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M'ma

by

Charlotte Rose Eshelman

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related
Media

School of Photographic Arts and

Sciences

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of

Technology Rochester, NY

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Abstract

As I wrestle with myself, I wrestle with my mother. Both my mother and I survived domestic abuse as children, my mother again as an adult. Our bodies carry our trauma, her body carried mine, and someday, my body will carry my children. *M'ma* contemplates what we do with what we're given, how trauma is inherited and passed down to the next generation through the body, and the complex intimacy of the mother-child relationship. I express and project my questions about my future children, my relationship with and understanding of my mother, and of myself in anticipation of being a mother through a multimedia installation. The installation consists of a photo sculpture, two quilts, a video piece, and photographs. The project recognizes how the individuality of both the mother and child affect their relationship with each other. The materials used in the project explore the comfort, difficulties, and even danger inherent to the mother-child relationship. I engage with the photographic family archive and fragments to address the ways in which trauma is inherited and passed on. The house is a motif throughout the project to discuss the protective and stifling nature of the domesticity, mothers, and motherhood. The installation continues this motif as it mimics a domestic space and a womb, spaces a mother and child navigate with and against each other. My body is present throughout the work because the body is so much a part of motherhood, both in pregnancy and well beyond. My own body bears the weight of my questions through recorded performance, quilting, sewing, and self-portraiture. The installation affects the body of the viewer, forcing them to duck to enter and to navigate through the space.

As a child, I kept a family of white ceramic cats, each with a pink bow tied around their neck to show they belonged to each other. There was a mom cat, a dad cat, and a baby cat. One day, the dad cat fell and broke. I asked my mom if she could fix it. “Yes, leave it on the counter for me,” she answered. Day by day, I checked on him to see if he was repaired. And day by day, he stayed on the counter, still broken, until he moved to the junk drawer and eventually disappeared. I assume he was thrown away. “I cannot always rely on my mother,” I told myself upon realizing her words would remain unfulfilled. I decided I would try to do things myself more often. I’m sure my mom didn’t understand how much the dad cat meant to me nor that his loss pushed me more towards independence at an age when I was still highly and naturally dependent. She couldn’t realize how my thoughts about myself and her changed because of him.

Both my husband and I want children but have chosen to wait. As I consider what it will be like for me to be a mother, I find myself revisiting childhood memories. In the making of *M’ma*, I land in moments as mundane as the aforementioned instance and as traumatic as being physically harmed by a parent. Though I’ve longed to be a mother since I was a young girl, I didn’t worry much about motherhood before deciding to wait. I was never so close as to catch a glimpse of its reality, never so close as to feel its impending weight.

In my project *M’ma*, I explore the experience of waiting for children. I express and project my questions about my future children, my relationship with and understanding of my mother, and of myself in anticipation of being a mother through an multimedia installation consisting of a photo sculpture, two quilts, a video piece, and photographs, some of which were made in collaboration with my mom. (Fig. I)



Figure I. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, installation of *M'ma*, 2024

I speculate about how bearing children will affect me through a self-portrait in which I stand in front of a dull yellow wall holding a large glass ball against my stomach (Fig. II). Only my torso is visible, and I face away from the light falling from the left side of the frame, leaving the front of my body in shadow, not completely obscured but not easily examined. The hollow, glass ball pressed against my stomach, with its circular opening cupping some of my flesh, becomes an extension of my body that represents the possibility and the fragility of pregnancy. If dropped, the ball will shatter, my body will remain small, and the shards will lay around my feet with the potential to cut me should I try to move. Will my body be capable of carrying a child to



Figure II. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, *Untitled*, 2023

full term and if not, what effect will this have on my mind? A turning from the light, which gives visibility, signifies the way in which some women lose themselves in motherhood. Their identity becomes mother first, individual woman next if at all. This is further expressed in the reflection of windowpanes in the glass ball. The image gestures to mother as house, as the first house for every human being in existence, and as a being within the domestic space who has the potential to do good and receive good, to harm and be harmed. Will I feel trapped within the expectations of society and of my community when I become a mother, or will the domestic space become, for me, more like Virginia Woolf's room of one's own, which offers respite from the expectations

of society and gives space for women to create?¹ Will the space I offer my children be one of security and refuge, or a space which they find difficult, even uninhabitable? Most likely both.

