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An Exploration into Motherhood and Identity in
Art

May 2026

Fine Art

[DOI 10.15132/30000125](https://doi.org/10.15132/30000125)



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Abstract

The objective of this dissertation is to examine the ways in which motherhood is represented throughout art history and how this informs our understanding of the impact maternal obligations have on women and their identities. This writing aims to explore how evolving attitudes towards the topic of motherhood have allowed for more authentic representations to be observed in contemporary art. It also intends to provide a framework for a better understanding of the struggles faced by women trying to reconcile their identity after becoming a mother, and how, through art, they can express historically taboo subjects. Chapter one details the historical context for attitudes towards motherhood in art and the impact it had on how women created art about their experiences. Chapters two and three go on to look at more contemporary art made in this subject, exploring how, with more modern attitudes towards women and motherhood, art that is more representative of the experience of motherhood is able to be expressed.

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my dissertation advisor, Dr Helen Gorrill, whose steady reassurance and encouragement throughout my studies has supplied me with the confidence in my abilities as a writer.

More than anyone, I owe a massive thank you to my mum for her constant companionship and gentle understanding. She has always been the voice of reason in my life, and it is only by virtue of her that this dissertation should exist. In her own words, Mother Knows Best.

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Introduction

This dissertation forms a critical analysis of how changing societal attitudes have impacted how the topic of motherhood is expressed throughout art history. It also considers the emotional impact of motherhood on women and how this affects their identities and how it is represented in art. This dissertation explores a wide variety of different mediums of art, including portraiture painting, sculpture, performance, and photography, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary art has been influenced by evolving attitudes towards women. In forming a new contribution to knowledge, this dissertation was inspired by my established interest in how controversial the topic of motherhood is, not only when depicted in art but also how it affects a female artist's career. Statements from prominent female artists, such as (Emin, 1963), which state that women cannot be both a great artist and a mother, sparked a defiance in me, and I was galvanized to understand the history of motherhood and art and to showcase its importance in a contemporary context. Due to the confines of this dissertation and the wide and extensive information and academic theories of this topic, I am unable to cover all aspects of historical context, in particular, religious influence. This, however, forms a platform for future exploration and research in this subject. The first chapter will look at the historical framework that set up the notion of reproduction being a taboo subject in art (Eworth, 1563), which led to the demonisation of women's bodies and sexuality. Looking at the work of (Morisot, 1841), it will also examine the impact of the societal pressure historically put on women to be devoted mothers, which forced them to abandon their art. This will provide an explanation for women's lack of ability to add to the canon of what motherhood and maternal life should look like. The second chapter will look at

how motherhood in art is explored in a more contemporary setting, investigating how deeply the identity of Mother affects women and the reasons why this is only now being represented in contemporary art. This chapter will examine the work of (Georgescu, 1984) and (Bilon, 1981) focussing on how the mental impact of motherhood appears in their work and informs their practice. The third chapter similarly goes on to examine particularly groundbreaking contemporary artists (Saville, 1970) and (Bourgeois, 1911) and their ability to balance motherhood with their career as artists. This chapter focuses on how their art depicting the raw and unfiltered lived experience of motherhood have helped to revolutionise how society interacts with the topic of motherhood in art and is better able to understand the identity of Mother as a whole.

Chapter One: Societal Expectations

The duty of a woman according to the men in their lives has been a prevalent issue across history, stripping women and girls of their identities and moulding them until they took on the perfect, pliable form that was expected of them. The act of reproduction is just one way in which men have been able to control the lives of women (Beechey, 1979). In Claude Meilassoux's paper *The Pregnant Male* (1979), he argues that it is a woman's reproductive capacity that is to blame for their ensuing subjugation by men, but also the source of their power over them. Meilassoux argues that a woman's unique ability to create and carry the next generation gives them leverage over men, referring to their reproductive abilities as 'their actual and decisive superiority -their hold on the future of humanity'. (Meilassoux,1979). The word hold insinuates a position of power as though, across history,

women have held any such autonomy over whether they wanted to carry children and could make authoritarian decisions to not partake in such practices and receive no repercussions whatsoever. This is an entirely outrageous way of thinking and frankly undermines the lack of control women have actually had over their reproductive systems and continue to have in the modern era. I don't subscribe to the idea that women have ever been fully in control of their reproductive rights, never mind able to use it to get a leg up. It seems to me that Meilassoux thinks that if women simply banded together and refused to reproduce, they could enact a change so big that it would threaten men as the dominant party of the two sexes, and this frightens him. To understand how this is important to the topic of motherhood and identity, we first need to examine how reproduction and pregnancy are depicted in art.

