

Working with Ambivalence and Loss

Artworks that Explore an Aspect of the Mother/Adolescent Daughter Relationship

Artworks made from the material sugar and which explore ambivalence in the mother/adolescent daughter relationship are discussed through psychoanalytic perspectives developed by Julia Kristeva in Black Sun. The works investigate a mother's experience of emotional and psychological ambivalence as she separates from her adolescent daughter. The article discusses insights that emerged from the creative process, such as a present experience of loss (separation from the adolescent daughter due to maturation) may provoke an ambivalent response by the mother as a result of an earlier and unresolved loss. The works of art perform ambivalence over loss through the associative qualities of sugar as both a preserving material but also a material that decays over time. Kristeva also suggests that "affect" and a lost maternal Thing can be detected in literary works and theorised as the symbolic and the semiotic orders. Although an affect such as sadness over loss and a narcissistic wound exists before language, Kristeva proposes that it can be detected in a literary work as rhythm that disrupts the order of language. Is it therefore possible to detect the presence of affect in a work of visual art by looking for a corresponding set of criteria? The article looks at an artwork to see whether rhythms made from a symbolic representation of the breath and repetitive processes can be used to trace affect and thereby create a visual language for loss. The artwork references the work of Canadian artist, Agnes Martin and Adelaide poet, Cath Kenneally.

As a sculpture and installation artist I am interested in ways that my own life experience can motivate creativity. An area of potent emotional complexity for me is the parenting of three teenage daughters. Prior to their adolescent years, I had thought of the girls and myself as a unit. As a consequence I felt bewildered and betrayed by their obvious adolescent ambivalence towards me, but I was also perplexed and uncomfortable with my own ambivalent feelings

for the girls. The process of art making and reflecting on the insights of writer and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, has allowed me to explore the possible origins of this ambivalence and has also led to the insight that a current experience of separation and loss due to the growing maturation of my three daughters may be evoking an earlier, unresolved and unconscious loss.

Themes of ambivalence and loss

In order to contextualise a mother's experience of ambivalence and loss in relation to the maturation of a teenage daughter, the artworks draw on selected elements of the work of Kristeva as developed in her book titled *Black Sun* (1989). Kristeva's psychoanalytic and linguistic perspectives discuss and analyse the creative potential of depression and "affect"¹ for initiating creative imagination and art practice. Kristeva's theories of melancholy and depression are useful resources for analysing the creative potential of loss in works of visual art, particularly my own work. More explicitly, Kristeva discusses loss in the context of melancholia and depression in relation to a lost object² which I now go on to discuss and to a narcissistic wound which is discussed later. In relation to a lost object, Kristeva writes that: "While acknowledging the difference between melancholia and depression, Freudian theory detects everywhere the same *impossible mourning for the maternal object*" (Kristeva, 1989: 9). She asks why this mourning for the maternal object is impossible and responds by proposing that melancholics and depressives share a common experience of: 1) "*intolerance for object loss*" and 2) slowing down of thinking and a decrease in psychomotor activity that affects language in particular (10).

Classic psychoanalytic theory proposes that ambivalence for a lost object is concealed by depression (Kristeva, 1989: 11). A largely unconscious experience of ambivalence may occur due to unresolved and contradictory feelings about a lost object from the past. "I love that object' is what that person seems to say about the lost object, 'but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad..." (11). For the depressive this initial loss is re-experienced with each subsequent loss of a beloved person or thing.

How do psychoanalytic theories about depression and a lost object concern the separation during adolescence between a mother and her adolescent daughter? The loss of the mother is a biological and psychological necessity for both men and women; it is the first essential step to autonomy and one which Kristeva identifies as being a different experience for men and women. According to Kristeva (1989) it may be difficult for a heterosexual woman to resign herself to the loss of the mother because, unlike the male heterosexual and the female homosexual who recover the lost "object" of the mother as an erotic object, "...the loss of the [maternal] object seems beyond remedy for a woman and its mourning more difficult, if not impossible" (85-86). Kristeva emphasises that a tremendous psychic, intellectual and affective effort must be made by a woman, to find the other sex as erotic object (30). As a result

there is a greater chance that a heterosexual woman will not find adequate compensation for the “lost maternal object” making it more difficult for her to relinquish it and mourn its loss. Many women are therefore susceptible to a depressive desire to want to hold on to the beloved object.

