

**MOTHER
MASTER**



*Mother and Master:
The Maternal in the work of
Louise Bourgeois, Alice
Neel and Marlene Dumas*



For Christian and Martha, my continuous source of inspiration.

COLOPHON

Thesis: Mother and Master: The Maternal in the works of Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel and Marlene Dumas

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Mother and Master: The Maternal in the Work of Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel and Marlene Dumas

Introduction

The entanglements and difficulties of mothering are present in the lives of many contemporary artists, as they are in the lives of women globally. Still motherhood has been a problematic source of artistic inspiration in the past and the present day.¹ Motherhood and what means to be a mother is in a state of revision, as it is a more fluid concept than we might think at first. Today more and more, “[...]‘mother’ is understood as a social role that anyone can inhabit”.² According to Ruddick, “anyone engaged in maternal practice, male or female [birthmother or not], can develop maternal thinking”.³

My fascination for the maternal in contemporary art started from my personal life: My own pregnancy at the age of forty-three and the challenge I faced creating art work and pro-creating at the same time. Something as private as the embodiment of a new being can at times get very public; interestingly this seems not to be enough articulated through contemporary art. Although some talk about the “*mother-shaped blindspot within the art world*”,⁴ others refer to motherhood as a taboo in contemporary

¹ Rachel Epp Buller (ed.), *Reconciling Art and Mothering*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p.1

² Natalie Loveless, Catalogue for New Maternalisms, Toronto, Canada, 2012, p.1 para.4, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56745b1c1c1210f594cc73bf/t/56d374f927d4bd3f75e6d23d/1456698626610/NM_Toronto_Publication.pdf (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

³ Sara Ruddick cited in *Ibid.*, p.13

⁴ Website Mothers is Art, Statement, Mondrian Fonds 2020, <http://mothersinarts.com>, (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

art.⁵ Nevertheless, this is not to say that the representation of the mother through art history is absent, in contrary, from the fertility Venus of pre-history to the roman matriarchs, the Renaissance Virgin Mary and her secularised and romanticised sisters. All these iconography and images picture what Andrea Liss, as well as many other scholars, call the institution of motherhood, versus the experience of it.⁶

I was intrigued by why these experiences are silenced from the narrative. In the 70's and during the first generation, feminist art looked down on what they called "baby art". Women were finding political freedom and gaining presence in the art world, yet they took the decision of not having children. Galleries and art spaces did not show much of this work and considered it soft-egged, it was not talked about or exhibited.⁷ *"Arguing that women's status as mothers had been used to keep women out of the workforce, out of public office, and out of the universities, many early feminist art strategies and discourses carefully avoided the maternal, the feminine, and the sentimental, thereby leaving the material-semiotic complexity of maternal practices uninterrogated."*⁸ One of the primary discourses and concerns of this first wave feminist movement and feminist art, was the female body and finding alternative ways of representing it. Many of these artists were trying to expose how the body has been predominantly represented under the male gaze. Berger was one of the first to look at Western art from this perspective and tried to expose the hidden visual power over women in these representations, where the women were mostly seen as passive objects. Women

⁵ Diana Quinby, "Art about Motherhood - The last Taboo? Reflections of an American Artist in Paris", in Rachel Epp Buller (ed.), *Reconciling Art and Mothering*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p.153 para.2

⁶ Ibid., p.1

⁷ Sharon L. Butler, "Neo-Maternalism: Contemporary Artists' Approach to Motherhood", the Brooklyn Rail, *Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture*, 12 Dec. 2008, para. 12, <https://brooklynrail.org/2008/12/artseen/neo-maternalism-contemporary-artists-approach-to-motherhood> (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

⁸ Loveless, Op.cit., p.9

accepted what was being defined for them; *"Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at"*.⁹

Who were/are the mother-artist role models in contemporary art? How do they explore the maternal in their work?

This thesis comprises five main sections: First, the introduction which explains the motivation and research questions; the next three chapters investigate the work of the artists Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel and Marlene Dumas; all have drawn from their experiences as mothers in their work. I shall be using feminist theory, art history and gender literature as a foundation on which to base informed analysis of the three artists. Finally, in the conclusion, I shall compare, contrast and evaluate their differing methods and strategies when using the maternal in their work.

⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: British Broad Casting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972 and reissued 2008, p.41

Louise Bourgeois: *The Bug in the Rug*¹⁰

Louise Bourgeois's work has been intensely studied and her oeuvre has been well exhibited in the main stream modern and contemporary art institutions. She bared witness to two centuries and she was an institution in herself. From modernism to contemporary art, she was always the 'contemporary' artist. Her extensive body of work has been mainly understood in parallel to her life, her personal biographical notes, journals and accounts. She was a very intellectual woman as well, a ferocious student, not only of art but also psychoanalysis, including psychoanalysis of children.¹¹ The life and the works fed each other and she also played with that. She was someone who wanted to contribute and have part in the narratives formed around her work. Her work was enigmatic, ambiguous, elusive, powerful, vulnerable, fragile, controversial, experimental, brutally honest and above all very human. Fluid like the river she grew up next to, whose current she followed and went against all her life, in flow and movement until she died at age ninety-eight at the peak of her artistic life. She was associated with abstract expressionism, surrealism, the American feminist movement of the 70s and 80s and postmodernism. She was called an artists without secrets and even an entire category of art was attributed to her 'confessional art'. Nevertheless, she never ascribed herself to any categories. She revisits certain themes over and over in her work and one of those themes is motherhood, family and the maternal. She treats the subject in very different ways and in many mediums, from marble sculpture to metal or latex,

¹⁰ "The question of history is yours not mine, in to history I fit like a bug in the rug": Louise Bourgeois quoted in Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 2005, p.1

¹¹ Jo Applied on Louise Bourgeois, The Great Women Artists Podcast with Katy Hessel, episode 22, 22 April 2020, at 11:30, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/jo-applin-on-louise-bourgeois/id1480259187?i=1000472265574> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

drawings, paintings, prints and fabric drawings. She was an amazingly prolific and experimental artist, some of her themes were appearing for the first time in art as she was unfolding them, one of them was for example the aspect of the ambivalence towards motherhood.¹² It is this recurrent theme, motherhood and the maternal in her work, which is the focus of this case study.

Holly Trinity: Mother, Daughter and Sons

*"I have three frames of reference...my mother and father...my own experience...and the frame of reference of my children. The three are stuck together."*¹³

Bourgeois explores the maternal in different ways, her own mother plays a central role all throughout her work. She explores her own relation to her as well as the well known traumatic relationship with her father and her own children. It is the fact that she centers the mother in her work, that gets the attention of the North American feminist movement. For some years she participated and collaborated with them, but she did not consider herself a feminist artist. Another reason feminist artists identified with Bourgeois was the *"candidly sexual aspects of her work"*. She enjoyed the recognition and championing from feminist art, but did not want to be pigeonholed in the category female artist or woman artist; she staunchly believed: *"I am not what I am, I am what I do with my hands"*.¹⁴ She neither believed in a feminist aesthetic, she said she worked the way she worked because the experiences she went through and that women got together not because of the things they had in common but because

¹² Louise Bourgeois *Spider woman*, BBC, Transmission: Tuesday 13 November 2007 at 41:40

¹³ Louise Bourgeois as quoted in MoMA Website: The Complete Prints & Books, Themes, Motherhood and Family, https://www.moma.org/s/lb/curated_lb/themes/motherhood_family.html (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

¹⁴ Natalie Bell in Massimiliano Gioni [et al.], *The Great Mother: Women, maternity and power in art and visual culture, 1900-2015*; Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2015 p.328

of what they lacked.¹⁵ Nevertheless the feminist movement considered her a Foremother.

When expressing the maternal, she does not have a preferred medium or style, she would always put the work first and give what the works need, no compromises. I find the works on fabric, the early drawings and late prints and gouache particularly interesting. In the fabric works she uses her own clothes; these works have a sense of intimacy and make us think of the contact with the skin evoking tactility. It is this sense or this seeking of intimacy and connection that I find clear in the works on the maternal. Bourgeois has represented the female body, at times in her own memories of pregnancies. And then in the final years of her life, she becomes the child in the pregnant belly of her own mother. Her print works are very well documented and we have insight into the decisions she made and the risks she took as artist; what avenues she closes and which ones she opens, it is like being inside her thoughts. I will explore her works on the maternal by focusing in her frames of reference (the relation to her mother, to herself and to her children) and in the medium of drawings and print she did throughout her entire life which are well documented and are the source of further sculptures and other works.

Bourgeois had three children, two biological and one adopted. During the 40s while her children were young, she kept printing and drawing and would have a small press print in the household, diluted the etching acids to be less abrasive and harmful.¹⁶ Printing was part of her strategy as mother to keep working as artist while

¹⁵ Louise Bourgeois, "Statements from Conversations with Robert Storr" in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.220

¹⁶ Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait, Prints, Books, and the Creative Process*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017, p.14

parenting, so I think is a good medium to focus on for this exercise on exploring the maternal in her art.

