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Caring About Care: Exploring the Ethics of Care
Through Contemporary Sculptural Practice.

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Fine Art

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Contents

List of figures

Positionality Statement

Abstract

Introduction

Chapter one: Curatorial Thesis

1.1: The Ethics of Care

1.2: Theoretical Framework

Chapter Two: Curatorial Approach

2.1: Curatorial theory

2.2: Maggie's Centre

Chapter 3: Curatorial Choices

3.1: 'Maman' by Louise Bourgeois

3.2: 'The China Harvest' by Christine Borland

3.3: 'The rest of us... we just go gardening' by Katherine Fay Allan

3.4: 'Protectors' by Veronica Ryan

3.5: 'Untitled 1989' by Judith Scott

3.6 'Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)' by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Conclusion

Bibliography

Appendices

List of Figures

Figure 1: Image of artwork in situ. Louise Bourgeois (1999), *'Maman'*, bronze, steel and marble, 895cm x 980cm x 1160cm

Figure 2: Image of artwork in situ. Christine Borland (2018), *'The China Harvest'*, 144 exploded porcelain feeder cups, dimensions variable, image modified by Gemini AI

Figure 3: Image of artwork in situ. Veronica Ryan (2017), *'Protectors'*, hand-stitched stuffed polycotton nursing cushions, steel welding rods, 221cm x 247cm x 190cm, image modified by Gemini AI

Figure 4: Image of artwork in situ. Katherine Fay Allan (2019), *'The rest of us... we just go gardening'*, plants, radiotherapy masks, hospital bed, dimensions unknown

Figure 5: Image of artwork in situ. Judith Scott (1989), *'Untitled'*, fibre and found objects, 114.6cm x 55.9cm x 25.4 cm, image modified by Gemini AI

Figure 6: Image of artwork in situ. Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1991), *'Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)'*, sweets in various coloured wrappers of endless supply, dimensions variable, image modified by Gemini AI

Positionality Statement

My understanding of care and the methodological foundation for both this dissertation and the proposed exhibition, has been shaped significantly by my lived experience of accompanying my mother through her recent terminal cancer diagnosis. This proximity to care, as both a daily practice and an emotional condition, has informed my approach to the planned exhibition, grounding the research both personal observation and critical inquiry.

My mother is the artist Christine Borland, whose work is included in the exhibition. Her inclusion is not simply a result of our familial relationship but reflects her longstanding engagement with themes of care, vulnerability, and the body across her artistic practice. As both my primary carer throughout my life and my most influential artistic reference point, her work has played a formative role in shaping my own understanding of art as a site through which care can be examined and articulated.

My mother's experiences of receiving and negotiating care following her diagnosis have further informed her practice, and it was through engaging with this work that I was prompted to consider how experiences of care, particularly those shaped by illness, can influence artistic production more broadly. Acknowledging this personal connection is essential to situating my positionality within the research, as it recognises care not only as a theoretical framework, but as an embodied, relational experience that underpins both the curatorial decisions and critical concerns of this dissertation.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the various and open-ended manifestations of care across contemporary sculptural practice. Both the proposed exhibition and the research process detailed throughout illustrate the ways in which experiences of care may be translated into sculptural form to make visible what is often intangible, overlooked, or undervalued. Drawing on the ethics of care, particularly the work of Carol Gilligan and Virginia Held, the research frames care as a relational, embodied, and socially situated practice. These theoretical perspectives guide the selection of artists and artworks that examine a range of manifestations of care, including maternal care and institutional care. The proposed exhibition will be held at Maggie's Centre in Dundee, a venue dedicated to non-clinical support for people affected by cancer. Employing sensitive curatorial strategies that highlight individual experiences of care, the exhibition seeks to align with Maggie's ethos, illustrating how sculpture can both reflect and enact ethics of care within a context defined by support, openness, and healing.

Introduction

The concept of care is continually evolving in response to shifting social, cultural, and historical contexts. Its meaning is shaped by time, place and lived experiences, rendering it ubiquitous and difficult to define (Puig De La Bellacasa, 2017). This curatorial exhibition dissertation seeks to examine the potential of care within contemporary art through experiences of care translated into sculpture, giving care a physical presence when aspects of care are often intangible, unacknowledged, or rendered invisible in society.

The investigation into manifestations of care is primarily rooted in the research of care ethics. Philosopher Virginia Held's 2005 book, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, has interrogated how the ethics of care can be applied to global politics to cultivate positive, peaceful relationships. Psychologist Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) provides a context for how our experiences of care can influence our moral decision-making and outlook on the world. Both texts have shaped the choice of artists and artworks for this exhibition, ensuring a wide range of artists with different experiences of care for a diverse array of unique sculptures that touch on various aspects of care such as maternal care and the labour of caring.