In addition Kristeva (1989) identifies that the separation from the mother is difficult for a daughter due to shared subjectivity. She calls the drive to separate from the mother “matricidal” and describes it as essential to the process of becoming an individual. The male child renounces his love for his mother and “kills her” but the daughter’s separation from the mother is made more difficult due to her “specular identification with the mother” and the introjection⁴ of the maternal body and self which is more immediate (28-29).

Kristeva’s (1989) description of the matricidal drive as it affects a daughter emphasises the potential for women to carry unresolved and contradictory feelings about separation from the mother into adulthood: concealed by depression. Later as a mother she may experience the echoes of these unresolved psychological and emotional feelings about a lost object from the past as she witnesses a replay of the inhibited matricidal drive when her own adolescent daughter takes steps to separate from her. Triggers such as this can potentially lead to a complex emotional response to loss for mother and daughter that is disproportionate to any particular situation.

The artworks and loss

I made a series of artworks out of the material sugar to explore a mother’s ambivalent response to separation and loss of an adolescent daughter. To me sugar symbolises contradictory states of nurture as in sugary treats and of anger as in blood sugars produced by the body and part of the fight/flight instinct, as well as its use as a preserving material, but one that deteriorates over time.

I experimented with the sugar: using it as liquid to grow crystals on a toy (*Unfurl*, 2005, Figure 1), or to stiffen netting that was then cast (*Abandonment*, 2005, Figure 2), or boiled and then cast onto marble slabs to make “stained glass” (*I can’t go on/I go on*, 2005, Figure 3) or made into toffee and cast into moulds (*Melancholia*, 2005, Figure 4). Although relatively stable as a stiffening agent when it is first cast, over time the sugar becomes unstable and deteriorates. It melts as it reacts to moisture in the air, becomes tacky, attracts ants, small birds and dirt, and eventually becomes opaque or crystallised and loses its shape.

The works made from sugar can be understood to symbolise intolerance for object loss. For example a work such as *Unfurl* (Figure 1) suggests an unconscious experience of ambivalence as the notion of time as “frozen” or arrested is evoked by the association of “sugar” as a preserving material. Preserving defers the moment of loss. As a metaphor to delay the moment of loss sugar may be understood as a material that suggests an “inability to let go.” Kristeva notes that grief is a postponement that points to the fact that: “I don’t know how to lose” or am unable to find valid compensation for the loss

(5). In *Unfurl* a childhood toy is suspended in a thick crust of sugar crystals, trapped in an excess of sweetness.

Sugar also presents an interesting, if literal, way of interpreting Kristeva's discussion of "melancholy cannibalism" in *Black Sun*. "Melancholy cannibalism" is the fantasy of ingesting the object rather than losing it: "Better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested ... than lost" (12). A work titled *Melancholia* (Figure 4) has casts made in sugar of the dolls from my own childhood and which are placed in a cast sugar "shoe-box." The dolls' faces look invitingly edible and could be imaginatively, as well as literally, held in the mouth and sucked on for a long time.

The importance of the doll to a little girl is emphasised by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1972). Beauvoir describes the doll as an "alter ego" or "double" for a girl as well as being her child. Through the doll a girl combines in herself both the mother and the daughter (de Beauvoir, 1972: 310). A use of my childhood dolls in the work of art may be understood as symbolising a combined mother-daughter subject position from the past. Read in the context of Kristeva's psychoanalytic insights, this may be seen as pointing to an earlier unresolved or incomplete separation; the result of an inhibited matrilineal drive and a sense of inadequate compensation for the lost maternal object? A symbolic layering of ambivalence as an inability to lose accrues in *Melancholia* through a use of the dolls to suggest a combined mother-daughter subjectivity; an association of "sugar" as a preserving material; and "sugar" as an edible material that can be ingested.

