

Leslie Reid

Afterimage

A Photographic Journal of Making Art and Mothering Teens

For the past few years in my work as an artist and photographer, I have been looking at issues of motherhood and in particular maternal ambivalence. I turned to these ideas at a time when my two sons were getting a little older—a time when I finally felt confident enough to look at my life as a mother in my art. In their early childhood, I had little energy, less confidence, and even less desire to think about motherhood as an issue in my work—any work at all was a major achievement—and I clung to the belief that my art had not changed just because I was a mother. I lived through a long period of denial and self-censorship in my work.

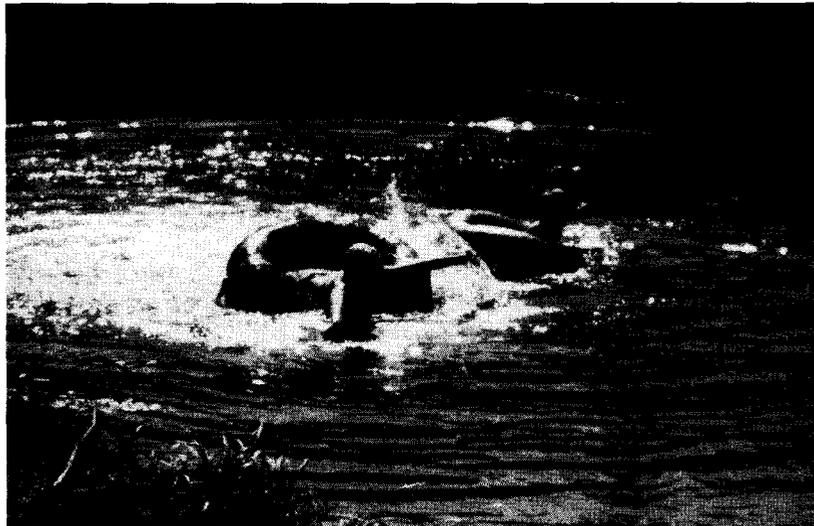
Many of our difficulties in addressing our roles as mothers stem from the fact that we are, not surprisingly, fearful of the deep and unspoken ambivalence we experience as mothers. We fear also the effects, both private and public, of our acknowledgment of this ambivalence. As well, the discipline of visual arts does not particularly encourage such an exploration. For artists, the representation of motherhood is difficult as it is coloured by its association with essentialism, sentiment, and autobiography. My exploration of maternal ambivalence in my work began with a serendipitous moment of revelation while sorting through family photographs—snapshots, really—and led to an urgent desire to examine my reluctance to dig into the center of my life—digging into the wreck, as Adrienne Rich (1986) calls it.

I have always used photographs as source material for my painting but consciously eliminated all reference to my maternal life in work that dealt with physical, perceptual, and psychic effects of light. It was photographs of my two sons swimming in a pond—a pond image used in many un-peopled paintings—that triggered my recognition of the need to turn to my motherhood as a focus in my work. The intensity of my response to these photographs took me

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Leslie Reid, "Cantley VI," 1993, 56" x 85", oil on canvas.



Leslie Reid, "Cantley VI," 8" x 12", Cibachrome.

by surprise. They revealed the darker side of my connectedness to my sons, one of anxiety and dread, and a recognition of both external and internal danger, and led me to explore maternal ambivalence as subject in my art.

In the photographs of the children these ambiguities are evidenced by shadow and by absence—my absence. The figures are often held transfixed in rings of water; faces are obscured, lost in patterns of light and shade. Connec-

tion seems tenuous at best, fragile and threatened—I am present only as watcher. Subdued colour, low tonality and a flattened unknowable space heighten this sense of anxiety. The photographs are more direct in their depiction of motherhood and ambivalence; the paintings developed from them are subtle and somewhat destabilizing.

The idea of afterimage comes from thinking about the positive and negative, light and shadow character of mothering, how these qualities are



Leslie Reid, "Cantley XII," 1995, 24" x 36", oil on canvas.