The proposed exhibition will take place in Maggie's Centre in Dundee. Designed by architect Frank Gehry, it is the first purpose-built centre in the UK. It is modelled after traditional Scottish "butt n' ben" structures with a large garden outside designed by Arabella Lenox-Boyd, featuring a large stone labyrinth, based on a similar design element from the Chartres Cathedral in France. (*Architecture and Design – Dundee | Maggie's, 2025*).

"The labyrinth is an allegory for life: It isn't a maze, there are no dead ends, but you have to trust you will find a route through, even though often it feels like you are heading in completely the wrong direction." (*Architecture and Design – Dundee | Maggie's, 2025*).

Hosting the exhibition at Maggie's is essential to its purpose of providing a quiet, welcoming environment for people undergoing cancer treatment and their friends and family. Their work is vital in supporting the non-clinical care of those affected by cancer through workshops, counselling, and support groups. Maggie's mission upholds the ethics of care that have underpinned the research for this proposed exhibition, with the careful curating ensuring the artwork is not too intrusive on the centre's normal functioning, enabling them to carry out their vital work while the exhibition is ongoing.

Chapter One: Curatorial Thesis

The inspiration for proposing this exhibition stems from my firsthand experiences of care: receiving care as a child, developing a sense of responsibility for others, and supporting my mother during her terminal cancer diagnosis. These experiences have profoundly influenced my artistic practice and critical thinking, prompting me to explore how others perceive and embody care. The exhibition therefore aims to illuminate the diverse manifestations of care through sculpture, acknowledging the significance of lived experience in shaping understandings of care in art, I have selected artists with varied backgrounds and sculptural approaches.

1.1 The Ethics of Care

Theories of care that investigate and attempt to define an ‘ethic of care’ have significantly informed my research, particularly Virginia Held’s 2005 book, *‘The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global’*. In this work, Held describes the ethics of care as follows:

“as both a value and practice ... It has been developed as a moral theory relevant not only to the so-called private realms of family and friendship but to medical practice, law, political life, the organization of society, war, and international relations.” (Held, 2005).

Held introduces the argument for the utilisation of an ethic of care into broader social systems. Before extending the ethics of care to wider contexts, Held highlights the core principles that constitute this moral framework.

Held’s ethics of care builds upon aspects of Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue theory, each of which emphasises actions that promote the well-being of others (Friedman, 2008). First, the ethics of care make central the responsibility to meet the needs of others, particularly those for whom one is personally responsible, and acknowledges the universality of both giving and receiving care.

Secondly, emotions such as sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness should be regarded as essential sources for understanding morality.

Thirdly, moral decision-making within the context of care ethics considers context, relationships, and lived experience, rather than relying exclusively on detached or impartial rules.

Fourthly, care ethics aligns with feminist thought by challenging traditional distinctions between the public and private spheres (Held, 2006). Held explains that patriarchal frameworks of domesticity and 'private life' have rendered women and children vulnerable to domestic violence and economic dependence.

Finally, care ethics conceptualises individuals as relational and interdependent, rather than self-sufficient, independent, or solely rational autonomous agents (Held, 2006).

Within the context of this dissertation and exhibition, Held's work provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding care as a practice that has the potential to operate across personal, institutional, and global levels. Her arguments support the exhibition's emphasis on care as an ethical framework that can be materially expressed through artistic practice, while also engaging with broader political and social issues. By drawing on Held's expanded concept of care, the exhibition aims to present artistic representations of care as both personal gestures and reflections on communal responsibility and ethical engagement with others.

This exhibition places an ethic of care at its centre, engaging with the practices and values of Maggie's Centre, a location where care is integral to both the architecture and the charity's mission. In this way, the exhibition embodies care not only through the artworks but also through the spaces in which they are presented. This approach aligns with Held's vision of integrating the ethic of care into society by embedding it within institutions that shape broader social dynamics.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Another significant early contribution to the development of the ethics of care through qualitative research is Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982). Gilligan's work critically responds to prevailing psychological models of moral development, which were based on male-centred research and baselines (Gilligan, 1982).

Gilligan frequently references Freud's 1914 essay 'On Narcissism,' in which Freud traces the evolution of the capacity to love within the context of narcissism, associating it with 'psychic health' and 'maturity' (Freud, 1925, pp. 67–102)

He hypothesises that the root of this evolution lies in the distinction between love for the mother and love for oneself. By dividing love into 'object' connections and narcissism, Freud renders women's development less visible whilst making men's development more apparent. In her 1982 text, Gilligan identifies a fundamental flaw in Freud's research: the exclusive use of male experience as the baseline for human development. This omission of women's relationships, sense of self, morality, and sexual life results in the marginalisation of female moral development. Although Freud acknowledges biological differences between female and male maturation, he does not fully deconstruct them, which is apparent in the following quotation.

