

Domestic Labour, Repetition and Acts of Care in Art Making

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Fig. 1, Megan Carroll, *Toilet Brush, Considering the Bathroom*
(*Kitchen Floor Series*), 2023

Charcoal, Black Chinese Ink with Gold Suspension, 24"x24"

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Abstract

This MFA Thesis Project explores how repetitive domestic labour in the home, predominantly carried out by women and in particular my experience as mother and caregiver informs my MFA research. The Thesis Project artworks range in scale from small handheld intimate embroidered textile pieces to large abstract paintings created on my kitchen floor with tools such as brooms, toilet brushes and rags that are commonly associated with women's work. I use a minimal colour palette of black, greys and gold to highlight the sombre and never ending actions of daily domestic maintenance. By giving the marks presence and weight, I am demanding that they be acknowledged and the audience feels the relentlessness of activities that never seem complete. I incorporate concepts addressed by artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her documentation of invisible labour as well as Janine Antoni who physically put herself into the act of art making with her body. Ultimately, my practice draws on these artistic influences to generate artwork that speaks to my lived experience as an artist, mother and caregiver.

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Introduction

This MFA research is informed by the history of women's work, domestic labour, gender roles¹ and what it means to be a female artist who is also a mother and wife. The thesis project has been guided by some key questions. How might an engagement with domestic objects and actions become part of an artistic method? What are the range of emotions that women artists/mothers endure as we navigate the endless daily rituals of the home? How can anger, frustration and ambivalence be woven into artworks? And finally, will working this way assist in processing life's experiences, finding clarity and purpose, both for the artist and the viewer? While I don't always directly answer these questions in this paper, they have inspired the larger issues that I am grappling with. I aim for viewers to connect intimately with the art and reflect on their own relationships with these activities. Through simple methods and often ignored materials, I encourage introspection and an appreciation for the beauty and complexity of everyday life.

Admittedly, I could spend years researching artistic practices that explore domestic labour and gender roles in the home. Indeed, there are many artists and social scientists who have dedicated their practice to this overarching theme. My focus here is on artistic research that entangles material explorations, themes of time and repetition as well as the working through of emotions that permeate my daily lived experience. Experiences that are sometimes influenced by the inherent privilege of being a white

¹ For example:

Rosita Parker. *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the making of the feminine*. 1984,
Kassia St.Claire. *The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History*, 2019,
Clare Hunter. *Threads of Life, A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle*. 2020,
Elizabeth Wayland Barber. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years Women Cloth and Society in Early Times*, 1994

woman, within a middle class structure.² I acknowledge a few women artists that have informed my understanding of domestic labour as an aesthetic practice alongside theories and writing that deepen this discussion. To be honest, this feels like the beginning of an artistic trajectory that will sustain me for years to come. And as important as this topic is for the ongoing fight for equality, at this time and in this document, I explore the labour (artistic and otherwise) performed predominantly by myself through an engaged artistic method.

²I have struggled with finding the appropriate words about my own privilege. I grew up in a blue collar family, in a homogenous neighbourhood in western Canada. My father worked hard to provide for his family, we would not have been considered wealthy but we always had enough. Growing up I didn't have to think about race, I am from the generation that was taught that Canada was a mosaic/melting pot. It wasn't until I started travelling and then subsequently moving to the US that I started to understand the depth and breadth of how I was able to navigate the different spaces. These days and in this current political climate, I am very aware of my inherent privilege and I try not to take it for granted. I recognise that race has not been a barrier for me that I have been given many opportunities and chances that others would not have access to based solely on my race.

Because of the personal narrative of my thesis work and the document, tackling race at this time felt disingenuous to me. I wish that this didn't need to be said but the fact that it does means there is still work to be done. I would like to be a part of the solution and not the problem, and I know that there are many voices that I can still learn from and that my story is not the only one. As my artistic career unfolds I would like to respectfully include other stories and viewpoints.



Fig. 2, *Megan Carroll, Sweeping Meditation,*
Kitchen Floor Series, 2023
Chinese ink on paper,
30' x 4'

Positionality

As an artist with two teenage children and a husband with a hereditary neurological disease, which I will speak to later, my research is directly informed by the realities of care³. In many ways, this MFA degree has been an opportunity to understand my current situation through artistic research, practice and the power of making. The journey has been surprising for its twists and turns. The work began through an exploration of personal and bodily trauma via fabrics inherited from my family. The focus soon evolved into addressing more immediate challenges through materials and a daily negotiation of difficult emotions.

I spent four years working towards my BFA in the early 2000s, and suddenly two events changed my course. My husband was diagnosed with Huntington's Disease and we decided to have children. When I graduated from Emily Carr institute of Art and Design in 2006, I did so from bedrest in the hospital for complications due to a high-risk multiple pregnancy. It was probably predictable that art would become my last priority. Equally predictable, I also lost my touch with my creativity. New motherhood always has its challenges but new motherhood with premature twins was more than I could have anticipated. The loneliness and boredom⁴ from bedrest were barely memories before I was a full-time caregiver twice over. This was a different type of loneliness and boredom, created by monotony, repetition and overwhelming responsibility. At 32, fresh from my undergraduate degree, I put my passions aside to raise babies and help my husband

³ De La Bellacasa, María Puig. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. 3rd ed., PostHumanities (Paperback), 2017 and Garbes, Angela. *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*. Harper Wave, 2022.

⁴ In the article *The Unengaged Mind: Defining Boredom in Terms of Attention*, authors Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske and Smilek, consider different theories of boredom. The one I am most interested in is arousal, "when it is not possible to achieve an optimal level of arousal through engagement with the environment" (2012). For me, this essentially involved experiencing a lack of excitement with my artistic ambitions and the ways in which it offered connections to the world around me.

achieve his grad school and post doctoral ambitions. We both thought that this was temporary. Once the twins were old enough they would go to daycare, then school and I could focus again on my art practice and find employment outside the home. If I was lucky it would be creative. However reality set in as on my husband's student stipend we could not afford daycare. It made more sense for me to stay home with the twins as I would only be working to pay for daycare while I was outside of the home. The years flew by and I became a stay at home mother. I cooked, I cleaned, I made dinners, beds, washed clothes and homeschooled our children. I was an educator, entertainer and disciplinarian. I tried throughout those years to hold on to 'I' but truthfully I had become 'We'. My husband would tell people I was an artist, justifying why I was at home but in reality the demands of his career meant that I was needed to run the household and what little time I had for art evaporated quickly. I became increasingly frustrated trying to be a new mother and an artist. It was at this point that I started modifying my practice and seeking out creativity when and where I could, small drawings, sewing and even cooking became outlets. I found ways to fit my creativity into the repetition of my domestic routines.

Artistic Method

My artistic method is directly connected to my lived experience. As stated above, I learned to modify my practice and seek out creativity when I could, fitting creativity into my daily domestic chores. As a result, my home also became my studio which has informed and constrained what I have been able to make. I have developed strategies that allow me to continue working while raising children and supporting my husband. What I have produced with the thesis research is a series of projects that build upon previous practices while developing new ways of working. This includes hand stitching with embroidery thread on worn out and/or vintage textiles as well as drawing on paper with ink, charcoal and gouache with the use of domestics tools. I deliberately chose this way of making because as noted by Claire Hunter in the *Threads of life. A history of the world through the eye of a needle*, “materials are cheap and readily sourced. ... easily accommodated when living conditions are cramped. Moreover, it can be done anytime of the day and be fitted around domestic chores and child care.”⁵ In this way, my artistic strategies engage with daily domestic patterns and ways of mapping or recording time. I purposefully use limited tools, a reduced palette and minimal spaces of practice as a way of reflecting and transforming my domestic environment. These artistic methods are conducted in the privacy of the home because this is what is available to me. Perhaps more importantly, the invisibility of practising in the home highlights the kinds of women’s work that never gets seen or acknowledged. Of course, this way of working is directly informed by the

⁵ Hunter, Clare. *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle*. Abrams Press, 2020.(271)

reality that I have been making work around and in response to my domestic responsibilities.

