

2007

## **M/others : One lens, multiple maternities**

Toni Wilkinson  
*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses\\_hons](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons)



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Photography Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Wilkinson, T. (2007). *M/others : One lens, multiple maternities*. Edith Cowan University.  
[https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses\\_hons/1297](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1297)

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.  
[https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses\\_hons/1297](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1297)

# Edith Cowan University

## Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author's moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).
- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY

**m/others**

one lens; multiple maternities

Toni Wilkinson  
Bachelor of Communications (Photomedia)

Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries  
Edith Cowan University  
October 2007

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## Abstract

This body of photographic portraits re/presents the maternal relationship as a significant one in a cultural economy than 'downgrades motherhood', and fails to adequately recognise the contribution of mothers to society, as they struggle to uphold self and family in contemporary life. Throughout this work, which fuses religious visual art principles and photographic documentary, a more complex, powerful maternal figure emerges than the singular, passive and restrictive example of motherhood, commonly portrayed in art history. I undertake a comparative analysis between traditional Madonna and child icons and contemporary female photographers involved with maternal themes, to highlight that certain photographs facilitate subversive readings. Seventeen mothers and their children were photographed for the project; this diverse range of mother/child combinations provides variables and ambiguities, which reveal beauty and menace to allow for multiple opportunities for female subjectivity and a potent maternity. Julia Kristeva's ideas on the abject, herethics and psychoanalysis are referenced in the production of the photographs and the exegesis, in synchronicity with Panizza Allmark's *photographie féminine* approach. In *m/others* I celebrate the intense, unique and complicated maternal matrix and contribute to a reshaping of maternity in cultural discourse.

**Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature.....

Date..... 4 . 3 . 08 .....

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor and accomplice for *m/others* Dr Panizza Allmark whose commitment to, and I re-apply Kristeva's words, "ceaseless analysis, vigilance and will to subversion" in her work is rare. Her deep support and guidance sustained me when I struggled with this project. I am also indebted to Mike Gray who withstood my relentless requests for more scans, more scans, and then more scans! I acknowledge my colleagues in Photomedia, Norm, Max, Kevin and Paul for advice and assistance. I extend my love and gratitude, to all of the wonderfully complex and generous 'subjects in process' that appear in these photographs. And also to my mum, who gave me the camera I use to interrogate being and whose image I reinvent whenever I use it.

## Table Of Contents

Introduction	7
Malapropos Virgin Madonna	10
Migrant Mother	13
Other Mothers: Contemporary female photographers	15
Reconceiving the maternal: Kristeva and full bodied feminin theory	21
Herethics and a Photographie feminin approach	23
"Subjects in Process"	24
Melancholic Maternity	27
One lens, multiple maternities	28
Illumination	28
Works in progress	30
Reframing breasts and body	30
Conclusion	33



## Introduction

As a mother and photographer I have increasingly turned the camera towards my own children, and in so doing I have realised that with each slam of the shutter a part of them is lost to me; this loss confronts and saddens me. Photography is the means through which I ask questions of a maternity that is simultaneously fulfilling and demanding, it thus "wounds and increases me". The photographs I make become "metaphors of the invisible"; they intimate my own melancholic maternity, which is tender and fierce. I embrace Julia Kristeva's expansion on Kleinian negativity, which highlights the potential for Klein's ideas on love, loss and melancholia in the mother/child web to create new possibilities for subjectivity and the maternal. Kristeva suggests that Klein recognised the potential for a rediscovery of the mother after separation: "The self never stops re-creating the mother through the very freedom it gained from being separated from her. The mother is a woman who is always renewed in images and words, through a process of which "I" am the creator simply because I am the one that restores her" (2001, p.131).

I also use photography to create an awareness of the constraints imposed by motherhood. Maternity is costly for many women, particularly in the workplace and often women choose not to have children because of the perceived set backs involved in parenthood. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner John von Doussa (2007, p.1) says women are "punished" with low workplace participation for being genetically responsible for producing the next generation. Mothers remain responsible for the majority of parenting and carry the weight of childhood development that is not held by fathers. This unequal distribution of parental commitment is problematic for women who often struggle to balance work and home, for society, and in particular, for children who can be disadvantaged by a lack of parental support. Pru Goward, Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Commissioner (2006, p.7) maintains that what is necessary for solutions to this problem are, "a repositioning and revaluing of children and family life by everyone, not just mothers." A cultural, social and financial shift and upgrade of motherhood in society, which better reflects the importance and power of the maternal is long overdue.

To embrace the power of the maternal I combine Kristeva's herethics and Allmark's *photographié féminine* approach in my photographic methodology, as both encourage the inclusion of female subjectivity in creative work. Allmark clarifies that the "major differences between a *photographié féminine* and other types of photography is that it consists of an acknowledgement of the *feminin* experience", which attempts to disrupt the masculine schema of containment and representation (2003, p.122). And herethics is based on the unique mother/child bond that is set up in pregnancy and recognises the maternal capacity to love the other in the self. The title of this project *m/others* emphasises the connection between the 'other' and the maternal in several ways. It acknowledges what Kristeva believes is the maternal ability to accommodate the other within through the shared mother infant body experience, reflects the status of maternity as other in dominant culture and also references the participation of child/ren as the maternal "first other" in the images. These

images of m/others work against the stereotypical institutional constructions of motherhood as uniform and singular. Instead they attempt to dissolve similarities and difference in the maternal to create variables, to which "many values can be assigned" and reveal 'subjects in process'. Each image in the series is named *m/other # 1*, *m/other # 2* and so on, up to and including *m/other #17*. The number value assigned to each *m/other* reflects the multiple mothers in the series and also the multiple possibilities for interpretation of the images.

In order to deviate and repossess motherhood from traditional maternal icons and female archetypes, I analyse depictions of maternity in the history of Western art and photography. In particular, I consider the Christian based Madonna and child images, which pervade Western culture and sanctify motherhood and the divergent image of maternity presented in *Migrant Mother* (1936), which suggests motherhood as an ordeal rather than as a blessing. I argue that many Christian depictions of maternity do not necessarily represent the complexity of women; instead they seem to provide an outmoded vision of motherhood devoid of sexuality and tension. In contrast I accept that the maternal matrix is entangled and that "every mother is herself a mixed blessing who brings pluses and minuses to the upbringing of her child" (Pru Goward, Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Commissioner, 2006, p.7). The refined, sanitised, symbolic construction of maternity is challenged in my portraits, which disturb and unsettle as they merge the rich colours and visual principles of religious art with a more contemporary, documentary approach to allow for more open readings. These images combine beauty and menace in an attempt to shift our perception of the maternal.

The work of other female photographers notably Sally Mann, Cindy Sherman and Rineke Dijkstra who have attempted to subvert conventional representations of motherhood will also be examined. These women utilise photography to create an alternative discourse for maternity, Sherman and Dijkstra reinvigorate the maternal with their assimilation of the abject in allegiance with the maternal throughout their work. Astore (2001) says the abject is palpable through gestation, pregnancy, and birth, from morning sickness to breastfeeding and beyond. While Mann challenges the boundaries of maternity and illuminates the conflicted bonds between mother and child, she creates poetic, haunting pictures that covet a return to her children. Like Mann I reference a melancholic maternity.

I specifically consider Kristeva's notions of identity, the maternal in psychoanalytic contexts and the role of creative practice, as they play out in and encircle my own engagement with the photographic portrait. Kristeva's ideas have more often been applied to literature, painting and more explicitly to poetic language to investigate the ability of creative work to facilitate the emergence of unique identities. Kristeva (2003) maintains that it is the responsibility of creative practice to question and challenge all identity, she believes that it is the responsibility of creative individuals to break down identity through practice and that "powers reside in the ability to demand interrogation." In this paper, I involve Kristeva's teachings, which unite herethics, maternity and the abject, to illustrate the potential of the photographic portrait to create an

abundant, alternative discourse of motherhood; one that reveals the potential for strength and love in the maternal relationship, alongside vulnerability, ambivalence and loss.