Ode à ma mère / Ode to my Mother (1995)

“The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother”¹⁷

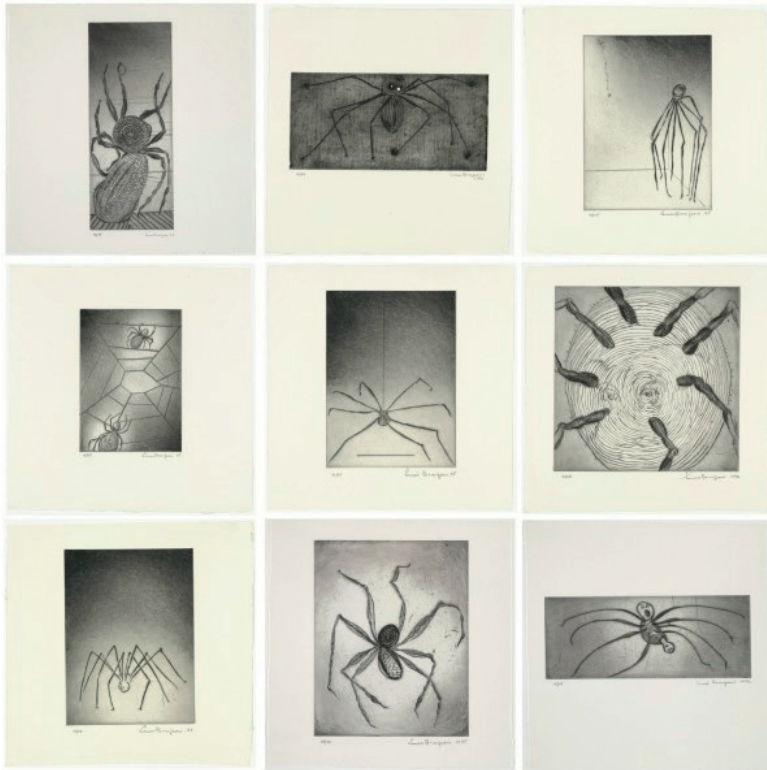
The figure of her own mother plays a central role in all her work material and iconographically. Early memories of her mother are as a repairer of tapestries, which she did for the family business. Bourgeois use of textile is key in her work, in the soft sculptures as well as in the late print works, where she uses her household fabrics and personal clothes as material itself on which she printed etchings, dry-points and drawings. Her more direct reference and best known work of this kind are the monumental spider sculptures called *Maman*, but in 1947 she already drew *Spider* and in 1995 she made a portfolio with nine dry points prints and text in French called *Ode to my mother*. This is where she refers to the spider as her own mother for the first time.¹⁸ The act of drawing seems very directly linked to the spider for her *“what is drawing? It is a secretion, like a thread in a spider’s web...It is a knitting, a spiral, a spider web and other significant organisations of space.”*¹⁹ If we look close in the last prints, we see a spider that has eggs inside and another giving birth to an anthropomorphic figure,

¹⁷ TATE, Press Release, “Louise Bourgeois quoted at Tate Acquires Louise Bourgeois’s Giant Spider, *Maman*”, 11 January 2008, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-acquires-louise-bourgeois-giant-spider-maman> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

¹⁸ Elizabeth Manchester, TATE, Art and Artists, “Louise Bourgeois *Maman* 1999 Summary”, 2009, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625>, (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

¹⁹ Louise Bourgeois in France Morris [et al.], *Louise Bourgeois*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., 2000, p.50

supposedly the artist as child. The spider is her mother and the spider is a mother. The spider carries this double contradictory meaning of being something extremely skilful and caring but at the same time something that infuses fear.



The intergenerational relationship and the central and active role of the mother are at play in Bourgeois work, in this work she refers to those roles by contradicting it to the Oedipal triangle and exchanging it for the mother-mother-child.²⁰

²⁰ Rosemary Betterton, "Louise Bourgeois, Ageing and Maternal Bodies" in *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, p.172

The Ambivalence of Motherhood

In her artworks and in her diaries, there is a real sense of guilt and insecurity towards motherhood, the fear about not being a good mother. The titles *Good Mother* and *Bad Mother* repeat in several works and even in her writings as she expresses her guilt *"There I was...a wife and mother, and I was afraid of my family...afraid not to measure up"*.²¹ She displaced some complex or the idea of being less a good mother than hers was *"My mother appeared strong to me. In my eyes she was perfect. I am not as good as she was..."*²² or *"My mother had understood her role and was not afraid of the demands. I did not understand my role and I'm afraid I did not fill it"*.²³ Here we sense her conflict between the mother as expectations and what she was experiencing. When talking about early works, like *Femme Maison*, she even expressed this ambivalence in terms of not having the right to have both children and art *"[...] the feeling that I didn't have the right to have children, and that I didn't have the right to be an artist. [...] if you consider art a privilege instead of something that society will use, you have to save and suffer for your art, for what you love; you have to deny yourself in the cause of art"*.²⁴

²¹ Louise Bourgeois, "MacDowell Medal Acceptance Speech (August 19, 1990)" in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.200

²² Louise Bourgeois in Susan L. Stoops, Exhibition Catalog *Louise Bourgeois: The Woven Child (in context)*, Worcester Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, (2006), p.26, 24 Jan. 2017, https://issuu.com/worcesterartmuseum/docs/bourgeois_book-f-updt (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

²³ Louise Bourgeois, "MacDowell Medal Acceptance Speech August 19, 1990)" in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.200

²⁴ Louise Bourgeois, "Statements from an interview with Donald Kuspit" in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father - Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.160-61

The Bad Mother, is a lithography on paper. The source drawing title is *I Undo* or *The*



Bad Mother and it relates to one of the three towers of her most monumental installation work, which opened the turbine hall at Tate Modern in 2000, the *I Undo* tower. *“Undo is the unravelling. The torment that things Are not right and the anxiety of not knowing what to do. [...] I take things away. I smash things, relations are broken. I am the bad mother.”*²⁵ I

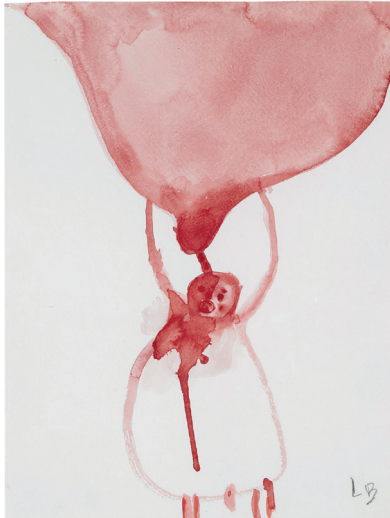
Undo, together with I Do and I Re-do are all based in previous drawings and etching works, all with the subject of the relation parent child. Inside the towers were also three small sculptures of mother and child all under glass, what evokes a protective but perhaps also a suffocating relation. *The Bad Mother* gaze is disengaged from the child whose milk is spilled on the floor. This idea of spilled milk is repeated in other works, it is a threat to the child and the visualisation of the power the mother has in her hands, or rather her breasts. Bourgeois described the falling of the milk in terms of mother and child bond rapture, the abandoned child.²⁶



²⁵ Louise Bourgeois, “I Do, I Undo, I Redo” in France Morris [et al.], *Louise Bourgeois*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., 2000, p.32

²⁶ Louise Bourgeois - Spider Woman, BBC, Transmission: 13 Nov. 2007, at 30:40, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkaJ6SOViXg> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

In *Bad Mother* 2007, a gouache on paper, the milk even has red colour. It is an



ambiguous image, as if it refers to blood, and who's blood, the mother or the child? For Bourgeois, motherhood can be rejection, can be violence or nurture. The drawing is done in a very fast and expressive way, a late style drawing from Bourgeois. The face of the child is done with minimal strokes and still it is full of expression, mouth wide open. Is he/she drinking or trying to breathe?

The Good Mother instead of spilling milk is generating it and provides it, a child is still attached to the body, there is no separation.

Attachment is one of the themes that preoccupied Bourgeois, attachment as a need, her bond not only to her children but also others, her human relations.²⁷ The milk in the drawing is a collage from the left overs of aluminium when casting sculptures. It evokes precious metal; the precious liquid maternal milk can be. This is one of many prints Bourgeois did on this motif in the late stages

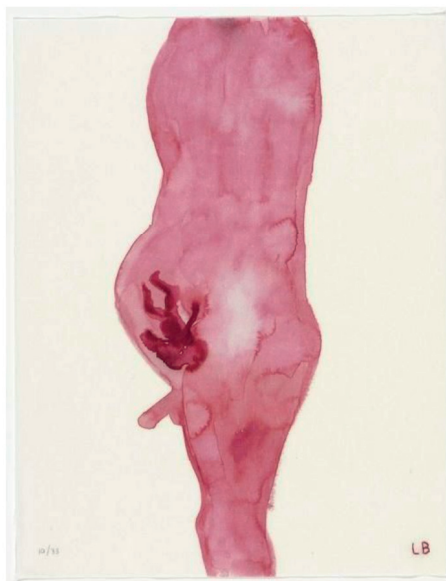


²⁷ MoMA website Louise Bourgeois, The Complete Prints & Books, Themes, Motherhood and Family, https://www.moma.org/s/lb/curated_lb/themes/motherhood_family.html (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

of her life, when asked, she identified herself with the baby in the belly and not with the mother. She often depicts a mother without extremities, to indicate powerlessness, fragility and vulnerability, a mother that cannot embrace or hurt. The late prints are incredibly powerful and fragile at the same time. I agree with Betterton that the late works and style of Bourgeois, especially in what concerns the maternal relations images are open to a future, are regenerative rather than nostalgic referring to any trauma.²⁸