I worry about how the trauma my mother and I experienced in our childhoods and adult lives will affect my children. A 2014 study found that mice transmit early life trauma to their offspring genetically. The offspring who inherited the trauma of their predecessors behaved similarly to their parents when navigating difficult situations. The scientists conducting the experiment speculate this may apply to other mammals, specifically to humans.² After reading this study, I lamented my desire for children—my desire to give another person a childhood untouched by the domestic abuse my mother and I endured. My mother was raised by her abusive mother who used to break spoons on her back and hit her until she bruised. Her father left when she was very young. The first memory I have is of being thrown across a room by my father and of him laughing after my body hit the wall. I used to hide in the cupboards every time he came home but couldn't keep from crying at his funeral. These experiences shaped how my mom and I approach the world and how we think of ourselves. I specifically notice in both myself and my mom an aversion to feeling controlled and a difficulty trusting others, even those close to us. This makes communication between my mom and I quite difficult and sometimes harmful as we each attempt to navigate the other's will without coming too much underneath it. How much will the trauma and the habits of survival learned by previous generations affect my children in the womb before they ever enter the world? I suppose there are certain things we can't help but pass on, no matter how deliberate we attempt to be.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1957).

² Katharina Gapp et al., "Implication of Sperm RNAs in Transgenerational Inheritance of the Effects of Early Trauma in Mice," *Nature Neuroscience* 17, no. 5 (May 2014): 667-9.

However, just as I waited for the broken ceramic cat to be fixed, I sometimes feel that waiting for children is like waiting for a form of repair. I fantasize about my future children being held lovingly by my husband, safe in his arms. I consider how to address them so they feel they have agency and can express their thoughts and desires to avoid the communication style that developed between me and my mom. In some ways, I see my future children as a chance to redeem the parent-child relationship and the role of parenthood. *M'ma* does not interrupt the passing down of trauma but offers an opportunity to engage with this pattern.

Though I worry about what I will give to my children, I also recognize that children are particular beings and begin forming as individuals even in the womb. Fingerprints, unique to each person, are only marginally influenced by genetics. Instead, the grooves are formed by the movement of amniotic fluid as the child wriggles and turns in the womb.³ When my mother was pregnant, she craved different foods with each of her children. When she was pregnant with my oldest sister, all she wanted was refried beans. With the next, breakfast food all day long. With me, she only wanted a particular salad. With my brother, she couldn't get enough desserts. What's interesting is how each of us now love the foods she craved. Even from within the womb, children express their desires and make them urgent to their mothers.

"We're going to fuck up our kids and you're going to be a good mom," my husband will say in the same breath, without pause. What he doesn't talk about is how they might also fuck us up. But then there is the hope, the possibility that it could be for the better; likely I will do some

³ Laura Jansson, *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage through Pregnancy* (Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019), 27.

good for them and they for me just as my mother has done some good for me and, hopefully, I have done some good for her.

I express the complicated nature of the mother child relationship through the materials I use. I interrupt objects that normally offer comfort and warmth with sharp, unyielding materials. While the fabric on which images from my family's archive are printed gives when pressed



Figure III. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, detail of *Mobile For My Future Children*, 2023-2024

upon, stretches slightly, and wears with time, the metal that connects, pierces, and rests beneath the fabric is rigid and cold. The images are sewn and stuffed to create double sided plushes. I then hang these plush images from a large metal hoop by red, steel cords which pull at the images, distorting them even as I unite each disparate piece into one sculpture (Fig. III) In a quilt that binds an image of my mother with an image of myself, I use safety pins to pierce our bodies

