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Still Not Done: Methodology, Making and Mothering

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### Abstract

The research-creation project which this text examines was initially conceived as an oil painting. The painting would be supported by the frameworks that I have previously associated with my existing body of work through textual research and academic writing. The content would search the personal, the sentimental, and the nostalgic, incorporating feminist practices such as autotheory, the everyday, and the notion of in-betweenness to consider the boundaries between life and art and what Griselda Pollock describes as the “conditions of creation”. These theoretical frameworks allow me to understand and advocate for my work from a social perspective. Still, they don’t necessarily offer insight into the specific form and function of my subjective studio practice. I look to Boris Groys’ conception of “life in the project” to reconsider mothering as praxis and art as documentation. Can or should these frameworks describe the process of making as well as the finished work? Or, more broadly, what *are* the material conditions of my mothering (labour/home/social life), practice (art-making), and research (reading/writing), and how do they affect one another? And to think alongside the personal, how does the specific configuration of my practices of mothering and painting impact, impede, or enhance my research-creation projects? I recount the implementation of various methodologies borrowed from writing and pedagogy to interrupt established paradigms and determine new ways of working and thinking about the messiness of conflicting practices. The answers to my questions may not be as definitive as I’d hoped, and I may not find them. I suspect the reason that they are so difficult to pin down is because the social and material conditions are, in fact, entangled and always in the process of becoming.

279 words

### Still Not Done: Methodology, Making and Mothering

Ideally, one starts an essay with a clear thesis, then outlines the succinct reasoning that defines the well-argued position. As I sit to draft a textual record of ever-shifting progress, process, or research-creation, to claim a clear stance seems an impossible task. Each time I catch a glimpse of the potential end, I round another corner, and it disappears. I do, however, have guiding questions to which I have some working answers. And while the answers may range from profound to pedestrian, they are always necessarily rooted in the personal. I caution that the personal, as I will discuss here, rarely takes the straightforward and linear route anywhere. I am a learner, a mother, and a maker, and these three things must always be held at once. As such, the *work* (which will refer to the processes and products of art-making), the research (which, if pressed to define I would describe as reading and writing), and the labour (the practices of the maintenance of life) are always pushing up against each other. So rather than attempting to prove a point, it is perhaps more useful to point toward potential.

The research-creation project which this text examines was initially conceived as an oil painting. The painting would be supported by the frameworks that I have previously associated with my existing body of work through textual research and academic writing. The content would search the personal, the sentimental, and the nostalgic, incorporating feminist practices such as autotheory<sup>1</sup>, the everyday<sup>2</sup>, and the notion of in-betweenness<sup>3</sup> to consider the boundaries between life and art and what Griselda Pollock

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<sup>1</sup> In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier describes that “autotheory relies on theorizing and philosophizing from the particular situation one is in drawing from one’s own body, experiences, anecdotes, biases, relationships and feelings in order to critically reflect on such topics as ontology, epistemology, politics, sexuality and art” (67).

<sup>2</sup> The everyday as I use it here is defined by sociologist Brigitte Bargezt, as “a critical concept [which] is not an unchanging and distinct social sphere. Rather, critical conceptualizations of the everyday situate it in specific historical and political contexts” (4).

<sup>3</sup> The complex relationality of the mother/artist/academic embodiment has been theorized by Angela Clark and Fleur Summers through a non-hierarchical ordering or “in-betweenness.” Clark and Summers conceptualize the shifting between their roles as middling transversal movements of “always becoming,” calling back to Deleuze and Guattari.

describes as the conditions of creation<sup>4</sup>. These theoretical frameworks allow me to understand and advocate for my work from a social perspective. Still, they don't necessarily offer insight into the specific form and function of my subjective studio practice. Can or should these frameworks describe the process of making as well as the finished work? Or, more broadly, what *are* the material conditions of my mothering (labour/home/social life), practice (art-making), and research (reading/writing), and how do they affect one another? And to think alongside the personal, how does the specific configuration of my practices of mothering and painting impact, impede, or enhance my research-creation projects? The answers to these questions may not be as definitive as I'd hoped, and I may not find them. I suspect the reason that they are so difficult to pin down is because the social and material conditions are, in fact, entangled and always in the process of becoming.

