

ABSTRACT

Mary Kate McTeigue

My art work is a personal exploration of motherhood and the domestic work involved in this role. The lack of value placed by society on mothers, in their roles as both caretakers and domestic workers, insidiously chips away at the idealistic expectations of motherhood and identity. Tangentially, the lack of a feminist theory on motherhood exacerbates the tension between this devaluation of motherhood and the mothers' expectations. The social construct of the *happy-mother-with-another-one-on-the way* breaks down one load of laundry at a time, one dirty diaper at a time, one child after another, and one year after the next. My process of art making, as a mother, is an attempt to reconcile the sense of displacement and disconnection from society and oneself by creating a pause - to reflect, reclaim and rebirth the fragmented parts of one's identity.

The intersectionality of the third wave of feminism focused on integrating different races, genders and classes from various geographies and socio-economic backgrounds into a common conversation while still maintaining their own strong and dynamic platforms. Mothers, however, were left out of the conversation. "It has been said that motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism" states, Andrea O'Reilly, a professor at York University, in a keynote speech, at the Museum of Motherhood in NYC, 2014. O'Reilly has spent her career as a professor and mother, pushing for a maternal feminist theory which she coined "matricentric feminism." Both, O'Reilly and Samira Kawash, a professor in the Rutgers University PhD program of Women's Studies, ask the same question: Why haven't women's studies' programs embraced a feminism for the specific needs and concerns of mothers?

While the feminist academic world has not embraced the concerns of mothers, within the art world, the work of mothers has been visible. Mothers and their art have added voices to various phases of feminism. Mierle Laderman Ukeles is an artist, activist, mother and feminist working since the late 1960's. She elevated the maintenance chores of mothers and service workers to that of art, thereby creating a community of mothers and workers that felt validated in their jobs. Her art has been a powerful tool in strengthening the agenda and agency of mothers.

My art installations explore women's traditional work. The process of making handmade paper mimics the often tedious, mundane, and oppressive aspects of domestic chores like doing laundry or dishes. The soaking, beating, rinsing, and pressing of fiber into sheets of paper is labor intensive. The paper with its imperfections is used to create simple objects of domesticity like an apron or laundry basket or large panels of color that focus on process. This work has helped me to reconcile with the past twenty-five years as a mother. Art making creates a foundation from which to understand and reclaim oneself.

Paper and Process

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Part I: Artist's Analysis

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My art work is a personal exploration of motherhood, the domestic work involved and how the lack of societal value placed on mothers and caretakers effects a mother's overall sense of worth. Tangentially, the lack of a feminist theory on motherhood exacerbates the tension between this devaluation of motherhood and the mothers' expectations.

I am a mother of four children and was a stay-at-home mother for over twenty-five years. Mothering is a 16-hour workday, on-call 24 hours, seven days a week with no pay and no benefits. The expectation is that mothers do their very best, always, and if this expectation is not met you are deemed a bad mother. This is a set-up.

Women's traditional work in the home is explored in my art. I create installations and prints with handmade paper. The process of making handmade paper mimics the tedious, mundane, and often oppressive aspects of motherhood like doing laundry and dishes. The soaking, beating, rinsing, and pressing of the fiber into sheets of paper reflects the endless chores of maintaining a home. The results can be unpredictable, the sheets of paper have flaws, small holes, are too thin in some areas and too thick in others. The sheets can be messy and imperfect like real life. The ability to let go of the imperfections and use flawed paper to create artwork has helped me to reconcile myself with the past twenty-five years as a mother.

In this paper, I will introduce my work. Simple objects from the home – an apron, a bag, a laundry basket – are presented in obscure sizes, angles, and colors to emphasize work load and emotions. These are accompanied by a grouping of three paper dresses and a set of colored prints.

The book, *Using Textile Arts and Handcrafts in Therapy with Women*, by Ann Futterman Collier, helped to define and understand the objects I created intuitively.

