

Freddie Robins

Bad Mother

Peer-reviewed conference paper

Motherhood and creative practice: Maternal structures in creative work

Centre for Media and Culture Research, School of Arts and Creative Industries, London South Bank University, 1 – 2 June 2015

DO I FIT IN

2005 Hand knitted wool. Knitted for me by Freda Burgher

Knitting has long held associations with practical function, the production of garments to keep us warm and comfortable. Like many people I have a desire to own functional, knitted things, but I have no desire to make them. When I was pregnant I was continually being asked what I had been knitting my baby. As I am an artist working almost exclusively with knitting it was assumed that she would have a wonderful array of lovingly knitted items to wear but I had knitted her nothing. Guilt got the better of me and she received a jumper, then depression and she received some giant pram trousers.

How to make a piece of work when you're too tired to make decisions

2004 Machine knitted wool, dress pins

This piece of work was conceived of during the first few months of my daughter's life when I was lying in bed at night, over tired but unable to sleep. Long before I had given birth, determined not to change a thing about my life once I became a mother, I had arranged to go to Berlin on an artist's residency six months after my due date. However now I had given birth I was unable to stop crying let alone concentrate on making work. This was the period in which I had knitted the giant pram trousers, luckily my daughter was a late walker, or maybe hindered by my knitting she could not walk. Anyway I knew that when I did manage to make work again it would no longer be possible for me to approach it in the same way that I had before. My studio practice was built on continuity of time and thought, which was no longer available to me. My work is technically challenging and even during my pregnancy I had found it increasingly difficult to make the necessary decisions, let alone do the required mathematical equations. My work had also been increasing in scale and I wanted this to continue. With much less time available to me the only way that this was possible was to make smaller components which, when placed together, would form a large work. This piece aimed to address all of the above. It took the decision making away from me and let it rest on the throw of a dice. It also enabled me to make work in very short periods of time where continuity of time or thought was not necessary. I could make work when I was tired or even give the dice and instructions to someone else and they could make it for me, no pattern necessary!

(Detail)

I used 3 dice, one to decide the colour of the yarns that I would use, one to give me numbers for stitches and rows and the other to decide the actions such as "hook up side of knitting", "turn knitting" or "decrease 1 stitch fully-fashioned at the beginning of each row". Each individual piece was made using 10 actions. The instructions, numbers dice and actions dice were modified after several experiments to give more consistently successful results. The finished piece is on going. The arrangement of individual pieces can be changed and it can be added to at anytime. The instructions and dice are open to modification should it become necessary or should I feel like it.

This work was initially shown at the Crafts Council's 2005 exhibition, *Knit 2 Together: Concepts in Knitting*, at their former gallery in Islington, London.

PAUSE

(Drawing)

When I managed to get some reliable childcare in place I returned to the studio. I produced a series of untitled ink drawings communicating the intense emotional and physical relationship that I was having with my baby daughter. She completely consumed me, filling all my thoughts. I couldn't concentrate on anything but the most banal of tasks if she was anywhere near me. She completely filled my head. I can still only concentrate fully in my studio, which is now at home, if she is not home, or is definitely asleep. Struggling with these ongoing feelings I have been reassured by an interview with Phyllida Barlow, a mother of five. Many years ago when she was lecturing to students she was asked, "Well what's more important to you: being a mother, or being an artist?" She replied, "Being a mother". The students recoiled in horror at the prioritisation of motherhood over artist. Barlow goes on to say, (and I quote) "it isn't about a choice, the two are actually reciprocal, although an impossible combination, and I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to anyone, because the split is a very cruel schism; they're both intensely creative processes, but they stand in absolute opposition to each other. One is selfish and the other has to be selfless. The mix is not good". (end quote)

PAUSE

In 2005 I initiated an exhibition entitled *Ceremony* at the Pump House Gallery in Battersea Park, London. *Ceremony* was born out of a discussion with curator Sandra Ross about the relevance, application and value of craft skills in today's society and the need to platform contemporary craft in visual arts venues, especially in London. An idea that we kept coming back to was the way that unique crafted objects play an integral role in the execution of traditional rites of passage, from the knitted christening shawl to the gold wedding ring and finally the floral funeral wreath.

IT SUCKS

2005 Hand knitted 2-ply Shetland Lace Yarn. Knitted for me by Audrey Yates

In *IT SUCKS*, I subverted the traditional hand knitted Shetland Lace christening shawl to communicate the very mixed feelings, not all together positive, that I had upon the birth of my daughter and becoming a new mother.