### **Peering Backward**

To consciously move forward (or to become), you must first understand where you are and how you arrived there. Taken up as a means of self-care, my painting practice developed in parallel to the already established practice of mothering. The two practices naturally took opposing positions and methods. Finished paintings have necessarily taken the form of interruption or exclamation points to the practice of mothering that itself has few success markers or delineations. I began painting (mostly at night) in large chunks of (what felt like) stolen time in order to (physically and mentally) remove myself from my household duties. As an oil painter, I adopted a method of painting that progressed quickly but demanded lengthy, intense bursts to be successful<sup>5</sup>. When the painting was complete, I would feel a surge of accomplishment that came from little else in my every day: "For a painter there is certainly tremendous

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<sup>4</sup> In *Vision and Difference*, Pollock suggests that in reading the work of female artists; "By stressing the working process – both as manufacture and signification - as the site of the inscription of sexual difference ...to emphasize the active part of the cultural practices in producing the social relations of femininity. They can also conceivably be a place for some qualification and disruption of them." (84)

<sup>5</sup> My preferred way of painting is *alla prima*, a direct method or wet on wet application. It does not incorporate drying time or the use of mediums; it requires sustained focus (at times over consecutive days) until the piece is complete.

pleasure in working out a thought in paint. It is a complete process in terms of brain function: an intellectual activity joining memory, verbal knowledge and retinal information is given visible existence through a physical act” (Schor, 123). The finished piece was a physical record of intense effort that had the potential to persist in public. On reflection, I see how even the material handling of paint (through visible brushstrokes and exposed layers) references my bodily presence in the movements of my hand. Contrary to mostly invisible care work, paintings were my outlet to feel seen.

This delineated and intense way of working translated well as I shifted into academic spaces. Textual research offered another opportunity to recuse myself from domestic labour and participate in public discourse. I naturally gravitated toward chunking my time as a method for academic success. (I am reminded of Lydia Davis’s reference to writing “in one uninterrupted breath” (170), though for me, painting and writing have always been separate breaths.) My writing, like my painting, shows my hand by incorporating autobiographical perspectives. I continue to pursue lines of research that argue for the visibility and valuation of care work. Despite my attempts through research and creation to escape the practice of mothering, it remains the locus of my public expression. It is difficult to imagine how this might be otherwise, as most, if not all, of my tacit knowledge (outside of painting) stems from my many years as a sole caregiver. Mothering or caregiving is the role in which I am most practised.

In considering the conceptions of *practice* and *project* as argued by Boon and Levine and Groys respectively, I can reflect on the ways in which these terms have been applied and may continue to be implemented across the different subject positions I currently hold. While concerned with defining and noting the potential of practice through the arts, in *Promise of the Practice*, Boon and Levine offer a history of the term that shifted my perspective. They cite the Aristotelian notion of praxis as “an action that is valuable in itself, in contrast to those actions whose goal is making or creation (poiesis). The Greek praxis had an ethical dimension, concerned with self-shaping or a decision as to how to live, as well as a political dimension, concerned with the form in which one lived with other people” (13). This was the definition of practice that felt most familiar. Caregiving is the action that “is valuable in itself,” painting is the action of “making.” It is through the lens provided by praxis that I began to conceptualise mothering

as practice and subsequently also the arrangement of my parallel practices of mothering and painting as separate but enmeshed through embodiment. Moreover, Groys's description in the *Loneliness of the Project* of "the kinds of projects that have no set time limit, [which] irrevocably remove people from overall communicative contemporaneity and transfer them to the time frame of a lonely project" (2) was a poignant reminder of the invisibility often felt by those who perform domestic labour. If mothering is recontextualised as an indefinite practice of caregiving or comparable to what Groys posits is "life in the project," then painting may be considered "an attempt to use artistic media [...] to make direct reference to life itself: to a form of pure activity or praxis as it were; indeed, a reference to life in the art project, yet without wishing to directly represent it" (5). My paintings can then be interpreted as documentation of my life in the project of mothering. Again, this configuration resonates with the ways in which my painting practice has related to that of my mothering, made all the more relevant by my continuing choice to paint children. Taken together, these notions of mothering as praxis and painting as documentation profoundly shifted the way I think about my practice and reconfigured my understanding of art and life or, rather, life as art. But if the self-imposed contrast between mothering and painting or praxis and documentation were evident when reflecting on the evolution of my practices, it becomes less stark when I consider their present relationality.