## Malapropos Virgin Madonna

I will now discuss conventional depictions of maternity in Madonna and child imagery throughout art history, followed by a discussion of Dorothea Lange's famous photograph entitled *Migrant Mother* (1936). The comparative analysis provides context for the understanding of the series *m/others*, which melds conventions of the art genre with photo documentary to produce visual ambiguity and transgression in my own work.

The text has the ability to assist cultural transgression. Kristeva maintains it is crucial for creative works to provide possibilities for change in the subject and that this leads to opportunities for social change as well as personal revelation. Regarding the conception of 'subject in process' through the text, Kristeva (1984, p.105) asserts, "Within this apparent asociality, however, lies the social function of texts: the production of a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations, and thus joining in the process of ... subversion." The prospect of cultural deviation is enhanced with the invention of a "subject on trial" through open, subversive, creative texts. Kristeva articulates that religious elucidations of motherhood as linked to the Virgin Madonna and child are redundant. Oliver (1993a) expands:

What she describes as 'the cult of the Virgin has been used in Western patriarchy in order to cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother child relationship. The cult of the Virgin controls maternity and mothers by doing violence to them. (p.49)



Botticelli, *VIRGIN AND CHILD*, c. 1480

Throughout *Stabat Mater* Kristeva makes plain the impotency of the Western, Christian image of the Virgin Madonna and child to properly represent maternity. To illustrate the Virgin's failure to represent women, Kristeva (1986, p.181) describes the Virgin as, "a Unique Woman: alone among women, alone among



mothers, alone among humans since she is without sin." Alone of her sex the Virgin and depictions of the Virgin Madonna can never offer a powerful, maternity that stands for multiple, complex and autonomous motherhood. Virgin Madonna and child images symbolise a maternity devoid of sexuality as Gaudelius (1995,p.184) asserts, "The Virgin represents motherhood as separate from female sexuality. This definition is the definition of the patriarchal order and it is this which Kristeva seeks to (re)present and question."

Throughout my portraits I make reference to, yet deviate from, the Madonna and child icon in Western art, I intentionally and consistently make active sexuality an integral branch of the maternal. In doing so I draw from Kristeva's appeal for a different discourse on maternity other than the limited definition offered by the Madonna and child of western Christian art.

Sturken and Cartwright (2001,p.36) attest:

The image of mother and child is ubiquitous in Western Art. It is widely believed to represent universal concepts of maternal emotion, the essential bond between a mother and her offspring, and the dependence of that child upon her. This image is perceived as an icon of motherhood and, by extension, the importance of motherhood throughout the world and in all human history. The sheer number of paintings created with a mother and child theme throughout the history of western art attests not simply to the centrality of the Madonna figure in Christianity but also to the idea that the bond between mother and child represented in images like this is universally understood to be natural, not culturally constructed.



*Marco Basaiti, MADONNA AND CHILD, c. 1510*

The clear-faced images of the Madonna produced in the renaissance period, define a maternity that is seemingly linked to nature as chaste, youthful and imbued with moral innocence and whose needs are secondary to the child. These depictions represent a stable icon of sacred motherhood endorsed by the patriarchal Christian church that is seemingly universal in its values where maternity is tied to nature and free from any social and cultural controls.

Representations of maternity in art history perpetually define women as mothers by what they mean to patriarchy. Women in fine art are "almost always portrayed in ways that deny them dignity, personhood and

legitimate power " (Silverman Van Buren cited in Bentz/Mayes 1993,p.141). Furthermore Balfe asserts: "Whether as witch, whore, Madonna or angel; as Lilith, Eve or Mary, women are seen from the outside as objects under the total domination of men" (1993,p.141). Virgin Madonna and child depictions offer little real power for women as mothers. These countless cultural creations are often seen to reduce maternity to a passive, repressed archetype, which denies any active participation in society for m/others, other than as stable in the devotion to and service of her child within a western, Christian, patriarchal tradition. Weekes (1993,p.36) elaborates:

Mothers do appear in traditional art histories, of course: the madonna adoring her newborn child, the "happy mothers" of 18<sup>th</sup> century France, and all the loving caretakers of the Impressionists and others. as one critic notes "Art galleries are stacked with mothers, and most of them are virgins" But the mother whose child circumscribes her world is not an empowering figure, a fact not unconnected to the popularity of this image.

The reinforcement of patriarchal values in traditional Madonna and child icons illustrates the way that throughout history, art has contributed to the unequal distribution of power between males and females. The proliferation of images of women as other represents the way that patriarchy itself seeks to limit and define women. Therefore, any discourse of art history needs to reflect that it offers a particular, singular masculine perspective, which denies female subjectivity. "Art history is not just indifferent to women; it is a masculinity discourse, party to the social construction of sexual difference" (Pollock 1998,p11). Images like the conventional Madonna and child can be said to deny a woman's subjectivity, and confine her to the dominant systems of meaning reflected by art history.

The *m/other* portraits deviate from conventional Madonna and child icons with their incorporation of multiple mothers and a more documentary approach, combined with distinct elements and principles of visual art. Colour saturation is one feature in the pictures drawn from religious iconography, while black and white is also included, to provide contrast and align with photo documentary. However, I accept the position of the Madonna and child in art history as a beacon of the maternal. Mirelle Astore (2001,p.37) articulates a similar perspective when she states:

Until enough images are created, I cannot leave the Madonna and Child iconic image behind. This iconic image is so pervasive over the centuries that any other representation of the mother/child relationship necessarily refers to it in order to depart from it.

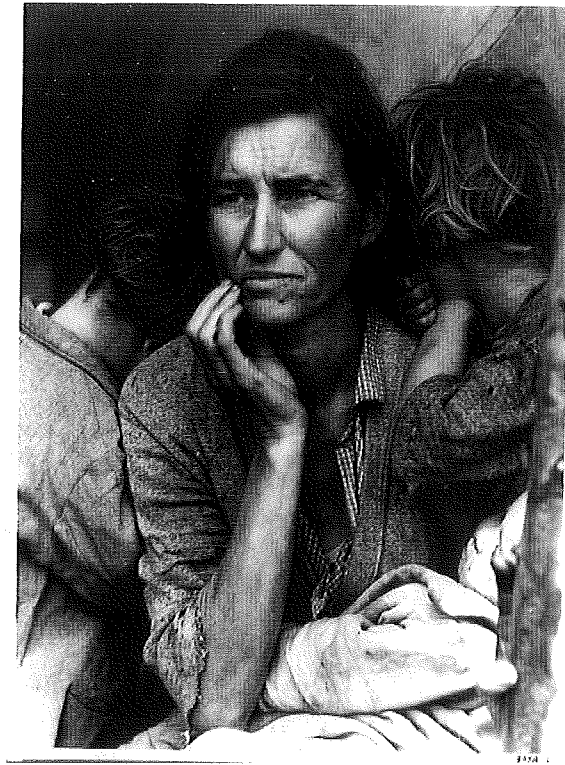
In *m/others*, the stylistic devices like colour, and pose used in Madonna and child images are combined with aspects of Dorothea Lange's photojournalistic technique in *Migrant Mother*.

### **Migrant Mother: multiple opportunities for the maternal**

*Migrant Mother* (1936) became an icon of the Great Depression in the United States because of its depiction of stoic perseverance in the face of adversity; furthermore, the photograph references the possibilities for female subjectivity when reinventing Mary's image. *Migrant Mother* depicts the mother being leaned on rather than offering active support to her children - in traditional images the mother is commonly shown to be tenderly holding her child in her hands. This suggests steady support, rather than the weighty load the *Migrant Mother* must carry from the burden of her children. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) maintain that *Migrant mother* generates most meaning from its paradoxical relationship to traditional Madonna and child images found in art history. *Migrant Mother* references conventional portrayals of mother and child, yet reveals a maternal figure quite different to the one-dimensional, sweet- faced iconic Madonnas marketed by Christianity.