In the sixteenth century, portraits of visibly pregnant women were not a particularly prevalent commodity. Karen Hearn, an art historian who specialises in 16th- and 17th-century British art, noted that this was because of the societal attitudes surrounding the topic, stating that people 'felt it indelicate to talk about pregnancy—even using the word pregnant was problematic' (Jansen, 2020). Despite this being an extremely significant time in the sitter's life, and one that most adult women spent a considerable portion of time in, the lack of preserved pieces suggests that pregnancy was simply not an attractive or decorous subject. Being visibly pregnant in a portrait could even be seen as indecent, as it is a reminder of a woman's lack of virginal status and purity, which was not something people wanted to think about or engage with (Croft and Hearn, 2002). Hans Eworth's Portrait of English Noblewomen, Mildred Cooke, was one of the first 'Pregnancy Portraits' in England and one of the few to survive to the present day. (Croft and Hearn, 2002).



Fig 1.1, Hans Eworth, *Mildred Cooke, Lady Burghley*, (1563), Oil on Panel, 104x79 cm,

Image courtesy Gallerix

The piece features Cooke in a black satin gown, which is stretched taught over her protruding abdomen. She wears a fashionable gold chain belt around her waist, which is connected to an ornate pendant, possibly a bottle of perfume, drawing attention to her advanced pregnant state. Cooke's expression is one of exhaustion. By this point in her life, Cooke had given birth to four children, spending approximately a collective 160 weeks of her life pregnant. With infant mortality rates in the sixteenth century estimated at 175 out of 1000 live-born babies failing to survive their first year (Galley, 2023, p. 9), it is unsurprising that even a wealthy woman such as herself had suffered the loss of all but one of her children, her second daughter, Anne. The loss of Cooke's two previous sons, both named William, who died shortly after their respective births in 1559 and 1561, would have forced her into yet another pregnancy as 'producing a male heir within a rich family was considered vital' (Trueman, 2015). This tremendous pressure to fulfil her duty as a wife would have been of typical occurrence among women of her standing. It was simply something they were expected to dedicate their adult life to, regardless of the burden it had on their physical or mental health. Which leads us to the portrait in question, at age 36, Cooke is heavily pregnant with her fifth child, Robert, who was born in June of 1563 (Croft and Hearn, 2002). Cooke's age now becomes increasingly prevalent in this discussion as we have to consider the risk she is undertaking in having a child at her mature age. While it is impossible to determine exactly the average life expectancy in sixteenth century England, historians estimate that if a person survived infancy and their teenage years, it wouldn't be unlikely for them to live to their 50s or 60s (Lambert, 2021). This means Cooke wasn't necessarily considered elderly by period standards, however, it did pose some challenges regarding pregnancy. A pregnancy is considered of advanced maternal age (AMA), once the pregnant individual is over the age of 35. This is categorised as a potential issue as after this point there is an increased risk of miscarriage, Gestational Diabetes and Pre-eclampsia, putting both the pregnant individual

and their unborn child in a potentially fatal position (Trust, 2024). Infants are also at a heightened risk of birth defects (Philadelphia, 2014), which is possibly why Robert Cecil was born in poor health and with some bodily deformities. Despite these challenges, Robert lived a successful life before dying aged 49.

It is easy to assume that mothers in the sixteenth century had a heightened risk of dying during childbirth due to inadequate medical understanding and lack of sanitation, compared to what is known and practised in the twenty first century, but this is not necessarily as straightforward to declare. It is difficult to affirm with absolute certainty the exact risk posed to women as many determining factors go into quantifying maternal mortality in this period (Reid, 2020). Religion plays a key role in understanding this, as data on maternal mortality in the sixteenth century comes from the register of St. Botolph without Aldgate, which only considers the number of registered baptisms to understand maternal mortality, making it an underestimation of the true number of deaths (Dobbie, 1982). Historical information suggests that women of elite status suffered from a heightened risk of perishing in childbirth, however, we must take into account that these women's deaths were simply better documented, making it seem more ubiquitous than it was (Reid, 2020). In fact, maternal mortality would have been lower for these women as they would have had better access to medical care. Despite all this, childbirth remained a real risk for a lot of women, and as this was a profoundly well-known fate, women of this era often wrote their wills before labour, preparing for the likelihood of their untimely death. As a result of these often tragic outcomes of childbirth, pregnancy portraits were, in some cases, commissioned to preserve the faces of beloved wives who knew all too well that they may not survive their confinement (Cork, 2022). The experience of having to give up years of their lives to dedicate their body, energy and mental health to constantly producing children that they knew all too well had high chances of dying before

