

Holding On & Letting Go: Material, Grief, and Care



By Alexandrya Eaton
BFA, Mount Allison University, 1991

A Thesis Support Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Fine Art

Emily Carr University of Art + Design

2024

© Alexandrya Eaton, 2024

Holding On & Letting Go: Material, Grief, and Care

Abstract

This research paper examines the importance and value of matrilineal knowledge and emotional knowledge as foundations for an art practice, as well as artmaking as a means of processing difficult emotions such as grief. The studio research investigates traditional craft practices and explores their reorganization within the realm of painting as a way of visually making order to better understand emotional experience and maternal relationships. This hands-on material research involves many processes including stitching, smocking, weaving, painting, and performance.

Through the act of making, the work undergoes many layers of doing and undoing, and relies on tactile repetitions of movements and gestures, as well as an intuitive sense of colour. This multilayered way of working results in three dimensional sculptural paintings which speak to motherhood, memory, grief, and care.

Textiles are embodied forms of knowledge that articulate powerful relationships between materiality and nostalgia. Speaking to life's many transformations, through soft sculpture, painting, textile installation, and performance, studio research becomes a feminist expression of care.

Table of Contents

List of illustrations.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Research.....	7
Textiles.....	10
Matrilineal Knowledge.....	13
Emotion.....	16
Personal History.....	18
<i>Grief Cloak, 2023-2024</i>	21
Foundations of Exploration.....	25
Care.....	25
Diary.....	27
Colour.....	29
Glitch.....	31
Body.....	34
Conclusion.....	40
Final Reflection	43
Documentation.....	44
Bibliography.....	57

List of Illustrations

All images are of artworks made and documented by the author, unless otherwise noted.

Figure 1: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , 2023-2024.....	1
Photograph by Annie France Noel, 2024. Printed with permission.	
Figure 2: Detail, smocked textile, 2022.....	6
Figure 3: Studio wall with smocked and painted textiles, 2022.....	8
Figure 4: Smocked and painted textile, 2023.....	9
Figure 5: <i>Prom Dress</i> , 2023. Acrylic, canvas, thread, 142 x 74 x 23 cm.....	12
Figure 6: Detail, honeycomb smocking on canvas.....	14
Figure 7: <i>Collapse</i> , 2024. Acrylic, canvas, thread, 102 x 97 x 13 cm.....	15
Figure 8: Summer studio, Emily Carr University of Art & Design, 2023.....	17
Figure 9: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , 2023-2024.....	20
Photograph by Annie France Noel, 2024. Printed with permission.	
Figure 10: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , 2023-2024.....	22
Photograph by Annie France Noel, 2024. Printed with permission.	
Figure 11: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , in progress.....	23
Figure 12: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , 2023-2024.....	24
Photograph by Annie France Noel, 2024. Printed with permission.	
Figure 13: <i>Caring Hands</i> , 2024. Digital Jacquard weaving. Cotton, 71 x 58 cm.....	26
Figure 14: Studio floor with daily drawings, acrylic on paper, 2023.....	28
Figure 15: Weaving detail, mixed media.....	30
Figure 16: <i>Life Raft</i> , in progress.....	32
Figure 17: <i>Life Raft</i> , in progress.....	33
Figure 18: <i>Life Raft</i> , 2023. Acrylic, canvas, thread, yarn, stuffing, 91 x 183 x 15 cm...	33
Figure 19: <i>Life Form</i> , 2023. Acrylic, canvas, thread, pillows, 91 x 61 x 51 cm.....	35
Figure 20: <i>Weighted Blanket</i> , 2023. Acrylic, canvas, thread, 191 x 157 x 25 cm.....	36
Figure 21: <i>Swaddle</i> , 2022. Acrylic, thread, canvas, 51 x 30 x 20 cm.....	38

