynamic works of art—works of art that acknowledge the experiences that have historically been deemed irrelevant in the history of art.
1.2 METHODOLOGY

The structure of this thesis is autoethnographic. This methodology combines ethnographic research and autobiography “to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 273). Autoethnography is a constructive technique to introduce research tied to personal experience and reveal issues associated with the subjective nature of both the researcher and existing research. It enables research to negotiate insider or outsider membership, statuses and the space between those positions (Dwyer and Buckle 57 – 60). Writers can analyze experiences and document personal epiphanies in a way that can deepen cultural understanding (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 275-6).

The autoethnographic method not only fuses research with practice, but it also relates directly to my argument concerning the subjective nature of cultural analysis. Just as cultural researchers cannot completely divorce themselves from society, practicing visual artists cannot embody a single universal truth. Instead, artists describe subjective experiences and depict aspects of the larger society within which they are working. This approach counters the idea that researchers and artists can be objective, a concept that has often led to large cultural constructs that are based on the understandings of a small demographic (often white, Western, heteronormative males). Accordingly, many feminist scholars have used this approach to explore biases in the role of the researcher.
For the above reasons, I employ this methodology to allow me to contextualize my personal narrative in relation to major themes and important movements in the art world, and to describe how my personal experiences encouraged me to approach the taboo subject matter of maternal subjectivity. Being a practicing artist precludes me from being an outsider to the research linked to my artwork.

This research comes from an intersectional feminist perspective, and my argument advocates for a diverse dialogue about grand narratives that support singular or binary ways of understanding society and the visual arts. I describe polarities that generalize the roles of men and women in society that allows gendered bias in viewing artwork. It is important to emphasize that gender is more diverse than singular representations of a “woman” or “man.” By extension, there is no one definition of “women’s art” or “maternal art.” This essay describes how the role of genius limits the maternal influence, but it does not go into depth on how grand narratives deny the voice of the “other” altogether.

1.3 PAINTING PRACTICE

The project that accompanies this essay is made up of paintings based on my experiences as a mother and a witness to my maternal experience. My process of painting involves the interplay of practice, research, and analysis. The practice of painting focuses on the physical acts of making art: observation of the environment that I reference, as well as continual reflection upon the image I create; experimenting with color, value, and form; expressive brush techniques; and the mixing of latex and acrylic paint with paint mediums. Research also happens on many levels. It involves viewing works of art, investigating art
methods, and reading related texts by practicing artists, art critics, art historians, and others. My research also involves questioning social values and situations. In the same vein, I find inspiration from reading works of fiction and non-fiction that relate meaning by illuminating intersubjective experiences. My analysis explores the interplay of all aspects of practice and research in addition to relating these to both my experiences and society. Ultimately, my research and painting become integral to each other.

2.1 AN AWARENESS OF THE GENIUS THEME

Last year, while I was an artist-in-residence at a local school, I asked my eighth-grade art students to name one living visual artist. They could not. I could not have either at their age. Growing up in a working-class family in the rural Midwest, my knowledge of contemporary fine art was sparse. It was not until college that I became aware of the art and artists that define contemporary visual art. I began to read magazines such as *Art in America* and *Artforum* to get insight on the living artists who may eventually define this generation. Exposure to this work expanded my view of the world, as well as the potential in art making. Still, much of this new world seemed far away from what I considered to be my lowbrow upbringing. Fortunately, the postmodern art world was not devoid of diversity, and I was determined to become a part of something vibrant and new.

As I finished my undergraduate degree, I felt that I was witnessing a significant movement in art – the bridging of lowbrow and high art – when the exhibition *Beautiful Losers* took over the four floors of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Not only was street art becoming incredibly popular in the art scene, but it was also something I knew:
painted skateboard decks, photography of hardcore and punk bands, and even zines (hand-made magazines). I expected to see new and varied voices that I could relate to. Instead, I was dumbfounded by what I saw. Almost fifty artists exhibited, but most works were by men, of men, and for a typical, masculine man. Photographs were full of shirtless men at small punk shows, others filled with topless women. These works cannot be reduced to just a sinister product of the patriarchy, but I still felt defeated by the overriding singular viewpoint.

My epiphany in discovering the overpowering male domination of this exhibition may have shown my youthful naivety, seeing as I considered myself aware of the “macho” disposition of Dayton’s late 1990s-early 2000s underground music scene. Given Beautiful Losers strong representation of the West and East Coast art scenes, I expected to see the visual art equivalent to West Coast bands Le Tigre and Bikini Kill. I had the notion that gender equality was a priority for the creative thinkers of the art world, despite my knowledge of the patriarchal history of Western art. An exhibition presented as “cutting-edge” was not pioneering enough to represent the feminist riot grrrl movement that was associated with the culture. Also, given that I knew that more than half my classmates and instructors were women, and that I could also find significant women artists to study and reference, I anticipated gender equality in art to be a given. Following this epiphany, I could discern that celebrated women artists were the exception, not the rule.

Before visiting the Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center that year, my classmates and I had discussed art historian Linda Nochlin’s celebrated essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists.” In her essay, she revealed an underlying uncritical “meta-history”
that links the “superstars” of art history—the deeply embedded notion that artists are geniuses who create something out of nothing. We discussed one manifestation of this genius, the Abstract Expressionist. In this movement, painters supposedly broke all the rules of art pre-World War II to bring in a new age of art. I felt like I was witnessing another materialization of heroes gallantly taking art forward in the form of the street art movement. As the Cincinnati Enquirer claimed, in the Beautiful Losers exhibition, there were “no rules, just art” (Bauer).