Fig.1. Kokolakis children playing, 2010, image: Corynn Kokolakis

### Shifting Across

The children are (mostly) grown, and I am no longer the primary caregiver to my three teenagers, who are (more or less) happy to stay out of sight. I now find myself rarely in need of an escape. I've been given the time and space to pursue my own autonomy and ambitions. My social world has widened to (once again) include academia, which (at least in post-graduate studies) imbues nearly the same intensity as child-rearing. Still, the patterns on which my creative practice was formed have (for the most part) guided both my work and my research in separate "breaths." If I am to take up the middle and embrace life (of an already embodied) in-between, I must adopt transversal movements in place of the well-ingrained pivot and withdraw (or escape) paradigm that maintains the oppositional structure of mothering and painting. Summers and Clarke turn to Deleuze and Guattari to demonstrate the potential of situating oneself in-between:

The middle is by no means an average: on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other way, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (25)

It is in envisioning a practice that stretches across the learner/mother/maker that incited my impulse to reimagine and rework my methodology. Though still a painting (albeit in progress), the research-creation project is also a catalyst to adapt working strategies that I suspect will prove more sustainable in the long term, if not offer opportunity for rhizomatic and entangled approaches.

Though this step appears obvious in retrospect, the revelation to turn the reflexivity regularly enacted in caregiving toward creation only came when comparing my existing methodologies to those of a writing practice as exemplified by Davis. I was made aware through her recommendations that I've adopted many of the bad habits she warned against and few of the good habits she encourages. Daily

work, revision, low stakes exercises, and trusting instinct were among the most personally relevant and adaptable suggestions for maintaining a sustainable studio practice. Since most of these run counter to the strategies of separation, focus, and finish that my practice was built on, it became apparent that the in-betweenness that I claim my work draws from should be fostered in physical form in the processes of the studio. However, paradigms are difficult to break; learning doesn't (often) happen in great leaps; to consolidate gains, they must be made in increments; failure and regression often occur before a breakthrough. These are lessons that I have lived.

Without much deliberation, I changed the parameters through which the painting would be made. I instinctually turned to pedagogical conceptions of emotional regulation, authentic learning, proximal development, and scaffolding in order to problem-solve my self-diagnosed rigidity. First, I considered potential emotional barriers. Pedagogical research has shown that emotions significantly impact learning, motivation, and creativity: "People experiencing positive emotions tend to use more general knowledge in heuristic ways whereas people experiencing negative emotions tend to use systematic analysis with more focus on details [... A]ctivating positive emotions facilitates flexibility and creativity" (Kim and Pekrun, 67). Without direct reference, I would argue that Davis's recommendations address what can be understood as creative or academic emotion. Davis discusses the importance of allowing instinct and interest to drive the creative process, noting that "interest may pass" but should be followed despite "not knowing where it will go." Further, she advises that interest should "be tested by time, not by other people—either real other people or imagined."<sup>6</sup> This advice hit a nerve, as I have long been concerned with curbing or mitigating my interest in representing children for fear of critique. It also speaks to the anxieties that have manifested due to internalised social paradigms<sup>7</sup> around how to be a good mother/artist/feminist, which my work (at least conceptually) strives to push back against.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited from recommendation #2 "Always work (note, write) from your own interest, never what you think you should be noting or writing."

<sup>7</sup> Paradigm, as I use it here, refers to Kuhn's definition as described by Agamben as a "disciplinary matrix" a "set of techniques, models, and values to which the group members more or less consciously adhere" (11).