The Pregnant Body as Shared Space

The source for *The Maternal Man*, print on fabric was a gouache on paper of 2008. The work was the basis for further digital prints on fabric and was also the basis for the collaboration with Tracy Emin, *Do not abandon me*. In this work the pregnant body is far from romantic or idealised representations of pregnancy. She depicts a very fluid concept of gender and roles. Also, in terms of material she uses very liquid gouache. When we talk about pregnant bodies, we have to remember that not all pregnant bodies become maternal. This always leaves a sense of interrogation or anxiety around what the future of those bodies will be. This is made clear in the alternative title to the image, the possibility of



²⁸ Rosemary Betterton, "Louise Bourgeois, Ageing and Maternal Bodies" in *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, p.178

abandonment of both mother and child, was something that troubled Bourgeois. If we do not talk about motherhood in an essentialist way, but rather about mothering, not all maternal bodies are even female. In this case the author has resolved those interrogations in the title, instead going to a violent route to destroy patriarchy, for example in her work *The Destruction of the Father*. Bourgeois has found balance in an inclusive way, simultaneously sharing the space of the pregnant body for different genders and identities and at the same time referring to gender roles. She often used the representation of the body and was not afraid to use in her explicit imagery sexual organs that would merge and collide with one and other and in this case in one body. She was exploring the relationship between sexes and saying her work was pre-gender. The sexual dimorphism displayed in her works stresses the vulnerability of both genders.²⁹

The Act of Birthing

Pregnancy and the over all inclusive experience of motherhood, are not often represented in contemporary art, but child birth itself is even more rare. As Carmen Winant puts it, "*it is the physical action itself that is distinctly lacking from the folios of art history*".³⁰ She gives some reasons for this: the patriarchy in the art market, where "women issues" are considered less worthy; the intimacy of the moment, even too private for some close family; or the impossibility of expressing something we have been deceived of by popular culture representations. We do not know how to express child birth even after experiencing it. I would add that it also has to do with what we have historically considered aesthetically beautiful or appropriate in Western art. If

²⁹ Natalie Bell, "Louise Bourgeois" in *The Great Mother: Women, Maternity and Power in Art and Visual Culture, 1900-2015*; Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2015, p. 328

³⁰ Carmen Winant, "The Art of Birth", in *Contemporary Art review LA (CARLA)*, Issue 5, (2016), <https://contemporaryartreview.la/the-art-of-birth/> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

art was historically about beauty and aesthetics, how to paint a close up of a female genitalia if not an object or eroticised?

Bourgeois approached this subject in many different ways, from the freakish and grotesque, symbolic and humorous. She was never concerned with aesthetics conventions or beauty canons if not to defy them. In her early drawings and prints she refers to the birth of her own children, drawing from her own memory and experience, but in her late works she refers to her own birth, as imagined. She goes back to the comfort and search of her mother in the years near her death, a figure important in her work and that in her late days she seeks for reassurance. For Bourgeois drawing was an act of thought, she would refer to her drawings like thought feathers: *“Yes, drawings are thought feathers, they are ideas that I seize in mid flight and put down on paper. All my thoughts are visual...”*³¹



In *Untitled* she is interested in sharing with experience, the act of birthing itself, with us. This work is part of her prints portfolio called *Autobiographical Series*, a portfolio from 1994 where she uses as starting point drawings from the 40s. The portfolio refers to her everyday family life in New York. It starts with a symbolic reference to birth, it includes children bathing or herself washing her hair and a paternity portrait of Robert

³¹ Louise Bourgeois, “Interview with Marie-Laure Bernadac” in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father - Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.293

Goldwater. Plate II *Untitled* is child birth as an action. She acknowledged to have been obsessed with procreation to the point it caused a trauma and her art is filled with allusions of fertility and motherhood. *"I adopted Michel. It meant that I was not able to procreate. And it was a trauma [once I had children] I didn't stay on that subject. I found another subject, the anxiety was gone."*³²

Making *Untitled* for her must have been to get rid of that obsession. The autobiographical approach in her art was a way to sort out trauma. In this print she focuses on the pain, we see it in the expression of her forehead, bended legs and feet. The gaze is lost in thoughts or absent. There is a cavity where genitalia would be. It is a very strong image full of agency. She is using her own hands in her abdomen to push out a child. The hair protects and cradles the child. This birth could be reference to the birth of her second child Alain, Whom she dedicated an entire installation, *The Reticent Child*, permanently displayed in the Freud museum in Vienna. The mother and the child are co-emerging subjects. This image is the birth of a child but also the birth of a mother herself. The neck of the woman is inserted in a cavity almost identical to the one the child is coming out of. As she puts it, it is not a flattering position: *"you could say it is a self-portrait, but I'm in a really difficult position. It's not flattering, and it's not simple"*.³³ I believe this was the idea of motherhood she also wants to convey, motherhood is not a flattering and easy endeavour and it can also be very alienating.

³² Louise Bourgeois, "Two Conversations with Deborah Wye", Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father - Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.124-125

³³ Louise Bourgeois, "Interview with Marie-Laure Bernadac" in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed) *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father - Reconstruction of the Father, writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London: Violette Editions, 1998, p.293

I have analysed some of Bourgeois' works that we can consider maternal. Although these are just a small sample, we can already say something about how important this aspect was for her oeuvre, her own process and contemporary art in general. Motherhood, family and the domestic are themes that are overarching the entire work of Bourgeois, from the first paintings and drawings to the last works before her death. She articulated the ambivalence of motherhood in her work, by going against the romanticised ideals of the representations of mother and child. She was a very personal, intimate and brave artist, her private world physical and psychological was made available to us through her revelations of memories, feelings, fears, pain, emotions and confessions that she incarnated in materiality through what she called the spell. At the core of her work is the main theme of human relations and the anxieties surrounding the rupture of those. She explored her relation as a mother herself to her children, as a daughter to her own mother, as an artist to her work and as a wife to the father of her children. Louise Bourgeois was using her memories and emotions in a non apologetic way, she recognised them as primarily feeding her artistic activity *"my reminiscences help me live in the present, and I want them to survive. I am prisoner of my emotions. You have to tell your story and you have to forget your story. You forget and forgive. It liberates you"*³⁴ and repeated often that art was her warranty for sanity. What prompts many to give a mainly a psychological interpretation to her oeuvre. *"I want to express and emotion [...] the material does not mean much to me. It is just a mean to an end. Some artists are afraid of emotion. I am not."*³⁵ In the treatment of the maternal, we can sense her emotions but also her thinking. When we are in front of her work, she wants us to engage with our own ideas, thoughts and memories and to unravel our own

³⁴ Celant citing Bourgeois in Germano Celant, *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works*, Milan: Skira, 2010, the Catalogue of the exhibition at the Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova, Venice 2010, and at Hauser & Wirth, London 2010, p.24

³⁵ Louise Bourgeois in Paul Gardner, *Louise Bourgeois*, Universe Series on Women Artists, New York: Universe Publishing, 1994, p.74

narratives of what she presents. Her work makes one think and feel at the same time. I agree with Storr that to read her work only through Freudian or pre-Freudian psychoanalysis, as an illustration of her psychoanalysis, is too simple. It would be too narrow an interpretation of her work. She is a very complicated and highly intellectual artist; a free-thinker, an independent artist and her work is not only biographical or psychoanalytical.³⁶ It is easy to get lost in the memories of her own traumatic experiences and the accounts of her juicy life, to forget to look at the actual work in all its possible interpretations and materiality.

For Bourgeois the heart had its reasons.³⁷

³⁶ Robert Storr on line Lecture, Hammer Museum, "The Art and life of Louise Bourgeois", 2017, <https://livestream.com/hammermuseum/events/6754782/videos/149636211> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

³⁷ Blaise Pascal cited at Hauser and Wirth Website on exhibition Bourgeois 'The Heart Has its Reasons' <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/30635-louise-bourgeois-heart-reasons> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

Alice Neel: A Humanist Painter

Alice Neel painted the vulnerability, resilience and psychology of her sitters. She connected completely with her subjects, almost penetrating their state of mind, catching their personality and the situation the person was in, she would “*excavate the character beneath the surface*”.³⁸ Her portraits understood intimate human encounters, they were infused with affection, disengagement, empathy or directness but always under a new gaze. This was a way of portrait painting that was opening up a canon, especially when painting women. Neel did not paint pictures, she rather painted people.³⁹ She had an unconventional and extraordinarily hard life which helps to understand her work, but she did not consider her work autobiographical. She was interested in life as a whole and described herself as a humanist.⁴⁰

“I believe I am a humanist. That’s the way I see the world, and that is the way I paint”

Neel has been associated with the American Ashcan School, expressionism, social realism, post-modernism and feminist art, but there is something about her style that is unique and cannot be categorised, Neel is Neel.⁴¹ The use of her colour palette is very distinctive. In the late years she would be abstract in the depiction of the backgrounds, and figurative when painting the human body, always giving a more