Indeed, both Abstract Expressionism and Street Art built upon and rejected the past to command a new and valid approach to art. Nonetheless, neither broke away from the genius meta-narrative to go beyond a singular point of view. While both included women who created remarkable works of art, art history texts and news media focused on the male “superstars.” The Abstract Expressionists gave us Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning while Street Art gave us Shepard Fairey, Barry McGee and Ryan McGinness. While I admire the work of these men, I am more drawn to the work of women in each movement – the Abstract Expressionists Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning, and the Street Artists Margaret Kilgallen and Clare Rojas.

I left the exhibition wondering how much had changed since Nochlin’s essay was written thirty-four years earlier. The art world has become far more diverse than the one movement at a time typical of art textbooks’ linear layouts. Could the Street Art movement be no more than an art world “man cave”? If so, how does the rest of the art world fare in representing the diverse individuals that make up culture?
I did not find an answer to these questions immediately after the exhibition, but I did find what I was hoping to see in the exhibition—a work that embodied something I could relate to. Instead of a work of art, I found this meaning in a book, unrelated to the visual arts, which included a collection of autobiographical essays by women who grew up poor or working class edited by Michelle Tea. I was struck by the way I could relate to the writers in Without a Net. Even stories from women whose circumstances I could not identify with embodied a voice that I was starving to hear. Their voices were only implied in culture and political dialogue but seldom given a platform. My sister and I shared the book as if it were a cherished text that proved we existed, or at least, that our existence could count for something. Of course, there are cultural implications that people like my sister and I exist in text or in media that portray a simplistic image of the poor and working-class. As Without a Net’s editor Michelle Tea points out, instead of hearing the varied and complicated voices of poor and working-class women, society gets to read the sensational stories in Barbara Ehrenreich’s bestseller Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America (XIII – XV). Tea’s anthology may not have had the social impact of Nickel and Dimed, but it was evidence to me that writers in Without a Net expressed lived experience in a meaningful way. As an artist, I was influenced by Without a Net to push rule breaking in art even further—to disregard meta-narratives and paint works that reflected my experiences.

2.2 GENIUS AND THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE

Together, Without a Net and Beautiful Losers revealed themes in culture, as well as my desire to create work not restricted by these themes. I began my investigation into how
the idea of artistic genius limited art, artists, art audiences, and the art market. This section further defines the concept of artistic genius by explaining its history and its impact.

The story of artistic “genius” has been used to maintain the concept of what it has meant to be a “great artist” ever since the Renaissance. As Nochlin pointed out:

These assumptions, conscious or unconscious, link such unlikely superstars as Michelangelo and van Gogh, Raphael and Jackson Pollock under the rubric of “Great” … and the Great Artist is, of course, conceived of as one who has “Genius”; Genius, in turn, is thought of as an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist.” (n.p.)

This “honorific” and “misleading” title ignores the process of making art in favor of mythologizing creators (Nochlin).

The root of the genius concept dates back to classical times, but the Romantic philosophers entrenched it as the singular model of artistic appraisal in the eighteenth century. Philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer, in her book *Gender and Aesthetics*, summed up the Romantis’ belief that “[g]enius signals a powerful original mind that vaults over tradition and rules of art to discover entirely new ways of conceiving and enacting creativity” (30). In other words, only those with a superior mind are capable of enterprising greatness. Kant, who influenced Romantic thinkers, deduced that women’s emotional nature prevented them from superior mental faculties and as a result also inhibited extraordinary acts of creativity. Only a man who has a mind that “is strong and capable of independence from traditions and social norms, and that rises above the quotidian concerns that shape ordinary activities” (29), can be a genius. Such a mind was linked to a glamorized form of
madness. That is, access to such independent thought gave permission to the amoral and anti-social behavior of creators. Women, on the other hand, could not extract creativity from the depths of their gendered described madness known as “hysteria” (29-30).

One reason for the creation of distinct binaries by the Romantic philosophers was to alleviate anxieties about being considered “effeminate.” As Korsmeyer states, it was common for men who are artists to be accused of feminine behavior. Discourse explicitly contemptuous toward women was a result. She described the works of philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Arthur Schopenhauer as “expressed with particular vitriol.” These men emphasized the polarity between the rational and nature to candidly state that women were incapable of genius. Such philosophies invalidated challenges to a creative man’s masculinity by stressing the social roles of women (46-48, 66-68).

While superior thinking was distinctly a trait of men, the act of genius was thought to surpass gendered distinction. In the book Women Making Art, art historian and theorist Marsha Meskimmon explains that this “myth of transcendentals” gave men access to “gender-neutral subjects, universal, homogeneous truths” (6). It was believed that a work of art was created in this transcendent state, and what was created represented truths knowable by all of the humanity. Men, by extension, could transcend their gender, whereas a woman could not produce cultural content unaltered by their biology. Again, this was another way of specifying that women ought to adhere strictly to social roles (Battersby 75).