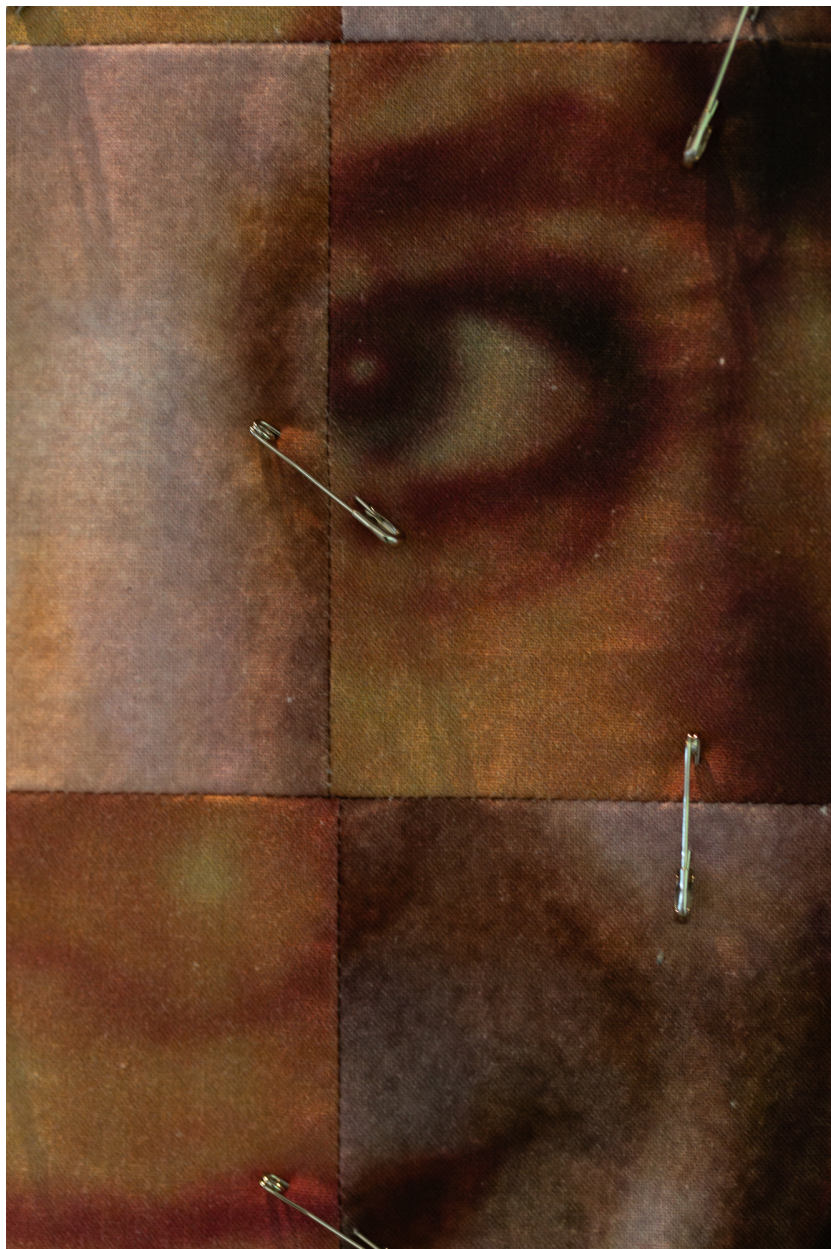


Figure IV. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, detail of *In Our Twenties*, 2024

and to align our figures into one (Fig. IV). The textures and actions of the materials point to the ways in which the mother child relationship can be a source of pleasure as well as suffering.

This pleasure and suffering is made visceral in Maggie Gyllenhaal's film *The Lost Daughter*. Protagonist Leda wrestles to no resolution with feelings of bliss and guilt as she remembers her time as a young mother and the three years she spent apart from her young daughters before returning for them. Without the support of her husband and family, Leda's career ambitions are put at odds with her husband's and with providing for her children. The film shows the tender and sweet right up against the frustrating, difficult, and even dangerous interactions between a mother and her children. Reflecting on her daughter Bianca's stubborn and sometimes violent behavior, Leda says "She made me feel like she wanted to remake me. Like her viciousness was for my own good."⁴ Leda's interactions with her children reveal the complex intimacy and danger inherent to the mother child relationship. Each forms the other, carving and chiseling as well as restoring and building up. It is equally terrifying and wonderful to think of how my children will change me as it is to think of how I will shape them, to consider the possibility of ruining them and losing myself in their midst.