The power and potency of the maternal is inherent in the image of *Migrant Mother*, here universal, natural motherhood is denied and a more ambiguous relationship of mother and child is revealed. In the image woman is linked to her sexuality through motherhood, however, a more complex opportunity exists for female subjectivity outside of the prescriptive conventional limits set by Christianity, in traditional maternal depictions. "Women should not be depicted as only sexual or biological creatures, but neither should these aspects of their existence be ignored or misrepresented" (Weekes 1993,p.37). *Migrant Mother* offers an alternative vision of the maternal relationship, it conceives multiplicity of meaning, acknowledges female biology and sexuality, yet simultaneously, elevates wide ranging female subjectivity. Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p.38) expand:

This mother is hardly a nurturing figure. She is distracted. Her children cling to her and burden her thin frame. She looks not at her children but outward as if toward her future- one seemingly with little promise. This image derives its meaning largely from a viewer's knowledge of the historical moment it represents. At the same time, it makes a statement about the complex role of motherhood that is informed by its traditional representation. Like the earlier images, this photograph denotes a mother with children but it casts this social relationship in terms of hunger, poverty, struggle, loss and strength. Thus it can be read in a number of ways



*Migrant Mother* Dorothea Lange (1936)

*Migrant Mother* then, challenges conventional representations of the maternal figure and imparts an alternative discourse of maternity that allows multiple interpretations. For example, Hispanic and Black media reappropriated the *Migrant Mother* image, refiguring it as an icon of rebellion in the sixties and seventies; the picture itself became reframed to reflect concerns other than those first anticipated by the photographer. Hence, the portrayal of a complex maternity provides opportunities for the representation of unique identities and furthermore recognises the subversive potential of the photograph in culture through its inability to fix meaning. Wells (2000,p.43) explains, " the photograph signifies reality rather than reflecting or representing it. The emphasis is upon what the viewer as reader of the image takes the principal cues and clues for use as the basis of interpretation." The image itself then is referenced as "subject in process" and provides opportunities for diverse readings; hence its potential as a subversive medium for photographers.

Other more contemporary female photographers have incorporated the maternal abject into their own work as a mechanism to disturb viewing pleasure and facilitate transgression. Next, I will explore the work of Cindy Sherman, Rineke Dijkstra and Sally Mann who share a fascination with and incorporation of the maternal abject to depict a powerful maternity.

#### **Other Mothers: contemporary female photographers**

Cindy Sherman is one female artist who plays with female subjectivity and takes a conceptual approach, which subverts stereotypical, cultural representations of the maternal in her photographs. Sherman disrupts



maternal ideals with abject depictions of the Madonna and child icon. In *Art history* Sherman utilises prosthetics and masquerade to create grotesque self-portraits which mock nostalgic, historical depictions of motherhood as tied to purity in religious and Renaissance art. According to Kristeva (1986, p.163.) "resorption of femininity within the maternal is specific to many civilizations, but Christianity, in its own fashion, brings it to its peak." Sherman disallows constructed femininity to be absorbed by maternity. Instead she ridicules, torments and deconstructs sentimental notions of motherhood as virtuous by incorporating abjection in her 'unnatural,' prosthetic portrayals of the swollen, abjected Madonna and child. Sherman recognises the maternal and abject coalition. Astore (2001, p.19) agrees, "it is in the maternal that the abject is most prominent."

Like Sherman, I include abjection to subvert conventional depictions of the maternal though my method, aesthetic and focus differ. I reference an abject relation to the maternal by provoking ambiguity around the mother/child relationship, which problematises conventional notions of identity. My images do not incorporate masquerade. Rather, they rely on an intimacy between the sitters that unsettles, confuses and disrupts. I include older mother/child interactions to create tension and depart from representations of motherhood as sacred, linked to innocence and youth. "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1984, p.4). I blur boundaries and reveal subjects that allude to fragility and disjunction, embrace confusion and delight in the delicate manner that mother and child fall between each other.



*Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994 Rineke Dijkstra*

Rineke Dijkstra is another photographer who articulates the maternal abject, however, she celebrates the bloody corporeality of new motherhood. Her portrayals reject traditional images of the maternal where scars are disguised or denied. In 1994, Dijkstra produced a series of prints, which depict new mothers tentatively holding their newborns immediately after childbirth. Here, mothers stand in a state of loss, naked against a wall clutching their baby, newly separated, one has visible blood running down her leg, others wear sanitary pads. The revelation of the wounds from childbirth enhances the notion of the raw maternal body and denies an interpretation of motherhood that fits easily into the standard symbolic order of representation. These mothers are not typical displays of new mothers tucked up in a hospital beds, proudly and securely embracing a swaddled newborn. Dijkstra's mothers are wounded in their newfound altered state. Kristeva gives a poetic account of childbirth in "Stabat Mater" (1986, p. 168):

"But everything swarmed, and crumbled, and twisted, and broke - the grinding continued ... Then, slowly, a shadowy shape gathered, became detached, darkened stood; seen from what must be the true place of my head ... Just bony, sleek, yellow, misshapen, a piece of my body jutting out unnaturally, unsymmetrically, but slit: severed ... My removed marrow... which wounds and increases me. Paradox: deprivation and benefit of childbirth ... own flesh ... which was mine yesterday.

Dijkstra's portraits, like Kristeva's poem, illustrate the capacity for creative texts to revive a discourse on maternity. These pictures of maternal revelation, reference a conflicted, abject maternity, which encompasses the brutality of childbirth, and introduce the paradoxical relationship between the self and other. The maternal body discharges itself with another and so creates a crisis for identity through separation.

Of the separation between mother and child at birth Kristeva (1982, p. 13) states:

It is a violent clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling ... pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting."

Kristeva's account of the separation and abjection is evoked in Dijkstra's images, which confront the viewer, they beckon and repel and in doing so are revealed as treacherous territory. This elevates the conundrum for identity that is created in the separation and rejection of the child by the mother through birth. Here abjection illuminates the fragile state between self and (*m*)other and portends the impossibility of a coherent self. "No identity holds up. A mother's identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit, when a woman protects herself from the borderline that severs her body and expatriates her child" (Kristeva, 1986, p.179). Dijkstra's *new mothers* insist in all their glorious frailty on the endless dilemmas maternal rejection poses for the establishment of self.

The border between mother and child, evident in Dijkstra's portraits, highlights the divisions between nature and culture, subject and other. Kristeva (cited in Oliver, 1993b, p.5) believes "maternity is a bridge between nature and culture, the drives and the Symbolic." The Symbolic order refers to Lacan's expansion on Freud's Law of the Father, which is established through a patriarchal ordering of language and fixed structures.

The mother's body is the pivot of sociality. "The mother exists in the Symbolic order, but also threatens to destabilise its cohesion because the maternal identity is equivocal. The questionable identity of the mother makes maternity impossible for the Symbolic" (Oliver, 1993b, p.5). Like maternity, the abject is also excluded from the Symbolic order because it threatens the stable foundations on which it exists. "What is abject ... is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). Thus, the abject is linked to the maternal body because it, too, threatens the subject and its boundaries. The abject and maternal body is neither subject nor object and as such operates in a place that precedes the Symbolic.



*m/other # 1*

Like Dijkstra's, my works incorporate the maternal abject and reference frayed borders in attempt to extend the maternal as powerful and compelling. In *m/other # 1* the mother holds her baby as he feeds from her breast and simultaneously excretes her breast milk. The newborn's feces are seen running down the m/others leg and this disgusts me yet holds my attention. "The abject is something repulsive that both attracts and repels. It holds you there in spite of your disgust. It fascinates" (Oliver 1993, p.55). This particular image demonstrates the sway of the abject, and incorporates theory in practice; it serves as a visual metaphor for Kristeva's thought in the *Powers of Horror*. Oliver (2001,p.57) expands on Kristeva's thought on the maternal abject:

The most archaic boundaries of the clean and proper self, of course, are those regulated by the maternal authority, in particular anal and oral drives. Food not yet the body, is expelled through the anus. The boundaries between body and not-body are

controlled by the mother. And both the subject, and society, which depend on the Symbolic order, depend on the repression of this maternal authority, which represents the threat from beyond the borders of the Symbolic.

