

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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Diana Aramburu, Rachael Boulton, Marcella Gemelli, Katherine Herrán-Magee,
Mariana Trujillo Marquez, Elisabeth Hanscombe, and more

USOA GARCÍA SAGÜÉS

Collaborators in order of appearance:

Charmaine Beneyto, Eunjung Kim, Hannah Scott, Angele Lautier,
Maria Bacha, Izabela Beata Kuchta, Eileen Morley, Alison Dollery,
Tina Surridge, Lola Luk, and Annie Edwards

All Love Begins and Ends Here

I am an artist currently studying textiles at the Royal College of Art. My practice focusses on soft sculpture to tell an alternative motherhood story. This article offers meaningful glimpses into motherhood through original artworks from a recent college exhibition with the same title and supported by our student union, for which I was awarded to curate in March 2025. The open call asked artists to respond to a quote from Hettie Judah in her 2024 book Acts of Creation: “Long taboo, the realities of motherhood are now the subject of urgent discussion.” I believe I have never added as much value as being a mother. However, I have also never felt as lonely and overlooked. Through my curatorial choices, I wanted to highlight this paradox of motherhood and show that I am not alone.

While the virgin and child is one of the great subjects of European art, there is more to be expressed about motherhood as a lived complex experience, including themes of identity change, blurred boundaries, sacrificing the self, and retaining strength, patience, and grounding while fighting solitude, depression, worthlessness, and fear, as well as being often flooded with pride and joy. The show successfully explored the gifts and struggles of mothers—and of not becoming a mother—through fourteen works by twelve artists from programs across the college. To the collective world, mothers are only mothers but to so many individually they make the world. It was a pleasure to see the audience immersed in the artists’ stories. Their interest prompted me to write this article to sustain discussion around motherhood.