I recognize the complex intimacy and danger specific to my relationship with my mom. When my mother held me as a baby, I would sometimes bite her neck until she bruised but could not fall asleep without stretching out my foot to touch her leg. When I cried as a child and young adult, my mom told me my tears were manipulative, but she made time to talk and pray with me every night before bed. While I would not call my mother a bad mom, I would not always call

⁴ *The Lost Daughter*, directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal (Endeavor Content and Samuel Marshall Films, 2021)

her a good mom. She lives in that space in between, as most of us do, with qualities worth repeating tangled up in undesirable, even harmful traits. She is what Winnicott would call the “ordinary devoted mother,” who loves and cares for her children well though she also causes them pain.⁵

I chose to title this project *M'ma* because it is my particular name for my mother. None of my siblings call her by this name. I started calling my mom M'ma during a time when our relationship seemed impossibly difficult, when I sometimes felt I really could hate her, because I wanted to give her a sweeter name to remind myself of her goodness and of all the things she did to care for me and love me in the midst my frustration with her. As an adult, I am drawn to the parts of my mother I do not understand: her firm grip on material possessions, her longing for my siblings and I to be small children in tandem with her distaste for our dependency, her constant avoidance of conflict. At the same time, I long for the parts of my mother I find comforting. Many of my anxieties and hopes surrounding motherhood are born out of these areas of my mother's personality. I have hope that I can give my children a less complicated childhood and take up some of the good qualities I see in my mom. That I might pass on the stories she told us about her grandparents, the traditions she established together with me and my siblings, that I could take up her handiness and her strength.

While making *M'ma*, I collaborated with my mom in an attempt to deepen my understanding of her and to give us a space to talk about her experiences of motherhood. We made photographs of each other and responded to writing prompts I prepared beforehand. I did not anticipate how many of the questions I prepared for my mom would be applicable to me,

⁵ D.W. Winnicott, *Winnicott on the Child* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 2002), 11-18.

some directly, and some as a reaction to my memories of her. The writing was consistently intense and long conversations followed almost ritualistically. We wrote together only when we were alone and always before photographing. The writing stirred up ideas to use in the photographs. In Figure V, I lie on top of my mom so that most of her body is not visible.



Figure V. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, *We Are Touching At Every Point*, 2023

In a way, my body is restraining hers. She cannot move. My body is more active than hers as my open hand blurs slightly and one of my feet rests in a tip toe position. My mom's hand is closed and tucked against her side, and her foot is planted firmly on the floor. Our bodies are touching completely. At every visible point, we are in contact. Perhaps my body moves because it is as if I am emerging from her.

As I reflect on our collaboration, I am reminded of photographer Carolyn Drake's monograph *Knit Club* in which she collaborated with and photographed a community of women, mostly mothers, who call themselves a knit club as an excuse to spend time together, though there is little to no knitting involved in their meetings. In the photographs, their faces are mostly hidden or obscured by flowers, a painting, masks, windows, quilt batting, an old newspaper, or by their pose. Drake includes short stream-of-consciousness writing paired with the name of the woman who wrote each piece. The audience becomes more familiar with the women in these writings, but each name is attached to at least two vignettes, and they are arranged in such a way that we have no sense of time.⁶ Drake's choice to hide the faces of the women with whom she collaborated adds to the mystery and specificity of their community. They are not stand-ins for the every-woman but are so specific that you cannot know their faces without truly knowing them. In most of the photographs my mom and I made of each other, our faces are either hidden or obscured as an act of intimacy between us two. By denying information we become specific characters with a relationship that cannot be fully known or understood by others, just as we cannot fully know each other.

Unlike Drake, the pieces of our written responses featured in this project are left anonymous. My writings and my mom's mix together with a poem I wrote and a passage adapted from Gaston Bachelard's book *Poetics of Space* in which he quotes and engages with Jules Michelet's book *The Bird*. The writings are a part of a video piece in which I rip rocks from the ground and press my body against the earth, building a nest. I was initially inspired to perform this action after reading the portion of *Poetics of Space* I adapted for the video piece. Bachelard

⁶ Carolyn Drake, *Knit Club* (Oakland, California: TBW Books, 2020).