In *m/other # 1* the mother is steadfast and unperturbed while the yellow slime oozes down her thigh, she appears satisfied that the healthy excrement indicates that her beloved infant is sustained by the milk from her breast. "For the mother, the infant's shit... becomes the way the child communicates ... Through this shit: its colour, consistency and frequency, the mother faces the abject and returns herself to the pre-verbal stage of signs in order to interpret the child's needs" (Astore, 2001,p.20). *M/other # 1* reclaims maternal authority and reveals the power the mother wields as the keeper of the infant's body. Here the representation of the maternal abject elevates the status of the maternal figure and unveils her as the curator at the boundaries between the individual and culture. Burgin (cited in Fletcher and Benjamin, 1990,p.116) believes that the maternal body highlights to men their own mortality and he reiterates Kristeva's position in *Powers of Horror* that, "fear of the archaic mother proves essentially to be a fear of her generative power. It is this power, dreaded, that patrilinear filiation is charged with subduing." *M/other # 1* accentuates the strength of the mother's body and makes clear the power of the relationship between mother and child. In a cultural economy that downgrades motherhood, *m/other # 1* celebrates the power of the maternal and demonstrates that "the mother- child dyad provides a foundation for all social relations" (Oliver 2001, p. 65).

I engage with a diverse, multi age range of mother/child combinations, I do not isolate new mothers but rather, seek out more disparate mother/child subjects whose intense and intimate maternal bond will allow me to introduce the perverse. My interest in the perverse stems from its companionship to the abject, "The abject is related to perversion ... The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts" (Kristeva, 1982, p.15). My incorporation of perversion urges conventional notions of maternity and identity towards the point where meaning collapses and heightens the absurdity of a cohesive maternity or fixed identity. *M/others* raise questions and acknowledge the impossibility of the Symbolic realm to sever the mother and child bind.





Y.A. A. MANN SPAIN

from *What Remains* Sally Mann

Sally Mann's controversial and often publicly condemned photographs of her own children also speak of the turbid boundaries between mother and child. Like Tierney Gearon who was threatened with police action when she displayed images of her children at the Saatchi gallery in 2001, Mann has been accused of exploiting her children. Mann's photographs are confronting, they exhaust boundaries and provide an alternative discourse for maternity and childhood, they lament the chasm created in the mother at the loss of her child, "confronting the flash that bedazzles when I confront the abyss between what was mine and is henceforth irreparably alien" (Kristeva 1986, p. 179). Conflicted with the "abyss", the lack that all mothers face at the separation of birth, Mann creates poetic, haunting pictures that covet a return to her children. Mann refuses to balk from the in between and ambiguous, so introduces the fetish, in an attempt to deny the lack from the 'abyss' that a mother confronts after mother and child separation at birth: "The fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary, slippery, but nonetheless indispensable ... ultimate inseparable fetish" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 37). Sally Mann, as mother, poet, photographer, repossesses her children by fetishising them within her photographs and in doing so she struggles against the establishment of a sacred, uncomplicated maternity, which stagnates securely in the Symbolic order.

Unlike Mann, my work is not entirely autobiographical. I do not take my own children as primary subjects, however, I do include one autobiographical picture. Instead, my aim is to indulge in contradictions and perversion via the intimacy and ambiguity of the photographic portrait. I depict a maternal that does not adhere to "nice and normal" representations of motherhood, *m/others* disallow the confines of conventional visions of maternity. Instead I introduce transgression to provide the possibility for pleasure to counteract the sorrow of separation: "A suffering lined with jubilation - ambivalence of masochism - an account of which a woman, rather refractory to perversion, in fact allows herself a coded, fundamental, perverse behaviour" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 183). These images imply my own maternal yearning and feminine anxieties, which play out through my photographic practice to promote an alternative discourse for maternity, one that shivers on the edge of the Symbolic.

motherhood destines us to a demented jouissance that is answered, by chance, by the nursling's laughter in the sunny waters of the ocean. What connection is there between it and myself?... we are in it set free of our identification papers and names, on an ocean of preciseness, a computerization of the unnameable. No communication between individuals but connections between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences (Kristeva, 1986, p.p. 179-181).

### **Reconceiving the maternal: Kristeva and full bodied *feminin* theory**

"the ultimate language of jouissance [is] at the far limits of repression, whence bodies, identities, and signs are begotten" (Kristeva, 1980, p.269).

Fiercely debated amongst feminists, Kristeva is a provocative theorist, she is simultaneously celebrated by some and criticised by others. Alice Jardine (1986, p.106) recognises Kristeva's ability to polarise opinion:

Kristeva's thought is peculiar: it is transparent enough that it tends to be reduced very quickly to a set of bipolar opposites by her critics (and thereby) criticised as being everything from ultraanarchistic to ultraconservative); but at the same time, it is opaque enough to be uncritically idealized by her most fervent admirers.

Kristeva struggles for the possibility of unique identities through the ambiguity and complexity of her writing and suggests that men and women can both fulfil the maternal function. Oliver (1998, p.3) states, "by insisting that the maternal body operated between nature and culture, Kristeva tries to counter-act stereotypes that reduce maternity to nature." While I am aware of Kristeva's suggestion that the maternal function is not tied to gender, I chose to photograph women as mothers for this thesis project so that contrasts between my images and traditional depictions of mother and child are revealed. I also highlight my own subjectivity as woman and mother through the portraits.

Many believe Kristeva is an essentialist who seeks to establish maternity as obligatory for all women, her theories promote debate and divide feminists and her dismissal of feminism has frustrated and estranged some. Judith Butler (2004,p155) maintains Kristeva's "postulation of the primacy of the maternal body... is clearly questionable." However, I believe the ability to reflect on the significance of maternity does not rely solely on the experience of being a mother. The recent book *We need to talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver (2003) who is not a mother herself yet, still creates a demand for a discourse of maternity, is a contemporary example. Instead, it requires the capacity regardless of gender to contemplate the complexity of the mother/child bond and encourages a discourse about maternity, which recognises its potential to dissolve rigid ideas of self and other.

Kristeva is regularly identified with other French, feminist psychoanalytic critics, in particular Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. The trio are united as they muscle for a re-conception of the maternal within the paternal Symbolic order. Van Bruren (1989,p.9) illuminates:

They propose that the metaphor of maternity and of the mother's body locates a richer meaning that precedes the signs of language... The French school trio applies the metaphors of the madonna, maternite, *écriture féminine*, and Kristeva's notion of the infant semiotic to explore the nature, function and power of the mother's body and mind in relation to the mother and infant's experience of pregnancy, birth and nursing. They suggest that the potency and efficacy of the mothers early mental symbiosis and the archaic hermeneutics of that relationship are the wellspring of culture; but they charge that the emotions and values associated with these deep states of mind have been dammed and barred from the symbolic discourse of society and civilisation.

This appeal for the maternal to be reconceived with greater significance in society provided my initial attraction to French feminist psychoanalytic theory. Complex and contradictory, I have found the ideas of the three women to be full bodied- liberating, exciting and challenging.

The critical works of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray remain vital because they interrogate the structure of sexual difference in the Symbolic order, which is instigated through separation from the mother in traditional psychoanalysis by Freud and Lacan. The trio expand on and deviate from patriarchal psychoanalytic theories which privilege male subjectivity. For Freud male subjectivity is resolved through the Oedipus complex and for Lacan it is through access to the Symbolic order and the Law of the Father, via the acquisition of language at the infant stage. Female subjectivity is overlooked in Freudian and Lacanian models of psychoanalysis and this has driven Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray to articulate the potency of the maternal experience between mother and child, in order to accentuate the importance of the pre verbal in cultural discourse. "The old formulas regarding the place of men and women in society and the nature of the cultural web of values, customs, and language structures which carry concepts of difference are unmasked as based not only on hierarchical oppositions but also on a denial of the experience of the mother's body" (Silverman Van Buren 1989,p.13). Like Alison Bartlett (2000), I wish to share the intelligences of the



maternal body, to shatter the hush of maternity that Susan Maushart's *Mask of Motherhood* (1987) discusses, and about which Bartlett (2000, p.175) says, "Maushart's thesis is also that there is a conspiracy of silence around mothering stories".