Paradoxically though, if sugar can be seen as analogous to a melancholic "holding on" due to its preserving qualities, it may also be understood as analogous to loss and death due to its temporal nature as it changes and deteriorates over time. Freud postulates that the "double," originally considered as an assurance of immortality, turns around to become the uncanny "harbinger of death" (Freud 235). As such sugar suggests the qualities of the "double."

The mother finds a "double" in her daughter. Looking at examples of the double in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde, de Beauvoir notes that: "The double is a dubious personage, who assassinates his original [so too] ... in becoming a woman the daughter condemns her mother to death; and yet she lets her live on" (1972: 600). The mother is aware that even as her daughter reaches her prime, she herself is in decline having lost the freshness of her own youth (535). As a consequence of mirroring her inevitable aging process, the mother may feel ambivalently towards her daughter, her double.

The doll is a double for a girl, and a daughter is a double for a mother. In *Melancholia* the doll as a symbol of past mother-daughter doubling by a daughter, re-emerges to become a symbol of a present experience of a mother-daughter doubling, now from a perspective of a mother. Cast in sugar and as doubles the dolls' faces act in their dual capacity as a preserving material that reflects a desire to hold on and deny the loss, but which as it changes and deteriorates, turns around to become a sign of the inevitability of loss.

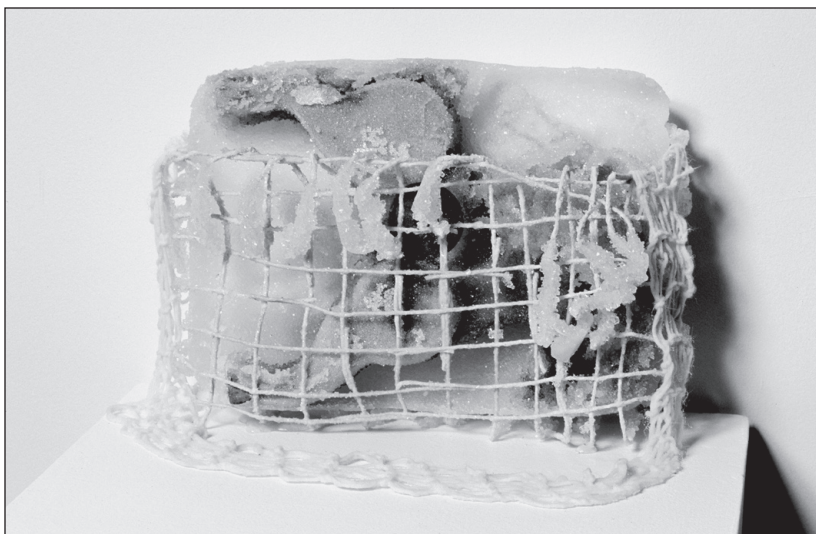


Figure 1: "Unfurl," sugar, wood, wool, plaster, 35cm x 25cm x 10cm, 2005.