“Perhaps it is not out of place here to give an assurance that this description of the feminine form of erotic life is not due to any tendentious desire on my part to depreciate women. Apart from the fact that tendentiousness is quite alien to me, I know that these different lines of development correspond to the differentiation of functions in a highly complicated biological whole” (Freud, 1914, pg.89)

Gilligan presents research examples involving two eleven-year-old children, one boy and one girl, to explore how differing experiences of care can impact a child's moral thinking. By employing moral dilemmas to examine how each child understands morality, Gilligan adopts an ethic of care as the evaluative baseline, in contrast to the male-centred frameworks prevalent at the time. She emphasises that her methodology does not seek to highlight gender differences or assert superiority of sex, but rather to interrogate the interpretation of experimental results.

The moral dilemma experiment, originally developed by Kohlberg to assess moral development in adolescents (Kohlberg, 1981), presents a conflict between ethical norm and examines the reasoning behind potential its resolutions. In this scenario, a man must decide whether to steal a life-saving drug he cannot afford for his dying wife. The experiment reveals

that the eleven-year-old boy approaches the dilemma through logical reasoning, weighing morality against law, while the eleven-year-old girl demonstrates an orientation toward an ethics of care, prioritising human relationships and mutual responsibility over legal considerations.

“Just as Jake is confident the judge would agree that stealing is the right thing for Heinz to do, so Amy is confident that, "if Heinz and the druggist had talked it out long enough, they could reach something besides stealing." As he considers the law to "have mistakes," so she sees this drama as a mistake, believing that "the world should just share things more and then people wouldn't have to steal." Both children thus recognize the need for agreement but see it as mediated in different ways — he impersonally through systems of logic and law, she personally through communication in relationship” (Gilligan, 1982, pg. 4)

This example illustrates a divergence in the moral reasoning of the boy and the girl; however, it represents only a single instance, and numerous factors beyond sex, such as family income and individual experiences with mortality, may also influence these perspectives. A potential limitation of Gilligan’s analysis is its reliance on a small, specific sample, which raises questions about the wider application of her findings. Furthermore, focusing primarily on sex as the sole source of difference may overlook the intersecting social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape moral reasoning. Nevertheless, Gilligan’s analytical approach uncovers nuances in moral reasoning previously unrecognised within dominant frameworks, which would have dismissed the girl’s response as a misunderstanding of the dilemma.

However, it is important to note that these experiments are based on somewhat historical ideas of sex and gender which do not account for transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming people. (DeSantis, 2020)

The conceptual focus on care, informed by underrepresented experiences, has shaped the exhibition’s curatorial strategy through the selection of artists, artworks, exhibition venues, and intended audiences. These choices are guided by an interest in how care is enacted, embodied, and represented by individuals and communities whose labour and emotional contributions have historically been undervalued. By foregrounding personal, intimate, and often overlooked expressions of thinking and care, the exhibition seeks to investigate how contemporary artists materialise care through their practices and how these gestures can be experienced within

supportive, non-institutional contexts. Thus, ethics of care serve not only as a conceptual foundation but also as a practical framework for the exhibition's curatorial methodology.

Chapter Two: Curatorial Approach

2.1 Curatorial Theory

A key theoretical framework informing the care-centred curatorial approach of this exhibition is *Curating with Care*, edited by Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (2023). This publication provides a comprehensive analysis of the ethical, political, and methodological implications of what the editors describe as both “curating care” and “caring curating.” Through critical essays, the book positions care as a central curatorial concern, extending beyond logistical responsibilities to encompass relational, institutional, and social dimensions of exhibition-making.

Krasny and Perry contend that the growing prominence of care within contemporary curatorial discourse responds to multiple intersecting crises. These include ongoing social and ecological emergencies, as well as a professional crisis within curating itself. The latter is associated with the emergence of the “celebrity curator,” the commodification of culture, and critical reckonings with the legacies of colonialism and imperialism embedded within cultural institutions such as museums (Krasny and Perry, 2023). Within this framework, care is positioned as a critical and reparative practice that challenges extractive, hierarchical, and market-driven models of curatorship.

Chapter three of ‘*Curating With Care*,’ in the section titled ‘curating care,’ presents an interview with curator Lauren Craig conducted by Racha Baraka. Craig articulates her distinctive perspective on the curator’s role.

“If I had to define that role [curator], I would say that it is a list of things:

a doula ... celebrant, translator, advocate, activist.

To curate is to influence to a certain extent –

I don’t mean on Instagram....

I mean to bring forward some original thinking or knowledge;

By original, I mean something from your lived experience; in other words, how life has touched you and to involve others in different ways of thinking.” (Craig and Racha, 2023)

Craig’s distinctive perspective on the curator’s role is informed by her practice as a doula, described as “an emotional, spiritual and physical birth worker” (Craig and Racha, 2023), and

as a celebrant, both of which demand significant care for others. She frames her curatorial method as sharing her perspective shaped by lived experience. This approach closely aligns with the methodology adopted for 'Caring about Care,' in which my own experiences influenced both the selection of exhibition locations and the artworks displayed.