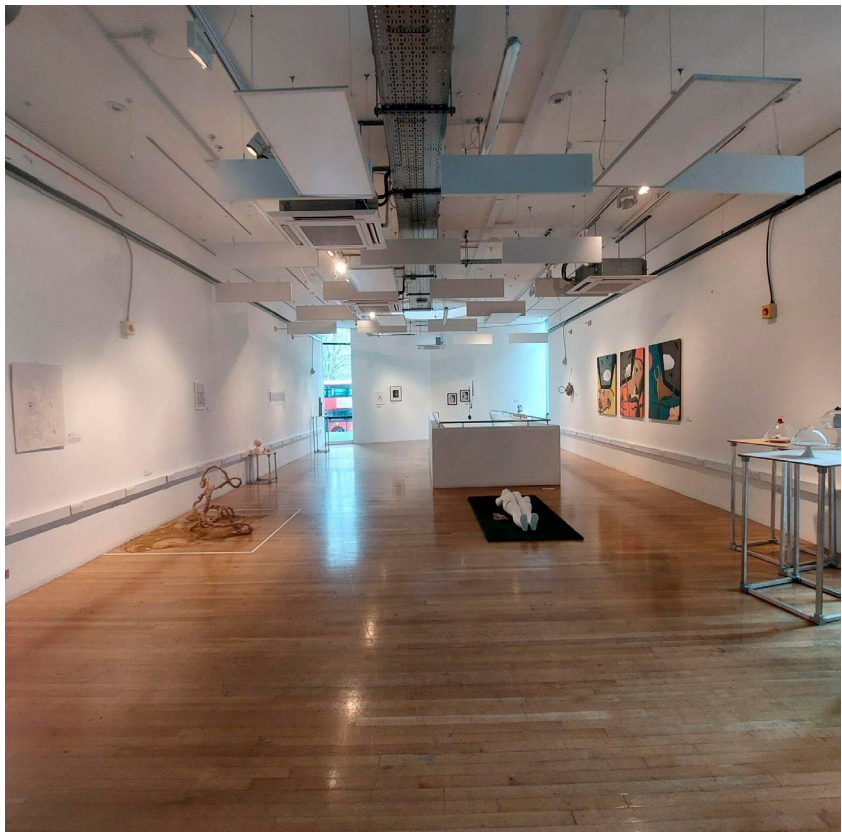


Figure 1: Upper Gulbenkian Hall, RCA 24 March 2025

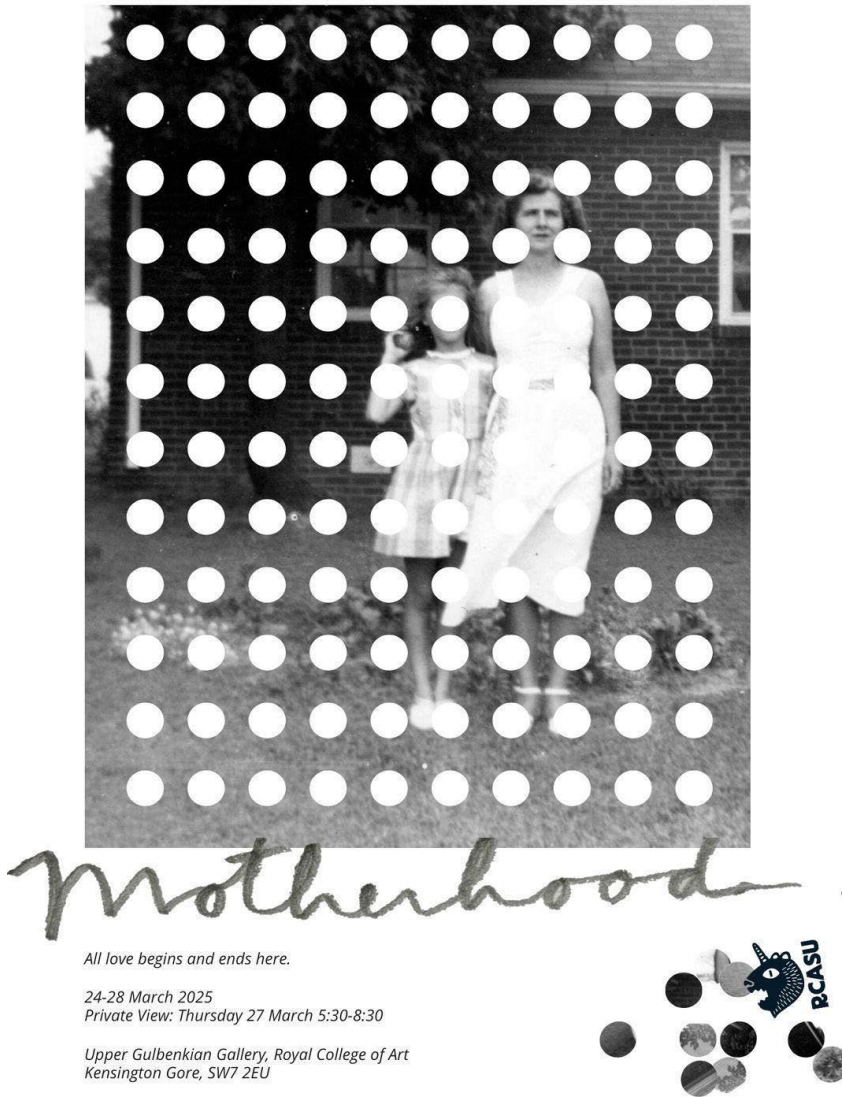


Figure 2: Exhibition poster by artist Eileen Morley

Artwork 1. Seeking Balance



I Never Knew Only Love Could Hurt Like This

Charmaine Beneyto

73x50cm Interior emulsion, wax crayon, graphite, baby blanket on wood

MA Contemporary Art Practice

@eniamranch

www.charmainebeneyto.com

“After the birth of my first child, I remember feeling this incredible amount of pressure. I didn’t know which way to turn. Everything that I knew had done a complete 180. I remember the term “mom brain” being branded about like a badge of initiation, as though it was funny, somewhat normal. I committed myself: I would return to my centre.

I Never Knew That Only Love Could Hurt Like This is an ode to the many times I have had to find a way to put my children to one side so that I can focus on finding myself again. There is a myth about mothers that for us to be good at it, we must be selfless. I don’t see it that way. The best thing I can do is show my children that honouring yourself is an act of pure love. This is where we find the balance, even if it is somewhat temporary. We must come back to ourselves again and again.”