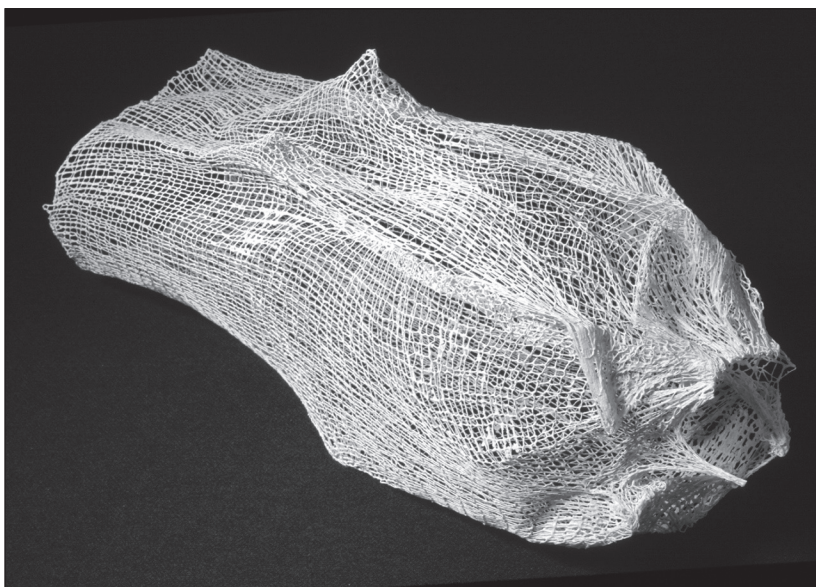


Figure 2: "Abandonment," wool, plaster, sugar, 195cm x 75cm x 90cm, 2005.



Figure 3: "I can't go on/I go on," sugar, 74cm x 60cm, 2005.

Meaning in loss

Modern psychoanalysis has revealed another form of depression that is not about ambivalence towards an object. Kristeva (1989) writes that this other form of depression is a narcissistic wound of the "primitive self," a fundamental wound to self esteem (12). Persons afflicted with this form of depression consider that they have a fundamental flaw. They sense the loss of an unrepresentable and "unnameable good." The affect of sadness replaces the object and the sufferer becomes attached to sorrow (13). The depressed narcissist does not mourn a lost object but a lost Thing.

Kristeva's (1989) work on melancholia and depression is important for imagining meaning *in* loss. She writes, "rather than seek the meaning of despair (it is either obvious or metaphysical) let us acknowledge that there is meaning only *in* despair" (5-6). The despair, the hopelessness is borne of the certain knowledge that we will be separated from the one that we love. It is



Figure 4: “Melancholia,” sugar, 13cm x 18cm x 11cm, 2005.

in this space of despair that a search begins for the lost object of love, “first in the imagination then in words.” Creative potential is present in the despair over loss. Emotions such as anger, love, anxiety, hostility and sorrow that are experienced by the mother when separating from her adolescent daughter may be transposed into a work of creative imagination.

Loss as creative potential

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva theorises how an emotional affect, such as sadness, can become both the initiator of, and indexed to, the product of the creative imagination.

Kristeva (1989) claims that loss, bereavement and absence may be the initiators of a work of creativity and help to nourish this work. Yet loss, bereavement and absence are also paradoxically the elements that “threaten” the work of creativity as the melancholic artist struggles against succumbing to the sorrow (9). Kristeva conceptualises this process in terms of art work as fetish. The artist endows the artwork with meaning and significance. Fetish is an example of primary process thinking, an aspect of which is symbolisation. Symbolisation means to substitute one image or idea for another and is a process upon which sublimation depends—or the ability to deflect energy into creative channels. Kristeva claims that the artwork as fetish emerges when the activating source of the work, being sorrow, has been “repudiated” and no longer has binding force (24).

But having made the work of art, how can traces of the initiating affect such as sadness be detected?

In psychoanalysis affect is a generalised term for feelings and emotions that are attached to ideas and not vice versa (Rycroft, 1972: 3-4). Sadness is an affect caused by external or internal traumas and is the main mood of depression. Kristeva asks: "If affect can be assumed to be the 'most archaic inscription' of inner and outer events, pre-language and pre-sign, how does one then reach the realm of signs?" (1989: 23). This question needs to be briefly considered because Kristeva speculates on the relationship of affect, its generative ability and to its presence in literary creation, which I then go on to apply to a work of visual art.

