

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 24:

August 2023

Artist's Page

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1024003>

UNPICKING THE BLANKET – ESCAPING THE BED WE WERE MADE TO LIE IN

Lissie Brown

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.
Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of Te Pūkenga,
New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

CC-BY the authors;

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

UNPICKING THE BLANKET – ESCAPING THE BED WE WERE MADE TO LIE IN

Lissie Brown

INTRODUCTION

The final exhibition for my MFA was about relationships and womanhood. The themes explored in this body of work were born out of my own experiences as a daughter, wife, mother and woman. I also drew upon the stories and accounts of others, gathered while researching and reflecting upon the complexities of historical attitudes towards women, and the issues around gender inequality that still exist today.

As I hand-stitched blankets into body parts and explored drawing on a large scale, I became immersed in the constantly evolving narratives that emerged during the process. I gained a sense of my own agency, perhaps for the first time ever, as this body of work is a gathering of objects that speaks directly to personal experience. This study has allowed me to look inwards in relation to the outward commands that I had been taught to live by. I have unpicked my own stitches, using as a starting point the threads of stories that have become woven into the installations in this exhibition, a platform from which discussion and debate over the plight of contemporary women can continue.



Figure 1. Lissie Brown, *Fruit*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

BEGINNINGS

The project began with an investigation into the lives of my female ancestors, through which I discovered a host of strong-minded, intelligent and independent women. Generational associations are instrumental in shaping our beliefs and approaches to life, with each generation unwittingly throwing a blanket of their experiences onto the next. It is important to acknowledge that we carry forward ripples from the past, while also being informed by events and opinions specific to our own time.

Much has been written on the topics of womanhood and the maternal. Judith Butler suggests that motherhood can be seen as performative, an action with no clear distinctions or boundaries to establish a definitive whole.¹ Susan Stewart states that the “maternal” is not only inherent in women,² while Julia Kristeva challenges the contemporary understanding of motherhood, describing it as self-limiting: “by turning all our attention on the biological and social aspects of motherhood as well as on sexual freedom and equality, we have become the first civilization which *lacks a discourse on the complexity of motherhood.*”³

My research investigated the cultural constructs of patriarchal societies and feminist action, which continue to shape women's lives today. While women are embracing their feminist identities with renewed and mediated visibility, manipulation and control remains ingrained in our cultural norms, though presented with such nuanced subtlety that it regularly goes unnoticed.

Contemporary art can be used as a forum to draw attention to ideas and issues across different domains. Vivian Lynn has been a major influence on my practice, as she frequently addressed matters of gender in her work. Exploring subjects that spoke to the patriarchal, cultural, feminist and biological,⁴ Lynn initiated both cultural and personal responses that questioned the ideological representation and treatment of women within Western patriarchal culture. I have also looked beyond the traditional – not just looking through the lens of things, but also *between* things, questioning the purpose of patterns of existence, belief structures and identification markers that are used as means to shape attitudes, opinions and behaviours in regard to gender.

DEATH OF A WOMAN – THE UNPICKING

The day for installing my exhibition arrived, and friends helped transport, carry and hang the works. Things shifted and moved, perspectives and meanings around arrangements that had been decided previously were challenged. Unexpected relationships between pieces arose and had to be considered regarding placement of the works. I have been influenced by the artwork of Cathy Wilkes and Juan Muñoz, who both create tableaux that allow for intimate relationships to occur between the figures and objects in a work, which nonetheless remain isolated within the whole.



Figure 2. Lissie Brown, *Fruit*, detail, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Lissie Brown.



Figure 3. Lissie Brown, *Fruit*, detail, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

This was the first time I had seen the entire body of work gathered together. My friends left, realising I needed time by myself to engage with works that had been so personal in their making. This time alone allowed for reflection on what the work meant to me. I moved things around, added and removed objects, considering the whole while also addressing how each tableau sat within the overall installation. During this time, my writing supervisor arrived; her reaction positive, we ran through my presentation and she left. Later, my practice supervisor came and, after casting an expert eye over the layout, adjusted a few pieces. Finally, picking up the apple that I had placed close to the central figure, she wandered around considering options, finally dropping it some distance from the rest of the installation. Suddenly everything seemed to fit. I learnt so much that day about myself, about curating a body of work and, most importantly, that this was not so much an individual endeavour as a collective effort encased in the friendship, care and support offered by others.