While Charmaine Beneyto explores the internal struggle for balance, Eunjung Kim’s sculpture next examines how that struggle reshapes identity itself.

Artwork 2. From Self to Selfless



The Edge of Becoming

Eunjung Kim

75x80x42cm Metal wire and wool string covered by plaster

MA Sculpture

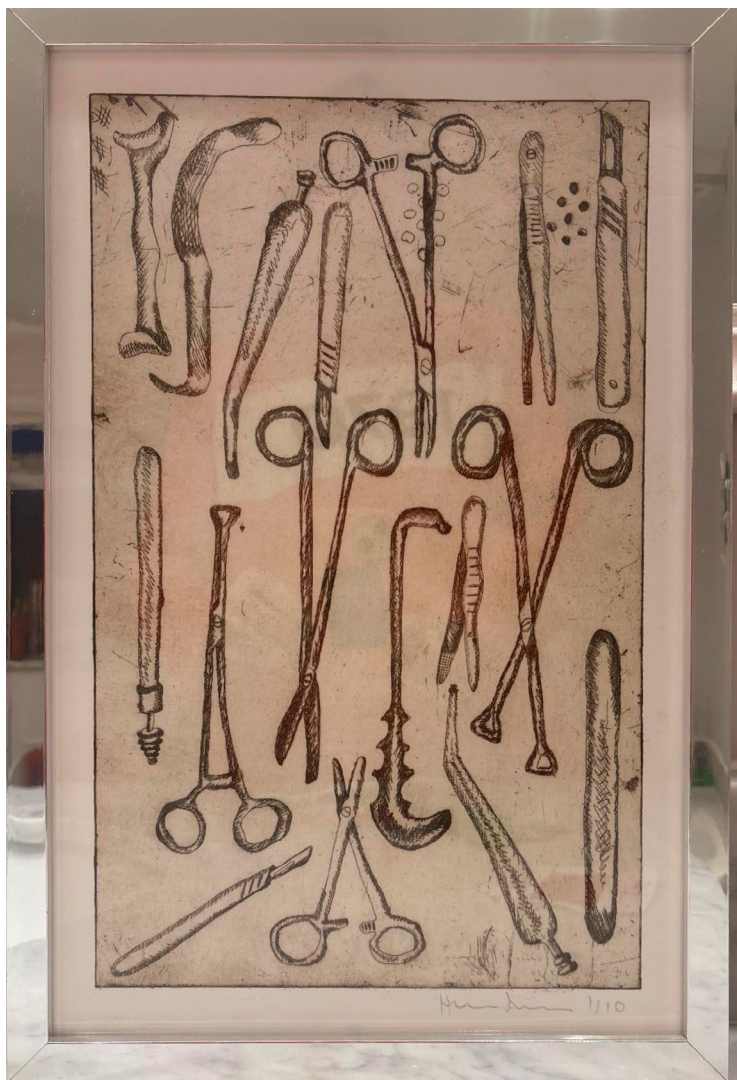
@ej_eunjungkim

“As a parent of two children, I am experiencing changes in my identity, struggling and growing as I transition from the boundaries of an individual to the position of a parent in the process of building a family community, which requires tempering my selfishness.

In this artwork, the aim was to capture the selfish yet selfless and individual yet communal human figure that a society of individuals is bound to have.”

Kim’s reflection on identity change upon motherhood is followed by Hannah Scott’s piece exploring the haunting of the unborn child, the impossible decision between family and career, and the realization that we cannot have it all.

Artwork 3. The Missing Child



Virginia's Shadow

Hannah Scott

40x27x2cm Etching on paper 1/10

MA Sculpture

@hannah.b.scott

www.hannahscottart.com

Etching of a hysterectomy set. “Across the broad continent of a woman’s life, falls the shadow of a sword”—Virginia Woolf

“The Unborn Child. There is a gap between the number of children they want and the number they have. The gap is highest in women with a higher education.”

“The Lost Career. The majority of women leave or demote their professions after having children. Most never regain the same pay or status.”

“They told us we could have it all. They didn’t tell us that we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.”

In continuation of Scott’s work, Angele Lautier offers a more playful piece, taking us back to childhood memories of games under our mother’s watch.