My life has been set up in such a way that being a homemaker and a caregiver has⁶ informed how I currently approach art making. During the most formative years of my children's early childhood and my husband's academic pursuits I found ways to express my creativity through domestic acts. I didn't know it then but I was unwittingly performing a kind of maintenance work more often seen in the public realm.

When I think about the labour in the home, the core issues that come to mind include time, physicality, emotional investment, as well as concepts of invisibility, disappearance and value⁷. Maintaining a home and caring for others is monotonous, repetitive, mundane and often thankless. Through the Thesis Project, I have attempted to record domestic actions by giving them representational presence while simultaneously calling attention to the often overlooked functions of domestic maintenance, such as the repetitive nature of them or their utilitarian necessity. These actions are carried out day in and day out to keep a household running. They are unglamorous but so fundamental to the upkeep of a home that one only notices these actions in their absence.

I use repetitive actions such as sewing the same stitch over and over again or doing a task over prolonged periods of time to highlight the never

⁶ Recently at dinner out with my husband's colleagues, someone asked me 'what do you do?' - the dreaded question about worthiness, but I've been trying to get better at self identifying and I said artist! Their response was 'no, what do you do for work?' exasperated, I said 'caregiver'. The table got quiet, nobody quite knew how to respond and conversation moved on.

The University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion Created a collaborative project inviting members of the UTS community such as Australian multimedia performance artist Danica I. J. Kenžević who taps into undervalued labour creating a series of videos caring for an elderly parent with a disability. *Meaning Making – Art as Acts of Care* "is a different kind of conversation that invites us to engage with the empathetic and embodied conditions that shape the emotional landscape of our lives" and seeks way of "luminating the experience of caring into art and social spaces." ("Making Meaning: Art as Acts of Care")

⁷ I share this interest with several artist such as Mary Kelly and her artworks about motherhood, in *Post Partum Document*. (1979), Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and peer artist as well as curator Eliane Luther who curated the group show *Clocking in for Unpaid Labor* (2023) that I was a participant in.

ending monotony of the labour performed in the home. For this repetition mimics the endless cycle of housework and maintenance. This is exemplified in *Kitchen Floor Series 2023* (see Fig. 1 & 1.2), *Interruptions & Erasures 2023* (see Fig. 4) and *Acts of Care Series 2023* (see Fig. 5). With the brush works in the *Kitchen Floor series*, I used a single gesture to make repetitive and almost meditative marks. These gestures are generated by using utilitarian tools found in the home. For instance, I use a toilet brush (see Fig. 3) to move ink around the paper which mimics the motion of vigorously and intensely cleaning a toilet. Or I enlist a broom to sweep ink across a large piece of paper as if I was cleaning the kitchen floor. Despite the simplicity of the tools employed, they became ideal tools to express emotional energies such as anger, frustration and grief.



Fig. 3, Megan Carroll, *Kitchen Floor* series, 2023, video still.

I purposefully use a minimalist colour palette in all of the thesis projects. Many of the works on paper are black ink⁸ on a white ground, highlighting the intensity of the gesture of the marks made from the tools. It is not so much about composition as it is about the emotional energy put into the act of laying down the marks. At times I employ gold, which adds a quality of preciousness and gives importance to the easily overlooked actions of domestic labour. The gold highlights call attention to the care put into the ordinary overlooked acts of domesticity.

For the embroidery works, I mostly use grey on grey in varying shades that match or progressively contrast with the ground fabric which itself is a charcoal hue. I want the colours to disappear into one another so that the viewer can not tell when one colour ends and another begins, similar to my daily routines where I am moving from one activity to the next, often without pause. The subtle colour shifts denote an element of blurring whether of time, or life into art. With these artworks, I may use gold as a highlight to break the monotony of the gesture and give importance to the easily overlooked. This is my way of saying, *I am here*, I made this thing - or touched this object and it may be inconsequential but it has value. I don't want my efforts to disappear.

The materials I have focused on for the thesis works, charcoal, ink, embroidery thread and fabric which are simple, humble and commonly found. The fabrics are particularly precious as they are upcycled scraps from worn-out bedsheets from my marital bedroom and signifies our relationship, which I speak to later in this paper.

⁸ Kassia St.Clair has several entries in her book, *The Secret Lives of Color* on the pigments associated with black such as Ink, Jet, Pitch et al. She gives a short description of invention, use and symbolism for each. I use Chinese ink, originally this type of ink was derived from the soot of candles, called lampblack and combined with binders. She notes "Inks tend[] to be black because they need to be very fluid... [to] be sufficiently legible at high levels of dilution". (St. Clair, 271) Black also carries with it heavy and intense emotive qualities, such as death, anger and spirituality; it is that rawness of emotion that draws me to its use.

Artistic Methodology

My artistic methodology has been focused on researching materials and practices that resonate with the inspiration drawn from what I can accomplish given my current situation. For example, I have been engaged with the history of textiles and the role that women played in their creation and how it relates to the development of civilization through production, trade and commerce.⁹ I have sought out online workshops¹⁰ and in person ones when time permits on different modes of working with textiles, such as weaving, quilting, and surface pattern design. I am constantly updating my skills on the use of gouache, video editing, digital artmaking, and design through Skillshare classes. I am also continually reading articles in publications such as Fiber Art Now, Smithsonian Magazine, Where Women Create,¹¹ and others. I am particularly drawn to articles about women who use textiles in unconventional ways such as artist Coulter Fussell, who creates painterly quilts with donated clothing and other fabrics. I have also focused on specific women artists who themselves navigate issues of women's work and domestic labour. Throughout the course of my two years of MFA research I have been drawn to an array of artists and texts. One of the most influential has been Mierle Laderman Uekles. I would like to detail some of her influence on my practice here as it has been truly significant.

⁹ Kassia St Clair in her book *The Golden Thread* and Elizabeth Wayland Barber in hers, *Women's work the first 20,000 years* both suggest that without textiles and the labour performed by women, (such as harvesting, processing, producing thread, weaving and sewing that could be done while tending to children, cooking and other essential activities), civilization would not have been able to thrive. For example: Turning sinew into strands or plant fibre into thread gave humankind the ability to tie things together, creating nets, traps etc to hunt, weaving tree bark to make baskets to carry food. Sewing two hides together to make body coverings or tents gave people the ability to expand their territory into cooler climates giving them access to different types of foods. Later, the Silk Road that expanded trade and ideas would not have been possible without the production of the valuable commodity of silk.

¹⁰ Due to Covid-19 many in-person workshops were moved online. That let me take live classes in my own home with artists in New York, Mississippi and other parts of the country.

¹¹ Smithsonian did an amazing article on Bisa Butler, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/bisa-butler-stitches-together-quilts-african-american-experience-180975397/>

Uekles's prolific career began as a student at the Pratt Institute and includes her long standing artist residency at the New York Sanitation Department. I recognize that her journey has not been easy. Early on in her marriage to Jacob Ukeles, with a newborn infant, she became frustrated. She writes, "Half of my week I was the mother, and the other half the artist. But, I thought to myself, this is ridiculous, I am the one."¹² She was inspired to write the *Manifesto Maintenance Art 1969!*¹³ recognizing how those who performed the monotonous acts of maintenance and care were usually invisible and underpaid. When she declared "My Working will be the Work"¹⁴, this defined her life and practice moving forward as an artist. The written artwork, a four page typed document, and ensuing practice challenged the perceptions of her public role as a mother and an artist.

When I started to focus my research on artist mothers, labour, women's work, and feminism, Mierle Laderman Ukeles popped onto my radar. Like Ukeles, I had become frustrated trying to be a new mother and an artist but unlike her it took me years to grapple with the challenges. Reading about Mierle Laderman Ukeles project at the New York Sanitation Department¹⁵ and her manifesto inspired me to start documenting the types of labour I was doing at the bookstore. I made observations on the similarities between my experiences as a new employee, my domestic roles and the labour of maintenance workers (See Fig 2). At the end of every work day, I felt compelled to collect names and numbers of students' book orders on scraps of paper. I then scanned and arranged them so that they made a repeatable pattern that I reproduced on fabric.

