

IV.
RESISTING BAD MOTHER NARRATIVES



*Image 1: "DO I FIT IN," 2005, hand knitted wool, 800 x 340mm.
Knitted for me by Freda Burgher. In Private Collection. Photo: Douglas Atfield.*

Bad Mother

FREDDIE ROBINS

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, and with postnatal depression, she received some giant pram trousers.



Image 2: "How to Make a Piece of Work When You're Too Tired to Make Decisions," 2004 machine knitted wool, dress pins. Photo: Ed Barber, courtesy of Crafts Council (UK).

Image Two: 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, overtired 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 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

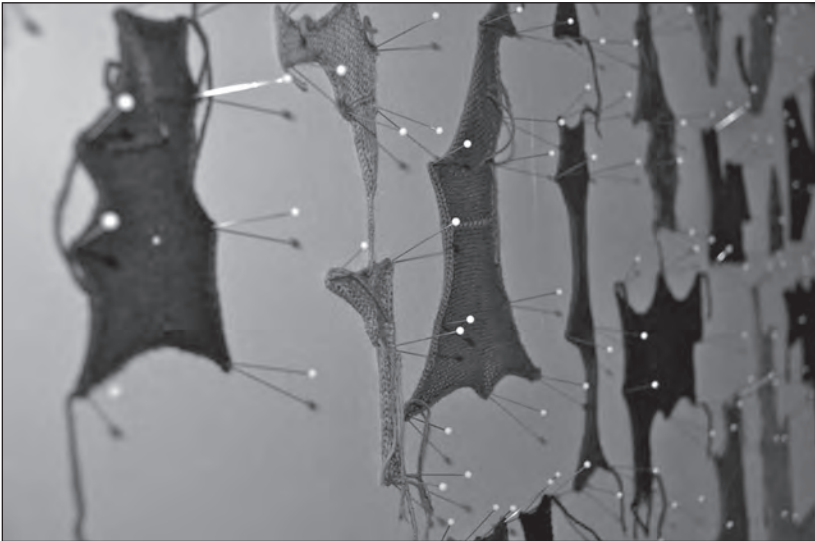


Image 3: "How to Make a Piece of Work When You're Too Tired to Make Decisions" (detail), 2004, machine knitted wool, dress pins. Photo: Ed Barber, courtesy of Crafts Council (UK).

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 short periods of time where continuity of time or thought was not necessary. I could make work when I was tired, or I could even give the dice and instructions to someone else, and they could make it for me, no pattern necessary.

Image Three: I used three 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 one stitch fully fashioned at the beginning of each row.” Each individual piece was made using ten actions. The instructions, numbers dice, and actions dice were modified after several experiments to give more consistently

successful results. The finished piece is ongoing. The arrangement of individual pieces can be changed, and it can be added to at any time. The instructions and dice are open to modification should it become necessary or should I feel like it.

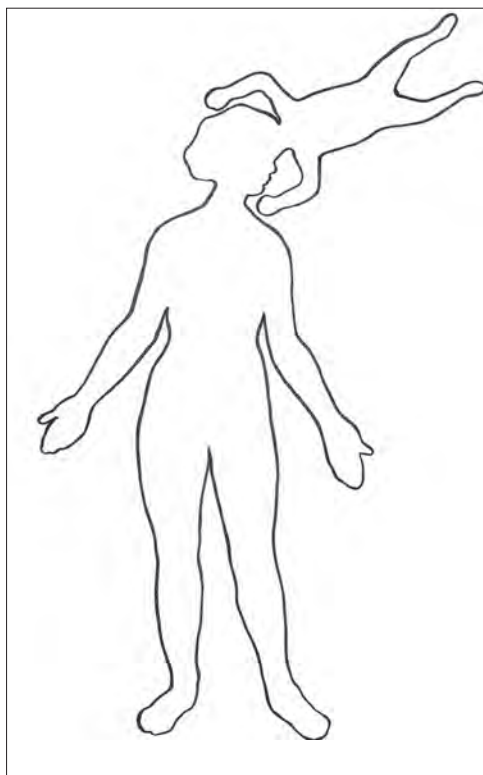


Image 4: “Untitled 1,” 2006, ink on paper,
296 x 199 mm..

Image Four: 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



Image 5: Installation shot of "Mad Mother," 2015, machine and hand knitted wool, 2300 x 1520 x 20 mm), in "Liberties," Collyer Bristow Gallery, London, UK. Photo: Stephanie Rushton.

but the most banal of tasks if she was anywhere near me. She completely filled my head.

Image Five: Nearly ten years later, I translated the ink drawing into a material work—taking one of my industrially knitted bodies and hand knitting my baby from the top of the head, with the baby's head filling the mother's. This work was exhibited in *Liberties*, an exhibition of contemporary women's art reflecting the changes in art practice within the context of sexual and gender equality since the introduction of the *Sex Discrimination Act* (1975) in the UK. *Liberties* was curated by the curatorial partnership, Day + Gluckman, for the Collyer Bristow Gallery, London, UK. And nearly ten years later, I can still only concentrate fully in my studio, which is now at home, if my daughter is not home or is fast asleep. She still controls my head and my heart.

