

TONI WILKINSON

Rediscovering Maternal Passion in the Photographic Portrait

The photographic portraits in the m/others series facilitate a rediscovery of maternal passion and surrender to a maternal return after the loss of separation. Combining theory with practice, the images incorporate Julia Kristeva's ideas on the abject and maternal passion to acknowledge the complexity and conflicting dynamics of the maternal. Consequently, the accommodation of maternal ambivalence via the illumination of the abject within the portraits sharpens the capacity for subjective interpretation with a refusal to idealise or vilify the mother. The m/others portraits magnify the ambiguous pleasures of the maternal bond through a representation of the coexistence of beauty and menace to emphasise mutual recognition between mother and child.

As a mother and photographer, I have increasingly turned the camera towards my own children and, in so doing, I have realised that with each slam of the shutter a part of them is lost to me; this loss confronts and saddens me. Photography is the means through which I ask questions of a maternity that is simultaneously fulfilling and demanding, it thus “wounds and increases me.” Hence, the photographs I make intimate my own tangled, melancholic maternity, which is tender and fierce. To better understand these personal feelings of maternal loss that significantly influence my creative output, I embrace Julia Kristeva's ideas on *maternal passion* and the abject, which engage with both negatives and positives to reclaim a more powerful opportunity for the maternal. Kristeva's (2005) *maternal passion* acknowledges the conflicting dynamics, violence and ambiguity that inhabits the maternal and is therefore at odds with conventional western ideas of maternity as a “sanctuary for the sacred.” I argue that attention to the ambiguities and ambivalences of *maternal*



m/other #1. Photo: Toni Wilkinson



m/other #2. Photo: Toni Wilkinson



m/other #3. Photo: Toni Wilkinson



m/other #4. Photo: Toni Wilkinson

passion, which are explored through the photographic portraits in this particular series, titled *m/others*, acknowledge a complex maternal and combine theory with practice. The photographs incorporate contradictions and involve the intricacies of love, loss and melancholia that inhabit the mother/child web, to facilitate transgression, emancipatory opportunities for subjectivity and a rediscovery of the maternal via the photographic portrait.

It is through a departure from the maternal that we arrive to ourselves, through the crisis of separation from the mother we deviate, and then following the remorse that accompanies this loss we may rediscover the mother. Kristeva suggests that Melanie Klein recognised the potential for a rediscovery



m/other #5. Photo: Toni Wilkinson



m/other #6. Photo: Toni Wilkinson

of the mother after separation: “The self never stops re-creating the mother through the very freedom it gained from being separated from her. The mother is a woman who is always renewed in images and words, through a process of which ‘I am the creator simply because I am the one that restores her’ (2001: 131). Indeed, Kristeva further describes motherhood as a “reconquest that lasts a lifetime and beyond” (2005: 2) and I illustrate this “reconquest,” when I use the camera my own mother gave me to make portraits that are imbued with my own maternal experience. While these photographs of *m/others* reference my own personal lament of the continual movement of my own children on their journey of separation from me. They also revel in the possibility of a maternal return that I rediscover via the photographic portrait.

The *m/others* series contemplates the wider complexity of the maternal relationship and “maternal passion.” According to Kristeva in “Motherhood Today,” reflection on the significance of maternal passion has been lost in contemporary culture, “we have become the first civilization which lacks a discourse on the complexity of motherhood”

(2005: 6). Throughout these images I resurrect maternal passion and elevate its significance to redress the continued vacancy of a complex maternal in the media and contemporary visual culture, which remains preoccupied with the paternal function over the complex maternal. This lack of engagement with maternal passion springs from an avoidance of the ambiguity and “passionate violence of the maternal experience” (Kristeva 2005: 1). To oppose any dodging of maternal, the images in this series illuminate the coexistence of beauty and menace in maternal passion. Subsequently, the potential risks and benefits that accompany the maternal experience are exposed throughout the works.

Each image represents the maternal bond as ambiguous and ambivalent



m/other #7. Photo: Toni Wilkinson

and reflects the concurrence of conflicting dynamics that operate in the maternal realm. The incorporation of uneasy pose and gesture and the reliance on intimacy between the sitters unsettles, confuses and disrupts to impart an alternative discourse of maternity that allows multiple interpretations. Furthermore, abjection is included as a mechanism to disturb viewing pleasure, to facilitate transgression and to subvert conventional depictions of the maternal. For example, I include older mother/child interactions to create tension and depart from conventional representations of motherhood as sacred and linked to innocence and youth. Kristeva maintains, “It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous,

the composite” (1984: 4). I celebrate abjection within the images when I blur boundaries and reveal subjects that allude to fragility and disjunction, embrace confusion and delight in the delicate manner that mother and child fall between each other.