their first birthday was a tragic yet common occurrence. Women had no time to grieve the children they had lost, simply being expected to move on and immediately put themselves through the strain of pregnancy again without a second thought. Their identities as women were reduced to birthing machines forced to churn out children with no regard for the toll it took on their ever-aging body and their minds, which had likely been traumatised from witnessing the deaths of their children.

Pressure to take up the maternal position weighed heavily on the minds of women throughout history. It wasn't just their bodies they were expected to give up to raise a family, it was their aspirations, their hobbies and passions, everything that made them unique and gave them a sense of identity. I believe no piece shows this loss better than Berthe Morisot's *The Cradle*. Painted in 1872, it features the artist's sister and close companion, Edma, watching over her newborn daughter, Blanche. The scene is incredibly intimate, with Edma pictured pulling the net curtain of the cradle around to obscure the spectator's view of the child in a protective manner. This reinforces the pure intimacy and display of tender love expressed in the painting. I believe that the wider context of this piece also gives a different, more melancholic frame of reference. To fully understand the weight of this painting and how it informs this piece of writing, we must first examine Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice:*

Psychological Theory and Women's Development (1982). In this seminal text, Gilligan challenges Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. She states, 'Women's sense of integrity seems to be entwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection' (Gilligan, 1982, p. 171). The idea of relationships and connection is highly prevalent throughout this text and is something that will also be discussed at great length in chapter two. Here, we can read Morisot's unofficial 'Edma series' through the lens of this. For 19th century women, the connection with the

women in their lives, in particular sisters, was something deep and important, as oftentimes women spent much of their time in the domestic sphere, and the connection with a sister would have provided the emotional support and social contact missing from everyday life (Kessler, 1991). Berthe revealed in multiple letters to her sister that Edma was her closest friend, whom she confided in and was able to seek support from surrounding her career as an artist during a time in which women were not respected as artists.



Fig 1.2, Berthe Morisot, *The Cradle*, (1872), Oil on Canvas, 460x560cm, Image courtesy

Musée d'Orsay

Morisot painted Edma at various stages of her life, in particular, Edma's progression from newlywed to pregnant woman to mother. These paintings reflect both the transition of their relationship and the impact of societal expectations on women. Berthe feels as though motherhood has interrupted her relationship with her sister, drawing her attention away from her and toward her maternal duties. The paintings show how the world of the domestic and maternal, something which Berthe had not yet subscribed to, has taken away her constant companion. The idea of motherhood coming at the cost of a relationship is explored in many works, oftentimes at the cost of one's own identity. In this series, however, the relationship lost is Morisot losing her sister to her maternal duties, of raising a child, and with this, she feels as though she has lost a part of herself. After Edma's marriage to Adolphe Pontillon in 1869, Berthe began painting her sister more frequently when she would come to visit as a way to preserve her relationship with her (Kessler, 1991). The paintings become almost a substitute for having her sister, her constant companion, around her at all times, emphasising how great a loss it is to her. This hardship and loss of relationship is complex and lengthy, spanning years of both women's respective lives, and so is unable to be fully deconstructed within the confines of this text. Going back to the painting in question, with this deeper understanding of the wider context surrounding this piece, I believe it can be looked at in a different light. With Edma gazing lovingly at her new daughter, her future and object of her affection, we, as the viewer, become Berthe, longingly looking at her sister who is no longer, in a sense, looking back at her. Edma's priorities have changed, leaving Berthe behind and creating a sense of being on the outside looking in.

‘Many artists live with a shadow version of themselves: an awareness of how things might have been if they had done this and not that, if life had made this choice for them rather than that. The road not taken remains at the back of the mind. For some their shadow is an external presence, for others an inner haunting. Few can have experienced it more precisely, with more emotional complexity, than Berthe Morisot.’

