

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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After Weaning

Artist Statement

After Weaning is a series of photographic works created by hand-expressing human milk directly onto silver gelatin photographic paper. Originally devised as a strategy to prevent mastitis after my child stopped breastfeeding, this act evolved into an artistic ritual—an exploration of lactation as embodied labour and an honouring of this vital carework.

Utilizing human milk as both medium and subject allowed for an interrogation of maternal aesthetics, body boundaries, and care within a feminist framework. At varying intervals over twelve months, I would trigger a let-down by hand-expressing my breastmilk onto sheets of silver gelatin paper, exposing the paper to ambient light conditions in my home studio. The photosensitive paper captured the milk's chemical interaction with light and time.

Exposure times varied from a few minutes to hours, depending on environmental factors, such as time of day, temperature, seasonal changes in daylight, and domestic interruptions. These variables directly affected the visual outcomes, particularly the colours that emerged. No two prints were the same, and results were impossible to replicate due to changing conditions from month to month, exposure to exposure. Over time, as my milk supply diminished, so did the volume of droplets recorded on the photographic emulsion, resulting in an evolving series that documents physiological change through an alternative photographic process—the lumen print.

While the making was conducted privately, the process itself was performative—a repetitive, embodied gesture conducted over time. The durational nature of the work, spanning a year beyond active breastfeeding, echoes cycles of depletion and renewal, visibility and erasure. The ritual marked not just the end of lactation but the slow, often unspoken maternal

grief associated with weaning (Rich 18–19). Our feeding journey had been marred by recurrent mastitis and nipple pain, but I persisted and fed my child until they started to lose interest after two years of feeding. When it was over, I missed it immensely and felt the need to record the end of the milk production and use the milk creatively.

This work sits within the lineage of feminist body art and maternal aesthetics, in conversation with artists such as Helen Chadwick and Kiki Smith, and their reframing of the body, its fluids, and byproducts as artistic material and inspiration (Betterton 61–63, 81–82; Heartney 207, 210). In addition, theorist Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection and maternal semiotics informs the tension between attraction and repulsion in these images (Betterton 10; Elkin 37–38, 56), Breastmilk, typically confined to the private realm, is recontextualised as an agent of aesthetic production—a visual representation of the messiness of these life-giving bodily fluids.

The droplets and splashes of milk captured in each image often take on a luminescent, nebula-like appearance. The interaction between the milk, the available light, and the photographic emulsion resulted in images that are both materially indexical and formally abstract. Their abstraction destabilizes the boundaries between the body's interior, the cosmological vastness, and the stardust residing in all of us.

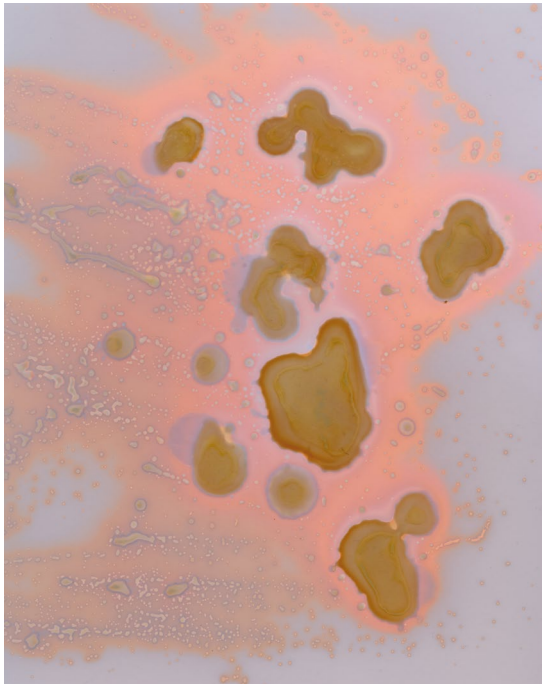
For the exhibition, fourteen of the original 8 x 10-inch lumen prints were scanned, enlarged to 42 x 51 inches, and printed on cotton muslin—a textile often used to swaddle newborn infants. The works are suspended from the ceiling in a spiral to create an immersive space. The lightweight fabric moves as people enter the installation and interact with the work. The muslin functions as both a symbolic and literal reference to care while enlarging the scale of the images amplifies the immersive potential of the installation, transforming an intimate gesture into an environment for the viewer to inhabit.