This mode of curation is particularly resonant in the context of Maggie's Centre in Dundee, where care is not an abstract concept but a lived, spatial, and institutional practice. As a non-clinical environment dedicated to supporting individuals affected by cancer, Maggie's Centre prioritises emotional well-being, accessibility, and attentiveness to vulnerability. Curating in such a setting requires ethical sensitivity to audiences who may be experiencing physical or emotional fragility, highlighting the relevance of Krasny and Perry's emphasis on responsibility, relationality, and accountability.

Informed by *Curating with Care*, this exhibition adopts a curatorial methodology that seeks to engage in dialogue with Maggie's Centre rather than imposing upon it. Care functions as a guiding principle in decisions regarding artwork selection, placement, and audience engagement, ensuring that curatorial practice supports the Centre's primary role as a space of refuge and support. In this manner, the exhibition aligns curatorial ethics with the Centre's broader mission, establishing care as a foundational mode of working rather than a supplementary theme.

2.2 Maggie's Centre

Maggie's Centre in Dundee is integral to the conceptual and ethical framework of this exhibition. Maggie's Centre was established to provide information, resources, and a supportive environment for individuals undergoing cancer treatment, as well as for their friends and families through workshops, courses, one-to-one and group support. Maggie's provides care through the presence of calm, welcoming, and non-clinical spaces. Its emphasis on comfort, accessibility, and emotional well-being aligns closely with the exhibition's thematic focus.

The decision to situate the exhibition within Maggie's Centre is informed by both the organisation's charitable mission and its commitment to caring for those affected by cancer. The Centre's ethos of support and attentiveness provides a meaningful context for exploring artistic practices that engage with care, vulnerability, and relational responsibility. While personal experience has informed this choice, particularly its role in offering a quiet, restorative space during my mother's cancer treatment, this motivation is grounded in a broader curatorial intention to foreground care as a lived, spatial, and communal practice.

A central consideration in curating the exhibition is ensuring Maggie's Centre can continue fulfilling its primary function without disruption. This requires an approach to exhibition design that is deliberately minimal and non-invasive. Artworks will be positioned and selected to ensure full accessibility for visitors of varying physical abilities, and to avoid overwhelming individuals who may be experiencing physical or emotional fragility. The exhibition aims to integrate seamlessly into the existing environment, supporting rather than competing with the Centre's role as a place of respite and care. The exhibition will run throughout the month of March 2026, with public access on weekends from 9 am until 7 pm and on weekdays from 5 pm until 7 pm.

The exhibition is scheduled to take place in March 2026, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of Maggie's organisation. It will run in parallel with the V&A Dundee's free exhibition '*Healing Architecture*,' which examines the role of architecture and design in wellbeing. In contrast, this exhibition will focus specifically on care as articulated through contemporary artistic practice, offering a complementary perspective that emphasises affective, relational, and embodied forms of care within a healthcare-adjacent setting.

Chapter Three: Curatorial Choices

3.1 'Maman' by Louise Bourgeois



Figure 1

The first artwork in the exhibition is Louise Bourgeois's '*Maman*' (1999), a monumental sculpture in steel and bronze depicting a spider rising to over thirty feet. The scale and materiality of the work generate an immediate sense of physical and psychological intensity. As viewers move under its elongated, spindly legs, their gaze is directed upward toward a suspended mesh sac containing marble eggs. This interplay of mass, delicacy, and enclosure establishes a complex visual and emotional experience in which threat and protection coexist.

'*Maman*' will be positioned at the centre of the stone labyrinth in the garden of the Dundee Maggie's Centre, serving as the initial focal point for viewers approaching the building. The surrounding landscaped terrain, particularly the raised ground adjacent to the labyrinth, provides an atypical vantage point. From this elevated position, viewers can engage with the sculpture at eye level with the spider's body, rather than exclusively from below, as is common in many previous installations. This shift in perspective is intended to soften the work's initial sense of intimidation and to encourage a more reflective engagement.

The sculpture's meaning is articulated through conceptual metaphors, particularly those of strength and vulnerability, ferocity, and nurture. While the spider is conventionally associated with danger or fear, Bourgeois reconfigures this imagery to foreground maternal care and endurance. The presence of the marble eggs creates a powerful counterpoint to the imposing structure, symbolising fragility and reproduction, held securely within a protective framework. In this way, '*Maman*' embodies a tension amid aggression and tenderness, suggesting that care is not inherently passive or gentle, but can be resilient, vigilant, and powerful.

Virginia Held's analysis of Sara Ruddick's 1980 essay 'Maternal Thinking' addresses the emotional conflicts mothers experience, particularly the loss of a sense of self and the responsibility inherent in caring for a dependent child.

