

Forgive Me I'm a Mother
Corynn Kokolakis
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416-910-7966
info@corynn.com

OCADU
Corynn Kokolakis
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My return to painting came out of a visceral need to find space, to define myself as something other than mom. And indeed, I no longer describe my vocation as “Mother.” I have a “real” job now, one that I can talk about at parties without watching people shift uncomfortably as they wait to exit the conversation. How strange is it, then, that what makes me happiest in this new, exciting, potentially evocative vocation is to recreate this awkward social scenario, in paint. I've considered this question from multiple angles, but ultimately, I think we are most comfortable with what we know. And I have put my 10, 000 hours into child rearing, not just my own children but those within my community. Certainly, the skills I've attained in those (often wee) hours seem to serve me well in this new venture. Research, time management, creative problem solving and big-picture thinking are almost automatic, but so is that finely tuned radar for children of all kinds. When in close proximity to one, without conscious thought I assess first their well-being, then look for developmental markers both glaring and barely perceptible, instinctively trying to anticipate their next move. I walk a fine line (especially in this city) swallowing the urge to be the village that I so longed for when stuck in the thick of it. See, despite the new title of “Painter,” “Mother” is at the centre of who I am, and I'm still the dud at the cocktail party.

Unless you would permit me to reimagine the gathering. Perhaps this time I'm surrounded by those also marked by the labour of *mothering*,¹ those who have an intimate

¹ *Mothering*, as I use it here, refers solely to the work of childrearing, not the biological processes associated with giving birth.

understanding of the precarious balance between love, determination and resilience, and guilt, self-doubt and defeat. I imagine them, exhausted, leaky, saggy and harried but exhilarated by the freedom from distraction, intently focused on conversation, filling their cups not with beverage but commiseration. Make-up and “real clothes” are, of course, optional.

The MVPs at this tête-à-tête would be the women who have shared with me intimate images of their children—images that have resonated in one way or another with my own experience of mothering, images that they have trusted me to adapt and render through my own lens. And these images, so generously provided, have offered a doorway into my own memories that (as is often the case with moms of many) I did not have the presence of mind to document myself. These women and their children are part of my circle (either real or virtual), and I can't imagine my work without their influence.

But since we are imagining, why not fill the guest list with just a few of the countless others who have contributed in one way or another to this body of work? Perhaps we could start with an academic or two? I would expect lively discussion to arise around Dr. Andrea O'Reilly's framework of mothering. As an author and professor of gender studies at York University, she could offer much to say of what she terms matricentric feminism (a feminism with mother as centre), what it is not (maternalism²) and why she believes it is necessary now (“the mother shaped hole in academic women's studies”) (O'Reilly). O'Reilly would encourage me to continue making work that looks outward from mother: “A matrifocal perspective...is one in which mothers play a role of cultural and societal significance and which motherhood is

² O'Reilly is careful to avoid an essentialist approach, because though “mothering” is predominantly still a female endeavor, it is not innately gendered. O'Reilly argues that the only way to achieve gender parity is to learn to value “mother work” or the work of caregiving as a skill.

thematically celebrated and valued.” Indeed, her research has found that the theme of mothering is far from celebrated, and motherhood, with relatively few exceptions, is largely missing within contemporary art. The writer Sarah Menkedick, would surely offer up agreement, as she did in her article "In Defense of Motherhood," 2016 for *Velo Magazine*. In it, she tackled notions or tropes of what motherhood is, what is the role of the artist, and how the two interact. Though the article focused on literature, she weighs the notion of the male perspective as most valued, against the current social construct that domestic is synonymous with female, ultimately concluding that the dominant discourse predetermines the domestic as incompatible with art creation. Menkedick argued

...if we examined our derisive and supercilious attitudes towards the domestic and the realm of caregiving instead of assuming it pathetic, female, and sentimental, then it wouldn't seem that art exists in such a rarefied realm. The assertion that it does, and that mothers may never be able to fully exist there or, if they do, will cease to be good mothers, impoverishes both art and motherhood.

As hard as they are to follow, I'd have to jump in to thank these two women for providing both inspiration and the framework to springboard my exploration of the mother's gaze and to proudly investigate my relationship with the work of mothering.

I mentioned earlier my radar, which is probably the wrong word for the perspective that came out of many hours of research, commiseration and in-the-trenches experience. The heavy lifting of my relationship with mothering was born out of the need to nurture a child who doesn't fit within the prescribed notion of development. My remuneration for this work is always milestones achieved, in their own time and never as expected, but they are a sweet payout none the less. The result of this experience is a shift in the way I view children and development that

runs consistently through my work. The paintings move between the relationship to mother and her influence (through the use of implied maternal gaze) evident in *Extricate* (2018) or *Controller* (2018) and the autonomy and celebration of the children as they are in *Posturing* (2019) and *Immiscible* (2018). The series touches on these ambiguous shifts, transitional spaces where mother and child are neither together nor apart. The moment depicted becomes the goalpost, the event worth memorializing. Art, in this sense, seems to reflect life.