³⁸ Ann Tempkin, “Alice Neel Self and Others” in Ann Temkin (ed), *Alice Neel*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000, p.13

³⁹ Lewison citing Dumas in Jeremy Lewison, “Beyond the pale: Alice Neel and her legacy” first published in *Art & Australia*, vol.48, No.3, Feb. 2011 p.513, https://www.aliceneel.com/articles/pdf/502_512_Neel_low.pdf (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

⁴⁰ Alice Neel quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals - American Women Artists*, Alice Neel, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979, p.128

⁴¹ Jeremy Lewison, “Beyond the Pale: Alice Neel and her Legacy” first published in *Art & Australia*, Vol.48, No.3, Feb. 2011, p.504, https://www.aliceneel.com/articles/pdf/502_512_Neel_low.pdf (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

finished touch to the parts in the composition she wants us to direct our attention to. Some times we have the impression she is just not finished, as if she is still around. Her distinctive indigo blue line, as expressive as it can be, makes forms free, glowing in an atemporal way, rather than being contained by them. She portraits the people she surrounded herself with and her daily life, but she also painted in order to process her own traumatic experiences.⁴² When painting the female body she used a different gaze, a non-male gaze. Here we should understand male gaze as the situation where the person painting has power, control and authority over the painted, not necessary enacted by a man - it is about power and not necessary gender.⁴³ For Neel, painting was history, she saw art as *"a form of history [...] a moment's monument"* and also understood her work to reflect the *"Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age"*.⁴⁴ She was fascinated by people and their faces. She chronicles the entire century in her portraits, the '50s, '60s and '70s, by showing the background, the personality, the intellect and emotions of her sitters. One of the subject's matter she depicted is mother and child, we will see only her Madonnas are far from the idealised or romanticised icons we know, and charged with a social critic that makes them very unique. She also mastered the female pregnant nude, a subject neglected in art and art history still today.

⁴² E.g.: *The Futility of Effort* is painted all in greys, is a painting where she distillates the traumatic experience of losing a child *"I had a child in Havana, and she dies in New York, just before she was one year old of diphtheria. There's a picture I made, three years after, that's the distillation of that and so much else: The Futility of Effort..."* Eleanor Munro, *Originals - American Women Artists*, Alice Neel, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979 p.125

⁴³ Helen Molesworth in David Zwirner Gallery, Walkthrough of "Alice Neel: Freedom" led by Helen Molesworth on 13 March 2019 at 28:05, New York, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aULGfEQZPUA>

⁴⁴ Alice Neel Interview with Patricia Hill, 'Figuration' in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (ed) *Theories and documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1996 p.213

Quirky Madonna

While motherhood has been a controversial subject in contemporary art, the representation of the mother in visual culture and art history has been dominated by western images, especially the Virgin Mary. If we think of motherhood in art, we probably think first of a maternal body, often we picture an oil painting of a Madonna with a Christ child in her arms. This is more likely to be a painting rather than a photographic work, video or any other contemporary art work. Or we have to think of all the pietas, for example by Michelangelo. All these images privilege a heterosexual, young and able white body in certain narratives. Neel paints a very different view of motherhood than the bourgeois loving mother relationship depicted by Marie Cassat.⁴⁵ In fact Phoebe Hoban, biographer of Neel, calls her the anti-Cassat.⁴⁶ The theme of parents and children has been repeated through the oeuvre of Neel, more linked to the relationship between the parent and child itself than to domesticity and narratives of every day parenting accounts or the role of the mother as nurturer and carer.⁴⁷ She has an interest in this theme perhaps because it relates to her own intense life experience as a mother. Once she was a mother, she had no steady hours of studio and models, she had to 'steal hours' and paint when the children were absent or sleeping and she started painting from memory. According to Temkin she was trained to consider this as integral part from painting form life and has a visible effect in the paintings done during the 40's and 50's in this

⁴⁵ Annamari Vänskä, "A Modern Woman's Social Conscience" (extract) in Jeremy Lewison (ed), *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, Brussels: Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery and Mercatorfonds, 2016, p.59, <https://www.aliceneel.com/articles/pdf/alice-neel-painter-of-modern-life-p57-60.pdf> (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

⁴⁶ Phoebe Hoban, Exhibition Review "Alice Neel: Freedom" in *Riot Material: Art, Word, Thought*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.riotmaterial.com/alice-neel-freedom/> (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

⁴⁷ Jeremy Lewison, "Parents and Children" in Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker (eds) *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, Museum of Fine Arts Huston, New Haven and London: Museum of Fine Arts Huston and Yale University Press, 2010, p.214

way since they are more schematic, design and colours were more stylised and pattern more rhythmic.⁴⁸

The Well Baby Clinic (1928) and Degenerate Madonna (1930)



The inspiration for *Well Baby Clinic* was the visit to a children's clinic in New York with her daughter who was very ill. The landscape she describes was dantesque and left a big impression on her and she painted it from memory years after. In the lower left corner of the painting we can see almost the same child figure she then depicted central in *Degenerate Madonna*. I see *Well Baby Clinic* as a room full of uncanny Madonnas. She also painted herself in the upper right corner as she identified herself years later. It

portrays a very unromantic and grotesque way of child birth and mothering, a raw look into the privileges and unfavourable circumstances for some. The details of neglected babies at the back and the poor state of the furniture, a bed tide with a knot, and the contrast between the white of the doctors and nurses and the rest of the people in the painting.

"Well Baby Clinic makes my attitude toward childbirth very dubious. I wondered how that woman could be so happy, with that little bit of hamburger she's fixing the diaper for. That nice-looking one to the right of her is me. [...] And then you know another reaction I had? The purity of the nurses'

⁴⁸ Ann Temkin (ed), *Alice Neel*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000, p. 25

outfits, and the white walls of the hospital, so neat, and then sloppy humanity there, all ragged at the edges. [...] This was done in the winter of 1928–29 from memory.”⁴⁹

In *Degenerate Madonna*, both mother and child are depicted deformed, crooked and



sitting in impossible ways. The child has doll like limbs but an undeniably human look in his eyes, with the grey skin of the mother where we see veins, and blueish for the child. This is a dark painting and not only on the pallet, with blacks, greys and red but also in what is happening inside and how it leaves the viewer. The breasts far from nurturant or charming are like bells, announcing death, pointy, empty. We can see a reflection in the mirror. Neel used this mirror effect in

other paintings as well, like *the futility of effort* to delimit fate. She further transforms the figure in it, to the point we might question if that is a mirror, a sort of window to a nebulous ghost land, dead land, where the viewer is in it, since it is in an angle that is directed to the viewer. This was a controversial painting at the time it was shown in New York at Washington Square open air exhibition of 1932, the painting had to be taken down because of the protest of the catholic church.⁵⁰ It has been given both, an autobiographical over sentimental interpretation (despite Neel never gave explanations of the painting) and an uncanny and grotesque one. Neel introduces a

⁴⁹ Alice Neel cited at Helen Molesworth (ed) *Alice Neel: Freedom*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019, p.30

⁵⁰ Phoebe Hoban, Exhibition Review Alice Neel: Freedom in Riot Material: Art, Word, Thought, 11 April 2019, available at <https://www.riotmaterial.com/alice-neel-freedom/>

black humour impossible to deny that puts the painting into the grotesque arena evoking both empathy and horror at the same time.⁵¹

Carmen and Judy (1972)

Carmen Gordon was an Haitian woman that would help Neel and her daughter in law with the household. She radiates wisdom in the lines of her neck, face, and breast and strength in her sight. There is this serenity and knowledge she holds, that we sense, but that she shares only with the artist. There is complicity, empathy and care from the part of the artist and unconditional trust from the sitter. The child's sight lost and the breast very near offering warmth and shelter while she holds steadfast to the finger of the mother. The mouth half opened and the lost sight give us little confidence this baby is well or even alive, the exception is her small hand, this gesture. There is contrast between the colourfully dressed figure of the mother, warm and expressive prints and the stillness and nakedness of the baby girl. Neel sees beyond the sitter but she wants us also to look beyond the painting, to her era.



⁵¹ Jeremy Lewison, "Showing the Barbarity of Life: Alice's Neel Grotesque" in *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern life*, Jeremy Lewison (ed), Brussels: Gemeente Museum Den Haag and Merkatorfonds, 2016, pp.35-36

Don Perlis and Jonathan (1982)

A child sits innocently on the lap of his father. The face of the father has dark shadows below the eyes, an expression between tiredness and absence. The child has



some lightness, not only with respect to the colours and the way it is painted, less details in the hands, but also the white colour of the shirt, colour of innocence, his light blue eyes and complexion. This is a posture that is deeply associated with mother and child, just now we have father and child. The sitting position and the posture of the child reminds us of secular madonnas of the 19th century. Also the colours used are pinks and reds. Fashion changes with time, and of course pink was not always associated with femininity, this

is the beauty of painting, it is not static. Don Perlis was a painter known to Neel and Jonathan was his son, a child with cerebral palsy.⁵² The detail of his hand on the chin of the father and how the father figure stands to hold the child, makes us think about the communication between them, the role of the father as carer. Neel was always interested in the relationship between parent and child; perhaps a fixation since she survived a daughter and was abruptly separated from another.