¹² 1. Ryan, B. *Art in America*. "Manifesto for Maintenance: A Conversation With Mierle Laderman Ukeles" <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/draft-mierle-interview-56056/>

¹³ I first read the manifesto in PC Phillips 2016 book *Mierle Laderman Ukeles* for the Queen's Museum exhibition. All quotes from the manifesto are from Philips' book.

¹⁴ Phillips, Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*

¹⁵ <https://www.sanitationfoundation.org/blog/portrait-of-an-artist-mierle-laderman-ukeles>

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Ukeles manifesto has been important to how my thesis project evolved.¹⁶ In this text based work, each name and number represents a student's textbook order that I had to retrieve during RUSH week(s). At one point, in a period of less than 15 days, I estimated I had walked more than the equivalent of a marathon in a space that wasn't that much larger than my living room. This was an intense period of repetitive physical labour. Once the orders were printed, processed individually, searched for among the rows of textbook shelves, picked up and packaged, they finally came to me to be alphabetized and put on the corresponding shelves where I would retrieve them for the individual. There was often frustration about the slowness of the process for the students, many arguments, complaints and occasionally insults. After a nine hour day, my feet would be swollen and blistered and then I would go home to think about family and dinner. By documenting my labour at the Associated Students Bookstore at the University of Washington and creating a composition that incorporated the residue of work I was able to visualise how labour could be art. *WWU Steps* (Fig 2) is a digital image of what looks like rows and columns of handwritten text that are both organised and chaotic, carefully printed but also scratched through or scribbled over. This pattern, (in which the image can be digitally repeated endlessly on all four sides) has no defining direction which gives it a labyrinthine composition but also allows me to print and reproduce it infinitely and at various sizes on different substrates. A collage of several pages of lists documenting transactions, this work for me is both aesthetically interesting, documents a kind of performance of the interactions in a service role and became a breakthrough for my thesis research.

The subject of labour is important to me and Ukeles practice speaks to gestures that resonate and inform my own artistic investigations. While

¹⁶ Phillips, Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* 1969!

there are many similarities, her approach is clearly different from my own. Her projects are often large-scale collaborative pieces that engage and require public participation. My thesis work has been created in the home, alone, while the children are at school and my husband is at work. In *Touch Sanitation, (1978-1980)*, Ukeles documented herself meeting and shaking the hands of hundreds of stigmatised sanitation workers to recognize “that the individuals who take the garbage don’t make the garbage .”¹⁷ I see this example of the sanitation workers doing a repetitive and often invisible mundane job , as not dissimilar to that of the relentless acts of maintenance performed by housewives. Through her four page artist document, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* some shared themes between these public employees and the private work of most housewives emerge such as repetitive labour, invisibility and the ways in which they are undervalued even if they are essential to one's quality of life.

¹⁷ Quoted by Ukeles in Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Press Release: August 22, 1984

Work 1, Kitchen Floor Series

Six months after my husband and I married in an abrupt ceremony in 1998 we were back in the US from Germany, where my husband's family lived. He was in the US Army, and we were 'home' for Christmas. One evening, his father sat us down in the kitchen and explained to us that my husband's mother had Huntington's Disease. The reason for telling us this, then, they thought I could be pregnant - why else would we have done something so unexpected?

I will probably never get over the fear in my husband's eyes that night as he left the room, leaving me standing there confused, lost and scared. I had never heard of Huntington's Disease. I did not know it was an incurable brain disease, it was fatal and that people who have the mutation have a significantly reduced life span with their quality of life rapidly declining often starting in the prime of their lives. Any child born to someone with the HD mutation, as my husband was, has a 50/50 chance of inheriting it, and so would any children they had.

Several years later we would be sitting in a waiting room watching the clock tick as we waited for the result of his genetic fate. Distractedly I looked at magazines and the images on the wall, all I could see were babies and happy smiling families. When we were called into the office, we sat down directly in front of a large window, staring out onto a sunny beautiful day full of light. Looking at both of us, the Dr opened the envelope and asked my husband "Do you really want to know?". My world went black. My husband vowed that we were never having children, he had the gene that causes Huntington's Disease (HD)

Megan H Carroll, Virtual Studio Blog post 2022



Fig. 4, Megan Carroll *Kitchen Floor Series Untitled*, 2023,
Broom Experiment, Chinese Ink on paper, 48" x 48"
(Feet shown for scale.)



Fig. 5, Megan Carroll *Kitchen Floor Series Untitled*, 2023,
Toilet brush , Chinese Ink with gold Gouache on canvas,
30"x30"¹⁸

In the painting *Toilet Brush* (Fig. 1) part of the *Kitchen Floor Series*, black Chinese ink is spiralled on white ground drawing the eye around the circle and back to the centre. Using a toilet brush, I applied crushed charcoal and ground it into the paper in a circular motion, reinforcing the

¹⁸ I wanted to see what it would be like to use canvas instead of paper. Using Canvas made me be more thoughtful and considerate of my application which is opposite of what my intention is for the series.

relentlessness of domestic labour. The harder I applied pressure the darker and more bold the marks on the paper became, matching the intensity of the ongoing emotional tug of war I was experiencing between the expectations and responsibilities of my family responsibilities and MFA commitments.

I first used a gesso ground as I thought this would hold the marks better. My gesso palette was unclean and there were faint streaks of pink and beige which I decided to leave, they reminded me of the colours of mineral deposits, like a ring around the toilet bowl. As with all of the *Kitchen Floor series* I mimicked the domestic labour related to the application. Using a toilet brush and crushed charcoal, I worked from outside in, for a spiralling effect. The black Chinese ink with gold suspensions was added for depth. I found that the painting lacked the intensity I wanted.

I was drawing on the recollection, years ago when my young son was cleaning the toilet. Instead of brushing clockwise, he went counter clockwise and slowly unscrewed the head of a toilet brush completely off. Somehow the brush managed to get lodged far enough into the toilet that it was unretrievable and a plumber had to be called. When the plumber determined that he could not dislodge the brush, it was decided that the entire toilet had to be removed to retrieve the obstruction. The whole operation then took a matter of minutes but the bill was astronomical. Getting my son to clean the toilet has been a struggle ever since.

The size of the drawing is determined by the available space in my kitchen, where I spend most of my days either cleaning or cooking. (See Video <https://vimeo.com/807100756>) As noted earlier, I was inspired by Ukeles “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!”, where she declared “MY

WORKING WILL BE THE WORK”¹⁹ Ukulele's manifesto was influenced by her own struggle of becoming an artist/mother. In an interview with Randy Kennedy in *The New York Times*, the artist states: “I was in a crisis because I had worked years to be an artist, and I didn’t want to be two people. It seemed like I could be an artist only by being two people.”²⁰ I continually return to this statement as I develop the *Kitchen Floor series*.

In my research exploring the impact of domestic labour on female artists²¹ I have seen instances where women were told that they can not be both, an artist and a mother. Artist Rebecca Campbell recounts in the documentary *Artist and Mother* (2018)²² how several artists and critics said that “they personally feel that if you are an artist and a mother you are either a bad artist or a bad mother.” Ema Shin, a textile artist, in an interview with *Hi-Fructose Magazine* recalled a “professor’s advice to ‘not approach art galleries too early because if you're going to have a baby, you're going to stop making art’.”²³ Other female artists gave up their children such as Camille Billops (1933-2019) who left her daughter at an orphanage, when she was four to pursue her artistic career ²⁴ or decided not to have children at all. In an interview with *Red Online Magazine*, perpetuating the idea that women can not be both mother and artist, Tracy Emin is famously quoted as saying “I don’t think I’d be making work (if I were a mother).” She admits,

I would have been either 100% mother or 100% artist. I’m not flaky and I don’t compromise. Having children and being a mother... It

¹⁹ Phillips, 39 Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*

²⁰ Kennedy, R. (2016). *An Artist Who Calls the Sanitation Department Home - The New York Times*

²¹ Though I have looked at several artists from varying communities and socioeconomic backgrounds, a large proportion of my research has been conducted on Westernised women artists that have worked in the later half of the 20th century until present.