Collier, in her book, writes about the use of objects as metaphors in the therapeutic arts. She cites a researcher, B.L. Moon, who states that using personal metaphors in art making, whether conventional or new, makes them “concrete and tangible” for the maker and that “through the process of exploration the artist can gain new perspective to reframe the past and current experiences.” (Collier, 79). Collier has created a matrix for metaphors, which considers archetypes, rituals and design elements, to name a few, which enable the client/artist to let go of old traumas and transform their metaphors into new ones (Collier, 78).

My piece titled, The Apron, a classic metaphor for the mother, is handmade Japanese paper with natural dyes in muted pinks and light browns (Image 01,02). The paper has natural imperfections and texture giving the piece, and all my other pieces, a unique set of characteristics. After dying the paper, it was treated with konnyaku, a sizing, to give the paper a fabric-like feel. It allows the paper to be crunched and squeezed, creating even more tension and texture. The sheets were small and patched together to create a sense of fragmentation.

Collier suggests the creation of an apron, for her clients, in which to work through themes of motherhood and domestic work to reclaim identity, a sense of oneself, or whatever trauma the homemaker needs to heal (Collier, 126). My artwork and process gave me time to explore deep reasons for the fragmentation in motherhood. As I began to question the reality of society’s devaluation of motherhood it became apparent that the lack of a maternal feminism exacerbated the lack of value and legitimization of motherhood as well.

Andrea O’Reilly, a professor of Women’s Studies at York University, in Canada, and the author of over a dozen books about mothering and feminism, is leading the conversation

regarding the need for a maternal feminist theory, which she terms “matricentric feminism” in 2011. O’Reilly states, “It has been said that motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism,” in a keynote speech, at the Museum of Motherhood in NYC, 2014.

The third wave of feminism brought the intersectionality of different races, genders, classes and geographies to the forefront of the movement. O’Reilly goes on to say, “. . . but not for maternity.” O’Reilly states the unique challenges mothers face as the reason for writing their own feminine theory:

The mother is distinct from the category of woman, and that many of the problems mothers face—socially, economically, politically, culturally, psychologically and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mothers.

Ironically, The Apron, was the first piece I created as a studio art major. This piece set the tone for the rest of my work. Each semester other objects emerged from my subconscious to explore. Open Road is a bag made from Japanese paper and is dyed a pale pink (Image 03, 04). The bag symbolizes many trips I’ve taken with my children, the endless small bags packed and unpacked while losing sight of where anyone was going and why. They had their own little bags. When they could read, next to the bag, I’d set a list of clothing they needed to pack - two pairs of underwear, two pairs of socks, three t-shirts, one pair of jeans, two pull-ups (because this one wet his bed). I’d inspect the bags to see if they’d forgotten anything. Usually, it was me that forgot to pack for myself. On one trip for a hockey tournament, I had organized and inspected three hockey bags, gear, four general weekend bags and food. When we got to Vermont I had a toothbrush and the clothes on my back. I had dropped another ball, *you didn’t quite get it*, I thought. *Almost.*

The bag also came to represent my personal journey, physically and metaphorically, as a woman and a mother. It was hard for me to sit still in the role of motherhood, I wanted to run away. It became harder for me to keep all the balls in the air. Looking back, I see that I had unrealistic goals for myself and my children, but while going through those times, I would have thought otherwise. I thought, *I am beyond the pressures of society, community and expectations* but it turns out that wasn't true. I felt like a personal failure and that my children were too when they didn't practice the guitar or they skipped a hockey practice or when they started smoking pot. Every other families' successes were my families' failures. This came to be the set-up: an ever-losing battle with myself to win at the game of motherhood. As it turned out, I stayed; it was my husband, their father, who left.