Knitting has been a source of income for women in Shetland for many years and continues to be so for some today. In the past when the men were at sea, it was up to the women to run the croft. Women spent their days growing crops, caring for the animals, carrying peat from the hills for the fire and gathering winter fodder. Any free time was spent in knitting with the items made, most commonly elaborately patterned jumpers or lace shawls, either used as essential clothing for the family or to be sold as a way of boosting the meager family income. The recent renewed interest in knitting has not come from financial necessity and is associated with relaxation and fun. Having to knit for a living is not relaxing or fun, like my experience of new motherhood, and my new baby, it sucks.

(Installation shot)

In this installation shot *IT SUCKS* can be seen on the wall on the left hand side. On the right is Rozanne Hawksley's *Pale Armistice* from 1991, from the Collection of the Imperial War Museum and Serena Korda's *Love, Honour and Obey* from 2004

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT

2005 Hand knitted wool. Knitted for me by Jean Arkell

PAUSE

(Installation shot , *Fifties, fashion and emerging feminism [a contemporary response]* at Collyer Bristow Gallery, London)

In 2011 I was invited to take part in an exhibition, *Fifties, fashion and emerging feminism [a contemporary response]* at Collyer Bristow Gallery, London by the curatorial partnership Day + Gluckman. The stereotypical image of the fifties is of a modern, clean world where glamorous women flit around homes

filled with contemporary, colourful design by the likes of Lucienne Day. The truth for most women was quite different. The shadow of the war still loomed, rationing for textiles and clothing hadn't ended until 1949. After the war women had re-embraced the domestic role of wife-and-motherhood with surprising fervour. Sex and childbirth outside of wedlock was still unacceptable, "nice girls didn't". Although the contraceptive pill first came into existence in 1951 it didn't go on sale in the UK until ten years later. The Abortion Act wasn't in place until 1967. Children born outside of wedlock, if 'backstreet' abortions hadn't, or wouldn't, be sought, were raised by other married family members, put up for adoption or raised within institutions. I am saddened by discoveries of such situations in my own family. More haunting are the stories of the remains of babies found amongst the possessions of deceased elderly women. Whether these babies had died naturally is often undeterminable but the woman's need and determination to keep her 'reputation' intact is without doubt.

(Wardrobe detail)

My sculpture, *He's behind you*, is a reflection on these facts. A small, fragile, slightly distorted, knitted 'skin' hangs inside a small, miserable, broken, dark wood wardrobe. Knitting has connotations of warmth and comfort. It has stereotypical associations with people at both ends of life, elderly women knitting for newborns. More sinisterly knitting needles were often used in self and 'backstreet' abortions.

(Drawing)

PAUSE

I'M SO ANGRY

2005 Hand knitted wool. Knitted for me by Freda Burgher

***Bad Mother* 2013, Machine knitted wool, machine knitted lurex, expanding foam, broken knitting needles, glass beads, sequins, dress pins, crystal beads on an oak and maple wood shelf**

This problem of motherhood, or rather the problem that I have with motherhood is revisited in this work. I have severed an arm from one of my machine knitted bodies, filled it with builders expanding foam, pushed a bunch of broken and bent knitting needles into the end voodoo style and embellished it with red lurex tubular knitting spelling out the words BAD MOTHER. The O of mother has been turned into a sequined eye crying crystal tears. The phrase BAD MOTHER came from something that was said to me at Christmas. One of my daughter's school class-room assistants loves to knit. Last December she said that she had knitted my daughter a cardigan as she knew that I would never get round to it. On Christmas Eve her husband brought it over, as he handed me the package he said two words, not Happy Christmas but "Bad mother". When exhibiting it through the Crafts Council's exhibition COLLECT six months later, a man congratulated me on what he saw as a "very honest admission."

(Present for Knitting Well pottery mug)

I knit well and I mother well enough

(Liberties)

I will be showing a new work, *Mad Mother*, a machine and hand knitted version of the first drawing that I showed you, alongside *Bad Mother* in *Liberties*, an exhibition of contemporary art reflecting on 40 years since the sex discrimination act, curated by the curatorial partnership, Day + Gluckman, at the Collyer Bristow Gallery, 4 Bedford Row, London, from 2 July – 21 October this year.