Kristeva refers to Hannah Segal's hypothesis that the child produces vocalisations or uses objects that are symbolic equivalents of what is lacking. Then later in response to its sadness the child produces "within its own self elements alien to the outer world, which it causes to correspond to such a lost or shifted outerness; we are then faced with symbols properly speaking, no longer with equivalences" (23). Kristeva then adds her own perspective to that of Segal's and develops her own understanding of "affect." She writes that the ability to overcome sadness lies in the identification with a third party—father, form, schema—and not with the lost object. This identification may be called phallic or symbolic and results in the subject denying the loss and entering the realm of signs and creativity; "no, I haven't lost; I evoke, I signify through the artifice of signs and for myself what has been parted from me" (23). It becomes possible to detect affect in literary creation as it is transposed into rhythms, forms and signs that "disrupt" the symbolic order (22). Kristeva's point about affect in literary creation is important when considering the complexity and the intensity of the emotional and the psychological aspects of the mother/daughter relationship and its representation in works of art. This is because, if affect may be detected as rhythm that disrupts the grammar and logic of language in literary creation, it suggests that it is possible to detect the presence of affect in a work of visual art by looking for a corresponding set of criteria; for example the use of repetition to create visual rhythms that disrupt the order of the grid.⁵

Repetition and the work of art

An example of affect in a work of art may be seen in the paintings of Canadian born artist, Agnes Martin. Her paintings are built up of grids, measured and regular but with irregularities appearing in the hand-drawn, pencilled lines made with a straight edge (Haskell, 1994: 146). As I look at her paintings I picture Martin drawing in her breath, holding it and slowly breathing out to still her hand as she concentrates on the line being drawn. I wonder too if she deliberately breathes out and with the next indrawn breath continues drawing the line to become a rhythmic process of working with her breath; irregularities appearing as each line is drawn.

Kasha Linville's phenomenological reading of Martin's work describes the changes that appear as the viewer moves back from the work. On stepping back

from the paintings they become atmospheric as the ambiguities of illusion take over from the earlier materiality to become a "...non-radiating impermeable mist. It feels like, rather than looks like atmosphere ... hazy, velvety ... you step back even further ... the painting closes down entirely, becoming completely opaque" (Krauss, 1999: 79).

The mention of "atmospheric" takes us to the enigmatic realm of mood and affect. The repetitive hand-drawn quality of the line allows irregularity to appear and creates a visual rhythm as the repeated lines in the painting interact with each other in order to create an artistic whole. These irregularities are highlighted by a use of the grid. Anna Chave writes that the grid in Martin's work is conventionally viewed as a "... highly intellectual geometric formulation that reflects the logical order of man's mind..." (Haskell, 1994: 135). Haskell writes that, "...in [Martin's] hands the grid becomes a vehicle for the expression of infinite expansion and metered cadences" (109). Although inspired by the rhythms of nature, Haskell adds that it is not Martin's intention to depict them in her painting, rather Martin seeks to "...find visual correlatives for the detached emotions that often attend the experience of these rhythms and visual experiences" (109). Using Kristeva's (1989) theories of affect it is possible to understand the grid in Martin's work as evidence of form or schema belonging to the phallic or symbolic order. Rhythm occurs as a consequence of subtle changes visible in the quality of the repeated lines. These visual rhythms disrupt the ordered nature of the grid to allow the initiating affect to be discerned by the viewer. In Martin's work this affect appears to be one of joy.

My interest in Martin's paintings and affect relates to a work I made for exhibition in which I focused on the rhythm of the breath. The work began when I made two or three small crocheted forms out of transparent nylon thread and suspended them in my studio. They moved gently on the air currents and suggested to me the idea of breath. As the exhibition date drew nearer and I considered how to resolve the work I came across a poem by Adelaide poet, Cath Kenneally titled "Being Away" (2003). The poem uses the personal voice to talk about illness and resolve. Kenneally described for me her use of unpunctuated, unbroken and unmeasured rhythm to suggest a slower pace due to illness. As I read the poem, it became possible to experience illness as a breathy quality, its halting rhythms, economical use of words, and a quotidian awareness of limits, imparted a sense of multiple rhythmic layering. The last eight lines of the poem affected me deeply:

...but love
for my absent eldest, who
travelled to this country
with me, a wide-eyed ten,
ten years back. For him

I wish this calm

profusion—less admirably,
I wish it could be me
who gives it to him.
(Kenneally, 2003: 46)

The lines speak about an absent eldest by a mother who remembers him as a wide-eyed youngster. The poem also narrates Kenneally's own self awareness of complex and conflicting emotions about the independence of her child that stem from her ongoing desire to nurture and protect him, which she knows to be inappropriate. The acceptance of physical and emotional limits by the mother and her resolve in the face of illness and loss, appear to me to be quietly courageous in the face of human frailty.