Artwork 4. Childhood Memories



Childhood Memories

Angele Lautier

30x20x15cm Mixed media sculpture

MFA Arts & Humanities

@angele_lautier_artist

www.angelelautier.com

“The central figure is the mother around whom the two little figures play safely. This piece is interactive and encourages the audience to play with the figures, creating new configurations and narratives. It brings out the inner child of the participant and is reminiscent of playing with action figures and dolls from one’s childhood.”

Although most of the exhibition lets mothers do the talking, motherhood is also about daughters, and Maria Bacha’s poignant work next reflects on that physical and emotional distance that can build between mother and daughter.

Artwork 5. Bridging the Distance



Wild Cloud

Maria Bacha

25x35cm each of the 8, Photography

MFA Arts and Humanities

@theartofmariabacha

www.maria-bacha.com

“Wild Cloud is a heartfelt ode—a letter bridging the distance between a daughter, her mother, and her own evolving self. Created in the wake of the daughter’s arrival in London, it captures a tender yet powerful exploration of emotions, memories, and newfound horizons.

It consists of a series of eight photographs, each piece a composition of layered imagery, cyanotype, and text. Together, they form a cloud of memories and feelings, offering a glimpse into the complexities of love, care, identity, and motherhood.”

Next, exploring the topic of unpaid labour, which is later further discussed in the exhibition, my work from my Mother Interrupted series focuses on mothers as service providers.

Artwork 6. Mothers as Services



Mother's Back

Usoa García Sagués

10x10x60cm Card, knitted yarn and copper wire, electroformed
copper-knit basket

MA Textiles

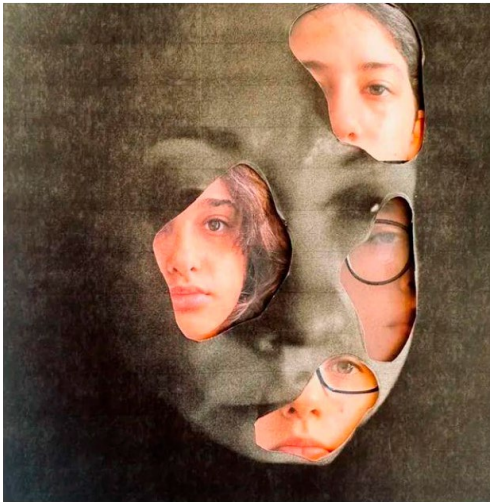
@usoa_textileartist

www.usoasculptedtextiles.com

“This work comes from my textile 3D collages series, which relies on mixing objects alluding to mothers’ body parts representing their services. In this piece, mothers are the backbone of the family and do most of the carrying. The pieces intend to be both celebratory of mothers’ attributes as well as provocative of the limited way in which society sees us. I use the collage approach because it is very much seen as a women’s activity and to reject more traditional media, as a sign against the established patriarchal system that undervalues mothers.”

From my piece, a natural progression to Izabela Beata Kuchta’s work, exploring the unrealistic expectations society places on mothers around the world.

Artwork 7. Unrealistic Expectations



Do You Want to Toy with Me? and *Motherhood*

Izabela Beata Kuchta

Collages on paper, A4

MFA Arts & Humanities

@explorer_1984

www.explorer1984.com

“My work illustrates the demands and unrealistic expectations put on women in contemporary society. Barbie is a global brand that has dominated the social imagination for six decades; she is also a fashionable doll, a toy, and an object of entertainment, pleasure, and fun, to be played with and placed back on the shelf once used and no longer needed. The symbol of the unrealistic expectations, the unnatural and unmaintainable aesthetics, highlights the unconsciously shared social values, as well as the dominance of a narrow and superficial understanding. Is Barbie independent and empowered or overwhelmed and exploited? The work advocates for the recognition of domestic labour as a form of work.”

The face collage is inspired by Elisabeth Gilbert’s quote, “Having a baby is like getting a tattoo on your face,” and is informed by the artist’s own challenging experiences of raising four children as a single mom. The work illustrates the sacrifices, the unseen, consistent, and unrecognized effort, and the personal expense the mother must pay to provide for her children, that corrodes and compromises her wellbeing.”