Neel paints in the manner of the classic Madonna in these paintings, just in a very unique way. She gives visibility to vulnerability in a very candid, honest, direct and

⁵² Barry Walker in Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker (eds) *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, Museum of Fine Arts Huston, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2010, p.86

affectionate way that makes us connect and identify with the subject and what is happening inside the frame.

The Neel Female Pregnant Nude

Neel has a frankness, boldness and directness that is very distinctive and it makes some feel unsettled, almost shocked, as if the artist gave us something we are not entitled to when painting her nudes. For Molesworth it is not only that we are in front of something very intimate, but that they are erotic and painted by a woman what makes it shocking. History does not have many accounts of such paintings, yet. She painted under a gaze that is so specific to her paintings; engaging over time and curiosity, empowering the depicted and making them unique encounters.⁵³ This is particularly true and something central in her female pregnant nudes. Some of the few images have in art and that were unprecedented in western art history at the time Neel painted them.⁵⁴ They can be understood in the context of the body art of the women's movement during 60's and 70's, although Neel never explicitly referred to these paintings as a feminist statement or of herself as a feminist. Central to these nudes are the gaze they are painted under, a gaze that wouldn't turn the looked at into an object, where only the looker has subjectivity. Her paintings are always trying to find our individuality but always refer to a common place that we all share birth, death and sex.⁵⁵ In choosing this subject matter and the gaze she paints them under, Neel was breaking conventions and a double taboo, one of the female nude in western art history as well as defying the women's movement practice and theory by

⁵³ Helen Molesworth, "Looking with and looking at Alice Neel" in Helen Molesworth (ed) *Alice Neel: Freedom*, David Zwirner Books, 2019 pp.11-20

⁵⁴ Pamela Allara, "Mater of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes" in *American Art*, Spring, 1994, Vol.8, No.2 (Spring, 1994), pp.6-31, The University of Chicago Press, p.7

⁵⁵ Helen Molesworth, "Looking with and looking at Alice Neel" in Helen Molesworth (ed) *Alice Neel: Freedom*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019 pp.13-15

introducing these images as quotidian, previously considered outsiders.⁵⁶ There was precedent in a semi-nude self portrait of Paula Modersohn-Becker, nevertheless this is an imagined vision of pregnancy. Another precedent was Raphael Soyer - his depiction of a pregnant nude is very different from Neel's ones: It is a typical portrait with a posing model in front of the artists, while Neel ones were individuals.⁵⁷ Most probably Neel knew about this painting, she was not only a contemporary but a friend of Soyer all his life.

From 1964 to 1978 Alice Neel painted seven pregnant nude portraits. These portraits are all part of family portraits that Neel did during these years. It was very often that she depicted what surrounded her own life and experience. Being pregnant, apart from collective narratives of how your skin should glow and you feel complete as a woman, carries also all sorts of insecurities, curiosity and overwhelming feelings of love, anxiety, responsibility, hope and fear towards the life that you are conceiving, or perhaps not, inside your own body. In Neel's portraits we can see and palpate these emotional stages, she does not hide them, on the contrary she makes them the strength in her way of painting the pregnant nude. Her sitters were at ease with Neel, she would talk them through the sessions, almost as a humming noise. The pregnant nudes are monumental in size and very present as paintings, but at the same time some of the women in them are immersed in thoughts, absent in a way. They look like they would not be posing in front of an artist but are caught in a private moment. They are all very intimate, particularly for these portraits I think it was important that they knew the artists, most of them were family members and friends. Neel would not make her sitters pose but rather try to capture the personality of someone

⁵⁶ Pamela Allara, "Mater of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes" in *American Art*, Spring, 1994, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring, 1994), pp. 6-31, The University of Chicago Press, p.10

⁵⁷ Idem p.17

in a gesture they would repeat for example; she enjoyed analysing people.⁵⁸ I see in these monumental size portraits, defiance, 'look what we women can do', and it is double: not only look we can create life but we can paint it too, "*she did consider it a rebuke to the "sissies" [...] who never depicted pregnancy, even though "it's a basic fact of life."*"⁵⁹ From these seven pregnant nudes there are two where the figure of the father is included as well.

In *Pregnant Julie and Algis* (1967) the most salient feature is the total nakedness of the



woman versus the fully clothed man. Within the woman's figure Neel is more invested in the finishing of the face and the eyes, in her expression, than the in rest of the body. She seems very confident. The pregnant belly takes the almost entire centre

⁵⁸ Nancy Neel quoted in Ann Temkin (ed), *Alice Neel*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2000, p.74

⁵⁹ Alice Neel in Pamela Allara, "Mater of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes", *American Art*, Spring, 1994, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring, 1994), pp. 6-31, The University of Chicago Press, p.7

in the composition. They are at a very casual moment and it is this private allure or the banality of the moment, a pregnant couple chilling out, that makes it easy to relate to. They are also both looking at the viewer and the light is warm and beautiful. There is this gentle gesture in where both woman and man touch each other at the back of the neck and on the arm, locked in an open and casual embrace. This is telling about the relation between them, the connection. He seems protective, almost over protective. Allara gives a male dominant interpretation to this painting,⁶⁰ Although the man is above the female figure, he is clearly behind the woman, half hidden almost as background. The central and most important aspect of the painting is the pregnancy of Julie. There is a richness of gestures in the way Neel painted both on a colourful flowers cover, but the feet have a sense of being higher in a blank space, as suspended in the air. It is this contrast between the grounded bodies, the heaviness of the big belly and the lightness in the feet, what gives the feel of suspension or the idea of unbalance. They are getting into unknown terrain, the terrain of parenthood that is definitely not a breakfast on the grass.

In *Pregnant Woman* (1971), the figure of the man is almost an anecdote in the painting, almost invisible at the back of the woman. He has a frame around, so most probably is a just a picture or painting. All the attention is concentrated in the woman an her pregnant physiognomy and expression. She seems tired and lost in thoughts. We know the man is Neel son, Richard, and that the woman is her sick pregnant daughter in law, Nancy Neel, not only because of the colours she has chosen but also because of biographical accounts we know she is suffering in the last days of pregnancy some disease.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Pamela Allara, "Mater of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes" in *American Art*, Spring, 1994, Vol.8, No.2 (Spring, 1994), pp. 6-31, The University of Chicago Press, p.20

⁶¹ Neel's daughter-in-law was, in fact, carrying twins and was suffering from toxemia in Allara Ibid. p.21

In the title, she does not reveal that the woman is her daughter in law, she wants this painting perhaps to remain more a metaphor of the mental states pregnancy can bring about than a family portrait. Nevertheless she was not trying to create an unequivocal image or metaphor of what pregnancy is for all women. This would be contrary and inconsistent with the way Neel was painting, trying to always find the personality trait that made her sitters unique, showing their soul, as she puts it.

*"Neel avoided any attempt to construct a coherent picture of an 'essential' experience of pregnancy. Rather, her conception of conception is one that is historically based and individually variable. The women appear in turn sexually self-confident, childlike, earthy, physically drained, vain, emotionally anxious, and catatonic"*⁶²



The figure in the centre of the canvas is detailed and painted with care. She is going to give birth very soon, we have this anticipation of time, fear of death and birth vibrating in the image. When discussing pregnant bodies, they are often referred to

⁶² Allara, Loc.cit., p.10

as grotesque or deformed bodies. The blown belly, the enlarged aureolas and nipples and the swollen lips. The grotesque or deformed is always in comparison to something and in this case it is the idealised nude female in western oil paint art history. These female pregnant nudes are full bodies in its most literal sense, full and plenty of life inside and outside the indigo blue lines of their skin, rich, ready to split, transform and divide.

By looking into the portraits of mother and child, we have looked at how Neel reinterpreted the figure of the madonna, some times in a grotesque way and from memory. Some-others by portraying in a manner that brings to the front figures not so often depicted in such subject matter. While for some this might have been intentional, for others this was just a matter of the reflection of her personal life and surroundings, specially when living in Spanish Harlem.⁶³

Neel also challenged the concept of the female nude by portraying the women to the point that some may not consider nude even a proper category to describe her female pregnant nudes. The female nude was an idealised female body generally portrayed as contained and smooth, formalness with apertures, genitalia, and protuberances was perceived as threatening, disgusting and grotesque. Neel paints from a female gaze, the individuality of each person, in a non judgemental, non shameful way, infusing life, dignity and less preoccupied with forms and flesh.⁶⁴

She paints "*the barbarity of life*" in a very anti-sentimental and authentic way.

⁶³ Ann Tempkin, "Alice Neel Self and Others" in Ann Temkin (ed), *Alice Neel*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000, p.13

⁶⁴ Jeremy Lewison "Showing the Barbarity of Life: Alice Neel's Grotesque" in Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker (eds) *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, Museum of Fine Arts Huston, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2010, pp.45-48

Marlene Dumas: *I paint because I am a woman...*⁶⁵

Marlene Dumas is a painter of images, more than a painter of people. She regards our age not an age of paintings but an age of images, where we are overwhelmed by the quantity of them that we see and how that influences our vision of the world and of each-other: *"people today rather look images than painting or the images inside the paintings."*⁶⁶ In her work she explores and poses questions simultaneously on gender, religion, sexuality, ethnical or economic inequality and art itself. She blurred the clear distinction on what is painting and what is drawing and sees them as equally important, commenting on old ideas about the hierarchy of mediums. She also reflects on what it means to paint in an era controlled by visual culture and mass media. Sometimes she ironically refers to her medium as something dead, an old fashion endeavour.