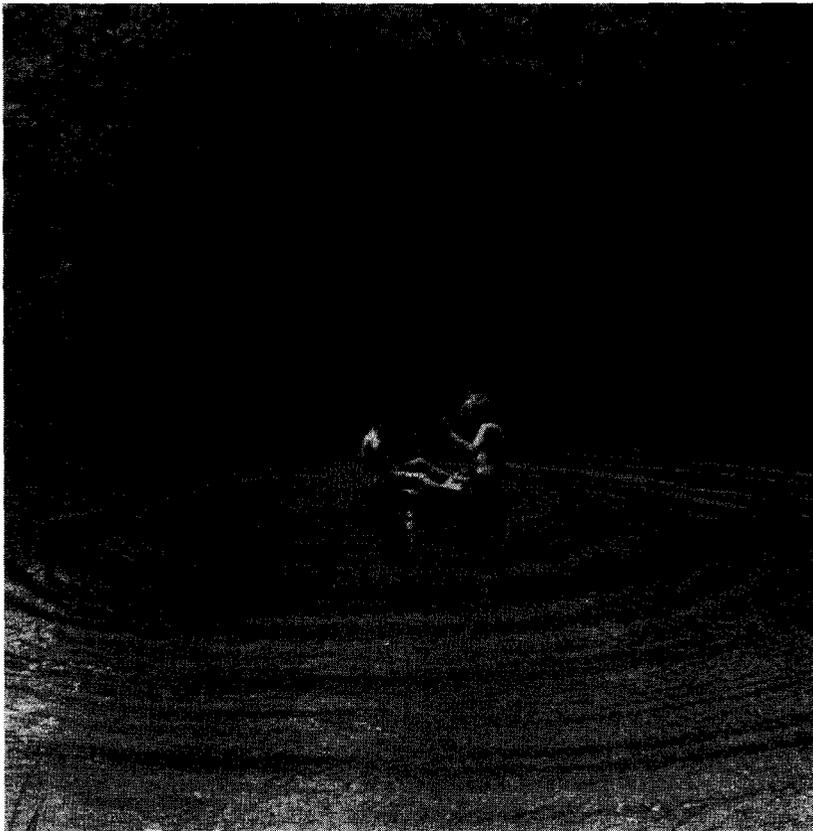
exacerbated in mothering teens, and the parallels in the light/dark qualities of my work that has always referenced the positive/negative of the photograph as a continuing metaphor. As my sons grow closer to adulthood, my perceptions of them, of myself, of our constantly shifting and often-fraught relationship have, of necessity, changed, and are moving into and transforming the paintings. The distancing devices I had found necessary in earlier works with the children—were they defenses against fear and foreboding?—have begun to dissolve, and I am looking more directly at the tangled child/parent/adult image. The narrative, like the boys themselves, is becoming more assertive. Often conflicting perceptions of our changing roles are bringing new emotions to the surface, appearing, almost literally at times, in the images of my sons and the ponds and rivers that occur repeatedly in my work

I am now dealing with these new concerns—the challenges and perils of making art about mothering teens—and the seeming impossibility of seizing

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this time, in my life and in my work. I am contemplating the necessity and the resistance encountered in trying to capture the chaotic feelings of release and regret that accompany this time—this period of breaking away and letting go, of stepping back as I continue to reach out a hand. My older son is now 18 years old and a self-declared, legally independent, adult male, although clean socks and a full refrigerator are still issues. I'm still on call.

I have been reliant on my family photographs for painting and drawing for years now. They are a source of reflection and investigation of my changing experience of motherhood and maternal ambivalence. Now there are so few



Leslie Reid, "Cantley XIV," 8" x 8", Cibachrome.

photo opportunities. The boys are more resistant—hardly unusual but so significant for me and my watchfulness. It is harder to mark my presence and absence, my ambivalent feelings about the whole enterprise of mothering. I feel a poignant regret, much stronger than I had anticipated, at this turning point in our lives as mother and sons. I am facing testosterone-driven individuation which, unlike that of infancy, seems to be happening without me, or without



Leslie Reid, "Cantley: Hurricane," 1998, 48" x 72", oil on canvas.



Leslie Reid, "Cantley: Spiral," 1998, 8" x 12", chromogenic print.

my influence on how, when, and where it occurs. And it's gathering noisy momentum. I am becoming someone other.