²² *Artist and Mother, Artbound*, Season 9 Episode 7, Public Media Group of Southern California, KCET,(2018)

²³ Robertson, M. (2022). Hi-Fructose, *The New Contemporary Art Magazine*, 64 (Volume 64), Ema Shin 22–26. www.hifructose.com

²⁴ Bonét, S. (2019). *The Artist Who Gave Up Her Daughter*.
<https://www.topic.com/the-artist-who-gave-up-her-daughter>

would be a compromise to be an artist at the same time. I know some women can. But that's not the kind of artist I aspire to be. There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men.²⁵

I have often questioned what my artistic practice would look like if my husband and I had chosen to not have children. I don't think not being a mother would have made me a better artist, I think it would have made me be a different one. Across fields, married, unmarried, mother or childless, women are still fighting for equalities in the workforce, in the home and in the other public realms. I believe my art practice would continue to reflect those realities but through a different lens. Working against this kind of public perception, much of my work addresses the inequality I experience as a wife and mother²⁶. Ultimately, I have made the choice to support my husband and his desire to further his career ambitions at the cost of my own. I made this decision because of his illness.

After receiving the devastating news of my husband's diagnosis of Huntington's Disease,²⁷ we thought having children was lost to us. We had no intention of bringing children into the world that would share his genetic fate. However, with new medical technologies combined with In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), it became possible to screen embryos before implanting them (PGD, Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis).²⁸ So we made a conscious

²⁵ Groskop, V. (2015). I am not flakey and I do not compromise. *Red Online Magazine*. <https://www.redonline.co.uk/red-women/interviews/a506662/tracey-emin-interview/>

²⁶ I don't think not being a mother would have made me a better artist, I think it would have made me be a different one.

²⁷ Huntington's disease (HD) is a fatal genetic disorder that causes the progressive breakdown of nerve cells in the brain. It deteriorates a person's physical and mental abilities usually during their prime working years and has no cure. <http://hdsa.org>

²⁸ Previously the options were to conceive children naturally and at 18 yrs old they could decide for themselves to do the genetic test, or to guarantee that children of someone with HD did not have the mutation involved having an in-utero test. To do the test you have to agree that if the embryo was positive it would be aborted. In our community we have known people who have done one or the other. Often those children grow up living with a parent with HD, watching them get sick and eventually dying, wondering if they will have a similar outcome. We have known people who

decision to have children using this method. We even timed it so that if the IVF-PGD round was successful, I wouldn't be heavily pregnant during my last semester of school, and I would give birth months after I graduated. However, nearly halfway through my second trimester at 20 weeks gestation, I was hospitalised, and put on strict bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy. I graduated by proxy, missing the ceremony, celebrations and graduation show. As my classmates moved on to their new endeavours, my life became engulfed with the care and extra accommodation of my newly born premature twins. I did not see a way to be an artist and a mother,²⁹ and it took me many years to return to meaningful creative practice. Instead, between naps and feedings, I made a game of my domestic duties with emphasis on cooking, then sewing, and even experimenting with making my own household cleaners. I didn't know it then, but my domestic labour became the work. The simple things that I did to keep myself engaged, relevant, and maintain a creative identity continue to resonate and also inform my MFA research.

have had both positive and negative in-utero tests. I am pained when I think of the women who have terminated their wanted pregnancies. It is unethical to have a minor tested for HD unless they are showing signs of the disease, called Juvenile-HD. IVF-PGD also has its complications as a difficult laborious procedure and can often be unsuccessful due to the nature of IVF and the additional 50% risk factor of each embryo.

²⁹ Because we lived in a small footprint, every space was dedicated to something. At one point I worked under my bed that had hydraulic lifts to raise the mattress for easy storage access. It is where I kept a printer, paints, drawing supplies and other small art making tools, as well as spare linens and clothes. In another house, I made artwork in an uninsulated mudroom sharing space with shoes, jackets and a double stroller.

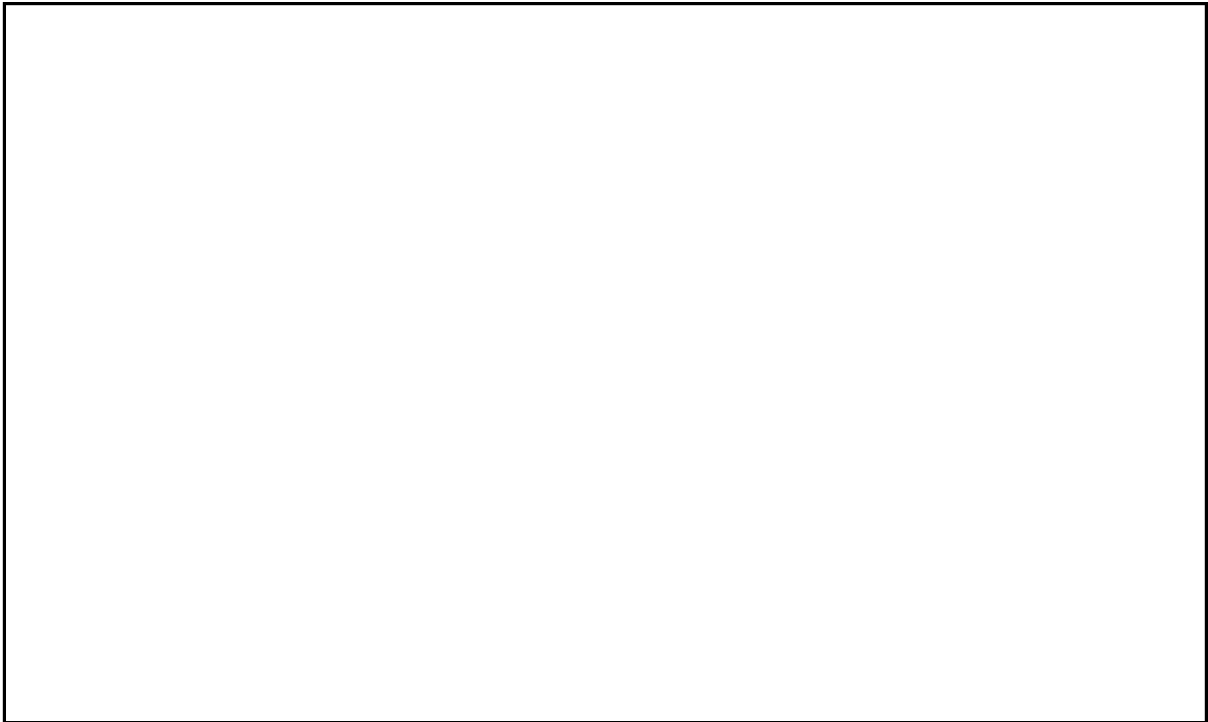


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Fig 6, Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1993

Janine Antoni is another artist that I admire as both a feminist and someone who experiments with unconventional materials. While she doesn't have children, she does use gestures and actions as well as employ a variety of non-traditional materials to convey meaning in her conceptual practice. This is seen in her performance *Loving Care* (see Fig. 6). Working with Natural Black Loving Care hair dye at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London, UK, Antoni used her hair as the mop and her body as a tool to paint directly onto the floor. As the performance evolved and she took up more space, the unpainted surface shrunk and the viewer needed to, 'slowly backing out of the gallery'³⁰. Like Antoni, I physically place my body in relation to many of my artworks, positioning myself on the floor hunched over on hands and knees to mimic the gestures of housework labour such as scrubbing, mopping, and sweeping.

³⁰ "Loving Care", 1993, Janine Antoni <http://www.janineantoni.net> date accessed 01/24/23

The final piece of the *Kitchen Floor Series* consists of the painting *Sweeping Meditation* (See fig, 1.2) and accompanying videos. For the *Sweeping Meditations* painting, a 4'x30' scroll on paper, I used a regular household broom with black Chinese ink to paint across a section of the roll each day for a week. As the title suggests, I use the act of sweeping as a type of meditation, to slow down and catch my breath between activities. Most of the broom's marks are done in a single motion but a few are short and hurried as if I was concentrating on a single spot of dust. The ink I used is very saturated, the strokes are thick and heavy but become lighter before I reinked my broom and you can see the individual bristle marks as they are pushed and pulled across the floor. Because of the nature of my application, a day at a time and my limited availability of space, I was not able to view the painting as it progressed. I could only see the one section of the current day I was working on. I had no way of knowing what the painting would look like when it was complete. As a result I was surprised when I unrolled it in its entirety to discover that the ink had also captured the texture of my floor and you can see the long linear lines run through the scroll from the floorboard planks.

