

“Some Sort of Delightful Horror”: The Maternal Sublime in Creative Academic Mothering

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In recent years, groups such as PiPA (Parents and Carers in the Performing Arts) have brought attention to the challenges faced by parents balancing carer responsibilities with creative careers; similarly, the Flex Appeal movement or Women United Art Movement, and researchers from around the globe, have highlighted the struggles faced by parents with professional or academic careers. My project is located in the nexus of these spaces. I am seeking to investigate the intersectional experiences of mothers in academia who juggle an additional career in the visual arts. Situated in a critical feminist framework, with a particular interest in matricentric feminism, this project involves poetic, narrative and visual-art inquiry framed by an autoethnographic account. Intended outcomes from this research project include generating advice for universities to support and leverage creative academic mothers' expertise. The project also seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the developing field of Arts-Based Research in Australia.

The first poem¹

I am sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring at a ball of dust, going in and out of focus, and contemplating a sort of cosmic balancing of things. I have missed another deadline for application for an art competition.

Like the spinning of a wheel of fortune, the needle is currently hovering between crushing disappointment and acceptance that I have accomplished other things.

One of those things is stirring and starting to make small sounds. I reach out a hand to the plain, coarse cotton of the hammock and pull down.

Bounce, bounce, bounce.

Boing, boing, boing.

The creak of the spring, reassuring, insistent, compelling, lulling, inevitable, ineffable.

Creak, creak, creak.

The mumbling subsides.

The dust comes back into focus. The dust shouldn't be there. Soft-grey, softness. Why is it always grey. There is hardly anything grey in the house. Where do the colours go?

I have not managed to clean the floors today. The time got away with mashing bananas and raspberries with lemon juice, guiding a little hand on a wooden spoon and measuring flour and sugar with flowered cups, watching one little hand shoving succulent crumbs into its face whilst another pair of little hands wave in the air and gesture at the ceiling,

at the fan,

at the dust.

I have sat on the couch listening with half an ear to "Dora Splorer" whilst marking essays on the Burkean Sublime with one hand and cradling a sucking head with the other. I have bathed little squirming bodies, dried them and folded them into clean, dry softness. I have walked and walked and walked with one bundle in the harness, one bundle in the push, whilst planning the artist statement that I didn't write.

I didn't clean the floors today, I didn't arrange someone to come and fix the plumbing, I didn't get the groceries, I didn't change my life today,
but my children are sleeping untroubled
dreams.

Maybe in a great cosmic balance I didn't do too badly today.



Becoming Golden. Charcoal on Fabriano 300gsm 2025

The second poem

- i. In the forgiving darkness of the mostly sleeping house, I dry my hands
and breathe it in, dishes done.
 A night light,
 Burning bright,
A toy tiger,
 toy bear,
clutched tight or pillowing a head of tumbled curls, a dandelion clock.

Today I led a class on painting and tenebrism, still life, the conceptual use
of light.

Joseph Wright of Derby. A Natural Philosopher, hand raised, on the point
of proclamation.

Talking brushstrokes whilst surreptitiously brushing the hair of a little
head pressed to my knee under the computer.

Talking Caravaggio, talking Dutch still life and the magic of real
ultramarine, mica flecks flinging the light like the reflection in bubbles,
cascading from a wand waved outside the window.

Still life

Still Living

Stilled life.

My mind is fugitive, skidding from untenable thoughts.
The beauty and the horror.

Watching the tumbled mica, tumbled gold. The stilled children. A
stillness that haunts.

It is perhaps a perfect moment. In the clamour and the bustle of the day I
have not the pause to recognise how perfect they are, how much I love
them.

Looking at them in sleep, chiaroscuro under the night light, coming and
going,
Dark to light,
I find myself suspended between desires; to wake them and tell them how
much I love them,
How their beauty breaks and mends me
To let them sleep and let myself make friends with peace.

Or to paint them.

Itchy fingers holding a phantom brush.
Chiaroscuro. Tenebrism.
Out of the dark, into the light.

A photograph is compromise.
Painting is postponed.

To sleep.



Think but this, and all is mended. Charcoal on Fabriano 300gsm. 2025

The third poem

Hic habitas felicitas

I give my body to building a fence

two boards nailed in place,

12 nails clouted home,

Two little bodies separated from the rush of the street,

the bark of engines,

the squeal of dogs

noting exertion of sinew and bone,

there is pleasure in the hammer strike

mind abdicating responsibility to corpus

I will build this home breath by breath

Tickling through the movements that bring us closer to safe, to comfort, to whole

Whole again

A thing of patches

Drawing together

A home of second chances

Mens sana in corpore sano

I give my mind to assessing the construction of arguments
of beauty,
religious,
sublime,
profound,
profane
assaying essays,
the stuff of thought is the stuff that builds the fence, that buys the nails
The house breathes with reciprocal movements
In and out

Inspiration expiration
An exchange enacted of labour
Of love
For the realisation of patchworked hopes
Hic habitas felicitas.



All Danae to the Stars. Charcoal on Fabriano 300gsm. 202