Blankets are the primary material used in this project. A well-used blanket is soft and worn and speaks of use by humanity. Children have been swaddled in them, people and their pets have slept on them, they have been laughed and cried on. Blankets provide security, warmth and love. Much like human skin, they become tougher or thinner depending on how they have been treated. I have used second-hand blankets as a way of acknowledging the relationship between the physical and the emotional.

The colour palette, ranging from cream through to deep red, refers to flesh and bone, addressing both the fragility of life and the abject nature of the subject matter. Hand-stitching human body parts out of woollen blankets speaks of comfort and horror in the same breath, while also acknowledging women's toil and manual labour, both historically and in contemporary society.

On entering the exhibition, the viewer encounters a series of installations that are neither interactive nor immersive. The central focus shifts as the visitor moves among the works; singular objects are part of larger narratives, reinforcing the theme of womanhood that runs throughout. Attention is drawn to the spaces between, where fragments of untold stories are suspended in time. Invited in to grasp part but not all of the story, the visitor is able to fill in the gaps with their own experiences while also considering the lives of others.

Central to the exhibition is a figure representative of a woman laid bare, her abdomen an open wound, where the womb, the nurturer of life, should be. One side of her



Figure 4. Lissie Brown, *Death of a Woman*, 2023. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 5. Lissie Brown, *Cleanliness Is Next To Godliness*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 6. Lissie Brown, *Eve*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Lissie Brown.

body has been flayed, yet she does not appear to be in pain. Balanced on a small table, she cannot escape the visitor's gaze, but refuses to engage, staring into space, lost in her own thoughts. Occupying the surrounding space, a fetus nestles in the safety of a womb which doubles as a protective blanket; a placenta hangs on the gallery wall and scattered across the floor are flayed breasts of all shapes and sizes. These objects are connected to the central figure by an umbilical cord, and represent actants that have power over the lives of women.⁵ The installation, *Fruit*, explores the relationship between a woman and her body, and is intended as a starting point for discussion around the realities of motherhood and the violence that exists within the physicality of giving birth.

As a child, I visited the WD Trotter Anatomy Museum at the University of Otago with my father, and spent many hours drawing the human organs on display. A recent introduction to the waxworks of La Specola rekindled my fascination with the human body and has been instrumental in the development of this body of work.⁶ The remarkably accurate reproductions of both male and female anatomy, created in eighteenth-century Italy, are a bizarre mix of scientific analysis and romanticised celebrations of womanhood. They are both disturbingly abject and fascinatingly beautiful.

Julia Kristeva offers insight into the abject in relation to motherhood, providing an important link into my investigation of the relationship between mother and child: "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationships, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."⁷ The assault on and physicality of a woman's body giving birth is often overlooked for more romanticised versions of motherhood. I recall my mother telling me that being pregnant was wonderful and while the act of giving birth did hurt to some degree, the joy of becoming a mother made all the pain worthwhile. She was only talking about physical pain. There was no mention of the psychological challenges women face when becoming mothers, particularly those who struggle under the pressures loaded on them by society. By exploring the functionality of the human body, both physically and psychologically, and placing the concrete and explainable alongside the emotional, I am presenting women as human beings rather than gender-based objects of Western patriarchal expectations.

Working closely on the central figure of *Fruit*, I was so immersed in healing my own personal trauma that I became immune to the reality that the idea of a partially flayed woman, no matter the context, is disturbing. Stitched up, pulled apart and exposed, this figure is part of a larger installation that explores both the corporeal and psychological, blending the performative with the personal, inviting the viewer to connect on a variety of levels. The range of emotions and reactions invoked by this figure was overwhelming. Some were horrified, shocked, disturbed; others cried, hugged and thanked me.



Figure 7. Lissie Brown, *Fruit*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 8. Lissie Brown, *Fruit*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 9. Lissie Brown, *Fruit, detail of fetus*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Lissie Brown.



Figure 10. Lissie Brown, *Fruit detail of flayed breasts*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Lissie Brown.