These frayed borders are facilitated by the inclusion of the maternal abject in the images, which extend the maternal as powerful and compelling. In *m/other* #7 the abject is revealed where the mother holds her baby who feeds from her breast and simultaneously excretes her breast milk, the newborn’s unstoppable slimy, flowing faeces are seen running down the mother’s leg and this disgusts yet holds ones attention. Here, we are assured of the power of the maternal abject, “the abject is something repulsive that both attracts and repels. It holds you there in spite of your disgust. It fascinates” (Oliver 1993: 55). This particular image demonstrates the sway of the abject and incorporates theory in practice to serve as a visual metaphor for Kristeva’s thought in the *Powers of Horror*. Kelly Oliver expands on Kristeva’s thought on the maternal abject:

The most archaic boundaries of the clean and proper self, of course, are those regulated by the maternal authority, in particular anal and oral drives. Food not yet the body, is expelled through the anus. The boundaries between body and not-body are controlled by the mother. And both the subject, and society, which depend on the Symbolic order, depend on the repression of this maternal authority, which represents the threat from beyond the borders of the Symbolic. (1998: 57)

In *m/other* #7 the mother is steadfast and unperturbed while the yellow slime oozes down her thigh, she appears satisfied that the healthy excrement indicates that her beloved infant is sustained by the milk from her breast. “For the mother, the infant’s shit ... becomes the way the child communicates.... Through this shit: its colour, consistency and frequency, the mother faces the abject and returns herself to the pre-verbal stage of signs in order to interpret the child’s needs” (Astore 20). *m/other* # 7 displays maternal passion and reveals the power the mother wields as the keeper of the infant’s body.

Victor Burgin believes that the maternal body highlights to men their own mortality and he reiterates Julia Kristeva’s position in *Powers of Horror* that, “fear of the archaic mother proves essentially to be a fear of her generative power. It is this power, dreaded, that patrilinear filiation is charged with subduing” (116). *m/other* # 7 accentuates the strength of the mother’s body and makes clear the power of the relationship between mother and child. In a cultural economy that downgrades motherhood this image celebrates the power of the maternal and demonstrates that “the mother- child dyad provides a foundation for all social relations” (Oliver 1998: 65). Thus, the representation of the maternal

object elevates the status of the maternal figure and unveils her as the curator at the boundaries between the individual and culture.

To further elevate mutual recognition between mother and child, I engage with a diverse, multi-age range of mother/child combinations and do not isolate new mothers but rather seek out more disparate mother/child subjects whose intense and intimate maternal bond allow me to introduce the perverse. My interest in the perverse stems from its companionship to the abject, “the abject is related to perversion.... The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts” (Kristeva 1982: 15). The incorporation of perversion urges conventional notions of maternity and identity towards the point where meaning collapses and heightens the absurdity of a cohesive maternity or fixed identity. The perverse is at play in *m/other* # 1 where the embrace of an unusually ambiguous mother and child coupling is seemingly uncomfortably passionate. Within the image a complex opportunity for the maternal arises that is rarely depicted in traditional mother /child photography. Photography when used as a tool by the maternal artist can acknowledge the ambiguity of motherhood, as Andrea Liss states, “it is the feminist mothers admission that ambiguity is often the norm” (xvii). Maternal photography works against mutual exclusion and rather encourages the promise of subjective fluidity that accompanies mutual recognition between mother and child. Throughout *m/others* I utilise the perverse to offer a complex opportunity for maternal relationship and to acknowledge the impossibility of the Symbolic realm to sever the potent mother and child bind.

The title of the series *m/others* also emphasises the connection between the other and the maternal on more than one level. It acknowledges what Kristeva believes is the maternal ability to accommodate the other within, through the shared mother-infant body experience, reflects the status of maternity as other in dominant culture, and also references the participation of child/ren, the maternal “first other” in the images. *m/others* works against the stereotypical institutional constructions of motherhood as uniform and singular. Instead, the images portray the ambiguity of maternal passion and create variables, to which “many values can be assigned”; they reveal that which Kristeva names “subjects in process.” Kristeva recognises the contradictions in maternity and draws a correlation between the complexity of identity and the maternal body. Oliver expands, “like the maternal body, each one of us is what she calls a subject in process. As subjects in process we are always negotiating the subject within ... like the maternal body, we are never completely the subjects of our own experience” (1998: 3). Kristeva frees up contemplation regarding self and other in the subject by comparisons to, and consistent espousal of, the double identity within the maternal body. The maternal body then, creates a crisis for stable foundations of identity, as Kristeva reveals, “It is an identity, that splits, turns

in on itself and changes without becoming other” (1986: 297). The maternal body denies a clear binary subject and object exchange in identity and instead introduces a more complicated possibility—a paradox.