The Necessary Talent, (Barnes, 2019)

With both Berthe and Edma being talented artists, we can also examine the weight maternal life had on their respective careers. It would be remiss to overlook Edma’s own artistic career, which paled in comparison to her sister’s following her marriage and subsequent trajectory of her life. Edma was gifted at painting, perhaps even more so than her sister, but with Edma marrying and taking up her maternal duties before Berthe, we are able to see the different trajectories of their lives. As many women did after subscribing to the life of a wife, Edma set her painting career aside to focus on being a dutiful wife and a loving mother. Her career as an artist was reduced to a question of what might have been (Norlander, 2020). Berthe, however, was able to explore the life of a mother in her paintings through observing how it affected her sister. The ghost of her sister’s incomplete career perhaps hung heavy over her and made her question whether she too would have to abandon her art for the life of a mother. Despite the pressures of the 19th century, Berthe continued to paint after marrying and having a child of her own, but it still remains to be said whether she contemplated a world where both her sister and she were able to continue to paint together, where no one had to sacrifice a part of themselves to be a mother. The concept of motherhood coming at the cost of an artist’s own career is a ubiquitous circumstance covered by many, and one which will be explored in depth in the text.



Fig 1.3, Berthe Morisot, *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, (1869), Oil on canvas, 54.8 x 46.3 cm, Image courtesy National Gallery of Art

For Edma, the loss of her career and identity as an artist is naturally observed by her sister. *The Artist's Sister at a Window* (Morisot, 1869) captures Edma sitting in a stylishly affluent residence, gazing out a window from an armchair, wearing a pristine white gown. Morisot captures an unsettling sense of confinement in this piece. Edma rests her feet by the opening to the balcony, giving the impression that she wishes to get up and leave but is being mentally held back by something. Rigid societal propriety meant that women were expected

to stay within the domestic sphere, removed from wider society and the outside world (Hughes, 2017). Here, we see Edma demonstrating this. Neighbours chat idly in the background; their confident body language suggests they are men, but the impressionistic strokes of this piece make it difficult to be certain. This would work to make Pontillon's frustrations even more obvious, as they would be another reminder of the freedoms she is denied due to her gender. Unlike her, they are unrestrained by their circumstances. Swathes of fabric seem to weigh down her already dejected looking body, draping around her to conceal her growing pregnant body. Just by looking at this painting, the viewer cannot perceive the weight of Edma's predicament. Marriage and maternal life had recently forced her to relinquish her own artistic career, taking away what would have been an incredibly important part of her identity and independence. Her ensuing frustration with this is evident in her melancholic gaze out the window, her eyes lowered in longing for the freedom she no longer has. Her hands sit in her lap, fiddling with a fan with a restlessness which is palpable as she ruminates over the life she is now stuck with. The child growing inside Edma symbolises yet another confinement for both her and her unborn child. The baby is physically confined within her body and under layers of lavish fabric, and Edma is interned to a life of motherhood at the cost of her identity as an artist and her independence as a woman. Morisot likely understood the melancholic monotony of middle class motherhood through observing her sister. This is perhaps why she chose to depict her sister in such a state of tedium. Many of her paintings work to draw attention to the frustrations of women's shared oppressive experiences with motherhood (McCormack, 2021). In her seminal book *Women in the Picture* (2021), Cathrine McCormack states that Morisot's fascination with painting mothers with their children was the reason her work was overlooked. She argues that this is because it was found to be 'pleasingly unthreatening to male artists.' (McCormack, 2021). As stated before,

'feminine' topics, such as the ones explored in Morisot's work, were unattractive to male artists, reiterating their disinterest in the lived experiences of women.

Chapter 2: Effect of Motherhood

“In 2015, I became a mother. I was prepared for the gruelling labour and sleepless nights, but the loss of my sense of self surprised me. I had no time to think, and I began to feel like a shell of a person. My early days of motherhood were alienating and awful as well as sentimental and dear. I began to see myself as defined only by a relationship.”

Jennifer Georgescu, 2020

The role of Mother is an all-consuming, identity warping duty to undertake so it is no surprise that oftentimes women can feel themselves dissolve into an otherness unlike anything experienced before. In between sleepless nights, hormones, and changes to the body, it is a transformative time that can come with the troubling struggle to define oneself (Chisholm, 2021). Mothers can often find themselves becoming tethered to their identity only through their relationship with their child. It is not only an extension of themselves, but the mother and child have become one, as though one does not exist without the other. With all the sacrifices a mother makes to support her child, it is not surprising that she can lose all sense of herself in the identity of Mother. Ann Oakley's seminal study illustrates the ways in which motherhood changes a woman's relationship with herself and her personal identity. She argues that motherhood causes the erosion of personal identity in line with feeling like an