Figure 11. Lissie Brown, *Death of a Woman*, 2023, Exhibition image. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

The serpent rising out of her abdomen, hovering ominously, ready to strike, drew many questions from visitors. Had the serpent taken possession of her? Was it instrumental in drawing attention to the plight of women in regard to the maternal and the domestic? Was the threat of the serpent's strike preventing her from stepping outside the social conventions of acceptable female behaviour? This led to many thought-provoking and enlightening discussions about the perception of women within Western culture.

The apple is seemingly a minor player in the installation, placed some distance from the central figure, but its presence is important as it represents both temptation and the desire for a life beyond motherhood. Laden with symbolism, it also references the fragility of our existence on this planet and the consequences of physical, mental and spiritual action.

The clusters of flayed breasts, initially intended as support pieces for the larger works, held their own in a way I had not expected. People wandered among them, some reminded of flower gardens, others of sea anemones. They became relevant as works in their own right, while also leading visitors into and through the exhibition.

Every woman's narrative is personal, and I am addressing this reality in a subtle way through this installation. The empty abdomen of the central figure not only acknowledges those women who have had children, but also those who cannot or choose not to, as well as the gender diverse – in other words, anyone that identifies as female, whatever their experience in relation to motherhood.

Kristeva describes the "passionate violence of the maternal experience" as not subject to social manipulation, but rather as a conquest that derives from the role taken on when becoming a mother.⁸ Any ingrained desire to have a child or be a mother is a fabrication – conveniently portrayed through the construction of greater social needs and expectations – and is not instinctive in all women. The maternal can be a positive experience, triggering a love that lasts a lifetime, while others feel a loss of personal identity and self. I am peeling back the layers that constitute our perceptions of womanhood, questioning why we still view women through a narrow lens.

Visitors wandering among the breast flowers are led to a smaller installation, dominated by a large breast swaying ominously above a small male putto. By including the putto, an angelic winged infant that possesses elements of the trickster; I am drawing attention to the subtle manipulation and control over women within society. Complicated multi-layered characters with hidden complexities, putti represent the interplay between genders: the dependency of the child on the mother and the maternal influence that lingers long after the child has left the home environment.

Here, the putto is reminiscent of a decorative garden ornament, dwarfed by the breast that symbolises the power and strength of womanhood. His skin is adorned with images relating to domestic life, motherhood and romantic love. Imprisoned by a ball and chain, unable to escape the sins of his past, he has made his bed and now he must lie on it.

Entitled *Inexplicable*, this tableau refers to men's attempt to place specific identity markers on women, in an effort to control and understand them. However, women cannot be explained away, as no matter what approaches and methods are used in attempts to do so, women remain entirely inexplicable and themselves.

Lying abandoned on the ground nearby are a belt (reminiscent of one that hung in our kitchen, a constant reminder of what was to come if my brother or I stepped out of line) and a ragdoll. Pertinent here is Jane Bennett's theory of material vitality or "thing power," from the perspective of the maternal, whereby inanimate objects are part of assemblages producing effects that go beyond the realm of their singularity.⁹ Here, I am drawing attention to the way seemingly insignificant everyday objects can have power over the lives of women. Dolls, given to young girls as toys, allude to the stereotypical role of women as mothers; they are actants in the journey towards motherhood.

A girl stands close by, having discarded the doll and the belt. Spat out from the domestic vagina, she remains attached by umbilical cord to a giant sink plug, tied to the kitchen sink and the expectations that are placed on women from birth. A plug is a useful tool preventing water draining from a sink, but it can also symbolise an inability to escape domestic life. *Cleanliness is Next to Godliness* is a very personal installation, as the girl represents myself suspended between childhood and adulthood, still tied to mother's apron strings but desperate to explore my own autonomy. The gymslip speaks of institutions such as high schools, for me a place of bullying and isolation within the confines of a convent education. Here I am alluding to Michel Foucault's and Jia Tolentino's discussions of manipulation and control in relation to ritualistic movement, habit and familiarity.¹⁰

Gazing outward towards a future free from the world of high-school rules, religious indoctrination and parental expectation, I encounter, on the facing wall, a world that is the stuff of nightmares. When exploring options for placement of the drawing, *Links in the Chain of Causation*, it made sense that it was positioned in a way that allowed the visitor to explore its relationship to *Godliness is Next to Cleanliness*.