As I read and re-read the poem I became conscious of each breath I took and counted thirty-eight breaths in all. I decided to make thirty eight small forms to resolve the work for exhibition and titled it *Breath in Breath out* (2006) (Figure 5). Each of the forms was tied by a length of nylon thread to a piece of tulle netting and moved with the ambient air currents. The symbols for breath moved in a visual representation of the unmeasured rhythms of speech.

I enjoyed the repetitive process of hand-making each of the small modules that make up *Breath in Breath out*. The subtle differences that emerged in each individual form sustained my interest and I found pleasure in the unique character of each of them. These differences were apparent at a close viewing of the work, however from a distance the small forms became almost invisible and were seen moving softly in the air currents against a backdrop of the gallery architecture. At the time of making *Breath in Breath out* I was learning a meditation technique that focussed on the breath as a way to live with depression. The idea is that each breath is a calming and re-focussing mechanism to allow time and space to change thinking patterns. It requires that the individual slows down their responses and becomes aware of the moment and their emotions.

This is the joy of repetitive processes. In my work, I can slow down and focus on the moment of creating the work. In *Breath in Breath out* the affect is transposed from my thought, through the body and hands and into the plastic material being manipulated. From Kristeva's theories of affect it becomes possible to understand this process as a non-verbal indicator of mood. The initiating mood is sublimated through a process of repetition that allows differences to appear in each individual form; these differences are responses to feelings at different moments and to the moods of different days. But her theories also suggest that it may be possible for the viewer to detect affect in the finished work of *Breath in Breath out*, as the rhythms generated through the movement of each inter-related component act to disrupt the grid-like structure of the gallery walls, ceiling and floor. It is my hope that the breath-like rhythms inherent in the work communicate affectively to the viewer a calm acceptance in the face of sadness, depression and loss.



Figure 5: "Breath in Breath out," nylon thread, 80cm x 60cm, 2006.



Figure 5a: "Breath in Breath out," detail, nylon thread, 80cm x 60cm, 2006.

¹“Affect” may be detected in literary creation transposed into rhythms, forms and signs that Kristeva calls the semiotic or maternal realm that “disrupt” the symbolic order, that of the law and the Father (Kristeva, 1989: 22).

²The object is “... that towards which action or desire is directed.... In psychoanalytic writings, objects are nearly always persons or parts of persons or symbols of one or the other” (Rycroft, 1972: 100).

³Van den Berg diagnoses the maternal object in Freud’s dreams in reference to an oedipal and pre-oedipal mother. “The fantasy of the pre-oedipal mother is not entirely positive: she devours as well as nurtures, kills as well as cares, takes as well as gives” (Klein cited in van den Berg 1). She can be detected lurking behind a “seductive” and forbidden oedipal mother. “...[T]his archaic object is constituted by his [Freud’s] double desire to merge with her and to separate from her” (van den Berg, 2007: 2).

⁴Introjection “The process by which the functions of an external object are taken over by its mental representation by which the relationship with an object ‘out there’ is replaced by one with an imagined object ‘inside’” (Rycroft, 1972: 77).

⁵Rosalind Krauss (1999) proposes that there are two ways in which the grid functions to declare modernity in modern art, spatially and temporally. Spatially it is geometric, flattened, ordered, anti-natural, anti-mimetic and anti-real. Its temporality is reflected by the fact that the grid is particular to the twentieth (and twenty-first) centuries and did not appear in art prior to that; it is ubiquitous in the art of the twentieth century. For these reasons the grid may be considered as a visual representation to reflect ideas of order, rationality, logic and structure inherent to notions of culture and a modern society.

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