*"I am portraying the deadness of death, through a medium declared dead"*⁶⁷

Humour and irony are key to understanding her extremely provocative work. She makes the fact she is a female painter part of her practice, and refers ironically to painting as something she was not supposed to do as a woman, being a male activity, for what she was considered a boy, which ceased after being a mother.

*"Motherhood: Now I'm no longer one of the boys"*⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, 2nd edition (revised and expanded), London: Koenig Books, 2014, p.76

⁶⁶ Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Website, *Marlene Dumas: The image as burden* exhibition from 6 September to 4 January 2015, video at 00:21 <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/marlene-dumas-the-image-as-burden> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

⁶⁷ Ilaria Bonacossa quoting Dumas in *Marlene Dumas*, London: Phaidon, 2nd edition, 2009, p.178

⁶⁸ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p.80

Dumas has her beginnings in conceptual and abstract art. Later in her career the figure appears in a very personal and individual way. She uses what she calls wet on wet technique. The starting point images for her fluid drawings and paintings are mainly from the media, but also self taken polaroids, newspapers clips, art history and decontextualised film stills. She is a cinephile, and some times she reads her work in filmic terms. In fact her first encounter with the moving image was the drive-in cinema, as television was introduced in South Africa only in 1976. Rather than autographical or psychological, Dumas has something mystique, her paintings are full of complex emotional references mediated by personal experiences and universal acumen. I find that her most interesting works are in one way or another always related to life and death. She very often treats these two subjects as inseparably linked one to another and it is in her works on the maternal, that I understand this aspect at its best. Between the 1980s and 1990s Dumas painted portraits of children and pregnant women; these paintings were first exhibited in *'The Origin of Species'* 1990 and *'Keep out of the Reach of Children'* 1991. In her process the images are constructed, deconstructed, contextualised, de-contextualised, transformed and diluted until it takes us to a completely new and ambiguous place, mostly open for interpretations. Personally transformed in her own terms, we would not be able to recognise its inspirational images. Language and tilting the works is as important as the subjects matter and painting surfaces, she works with language very often as material and some times includes notes or quotes in her work.

"There was a time when I was so interested in gesture that I thought I wanted to be an abstract expressionist. But I knew I couldn't do that because there was always an aspect of language that I

needed. That's why my titles are so important in my works. That's also why I brought the figure back in".⁶⁹

If you hear Marlene Dumas talking, it is like a random open book, full of quotations, self loud reflections and personal anecdotes. She makes the most unexpected connections between film, art theory, autobiographical notes, history, psychology, philosophy or theology. I love her writing as much as I love her art work. I share some of her fascinations too: Goya, Munch, cinema and justice in its most human sense.

Emotions are part of her work, they resonate in the surface of her paintings and under the skins and gestures as she paints them. Other times, the mere lack of it all together makes them arise in the viewer. '*Second-hand images,*' according to her '*can generate first-hand emotions.*'⁷⁰

I have selected works of Dumas in relation to the maternal, but not exclusively depictions of motherhood as linked to the maternal female body *per se*. In order to analyse her works I have drawn from her own online lectures, interviews and writings, specially those in *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts* as well as the extensive catalogue books from her solo and retrospective exhibitions and monographs that exist. In analysing the drawings and paintings I have paid attention to form, medium, way of execution and subject matter, titling and the accounts of the author, if any. Not that I consider them more authoritative, but they clearly shed some light into what at first seems very dark works with infinite possibilities of meaning and

⁶⁹ Hilton Als, *Up Close and Personal With the Artist Marlene Dumas*, Interview Magazine, 5 December 2019, http://www.mutualart.com/ExternalArticle/Up-Close-and-Personal-with-the-Artist-Ma/82A31BE693ED282C?source_page=Results (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

⁷⁰ TATE, *To Show or not to Show, Malene Dumas: The Image as Burden*, conversation between Marlene Dumas, Andrea Büttner and Jennifer Higgin, (2 Apr. 2015) <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-33-spring-2015/show-or-not-show#> (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

interpretations. I have also paid attention to what left outside the frame and the reactions of a possible viewer.

The Un-born and the Just-born

Dumas understands painting as a dialogue, not only a dialogue between the work and an audience but also a dialogue in art history, between artists and also between her own works. Dumas likes to put works in relation to each other and also do series, specially of portraits.

"I keep repeating what he said and what he said and what she said and what I said. I cannot look at anything without thinking about what he said and what she said and what I said"⁷¹

The two works below, *Before Birth* and *After Life* are opposites not only in the names but also in the manner they are executed.⁷²



Before Birth (1989) is one of the few painted portraits we have of this kind in contemporary or any other art history. As a child I used to browse the pages of a book called "Un Niño va a Nacer" (A child will be born). I remember browsing these pages in disbelief and always asking my mum if the baby was real. It had black and white photographic works, very idealised floating babies with closed eyes and successive 'rose' portraits of a young

⁷¹ Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p.3

⁷² Dominic van den Boogerd, "Hang-ups and Hangovers in the Work of Marlene Dumas", in Dominic van den Boogerd [et al.], *Marlene Dumas*, 2nd edition, London: Phaidon, 2009, p.57

couple from when they fall in love until they have a baby. Once pregnant in 2015, a friend gave me a book in colour and I sort of felt the same disbelief paired with amazement of what colour endoscopic imagery can do nowadays. It was not until much later, while painting, that I realised the books were from the same famous photographer, Nilsson, who authored some of the most ill-famed photographs of foetus in *Life* magazine in 1965. I imagine Dumas during pregnancy and afterwards having her own child in 1989, collecting, analysing and archiving all these images or similar ones. Contemporary artists have made use of embryonic imaging, endoscopy, *in vitro* and genetic technologies to explore maternal and paternal imageries,⁷³ but I have not come across many accomplished works on this subject matter.

This is a transparent womb image, hosting a pre-conscious child, or rather a being. The colour and pattern of the skin makes us doubt if this is in deed a human foetus; the hands could be amphibian, and she plays with this ambiguity. The look in the wide open eyes of this creature is surprising, almost scary. This is a very self-aware being. The gaze is fixed to the left corner of the composition and is clearly flirting with the audience. There is always something disconcerting and ambivalent in Dumas paintings and the eyes of her subjects, alive, dead, unborn or simply relaxing. In contrast to other big sized works, this work is very intimate and small, no big gestures, small and differentiated patterns, strokes and thin layers. One of the characteristics of the faces of Dumas, is that they are very often in close-up. She uses this filmic method to decontextualise faces and to add confrontation and intimidation, then the eyes have strong impact.⁷⁴ In this portrait, the figures background is a flesh or light skin colour, reminiscence of a maternal body, but could

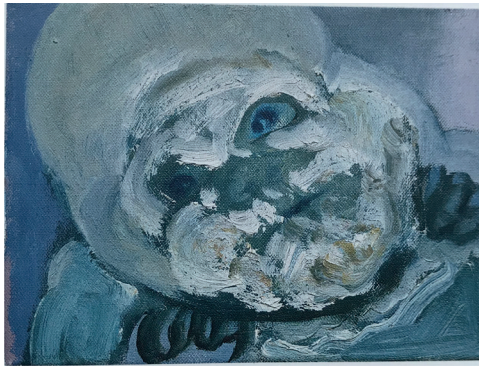
⁷³ Rosemary Betterton, "The Transparent Womb: Visual Technologies and Maternal Bodies", *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, p.87-88

⁷⁴ Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p.63

also very well have been mud. It is a very almost-alien image. The blue spots across all of the surface of the painting, make us think of glass or a fluid environment. The interesting thing is that we all look like that at some point in life, but it is still currently one of the most controversial images in culture or media if not out of medical magazines. Not only because it renders the mother invisible, but because questions always rise around birth and its politics.

After Life (1989)

This painting was exhibited between others at the exhibition "*Tronies: Marlene Dumas and the Old Masters*". A tronie was



a certain way of depicting and drawing faces that had its cultivation in baroque times but that was already in use in the antiquity and it flows into the present. It was a form of painting differentiated from portraits in that had a "*connotation of the psychological*

notion of a deceptive mask" and was not on commission, but at the individual initiative of the artist, some times a device of self advertisement.⁷⁵

The title is intriguing and leads us again to an open end. Is it referring to a child just born or to death? Is the author playing with the idea of birth and death as part and parcel of life? Dumas work is open to a thousand possible meanings and interpretations. She wants not only to makes us see something, but to realise how we

⁷⁵ Leon Krempel, "Sapho's backward Glance" in *Tronies: Marlene Dumas und die Alten Meister/ and the Old Masters*, Haus der Kunst München 29 October 2010 to 6 February 2011, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2010, p.10-11

see something. The title after life suggests the process of painting has been from life model and observation.⁷⁶ Dumas hardly ever paints from life models, the amalgamation of images is part of her process, as well as thoughts, words, clips, photographic works that feed one work. In essence, she says that it is almost impossible to know where the starting point of a work is. It is never a single photography, one to one image or thought. Marlene is not 'mimetic' but 'transformative' in her way to work an approach images.