One side of the bag is transparent and the zipper is partially open, signifiers that the journey remains open, that possibilities and transformation are always ready to be explored. I have remained open and willing to examine my life, my relationships with family, my part in failures and successes. I have not shied away or retreated from hard times like illness, divorce, addiction, or my children. The journey is open and ongoing and I am walking on the road in rain, sleet, and snow. Going back to finish my bachelor's degree has been a pivotal point on the journey, a pause and a time to reflect, regroup and recharge for the next leg of the trip.

The piece titled "I've dropped my basket." is a steel-framed, over-sized laundry basket with an assortment of handmade paper in a variety of colors and textures tumbling out of an off-kilter basket (Image 05, 06, 07). The title comes from a Southern expression referring to a temporary lapse in sanity. The title, for me, is analogous to the repetitiveness of household chores and isolation which for me led to a poignant sense of loss, loneliness, and depression

while trying to maintain the illusion that this was motherhood fully realized and expressed. In these moments of delusion, it would have been empowering to have a matricentric feminist theory, a feminism of our own, a realistic framework in which to define motherhood and create a sense of community to elevate and legitimize the job of motherhood.

The basket is filled to the top and overflows with a variety of handmade paper, different kinds of fiber like cotton rag paper made from my family's old sheets and towels as well fiber from friends, hand died fiber, and Japanese fiber. The overabundance of paper and the size of the basket speaks to the never-ending chore of doing the laundry, feeling buried under the weight of the load. The colors bring levity to this piece because, despite the pitfalls that my work represents, there is a joyful and fulfilling side to the story of being a mother, the love that is my family.

Collier explains bags and baskets are vessels that can symbolize fertility; for example, Guan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of love, compassion and fertility who always holds a small vessel in their left hand (Collier, 128). When I re-examined the piece, Open Road, created with pale pink translucent paper and a zipper, it left no doubt that this piece was womblike, a peaceful place for growth and healing. Even the basket with laundry, when examined, held the representational bodies of my family's four children albeit spilling over like a fertility goddess gone wild.

The fusing of domesticity, motherhood and art was brought forward by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an artist, activist and a mother who emerged in the mid 1960's. She described her work as Maintenance Art; and argued that domestic chores, caretaking, and public maintenance work were art. These acts, she claimed, were crucial in

maintaining families and systems, and therefore significant and central to her work. She exposed the dirty work to the public and challenged viewers to make the connection between acts of domesticity and the functioning of systems, like the household and sanitation systems. These systems relied on maintenance exclusively to survive but the work and workers were invisible.

She is best known for her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!—Proposal for an Exhibition “CARE,” 1969*, and as an embedded artist with the New York City Department of Transportation. The manifesto serves to expose and elevate the domestic and public workers that clean and care take. In her essay, Andrea Liss, states, “. . . (she) took the matter of fact stance that her maternal work was the material from which art and cultural commentary could be made,” (Liss, 53).

The manifesto is short, written in one sitting, and accompanied by a few photographs of her cleaning. The manifesto was born from the separation of two identities, the mother and the artist. Ukeles would clean and cook, repeat, and then she would “do art” when time permitted (Liss). She was split and the patriarchal times in which she worked didn’t value mothers as artists or women artists (an attitude which persists today). Instead of quitting, fueled by anger, she claimed her identity as a mother and artist, she became one person, and scribed a manifesto for herself, mothers and workers. Discovering Ukeles and her work her work provided a space of legitimization for my own work as a mother, woman and an artist.