I bring the maternal body into social discourse as a denial of the system of binaries and to conceive *écriture féminine*, a form of writing ripened by the French trio, within these photographic portraits. Panizza Allmark (2003) establishes a photographic approach of writing the female body, which draws from *écriture féminine*, and is called *photographie féminine*, which I incorporate with "herethics" as a methodology.

### **Herethics and a *Photographie féminine* approach**

Allmark's modus operandi presents an ethical practice, which seeks to include female subjectivity in photography. Allmark states, "my work follows an *écriture féminine* or, more descriptively, it is a *photographie féminine* that I engage in. I try to express what would be otherwise repressed by (masculine) culture. I am communicating and foregrounding my position as a woman" (2003, p.40). Like Allmark, I bring my own bearing as a woman and mother to my portraiture to further the discourse of maternity in the world. Allmark (2003, p. 105) references the incorporation of the photographer in a photograph when she states, "to make a photograph also reveals the trace and the mortality, the vulnerability and the mutability of the photographer." I have included a self-portrait in this series to disclose my own vulnerabilities and align myself with the subjects who consent to stand in front of my camera. The experience was illuminating; in the past I have avoided self-portraiture, however, due to the intimate content of this project I felt it was important to place myself as a referent within the work. My inclusion as a subject contributes to a *photographie féminine* and 'herethical' approach.

Kristeva articulates a 'herethics' based on her own experience of motherhood and the resulting blurring of the self and other that occurs in pregnancy and the suffering of childbirth. Oliver (1993,p.5) states "Kristeva uses maternity as a model for an outlaw ethics, what she calls 'herethics'. Herethics is founded on the ambiguity in pregnancy and birth between subject and object positions." "Herethics" is incorporated within the photographic portraits and references the alterity of the subject to create a discourse around maternity. Herethics is an ethics which operates outside of the Symbolic law of the father and recognises the potential for satisfaction when one can embrace the other as oneself through identification with the mother.

It is an ethics, which challenges rather than presupposes an autonomous ethical agent. Herethics sets up one's obligations to the other as obligations to the self and obligations to the species. This ethics binds the subject to the other through love and not the law (Oliver, 1993,p. 5).

Oliver describes outlaw ethics as an ethics which is reconceived through the recovery and articulation of the maternal function. She states (1993,p.189), "Kristeva's is an outlaw ethics. Ethics is not a matter of enforcing

the Law. Rather, it is a matter of embracing the return of the repressed other, the foreigner, the outcast, the woman, the Unconscious, *jouissance* in all its manifestations." To lift the other up and out through various means into discourse is a recognition of the other within and articulates Kristeva's notions of "subjects in process" and herethics. Through these images of other m/others and their children, I take an ethical approach that is based on acceptance and love and embraces the repressed other. I celebrate outlaw ethics with depictions of the repressed maternal in relation to society as well as the repressed maternal within the individual interior of the psyche.

The title of this project *m/others* emphasises the connection between the other and the maternal or more than one level. It acknowledges what Kristeva believes is the maternal ability to accommodate the other within, through the shared mother infant body experience, reflects the status of maternity as other in dominant culture, and also references the participation of child/ren, the maternal "first other" in the images. These photographs of m/others work against the stereotypical institutional constructions of motherhood as uniform and singular. Instead, they dissolve similarities and difference in the maternal to create variables, to which "many values can be assigned" to reveal "subjects in process".

#### 'Subjects in process'

Allmark (2003, p. iii) asserts that a *photographie féminine* places an emphasis on the primacy of the *feminin*. This body of work embraces a *feminin* experience and extends the photographic portrait as a difficult subversive site that encourages subjective exploration, recognition and revelation.

The use of the term *feminin* is different from a masculine construct of the feminine. Instead, it resists the masculine closure of representation and attempts to depict *feminin* heterogeneity and *feminin* desire repressed by the Law of the Father.  
(Allmark, 2003, p.iii)

Furthermore, Kristeva (1986, p.299) encourages, "ceaseless analysis, vigilance and will to subversion ... in the face of conceptual, subjective, linguistic identity." My strategy is to embed, in particular, the abject in my work to provide disruption and facilitate viewing pleasures that refuse conformity to normative subjectivity. I hope for responses in the viewer that cause some reflection on a maternal return through my photographic portraits. I also accept that it is impossible to guarantee the way that meaning will be generated through my images. Balfe (1993, p.142) clarifies, "the meanings of any image are neither inherent to it, nor fixed: they always involve the interaction of creation and interpretation, both by the artists and the original and subsequent audiences."

With the awareness that each viewer will be affected in different ways by the photographs and that meaning is impossible to fix, "meanings lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are "consumed", viewed and interpreted. The meanings of each image are multiple." (Sturken and Cartwright, 2004, p.25). I celebrate the potential for the production of multiple meanings in my photographs and actively

intend these images to refuse secure notions of sexual identity but instead embrace fluidity and develop multiplicity of identity. They enrich concepts of subjectivity by illuminating the complexities and continual struggles involved with being a 'subject in process' through their construction and I will discuss the strategies I employ to encourage open readings of the pictures later in the exegesis.

Kristeva recognises the contradictions in maternity and draws a correlation between the complexity of identity and the maternal body. Oliver (1998, p. 3) expands, "like the maternal body, each one of us is what she calls a subject in process. As subjects in process we are always negotiating the subject within ... like the maternal body, we are never completely the subjects of our own experience." Kristeva frees up contemplation regarding self and other in the subject by comparisons to, and consistent espousal of, the double identity within the maternal body. The maternal body then, creates a crisis for stable foundations of identity, as Kristeva (1986, p. 297) reveals, "It is an identity, that splits, turns in on itself and changes without becoming other." The maternal body denies a clear binary subject and object exchange in identity and instead introduces a more complicated possibility – a paradox.

The photographic portrait also introduces paradox and therefore establishes itself as an ideal space to cultivate and exemplify the correlation between maternity and subjectivity. Like maternity the photographic portrait is complex and unstable. Bright (2005) says of the photographic portrait:

Laden with ambiguity and uncertainty the portrait is perhaps the most complex area of artistic practice ... a portrait is the questioning or exploration of self and identity through a literal representation of what somebody looks like. The paradox is that the inner workings of the complex human psyche can never really be understood just by looking at the picture. (p.20)

The establishment of the photographic portrait as a complex entity renders it a suitable art form by which to investigate Kristeva's ideas. "The experiences of motherhood and art alike should occur in a place where contradictions, become variants... They are variables to which indefinitely many values can be assigned" (Kristeva cited in Oliver, 1993b, p.99). The photographic portrait is ambiguous and consequently possesses the potential to act as a compelling site for the incorporation of Kristeva, and the development of a symbiosis between creativity, the maternal function and sexual identity.

Kristeva's notion of the 'semiotic', the unspoken and unrepresented conditions of signification is tied up with the maternal function. The semiotic is established by Kristeva as a law before the prohibitive, paternal law of the Symbolic, which stems from the introduction of language (Felluga, 2006). Kristeva's version of the semiotic is concerned with body impulses, drives and is pre-language. Surrounding the entangled intimacy of the mother/child dyad is what Kristeva calls 'the *chora*'. "Here drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name after Plato... a *chora*, a receptacle" (Kristeva, 1982, p.14). Kristeva's *chora* then is a site of the undeclared undifferentiated corporeal space that entwined the mother/child share. The *chora*

cannot be ordered and is therefore a threat to the Symbolic. "The chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse- all discourse- moves with and against the chora ... it simultaneously depends and refuses it ... the chora can ... never be definitely posited" (Kristeva, 1986, p.94). The *chora* is a unified site of unacknowledged boundaries and pleasure between mother and child, abjected by the Symbolic order.