Image Six: 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



*Image 6: "IT SUCKS," 2005, hand knitted 2-ply Shetland Lace Yarn, 1000 x 1000mm.
Knitted for me by Audrey Yates. Photo: Colin Guilemet.*

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. The items made, most commonly elaborately patterned jumpers or lace shawls, were either used as essential clothing for the family or sold as a way of boosting the meagre 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.

Image Seven: In 2011, I was invited to take part in an exhibition—*Fifties, Fashion, and Emerging Feminism (a Contemporary*



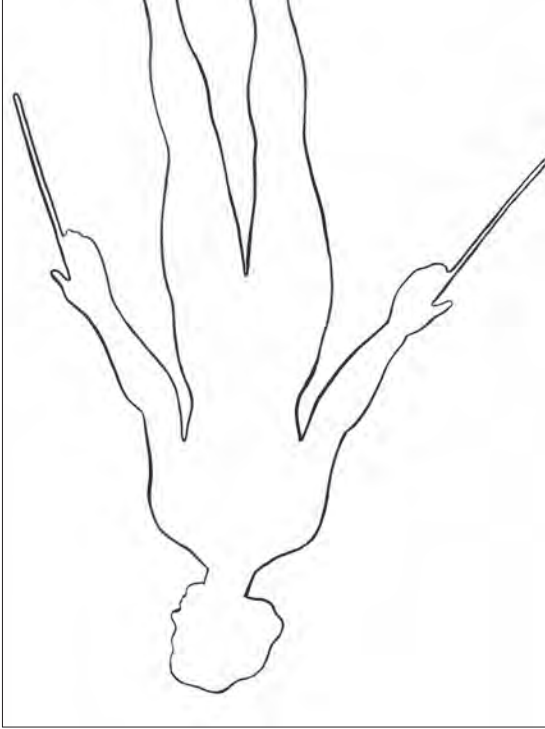
Image 7: Installation shot of “Untitled 3” and “He’s Behind You” in “Fifties, Fashion, and Emerging Feminism (a Contemporary Response),” Collyer Bristow Gallery, London, UK, 2011.

Response)—at Collyer Bristow Gallery, London, UK, 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, with rationing for textiles and clothing only ending in 1949. After the war, women had reembraced the domestic roles of wife and motherhood with surprising fervour. Sex and childbirth outside of wedlock were still unacceptable—“nice girls didn’t” do that. Although the contraceptive pill first came into existence in 1951, it did not go on sale in the UK until ten years later. The Abortion Act was not in place until 1967. Children born outside of wedlock, if “backstreet” abortions were not 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 among 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.



Image 8: "He's Behind You" (detail), 2011, machine knitted yarn, coat-hanger, found wardrobe, 900 x 600 x 1640 mm.

Image Eight: 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



*Image 9. "Untitled 2," 2011, ink on paper,
296 x 199 mm.*

for newborns. More sinisterly, knitting needles were often used in self and "backstreet" abortions.

Image Ten: 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 industrially knitted bodies, filled it with builder's 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 classroom assistants loves to knit. One December, she said that she had knitted my daughter a cardigan as she knew that I would never get around 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, (Saatchi Gallery, London, UK), six months later, a man congratulated me on what he saw as a "very honest admission."

BAD MOTHER



Image 10: "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, 780 x 160 x 160 mm. In Private Collection. Photo: Douglas Atfield.

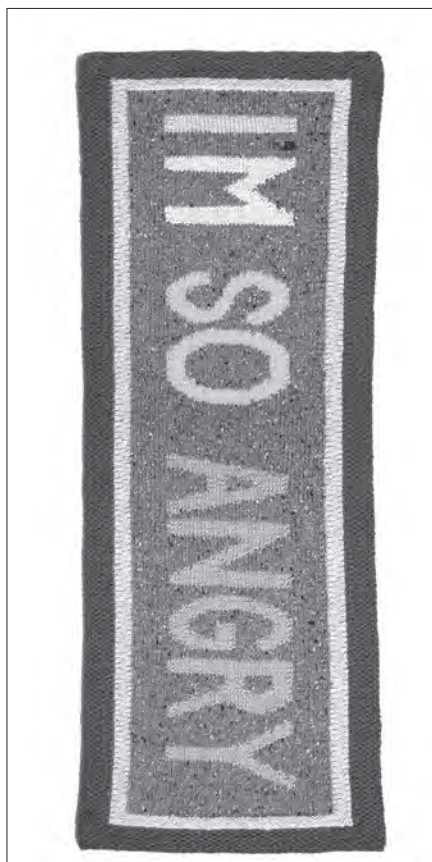


Image 11: "I'M SO ANGRY," 2005, hand knitted wool, 960 x 340 mm. Knitted for me by Jean Arkell. In the collection of KODE—Kunstmuseene i Bergen, Norway. Photo: Douglas Atfield.