Korsmeyer reflected on how these Romantic impulses of universal truths also laid the foundation of how works of art are to be viewed. She summarizes the Kantian philosophies that advocated the correct “aesthetic attitude” in which to enjoy works of art:
The best way to achieve aesthetic enjoyment is to assume a disinterested, contemplative stance intended to clear one’s mind of prejudice and personal preoccupations, opening one’s sensibilities to the aesthetic qualities—formal, expressive, imaginative—that are available to the attentive spectator, reader, or listener. While educated familiarity with the arts provides a fund of knowledge that makes sophisticated appreciation possible, the immediate prerequisite for appreciation is the distanced, quiescent, reflective stance. (48)

The judgment made by this position is that art is made for a universal spectator’s pleasure. It denies inquiry. It accepts only the pleasure granted by a creative genius (48 – 51). As it was established that a genius had the power to use his subjective disposition to connect to universal truths, inquiry as to social relevance was unnecessary. By extension, great art symbolized objectivity. Instead of acknowledging the subjective hand of the creator, cultural content worked to reinforce the supremacy of one type of person (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etcetera).

Further cultural binary distinctions were made in the Romantics’ quest to define culture in outlining high and low forms of art. Values were ascribed to objects made by women and men based on whether the object was functional or not. The fine arts were separated from crafts. Works predominantly made by women, whether utilitarian or not, were deemed domestic, and therefore, craft (Korsmeyer 27).

This framework functioned to prevent women from participating in culture based on their association with the maternal. Even the passive nature of mother and child as a
subject in painting reinforced social roles based on a women’s presumed ability to bear children. The maternal body links women to nature and not thought. Within such an overriding cultural dynamic, women’s activities must fit into this domestic narrative.

The glorification of the maternal body and its antithesis, the genius, have a solid foundation in the visual arts. This is the singular episteme, defined as the body of knowledge that exemplifies logic and understanding within a given time, in which works of art have been and still are evaluated. It is an episteme that supports the notion that men have no worldly obligations preventing them from greatness, whereas women will always be marked by biology, social roles, and maternality. Such deliberate distinctions are dated, but function on an unconscious level to influence contemporary culture. Alternative attitudes have been written about artistic inquiry since the Romantics distinguished the field of aesthetics, but their assessments still affect the creation and viewing of art even now (31-32, 158). These ways of mythologizing artistic genius still hold power over the current art world.

3.1 FEMINIST ANALYSIS IN THE FINE ARTS

Feminist writings, including those of Nochlin, are strong examples of how deconstructionist analysis shaped dialogue that questions sexism in the visual arts. Feminist voices also opened culture to more women (and outsiders altogether) to pursue and succeed in art than ever before. Art by women has demonstrated a diverse and expansive body of work. Since the birth of second-wave feminism, art and discourse have allowed significant and progressive changes in the art world. Why then, with such valid
deconstruction, does the romanticized notion of who can be an artist still hold sway in the visual arts? To find an answer, I will go back to fundamental points in Nochlin's groundbreaking essay about women’s access to training, and discuss how a greater number of women receive academic training while a larger number of men are represented in galleries. I then explore examples of two of the most successful women making maternal art and examine how responses to present-day maternal works of art reveal that the grand narrative of genius remains the dominant viewpoint in contemporary art.

3.2 EDUCATED ARTISTS AND WORKING ARTISTS

Nochlin correctly identified the reason there have not been any great women artists as an institutional problem, not a product of a woman’s inability to make art. To put it another way, society was not structured in a way in which a woman making art could easily succeed. As this institution has changed in the forty-five years since her essay was written, more women have joined the visual art canon than ever before. Still, the romantic notion of artistic greatness continues to exist, and the debate still continues about whether there are, or can be, great women artists. I will review Nochlin’s assessment and complications revealed over time.

Nochlin points out that society has historically supported men’s access to greatness by granting them access to training. Education is important, because, as Nochlin asserts, art is more than “the naïve idea that art is direct, personal expression of individual emotional experiences, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art never is” (n.p.). Instead, art possesses formal qualities that are learned through
Nochlin cites examples throughout Western Art in which women were denied access to study the male nude, and noted that male artists were more likely to teach their sons rather than their daughters.

The lack of equal access did indeed factor into the quality (or lack of) in a work of art. However, institutions have changed to allow more women access to formal training than ever before, and men are still far more successful (Korsmeyer 29-31). So, if education is such an equalizing force, then why are so few women finding success in the art world?

Currently in the United States, more than half of Bachelors of Fine Art recipients in the visual arts are women, and approximately 70 percent of Master of Fine Arts recipients are women (Steinhauer, “Tallying Art World Inequality”). Despite this, men are far more likely to make a living from their artwork (“What is a work of art in the age”). The largest survey of artists and art school graduates, by a group of researchers known as BFAMFAPHD, found that women constitute 60 percent of undergraduate art degrees, but merely 46 percent of working artists (e.g. see Fig. 1) In the same 2014 report, the group pointed out that in “the United States, 40 percent of working artists do not have bachelor’s degrees in any field, and only 16 percent of working artists have arts-related bachelor’s degrees” (BFAMFAPHD). Considering how education had the potential to be a powerful leveling force, these statistics are defeating. It seems that as accessibility increased, the rules of great art making have changed.