Which leads me to another guest at this party. It is hard not to draw some parallels between my depictions of children and those produced by photographer Sally Mann, for her book *Family Pictures* (1992). In it, the pictures of her children show the range of her maternal daily view, from the dramatic to the ideal, the cautious to the comfortable. In her memoir *Hold Still* (2015), Mann reflects critically on what it means to use children as subjects and the issues or controversies that arise out of doing so. To be clear, Sally discusses the specific backlash to the few nude images that appeared in the book, but she also attempts to put a finger on why it was so fierce: “Part of the artist’s job is to make the commonplace singular, to project a different interpretation onto the conventional...they tapped into some below-the-surface cultural unease about what it is to be a child...and calling attention to the limitations of widely held views on childhood (and motherhood)” (153). Somehow, by sharing how *she* saw her children, Mann upset the patriarchal construct of motherhood.

She hasn’t been the only one to do so. First shown in 1976, Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* conceptualized the labour of new motherhood, stripping the relationship of sentiment and sacrifice, while in 2004 Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, her “pervert” scarred chest visible, queered the canon of Madonna and child (Buller). Kelly and Opie confronted ideas of motherhood within the patriarchal construct head on. They looked at the materiality, the

changing bodies, the messy and the sterile, the labour and love involved in caring for an infant while questioning who could or should “mother.” Other mother artists have followed, pushing to make early motherhood and all of its trimmings visible within the larger culture. And it seems they have earned some notoriety. Have you seen the recent article in *Canadian Art*?³ The current parade of “mommy lit”?⁴ See, this is where I might stop to fill my glass because if you *have* seen either of the latter, you might notice the representations of mothering we are most willing to embrace are of the body altering, messy, diaper filled, baby days kind. Little attention is paid to those (of us) who are fumbling through the less precious parts of childhood, illness, injury, screen addiction, new math and puberty, all arguably just as messy. Mothering evolves, becoming less a self-sacrificing slog and more a collaborative dance along a tightrope. Which leads me right back to the similarity my work shares with that of Sally Mann. We emphasize the gaze, making ourselves visible only through the children as subject. The children we depict are for the most part not babies, but autonomous beings, tethered only by their mother’s sensitive and persistent watch. The gaze is neither self-sacrificing nor confrontational; it is pure connection, be it merely commonplace or riddled with idyllic sentiment.

Mann stands behind all of the images in *Family Pictures*, despite the numerous consequences. However, she might bemoan, as she did in *Hold Still*, that the act of printing her photographs at all distills the moment to a mere fraction of a second: “Photographs economize the truth; they are always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time’s continuum” (151). She posits that simply viewing these distilled images overrides the existing memory. As a

³ In her article “A Year in Motherhood” (2018), Leah Sandals describes the work of mother/artists that contributed to the 2018 “watershed” year for motherhood in the arts.

⁴ Lauren Elkin identifies the “trend” of “countercanon” books on motherhood in her 2018 article “Why all the Books About Motherhood?” for the *Paris Review* and points to how they offer differing perspectives.

painter who paints from photographs, it could be said that my paintings are all the more abstracted from reality, thus further perverting memory, but I would argue that this extra step allows space for introspection. Each painting contains in it many individual moments that converge into one subject through the labour of creation. Recalling my personal experiences with mothering, each stroke brings with it the weight of my connections and memories. In “Painting Modern Life” (2007)—this is when I’d need to pull out a party trick, because I can’t imagine him mingling among us sampling the spread—Ralph Rugoff argues a similar point, emphasizing the materiality of painting in relation to photographic reference: “in an era of instant media, painting’s resilience has been inextricably linked to its slowness as a medium...in the sense that its more nuanced and variegated surface invites the eye to linger, to scrutinise the hundreds of contacts between brush and canvas” (16). My painting style is immediate, oil, painted wet in wet to emphasize the paint quality and mark making itself. Unlike the quickness afforded by a photographic image, painting offers a window into its process. The act of creation and the labour involved become apparent as parts of the painting process are left for the viewer to discover. So, I ask, if the material invites you to linger, to stay a while, in whose view do you sit, whose memory do you access, and to which relationship does that memory refer? Might the painting process echo the materiality of mothering? Or maybe you are not interested in sitting with this kind of work, because like Rugoff you simply aren’t a guest at this particular cocktail party.