Figure 22: Weaving a painting.....	39
Figure 23: Smocking a painting.....	39
Figure 24: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , 2023-2024.....	41
Photograph by Annie France Noel, 2024. Printed with permission.	
Figure 25: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , Sackville studio, pictured with the artist.....	42
Figure 26: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , Sackville studio.....	42
Figure 27: Video documentation of <i>Grief Cloak</i> , 2023-2024.....	44
Figure 28: Thesis installation, July 2024	45
Figure 29: Thesis installation, view from hallway.....	46
Figure 30: Thesis installation, hallway.....	46
Figure 31: Thesis installation, high wall, hung salon style with eight works.....	47
Figure 32: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , with smocked details.....	48
Figure 33: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , detail, back view.....	49
Figure 34: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , back view.....	50
Figure 35: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , painted details.....	51
Figure 36: <i>Grief Cloak</i> with interior smocked and woven details.....	52
Figure 37: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , detail.....	53
Figure 38: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , detail.....	54
Figure 39: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , detail, chest area with smocking.....	55
Figure 40: <i>Grief Cloak</i> , detail.....	56
Figure 41: Summer studio, Emily Carr University of Art & Design, 2023.....	57

Introduction

How might textile making be a medium for articulating and transforming emotion? In my thesis work, I explore matrilineal textile production as means for processing grief. As I perform various techniques of hand making — pulling apart and stitching together, deconstructing and reconstructing — I also manifest my journey with matrilineal loss and engage in acts of remembrance. Difficult emotions such as fear and sadness are transformed through this making into soft tactile works imbued with love, hope, and joy.



Figure 2: Smocked Textile, 2022

Research

My research examines many traditional textile techniques, ways of working that were largely learned in the home and that historically are considered women's work, such as: weaving, quilting, stitching, and embroidery. Through explorations and iterations, I found that both smocking and weaving satisfied my conceptual concerns of space, material, memory, and time.

My art practice is a way to process emotion. Through art making, I transform complicated feelings into soft tactile painted forms. The concentration, the intent, the slowing down to think and feel, these elements of making allow me the time to understand my grief. This approach allows me to consider time in relation to my own practice, as well as time in relation to healing, grieving, parenting, making. How does time heal? Time is an element of attention, care, and love. In *The Scent of Time*, philosopher Byung-Chul Han states,

The hyperkinesia of everyday life deprives human existence of all contemplative elements and of any capacity for lingering. It leads to a loss of world and time. (vii)

This lingering of time relates back to my own material practice of weaving and stitching as a way of slowing down to take time to grieve. The act of making becomes a source of healing. Slow, methodical movement with my hands, tactile repetition, allows space for remembrance.

These acts of repetition make themselves known in my hand making but also in writing. I engage in repetitive motions, thoughts, and actions to develop facility and skill. The practice of repetition deepens my understanding and is important to my process.

My material research considers canvas as a textile component rather than simply a painting substrate. I then use this textile to try and represent emotions that are essentially unrepresentable. It seems an impossible challenge, but as Elizabeth Grosz writes in *Chaos, Territory, Art*,

Painting is about rendering the invisible in visible form, and music about sounding the inaudible, each the expression and exploration of the unrepresentable. (22)

What does it mean to try to represent the unrepresentable? Is it an achievable goal? In my practice, I attempt to represent my many complicated emotions around motherhood, aging, love, caregiving, and grief.

Through studio explorations, I have discovered that incorporating textiles and fibre practices into my painting practice allows me to access a visual narrative and language that is not present in painting alone. As author Sofi Thanhauser writes in *Worn: A People's History of Clothing*, “Sometimes cloth, when used as a text, can say things that are impossible to say in any other way.” (293) It is an exciting breakthrough to consider all the potential of visual language that becomes a possibility with this method of working. I have only touched the surface of the limitless possibilities of these hybrid works involving paint and textiles, and I will continue to explore this concept of hybridity.



Figure 3: Studio wall with smocked and painted textiles, 2022



Figure 4: Smocked and Painted Textile, 2023

Textiles

My research is informed by many female identifying and queer artists who have used textiles as their main form of communication in the gendered arena of contemporary art to comment and assert themselves against the patriarchal lens of art history and art institutions; I mention many of these artists in this support document. I believe there are many stories of experience from women and other marginalized voices that still need to be heard. In my studio research, I am drawn to the work of artists who have fearlessly addressed topics such as parenting, sentimentality, love, the grief of motherhood, and changing and aging physical bodies. These artists and those who speak of matrilineal wisdom and knowledge passed down through generations incorporate this history into their own making to weave together stories of their experience.