"Mothering aims to preserve the life and foster the growth of particular children and to have these children develop into acceptable persons. The actual feelings of mothers are highly ambivalent and often hostile toward the children for whom they care, but a commitment to the practice and goals of mothering provides standards to be heeded." (Held, 2005)

'Maman' functions as an autobiographical tribute to Bourgeois's mother, who worked as a weaver and co-owned a tapestry restoration workshop with Bourgeois's father. Bourgeois assisted her mother in repairing tapestries, an experience that profoundly formed her understanding of labour, repair, and care. (Cajori, 2008) The spider, a natural weaver, becomes an apt metaphor for this maternal figure: patient, skilled, and quietly industrious.

"Sewing, for Bourgeois, goes beyond restoration on a material level. Instead, it is a metaphor for psychological repair and for exploring the complexities of human relationships." (Lorz *et al.*, 2022, pg. 35)

Through this symbolism, Bourgeois elevates acts of maintenance and restoration, often overlooked forms of care, due to being carried out in the domestic, or 'private' sphere (Held, 2005), into the domain of monumental sculpture.

As visitors move through and around the sculpture, initially encountering its looming form and gradually observing the marble eggs and the intricacy of its structure, the spectacle of threat gives way to a more subtle comprehension of *'Maman'* as a figure of care and protection. Within the context of Maggie's Centre, a space dedicated to support, healing, and vulnerability, the sculpture's duality becomes especially resonant. *'Maman'* thus functions not only as an imposing visual landmark but also as a meditation on maternal strength, nurture, and the complex labour of care.

3.2 'The China Harvest' by Christine Borland



Figure 2

Christine Borland's *The China Harvest* (2018) is an installation composed of fragmented remains from 144 porcelain feeder cups. Feeder cups are wide, spouted vessels designed to help individuals who are ill or incapacitated feed themselves. In this work, Borland specifically references their historical use in the care of wounded soldiers during the First World War. By presenting these objects in a state of rupture and dispersal, the artwork foregrounds the material traces of care within a wartime medical context, drawing attention to practices that are often rendered invisible within dominant historical narratives of conflict. (Borland, Crichton Stuart and Gordon, 2018)

The work critically examines the role of women as caregivers during the First World War, a role formed through both social restriction and necessity. Excluded from direct combat, women nonetheless occupied indispensable positions within medical and nursing services, providing care to injured and dying soldiers (Grayzel, 2024). Borland situates caregiving as a form of labour that, while frequently marginalised or feminised, was essential to the functioning of wartime healthcare systems (Borland, Crichton, Stuart, and Gordon, 2018). *The China Harvest*, therefore, reframes care not as secondary to war, but as an essential, sustaining force attempting to negate the effect violence and destruction.

Borland's choice of the feeder cup as the central material element is particularly significant. As she notes:

“Each of these little objects creates a lot of aura around it because its function follows its form so clearly: that need for two people to be engaged in an intimate relationship, one picking up and holding the head of the patient and administering the liquid” (Borland, 2018).

This observation highlights the inherently relational nature of care embedded in the object’s design. The feeder cup necessitates close physical proximity, trust, and bodily vulnerability, making visible the intimate relations between caregiver and patient. In this sense, the object becomes a material witness to acts of dependency and attentiveness.

Through its highlighting the act of feeding, *‘The China Harvest’* opens onto a wider consideration of care within medical settings as an embodied and emotionally charged practice. Acts such as feeding, washing, or dressing another person require suspending personal autonomy and expose the individual receiving care to feelings of vulnerability, discomfort, or loss of independence. At the same time, these acts are fundamental towards survival and recovery. Borland’s work holds this tension in view, acknowledging both the necessity and the difficulty of care, particularly at moments when individuals are least able to assert control over their own bodies.

By fragmenting the feeder cups, Borland resists a sentimental representation of caregiving and instead presents care as complex, fragile, and formed by historical circumstance. *‘The China Harvest’* positions care in a critical, if often overlooked, site of ethical engagement, one that reveals the profound human cost of war while affirming the sustaining, relational labour that persists in its aftermath.

‘The China Harvest’ will be displayed within the kitchen area of Maggie’s Centre is informed by the work’s engagement with care as a form of embodied, domestic, and feminised labour (Held, 2005). The kitchen functions as a space traditionally associated with nourishment, maintenance, and everyday acts of care, making it a resonant site for an artwork centred on feeding as a life-sustaining practice. By installing the fragmented feeder cups in this environment, the exhibition draws a conceptual link between the domestic labour historically undertaken by women and the caregiving roles performed by nurses during the First World War (Grayzel, 2024).