From Kuchta’s unrealistic expectations affecting the wellbeing of mothers, we move to Eileen Morley’s work on the importance of caring for oneself.

Artwork 8. Caring for Your Care



All things separate, peculiarly united

Eileen Morley

7x12x296cm Cotton, tampon, pad, container of mascarpone

MA Textiles

@eieileenmorley

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“A tampon, a pad, and an empty container of mascarpone are united through a machine-knit cord and hand-knit pockets. No visible seams link these objects—only my mind and the fact that they all came to me in the same week.

From this strange collection was born a piece that is not about menstruation but the care of our care products and the imperceptible cords that connect one thing to another.”

Using the body as a canvas, the next work, by Alison Dollery, explores the transformations of the pregnant body.

Artwork 9. A Body Transforms



Matrescence Series
Alison Dollery
Real body canvas & background
MFA Arts & Humanities
@alisondolleryartist
www.alisondollery.com

“Exploring author Lucy Jones’s literature *Matrescence*, this silhouette/figure of the pregnant painted body is used as a canvas.

Although the pregnant body is the most natural transformation the body can go through, public breastfeeding and places mothers can go while caring for babies have social restrictions, where mothers face judgment. These are feminist material aesthetics, which have been manufactured through our bodies.”

The next exhibition piece is my own and shifts focus to a baby in a folded form from my *Mother-Infant* series, highlighting the strength of a softer world.

Artwork 10. The Mother-Baby Bond



Petra and Carolina

Usoa García Sagués

Baby wrap 40 cm tall. Sports jersey, paper, knitted copper wire, cotton batting, lace & pearls

MA Textiles

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www.usoasculptedtextiles.com

“This work comes from my folded quilts series. I use copper in my knits because it originates from the earth’s crust and conducts electricity, representing the spark of life; its shine and rigidity compensate for the muteness and softness of the quilts’ fabrics. I fold the quilts into forms because folding is a domestic activity also connected to raising infants, as mothers have been wrapping babies in folds for centuries. My folded forms are fragile but fierce, grounded but growing, and speak of the importance of the mother-infant bond.”

The maternal bond is strong and eternal, as highlighted also by Tina Surridge’s next work.

Artwork 11. Eternal Bonds



Mother and Child

Tina Surridge

Oyster shell size. Ceramic

MA Sculpture

@tina_surridge_

“A single parent of four, grandmother of six.

An eternal bond.

My soul has shared each heartbreak, and your success has made me smile.
Each fear has swept my light away, if only for a while.

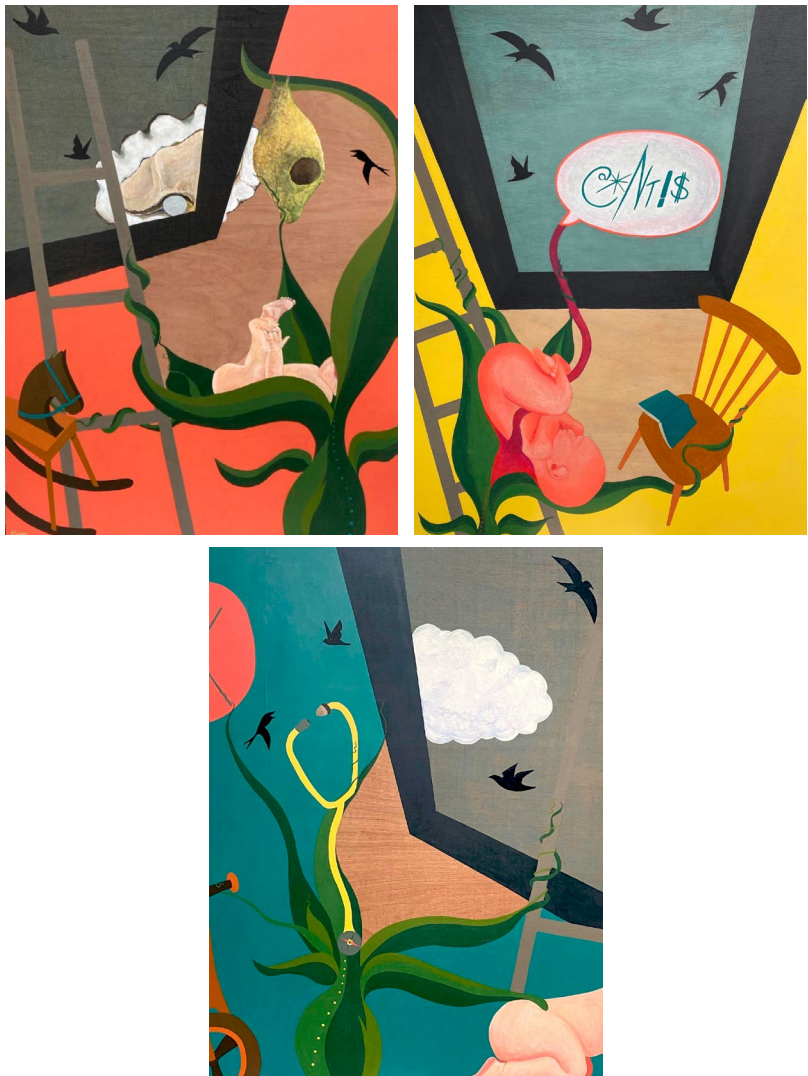
Some absences are hard to bear, and some choices were not right. Some
health scares changed our inner souls, so proud you fought the fight.