individual person in society. As society only sees these women as the mothers they have become, no longer as the singular person in their own right, they were before the birth of their child. 'Once a woman has a baby, she will never entirely be a person in her own right again - that is, she will never achieve a personal identity on the same terms and in the same way as before she had a baby' (Oakley, 1980, p244). Bridgette Atkinson critiques this assertion, stating that it was an antiquated perception of motherhood and not something that is necessarily relevant anymore (Atkinson, 2006). Oakley's statement is fixed to a cultural perception of societal views on motherhood, and since personal identity is shaped through how an individual is perceived by others, it is inescapable that the views of wider society affect how we view ourselves.

Jennifer Georgescu's mother series captures this dichotomy expertly. She uses photography to explore and unravel her emotional journey through motherhood, spanning the months and years following the birth of her first son, Ames, in 2015, right through to her second son, Corwin, and how all three of their intertwined relationships and dynamics develop. The 'Mother Series' project began at a time when Georgescu was struggling to reconcile her new identity as Mother with her old self. The early works in the series show this struggle with both her and her son's faces being covered or obscured from the viewer, creating a disconnect and a lack of individual identity. As Georgescu adapts to her new identity as a mother and is able to separate herself as an individual once again, her work begins to reveal more of her subjects, the camera is pushed back, faces and bodies are revealed, and we are able to see personalities and familial dynamics develop.



Fig 2.1, Jennifer Georgescu, *Number 20 in Mother Series*, (2019), digital archival print, 50.8x60.96cm, Image courtesy Kolaj Magazine

Looking at this image, we can see three figures, all partially obscured in some way. This is something which Georgescu has mentioned is done purposefully to represent how erased she felt by her relationship with her son, how she didn't have time for thoughts during the day or dreams at night (Seikaly, 2020). Georgescu's two small children stand at either side with just their outstretched arms in frame, each with a budgerigar perched delicately on their fingers. Birds hold many different symbolic and religious representations throughout art history,

including romantic and familial bonds, serving as powerful emblems of unity and affection (McCaslin, 2024). Here, they are used to highlight the brothers' connection with each other as the birds are full of life and seemingly youthful, just as they are. Georgescu stands between the two boys, holding what could be a mirror in front of her face with a bird skeleton in the centre. In contrast with her sons, Georgescu's bird is dead, perhaps symbolising her own feelings of mortality and death of her individual identity, she has given her life force and energy so that her sons can flourish. Birds can also be associated with themes of rebirth and renewal (McCaslin, 2024), so we can read this image through the lens of this, the cycle of life continues, and Georgescu is reborn through her sons. Georgescu has stated that children have historically been associated with the idea of cheating time, that they are what you leave behind in this life, your legacy, and also a way in which you can somewhat remain in this realm (Seikaly, 2020).

In certain Madonna and Child compositions, the bird can also symbolise the maternal breast, illustrating the nurturing mother-child relationship. Such as in *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John* (de Zurbaran, 1658) where a Saint John offers the child a Goldfinch, a popular choice of bird in Renaissance paintings (Schnier, 1952). Georgescu stated in an interview that she is interested in referencing historic religious symbolism to reinterpret 'the religion of children' and that she is particularly interested in Renaissance and Baroque art for their symbolic references (Seikaly, 2020). By omitting the faces of all the figures in this image, the viewer is unable to get a sense of the individual identities present, emphasising Georgescu's feelings of lost individuality. In other works, created at this time, we do start to see faces being uncovered and personalities emerging, which is a testament to the ebb and flow of motherhood, some days you feel like you are yourself, others you do not. Following the birth of her first son Ames, Georgescu stated, 'When he is near my thoughts are entangled

around him and when I am away, I cannot seem to be the person I was before' (Georgescu, 2022). This inability to feel as though you are no longer the person you were before having a child is directly linked to how women are treated after becoming a mother by society as stated by Ann Oakley. Georgescu's hope for her work is not only to decipher her own identity following her transition into motherhood, but also for her children to truly see and understand her (Seikaly, 2020).