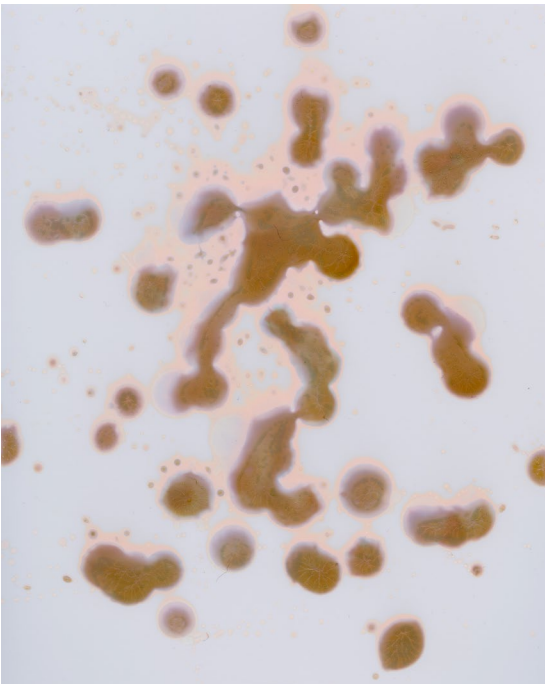
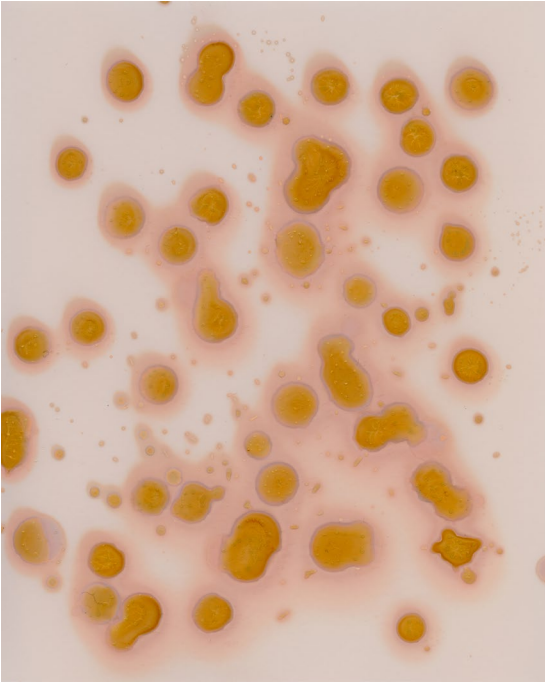
Exhibitions of this work centre a child-inclusive ethos and are accompanied by public programs, such as toddler story time within the gallery, creative workshops for children and their adults, invitations for children to touch the artworks, and space within the exhibition for workshop participants to add their artworks to the gallery walls. These events have brought together children and their primary caregivers with others at a similar life stage. The aim is to create a family-friendly, intergenerational space that reconceives the gallery as a site of community care rather than a rarefied space, accessible only to adults.