I will stand by forevermore, your mother to the end.

Forgive me my inequities, my child, my soul, my friend. Rejoice in all our
family bonds, the reaching goals and laughter, these intertwining hearts of
love, a happy ever after.”

We move next to consider family harmony through a triptych of paintings
from Angele Lautier reflecting on progression, roots, and freedom.

Artwork 12. Family Harmony



Holon Triptych

Angele Lautier

122x90cm each. Acrylic on wood float mounted

MFA Arts & Humanities

@angele_lautier_artist

www.angelelautier.com

"Holon is the chosen title for this triptych, as it means that each painting can stand alone, and equally be part of the whole. The paintings prompt a dialogue between themselves, focussing on the shared themes using a similar colour palette. A strong narrative of growth and progression exists as you move from one piece to another and brings to mind different perspectives on family, education, religion, health, freedom, and harmony."

But Lautier's harmony doesn't come for free, which leads well into our next artist Lola Luk, whose work considers whether our altruism in the name of family can eventually eat us up.

Artwork 13. Invisible Labour



Organic Altruism, It's a Lot on My Plate, and What Is Eating You Up?

Lola Luk

60x22x22cm. Ceramic, blown glass, resin

45x25x 25cm. Ceramic, blown glass, resin, pill, prescription.

45x25x25cm Ceramic, blown glass, resin

MA Sculpture

@luk_lola www.lolaluk.com

“My work reflects the intricate balance women navigate between selflessness and identity, shedding light on the invisible labour of caregiving and the societal biases that overshadow their contributions. It delves into the raw emotional landscapes of anxiety, mental health, and the sacrifices often rendered invisible. Through symbolic and tactile forms, I aim to challenge ingrained stereotypes, offering a poetic reflection on the complexities of motherhood and inviting deeper empathy for the unseen strength within these roles.”

The exhibition tour finishes with work from Annie Edwards. Her synthetic sculpture invites us to question what is natural, particularly given modern society and changing family structures, and how we can deal with tensions between intimacy and isolation and feelings of unrealized potential.

Artwork 14. Biological Clock



Synthetic Promise

Annie Edwards

2 x 1.5m. PLA, Polymer Clay, Resin, Vacuum Packed Pregnancy Tests, Astro Turf

MA Sculpture

@a_knee___

www.anniedwards.com

“Synthetic Promise delves into the complex realities of motherhood, confronting themes of personal grief, unrealized potential, and the societal expectations placed on the female body. Juxtaposing the natural and synthetic, hope and loss, and the tension between intimacy and isolation, the work symbolizes the stress and societal pressure of the ticking biological clock.”

In conclusion, a lot has changed and will continue to change. However, to nourish, protect, keep warm, and hold fast beyond reason seems still set to remain the foundation of human culture, which sublimates life to a higher reality without losing our bond to the natural world. Perhaps we need to arrive at a synthesis that better includes, values, and respects this more feminine side so future mothers can further enjoy motherhood.



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