The videos show me in the act of cleaning my kitchen to make room for the sections of *Sweeping Meditation* that I will make. Firstly, I need to clean up from the previous night's meal, and whatever new dishes that have appeared from breakfast and lunch. Once the dishes have been done, I sweep, sometimes vacuum, and mop the floor. To make the painting, on the clean floor, I unroll a section of about 4 ft, from the scroll. Once I have completed that day's section of *Sweeping Meditations*, it remains on the floor to dry. It becomes an object that I have to navigate and work around as I prep and make dinner. When it is dry, I roll up the scroll, put it away, reorganise my kitchen to complete the last of the meal preparations. Often the only witnesses to these activities are my cat and dog who walk in and

out of the frame unaware and oblivious. The intention of this documentation was to show the daily rituals of domesticity and how entwined they are with my art making practice. Additionally they show how the physical labour of art making is often like the invisibility of domestic chores. One usually only sees the end product, whether a clean home, a meal or a completed artwork and not the activity of their making. There are seven days in total, about 16 hrs of video, edited, sped up and compressed into 6 hrs. You can see the passage of time in the shadows that travel across the floor and through the windows as the sun changes position throughout the day.

I first became interested in this way of working and documentation when I watched Andy Goldsworthy's *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy, Working with time*.³¹ a documentary of the artist as he creates large scale sculptures in nature that erode with time. I am not saying this is similar to Goldsworthy but it was his film that got me interested in time based practices. My works are created in a private domicile and it is my physical presence that measures the passage of time in a flurry of activity. Many of his works are ephemeral and the only trace of his sculptures are the lasting images in film or photographs. By contrast, I have tangible works on paper of evidence of the time I have exerted as my output.

Working this way has allowed me to reflect on my process, and see patterns start to emerge as I navigate my space. For example, how I order my activities, how I contain and store my artwork and what I prioritise. At times I am lost in the task at hand and forget I am filming, and other times I am aware that I am also performing roles of homemaker and artist. The cycle feels endless. Many years ago I was listening to a podcast and the host was interviewing an author. I was in the midst of running my kiddos around, trying to find time to do yoga, go grocery shopping, meal, get the laundry done etc. This author was arguing that you have more time than you

³¹Riedelsheimer et al

think, and he gave an example of pumping gas, or sitting at a light or time you have in the morning before you get out of bed as minutes that you can recapture to become more productive. After all “Remember time is Money”³² and wasting time is wasting a valuable commodity. And as someone that needed to find more time in their day to get everything done it was a potential strategy. I thought if I could be more efficient in other areas I could be more productive in others³³. By contrast I recently read *How to do Nothing: Resisting the attention economy*. by author, artist Jenny Odell who argues to sit in that quietness, “our constant engagement with the attention economy means that it is something many of us may have to relearn.”³⁴ Busyness does not always equal worth and finding moments to disengage are just as valuable, potentially creating more time for creativity.

Work 2 Interruptions & Erasures

³² Benjamin Franklin

³³ I found that I filled that ‘lost time’ with more of the ‘to do’ list and I wasn’t able to achieve the time I desperately needed for my creative pursuits.

³⁴ Odell, 16

*One of my yoga instructors was talking about breath and how the inhale was to
lengthen... holding onto and appreciating the moment... capturing a second of
time and savouring it in suspension...*

*I have a box that I keep hidden away, it is unremarkable, purple, plastic,
small, the type you keep in a kitchen with recipes or miscellaneous odds
and ends you don't quite know where they fit.
However, this box is full of words, I don't know what they say anymore
but
I know who wrote them.
I keep them separate from the others, sealed.
They are my inhale.*

*I don't open the box or read the words... I know it would hurt too much.
But there is another reason. Each time I open it a bit of her escapes. It's
my way of keeping her earthbound. I can smell the patchouli, musk,
incense like it was yesterday but here and now. I can see all the
moments all at once, seconds stretched in suspension ...
waiting for an exhale...*

Megan H Carroll, Conversation with Sook-Yin Lee 2022



Fig. 7, Megan Carroll, *Interruptions and Erasures*, 2022/23, Embroidery on cotton bed sheet approximately 8 ft circumference.



Fig. 9 and 10, Megan Carroll, *Interruptions and Erasures*, 2022/23,
Embroidery on cotton bedsheet, details 8' in diameter

At first glance, *Interruptions and Erasures* (*Interruptions* for short) (see Fig. 8), is circular 8' in diameter charcoal grey textile, that is embroidered with a satin stitch. A closer inspection reveals that more than one colour has been used. There are seven different neural tones of tan and grey some of which blend into one another while others almost disappear against the textile itself. Much of the stitching ends before another colour begins, and others are unfinished, with the embroidery thread left to hang.

Interruptions began as a way to document domestic labour and time. The blocks of colour represent individual days where I sit for a duration of time, usually midafternoon and embroider. This action ends when I am interrupted for some reason. The more there is of a particular colour, the longer I was able to work. When I am interrupted, I simply stop and knot it off. If the interruption was abrupt, I let the unfinished thread hang. Each

colour is assigned a day and I may be interrupted for extended periods or unable to return to my sewing for a duration so will I pick up again on the day of the corresponding colour.

Repetition can be particularly useful as a learning tool to commit things to memory, however it requires practice, patience and duration. Similarly neuroscientists say about the brain “Cells that fire together, wire together”³⁵, “meaning that cells in frequent communication with one another strengthen the connections between themselves, which helps both cells survive and thrive”,³⁶ reinforcing that pathway. In the workplace it is acquiring the knowledge and skills to do your job well that is then rewarded with a pay cheque, or a promotion. But what if it is done in the home, what then? I am not learning a new skill, I am just doing the same things over and over again, it’s as if my brain isn’t firing during these activities, there is reinforcement of skill, but no growth.

I purposefully use neutral tones on the grey background to represent invisible labour in the domestic sphere. As days run into one another and become blurred, so do the colours in *Interruptions*, much like T.S. Eliot's phrase “I have measured out my life in coffee spoons” in his poem *A Love Song for J. Alfred Prufrock*, 1963.³⁷ Whereas spoons represent monotony and repetition, the embroidered stitches represent monotony and repetition as well as duties and tasks. In the 19th century embroidery “came to be seen as correct drawing room behaviour,... [and] convey the special social and psychological attributes required of a lady”³⁸ such as femininity, duty and purity. Embroidery was a way to occupy a woman’s time, to keep them engaged and prevent them from unsavoury behaviours.

³⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebbian_theory

³⁶ Text message with Jeff Carroll, PhD.

³⁷<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>
Collected Poems 1909-1962 (1963)

³⁸ Parker (152)

As much as *Interruptions* is a work about the consistent and relentless invisible labour that is performed in the domestic sphere, it is also about the embodiment of memory. It is my belief that fibres³⁹ hold memory, and we use them as a way to connect with memory. As long as I can remember I have been interested in sewing and have taken many classes throughout the years to expand and build my skills. At some point, an instructor said to me “Fabric has memory.”⁴⁰ What they meant is that it will hold onto folds; wear and tear, don’t iron, press, and be mindful of care, all of these things damage the fibres and like a crumpled up piece of paper, you can never make it completely flat again. Instead what I heard was that fabric is a living thing, made up of cells that have their own unique characteristics. These many fibres form textiles that then take on personalities and will remember the bodies of those that inhabit them, by holding creases or wearing thin with heavy use. The fabric I chose for this piece is a repurposed bed sheet. My interest in saving it from the landfill was that much of it was intact, only torn and worn soft from our bodies, mine and my husband’s. As I worked with the bedsheet, I started to think about how it has witnessed different emotions, such as love, loss, passion, frustration and ambivalence. The fibres have trapped pieces of DNA from sweat, tears and skin. When I touch it, I can feel the density of the weave. I know that if it is soft, torn and pilly, it was mostly likely from my husband’s side of the bed. If it had moderate wear but still intact, it was from my side of bed. The areas that showed the least amount of use were the foot of the bed on my side, with the edges of the fabric protected from use where they were tucked under the mattress. It even has a faint smell to it, of repetitive washing and hints of body odour. Art Historian and contemporary art curator Helen Molesworth claims, “The

³⁹ Fibre - a thread or filament from which a vegetable tissue, mineral substance, or textile is formed. *Oxford English Dictionary*

⁴⁰ I don’t remember who it was that said it to me but it was during a workshop in Vancouver, BC in 1998.

nontraditional materials have meaning and when they are used those meanings are in play”.⁴¹ This resonates deeply with me as I hold *Interruptions* in my hands on a regular basis.