3.3 ‘The rest of us... we just go gardening’ by Katherine Fay Allan



Figure 3

Katherine Fay Allan’s ‘*The rest of us... we just go gardening*’ (2019) was first exhibited at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design degree show. This work stems from Allan’s experience of caring for her mother while she underwent several craniotomies (katherinefayallan.com, 2019). The work draws conceptual inspiration from ‘*Adventures of the Human Being*’ (2016) by Gavin Francis, which recounts an unnamed neurosurgeon’s comparison between surgery and gardening. This analogy foregrounds a productive tension between the clinical sterility of medical environments and the perceived messiness of working with soil and plant life. While my own engagement with Allan’s work is formed by personal response, the analysis that follows considers how Allan’s exploration of this dichotomy prompts a critical examination of care as a process that operates across both medical and ecological contexts, despite their apparent differences.

At the centre of the work is an interrogation of how care is expressed through acts of tending, maintenance, and intervention. Both surgery and gardening involve attentive observation, skilled manipulation, and an ethical responsibility toward a vulnerable body, whether human or vegetal. While medical care is frequently portrayed as technologically advanced and highly controlled, and gardening as informal or intuitive. Allan’s work suggests that these practices are underpinned by similar forms of labour: patience, responsiveness, and an acceptance of

uncertainty. In this way, the artwork challenges hierarchical distinctions between clinical and domestic or ecological forms of care.

This conceptual framework echoes María Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (2017), which reconceptualises care as a relational, affective, and material practice that goes beyond exclusively human concerns. Puig de la Bellacasa argues that care emerges within entangled human–nonhuman worlds, where ethical responsibility is distributed across ecological systems rather than located solely within human intention. Allan's work can be interpreted through this lens, as it foregrounds the shared practices of care that link human health, environmental maintenance, and more-than-human forms of life.

Beyond its theoretical grounding, *The rest of us... we just go gardening* carries personal significance, marking an early encounter that influenced my interest in artmaking during my secondary education. Experiencing this work at a formative moment prompted reflection on the potential of nature as both material and metaphor within artistic practice, and on the ways, care can be expressed through engagement with the natural world. While this response is subjective, it draws attention to the affective dimension of care that the work activates, an invitation to reimagine care as something experiential and relational as opposed to exclusively conceptual.

This artwork will be situated on the terrace of Maggie's Centre. This placement positions the work outdoors while maintaining a deliberate separation from the surrounding natural landscape, reinforcing its exploration of care as a mediated and intentional practice. The terrace functions as a transitional space between interior and exterior, paralleling the conceptual movement between medical intervention and ecological tending. In the context of Maggie's Centre, a site dedicated to wellbeing and support, the work encourages observers to consider care as an ongoing, shared responsibility that unfolds across human, environmental, and architectural contexts.

3.4 'Protectors' by Veronica Ryan

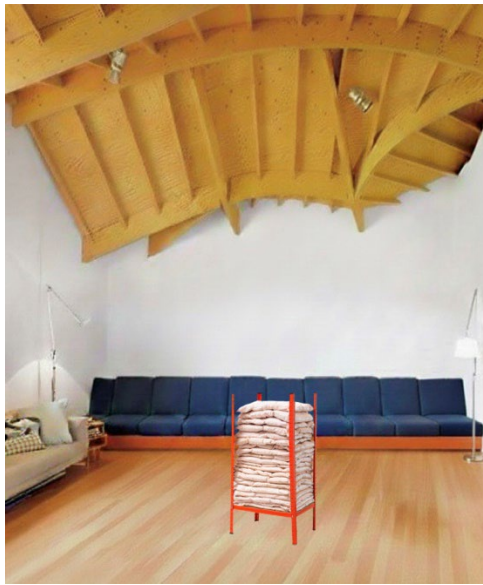


Figure 4

Veronica Ryan's *'Protectors'* examines the complex and often contradictory manifestations of care within institutional environments (Spencer, 2024). The work consists of an industrial, orange-painted metal framework that contains a series of pillows, a juxtaposition that immediately suggests both restraint and protection. The rigid, utilitarian structure suggests containment, surveillance, and control, while the softness of the pillows introduces associations of comfort, rest, and bodily care. Through this contrast, Ryan articulates the ambivalence of institutional care, where mechanisms designed to protect can simultaneously impose confinement.

A critical reflection informs Ryan's engagement with institutional spaces on historical and contemporary medical practices. In an interview with Veronica Simpson for *Studio International*, she reflects on the padded cell as an early form of institutional care:

"I'm interested in that padded cell because it's a kind of insulated space. ... hospitals don't put them in these cells anymore; they're drugged with antipsychotics. That, to me, is much more inhumane than these original padded cells which, in a funny kind of way, are more like a womb-like space" (Simpson, 2017).

This statement reframes the padded cell not solely as a site of punishment or exclusion, but as an ambivalent space that once offered physical protection. Ryan's comparison draws attention toward changes in medical care that prioritise chemical restraint and sedation over tactile or

spatial forms of containment, prompting ethical questions about what constitutes humane treatment. The metaphor of the “womb-like” space introduces a maternal dimension to the work, positioning care as insulation, enclosure, and protection rather than correction or suppression.