writes: “According to Michelet, a bird is a worker without tools. It has ‘neither the hand of the squirrel, nor the teeth of the beaver...In reality, a bird’s tool is it’s own body, that is, its breast with which it presses and tightens its materials until they become absolutely pliant, well-blended and adapted to the general plan...It is by constantly turning round and round and pressing back the walls on every side, that it succeeds in forming this circle...The house is a bird’s very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering. The result is obtained only by constantly repeated pressure of the breast, its heart, surely with difficulty breathing, perhaps even palpitations.”⁷ I was drawn to the idea of making a structure that would take on my shape. The bird suffers in the making of the nest, the nest is the bird’s suffering, its creation brings pain but it is also a vessel of the bird’s suffering because it is a vessel of the bird. The nest I create in this video is an external womb which causes me suffering to make and holds my suffering, my trauma. It is a memory of my body. It holds my shape, my spit, my hair, my blood. And even as it is shaped by me, the garment I wear for this performance changes color as I take on the dirt and moisture of the earth. I press against the nest, it presses against me. (Fig VI).

Occasionally the video shows me in a domestic space interacting with objects usually associated with children. I attempt futilely to build some sort of structure atop my womb with wooden blocks, stand with balloons strapped to my breasts and stomach as if to enlarge my body, hold a red birthday candle as it melts onto my hand, and cover my face with pieces of paper while coloring on them with markers (Fig. VII). Printed on each paper is a poem, song, prayer, movie, artwork, story, or tradition my husband and I hope to pass down to our future children.

⁷ Jules Michelet, *L’oiseau* (Paris:Hachette, 1858), page 208, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 120-121.

Later in the video, I bury these papers in the walls of the nest (Fig. VIII). By embedding things my husband and I want to give our children in the nest, I create an archive of our hopes for them.



Figure VIII. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, still from *Nest*, 2023-2024

The space of the installation is dim as most of the light comes from the projection of the video onto a wall. Darkness provides an easier transition for both mother and child during the birthing process; melatonin, the sleeping hormone, is involved in contractions and the womb from which the child is brought forth is darker than the outside world.⁸ Through this installation, I create both a space of birthing for a mother and a womb. However, because the space is an enclosed environment, I am not able to pass through to another room/space, I am forced to wait, unable to go through birth as mother or child.

⁸ Laura Jansson, *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage through Pregnancy* (Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019), 114-115.

In *M'ma*, I use the house as a motif for domesticity, mothers, and motherhood. As enclosed environments, houses both hold back the outside world and hold in their inhabitants. They can become both a refuge, a room of one's own, and a hostile space, a trap. Mothers are complex beings able to nurture and protect as well as harm. Motherhood can be joyful and fulfilling yet, burdened by societal expectations, can also be confining and isolating. Curator Camille Morineau and Art Historian Lucia Pesapane discuss women artists who wrestle with their relationship to the domestic space in their essay "From the Housewife to the Nana-Maison: Domesticity as a Key Theme for Women Artists." They consider the house as a symbol for the alienating and isolating as well as for inspiration and reinvention through the work of Niki de Saint Phalle, specifically her Nana-Maison sculptures. Saint Phalle's Nana-Maisons were larger than life women who were both triumphant and welcoming as a reaction against the stifled housewife. Their bodies often had entrances making them both sculpture and architecture. The Nana-Maison is a being within spaces and she herself is a space that can accommodate others.⁹

Though isolation is tangled up in the experience of the housewife, it is also woven into the experience of contemporary motherhood. I think of my mother, who raised me and my siblings alone. Without community or trusted family nearby, she interacted mostly with her own children and with adults she encountered while taking us to extracurricular activities. She expressed guilt when taking time away from us and asking others to spend time with her rather than their family. My siblings and I, as children, were not always able to care for her as she

⁹ Camille Morineau and Lucia Pesapane, *Women House* (Paris: 11 Conti, Washington D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2018), 16.

needed. She questioned our devotion with accusations that we only loved the financial security she provided. She began to buckle under the weight of raising four children on her own.