These internalised expectations may even have contributed to the separations in my practice that I have only just begun to attempt to integrate. Natalie Loveless points to a “mono-normative rhetoric of single minded devotion” ascribed to idealised motherhood: “Do not compromise. Do not allow relations to undo you. Be excellent professionally or be excellent at mothering. Do not allow one to taint the other” (476). That I have unwittingly given into such notions furthers my resolve to dissolve the boundaries between my practices—this resolve is also referred to as “cognitive change or reappraisal” (Kim and Pekrun, 70). Indeed, a reappraisal led to the decision to fully explore the personal, sentimental, and nostalgic through my archive of family images. The reference image I selected for this project had been banging around for some time, but I had been reticent to use it. The image, taken when my children were small, when I was not making, recorded not just a glimpse of childhood but a moment that I had chosen to capture simply for aesthetics (see fig. 1). It signifies a compromise, a step toward in-betweenness, where “art and life” or “life in the project” was (or can be) documented.

The second hurdle was the physical organisation of my studio practice. All at once or not at all is no longer sustainable. Research-creation seems to demand more time. Time to look. Ferment. Revise. Though I have more time in the studio than ever before (and finally, a door that locks out distractions), biding or holding time does not come easily to me. Once again, I turned to pedagogical strategies to aid transition and encourage new ways of working. Scaffolding is a term I’ve used countless times in I.E.P.<sup>8</sup> meetings and less often to describe the labour of community building and maintenance. From an educational standpoint, scaffolding is defined as a series of temporary and contingent “just-in-time supports [...] that allow[s] students to meaningfully participate in and gain skill” (Belland, 505). Importantly the goal should be just outside the student’s current capabilities, and the scaffold should attempt to limit frustration. While I have developed and participated in many such supports, this would be the first time I would do so for myself. Referring again to Davis, I considered how to incorporate play, experimentation, and contingency through exercises that wouldn’t “have to be permanent or good” (172).

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<sup>8</sup> I.E.P. - Individual Education Plan

Moreover, I would let go of the notion of grand movements and celebrate incremental progress (proximal development). Embracing the idea that my work doesn't need to change dramatically to signal progress was perhaps the most challenging part of the process. My approach to the project would again need to shift; it would now consist of a series of smaller sketch style paintings created in tandem that would (hopefully) inform the larger painting. In these small works, I would investigate coloured ground, new mediums, and layered compositions (see fig. 2). The small sketches would remain open-ended, and I would revisit or revise them over multiple sessions. I had set up this process to practice revision, but I wasn't sure that I could push through my urge to finish in a larger painting. The fear of going too far (and thus failing) remained very real.



Fig 2. Paint Sketches, 2022, Corynn Kokolakis

From a painterly perspective, I have been attempting to determine just how much information is required to create the image. Which marks are necessary, which are superfluous? How many times does

the brush need to touch the canvas to communicate? Contemporary critic Barry Schwabsky notes that “when painters succeed in evoking and disclosing painting-the-verb within painting-the-noun, they offer the rest of us a rare gift” (14). If painting can function as a verb and noun, can labour be signalled through the material application of paint? I’d adopted exercises that required more and still more, yet my instinct in the larger work was to include less and less. I needed to find a method of revision that would allow me to save the work at the stage it best addresses the questions above, yet also provide options to sit with it, revise it and keep it open. I devised another scaffold. I would photograph the painting in the state of nearly finished and print it out as close to life-size as possible. The print of the painting would become a space to experiment or a form of visual feedback. I would paint back into the print to work out new ideas or solve problems. I could print as many as required, and the prints might become works themselves (although not necessarily the goal) (see fig. 3). I imagined a line of the same image filling the studio that I would flutter between, working paint mediums interchangeably, accepting and embracing contingency and cross-pollination. It’s perhaps best to anticipate and acknowledge that imagination and reality rarely line up.

My attempts at scaffolding new methodologies were only somewhat successful; I can say that I am no longer deterred by negative emotion, and I have learned to watch for it (at least in the context of the studio.) The experiments (though fewer in number than I’d hoped) offered a much-needed reprieve from the seriousness of a finished work. They are neither good nor permanent, but their blatant denial of portraiture led me to consider the importance of photographic principles of cropping and framing to my process and my textual research. There is only one (unfinished) painting and one (mostly failed) print on the studio walls, with just one more planned (eventually). The painting, as it was first conceived, never materialised, but the one on the wall produced conversations during studio visits that left me with reminders of past inspiration and fresh threads to tug at. The lofty goal of learning to work differently is still just a goal, but I still believe it to be worthwhile. I think of Anna Tsing’s reference to indeterminacy: “our daily habits are repetitive, but they are also open-ended, responding to opportunity and encounter.