The *chora* is referenced in *m/others* through the intimacy of the subjects which, cultivates a discourse on the ability of the photographic portrait to facilitate *jouissance*. Kristeva maintains that *jouissance* is closely linked to the abject *jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on en jouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (1982, p. 9). *Jouissance* then, by Kristeva's account, is a joyfulness, albeit painful, gifted by the abject. Roland Barthes (1980, p.4) with whom Kristeva studied, also describes *jouissance* as an experience that mixes pleasure/pain. Furthermore, Barthes states that texts, which facilitate *jouissance*, "impose a state of loss," and "unsettle the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" (1980, p.4). I incorporate both beauty and menace in my portraits in order to facilitate *jouissance* through representations, which resist the Symbolic order. Frank (2000, p5) believes, "after the moment of *jouissance* the abjected person experiences meaning." I also articulate the perverse as an accomplice of abjection, to allow subversive readings, through the incorporation of dramatic pose and awkwardness within my subjects alongside a tender approach. Kristeva (1986, p.115) succinctly articulates "the very practice of art necessitates reinvesting the maternal *chora* so that it transgresses the Symbolic order; and this practice easily lends itself to so-called perverse subjective structures." Layers are created with setting, lighting, pose and subject selection in *m/others* to "reinvest the maternal *chora*" with abjection to encourage pleasurable, resistant readings.

"The signifying process as it is practised by texts - those "truly free works" transforms the opaque and impenetrable subject ... into a subject on trial" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 105). While my intention to create "truly free works" may appear ambitious, I question stable identity through rupture and divulge visual ambiguities in the portraits with uneasy expressions, gestures and intimate poses. On the portrait Avedon (2002, p.19) states "it may be miraculous or indifferent, but it is always a solution of the objective and the subjective, the prepared and the improvised the self and the other. As depicted the person in the frame is a new creation." The portrait then has the ability to dissolve divisions between self and other, create new possibilities for the subjective discoveries and to radically alter identity.

### **Melancholic maternity**

The pleasure of motherhood as the indescribable, pre language, unification of the mother and child is relished by Kristeva, though she reveals it as a "demented *jouissance*", in reference to the melancholia that accompanies the pleasures of the maternal. On the experience of motherhood Kristeva says "the child is the first other, and the experience of motherhood is its requisite appendage. It is an interminable experience that

is utterly lacking and for that reason, utterly sublime" (2001,p.155). The acknowledgement of the mixed aspects of the maternal discloses a struggle and complexity that is not often seen to inhabit the maternal. These portraits accept and bask in the ambivalence of separation and the maternal function; they reflect my own experience of motherhood, which is, anxious and sorrowful yet fervent and enduring, they encompass negatives to facilitate positives. Mothers who appear detached, as well as devoted, are shown in order to offer a range of the maternal and to provide an alternative model, which posits the negative crisis of separation from the maternal body for both the mother and the child.

Kristeva celebrates "anxiety as a conduit of pleasure (2001,p.14)" and is heavily influenced by Melanie Klein's thoughts on negativity and matricide. She states, "in truth *matricide*, which Melanie Klein was the first to have the courage to consider, is, along with envy and gratitude, at the origin of our capacity to think" (2001, p.13). Klein was the first psychoanalyst to consider matricide and developed her theories with particular attention to the maternal function in a way that had been overlooked by Freud. Klein puts forth that after being weaned from the mother's breast the infant loses or puts the mother to death via fantasy, this loss creates mourning for the maternal but is ultimately accepted by the child and this enables the infant to form the capacity to love.

An awareness of matricide feeds my own maternal melancholia, the knowledge that my own children will necessarily have to "put me to death" to gain independence creates an emptiness that becomes a timeless ache. On matricide, Kristeva states that it should be understood as a "'putting to death" and a "flight" to be taken both with the mother and against her- it is a necessary precondition for the psychic freedom of the subject: that is what Klein had the courage to proclaim... without equivocation". (2001, p.131). The recognition that my children must separate from me to develop, is a bittersweet realisation and one which Kristeva and Klein as mothers may also have felt intimately and instinctively. As a mother, I have a desire for my children to function as healthy individuals in both a physical and psychic sense, so that they may reach their own subjective potential. I depend upon what Klein believes is the child's innate ability to love in my own children, to calm my fears of loss and strengthen my own capacity as a dynamic mother, despite their own melancholia caused by separation from me. I do this with the knowledge that although they may distance me in their own search for autonomy, they will also find me again through remembering the bond of love that is facilitated by the freedom independent thought affords the psyche. I use my melancholic maternity as a motivation in these portraits, to invoke a remembrance of the deep, unnamable semiotic chora connection in the mother/ child dyad.

There are several key photographic elements and considerations that were strategically incorporated in the construction of this body of work to develop content and a visual style that did not subscribe to conventional photographic depictions of the maternal:

### One lens, multiple maternities

The same camera and lens were used in this project to photograph all seventeen m/others, however, the bearing of each subject is revealed in various ways. Seventeen different m/others provided a large enough group of women in the series to suggest that multiple maternities exist. Time constraints, financial limitations and a desire to keep the series "tight" meant that for this particular project seventeen was the limit. I will, however, continue to build on this particular body of work in future. In the series m/others are seen sitting, standing, looking at the camera, looking away from the camera, engaged, detached, embracing, separate, vulnerable and strong. The different postures and expressions of the subjects work to establish contradictions about maternal relationships and the photographic portrait. The introduction of variables is significant as it articulates an alternative dialogue of the maternal figure, which is ambiguous and ambivalent. They counteract sentimental images of maternity "to uncover the full range and potency of maternity hidden within the codes and myths which disguise its underlying meaning and full power" (Van Buren 1989, p.9).

### Illumination

A single tungsten light source was used in all photographs: The rationale for this in my methodology was to create a particular visual style and to introduce visual ambiguity. Tungsten light sources produce a warm yellow colour cast when used with daylight film without a filter and the result in print is less clear or accurate in terms of colour reproduction as those illuminated by daylight or strobe flash. Tungsten light produced a tonal value in the pictures, which suggests comfort through warmth but also offers an organic, bodily tone, which is more closely linked to the abject and the unclean.

The warmth of the tungsten light encourages an emotional affect with the images that would not have been achieved with daylight or flash. London, Stone and Upton (2008,p.227) state, "light can affect the feeling of a photograph so that a subject appears for example, brilliant and crisp, hazy and soft, harsh or smooth." The quality of the light was also considered and a direct, hard source was used in opposition to diffuse soft light conventionally used in print media to depict the maternal. I used a strong, direct spotlight to create tension and discomfort in the subjects in order to render an unsettled maternal relationship. As a subject in the series myself I experienced firsthand the uneasiness of withstanding the scrutiny of the camera lens and the severity of the spotlight. Thus, I realise the harsh light affected the emotion of the subjects as well as the mood of the picture. The spotlight, while confronting for the subject at the photography stage, appeared to envelope the mothers and children in the final print, and this created an intimacy and intensity that illuminated the power of the mother /child bond. The contrast between the warmth of the tungsten colour cast and the harshness of the spotlight introduced a paradox and was specifically used to establish contradiction and variables encouraged by Kristeva in creative work. The light source was employed as a means to incorporate theory in practice. The competing qualities of the light source intimate a complex and unstable proposition for maternity that encourages open resistant readings of the images and refers to m/others as subjects in process. The spotlight was also used symbolically to render an unyielding maternal figure that withstands the

glare of the spotlight and appears ready to emerge from the shadows in the pictures but also in cultural discourse too.

### **Internal spaces**

The majority of these photographs were taken in or around the internal spaces inhabited by the mothers and children pictured. The interior spaces were home settings that reflect intimacy, familiarity and inner strength, rather than domestic scenes, which represent service to the home. I am aware that mothers have traditionally been shown in domestic settings as a way of tying the maternal to the private sphere in servitude to hearth and home. Abby Arnold in *The rhetoric of motherhood* (2003, p.1) maintains, "In the past, motherhood was held to be an idealized state, glorified through myth and pithy statement to keep women anchored to their homes and families." In contrast I include parts of the home environment in some images to bring interior spaces into the public domain via the contemporary documentary approach to photography. I use intimate, internal spaces as a source of potency, as a tool to express the significance of the maternal figure as a keystone to society, rather than one that is suppressed and to suggest the capacity of the maternal figure, to cultivate opportunities for the development of unique identities in the future.