The photographic portrait like the maternal body also introduces paradox and therefore establishes itself as an ideal space to cultivate and exemplify the correlation between maternity and subjectivity. Like maternity, the photographic portrait is complex and unstable. Susan Bright says of the photographic portrait:

Laden with ambiguity and uncertainty the portrait is perhaps the most complex area of artistic practice ... a portrait is the questioning or exploration of self and identity through a literal representation of what somebody looks like. The paradox is that the inner workings of the complex human psyche can never really be understood just by looking at the picture. (20)

The establishment of the photographic portrait as a complex entity renders it a suitable art form by which to investigate maternal passion. “The experiences of motherhood and art alike should occur in a place where contradictions, become variants... They are variables to which indefinitely many values can be assigned” (Kristeva cited in Oliver 1993b: 99). The photographic portrait is ambiguous and consequently possesses the potential to act as a compelling site for the incorporation of Kristeva’s complex maternal passion and the development of a symbiosis between creativity and maternity.

“The signifying process as it is practised by texts—those ‘truly free works’—transforms the opaque and impenetrable subject ... into a subject on trial” (Kristeva 1984: 105). While my intention to create “truly free works” may appear ambitious, I question stable identity through rupture and divulge visual ambiguities in the portraits with uneasy expressions, gestures and intimate poses. On the portrait Avedon states, “it may be miraculous or indifferent, but it is always a solution of the objective and the subjective, the prepared and the improvised the self and the other. As depicted the person in the frame is a new creation” (19). The portrait then has the ability to dissolve divisions between self and other, create new possibilities for the subjective discoveries and to radically alter identity.

This body of work extends the photographic portrait as a difficult subversive site that encourages subjective exploration, recognition and revelation. However, I accept that it is impossible to guarantee the way that meaning will be generated through my images as [first name?] Balfé clarifies, “the meanings of any image are neither inherent to it, nor fixed: they always involve the interaction of creation and interpretation, both by the artists and the original and

subsequent audiences” (142). Consequently, each viewer may be affected in different ways by the photographs as meaning is impossible to fix, and Sturken and Cartwright agree that, “meanings lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are ‘consumed’, viewed and interpreted. The meanings of each image are multiple” (25). Hence, these photographs refuse secure notions of sexual identity and rather embrace fluidity to develop an opportunity for multiplicity of identity. The images therefore, enrich concepts of subjectivity by illuminating the complexities and continual struggles involved with being a ‘subject in process’ in their constructedness.

The pleasure of motherhood as the indescribable, pre language, unification of the mother and child is relished by Kristeva, though she reveals it as a “demented *jouissance*,” in reference to the melancholia that accompanies the pleasures of the maternal. Kristeva acknowledges the contradictions and struggles that inhabit the maternity and maternal passion is described by Kristeva as a “passion pregnant with madness and sublimity” (2005: 6). These portraits bask in the ambivalence of separation and the maternal function; they reflect my own experience of motherhood, which is, anxious and sorrowful yet fervent and enduring, they encompass negatives to facilitate positives. Mothers who appear detached, as well as devoted, are shown in order to offer a range of the maternal and to provide an alternative model, which posits the negative crisis of separation from the maternal body for both the mother and the child.

Kristeva also celebrates “anxiety as a conduit of pleasure” (2001: 14) and is heavily influenced by Melanie Klein’s thoughts on negativity and matricide. According to Kristeva, “in truth *matricide*, which Melanie Klein was the first to have the courage to consider, is, along with envy and gratitude, at the origin of our capacity to think” (2001: 13). Klein was the first psychoanalyst to consider matricide and developed her theories with particular attention to the maternal function in a way that had been overlooked by Freud. Klein puts forth that after being weaned from the mother’s breast the infant loses or puts the mother to death via fantasy, this loss creates mourning for the maternal, but is ultimately accepted by the child and this enables the infant to form the capacity to love. Kristeva (2001) states:

Kleinian negativity, which, as we shall see, guides the drive to intelligence by way of fantasy, chooses the mother as its target; in order to think, one must first lose the mother. The paths toward this loss diverge: splitting leads us on the wrong track, whereas the depression that follows the separation/death is much more befitting. In the end, a pure positivity—it too, innate—serves the capacity for love. (130)

An awareness of matricide feeds my own maternal melancholia, the knowl-

edge that my own children will necessarily have to “put me to death” to gain independence, creates an emptiness that becomes a timeless ache. On matricide, Kristeva states that it should be understood as a “‘putting to death’ and a ‘flight’ to be taken both with the mother and against her—it is a necessary precondition for the psychic freedom of the subject: that is what Klein had the courage to proclaim ... without equivocation.” (2001: 131). The acknowledgement that my children must separate from me is a bittersweet realisation and one which Kristeva and Klein as mothers may also have felt intimately. Nevertheless, I depend upon what Klein believes is the child’s innate ability to love in my own children, to calm my fears of loss and strengthen my own capacity as a dynamic mother, despite their own melancholia caused by separation from me. I do this with the understanding that although they may distance me in their own search for autonomy, they will also find me again through remembering the bond of love that is facilitated by the freedom independent thought affords the psyche. I use my melancholic maternity as a motivation in these portraits, to invoke a remembrance of the deep connection in the mother/ child dyad.

There are several key photographic elements and considerations that were strategically incorporated in the construction of this body of work, to develop content and a visual style that did not subscribe to conventional photographic depictions of the maternal. The same camera and lens were used in this project to photograph all m/others, however, the bearing of each subject is revealed in various ways. In the series m/others are seen sitting, standing, looking at the camera, looking away from the camera, engaged, detached, embracing, separate, vulnerable and strong. The different postures and expressions of the subjects work to establish contradictions about maternal relationships in the photographic portrait. The introduction of variables is significant as it articulates an alternative dialogue on the maternal figure, which is ambiguous and ambivalent and accommodates maternal passion. Subsequently, the photographs counteract sentimental images of maternity “to uncover the full range and potency of maternity hidden within the codes and myths which disguise its underlying meaning and full power” (Silverman Van Buren 9). One lens was utilised to capture complex and multiple maternities, in order to refuse traditional depictions that accommodate a secure and singular proposition for the maternal.

A single tungsten light source was used in all photographs; the rationale for this in my methodology was to create a particular visual style and to further introduce visual ambiguity. Tungsten light sources produce a warm yellow colour cast when used with daylight film without a filter. Consequently, a print is then less clear or accurate in terms of colour reproduction as those illuminated by daylight or strobe flash. Therefore the tungsten light produced

a tonal value in the pictures, which suggests comfort through warmth but also offers an organic, bodily tone, which is more closely linked to the abject and the unclean. Barbara London, John Upton and Jim Stone state, "Light can affect the feeling of a photograph so that a subject appears for example, brilliant and crisp, hazy and soft, harsh or smooth" (227). Significantly then, the atmosphere produced by the tungsten light encourages an emotional affect from the images that would not have been achieved with daylight or flash.

The quality of the light was also an important factor and a direct, hard source was used instead of the diffuse soft light conventionally used in print media to depict the maternal. I used a strong, direct spotlight to create tension and discomfort in the subjects in order to render an unsettled maternal relationship. The spotlight, while confronting for the subject at the photography stage, appeared to envelop the mothers and children in the final print, and this created an intimacy and intensity that illuminated the power of the mother/child bond. The contrast between the warmth of the tungsten colour cast and the harshness of the spotlight introduced a paradox. This strategy was specifically used to establish contradiction and variables, which are symbolic of maternal passion. The competing qualities of the light source intimate a complex and unstable proposition for maternity that encourages open resistant readings of the images and refers to *m/others* as subjects in process. The spotlight was also used symbolically to render an unyielding maternal figure that withstands the glare of the spotlight ready to emerge from the shadows.

Significantly, the majority of these photographs were taken in or around the internal spaces inhabited by the mothers and children pictured. The interior spaces were home settings that reflect intimacy, familiarity and inner strength, rather than domestic scenes, which represent service to the home. I am aware that mothers have traditionally been shown in domestic settings as a way of tying the maternal to the private sphere in servitude to hearth and home. Abby Arnold in *The Rhetoric of Motherhood* maintains, "In the past, motherhood was held to be an idealized state, glorified through myth and pithy statement to keep women anchored to their homes and families" (1). In contrast, I include parts of the home environment in some images to bring interior spaces into the public domain via the contemporary documentary approach to photography. I use intimate, internal spaces as a source of potency, to express the significance of the maternal figure as a keystone in society, rather than one that is suppressed. Subsequently, the capacity of the maternal figure in *m/others* cultivates opportunities for the development of unique identities in the future.