Are these changing relationships affecting my work? It seems harder to deal with than I expected. Perhaps it is because I am living the changes even as I paint and write. My mothering role is more tenuous and contingent than ever as a result of their growing separation from me—and so is my presence as artist.



Leslie Reid, "Calumet: Dive," 2002, 8" x 12", chromogenic print.



Leslie Reid, "Calumet: Splash," 2002, 8" x 12", chromogenic print.

Can I continue to work with these issues of maternal ambivalence as the relationship changes so dramatically? My work now seems coloured by a longing for a time available only in memory. The present asserts itself with harsh insistence. Their startlingly deep voices and large bodies fill the house.

I am more and more the watcher, a presence less visible. This has created a disturbing shift in my work. I seem to be editing my mothering relationship

out of the visual field in so many ways. Not only do we aging mothers of adolescents become invisible, we are supposed to accept this as inevitable and desirable.

No one can truly describe the extraordinary rush of emotion that comes with birth; equally, none of the stories I heard prepared me for the teenage individuation mothering experience. I find myself resisting while dealing with great need, impatience, hostility, grandiosity.

I am searching for the parallels in my work



Leslie Reid, "Calumet: Salute," 2002, 8" x 12", chromogenic print.

I have found little to dispel my growing discomfort at the seeming inevitability of my disappearance. Not only am I destined to bow out or be pushed out, but I will be viewed as the all-engulfing monster no matter what I do. The psychoanalytic literature is not very encouraging for mothers of teens. (Even Freud chose to ignore mothers and teens. I think he had an eye on his career.)

Teens are everywhere in the culture—driving it in many areas such as in music, film, video, fashion—and I watch helplessly the consumerisation of an entire age group. Yet, other than teen-management and tough-love help books (which don't seem to help anyway) it is hard to find a serious study of what is arguably the most turbulent and contradictory period of our mothering lives.

Delving into issues of maternal ambivalence in my painting was intensely affirming when dealing with my sons when they were younger, but as our relationship shifts, the ambivalence as I explored it in those works has also shifted, and absence has taken on a very different meaning.

It has become even more urgent to locate myself in my work.

How does this conflicted period translate into work? Much to my chagrin, with as great difficulty as the relationships themselves. I had optimistically

assumed that I could at least hold my own, hang onto what was properly mine—my work. But the struggles of adolescent individuation and teenage separation have accompanied me to the studio, and their images, once viewed more innocently, now seem taunting, challenging—hold onto us if you can.

We grieve as mothers because we know that however loving and close our relationships have been, our sons—and our daughters—are encouraged to discard us, and we let go. Finding the threads that still connect if not bind, before the inevitable feelings of “too late” set in, has become an issue in my work.

Am I moving towards memory or am I already there?

A student once asked me what I would do as my children got older. Would I be doing paintings of my 22-year-old children or would I endlessly rifle through the baby snapshots and relive the past. It was a difficult but reasonable question and one that I now ask myself as my sons at age 18 and 15 are grown up, somewhat allergic to cameras, and never home.

But, of course, my paintings are not a study of them; they are about the critical space of the mother-child relationship. Art about children moves in and out of fashion, but art about the mothering experience has not had much positive critical attention—when it has attracted any notice at all.

I have been sensitive to my sons' reactions to being used so publicly, and while they expressed a certain shy reservation at the outset, though their identities are not obvious, I think that, as well as being reassured that they appear anonymously, they have become increasingly quite taken by the idea of their inclusion in my work—a connection that has taken on significant meaning for them. (They have also mentioned modeling fees.)

At the same time, even as our relationship is intrinsic to my work, the work is separate from them. It is my accomplishment that is visible, and this has the added value, as Babette Smith (1995) has noted, of allowing them to view my accomplishments apart from themselves, unrelated to raising them, and they can thus avoid the ambivalence of assessing my success in raising them.

It is critical for me to acknowledge my lived experience as mother in my work as painter. Acknowledgement of that experience is essential to the understanding of why art is made at all. As for my teenagers and me, I know our relationship will endure, altered but ongoing. Perhaps it will exist as what anthropologist Sarah Hrdy (1999) has likened to a phantom limb.

It is up to us as mothers to reclaim connection, and in the new paintings of transition, it is that connectedness, mercurial, paradoxical and essential, that I will continue to explore.

References

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