But even mothers who are surrounded by a supporting community and family can feel isolated. As birth moved out of the home, where a group of women attended to a birthing mother, and into the hospital, women with child were advised against listening to their community and maternal lineage about how to conduct themselves while pregnant and prepare for birth.¹⁰ When caring for a child begins with isolation, it becomes easier to fall into a pattern which would prevent mothers from seeking support. While this is a pattern some women are breaking out of by taking more agency over hospital births or choosing to return to more domestic spaces to give birth, many communities are still dealing with the repercussions of the medicalization of birth. A woman's pregnancy and birthing experience is greatly impacted by her geographic location as well as her racial and socioeconomic status. Many women may not realize the choices available to them or better options are too far away to realistically plan for and feel they must conform to procedures that were developed to make a doctor's job easier rather than to support the mother in following the pattern and needs of her body. In Morineau and Pesapane's understanding of the house as a place for reinvention and inspiration, the domestic space becomes a place where artists create work "as yet unknown to them, as yet undecided by them, and never decided by anyone else."¹¹ Within the walls of her own home, the artist does not need to defend her creative practice, but can let her ideas flow unhindered by the expectations of others. Her artwork can

¹⁰ Agnes R. Howard. *Showing: what pregnancy tells us about being human* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 77-78.

¹¹ Camille Morineau and Lucia Pesapane, *Women House* (Paris: 11 Conti, Washington D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2018), 16.

unfold out of her being. How much do mothers do the very same? Never knowing exactly who their children will be nor who they will be as mothers even as their children continue to grow. A friend of mine who is already a mother told me that it sometimes seems like every so often, she loses the person she has come to know as her child and they are replaced by another person. People are always shifting but this change is more evident in children because it happens more quickly and as each child grows, constantly becoming a new person, their mother grows with them, learning how to love and appreciate this new person.



Figure IV. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, *Untitled*, 2023-2024

I use snapshots from the family archive as a guide into and through the space of the installation. Art historian Catherine Zuromskis in her book *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images*, addresses how the “social life” of snapshots impacts their meaning. Her idea of the images’ social life encompasses not only the physicality of snapshot prints but the way they are displayed or kept and the reason behind their creation.¹² By taking physical prints of snapshots from the boxes and albums of my family’s photographic archive, printing them on fabric, and stuffing them, I build upon the social life of these images and therefore their meaning.

The entrance of the installation is a ten-foot-tall quilt, formed from one image and shaped like the face of a house with a door cut out of the middle (Fig. IV). The door interrupts an image of myself as a child looking down and is short enough that I must make myself smaller to enter. Though the image was previously a photograph of myself just after I blew out candles on a birthday cake, now all that is visible of my five year old face is from my eyes up. My child self looks at my adult self as I enter the installation. As I reflect on her and on my relationship with my mother, my younger self returns my gaze. Through this entrance I acknowledge the effect my younger self has on me now and consider what it will be like when my own children grow old enough to look back at me, to consider our relationship.

I continue this practice of building upon the social life of my family’s archival images through *Mobile for My Future Children* (Fig. X). This photo sculpture is a mobile too large for a child and is made up of domestic shapes: a lamp, a faucet, a door, the partial silhouette of a house, an iron. Snapshot images of me and my siblings as children, and my mom—both as a

¹² Catherine Zuromskis. *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2013), 10-13.



Figure X. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, *Mobile For My Future Children*, 2023-2024

child and an adult—from my family archive are framed and fragmented by the domestic shapes. Sitting in boxes and albums, these images held only personal affect. They could make me chuckle at how silly my siblings and I were as children, reminisce about the way sunshine

poured through the windows in our childhood home, and tighten my stomach when I recognize the space where my siblings and I had supervised visitations with our father.

In *Mobile for My Future Children*, the forms of the house shape each of these images to allow me to consider how my mother and I were shaped by our parents. According to photo theorist Marianne Hirsch, postmemory is the experience of those who grew up shaped by stories of the preceding generation's trauma. Hirsch describes postmemory as constructed, full and empty, indirect and fragmentary. It is both the memories passed down to the next generation and what the next generation does with these memories.¹³ My generation and my mother's generation were both shaped by abusive parents and absent fathers. Though I do not know exactly how, these patterns will likely continue on in some way. My future children will see the effects of trauma in the way I approach the world and the way my family behaves toward one another. The residue of my family's trauma will not belong to my children in the same way it belongs to me and to my mother, it will be passed down as a shell, a structure which is formed from the inside and holds its shape even when empty of the creature that formed it.