BFAMFAPHD is just one group that tracks gender inequality in the art world. Since the 1980s, the Guerilla Girls have created billboards pointing out how few women were being represented in the art world’s most prestigious institutions (Guerrilla Girls. 1986
Report Card). In 2015, another anonymous art collective known as Pussy Galore updated one of the Guerilla Girls’ works to show how little progress had been made in nineteen years (see fig. 2). Another artist, Macol Hebron, has tracked gallery representation in her Gallery Talley project since 2014. She keeps a blog of images that focus on galleries and museums from around the world displaying percentages on top of poster-like photo-collages and drawings. Some of these works show institutions with women’s artwork accounting for half or more of their displays. Many more, however, do not.

These works of art activism point out that success in the artworld is not, as art journalist Ashton Cooper states, a “meritocracy... the best artists do not simply rise to the top based on the high quality of their work” (n.p.). Cooper notes the pattern repeated over and over in art media about the “rediscovered” or “forgotten” women artists. The “fable of the Overlooked Female Artist,” acknowledges artists who are in their late career. In short, women need to put in decades of work to compete in the genius narrative. Women have then proved that they have not used their “privilege of a choice to give up their careers to have a family.” At least, that is one gallery owner’s excuse for not equitably representing women (Steinhauer, “‘I like Art by Men Better’”).

For women to be recognized, it seems that they must compensate for their biology. Ultimately, a woman’s ability to have a child directly competes with the accepted idea of what it means to be an artist. Two of the most successful contemporary women making art, Marina Abramović and Tracy Emin, reinforce this belief by stating that having children holds back women artists (Voien; Alexander). Emin went as far as to say:
I don’t think I’d be making work (if I were a mother). ... I would have been either 100% mother or 100% artist. I’m not flaky and I don’t compromise. Having children and being a mother... It would be a compromise to be an artist at the same time. I know some women can. But that’s not the kind of artist I aspire to be. There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men. It’s hard for women. It’s really difficult, they are emotionally torn. It’s hard enough for me with my cat. (Groskop)

In this interview, Emin is pointing out sexism in the artwork while reinforcing the genius narrative. Abramović embodies this model of all-consuming art making as well. She boldly explains that she can be a fully personified artist because "I have no husband, no family, I’m totally free" (Neuendorf).

Again, these preconceptions have to deal with social roles, not a capacity to make art. Art educator Jane Piirto’s research tries to figure out where this mentality takes over in her 1991 essay Why are there so few? (Creative women: Visual artists, mathematicians, scientists, musicians), she reveals that women and men take up art from the same impulse to create, and even share astonishingly similar personalities. In art school, studies show that boys are judged on their personality and girls on their perceptual skills. The problem with this, she states, is that character traits are what make artists successful in our culture. Being an artist required “intensity and commitment” to overcome a fair amount of rejection and even poverty. At the same time, women are less prone to stop identifying as artists even if they are not successful. Still, when deciding career paths, women are much more likely to
choose art education as opposed to trying to make it as working artists. This is when social roles and responsibilities begin to define who makes art:

Girls' problems may come when they try to reconcile the stereotypical paradox of the nurturing, recessive, motherly female with that of the unconventional artist. ...Few if any gender differences are found in creativity until after college, when women must decide how they will manage being mothers, wives, and creators. The double bind hits hard, and this gender difference cuts across all fields and domains. The men creators never seem to wonder how they will manage raising a family and having a career. The women creators always do. That is why many who reached prominence were childless and even lived alone, without a mate.

Piirto goes on to explain that where men could completely lose themselves in their work, women are scrutinized (by themselves or by society) for such indulgent behavior.

Piirto’s observations explain how the equalizing nature of education is limited by the paradox of all-consuming artistic genius positioned against social responsibilities. Such an outlook helps to explain how education is no longer a factor in creating artistic greatness. For example, many of the artists in the Beautiful Losers exhibition did not have traditional fine art training. Nonetheless, their artistic personalities composed a marketable narrative.

What persists is a culture that presents the artworks of those with the least social responsibility; in turn, the art world favors works of art that lack social engagement. As philosopher Christine Battersby makes clear in her book Gender and Genius, artists must be “located in terms of chains of influence” to “suit subsequent historical perspectives and
value-systems.” Consequently, culture has adapted to a dated value system by denying the significance of education when outsiders become a prominent component.

Works of art have, of course, been made outside of this narrative. In fact, rich bodies of work that emphasize the maternal can illuminate the existence of and the drawbacks of the genius phenomena. When an artist directly confronts her social role as a mother, she both reveals and confronts the strict gendered binary in the history of art and contemporary culture.

4.1 NEO-MATERNALISM

Women inspired by their personal experiences as mothers have built a new movement known as Neo-Maternalism. Artist and author Sharon Butler explains that Neo-Maternalism responds to a canon of art that went from the idealization of the maternal experience to completely rejecting it as a subject in the visual arts. Both extremes encompassed the male gaze and reinforced the genius paradigm (“Neo-Maternalism”).

The genre of maternal art became the ultimate cliché in the 1950s when Abstract Expressionists, building on the Romantic concept of genius, constructed an overpowering and idealized image of art and artist. As Butler states, “the unwritten rule has been that making art is a consuming obsession that leaves no time or space for worldly responsibilities like childbearing.” She gives the example of Paul Gauguin and Philip Guston, who disregarded their roles as fathers, husbands to be fully devoted artists.