While such objects may not resolve psychological distress, *‘Protectors’* suggests that care can still be meaningfully attained through physical comfort. The work encourages viewers to consider how care persists even amid confined or uncomfortable contexts, and how subtle actions of softness and attentiveness can lessen the harshness of institutional structures. In doing so, Ryan foregrounds care as an embodied, material practice that operates within, and sometimes despite, systems of control.

‘Protectors’ will be displayed in the common room of Maggie’s Centre, a shared space designed for rest, conversation, and shared presence. This setting reinforces the work’s exploration of comfort and care by situating it within an environment that prioritises wellbeing and mutual support. The presence of pillows, objects associated with sleep, recovery, and bodily relief, invites reflection on how care can be enacted through modest, physical gestures.

3.5 'Untitled 1989' by Judith Scott



Figure 5

Judith Scott was born in 1943 with Down syndrome and experienced significant hearing loss following a childhood illness of scarlet fever. She was a fraternal twin and spent the first thirty-six years of her life within institutional care, initially at the Columbus State School (formerly the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth) and later at the Gallipolis Developmental Centre in Gallipolis, Ohio. These institutions operated within medical and social frameworks that prioritised containment over autonomy. In 1987, Scott's sister was granted legal guardianship, enabling Scott to leave institutional care and relocate to Chicago. That same year, Scott began attending the Creative Growth Art Centre in California, a studio-based programme dedicated to supporting artists with disabilities through access to materials, guidance, and an environment structured around respect, independence, and creative agency. This shift from institutionalisation to a supportive artistic community marked a meaningful change, allowing Scott to sustain an innovative practice and produce over two hundred sculptures before she died in 2005 (Morris and Higgs, 2014).

Scott's sculptural practice centres on the act of wrapping found objects, either singular or composite forms, in layers of string, yarn, textiles, cable, and other pliable materials. Through repetitive gestures of binding and enclosing, the original object is gradually obscured, resulting in dense, amorphous forms that resist immediate identification. Victoria Mitchell describes Scott's process as:

“formed through binding, winding, stitching, weaving and knotting threads, strings, raffia, cloth strips, tubing, or strips of plastic over and around the found, ‘appropriated’ and gifted objects which serve as armature or as items to be partially or fully covered.

While the notions of ‘art’ and ‘textile practice’ would be for others to declare, she was ‘wrapped up’ in her all-consuming making and warmly encouraged and supported in this by the community in which she worked” (Mitchell, 2021).

Mitchell’s account foregrounds the centrality of care within Scott’s practice, not only in the physical act of wrapping, enclosing, and protecting objects, but also in the social conditions that enabled this work. The Creative Growth Art Centre functioned as a caring infrastructure, providing time, encouragement, and material support without imposing prescriptive outcomes. Care here is understood as relational and environmental: a sustained attentiveness to Scott’s needs, rhythms, and autonomy that allowed her practice to flourish.

The artwork selected for this exhibition is an untitled sculpture produced in 1989. Its distinctive form offers insight into Scott’s making process, as meticulously layered strands of brightly coloured string encase a concealed object. The repetition of winding and binding does more than alter the object's appearance. Still, it actively integrates the notion of care into its formal qualities: the dense wrapping functions as both a protective barrier and a gesture of attentiveness towards the object within. This visual strategy highlights how acts of sheltering, enclosing, and preserving are rendered visible through the accumulation of material, directly connecting Scott’s method to the theme of care. Here, the sculpture’s formal characteristics, its multi-layered surfaces and hidden core, become material expressions of care, where the process of wrapping safeguards and honours the object.

The work will be displayed in the upstairs quiet room of Maggie’s Centre, a space designed for contemplation and calm. This setting encourages close, sustained engagement, allowing viewers to move around the sculpture and observe the intricate surface details produced through Scott’s labour-intensive process. Within this context, the work invites reflection on care as a practice that is tactile, time-based, and quietly sustaining, embedded not only in the finished object, but in the conditions and relationships that made its creation possible.

3.6 'Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)' by Felix Gonzalez-Torres



Figure 6

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's '*Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*' (1991) addresses themes of love, loss, and care through material vulnerability and audience participation. Conceived as a memorial to the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness in the same year the work was first exhibited, the installation takes the form of a pile of individually wrapped sweets placed directly on the gallery floor. The ideal total weight of the sweets corresponds to Ross's healthy body weight before his illness, embedding the work with an intimate, corporeal reference.