"A child is born on a certain day but the birth of an art work is impossible to calculate and its origin is impossible to find [...]"⁷⁷

The words after life (in old Dutch: naar het leven) were also included in the past at the margins of paintings together with signature and date, to refer to the documental character of a work.⁷⁸ Many of Dumas works have an aura of documentation, a reminiscence of forensics, like if the artist is the one that sees something for the first time in a certain way, her paintings are always a rediscovery of something very close or very familiar and at the same time very refreshing and new, like a close up or a change of camera lens.

The subject matter depicted is referred to as a child just right after birth where the child is mostly wrinkled.⁷⁹ The background is in pinks and blues, colours in contemporary time dedicated to baby nurseries. The eyes lost in the space may very well depict the eyes of a child that cannot see yet, or that perhaps does not see any

⁷⁶ Dominic van den Boogerd, "Hang-ups and Hangovers in the Work of Marlene Dumas", in Dominic van den Boogerd [et al.], *Marlene Dumas*, 2nd edition, London: Phaidon, 2009, p.57

⁷⁷ Dumas *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p. 54

⁷⁸ Krempel, Op.cit., p.24

⁷⁹ Dominic van den Boogerd, "Hang-ups and Hangovers in the Work of Marlene Dumas", in Dominic van den Boogerd [et al.], *Marlene Dumas*, 2nd ed. London: Phaidon 2009, p.57

more. The inclination of the face reminds us of the Cherubs of baroque times and the white in the face has been referred as the wrinkles in the face or a mask, but it makes me think of the *vermix caseosa* of the just born, the white wax substance we are all born with and that protects us inside the womb, looking very much like thick oil white painting. It has boldness and even brutality, and at the same time humour. It is the depiction of an incredibly intimate and intense moment, still the painter manages to make it remain very sober, like if the emotion is diluted at the same time with the paint.

Motherhood Daughterhood

Dumas refers to her daughter often in her work. For example she has depicted her from photography in *the Painter*, used her resemblance to depict a goddess in *Birth*, she has used her own anxiety of being a mother as a starting point for *Dead Girl* and co-authored works in *Underground*.⁸⁰ While *the Painter* and *Dead Girl* are key works of Dumas, these have been extensively studied and controverted. *Underground* seems to be a less known work. She concentrates in an unsentimental or detached manner in her relation to her daughter.

Underground (1995)

Underground is a panel of portraits showed for the first time in the Venice Biennale of 1995. What is immediately discerned is the two very different ways of drawing, colourful and cheerful, as opposed to black and white of the background. In western societies colour has been associated with something childish, in this case, it is not

⁸⁰"I was an anxious mother with a teenage daughter when I painted [...] *Dead Girl* in 2002, using painting as a prayer for protection." "Two of a kind" in Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts* p. 158. "I paint about my anxiety about my daughter entering adulthood, my mother being eighty-one, my own fear of falling apart, and the believe that art is, and has always been, a preparation for death." Ilaria Bonacossa quoting Dumas in *Marlene Dumas*, London: Phaidon 2nd edition, 2009, p.178.



only association, it is the actual work of a child, from the authoring information in title we get this is a participatory work.

Once I read the account of Dumas below, of how the work was conceived, I could relate to the work in a more sounded manner.

“Helena decorated, improved and worked on my black and white drawings with colour when she was six years old. She found them a bit too boring. I was her underground. Unlike Arnulf Rainer working on photographs, she worked ‘against’ me rather. I allowed her to play with my drawings so I could do other work. This wasn’t set up as an art project in the first place. She ‘re-casted’ my models into her own stories. One was kidnapped, she said, and walked into a horse...”⁸¹

⁸¹ Dumas *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p.109

These co-authored works with her young daughter make us reflect on questions of authorship and mastery, chance, human relations, the importance of what we see first and what after within a group of works, underground or foreground, the creative process and art itself. In contrast to other works, very long thought and matured, in which chance is not so much an aspect of it, these works are fresh, lyrical, spontaneous and playful. They are the 'accidental' product of the negotiations, as mother and artists, she had to make in order to keep working. They are overpainted portraits. The over-paintings are a dialogue not only between the mother and daughter, but mainly inside the paper, what occurs to the source work that is used as background. Forms are open and transform, new meanings appear and emotions are enhanced. It is creation and destruction at the same time. This fight accentuates aspects that would have remained minimally perceptible without the interventions of the daughter. In this case the backgrounds are drawings for her series models.

What is more salient in this work, although of course again we can suggest thousand readings, is the opposite of "serious work" versus "childish work", but the fact that the collaboration is not only of "a child", but her child, gives this work by Dumas also an added layer which is the bringing to one the most important galleries of the world her "serious" motherhood work. In the accounts of how the work came to be she does not say much about her intentions when deciding the completion of the work, instead she gives attention to the agency displaced by her daughter. Van Alphen has written about this work that can only be interpreted as an act of love and that the work is an embrace between mother and child.⁸² Although I agree that only love can give starting point to this work, more than the word embrace, I would use a

⁸² Ernest van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape thought*, London/Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p.148

“pulse” from the perspective of the child, a dialectic conversation perhaps ‘me’ (as child) against ‘you’ (the mother). We see traces of what looks like blood or rushes, *“Helena said: ‘it’s easier to draw sick people. You give them a wound, you make them cry, and then you give them a band-aid’.”*⁸³

Dumas wants us to see like in *The Painter*, a child that is not vulnerable and needy creature, but full of individuality and agency, able to go ‘against’ us at any moment and whom we have to respect. A subject with a particular signature that we can see in the decisive strokes and kinetic marks all over the faces, a sing of authority. In a way we can see this work as a tribute to mother child relations bringing it to a more equal stand for both.

The Maternal Body: Pregnant Female Nude and Nakedness

In her essay about Alice Neel 2019 exhibition *Freedom*, Molesworth makes a distinction between the naked and the nude.⁸⁴ A distinction that Dumas has embraced not only in her paintings, but also in her text in the same catalogue as well as in her writings.⁸⁵ They both depart from the gaze under which these types of portraits have been depicted in art history. They agree that the difference is firstly the gaze under which they are painted, a gaze that is not disempowering and not objectifying, and secondly the frankness, the banality and the everydayness in a naked picture versus the idealised way of painting female nudes. As Molesworth hints, the distinction already existed in the 50’s in the work of Kenneth Clark,

⁸³ Dumas *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p.109

⁸⁴ Helen Molesworth, “Looking with and looking at Alice Neel” in Helen Molesworth (ed) *Alice Neel: Freedom*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019, p.12

⁸⁵ Marlene Dumas, “Alice Neel Loves Jean Genet” in *Alice Neel: Freedom*, David Zwirner Books, 2019, p.23

nakedness would be raw and nude was transformed by aesthetics and idealisation.⁸⁶ Dumas has painted the female body and she has also painted the pregnant female body repeatedly. Below is one iconic example and two new portraits from last year.

Pregnant Image (1988-1990)



In *Pregnant Image*, already in the title, the artist is making reference to not being a portrait or depiction of a specific person, from a life model, it is an image. In her process Dumas hardly ever bases her work on a sole image, but she goes through a very long process of analysis and contemplation of images in our cultural and social reality until she starts a work. She gives credit to her polaroid photographic work for the creation of this specific work in her book "*Sweet Nothings*" and we also know the work is based not only in her image but in many.⁸⁷ Dumas explores the outdated canon of the western beauty in her female portraits,⁸⁸ for

⁸⁶ Helen Molesworth, "Looking with and looking at Alice Neel" in Helen Molesworth (ed) *Alice Neel: Freedom*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019, p.21

⁸⁷ Marlene Dumas, "Hommage to the Polaroid" in *Sweet Nothings*, p.148. See also Margot Norton in *The Great Mother: Women, maternity and power in art and visual culture, 1900-2015*, Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2015, p.336

⁸⁸ This is something she has explored through her work and comes back to in the last portrait of Dutch dancer Romana Vrede. See Noemi Smolik, Marlene Dumas Paints Vulnerable Yet Strong Women Through History in *Frieze* (3 Sep. 2020) <https://www.frieze.com/article/marlene-dumas-paints-vulnerable-yet-strong-women-through-history> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

example in the androgynous face of this subject. She is fascinated by androgynous features in women and in some of her most famous portraits, we are not sure if what is depicted, is a woman or a man.⁸⁹ The head and face have a different colour than the rest of the body, it looks almost overpainted, it is clearly not a self portrait either. She plays with the stereotype of female beauty as a western social construction, as well as that of the pregnant female body. Her *Pregnant Image* is intriguing, ambiguous, almost hostile and above all not devoid of subjectivity. It defies stereotypes of the fragile pregnant body. This is a very strong image not only because of the direction of the gaze to the audience, contrast in light and shadow but also in physiognomy, if we pay attention to the muscular anatomy of the body. It is in a very uncomfortable pose, but even more if you are pregnant, it brings in the need to stay kneeling, in balance, keeping the posture. Perhaps an analogy to what a balancing act is to be a mother and artists. The hands in the back may suggest comfort but also remind us of torturous positions, pregnancy as tortuous embodiment, no ribbons and soft clouds of classic paintings of female nudes, but an ambivalent one. The woman is semi-naked, rather than nude, in an almost erotic and exposing way she let us see her exploding abdomen, breast and genitalia. The painted physiognomy of the subject is very detailed as to the transformations a pregnant body goes through, the *linea nigra* in the abdomen or the darkened skin in the breasts aureolas. Dumas learned of Alice Neel's pregnant portraits in the spring of 1994, in fact Dumas has admired Neel's work for her warmth, directness, sharpness and authenticity.⁹⁰ Nevertheless Neel's pregnant nudes were not known to Dumas when she did this painting, as it is dated 1988 to 1990, just during her own pregnancy and after birth to her daughter Helena

⁸⁹ MoMA, website Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave, '*Marlene Dumas. Models. 1994*', at <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/226/2922> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

⁹⁰ Marlene Dumas in *Alice Neel – Schilder van de ziel*. (video) The Hague: Gemeentemuseum/ARTtube (2016) at 05:22', <https://www.marlenedumas.nl/alice-neel-schilder-ziel/> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

in 1989. We could say Neel introduced the subject in art and Dumas kept cultivating it in different ways.