I recognize my own postmemory from the domestic violence and paternal abandonment that shaped my mother's life and project my future children's postmemory through *Mobile for My Future Children*. As I chose and fragmented the images, sewed them into plush objects, and hung them in the form of a mobile, I built a version of my childhood as well as mother's without a thread to introduce specific characters; there is a feeling that something is anxious, uncertain,

¹³ Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22-23.

and unsettled within the mobile. The fragmented images, with negative space floating between them, function more as wholes than as pieces, making the sculpture both full and empty.

I draw this understanding of fragments from performance artist and theorist Eleonora Fabião's essay "History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography." She describes fragments not as units drawn from a whole or puzzle pieces which could be brought together to reveal something complete, but as pieces which generate wholes in and by themselves. Fragments threaten both completeness and temporal linearity.¹⁴ This understanding of fragments lends itself to my work with my family's photographic archive because I do not seek to find some whole understanding of myself, my family, or our histories. My work recognizes the impossibility of knowing a person fully and the nonlinearity of even personal history through engagement with the family archive which contains fragments and reflections of my family members and their histories.

Even when my role flips with my mother and it comes time for my siblings and I to care for her, I will not know her completely. She will die a mystery. In his book *Camera Lucida*, French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes reflects on how caring for his mother in her final days affected his interaction with photographs of her. He finds himself most drawn to the oldest photograph he has of her, the photograph in which she is a little girl. As her primary caretaker, Barthes came to view his mother as a child, himself her parent. He recognized her most as a little child because as she died and he cared for her, she became his little girl.¹⁵ My

¹⁴ Eleonora Fabião. "History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography," in *Perform Repeat Record*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (London: The Intellect, 2012), 121-136.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 67-71.

own mother is beginning to show more signs of aging and I am reminded of her mortality. There will eventually come a time when my siblings and I will care for her as she did for us when we were young.

I recently saw photographs of my mother as a baby for the first time and though I recognized her face immediately, the person in the photographs seemed so distant from the person I know as my mother. I incorporate photographs of my mother as a baby and little girl



Figure XI. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, detail of *Mobile For My Future Children*, 2023-2024

(Fig. XI) with photographs from my own childhood. Our histories mix as I look back to myself as child, to my mother as mother of young children, forward to myself as mother to my future children, as a mother to my mother, and to my mother as child again.

Art historian Thy Phu examines how shapes interact with snapshot images in her essay “Intimate Estrangements and the Shape of Family.” In this essay, she describes an antique family album whose maker placed pictures of family members within hand cut shapes of leaves, fruit, diamonds, hearts, and more irregular or intricate frames. Phu argues that the way these shapes frame and interact with the photographs are a strategy for passing the archive on to generations who do not know the people in the images. Phu says these shapes anticipate generations who will not recognize the people in the photographs and demonstrates a will to facilitate a way for viewers to connect with images of people they do not know.¹⁶ Most who interact with my work will not recognize or know the people in my family’s archival photographs, but the shapes interacting with the images can serve as a tool on how to engage with the images. However, unlike in the album Phu is analyzing, I do not intend for each individual shape to serve as a symbol which guides the reading of the image. I intend for the shapes together to function as symbol for the home, and am more interested in reading each individual image with the aid of the shape’s formal qualities. In Figure XII, I did not choose the shape of a lamp because I wanted this image to be read with the idea of a lamp and all it could symbolize or point to, but was drawn to the way the point where the lamp shade meets the body of the lamp forms an acute angle that arches inward and pokes at the boy’s eyes. I notice he’s smiling and wonder to myself,

¹⁶ Thy Phu. “Intimate Estrangements and the Shape of Family,” In *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. Tina M Campt, Marrienne Hirsh, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis (New York: Steidl, 2020), 291-296.



Figure XII. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, detail of *Mobile For My Future Children*, 2023-2024

has he brought the lamp's points down on his eyes as part of a joke or is he shielding his eyes unaware of the lamp's piercing edges? Similarly, when I look at Figure XIII, I'm not considering the iron as a symbol, but as a form which allows the two girls' legs to splay down and out of the frame while hiding their faces from view.