The next installation is a grouping of three white dresses titled, ragged edges and missing threads. They are made from Japanese paper and stitched with sashiko Japanese thread. The dresses are ephemeral and translucent. They sit on the ground unsteady and ghost-like. The first

dress is newborn size and resembles a Christening dress (Image 08, 09). The second dress is child size and resembles a First Holy Communion dress (Image 10, 11). The third dress is adult size and resembles a wedding dress (Image 12, 13). They remind me of skins that have shed past identities (Image 14). The unraveling progresses along with the dresses, or so I thought it would. While making the last and largest dress, nothing went as planned. I lost control of the result and yielded to the process. I first embroidered the sleeves and left long ends of sashiko thread hanging. The results didn't feel right. I pulled out rows of stitches, leaving small needle holes across the wrist. I wanted to rip the seams and cut into the dress to continue with the theme of unraveling and fragmentation. The process did not go in that direction. The bottom panel didn't fit correctly. I had to cut into it and add a small section, revealing an obvious mistake, an avoidable mistake, only, if the maker had been more meticulous. The dress began to trigger the voices of not being good enough, not being able to follow through and do your best. I wrestled with the dress, bemoaned the dress, and eventually owned and accepted the dress. The dress is all white without any adornments or embroidery but it shows signs of a life in the mistakes and imperfections. The intention was for the dress to be in a state of deterioration, beyond repair, instead it became a blank slate. The result was a surprise and a small victory. A sign of healing and possibilities. By allowing myself to get out of the way and yield to the process, I created a self-portrait, just as I am, in this moment.

Like Collier's metaphors, the dresses become objects to reclaim places in the past and to create new narratives. They are a "rites of passage" representational of phases from my past. They are not separate pieces of myself. The fabric on the floor draws the dresses together and

I'm reminded of the oneness that connects the past to now and how all along it's been one identity with shifting perspectives created through a labyrinth of life experiences.

In a complete departure from the above metaphorically based pieces, a set of three monotypes called Colored Panels represent a shift from symbolic objects (Image 15,16). The panels focus on process without a clear path or theme. They are a shift into processed based artmaking. They are made from handmade abaca paper, ink and partially coated with oil varnish. The panels are thin and translucent. They are constructed by making oversized sheets of paper and inking up a large piece of Plexiglas with big rollers and full-bodied sweeping motions. The intensity and movement in creating the panels transfers into vibrant colors and varied textures. The bold colors on the translucent paper have a strength but also a sense of fragility, a reflection of what it is to be human. It also reflects the delicate balance between humans and the environment.

Moving into process based artmaking has been to leap into letting go and allowing one process to create the next effect. The framework, from which I operated as a mother, was control. I needed to control the direction and outcome of my children's lives and if it didn't turn out the way I and society expected it to, I tried harder to control the situation. Again, this was a set-up, an unsustainable way of life. It was a house of cards and it fell apart. As I worked through the objects I created, I gained perspective and found acceptance. I was free to begin a different process and let go of the results.

The panels, and this way of working, are influenced by Eva Hesse and Helen Frankenthaler. Hesse took the fundamentals of minimalism and in the words of Elisabeth Sussman, in an essay called, *Eva Hesse Sculpture 1968*, from a collection called *Eva Hesse*

Sculpture, (she), “. . . de-skilled Minimalism, introducing or allowing for rough edges, chance groupings, the clash of smooth exterior and irregular interior.” Sussman said, Hesse wanted crudeness in her minimalism. She wanted her work to be representational of “nothing,” Sussman explains (Sussman, 1). Hesse’s style is an organic minimalism, random variations within a set of repetitive objects, like tubes, vessels (*Repetition Nineteen III, 1968*) or panels (*Contingent, 1968*) which slightly lean or bow in conversation with the other one next to it.

Helen Frankenthaler, an abstract expressionist, threw paint onto unprimed canvases, and let thinned oil paint seep into the canvas which created softer edges around the large swaths of color that spilled across large long expanses. Frankenthaler’s combination of action painting and color field painting resonates with how I create my printed color panels.

Hesse states she wants her work to be representational of “nothing”, I don’t know if that’s possible. The maker could get close to that intention, possibly, but the artist does not have control over the viewer’s perspective. The viewer sees it through the context of a certain time period, the life experiences of the artist, the materials, etc. but ultimately it will come to represent something for somebody.