Since the conversation has shifted as it does at these things, I’d like to discuss my use of photographic reference as it relates to two other artists’ work who could in some ways be considered my “artistic foremothers.” As with the feminist movement of the '70s, these women root their work firmly and unapologetically within the domestic/female realm. Neither seems to care how it was situated within larger critical discourse. Both have no qualms in speaking with

their own voices. Though I would like to think that I have followed in their footsteps in choosing to make “easy” or uncritical work, despite our formal education, what we share most is praxis. In her work, Mary Pratt references her environment, her view of the everyday (Andrew-Gee); she looks out as mother and paints what she sees beautifully, from fish to light-filled jars to newborns. There seems little time or effort paid to conform to canon. The work appears pragmatic in its creation. Similarly, Christianne Pflug painted her unique view of the world. Through her windows and doors, we catch a glimpse of her daily life as wife and mother, insulated, looking out from within (Siegel). I wonder what these artists would have chosen as subjects today as more and more of the inside and outside world becomes digitized, as access to diverse imagery is as simple as a click of a mouse. In my current role of mother of three, my access to the time and freedom it takes to create and develop reference is limited, so like Pratt and Pflug, I take inspiration from what I see around me. As a result, the images I chose to paint are drawn either from my own family or through my digital window from my community.⁵ And though the images include the mundane, they are chosen for a personal resonance of clarity or understanding, not necessarily their affective subject matter.

Admittedly, it is with some resentment that I consider the fine line between sentiment and the sentimental, employing scale and palette to mitigate the preciousness of the subject. And I know that I’m not alone in my feelings:

⁵ This, of course, is not without its problems; my references are limited by my connections, and it leaves my work with some glaring blind spots. I am working within a middle-class, predominantly white community, and as a result, the work lacks diversity of representation. That said, I can only truthfully speak to my subjective relationship with mothering, and the work as it portrays my current reality, through images that I have an honest connection to. My hope is to contribute my voice as mother/artist to that of a growing chorus of more diverse voices.

A taboo continues to surround the art of the maternal where it is often considered to be too “sentimental” to be interesting, due to its subjective nature... But our subjective “sentimental” maternal experiences are significant and powerful, and resonate with value. They become a huge part of our lived experience, which in turn feeds back into the work we make. These subjective and sentimental experiences need to be represented and validated both in the art world and further afield.

This, taken from the description of a workshop offered by interdisciplinary mother/artist Katy Howe in June 2018 to mother/artists in the UK, makes plain this othering of mother voices within larger critical discourse. But it is also indicative of the organization and encouragement around mother/artists and their explorations in subjectivity. Oh, how I wish I could have attended!

Still, the sentimental as a movement (if more general) has seen an uptick of acceptance in the last two decades, evident in shows like the 2004 *Whitney Biennial* (Capasso) or *Puppies and Babies* (2013). In his survey for the exhibition catalogue for *Pretty Sweet* (2004), Nick Capasso contextualizes the marked swell of sentimentality after the events of September 11th, 2001, concluding that “sentimental imagery is the last taboo...and in an age when aesthetic shock tactics provoke more eye-rolling than [sic] outrage, the current embrace of hearts-and-flowers may be the last option for the avant-garde” (4). Still, I'd rather not dwell on this particular avenue of discussion, as I feel (and you may or may not agree) that critique based in the sentimental comes from a patriarchal voice. And at this gathering, we hope to elevate a different set of voices.

In doing so, to give credit where it is due, I would need to offer that the inspiration for this reimagining is drawn from the words of Virginia Woolf. I spent an afternoon with them in

the middle of my research. As I painted, I listened to her book, *A Room of One's Own* (written in 1929!), in which she masterfully addresses the question “why are there no great woman writers?” As she recounts her research, she brilliantly asks the reader (or in my case the listener) to imagine along, just as I have here (admittedly a humble attempt in contrast). But it was in her last few words that I found the motivation to trust my instincts and to unabashedly use my voice. (I must interject one last time to say that if you have not yet done so, you must try to spend the afternoon with Virginia as I have.) In her very last paragraph, she points to Shakespeare's imaginary dead sister and writes: “She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh.”

As the lights turn up and the coats come out of the closet, to my bemusement the conversation comes full circle. This work, while necessary, now feels transitional. I have celebrated, monumentalized and tried to highlight my work in mothering through image making. The autonomy that I have ended up visioning is my own. One where my artistic decision making can move inside and outside of convention, where mothering can co-exist alongside the work of artist. I have earned through this work the chops to finally define myself as both “Mother” and “Artist.”



Corynn Kokolakis, Extricate, 2018, 122cm x 77cm, Oil on Canvas



Corynn Kokolakis, Controller 2018, 122cm x 77cm, Oil on Canvas



Corynn Kokolakis, Posturing, 2019, 122cm x 77cm, Oil on Canvas



Corynn Kokolakis, Immiscible 2018, 122cm x 77cm, Oil on Canvas

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