Figure XIII. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, detail of *Mobile For My Future Children*, 2023-2024

After navigating through the mobile with archival family photos fragmented by house shapes, viewers will see a quilt made up of an image of my mother and of myself hanging low enough that it spills over onto the metal bed frame placed below it (Fig. XIV). In this quilt, I checkerboard an archival photo of my mother and a self-portrait in which I mimic her pose and facial expression. I use the pattern to break up our bodies in an attempt to see us woven together, and the figure created is neither of us though it is also both of us. It is an embodiment of our relationship and a prefiguring of myself as mother. Though the outline of our bodies and our facial features align well enough, they do not neatly resolve into each other. Quilting, as a medium, recognizes the possibility of repetition, of maintaining the present pattern, and of disrupting it. There are consequences if I choose to follow the pattern into which I was born and



Figure XIV. Charlotte Rose Eshelman, *In Our Twenties*, 2023-2024

if I do not. The quilting exists only around the edges of our bodies. I used threads corresponding to the undertones of each image to create a pattern which makes the images look as though they are being woven together, but chose to leave in safety pins, which are used to hold together the layers of a quilt before thread does, only over our bodies. This incompleteness is purposeful. My

mom and I will always be a work in progress for each other, our relationship will always have flaws. The safety pins are also a recognition of how my relationship with my mom is often difficult and of the discomfort inherent in intimacy. The pins are shared between us, they do not belong to one or the other, they therefore come to represent our shared difficulties, even traumas and how these experiences affect our bond with one another. I would love to curl up in a representation of our relationship, to find comfort in the warmth of this quilt, but the safety pins remind me of the ways in which I cannot always find comfort in my mother, the ways in which I feel anxiety about motherhood, and our shared difficulties.

The rest of the installation breaks away from the family archive and focuses on the present and future without directly addressing the past to tie in waiting, anticipating, and speculating. In Catherine Jansen's installation *Soft House*, she built five life size, three dimensional rooms of a house entirely out of photographs printed on fabric: *The Parlor*, *The Kitchen*, *The Bathroom*, *The Children's Room*, and *The Bedroom (Sewing Room)*. Each room has a window with a landscape that influences the theme of the room even as the plush, photographic objects within each room influence the landscape. Outside the window in *The Children's Room* is a garden filled with and made out of animals. Throughout the room the animals reappear. The wallpaper is dotted with the head of a wolf or fox, the books lying on the ground have animals on their covers, and the pictures hanging on the walls feature animals. A child sleeps on the bed and her baby brother lies in a bassinet that resembles a nest. A bird perches on the edge of both and watches over the children. A small stuffed photo of a turtle pokes its head out from under the bassinet and a plush photo of a duck swims in a pool printed on the rug. The dollhouse within the children's room presents a more extreme version of the larger house. The lines between inside

and outside are blurred in the larger house, but in the doll house, they have effectively faded away and the house exists as both inside and outside. It becomes domestic space, forest, ocean, desert, and sky. Every object and wall is made of cloth, it is the bridge by which the spaces are blurred as the fabric is printed upon and shaped to mimic specific objects. I am drawn to way Jansen creates literary and psychological spaces, the way she uses theatrical elements to create an extreme vision of reality, the way she blurs the lines between house and the outside world, and the way she affects the body. In my work, my body is very involved because the body is so much a part of motherhood, both in pregnancy and well beyond. My own body bears the weight of my questions through recorded performance, quilting, sewing, and self-portraiture. The installation itself affects my body as I duck through the doorway and navigate through the mobile.

In *M'ma*, I do not seek to heal from the difficult memories of my mother and childhood, but to find ways to express the multiple dimensions of them. In my installation, I accept the failure of mothers, for mothers must be seen as flawed to be recognized as human, even my own mother, even myself when I become a mother. I embrace the complex intimacy and inherent danger of the mother-child relationship. I pull apart my own memories to reflect and understand. As a child, I waited for my mother to put together the pieces of my ceramic cat, but now I experience waiting by putting together fragments not from a whole but to a whole. Each memory and reflection are not put together as pieces of a puzzle which fit perfectly together, but each fragment comes together in *M'ma* to create a new whole which reflects without needing to heal, and speculates about the future without creating it.

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