In my prints, Colored Panels, I tried to let process be the driving force in the work and let my intentions and thoughts pass through like a meditation. This way of working challenges the maker to become objective and slightly distant from the work. After two years of creating metaphorical objects, empirically loaded with emotions, the prints and the freedom of creating something unburdened from past experiences is a relief. I stand in front of the prints and try to be in the moment and notice how what they mean to me, what I see, what I feel changes. These are the beginning of another part of my art and another part of me being ready to move forward.

Ukeles along with Hesse and Frankenthaler have influenced my ability to create art. Ukeles elevated and validated my identity as a mother, caretaker and an artist. She stated that neither one had to be mutually exclusive, those identities could be forged. She gave a voice, leaned into the beginnings of a matricentric feminist discourse with her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*. Hesse and Frankenthaler continue to and will always inspire my creative process providing endless possibilities and combinations to explore. Through them I've learned to let go more, expect nothing, and make more of a mess.

During this process of unpacking motherhood and domesticity, I walked into the Mount Holyoke Museum of Art to view the quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph from the Gees Bend quilting cooperative in Alabama. Walking in between and around the quilts felt intimate and sacred. There was honor and respect for the quilts in the way they were displayed. Up close the designs were simple and humble with a minimalist aesthetic. Fragments of her husband's shirt and pants were stitched into one quilt. Her children's and grandchildren's worn out clothes were sewed into other colorful quilts. She didn't have time for intricate pattern work, the daily chores took too much time.

Bendolph's quilts in their silent narratives spoke volumes. They contextualized concepts which I had explored in my work like domesticity, mothers and lack of a feminist theory to support motherhood. The unfurled quilts like flags proclaimed, I am here, I matter, and we matter as mothers and makers. I felt elevated and empowered in her work and quilts.

In this exhibition, my work found a place, a common language with other mothers and makers. Our objects, like silent protests, help not only to heal ourselves but to contribute and participate in the larger conversation that is motherhood.

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LIST OF ARTWORKS

List of Artworks in the order discussed:

01. The Apron

2017 sewn installation life-size apron
handmade Japanese paper with natural dyes

02. The Apron (detail)

2017 sewn installation life-size apron
handmade Japanese paper with natural dyes

03. Open Road

2017 sewn installation, overnight bag medium size bag
handmade Japanese paper with natural dye

04. Open Road (detail)

2017 sewn installation, overnight bag medium size bag
handmade Japanese paper with natural dye

05. "I've dropped my basket"

2018 installation 40" × 24" × 32"
steel, handmade paper from abaca, cotton rag

06. "I've dropped my basket" (Detail # 1)

2018 installation 40" × 24" × 32"
steel, handmade paper from abaca, cotton rag

07. "I've dropped my basket" (Detail # 2)

2018 installation 40" × 24" × 32"
steel, handmade paper from abaca, cotton rag

08. ragged edges and missing threads (Dress 1, detail # 1)

2018 sewn installation newborn size dress
handmade Japanese paper, sashiko thread

09. ragged edges and missing threads (Dress 1, detail # 2)

2018 sewn installation newborn size dress
handmade Japanese paper, sashiko thread

10. ragged edges and missing threads (Dress 2, detail # 1)

2018 sewn installation young child size dress
handmade Japanese paper, sashiko thread

11. ragged edges and missing threads (Dress 2, detail # 2)
2018 sewn installation young child size dress
handmade Japanese, sashiko thread

12. ragged edges and missing threads (Dress 3, detail # 1)
2018 sewn installation adult size dress
handmade Japanese paper

13. ragged edges and missing threads (Dress 3, detail # 2)
2018 sewn installation adult size dress
handmade Japanese paper

14. ragged edges and missing threads (Group of three)
2018 sewn installation adult size dress
handmade Japanese paper

15. Colored Prints
2018 three monotypes 40" × 60" each
handmade abaca paper, ink

16. Colored Prints (Detail)
2018 three monotypes 40" × 60" each