Anna Prushinskaya's collection of short essays in *A Woman Is A Woman Until She Is A Mother* (2017) examines the interconnectedness of motherhood and identity. Her essays chronologically follow the experiences from the final weeks of pregnancy to the birth of her son and the weeks that follow, giving a glimpse into new motherhood. These works allow for rumination on how a woman's identity is altered after having her first child and how she reconciles her new identity as a mother with her past self (Talarico, 2018). In a particularly centric essay, *Remembering and Forgetting: Before and After Motherhood*, Prushinskaya recounts the first time that she understood how much motherhood had changed her. After going out to a bar for the first time following the birth of her son, she came to the realisation that her time was no longer her own. She states, 'You have a window. You remember along the baby's timeline now...and not your own' (Prushinskaya, 2017). This sudden awareness of your life no longer being on your own terms would be incredibly profound. The idea that oneself is now second to that of another, that something as simple as getting a drink from a bar is no longer attainable as a spontaneous act, as another being's needs must be considered. It is the little everyday happenings such as this which build up to remind one of their lack of autonomy as explored in Georgescu's Mother Series.

The raw and overwhelming feelings of motherhood have begun to be dissected in contemporary art in part due to the efforts of female artist creating a space where the lived experience of women are listened to and validated. Dagmara Bilon is part of a collective of artists called the Desperate Artwives, which work to form a legitimising framework to celebrate and validate the lived experiences of women and insist upon the importance of their lives in art (Wade, 2017). Bilon showcases the somewhat ugly side of motherhood in *69 Soft toys* (Bilon,2017). In this work, Bilon performs with a large pile of soft toys. Using cellotape she slowly attaches them to her body one by one. Gradually, the plush toys physically overwhelm her as she begins to resemble a human-soft toy hybrid. Despite her increasingly unsettling appearance, Bilon, almost in a trance, continues to bind increasing amounts of soft toys until she reaches her final form as pictured above, with her eyesight and bodily movements entirely restricted. This almost mechanical action of becoming completely unrecognisable refers to the slow suffering of a mother as she is consumed and suffocated by the overwhelming demands and loss of identity resulting from maternal life (Wade, 2017). This performance showcases the suffocating and life altering reality of motherhood and how severely it can change how a person is. The transformation from human to unrecognisable soft toy-humanoid correlates with Ann Oakley's statement about this topic as this work demonstrates the detrimental way a women might view herself or be viewed by others following her transition to Mother. The work of collectives such as Desperate Artwives have made great strides in ensuing the true lived experiences of women and mothers, no matter how complex, are represented authentically. There are still barriers which continue to prevent woman from freely expressing their unabashed feelings on this topic, such as shame. Artist Jennifer Georgescu stated that women perhaps weren't discussing their feelings on the struggles of motherhood, as it was so inherently linked with shame. Women didn't want to be

seen as ungrateful. The mother-child relationship had to be idealised, it wasn't allowed to have vicissitudes (Seikaly, 2020).



Fig 2.2, Dagmara Bilon, *69 Soft Toys*, Photograph of Performance (2017), Mother House
London, Image Courtesy Mother House

Chapter 3: The Artist as Mother

The deconstruction of the idealised experience of motherhood can be partially credited to the extensive work of French-American artist Louise Bourgeois. Motherhood was a lifelong influence on Bourgeois, appearing in her work as early as the 1940s until her death in 2010. Bourgeois's work addressed her relationship with her own mother following her deeply traumatic death in 1932, when the artist was just 21 years old (Lesso, 2022a). This loss inspired many of Bourgeois's work and ensured that motherhood would be a topic that she explored her whole life. After becoming a mother herself in 1939, after adopting her first son, Michel, Bourgeois's work shifted to her own experiences as a mother. Her work subverted the image of the perfect maternal life, addressing the sometimes uncomfortable truths about what it is really like to be a woman and a mother in the modern world (Lesso, 2022a). Possibly her most impressive and notable work which addressed this, was *Maman* (1999), which confronted the complex relationship between mother and child and was a personal tribute to her mother, who was a meticulous weaver and tapestry restorer (Morris 2008, p. 170).