Artist and author of Feminist Art and the Maternal, Andrea Liss further explains that, given this model, a female artist is expected to disregard any allusion that would be
considered “feminine” in her work to be successful. As such, references to motherhood became the worst offense for being depravedly “sentimental.” If female artists chose to have children, in the eyes of the artistic establishment, “they weren’t serious about art” (13). Butler points out that artists Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning (both abstract expressionists) did not have children, while artists Louise Nevelson and Grace Hartigan “left their [children’s] upbringing to relatives so that they could turn their undivided attention to making art and tending their vocations.” Having no parental obligations helped these artists meet the Abstract Expressionist ideal of an artist.

Somehow this solitary notion of “artist” persisted through the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Even the most progressive project by feminist artists, the Women’s Building in Los Angeles (1974), continued to define being an artist as an all-consuming vocation. This female art space censured motherhood when its members approved a rule that prohibited children from artists’ spaces, despite the fact that they still allowed dogs (Liss 2). Even though feminist artists were in the process of redefining the domestic in their art, motherhood was still being undermined.

In response to the lack of acceptance of mothers in the larger feminist art movement, an alternative group called Mother Art was formed. In 1977, this group of women put together a series of site-specific performances called Laundry Works. Displaying art and poetry on clotheslines in several Laundromats in Los Angeles, these artists created a dialogue about the reality of motherhood. I find details of this series of performances provocative, as it represents a vibrant maternal community of artists. Unfortunately, this work garnered little attention compared to Womanhouse (1972) and other works that were
aligned with the Women’s Building. So, while the pleasure-driven aesthetics of the past have worked to make the subject of mother and child a taboo, the theme of genius persisted.

4.2 THE MATERNIAL IN NEW MEDIA

The feminist art movement from the 1970s on, with and without directly confronting the maternal, used new mediums of art making to aid in breaking limiting conventions. Artists who were inspired by their experiences as mothers found new and relevant ways to express their ideas by sidestepping traditional mediums altogether. Performance art and new media pioneered innovative ways for renewed explorations of pregnancy, motherhood, and raising children. Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) is a notable example. Kelly displays framed found objects from her son like stained clothes and scribbled drawings, mounted with cataloged information (Kelly).

Such embedded conditions may explain why photographer Sally Mann felt it took her “so long to find the abundant... artistic wealth within [her] family’ (105). In the late 1980s, Mann began to work with her children to create the most recognizable images of children in contemporary art. In her 2015 autobiography, she explains that she never expected the fame and controversy that would follow the release of these works. Her experience encapsulates the problems with still relevant narratives of art making and motherhood.

Mann, while having a strong body of work preceding her, was relatively unknown in 1992, when she released her book and exhibition *Immediate Family*. She was “blindsided” by the controversy that exploded after Richard B. Woodward’s 1992 *New York Times*
Magazine cover story “The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann” (see Fig 3). The journalist may have compounded her emerging success, but also inspired a sensationalism that has led to national scrutiny and outrage. He pointed out that she was not being charged with child pornography, but pushed the idea that she put her family in danger. “Beyond the issues of artistic license, Mann’s work has raised worrying personal concerns. The shield of motherhood can quickly become a sword when turned against her.” He goes on to describe the children as active participants in art-making, but the overall article underscores scandal.

Therefore, while making fresh and commanding images that highlighted the freedom of her children’s everyday experience in rural Virginia, her parenting was in question. What she refers to as “bad mother” letters condemn her for sexual abuse and psychologically damaging her children. Of course, as a mother and an artist, these ideas did not cross her mind when creating these works. “In the pictures of my children, I celebrated the maternal passion their bodies inspired in me – how could I not? – and never thought of them in a sexual context, remarking to Woodward, “I think childhood sexuality is an

\[\text{______________}\]

\[1\] Immediate Family coincided with a climate of increased social anxiety about pedophilia, and a concurrent nationwide outcry over controversial fine art. Mann states that the continuing controversy around the works of Jock Sturges and Robert Mapplethorpe “made it clear that we were in the throes of a full-scale moral freak out over the photographic representation of nude children” (Mann 156).
oxymoron” (Mann. “Sally Mann’s Exposure”). By social standards, though, Mann acted as an artist, which prevented her from doing her job as a mother.

Despite the criticism of Mann and her work, the *Immediate Family* series represented important maternal work that has remained engaging decades later. It has allowed space for more maternal voices in photography, including the work of photographer, Catherine Opie. Her 2004 image, *Self-portrait/Nursing* (fig 4) has become one of the most celebrated pieces of maternal art in contemporary times. In this photograph, the tattooed artist and her son affectionately look at each other. Her bulky arms, short hair, scarification art across her chest, and well-known lesbian identity place a contemporary notion of family in the classical narrative of mother and child (Liss 89).

4.3 THE MATERNAL IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

Mann’s and Opie’s images helped reintroduce the maternal into contemporary art. While this is an improvement over the past 50 years, these works have not undone the existing prejudice against maternal art. This is especially true in the medium of painting. As recently as 2012, two men, a prominent painter and a popular critic, proclaimed that women cannot paint as well as men (Clark, Johnson). This very concept dismisses not only female artistry but maternal subject matter altogether. These men still have influence in the art world, and their sentiments are a reflection of issues going on in many galleries and museums.

When a viewer can ascertain an artist’s identity as a woman or a mother in a work of art, too often inquiry factors in gendered bias about the artist’s perceived social
responsibilities. This is a by-product of the genius meta-narrative that focuses on the creator, and not what is created. This is how Sally Mann can create art about her children and be a bad mother, whereas fathers do not face this institutional scrutiny. This section I will examine how domestic, paternal, and maternal social roles have affected three contemporary painters: Elizabeth Murray, Lucian Freud, and Jenny Saville.