This painting also gives attention to the time of maturation of the work, It is as if she would like to draw attention to the time involved also in pregnancy and not only creation of a particular painting but rather pro-creation, as well as to draw an analogy.

"Birth: Create and art work (to make an image of) and to give birth (to another human being) have essentially nothing to do with each other. Yet this is no reason to stop loving metaphors or avoiding the unrelated [...]"⁹¹

In terms of colour it has a very cold palette of blues and blacks with accents of very dark red. There is a red stain in the right breast and also in the back of the legs and neck, this could be a reference to violence. The dark background contrast with the merengue greyish pink colour in the central figure, mainly in her exploding abdomen. We cannot locate spatially the subject matter. Dumas does this in order for the viewer to bring in its own interpretation. It is not a cheerful pregnant picture, not by expression and not by colours. It has a strange source of light from the back rendering the figure in penumbra and mystery, there is something very gothic. I would say this work is a semi-naked painting.

⁹¹ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, p.51

Helena Michel (2020) and Luana Carretto (2020)



In the two pregnant nude portraits at display in Antwerp during 2020 in the exhibition 'Double Takes' the depiction of the female maternal body is different from previous ones. Similar in colour and trustful to Dumas pallet, they are caring, warm and emphatic, also the size of the works is small and intimate. It is painted in a sketchy way, fast and diluted strokes with open parts where we see the bare linen canvas. This makes us feel the hand of the painter, the kinaesthetic traces. As it

was still work in progress, she is present in some way in the room where the paintings are displayed, a room full of intimate family portraits. They are not metaphors or tropes but persons known to the artist and close to her. The pregnant nudes are the daughter of the artist and a friend who is pregnant at the same time.⁹² What we see in these portraits is the maternal gaze they are painted under. These images made me think of female solidarity and shared bodily experiences but also about the bond between child and mother. A mother looking at a daughter becoming a mother, it's painted under a maternal gaze enabling to see and not disempowering, in contrary, capturing the human essence and make it shine in its banality and vulnerability. The maternal gaze in Dumas transpire her entire oeuvre and it does not refer to the biological aspect of being a mother, but a *'investment with the subject [...]*

⁹² Noemi Smolik, Marlene Dumas Paints Vulnerable Yet Strong Women Through History in *Frieze* (3 Sep. 2020) <https://www.frieze.com/article/marlene-dumas-paints-vulnerable-yet-strong-women-through-history> (accessed 27 Jan. 2021)

bearing witness, weighing the implication, and committing stories and images to a collective memory', absence of voyeuristic pleasure and acceptance of the unconventional or even unpleasant is the key to this type of gaze.⁹³ Dumas aim to display and not to reveal, *"I am intimately involved with my subject matter....I am not disengaged from the subject of my gaze [...] You can't TAKE a painting-you MAKE a painting"*.⁹⁴ The subjects in these paintings are very alive and self-aware and even in dialogue with the painter and viewer, one of them even smiles back, but at the same time, they also have something of mundane goddesses. Blue accents are present in both portraits. One seems to have a blue third eye in the front head reminiscent of Shiva. Blue is also the colour of Mary Mother of God, there is even a Marian blue. One could also read these two portraits as allegories of the East and West. Dumas references to the colour blue in her text on Ingres portrait of Broglie princess prompted me to this reading:



"Because of her immaculate satin dress with so much blue, I go on an imaginary journey, to the East and to Africa. I even find myself in heaven... 'over the seas' [...] This is how Virgin Mary, the most painted woman in Christian art, acquired her blue cloak from the East [...] It is not just in European symbolisms that blue is the colour of heavenly powers. The skin of the Egyptian God Amur is of a blue

⁹³ Lisa Gabrielle Mark, "The Binding Factor: The Maternal Gaze of Marlene Dumas" in Cornelia Butler [et al.], *Marlene Dumas: Measuring your own Grave*, Los Angeles New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art & D.A.P inc., 2008, p.211

⁹⁴ Marlene Dumas cited in *Ibid.* p. 211

colour [...] The dancing Krishna with his blue skin becomes even more seductive due to his contrasting Indian yellow loincloth...⁹⁵

These two portraits are very distinctive, I would say almost unprecedented in art history pregnant nudes under maternal gaze.

In her oeuvre Dumas has engaged with the maternal. Many of her key works have motherhood either as subject matter, starting point or inspiration. Sometimes her works are surrounded by anxieties around the maternal and sometimes she embedded in the work the mundanity and availability of situations and images that motherhood carries with itself. Motherhood and what means to be a woman painter take a central part in her work, not only because what she depicts (from conception, to pregnancy, to childhood, to family) or because she directs her gaze to her child, but how she does it. She has a very particular and unique gaze, a maternal gaze, that in Dumas means above all a profound respect for what she paints and a personal investment in what she does. With care, humour and love to extremes allows us to see her own transformations in a work and to see how we see the world we live in, also discovering always something about ourselves.

⁹⁵ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts*, pp. 209-210

CONCLUSION

Mothers are supposed to leave everything for their children, but the artist is also supposed to leave it all behind for art; *a priori*, these things are incompatible.⁹⁶ One of the anxieties that every artist working around the maternal has, is the possibility to be described as sentimental or emotional. In this context, these adjectives carry stigmatisation. Is in this anxiety different ways of treating the subject have emerged, one that promotes to stay as conceptual as possible, and to take distance from the existing previous iconography and its body politics, and another that uses the same iconography to subvert or expose the lacking of the visibility of these representations.⁹⁷

The above artists expose these old representations, and covered some of the maternal themes in contemporary: The maternal body, the maternal gaze and the pushing of boundaries and opening up canons in Western art. They draw from their own mothering experiences and work against the grain of -isms, exposing stereotypes and icons from art history, popular culture and media of their times. When engaging with the maternal, they work in order to sham those old representations of the mother as the *“the myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving, and all-sacrificing mother”*⁹⁸.

Marlene Dumas definitely does not paint to please us, she wants us to engage always in a critical way with all her work, maternal or not. For Bourgeois, this was more a question of personal urgency, showing a more sounded image of what it is to be a

⁹⁶ Artist and Mother, Artbound season 9, episode 7, 17 March 2018, KCET, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/artist-and-mother> (last visited 27 Jan. 2021)

⁹⁷ Joanne Heath, “Negotiating the Maternal: Motherhood, Feminism, and Art” in *Art Journal*, Winter 2013, Vol.72, No.4 (Winter 2013), pp.84-86, p.86, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43188637> (accessed 27 Ja. 2021)

⁹⁸ Rachel Epp Buller (ed.), *Reconciling Art and Mothering*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p.1

mother, in all its reality including the ambivalence of it, in a self warranty of sanity. Neel concentrated in aspects of the humanity of her sitters, and paid attention to diversity as well as how much those individuals had in common. She painted "*the barbarity of life*" in a very anti-sentimental and authentic way.

Indeed the motivations, starting points and inspirations were different for these artists; emotion, images, memory or life, always in a dialectic dialogue with art itself. But something they all have in common is the gaze under which these artists work. A gaze that as Molesworth put forward, is not so much a question of a female or male gaze, being solely a man or a woman, but a question of power and how you can render an object out of someone, devoid subjectivity. The female gaze solely would be the subject of a different research. What is clear is that they use a maternal gaze, not only because they have directed their artistic gaze to their children but mainly because it is a gaze that is non objectifying, empowering and accepting no matter what.

Although I did not concentrate in the gendered experience of being a mother-artist, I have also mentioned some of the negotiations these artists had to do in order to continue working. Dumas incorporated the product of these negotiations in her oeuvre, and Bourgeois adapted her medium to continue working while her children were small. Neel "stole" time in order to keep working and never had a studio, having most of her portraits done in her home.

They are artists to whom we own much in the terms of how we approach, relate to and create art today, especially maternal art. Against all the currents and waves, the artists remain honest and steadfast to what they were doing, and they are masters that gave birth to themselves and to new perspectives in contemporary art.

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