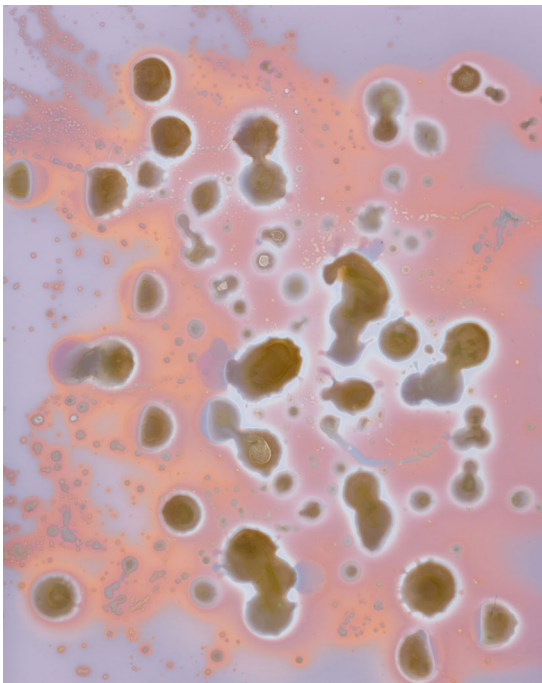
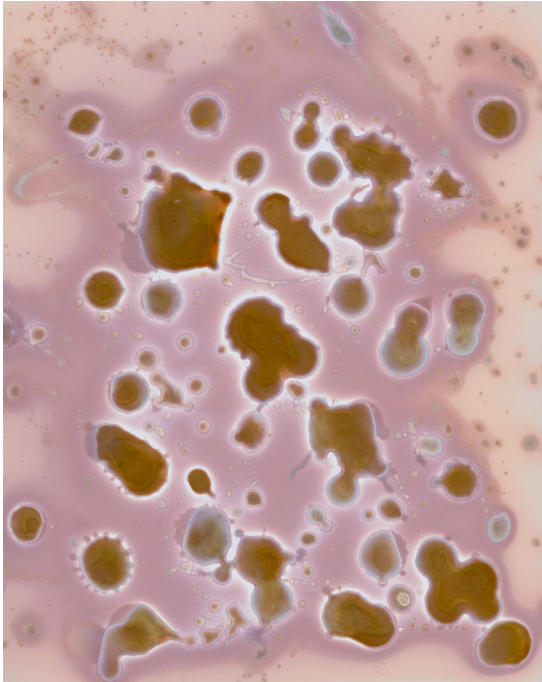
The majority of the lumen prints in *After Weaning* were made during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020. A time when women were more likely to exit the workforce to provide unpaid caregiving (Wood et al.). The global pandemic demonstrated how essential carework is. However, in Australia, whereas infant formula, cow's milk and paid childcare are included

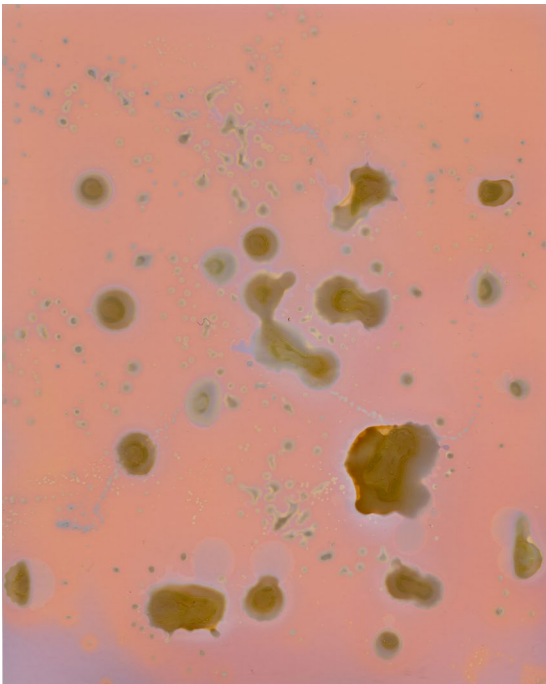
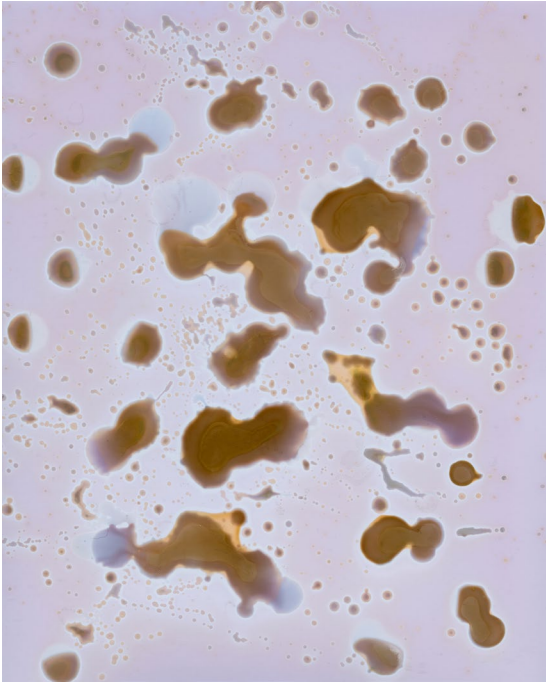
in the GDP, human milk and domestic caregiving are not (Smith). In *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*, Angela Garbes argues that mothering is crucial and necessary work—a labour that can be rendered invisible by the structures and systems in which many of us live (Golding). In making and exhibiting these artworks, I aimed to bring to light a private element of my mothering and carework and then create a public space for collective care and mutual support.