Painter, Elizabeth Murray is one of the most successful painters to use domestic themes in contemporary painting. While she did not paint images of her three children, she painted everyday objects that are labeled as feminine like teacups and utensils. Her works, which gained attention in the 1980s, are bold and colorful. They are constructed from small shaped canvases arranged into cartoon-like paintings (see Fig. 5). Like many artists, Murray feels a need to hide away in her studio. Instead of closing herself off, her children help her be a part of the world (“Murray’s Edgy Art et al.,”). They are also her most honest critics. In a segment of PBS’s documentary series, Art21, Murray’s adult daughters stand next to her critiquing a painting (Sollins). Her work and her methods of creating work are evidence of a shift in thinking in the art world. As Butler explains:

It’s clear from Murray’s paintings that raising children, rather than diminishing her art-making capacity, inspired her. The paintings channel the screaming, fractured energy and frustration that come from being both an artist and a mother, but ultimately transcend specific circumstances to make a more universal statement about life’s challenges and satisfactions that is neither masculine nor feminine. (Butler, “Neo-Maternalism”)
In short, Murray created important works of art while living outside a narrow definition of artist. She used personal experiences to make evocative cultural connections. While Murray’s work has garnered attention, her work deserves more investigation. As her friend, well-known painter, Chuck Close, expressed after her death in 2007, Murray’s paintings never got the attention they merited because of her gender and her domestic subject matter (“Murray’s Edgy Art et al.,”).

Murray’s approach to art making contrasts with that of figurative painter Lucian Freud. Freud is considered the top contemporary figurative artist in Britain. Until his death in 2011, he lived the lifestyle that Abstract Expressionism glorified. He was such an isolationist that he even refused to live with his wife and children. At the same time, some of his children estimate that he may have had more than 30 children in total, even though he only acknowledged 14 of them. When interviewed, one of his daughters admitted that he cared much more for painting than he did his children (“He May Have et al.,”).

Is this kind of paternal neglect reflected in his paintings? Or, was he just behaving as an artistic genius should behave to fit in the lineage of genius? These are complicated questions. The answers may lead artists, critics, and historians to let go of dated notions about what it means to be an artist. What is surprising is how his personal life and paintings were glamorized with little investigation. Freud painted his own children nude without criticism, while Sally Mann’s and painter Jenny Saville’s works and persons were demonized for having their children be subject matter. In fact, an investigation into the maternal work of Jenny Saville shows how artistic genius and the maternal taboo co-exist to reinforce the singular meta-narrative of who can be defined as an artist.
Saville became known in the 1990s for shocking paintings of heavy, fleshy, naked women that force viewers to face stereotypes about images of women. Her paintings are extremely large to the point that they are confrontational. The figures that fill the paintings’ surfaces are emotionally raw, stunningly rendered, grotesquely portrayed, and completely in contrast to the ideal stereotypes of women throughout art history. Saville’s paintings invoke a visceral response when looking at the flesh of modern humanity. Her paintings display a new realism in art, one that connects everyday experience to high art.

Being figurative, Saville’s work was instantly compared to Freud’s. Reviews of her work inevitably refer to his work in relation to hers. The cross-referencing becomes problematic because as critic Charles Darwent states, it is important to recognize that Saville “isn’t trying to paint like Lucian Freud” (108). Both Saville’s and Freud’s subjects are un-idealized nudes of ordinary people; yet, their aims and styles are notably different. Freud tried to capture a severe likeness of his studio models, insisting that his paintings embody these individuals fully. Whereas, Saville, working from photographs, focuses on the commonality of flesh instead of representing a particular identity. Even her self-portraits are not only about her; they express layers of meaning beyond one person’s psychology.

I want to reframe Saville’s comparison to Freud, which continued for over twenty years of reviewing her work, by pointing out that the contrast was constrained by their personal identities. In short, too many critics judged their work on how they measured up to the ideal image of artists. Nowhere is this more apparent than when Saville began painting works that were inspired by her experiences as a mother. In a 2012 review, conservative art critic and art world pundit Brian Sewell insists Saville’s paintings are
nothing like Freud’s for different reasons than Darwent posits. Sewell cared little about the ideas that Saville was undertaking. He expressed disfavor for things that did not fit his tastes—the size of her work, her expressionist brushstrokes, and her subject matter. At the same time, he gives her the back handed compliment that at least she has not given up painting “as so many women do.” This is not surprising from a man who recently said, “Only men are capable of aesthetic greatness. Maybe it’s something to do with bearing children” (Johnson).

Sewell makes the direct link that the Romantic philosophers did before him, linking women’s ability to create life with an inability to create art. He is reinforcing stereotypes that negate an entire gender while championing men who lack any parental qualities. For example, Freud’s paintings of his estranged children included one in which his adult daughter’s genitalia is the focal point (see Fig. 6). Furthermore, his children could only spend time with him by modeling for him (Portrait of a Particular et al.). None of the qualities of paternal neglect were discussed until after his death and none of the conversations disqualified him from the status of the premier painter in British contemporary art. This illustrates that maternity is taken into consideration in judging a work of art, while paternity is not, and reinforces the need for Saville’s maternal art to be seen, discussed, and celebrated.