In *m/other # 1* the mother and child are seen in the home environment where the birth process had taken place only days before. The significance of the birthplace was the motivation for its inclusion in the shot, this intimate, personal space was the site for the paradoxical union and separation of the mother and child. The paradox illustrates theory in practice by illuminating the complexity of the maternal relationship and unstable and vulnerable foundation of identity. Furthermore, it recognises the continual struggles involved with being what Kristeva calls "a subject in process" and encourages richer possibilities for fluid identities. In other images like *m/other # 3* the three figures are surrounded by darkness which itself references an internal yet unstable, endless space. By including different elements of familiar environs I worked against a restrictive position that ties women to home, however, was still able to capture the intensity and closeness of the maternal bond, without suggesting women have one and sole responsibility sole to children.

### **Works in progress – finding m/others and subjects in process that reference the other within**

Each participant in this project was invited to be photographed after careful consideration of several factors: the age of the mother and child/ren, gender of child/ren, number of children and the subject's willingness to participate in the project were all-important considerations. It was necessary to have a diverse group of subjects, which allowed me to "create a multiplicity of meaning about motherhood" (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan, 1994.p8). The wide-range of m/others also enabled the depiction of a diverse maternity that offers greater opportunity for interpretation of the images. Furthermore, the variety of subjects subverts traditional, prescriptive, fixed ideas of motherhood as singular and universal, linked to youth and so on, that were discussed earlier in the paper.

The majority of subjects who agreed to take part in this project were friends many of whom have appeared in my previous photographs, the familiarity with my subjects also influenced the selection of participants. The knowingness between the subjects and myself blurred the boundaries between self/other in a way that would not have been possible with strangers and this contributed to a heretical approach. "Photographs often function to establish difference, through that which is defined as *other* is posited as that which is not the norm or the primary subject" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, p.95). I chose subjects that were familiar, so that the images themselves were less likely to function in a way that emphasises difference. While I recognise that the m/others in this series are other to me and may have their own alternative approach to motherhood. I also accept that they share similarities, like Ruddick, "I have found that it is simply impossible to comprehend mothering in the world, to compare and contrast very different mothering practices, to listen to, let alone speak with mothers, without acknowledging the ubiquitous and tenacious connections among being female, giving birth, and mothering" (cited in Bassin, et al, 1991,p.37).

### **Reframing: breasts and body**

Throughout the project I have been mindful to consult with participants about their appearance in the photographs. Responses from individuals were mixed, some were happy to be photographed unclothed while others preferred to remain covered. While it was beneficial to the project for some parts of the body to be revealed, in particular breasts, it was important that the participant made the decision independently and I did not try to influence their choice (children who were old enough to decide were also consulted with parental guidance, though I recognise that the power of the mother over her child's body is a topic worthy of further research).

The inclusion of the naked breast in the image was used as a subversive mechanism to agitate borders around traditional ideas of the maternal. As Young asserts "breasts are a scandal for patriarchy because they disrupt the border between motherhood and sexuality" (1990,p.190). Depicting maternal breasts introduced contradictions about female bodies "the sexual aspects of women and the maternal aspects of women are expected to be independent of each other. Thus breastfeeding raises questions about the appropriate uses of women's bodies, for sexual or nurturing purposes" (Stearns 1999,p.309). I included breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding breasts to suggest an intricate maternity and to problematise conventional attitudes of the maternal figure as non-sexual. I endeavoured to challenge traditional perceptions of the maternal in visual culture by including breasts throughout the series, "given the strong cultural preference for sexualised breasts, women who breastfeed are transgressing the boundaries of both the good maternal body and woman-as- (hetero) sexual object. (Stearns, 1999,p.309). Female breasts appear in these photographs to declare that sexuality and nurturing coalesce and to assert that an abundant opportunity for maternal subjectivity is made possible through transgression.



Breasts are also included in this project to confront common representations of the eroticised female breast in visual culture where "the women are the objects of the male gaze, and their returning looks are accorded no power in the image" (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001,p.80).



In *m/other # 10* a mother and her two daughters stand uncovered to the waist, arms linked staring into and confronting the camera. Laura Mulvey (1985) in her significant essay *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, defined the "male gaze", which she believed reflected sexual inequity and privileged the male gaze as active and linked female looking as passive. Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p.87) recognise Mulvey's important

contribution on 'the male gaze' but suggest that contemporary visual culture offers alternatives to the male gaze:

It is also possible to see images that deflect a possessive gaze and gazes that are respectful and non-objectifying. It is thus central to the ways that the concept of the gaze has been rethought that we can think of many different kinds of gazes, each with a different relationship to power, and that these gazes are not seen strictly along the lines of male and female.

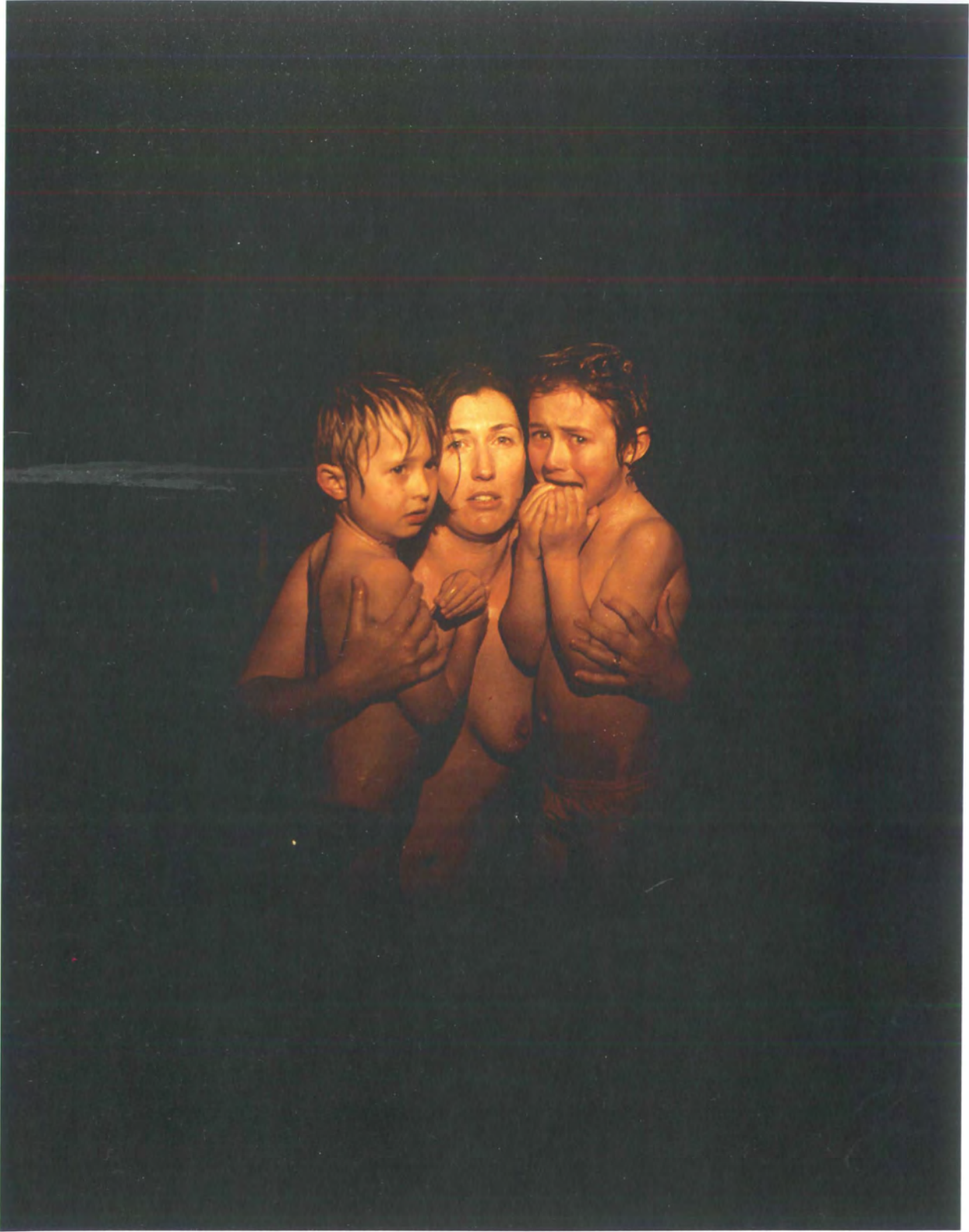
The female subjects of *m/other # 10* are not passive 'objects of the gaze'; instead, the image empowers the women and elevates their active matrilineal bond. The photograph reveals a powerful connection between the women, their united stance and unrelenting gaze back to the viewer rebuffs any potential 'objectifying gaze'. The pleasures of looking shift to destabilise limiting perceptions of maternity that persist in culture and society.