Fig 3.1, Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, (1999), Bronze, Marble, and Stainless Steel, 9.3 x 8.9 x 10.2 m, Image courtesy Artsper Magazine

When looking at this piece, we are first confronted with its enormous scale. Its long, jagged legs tower over the viewer, tapering to a point like a needle. This creates the sense of being both caught in its web while also being protected in an embrace by its outstretched limbs. The spider incites astonishment and fear, yet for all her height and typically frightening form, she is balanced remarkably on delicate slender legs. This conveys an almost fragile vulnerability (Dailey, 2023). The spider motif is complex, and one that appeared early on in Bourgeois's work in the 1940s and one which has repeatedly been attributed to her mother (Witek, 2025). These contrasting sentiments of predator and protector reflect the intricate and sometimes

ambivalent nature of motherhood and familial relationships in her life (Schiller, 2017). This spider is also a tribute to her mother's strength and nurturing disposition with the maternal duty of care being particularly apparent in this work in the 26 marble eggs carefully protected in a metal fenced pocket under the abdomen of the spider. This protective nature expands to the very installation of this piece. With it being placed in an urban or museum space, pedestrians are sheltered underneath its large frame, becoming part of the sculpture, showing that despite its imposing frame and unsettling subject matter, the spider still provides a duty of care to those around it. Bourgeois also undertook the mantle of the spider as part of her identity as an artist 'I do, I undo, I redo,' (Bates, 2023), this can be understood to be that just as a spider builds and rebuilds webs as they are destroyed, she too is constantly building, repairing and rebuilding new webs in order to survive, just as with her career and even herself. Bourgeois's work detailing her obsession with understanding motherhood and untangling her complex familial relationships works well to prove how important it is to have these topics represented candidly in art.

The discussion around women being able to maintain a successful art career while being a mother is one which has long since been headed by men, however it was artist Tracy Emin who made waves with her divisive statement: 'I don't think I would be making art (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 who have children. Of course there are. They are called men' (Groskop, 2015). In this interview, Emin points out the sexism that prevents women from having a successful art career while being a mother. However, in doing so, she perpetuates the issue, dismissing the work of artists who do make work while having children and

claiming it is less than works made from individuals who are uninhibited by the efforts of motherhood. Emin is a somewhat polarising figure in the art world whose increasing conservatism has only brought more attention and conversation to her art. She is simply stating that one cannot have it all, specifically, women. She has chosen to pursue art unrestrained and is evidently not interested in structural change, which would allow women to explore topics of motherhood and pursue avenues of parenting while maintaining a successful art career (Moore, 2014). Emin's assertion that motherhood is the demise of an artist's creative capabilities is incredibly antiquated, as many female artists have had great success while being mothers. Artists such as Paula Rego, Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel, and Jenny Saville are just a small selection of women who have all had flourishing art careers, often incorporating their experiences with motherhood in their work, while being successful mothers. This does not mean to say that it is not difficult, motherhood comes with its own challenges, but who's to say that this cannot be used to inspire new art and create an open conversation about the struggles women face in motherhood, rather than dismissing the topic entirely?

For a lot of women throughout history, having a serious career meant rejecting motherhood and their reproductive differences from their male counterparts. It also meant that they would need to eradicate any indication of something that could be interpreted as 'feminine' for fear of not being taken seriously (Liss, 2009). The identity of Mother, whether being expressed in the art itself or simply being a role in the artists life outside of her career, is one that was deemed 'sentimental' and thus, undesirable long ago (Reid, 2016). Feminist writings, such as art historian Linda Nochlin's seminal essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) is a strong example of how, when we begin to deconstruct sexism in the visual arts, it creates a culture where women begin to feel able to share their truth in their art.

Many contemporary artists have explored the reclamation of what a mother should look like, taking back the canon and giving the world an insight into the raw reality, rather than the sugar coated, puritan depictions of the past. Hettie Judah is particularly central to bringing these works to light in her critical book, *Acts of Creation* (2024), which offers a fresh perspective on the realities of motherhood in art and challenges the taboos of the past. One artist featured in the vast collection of artworks who has repeatedly worked in capturing real women's lived experiences, real bodies, and raw emotions is Jenny Saville. Women influenced by their personal experiences with motherhood have established a movement known as Neo-Maternalism. Author and artist Sharon Butler describes this as a response to an oeuvre of art that once was an oppressive idealisation of the maternal experience, to now having dismissed the subject entirely (Reid, 2016). Jenny Saville's work on motherhood is a strong example of the type of work created in response to this movement as she challenges antiquated ideals of what motherhood in art should look like.