Saville’s maternal artwork directly builds on the classical theme of mother and child and adds layers of lived experience. Unlike the classical models, though, Saville’s new paintings do not depict a narrative. Instead, they represent layers of sensation. Contemporary visual culture often relies on film and performance art to tell stories, but
Saville feels that painting has the unique ability to offer multiple meanings simultaneously. She explains that she wants to put the “essence” of a story into a painting, often through the illusion of time, just not sequential time.

This focus on time provides a performance-like quality to her artwork. *The Mothers* (2011) (Fig. 7) shows a contemporary experience of the classic Madonna and child. In this self-portrait painting/drawing, Saville, with a very pregnant belly, struggles to hold her active infant son. He is all over the canvas, struggling to escape his mother’s lap. Saville shows partial figures in many places throughout the canvas. As a result, this image appears to be in continual motion.

After looking at Saville’s earlier work, which is considered to be grotesque and violent, her imagery of the maternal seems tame if left uninvestigated, but this new series employs a subject that is as challenging as her earlier work. Her confrontation of the cliché of maternal imagery was a bold enterprise. Undertaking such forbidden subject matter makes this series as daring as challenging the sexualized gaze. Saville says that confronting the maternal taboo is also confronting the grand-narrative of greatness:

You think of Picasso...as this sort of magician that could transform one thing into something else as a constant process of creativity. That’s associating with a very masculine way of doing things. And so, there was always a sense of slightly trespassing on that from a female point of view. But I suddenly started feeling powerful from this point of view—that I was a creator.

(Modern Art Oxford)
Saville puts herself in the position of both artistic creator and maternal creator, saying that this is an empowering mode of creation. Where does such a stance fit in the meta-narrative of genius? Artforum critic Donald Kuspit rejects this body of work and her parenting in his 2012 review. Saville looks “unloving” and “angry” in Pentimenti IV (see Fig. 8) (“Kuspit ”). In his previous review, he describes her as “one of the most brilliant painters working today” (“Tragic Women”). Admittedly, the former praise was (unintentionally) backhanded description of the women Saville painted. He reduced them to only an embodiment of tragedy—not as living women who have encountered tragedy. Instead of using this outmoded psychology to define tragic women, he used it to identify Saville’s mothers as being “not good enough mothers.” To Kuspit, the squirming child and lively mark-making represent the “unconscious self-doubts” of an “ambivalent” mother. He concludes: “because of that, they represent a failure of parenting, and Saville’s labored impulsiveness” (“Kuspit”).

Apparently, Saville’s maternal artwork connects to contemporary motherhood so much that it cannot escape modern society’s urge to quickly condemn mothers. Being a mother, I related to Saville’s images. Not once did I see them as angry or “not good enough.” Kuspit’s remarks are too absurd to be taken seriously, yet his review is printed in a top art magazine.

While Kuspit and Sewell’s comments still have an audience, I think that their ideas do not have a future. Saville’s work has created positive dialogues, and it parallels much of what Liss and Butler examine in their recent writings on the maternal in art. Their argument recognizes the context for a rise of neo-Maternalism in the art world, helped by Saville’s
work using the maternal as a source of inspiration. The canon of maternal art and dialogue grows larger every year. Female artists are discovering “how to strategically negotiate between engrained codes of maternity and embrace the complexities of lived motherhood” (Liss xvii). Saville does this by negotiating the “in-betweeness” of art and life, ancient art and contemporary art, nostalgia and new, internal and external, and flesh and experience. She has made painting and drawing fresh by using it to represent time and concepts. Her subjects stay relevant because they are authentic, have meaning, and possess the utmost skill.

5.1 NEW EPISTEMES

The works of Sally Mann, Elisabeth Murray, Jenny Saville, and many others signify a need for a new episteme in art. The old ideas that frame artists within the narrow expressions are constraining culture. Artists do not have to live an obsessed and unconnected life in order to create relevant works of art. In fact, the arts are worse for allowing such stereotypes to dominate. As Meskimmon and others argue, a new episteme must be created to appraise the diverse artwork that is created outside of this limiting paradigm, namely to assess works of art by women as more than “merely the negative shadow of their male counterparts” (6). Artists, critics, and philosophers must advocate for a new way to evaluate art that does not disqualify art, when lived experience or outsider identity is recognizable in artwork. Instead, an evaluation must consider authenticity and embodiment. As a result, fine art will better reflect the diverse voices that make up culture.
Neo-Maternalism is just one of those voices to which such a paradigm would open the doors.

5.2 INTACT – PROJECT EXHIBITION

Artwork created within a broader episteme fills the void left by the linear trope of artistic greatness. I use the space outside of that narrative to understand my environment and experiences. Like the voices of the women in *Without a Net*, I want to use my subjective understanding to create. It is from this open framework that I created my project exhibition entitled *Intact*.

My thesis project is made up of acrylic paintings that depict a dynamic way of understanding experiences. The build-up of transparent and opaque color reflects the nuances that shape reality to show that moments are not isolated. Layers, colors, and compositions ambiguously work to reflect how my subjects and I are affected by location, career, education, family, entertainment, money, health, ability, race, history, religion, and consumption, and how all these things define our ways of being and work to internalize culture. To me, this approach works to connect the everyday to the ideas and structures that created that moment.