## Conclusion

### Open ended- works in progress

These photographs are "works in progress", a flow that will move in and out of my continued practice, which references my own, lived experience. Like the maternal figure as "subject in process" they are part of body of work that will evolve. Furthermore, like maternity the images themselves are ambiguous, unstable, and open to multiple, fluid interpretations. Thus they offer possibilities for the emergence of unique identities, and affirm that mothers need to be recognised as individuals, with their own needs and ambitions within and outside of the family. The involvement of Kristeva's thought via a 'heretical' and *photographie féminine* approach has enabled an abundant, alternative discourse of maternity in the pictures. I hope that they will stimulate questions and contribute to a re-evaluation of motherhood.

Maternal subjects are interconnected with cultural practice in painting and photography. Bassin et al (1991,p 17) agree that, "images of the maternal shape and are in turn reshaped by cultural practices", and therefore I accept that the existing depictions of the maternal in art and photography have influenced my own work. Moreover, I recognise that in order for these pictures to contribute to a "reshaping" of maternity in cultural discourse, the images will need to generate an audience in cultural institutions like art galleries, mass media, publications etc. One image from this project, *m/other* # 3, has been selected for inclusion in the inaugural National Photographic Portrait Prize at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra and will be on display from 6 December 2007 to 23 March 2008. While there is no way to envisage how the image will be received, it is likely to be read by politicians, artists, curators, media and 'others' who have influence over policy making and wider cultural communication. The image reveals a mother with her two distressed children, she appears strong yet fragile, her tired gaze meets the camera, her look is telling but it is difficult to know what she is really thinking; What is evident, however, is that she has her hands full. I see her as tender and fierce.



*m/other # 3*

## References

Allmark, P. (2003). *Un Voyage vers une photographie feminine [microform]: the*

*gender politics of body and space*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation,  
Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.

Arnold, A. (2003) The rhetoric of motherhood. Retrieved October, 2007, from  
[www.mothersmovement.org](http://www.mothersmovement.org)

Astore, M. (2001) the maternal abject. Sydney College of the Arts. Retrieved June, 2007, from  
[ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/ 2123/500/2/adt-NU20030623.10042401front.pdf](http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/500/2/adt-NU20030623.10042401front.pdf)

Avedon, R. (2002). *Richard Avedon Portraits*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Barthes, R. (1980). *The pleasure of the text*. (R. Miller. Trans.). New York: Noonday Press.

Bartlett, A. (2000). Thinking through the breasts: writing maternity. University of Southern Queensland.  
Retrieved August 30, 2007, from,  
<http://fty.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/1/2/173>

Bassin, D., & Honey, M., & Kaplan, M. (1991) *Representations of motherhood*. New Haven and London: Yale  
University press.

Bentz, V., & Mayes, P. (Eds) (1993) *Women's power and roles as portrayed in images of women in the arts and  
mass media*. Wales; Edwin Mellen Press.

Bittner Wiseman, M. (1993). Renaissance paintings and psychoanalysis: Julia  
Kristeva and the function of the mother. In K. Oliver (Ed.), *Ethics, politics  
and difference in Julia Kristeva's writing* (pp.79-92). New York: Routledge.

Bright, S. (2005). *Art photography now*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Butler, J. (2004). *The Judith Butler Reader*. New York, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

Curtis, J. (1986). Dorothea Lange, Migrant mother, and the culture of the great depression.  
Winterthur Portfolio, 21(1), 1-20.

Dijkstra, R. (2001) *Rineke Dijkstra; Portraits*. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art.

Farouque, F. (2007) "Punished" for having children. Retrieved, October, 2007, From

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/punished-for-having-children/2007/05/13/1178994994876.html>

Felluga, D. (2006). Modules on Kristeva: On psychosexual development. Purdue University.

Retrieved Mar 25, 2006, from

<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetothory/psychoanalysis/kristevadevelop.html>

Frank, J. (2000). Every civilized body is bound to have its vermin: The abject in women in love.

Retrieved June 2, 2006, from

[http://www.apsu.edu/franksj/abject\\_article.doc](http://www.apsu.edu/franksj/abject_article.doc)

Gaudelius, Y. (1993). Articulating women's voices. UMI Dissertation Services. Michigan: Bell and Howell.

Goward, P. (2006). Oh no children, we forgot motherhood, did we? Retrieved September, 2007, from

<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2006/01/goward.html>

Jardine, A. (1986). Opaque texts and transparent contexts: The political difference of Julia Kristeva.

In N. Miller Ed.). *The poetics of gender*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L.Roudiez. Trans.).

New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in poetic language*. (L.Roudiez. Trans.). New

York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1986). *The Kristeva reader*. T Moi. (Ed.), Oxford: Blackwell.

Kristeva, J. (1987). *Tales of love*. (L. Rouidez. Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1997). *The portable Kristeva*. K Oliver (Ed.), New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (2001). *Melanie Klein*. (R Guberman. trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (2003). Julia Kristeva. Talk. Tate online event. Retrieved March 30,

2006, from

[http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/julia\\_kristeva/](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/julia_kristeva/)

McAfee, N. (1993). Abject strangers: Toward an ethics of self respect. In K. Oliver

(Ed.), *Ethics, politics and difference in Julia Kristeva's writing* (pp.116-135).  
New York: Routledge.

Mettner, M. (1996). *In their mothers eyes: Women photographers and their children*. Zurich:  
Edition Stemmler.

Moore, C. (1994). *Indecent exposures: Twenty years of Australian feminist  
photography*. North Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Mulvey, L. (1985). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In B. Nichols (Ed.)  
*movies and methods 2*, 303-315.

Oliver, K (Ed.), (1993). *Ethics, politics, and difference in Julia Kristeva's writings*  
New York: Routledge.

Oliver, K. (1993). *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the double bind*. Bloomington:  
Indiana University Press.

Oliver, K. (1998). *Kristeva and Feminism*. Center for digital discourse and culture  
Virginia Technical University. Retrieved April 11, 2006, from  
[www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html](http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html)

Pollock, G. (1991) *Vision and difference: Femininity, feminism and the histories of art*. London and New York:  
Routledge.

Sellers, S. (1991). *Language and sexual difference: Feminist writing in France*.  
London: Macmillan Education.

Shriver, L. (2003). *We need to talk about Kevin*. Victoria: the Text publishing Company.

Silverman Van Buren. (1989). *The modernist madonna: Semiotics of the maternal metaphor*. Bloomington:  
Indiana University Press.

Stearns, C. (1999). Breastfeeding and the good maternal body.  
*Gender and Society*, 13(3), 308-325

Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2001) *Practices of looking: an introduction to visual culture*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press.

Tillmans, W. (2002). *Portraits*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc.

Wells, L. (2001). *Photography: a critical introduction*. L Wells (Ed.), New York: Routledge.