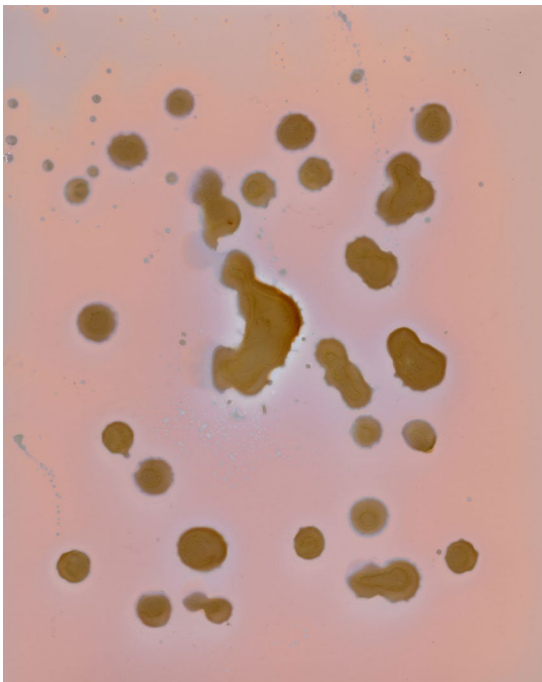
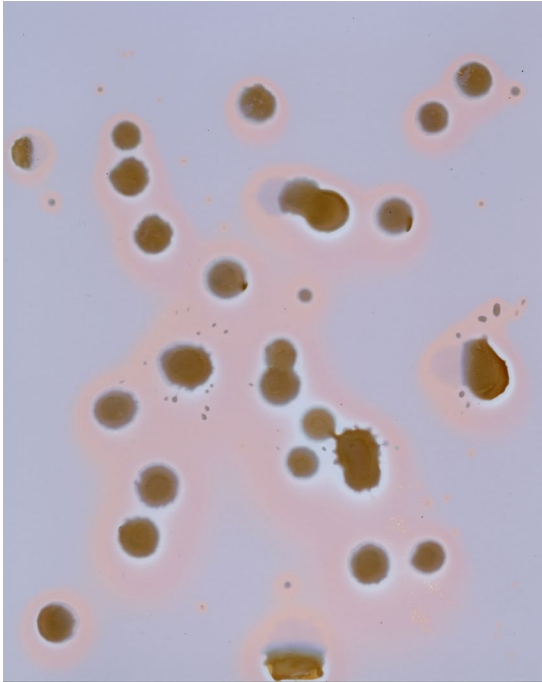
At its core, *After Weaning* is a meditation on the politics of care and the undervalued labour of birth-giving bodies. It invites viewers to consider the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of caregiving—not as an after-thought but as central to the making and sustaining of life and society. By making visible the slow, embodied processes of lactation, the artworks reclaim maternal work as a site of aesthetic, political, and emotional significance.