Fig 3.2, Jenny Saville, *The Mothers*, (2011), Oil and Charcoal on canvas, 270 x 220 cm,

Image courtesy Artforum

In this work we can see Saville naked and seated while visibly in the advanced stages of pregnancy. She appears uncomfortable as she struggles to maintain her grasp on two squirming children. As in many of her other works, Saville uses gestural sweeps of charcoal to surround the figures, giving the illusion of constant motion. In this piece, she is able to

expertly capture the chaotic movement only seen in young children approaching a tantrum, emphasising the stress and overwhelming nature of motherhood. Saville draws inspiration for a collection of large scale works, exhibited alongside this piece, from religious and historical context. In particular, Leonardo da Vinci, who's renaissance cartoon *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John* (da Vinci, 1499) lays the foundation for the painting in question (Kuspit, 2011). Similar to the aforementioned piece from da Vinci, Saville's work also appears to us in various stages of completion, which in this case, perhaps alludes to the never-ending task of motherhood.

Saville's expression appears to be one of ambivalence and strain caused by the action of struggling to keep a hold of the two restless children in her arms. Some might think that this could also work as a metaphor for trying to juggle her own art career with motherhood, however, this is not the case. Before becoming a mother in 2007, Saville was warned about how children having might affect her art career as she 'wouldn't be able to engage with [her] work in the same way once they were born' (Lesso, 2022b). Saville later stated that this couldn't be further from the truth and that she enjoys her work even more now. In a writing for ArtForum, Donald Kuspit expressed the view that the mother in this piece 'represented a failure of parenting' (Kuspit, 2011) due to her apparent disinterest in her children in this piece. He goes on to suggest that the piece also reflects Saville's own insecurity with her work. Kuspit proposes that the piece seems to be worked and reworked, as though Saville is unable to get them to a place where she is happy to call them complete. This supposed self-doubt conveys the emotional struggle and demand of the mother-child relationship. This perpetuates the idea that any art piece that features a mother and child that is not sentimental and lighthearted is inherently undesirable. It seems that the raw reality of motherhood is still too brutal for some male audiences to accept. We can compare this piece from Saville with

Hans Eworth's pregnancy portrait of Mildred Cooke. Eworth's portrait was highly controlled, with Cooke's pregnant stomach covered under layers of tight fabric, as though to conceal her body. In this piece however, Saville is naked and unabashedly displaying her body. This, coupled with Saville's bold display of the difficulties of motherhood, works to show how far society has come in accepting the authentic experiences of women as mothers in art. There is still much to be done in the art world before this kind of art detailing the authentic, lived experiences of women is fully understood and recognised by all. Society has come a long way in its acceptance, and with the incredible work of contemporary artists such as Jenny Saville and the long list of women who came before her, we can be hopeful for a future that is more understanding.

Conclusion

This dissertation aims to investigate how changing societal attitudes towards women have enabled a new oeuvre of work created by women, depicting the raw and honest experiences of motherhood. It also analysed the breakdown of identity experienced by mothers and how this affected the art that was created. Chapter one broke down the historical context, detailing why reproduction was a taboo subject and was subsequently omitted from art history. It also looked at how the societal pressures put on women to be the model wife and mother put strain on women's relationships with themselves and others, often causing them to abandon their own art. This difficult period for female artists and mothers would later be deconstructed by contemporary artists who set out to document the authentic experience of motherhood in art and create a space where artists could balance both their career and their maternal

responsibilities. Chapter two explored the contemporary depictions of motherhood in art, which detailed the struggle and loss of identity that came with becoming a mother, particularly while being an artist. It also examined the reasons as to why this has only just started to be represented in art, as women were ashamed of their struggles and were reluctant to seem ungrateful for their children. The third chapter focused on two particularly revolutionary artists, Jenny Saville and Louise Bourgeois, whose work relating to motherhood has worked to deconstruct the canon of what motherhood should look like in art and normalised the authentic lived experiences of women. Their work has validated the struggles faced by women and mothers through their vulnerable and powerful depictions of motherhood and has created a space where more artists and mothers feel safe to express their true feelings on this topic. The comparison made at the end of this dissertation between Hans Eworth's pregnancy portrait of Mildred Cooke and Jenny Saville's pregnant self-portrait is a strong example of just how far art has come since the sixteenth century. While Cooke was pictured with her pregnant body shrouded under swathes of fabric, Saville was able to proudly expose her naked, pregnant form alongside her unsettled children and deliver a raw insight into the true intimacy of motherhood. Both women wore strained expressions in their portraits, but for different reasons: Saville for the struggle to keep a physical hold of her children, and Cooke for the weight of her family's entire dynasty, which depended on the child she was carrying. The struggles of motherhood have only recently been able to be expressed freely and without restrictions in contemporary work. It is with great hope that with more time, society will become more understanding towards the struggles of women and mothers, and that through art, their experiences and feelings are validated.

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