An excellent example is Harmony Hammond, whose early wrapped sculptures are embodied forms representing the female body, conceptually mimicking the construction of a body with an interior skeleton and exterior skin. Hammond's work is very much in conversation with other artists of her time, such as Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Ree Morton, yet she develops her own unique language and vocabulary. Hammond's work focuses on the painting's surface, or skin, which the artist sees as a metaphor for where art and life meet. The surface functions as the site for storytelling of the maker and the making. Of her early experiments with painted fabrics, Hammond has said, "I painted on blankets, curtains, and bedspreads recycled from women friends, literally putting my life in my art." (161) She adds, "These new pieces could be touched, retouched, repaired, and like women's lives, reconfigured." (161) I appreciate Hammond's approach and adopt a similar philosophy of art merging with life in my studio practice.

Although much of my work makes use of the grid as a starting point and as an organizational system, I deliberately choose to move away from the rigidity of the grid through the process of stitching and painting. In this way, my research strongly relates to the approach of Howardena Pindell, an artist who chooses to playfully subvert the grid as a rigid device and instead employs a soft construction to her textile canvas grids which sag and droop onto to the floor. Pindell builds her grids out of rolled canvas and fastens them with grommets. This results in works that are light and easy to fold and carry. Curator Naomi Beckwith suggests that Pindell's way of working is feminist; the artist moves past the grid as a simple formal structure, choosing to take a tactile approach to work that is about process and material, involving movement, becoming embodied. Pindell is interested in the haptic and kinetic sensations produced by working with malleable material. I am inspired by Pindell's courageous approach to a grid with soft edges and contours and adopt similar intentions in my practice of smocking and stitching soft sculpture.

My work is also informed by Liza Lou, a contemporary visual artist who uses beads as her primary material and is best known for creating monumental installations, sculptures, and wall pieces which specifically reference labour traditionally associated with women. In Lou's work, labour exists as both process and subject matter. Our research shares similar conceptual and material inquiry, centering on investigations about materiality and craft, and is engaged with concepts of beauty, surface, and space. In Lou's work, the weight of the beads on canvas results in sagging, adding to the overall dynamics of the work, and resulting in curvatures in the composition which carry both positive and negative space. And again, as in many of my own works, weight and gravity play a role in the final form. Fibres drape or sag adding a bodily element.

Like Liza Lou, who cites artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro and their legendary project, *Womanhouse* (1972), as an important influence in her career and inspiration for her feminist practice, I too am inspired by feminist art history. *Womanhouse* was a project of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. The women in the program remade an entire house as a feminist art environment that centered on societal roles and pressures placed on women to 'keep house', transforming actual domestic space with installation, sculpture, and

performance as a critique on patriarchy and the male dominated art scene that was prevalent at the time. Like Lou, I also engage with the work of early feminist artists to support my practice, looking specifically at women artists who have been successful in creating work that acts as a vessel for thoughts, feelings, and their own personal histories. In claiming their space, women artists open conversations around topics often left out of contemporary art discourse, topics that relate to women's experiences, such as motherhood.

For me, the softness of textiles suggests vulnerability. In *The Sensing Body in the Visual Arts*, artist Rosalyn Driscoll writes, "The first indication of the artist's intentions for meaning lie in the choice of materials." (145) My choice to incorporate textiles into my painting practice stems from a desire to remain close to my matrilineal relationships, to preserve the memory of my mother and grandmother, and protect the memories of my children.