Because I work on it most days, it has become a living document, changing and growing with each stitch and shift in coloured thread. The stitches take on my day, mood and attention. They are tight and evenly spaced when I have more time, haphazard and loose when I am in a rush, or slightly crooked and uneven if distracted. This piece began as a way for me to visually represent the work that I do in the home, but has evolved into something more. I now notice my reactions to it. Some days I am excited and will sit happily stitching, imagining the outcome, other days I am bored or restless. At times I am resentful of it, and question my choice of project, materials and method. Artist Beverly Ayling-Smith wrote in her PhD dissertation, *Connecting with the viewer – affectivity and cathexis in textile artwork* 2019, “This paper investigates how cloth can be used in textile artwork to make a connection with this unresolved mourning and thereby contribute to the progression of the viewer’s work of mourning.” She continues, “The importance placed on clothes and other textiles belonging to the deceased in these processes⁴² would suggest that the role of cloth in the working through feelings and the part textile artwork can play in the materialisation and facilitation of the work”. Unlike Ayling-Smith who is using her work to process emotions of grief of the deceased, I am using *Interruptions* to process the imminent death of my husband. *Interruptions* is ever present in my life, not far from my thoughts, similar to my feelings of resentment and frustration about my husband’s disease, the bed sheet that we shared has become a transitional object,⁴³ a stand in for the person he

⁴¹ *Artist and Mother, Artbound*, Season 9 Episode 7, Public Media Group of Southern California, KCET,(2018)

⁴² Ayling-Smith is referring to the stages of Grief-work defined by Freud

⁴³ The term *transitional object* was coined in 1951 by Donald Winnicott as a designation for any material object (typically something soft—a piece of cloth, say, or part of a plush toy) to which an

was⁴⁴. My aim is that when the viewer discovers the story behind the work, they might better understand my ongoing attention and persistence with the textile and its subtle interruptions of coloured thread.

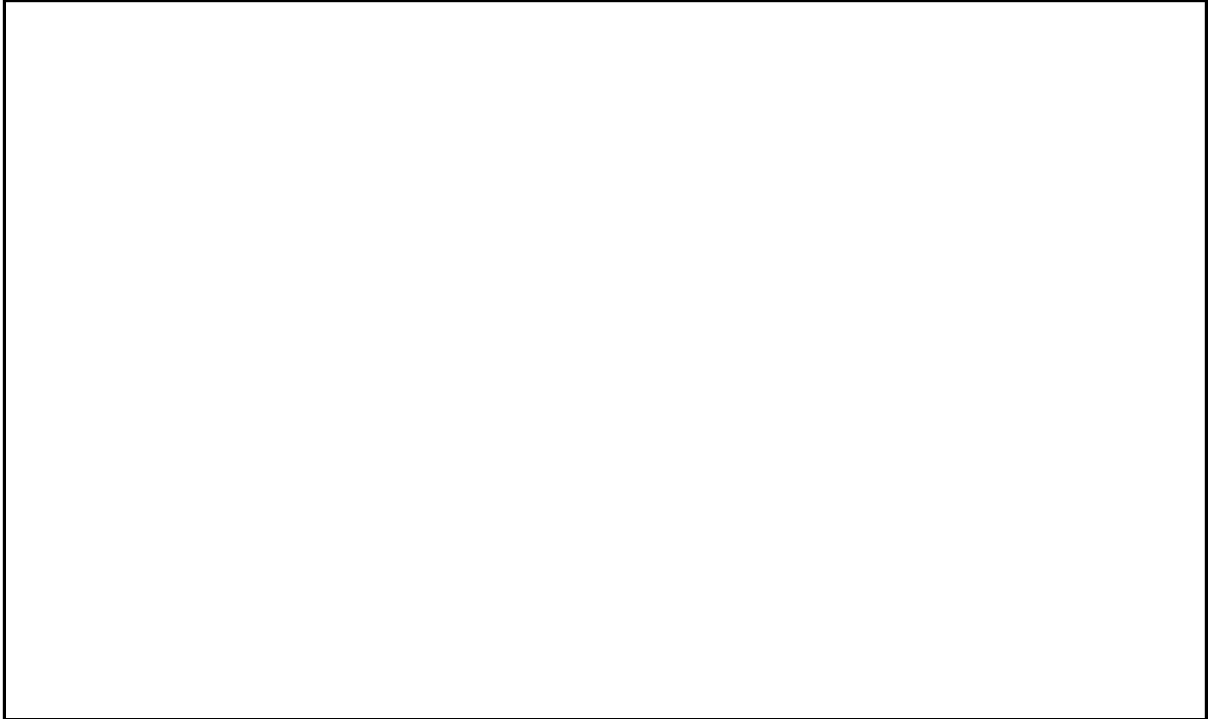


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Fig. 10, Beverly Ayling-Smith *Cloth and Memory*, 2012

infant attributes a special value and by means of which the child is able to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with the mother to genuine object-relationships.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/transitional-object>

⁴⁴ As I write this, the disease is slowly progressing and my husband is not the same person he was a short while ago.



Fig. 11, Megan Carroll, *Acts of Care* 2022
Various Size, Embroidery Thread, Gouache, Flame, Sandpaper on Linen or
Cotton



Fig. 12, Megan Carroll, *Acts of Care* 2022
 Various Size, Embroidery Thread, Gouache, Flame, Sandpaper on Linen or Cotton

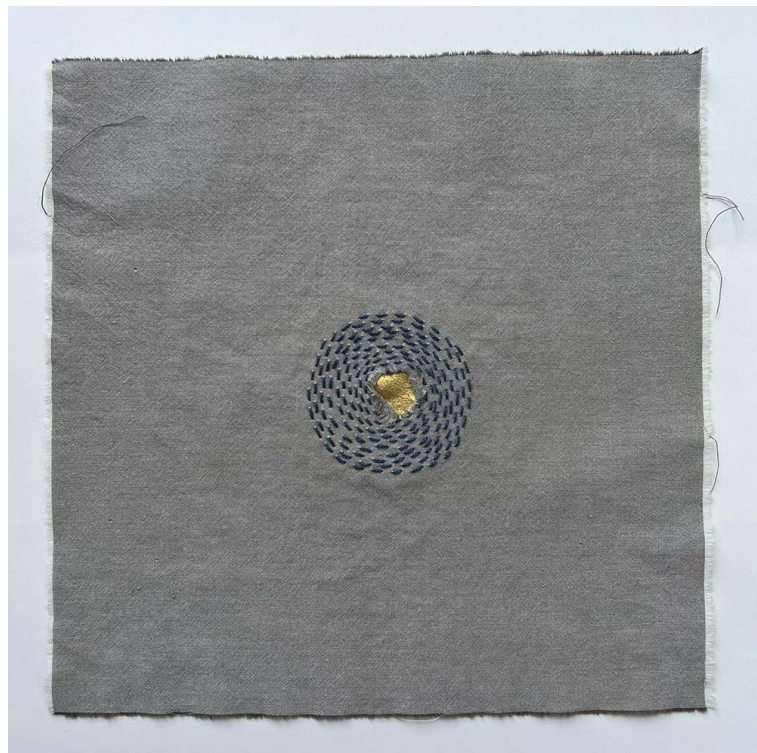


Fig. 13, Megan Carroll, *Acts of Care* 2022
 Various Size, Embroidery Thread, Gouache, Flame, Sandpaper on Linen or Cotton

Work 3 Acts of Care

We don't say the CURE word in our house, there is no cure, there is hope but no cure. We often say it is the C word. We never tell people there is a CURE. Then I got cancer (another famous C word) and for that, there is a Cure and I am Cured.