Central to the work is the invitation for viewers to take a sweet, an action that initiates the gradual depletion of the pile. This gesture of removal functions as a metaphor for the physical deterioration caused by AIDS, as well as the emotional experience of anticipatory loss. In an interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Gonzalez-Torres reflects on this process:

“So, at that time, it was losing Ross, so I wanted to lose everything to rehearse that fear and just confront that fear and perhaps learn something from it. I wanted to lose even the work, the stuff that's very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go” (Gonzalez-Torres, 1994).

This statement foregrounds care as an ethical practice grounded in vulnerability, surrender, and acceptance. By allowing the work to be diminished through audience interaction, Gonzalez-Torres relinquishes control over the artwork, resembling the emotional labour involved in caring for a loved one whose body is gradually failing. Care is not presented as preservation at all costs, but as an act of witnessing, accompaniment, and learning to live with loss.

The cyclical replenishment of the sweets, undertaken by exhibition staff, introduces a further dimension of care. While the pile may be continually reduced, it can also be restored to its original weight, suggesting an ongoing commitment to remembrance and maintenance. This act does not erase loss, but instead affirms care as a repetitive, sustaining practice that continues beyond death. In this way, Gonzalez-Torres's work echoes the broader themes explored throughout this exhibition dissertation, where care is understood not as an aspiration toward permanence but as an ongoing process of attentiveness and renewal that shapes how memory and relationality persist in the aftermath of loss.

'Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)' will be placed in the library area of Maggie's Centre. This location provides a quiet, contemplative environment that supports sustained reflection and is consistent with the memorial's function. Situated within a space dedicated to reading, thought, and respite, the artwork encourages an intimate encounter that resembles the private nature of grief and remembrance. In this context, the work operates not only as a tribute to the artist's late partner but also as a shared site of care, welcoming viewers to engage gently and respectfully with themes of loss, memory, and love.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has examined the complexities of care and its articulation within contemporary art. Through the selection of specific artworks and artists for the proposed exhibition, care has been explored not as a static or sentimental notion, but as a lived, negotiated, and materially embodied phenomenon expressed through sculptural form. The works discussed illustrate how care is embedded in artistic processes; negotiating the vulnerability of materials, and highlighting gestures of repair, support, and maintenance, thereby rendering care both physically manifest and emotionally embedded, rather than purely theoretical.

The selection of Maggie's Centre in Dundee as the exhibition venue was fundamental to this inquiry. As an environment dedicated to care, support, and wellbeing, Maggie's offered a context in which the exhibition's themes can move beyond representation and become part of lived experience. The Centre's domestic architecture, focus on openness, and established ethos of attentiveness influenced the proposed installation of the artworks, fostering a slow, considered and reflective engagement. Within this context, sculpture functioned not as an isolated object but as an element within a broader ecology of care, integrated with the everyday practices of listening, resting, and mutual support that characterise the space.

This attentiveness to site directly influenced the curatorial process. Decisions regarding placement, scale, and accessibility were informed by principles derived from the ethics of care, highlighting attentiveness to both the artworks and the needs of the Centre's users. Instead of pursuing curatorial neutrality or detachment, the exhibition adopts care as an ethical framework for decision-making, recognising relationality and responsibility as fundamental elements of curatorial practice.

By integrating sculptural practice, site-responsive curation, and feminist ethics of care, this dissertation contends that care is not exclusively a subject for artistic representation but also a methodology for producing, exhibiting, and experiencing art. Ultimately, situating the exhibition within Maggie's Centre in Dundee highlights care as an active and critical force that challenges conventional exhibition models and advocates for a more empathetic and symbiotic approach to engaging with art, space, and one another.

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Appendices

Generative AI Acknowledgement and Description

I acknowledge the use of the Gemini AI system (<https://gemini.google.com/app>) to generate materials that were included within my final assessment in modified form.

The following prompts were input into Gemini AI-

1. 'Remove furniture and place a large wide plinth in the centre of the room on the following image' –



2. 'Remove all furniture and visual clutter from the image, leaving only the built in sofa' -



3. 'Remove all furniture and the person from the image and add a short wide white plinth in front of the window.' -



4. 'Remove all people and free-standing furniture from the image'-



The output obtained was-



3.



4.

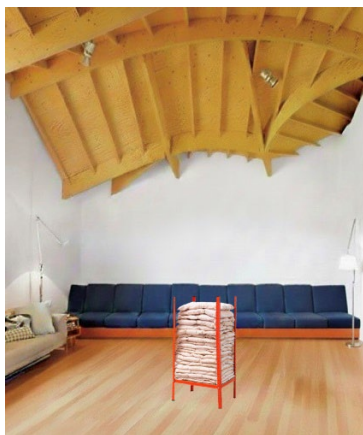


The output was changed and adapted by me in the following ways-

1. I added an image of the artwork that I digitally cut out and added it to the image-



2. I added an image of the artwork that I digitally cut out and added it to the image-



3. I added an image of the artwork that I digitally cut out and added it to the image-



4. I added an image of the artwork that I digitally cut out and added it to the image-