Figure 5: *Prom dress*, 2023

Matrilineal Knowledge

An underlying thread throughout my research is the importance and value of matrilineal knowledge. Working with textiles upholds connections with the women in my family. My mother sewed all our clothes and handknit our sweaters. My grandmother smocked our dresses and did embroidery. My work involves multiple processes- stitching, gathering, cutting, weaving- and requires disassembling and reassembling paintings, resulting in sculptural forms in which parts of the image and process become obscured. Textile paintings imbued with matrilineal knowledge exist as embodied forms which articulate powerful relationships between materiality, memory, and care.

Many of my studio explorations involve a technique called smocking. Smocking is a traditional craft process originally used in the making of garments. A system of stitching and gathering fabric, often finished with embroidery details to accentuate the folds, smocking was often found on the front bibs of gowns for young children. My maternal grandmother and mother both smocked dresses for their children and grandchildren; as a child I wore the dresses, as did my children. Smocking is a form of matrilineal knowledge; these techniques were passed on to me from my mother and grandmother and my art practice draws directly from these forms of knowledge. My research examines how this system of fabric manipulation can be incorporated into painting practice, and how the canvas, a woven material, accepts these folds and stitches. I explore its layers and the connections between materials and memory, on a conceptual level.

There are many incredible stories of matrilineal knowledge that are inspiration for my research. A powerful example is the community of women quiltmakers in Gee's Bend, Alabama. While generations of African Americans in Gee's Bend endured slavery and extreme poverty, the women found a sense of purpose and freedom in the act of making quilts. Hand sewing and quilting — knowledge passed down through generations as matrilineal knowledge — not only provided necessary articles for warmth and comfort but also gave the women a language and communication that was all their own.

In *Stitching Love and Loss: A Gee's Bend Quilt*, Lisa Collins writes about the community of Gee's Bend and their traditions of quilt making using worn out clothing of loved ones, abstract compositions, and the teaching of hand stitching being passed down from one generation to the next. This idea of textiles relating to grief and the tradition of matrilineal knowledge in the form of hand sewing to create soft objects for warmth and necessity directly informs my practice and research. I also approach the act of stitching, and include painting and weaving, as meditative ways to process grief and make sense of difficult emotions. Collins writes,

Perhaps the rhythmic effort and ease of stitching and pulling her steel needle through the cotton cloth, again and again, offered the quilt maker- with her practiced hand- a way and means to process the pain, seek solace, and experience and express her love, loss, and longing. (43)

I acknowledge the immense suffering that slavery and oppression brought upon these women, and their lasting generational consequences. Although our experiences of grief and loss differ greatly, I can appreciate and imagine the comfort of generations of family coming together to work quietly on hand stitching and quilting as a communal activity and a means to process grief.

My research relies on matrilineal knowledge and textile practices to push my painting and expand my research investigations. I value the importance of these traditional ways of learning and making and incorporate them directly into my research.



Figure 6: 'Honeycomb' smocked canvas

As author and researcher Heather Davis writes in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, “Reclaiming matrilineal knowledge is a powerful experience.” (12) I reclaim matrilineal knowledge by adding traditional textile processes to my painting practice, as I conduct my research through making. My intention with the work is to record and comment on our human condition in an abstract way. While responding to my experience as a woman, mother, and daughter, my textile manipulations draw on matrilineal knowledge to manifest an abstract representation and embodiment of the emotion of motherhood. My studio practice is a search for expansiveness, creating three dimensional soft painted sculptures which exist as abstracted views of bodies evolving and moving in space, in states of transformation. The bulging weight of painted forms is in reference to the gravity of human emotion, an expression of my own experience of grief associated with motherhood, and to the depth of sorrow associated with losing my mother.



Figure 7: *Collapse*, 2024

Emotion

When my youngest child left home last year, I experienced an overflow of emotions that I was not prepared for: concern, worry, pride, anxiety, sadness. My research asks, how do you fold another being into your own, and then let go?