My Husband is not Cured and will not be in his lifetime Cured. He is always going to have Huntington's Disease, it will be what kills him.

But before that all the things he is, will be a memory of mine. Long before the dance⁴⁵ ends, his memories will be my memories, hopes and dreams, family and adventure will be gone to him. I will hold the hand of the man that I shared kisses with, and I will be his memory, the meals we shared, the champagne we drank, the travels we did, and our children.

I will hold his hand the way he did mine.

Megan H Carroll, Virtual Studio Blog post 2022

⁴⁵ People with Huntington disease develop involuntary jerking or twitching movements known as chorea. As the disease progresses, these movements become more pronounced. Affected individuals may have trouble walking, speaking, and swallowing.
<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/huntington-disease/>

Acts of Care, another C word (see Fig. 12,13,14) is a series of small embroideries done on pieces of linen or cotton, the same ones used in *Interruptions*. I enjoy working with these reclaimed textiles: they have their own embodied significance and emotional weight. There are 10 pieces in the *Acts of Care series*. Three of them are shown above. I use a simple repetitive line called a running stitch, the kind you find on many styles of visible mending such as Boro⁴⁶, Sashiko⁴⁷, and Kantha⁴⁸. By replicating the same motion over and over the threads build up and strengthen the existing textile creating a newer reinforced surface. It is my intention to reinforce and preserve both the textile and their attached memories..

With *Acts of Care*, I use a blue cotton thread in a circular motion building out from a small hole accentuated by a gold patch. The patch is placed below the tear, to call attention to the edges of top fabric. In the *Acts of Care Series* I often use gold to accent a repair. And as noted earlier, the gold calls attention to the care put into the ordinary overlooked acts of domesticity. This is a carry over from my ceramic instruction and aligns with the ideas of Wabi-Sabi⁴⁹ and Kintsugi⁵⁰. For me the gold adds preciousness and value inviting closer inspection. The blue is also informed by my ceramic education. The hue I use is often described as Indigo. This is one of the oldest dyes for textiles and probably the most pervasive: the process

⁴⁶Boro are a class of Japanese textiles that have been mended or patched together. The term is derived from the Japanese term "*boroboro*", meaning something tattered or repaired.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boro_\(textile\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boro_(textile))

⁴⁷ Sashiko (Little Stabs) is a type of traditional Japanese embroidery or stitching used for the decorative and/or functional reinforcement of cloth and clothing. Owing to the relatively cheap nature of white cotton thread and the abundant nature of cheap, indigo-dyed blue cloth in historical Japan, *sashiko* has a distinctive appearance of white-on-blue embroidery, though some decorative pieces may also use red thread. (*cite*)

⁴⁸Kantha also spelled kanta, and qanta, is a type of embroidery craft in the Bangladesh and eastern regions of India, particularly in the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura and Odisha. (*cite*)

⁴⁹ There appears to be no one clear definition of Wabi-Sabi, the way I understand it, it is a humble aesthetic of appreciation of Wabi- a feeling of loneliness, distress or abandonment combined with Sabi- decay, temporal

⁵⁰ Kintsugi, is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum; it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi>

appears to have been independently discovered “at different times, across the world”⁵¹. I am drawn to it not only because of its historical lineage but the colour blue carries with it many connotations. It is extremely rare in the natural world yet is a beloved colour as it reminds us of the vastness of bodies of water and the sky.

With *Acts of Care*, (see Fig. 12), I burned a hole by holding a flame just below the fabric that smouldered until it caught the flame that I then snuffed out, creating an irregular shape. It has hard brittle edges that cast a shadow on the gold patch below the damaged fabric. Using grey thread on the grey fabric, I stitched carefully to avoid the burned edges. I use the same burning technique. When I snuffed out the flame I had two holes. This time I cleaned up the edges and carefully stitched around the two until they ran into one another. The more I stitched the more circular it became. The resulting shape reminds me of a dividing cell much like an embryo.

With all the pieces in the *Acts of Care series*, I employ a simple repetitive stitch, the kind you find on many styles of Japanese visible mending. By replicating the same motion over and over the threads build up and strengthen the existing textile creating a newer reinforced surface. The repetitive stitches are reminiscent of steps and paths, similar to the rows and columns in *WWU Steps*. Once again as with *Interruptions* I am using grey on grey to visually work with ideas of blending in and invisibility. One grey subtly runs into the other so you don’t always see where one ends and another begins. Making these pieces, using repetition and pattern, was again a way of bringing content and actions from paid work into my art practice.

Many fibre based artists I have encountered in my research about the history of textiles use embroidery to speak to maintenance, repair and

⁵¹ St Clair. 189

reuse, not only of clothing and other textiles but as “an act of care” through a social practice. *Make Thrift Mend* was a project started by Katerina Rodabaugh in 2013 to not buy new clothing for an entire year. This has since become a lifestyle. She explains in her book *Mending Matters* (See Fig. 14) that this slow fashion guide for a well loved wardrobe, was influenced by the high cost of fashion, such as the ecological impact of textile waste on the planet and events such as “the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing more than 1,100 workers and injuring 2,500 more.”⁵² She compares “fast fashion” to “fast food”, and asks her readers to slow down on the consumption, realign and reconsider where textiles are sourced and the garment industries practices. As someone that loves clothes and has had a lifelong sewing practise her approach resonates with me.



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Fig. 14, Mending on denim with various denim patches and stitches, hand-stitched Photo Credit, Katrina Rodabaugh

⁵² Rodabaugh, 19

Another artist I am interested in that uses mending as a form of personal expression is Molly Martin, author and illustrator of *The Art of Repair: Mindful mending: how to stitch old things to new life*.

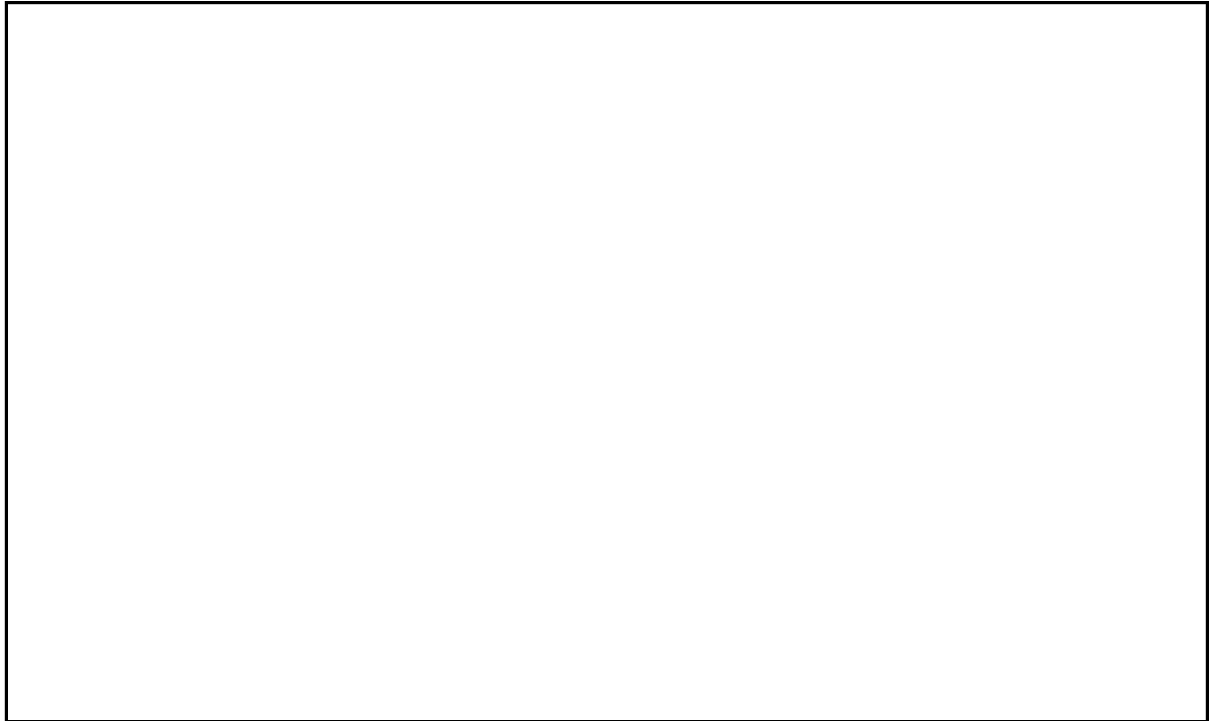


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Fig. 15 Molly Martin, Sketches for her book *Mindful Mending*