What if our indeterminate life form was not the shape of our bodies but rather the shape of our motion over time?” (47) I’ve come to realise that the project was never really a painting at all; it was always already the unfinished process of becoming.



Fig. 3. Studio Image, York University, April 2022, Corynn Kokolakis

Integrating studio practice with classwork and domestic work remains challenging, and the reality of my position as learner/mother/maker is that separation and rigidity are still reliable tools for success. Summers and Clark remark that “there are times when being in the middle becomes complicated [...] but even in these fast moving assemblages the directional pull remains transversal” (236). This paper was written in one “breath” at my dining room table, interjected by meals and stories of teachers, drama over friends and anxiety over war. The pedagogical term for my learning environment throughout this project is “authentic learning.” My learning tasks have been situated in my everyday, “the social and physical context within which [they] will be used” demonstrated as an effective “means to facilitate the acquisition of robust knowledge” (Harrington, 402). The demands on my body, time, space, and intellect will continue to ebb and flow. Studio experiments will fail. Books will sit unread. But I’ve learned to sit with

all of these things at once and embrace what comes of it. I've learned that the reflexivity I have relied on to solve questions around parenting and childhood development can be turned toward making and personal/professional development. I am, in a sense, no longer just raising children; I have begun raising myself. And so much of the work, the research, the labour, is still not done.

### **Moving Forward**

“The patterns and knots in research and creative works [...] are webs of impactful social influences and material traces [...] and vestiges of shelved projects that precede and in from the more cohesive works that happen to emerge.” (Rodgers, 159)

I began this project with no real vision of what my work might look like going forward. I devised the strategies mentioned above with the intent to foster a more mature and sustainable studio practice that can be responsive to my shifting responsibilities. But sitting with an unfinished painting for weeks in the studio has offered distance and perspective that I have rarely taken. Though the project did not produce a finished painting, it provided a clearer view of what form my work might take going forward. Scaffolding has emerged as a central visual theme and theoretical metaphor. Experimentation, along with time, has supported my instinct to pare back. I am more confident than ever in my choice to include little more than the figures themselves in the work. The intentional omission of the environment or objects in the painting become subjects themselves. I posit that to *see* the images, the viewer is left to fill in the details to provide a visual scaffold; the missing elements become visible through their invisibility. I was reminded while considering this new (old?) direction of the Victorian hidden mother images that many years ago inspired me to attempt to make care work visible. In retrospect, the connection of this approach to representation through omission to Victorian hidden mother photography<sup>9</sup> might seem apparent, but it was long and winding.

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<sup>9</sup> Victorian-era portrait photography where due to long exposure times, mothers or care workers were photographed with fabric draped over their bodies while physically supporting young children; the women's faces might also be removed in postproduction. “These ‘hidden mothers’ are easy to miss in pictures – yet, as soon as you spot them, it becomes impossible to unsee the head and shoulders, knees and legs of the adults beneath the brocade. And once

I have argued elsewhere that care work is the invisible scaffold that builds and maintains communities, and I'm that much closer to making that argument in visual form. As a first-generation academic coming from working-class roots, my practices of mothering and making have always been driven by my subjective place in the world. My objective has always been to help make the labour of care work visible (and ultimately more equitable) and to do so in a way that is accessible to those without the privileges of institutionalised knowledge and cultural capital. Even if I cannot always see the finish, I believe that undertaking this project has helped me envision a way to move forward authentically, reflexively, and responsively to the expanding social and material conditions of my transforming practice(s). It might be argued that I've only just begun.

Word count: 3637 Footnotes: 406

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you can no longer ignore her, you cannot believe you ever did *not* register that, of course, the infants are ensconced on their mother's lap." (Kaston, n.p.)

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