The interdisciplinary focus of the Masters of Humanities program has given me the opportunity to explore the intersections of art, art history, aesthetics, sociology, gender, and everything else that gives context to my work. The discovery of the Neo-maternal movement empowered me to investigate how my daily experiences connect to larger structures. I make these connections by exploring the dimensional effects of environments,
emotions, thoughts, and discoveries that transpire in everyday occurrence and extraordinary changes that happen in life. I do not want to paint a narrative, though; I relate an overall mood that encompasses the heart of an experience. For example, my painting *Funeral* (Fig. 9) expresses loss and support but does not delve into a lineage of events.

All of the works in this project center on people in my life, my daughter in particular. Works influence and respond to each other because I keep many paintings going at once. Paintings reflect observation, but portray the co-existence of internal lives and external structures. I push colors beyond their natural state and abstract shapes to describe the unseen elements that created that instant. Transparent layers express how existence occurs on micro- and macro-levels, interpreted on a cellular and astronomical level. For instance, in the painting *Play*, white office walls are turned orange and teal, and the rug becomes hot pink. I also added bright abstract paintings to the wall to push the connective nature of that moment.

*Play* was part of a turning point in my graduate studies. My previous work focused on individuals disconnected from their environment. When I painted my daughter, the work seemed sentimental and uncultivated. Like Sally Mann, I had finally realized the potential of using my family for inspiration, but I was not going deep enough to make meaningful work. With *Play* and other works like *On Stage* (Fig10), I have changed how I paint the people in my life. Instead of focusing on individuals, I emphasize the surrounding environment in which the figures reside. As a result, my compositions have begun to represent larger ideas about what makes up an individual.

Ultimately, these works are not about the people I paint; they are about my
interactions with them. Even though I am not represented physically, I portray my observations and understandings. I see these moments as a confluence of so many things beyond description. Through painting, I take on the absurd task of describing a theory of everything. I have finally figured out an unspoken and unwritten way to process my world, which I have had difficulty doing throughout my life due to having severe dyslexia. In other words, my brain processes large structures, but does not function in such a way that language allows me to describe what I have discovered. Instead, paint allows the means to explore and express my personal discoveries.

Scenes, layers, and colors are metaphors for maternal fear, love, and ambivalence, as well as my identity as a mother and artist. I try to describe that everything that has ever existed, has created moments, and at the same time embodies specific actions and emotions. Painting these works allows me to reconcile these contrasts without creating dichotomies. It gives me space to discover personal epiphanies that have revealed culture to me as well as revealing how simultaneously fragile and strong I am. Creating these works keeps me out of the survival mode that my immediate environment often encourages. I do not need them to tell the stories that inspired them; I need them to connect to my humanity. I appreciate ambiguity in my work. It allows room for others to bring their experience to viewing, and at the same time adds a layer of privacy to works that reveal so much about my life.

As my daughter and I have faced personal trauma, living the all-consuming lifestyle of the idealized artist would have constituted neglect. At the same time, meeting my daughter’s most immediate needs has not disqualified me from being an artist. Over the
past few years, my daughter and I have gone from not having a place to live to owning a house. I exalted the experience of what this little house in one of the worst neighborhoods in Dayton meant to us in the *Home* (Fig. 11) and *Home in the Light* (Fig. 12). As I painted one night while my daughter slept, a man broke in and tore up our home. Our sense of security is still recovering. Looking back at *Home in the Light*, I can see the fragility of our position. I was not aware of how deep our vulnerability was, but grasping the layered environment I described implied our instability. Over time, my daughter and I are healing from this and other traumas. The dynamic layers of meaning in the paintings *Background* (Fig. 13) and *Mergirl Defeats the Toxic Toothed Toilet* (Fig. 14) related to overcoming difficult events to portray a reality where we are fully intact. As all of these paintings show, we are more than the things that happen to us.

5.3 CONCLUSION

In spite of an art world that is slow to let go of the idea of genius, new art influenced by the maternal continues to demonstrate the reality of women in visual art. An awareness of subjective understanding adds layers of meaning that negotiate the “in-betweenness” of art and life, nostalgia and new, internal and external, and context and experience. In this vein, my goal in painting is to authentically represent my experiences and understandings.

I embody the unorthodox disposition that Piirto describes—I am an artist. It’s part of my identity. This identification is more complex than either popular or high culture have allowed. Like the women I described in this thesis, I acknowledge the limitations of history and the contemporary art world in an effort to find authenticity. As I found in works outside
popular grand narratives, my artwork expresses something other than genius. It encompasses so much more.

Figure 2. Gender for Total Populations and Artists U.S. 2012. by BFAMFAPHD. Artists Report Back. (10).
Figure 3. New York Times 1992 Cover.

Figure 5. Elizabeth Murray. *Hey Madge*. Oil on canvas and wood. 2001-2.

Figure 7. Jenny Saville. *The Mothers*. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 2011.

Figure 8. Jenny Saville. *Pentimenti IV (After Michelangelo’s Virgin and Child)*. Oil on canvas. 2011.
Figure 9. Heather Lea Reid. Funeral. 2015.

Figure 10. Heather Lea Reid. On Stage. 2015.
Figure 11. Heather Lea Reid. *Home in the Light*. 2015

Figure 12. Heather Lea Reid. *Home*. 2015.
Figure 13. Heather Lea Reid. Backgroundt. 2016.

Figure 14. Heather Lea Reid. Mergirl Defeats the Toxic Toothed Toilet. 2016
WORK CITED