What drew me to her work was how she uses mending as a metaphor of care. She speaks about giving articles of textiles new life and purpose. This is something that I think about a lot in my relationship with my husband. In a way I am attempting to mend and maintain aspects of him so that I can extend his life for as long as possible. Many of our decisions have been to give him space to grow and flourish, to reach his maximum potential before his disease erodes his brain at which point it will be my job to patch and mend the pieces that are left.

Mending acts to repair something that is broken or damaged in order to extend its use. I use the term care as an active response to sustaining and maintaining that which needs repair, giving care as an act of

preservation and improvement. This allows for greater connection to the environment as well with others such as my immediate community (family, friends and peers) and beyond such as the invisible labourers whose energies went into the linens and cottons I use. First the natural materials were harvested, then spun into fibres, creating threads to be woven into the fabrics. In a sense these unknown and often underpaid persons who are mostly women⁵³ are my collaborators. They have their own memories and experiences that leave traces of themselves on the raw fabric or garment and without them, my practice would not be possible. When I reuse and keep textiles from the landfill I am attempting to pay my respect to them. It is also no secret that the garment industry accounts for “92 million tonnes of garbage in our landfills, and contributes up to 20% of our global waste a year.”⁵⁴ This is in addition to the deplorable conditions that many of these workers live and endure such as the circumstances that led to the collapse of the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Therefore I feel it is my responsibility to these unnamed persons to reuse and repurpose as much as possible, it is not only care for my belongings, but also to care for my environment, and others.

⁵³ Women still hold most of the labour that is ‘considered’ less skill. Men hold positions of authority and jobs that are more mechanised. Of those working, women do more domestic labour and sleep less. (Zaman,2020)

⁵⁴ <https://earth.org/statistics-about-fast-fashion-waste/>

Conclusion

This thesis delves into the profound impact of organising my life and artistic practice around the realities of my personal experiences, specifically the challenges of raising a family while navigating decisions we have made to accommodate my husband in relation to his illness. These circumstances have not only shaped our motivations as a couple but have also defined my roles as a wife and mother, the complex birth of my two children and the imminent disease and eventual loss of my husband have directly framed and influenced this Thesis Project. Through this exploration, I have demonstrated how these transformative events have fundamentally altered my artistic practice and, in turn, have shaped my identity as an artist.

I believe my artwork will speak to others that have experienced or contemplated the challenges of domesticity in their own lives such as monotony, repetition, combined with the emotions of grief, loss, frustration, born from lived experiences. They are sensitive to feminist issues such as the inequality that women still face in both domestic spheres and the labour force⁵⁵. . My viewer recognises the emotional depth and care that is conveyed through domestic and traditionally feminine activities through my use of materials, methods and tools. I want my viewers to feel the intimacy of the gesture and mark making as they contemplate their own relationships with these activities. By using humble methods and materials that are often

⁵⁵ According to Organization For Economic Co-operation and Development, OCED.stat, on average in Canada men spend 2.46 hours and women spend 3.72 hours on unpaid labour. In the United States of America 2.76 hours a day for men and women 4.64 hours on unpaid labour. These statistics did not define the types of activities or the further breakdown of communities within the two countries.

overlooked or repurposed my aim is that the viewers find beauty in the ordinary and appreciate the complexities and nuances of everyday life.

Exhibition Installation and Thesis Defence Reflections

I like many of my 2023 cohort and others before us, entered into the Masters of Fine Arts degree with one set of ideals and aspirations. As I progressed in the program my ideas and goals shifted in ways that I would not and could not have predicted. I am not sure if it was because I deferred for a year but I had a monumental shift in the way I conceived and executed my art over this past year (late 2022/2023). With that came a clarity to the direction I wanted to pursue for my thesis exhibition and supporting document.

In preparation for the exhibition, I made many pieces of art experimenting with what had the most impact. I was able to figure out what was working for me and what was not. Initially I thought I was going to use all of them as a collection that would represent my overarching themes of domesticity and gender roles. As I started compiling and editing, along with advice from my supervisor, instructors, cohort and external influences the plan of showing it all started to shift and I saw how I could boldly represent my concepts by showing fewer but more decisive pieces.

Talking about the artwork and hearing others speak to it, indicated that my intentions for it were mostly understood. I appreciated other people's insights and reflections and the connections that they made to it in their own lives.

I felt like the experience of considering and curating the artworks that I created during my degree was enlightening and I learned what was successful and what I could do better next time. Such as I was disheartened that I could not get my video to work as intended and the main gallery space

lights were not on. I felt that the video would have given the viewers more insight into *Sweeping Meditation* and the lighting gave the impression that that area was closed and separate from the main exhibition. Because of this more than once I had to remove sandwich boards, garbage bags and other abandoned items that obstructed the view of my artwork.

I found the support document to be a challenge. Through this process I discovered my mode of writing is more narrative and autoethnographic, academic writing does not come easily for me. I needed to find strategies to combine both types of writing to fulfil the written part of my degree. Finding a balance I was able to combine storytelling with research that supported my ideas and themes. I do feel that there is more room to expand and flesh out my ideas. As I write more and continue my research I hope to use the skills that I have started to build through this process to make my writing stronger. As I read and reflect I am seeing obvious areas of strength and weakness.

I sincerely thank and appreciate my Defence Committee's insight into my work and the thoughtful questions and concerns that they brought up. I found the process reflective and challenging. For the most part I sensed that the themes of my thesis were received well and the criticism valid, especially about privilege and means. This indicated to me I did not specify my intention as clearly as I needed to in both my artwork and the supporting document. It is my intention to do more research to listen, to observe and include a diverse range of voices in future endeavours.

There were a couple of noted comments- both made by Ingrid Koenig, that I felt were openings for great discussions if we had more time. The first about what I perceived as privilege and the comment about my appliances. And the second about economy and worth. I was not expecting a question about my home. Yes it is nice and I have amassed a collection of appliances, I recognized my knee jerk answer was to justify and explain

rather than think about the deeper meaning of that comment and though I have thought about race and privilege throughout the course of the degree I should have been more prepared for it. I am still thinking about her use of the word economy- there could be multiple ways that that word was intended, as in, there is a labour force that I could theoretically hire to do the jobs I don't want to do. Or, what is my income for performing this labour, was it a reference to the Wages for Housework movement in the early 1970's? Is it the beautiful home I have now, it is about sacrifice and worth? I believe her intention behind that word was a bit of all of that, and that is why my response surprised me and I want to explore deeper- The word I heard myself say and resonate with me was "guilt".

There is so much to reflect on about the entire process, my experiences continue to shape me and I would like to continue delving into the themes of domesticity, labour and gender roles. Having such a diverse cohort and learning about their practices and positionality was eye-opening. I saw many of the same themes and overlaps but from different vantage points. Moving forward I would like to find ways that can honour multiple stories from different backgrounds, that includes race, class and other marginalised communities. I will also continue to expand upon my own narrative especially as I start the shift from one type of caregiver to another as my husband's illness progresses. This may include employing similar materials and methods but also seeking out opportunities to expand my practice. I also hope that I can find ways to curate and work with other artists to expand how art is viewed and accessed outside of a traditional gallery space.

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