Created from the perspective of my mother's experiences, which included teenage years spent fighting in World War II before immigrating to Aotearoa to start a new life, this work is about generational and societal influence. In the central panel, my mother stares out, inviting the viewer in, acting as the social conscience within a narrative that suggests that



Figure 12. Lissie Brown, *Inexplicable*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 13. Lissie Brown, *Inexplicable detail* 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 14. Lissie Brown, *Death of a Woman*, 2023, Exhibition image. Mixed media. Photograph: Lissie Brown.

life is not always what it seems. The work draws on Susan Stewart's theory of the miniature and gigantic, whereby, once we leave the miniature, the experiences we have grown up with blinker our view of the gigantic; in other words, our partial view is coloured by influences from the miniature.¹¹ Applying this to my own life, I realise that the problematic relationship I had with my mother while living at home greatly influenced my ability to trust women as an adult.

Done using graphite pencil and ink, *Links in the Chain of Causation* is filled with cluttered imagery that bypasses the niceties of life. It has a nightmarish quality and addresses the unspoken cruelties of everyday existence. Putti are trapped in a pit that is guarded by the flayed figure of Botticelli's Venus, whose skin hangs ominously overhead. Women swing from meat hooks attached to puppeteers' strings. Surreal images of distortion and imagination are evident throughout, and many of the objects represented in this work are repeated and come to life in the sculptural installations. Frequently addressing issues pertaining to women, using bizarre and distorted realism, surrealist Dorothea Tanning's original and innovative approach to her subject matter has been influential in giving me permission to express my own ideas with greater freedom and confidence, particularly in relation to narratives about human behaviour:



Figure 15. Lissie Brown, *Cleanliness Is Next To Godliness*, detail, 2023, ex-hibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 16. Lissie Brown, *Death of a Woman*, 2023, Exhibition image, Mixed media. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 17 & 18. Lissie Brown, *Links in the Chain of Causation*, 2023, exhibition installation. Mixed media. Photograph: Lissie Brown.

CONCLUSION

This body of work unfolded through personal and public, as well as performative and relational experiences. The narrative woven between my mother, myself and others speaks of the language of blankets that passes through generations, evoking a range of emotions dependant on personal experience. It is about human interaction and an attempt to understand the complexity of our existence and relationship with the worlds we inhabit, while acknowledging that pathways can be shot through each other and interconnected, and that both emotional and physical behaviour is societal.

On a personal note, I set out to investigate and unpick my own and my mother's experiences as a means of understanding the complexities of the mother–daughter relationship. I was able to think about the interconnections, overlays and links that existed as I stitched my own personal narrative into discussions and discourses about womanhood. This was where the decision-making in regard to the exhibition began. It has been a journey of self-discovery, providing me with a platform for the future, one where I am comfortable in my own skin, as a member of humanity, on both the 'miniature' and the 'gigantic' scales.¹² For this, I am eternally grateful.

Lissie Brown is a visual artist who currently works at Te Whare Toi O Heretaunga in Te Matua-a-Māui. Using experimental and auto ethnographic methodologies her recent research addresses inter-generational influence and the plight of the contemporary woman. Browns practice incorporates a range of media including ceramics, metal, paint, drawing materials, fabric, and recycled materials .Holding a DipFAA in Sculpture, a Dip(Ed) Art and Art History, Brown recently completed her MFA at the Dunedin School of Art.

- 1 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990; Taylor & Francis e-library, 2002 [PDF ed.]).
- 2 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 3 Julia Kristeva, *Motherhood Today*, <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>. Emphasis in original.
- 4 Elizabeth Eastmond and Merimeri Penfold, *Women and the Arts in New Zealand: Forty Works, 1936-86* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1986).
- 5 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 8-10.
- 6 Petra Lamers-Schütze and Yvonne Verlag, eds., *Encyclopaedia Anatomica: A Complete Collection of Anatomical Waxes* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999).
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.
- 8 Kristeva, *Motherhood Today*.
- 9 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
- 10 Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Press, 1984), 206-13; Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (London: 4th Estate, 2019).
- 11 Stewart, *On Longing*, 106-7.
- 12 Ibid, 77.