In *m/other # 7* the mother and child are seen in the home environment where the birth process had recently taken place. The significance of the birthplace was the motivation for its inclusion in the shot, this intimate, personal space

was the site for the paradoxical union and separation of the mother and child. The paradox illustrates theory in practice by illuminating the complexity of the maternal relationship and unstable and vulnerable foundation of identity. Furthermore, it recognises the continual struggles involved with being what Kristeva calls “a subject in process” and encourages richer possibilities for fluid identities. In other images like *m/other # 3* the three figures are surrounded by darkness which itself references an internal yet unstable, endless space. By including different elements of familiar environs I worked against a restrictive position that ties women to home, and yet captured the intensity and closeness of the maternal bond, without suggesting women have a singular responsibility for children.

Each participant in this project was invited to be photographed after careful consideration of several factors: the age of the mother and child, gender of child, number of children and the subject’s willingness to participate in the project were all contributing imperatives. It was necessary to have a diverse group of subjects to “create a multiplicity of meaning about motherhood” (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 8). The wide-range of *m/others* also enabled the depiction of a complex and diverse maternity that offers greater opportunity for interpretation of the images. Moreover, the variety of subjects subverts traditional, prescriptive, fixed ideas of motherhood as singular and universal, linked to youth. These *m/other* subjects were specifically chosen so that the portraits would engage and depict the conflicting dynamics of Kristeva’s maternal passion.

Overwhelmingly, those who agreed to take part in this project were my friends, many of who have appeared in my previous practice. The connections between the subjects and myself blurred the boundaries of self/other in a way that would not have been possible with strangers, this contributed to an ethical approach. According to Sturken and Cartwright (95) “Photographs often function to establish difference, through that which is defined as *other* is posited as that which is not the norm or the primary subject.” I chose subjects that were familiar, so that the images themselves were less likely to function in a way that emphasises difference. Sara Ruddick (cited in Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 37) states that, “I have found that it is simply impossible to comprehend mothering in the world, to compare and contrast very different mothering practices, to listen to, let alone speak with mothers, without acknowledging the ubiquitous and tenacious connections among being female, giving birth, and mothering.” Like Ruddick, I recognise that while the other mothers in this series may have an individual approach to motherhood, there is also similitude.

This photographic portrait series rediscovers the complex dynamics of maternal passion through the undertaking of theory in practice, in order to

facilitate and magnify the ambiguous pleasures of the mother/child bond. The representation of the coexistence of beauty and menace through the images reflects the conjoined subsistence of negative and positive within maternal passion. Moreover, the accommodation of maternal ambivalence, via the illumination of the abject and the perverse within the portraits, sharpens the capacity for subjective interpretation with a refusal to idealise or vilify the mother. *m/others* then, emphasises mutual recognition between mother and child, creates a dialogue on the significance of maternal passion and encourages surrender to a maternal return, following the loss that accompanies the crisis of separation.

References

- Astore, M. "The Maternal Abject." Sydney College of the Arts, 2001. Retrieved June, 2007, from <ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/500/2/adt-NU20030623.10042401front.pdf>.
- Arnold, A. "The Rhetoric of Motherhood." The Mothers Movement Online, 2003. Retrieved June, 2009, from <http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/rhetoric_motherhood/rhetoric_motherhood.htm>.
- Avedon, Richard. (2002). *Richard Avedon Portraits*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Bassin, D., M. Honey and M. Kaplan. *Representations of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Bright, Susan. *Art Photography Now*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.
- Burgin, Victor. "Geometry and Abjection." *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*. Eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Motherhood Today." 2005. Retrieved March 30, 2010, from <<http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>>.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Melanie Klein*. Trans. R Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. T. Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Liss, A. *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Barbara London, John Upton and Jim Stone. *Photography*. 9th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Oliver, K. *Subjectivity Without Subjects: From Abject Fathers to Desiring Mothers*.

New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998a.

Oliver, K., ed. *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writings*. New York: Routledge, 1993

Oliver, K. *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double Bind*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993b.

Silverman Van Buren, Jane. *The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Sturken, M. and L. Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.