

Reinventing Rapport: An Investigation of the Mother-Daughter Dyad within Contemporary Figure Painting.

by

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Signed statement of originality

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Abstract

This project is a visual exploration of a subjective experience of female sensuality within the context of contemporary debates about maternity, the female body, beauty and pleasure in western art. It specifically examines these ideas within the mother-daughter relationship (largely absent in western art) in a domestic setting. The conceptual foundations of the project have been developed through engagement with feminist theorists (Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray), feminist revision of art history (Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock) and personal experience, running parallel with a disciplined studio practice.

Employing a sequential narrative, the paintings aim to create a contemporary body of work celebrating the mother-daughter dyad situated within discourses about feminine *jouissance* and play. The research is informed by art practices from the Renaissance (Giovanni Bellini), from the seventeenth century (Jan Vermeer), from early Modernism (Gustave Courbet, Mary Cassatt, Edouard Vuillard, Suzanne Valadon), and contemporary artists (Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Gerhardt Richter). It seeks to discover possible new ways of representing the female body, specifically the maternal body in relation to the developing girl-child, so as to express a personal and positive idea of pleasure in the female body and its decoration using the tropes of the feminine.

The powerhouse of the project was a search to find a balance between feminism and a diverse and rich maternal heritage. In painting the female figure, the project attempts to create transgressive works which simultaneously honour feminism's core value, the empowering of women, but resist high Modernism's masculine, minimalist, hard-edged exclusion of pattern and a 'decorative' feminine aesthetic. Within the economy of my paintings the maternal body disappears, to become represented symbolically by colour and pattern, celebrating the

significance of textural elements - clothing, furnishing fabrics, bedspreads, carpets, wall papers; objects and styles of decoration chosen by the women who created the homes of my childhood and adolescence.

The project seeks to create images of the sensuality of the female body from both a feminine and feminist perspective, acknowledging female pleasure in looking at the female body, distinct from a voyeuristic male desire concerned with conquest or domination. The thesis exhibition is comprised of four series, which follow the daughter's development from the post-infant stage (where the separation of mother and child has recently begun) through to the pre-pubescent stage. Initiated into the rituals of femininity, the daughter gains cache in the world and the promise of sensual pleasure, beyond puberty. The independent gaze of the mother, and her absence in the final series, is an important signal of her psychological independence. In the case of the child, states of absorption or quiet activity, indicate 'flow' without passivity. Both figures are contained within their own interior worlds. If the works create an undercurrent of discomfort in the viewer, an unease at their proximity to this particular quasi-erotic intimacy, this is to be desired.

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