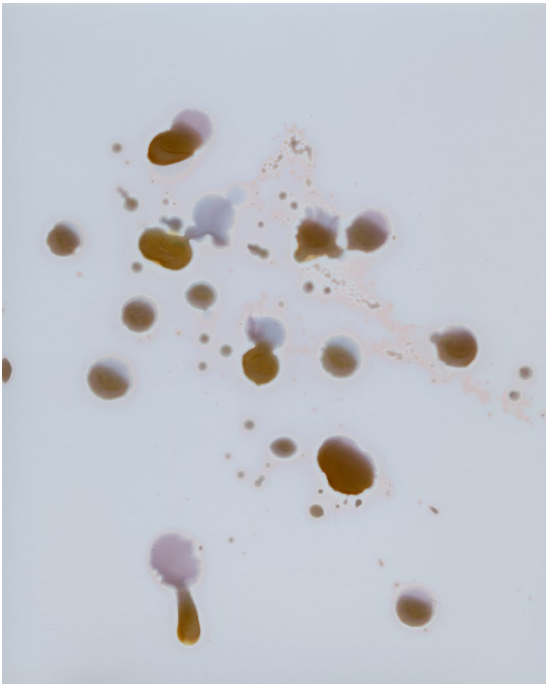


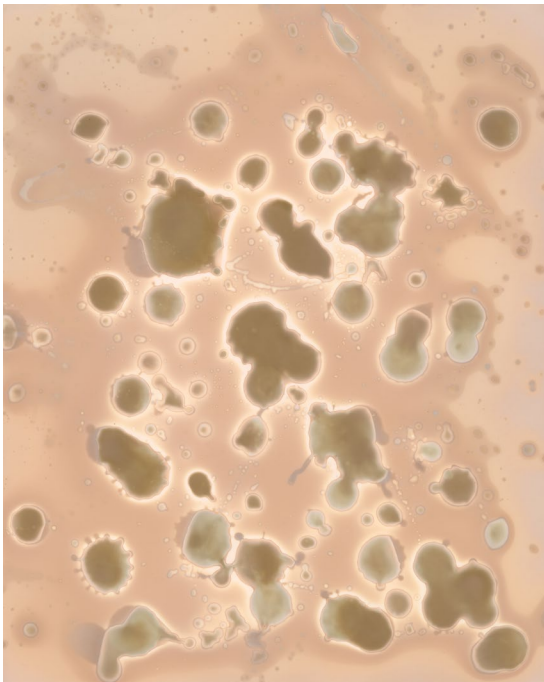




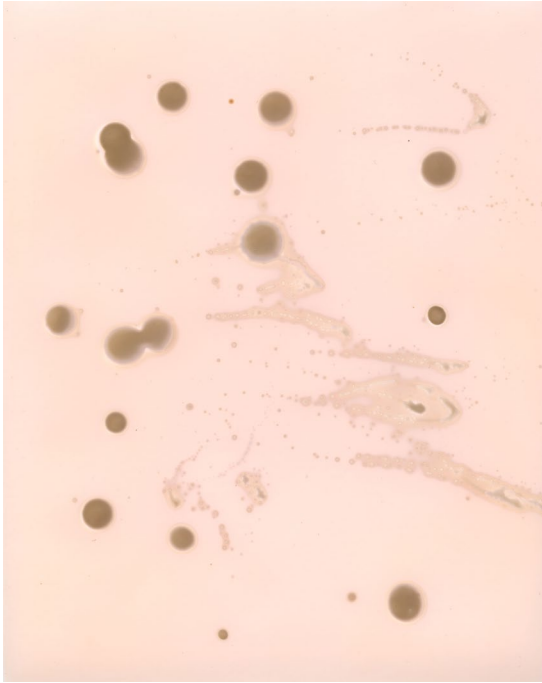








KATE GOLDING



Kate Golding, *Labours of Love*, including *After Weaning*, installation view, ArtSpace at Realm, Melbourne, Australia, 2024. Photograph by Andrew Curtis.



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