In my research, I pay close attention to my emotions and value the importance of emotional knowledge. In this respect, my research is informed by Robin Wall Kimmerer, from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Kimmerer writes about her scientific studies but integrates her emotional knowledge and draws from her personal experience of motherhood. In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge*, Kimmerer discusses her feelings about her children growing up and leaving home when she writes,

What does a good mother do when mothering time is done? As I stand in the water, my eyes brim and drop salt tears into the freshwater at my feet. Fortunately, my daughters are not clones of their mother, nor must I disintegrate to set them free, but I wonder how the fabric is changed when the release of daughters tears a hole. Does it heal over quickly, or does the empty space remain? And how do daughter cells make new connections? How is the fabric rewoven? (93)

Kimmerer writes in a way that provides fact and evidence but mixes it with her own emotions and reflections that creates a very personal retelling of experience. I am inspired by Kimmerer's approach which values the importance of emotional and matrilineal knowledge. I aspire to do the same through my studio practice.



Figure 8: Painting Studio, Emily Carr University of Art & Design campus, July 2023

Personal History

My mother had Alzheimer's for over a decade and passed away recently. Towards the end of her life, she no longer knew my name. For many of those years, I carried a heavy anticipatory grief. I was a mother to young children, and a caregiver for my own mother. At times, the sadness was overwhelming. As bell hooks writes in her book, *All About Love*, "We are taught to feel shame about grief that lingers." (200) I felt that no one around me understood the pain and the heaviness on my shoulders that never seemed to go away. In her book, *Birds, Art, Life*, author Kyo Maclear writes about her own experience caring for her ailing father while also being a mother to young children. Maclear says,

I did not speak of the relief of coming home late at night to a silent house and filling a tub with water, slipping under the bubbles and closing my eyes, the quiet soapy comfort of being cleaned instead of cleaning, of being a woman conditioned to soothe others, now soothed. (6)

Maclear also writes:

It is possible too that I was experiencing something known as anticipatory grief, the mourning that occurs before a certain loss. Anticipatory. Expectatory. Trepidatory. This grief had a dampness. It did not drench or drown me but it hung in the air like a pallid cloud, thinning but never entirely vanishing. It followed me wherever I went and gradually I grew used to looking at the world through it. (7)

Maclear's writing resonates with me on many levels as her descriptions of grief are powerful reminders of the deep sorrow I experienced during my mother's illness. Through my painting research, I attempt to synthesize my personal experience formally. The labour intensive and repetitive processes in my research mirror the labour involved in motherhood and caregiving. I have physically transferred the time and care of love into my canvas, paint, and stitching.

In *The Faraway Nearby*, author Rebecca Solnit speaks about her personal experience with her mother, writing,

They say Alzheimer's mimics childhood in reverse, but children's voracious minds are seizing on the knowledge that's disintegrating at the other end of life, and the conditions are as dissimilar as gaining and losing. I thought of my mother as a book coming apart, pages drifting away, phrases blurring, letters falling off, the paper returning to pure white, a book disappearing from the back because the newest memories faded first, and nothing was being added. (11)

I relate deeply to Solnit's words; her writing speaks to transformation, to the natural evolution of life, from being cared for to becoming the caregiver. It reminds me of the words of writer and storyteller, Ivan Coyote, who describes their experience as a non-binary person as one of un-becoming. This again suggests transformation, "returning, undoing, unbecoming, shedding." (Coyote 165) Human life exists as a state of evolution; we shed our old selves to become something new. I appreciate this approach, that life is full of endings and beginnings, and yet, each transition holds the potential for an element of grief.



Figure 9: *Grief Cloak*, 2023-2024, photo by Annie France Noel

Grief Cloak

My most recent piece is also my largest and my most ambitious work to date. *Grief Cloak* (2023-2024) is a departure for me, representing a dramatic change in scale and adding a performative element to my work.

The idea of grief having a form that can be dragged and battered, torn, and then mended, is fascinating to me and directly informs this piece. The cloak is heavy enough to make it difficult to walk but light enough around the edges for the wind to cause it to blow and billow, activating the piece with sense of movement and embodied knowledge. What is grief? Where does it live? Where can it go? From my personal experience it lives in a physical body, in the muscles, the organs, the heart, the brain, but also in the feelings and the memories, in hopes and fears, in tears and laughter. Grief presses down on us, on our physical bodies, but also on our excitement, on our creativity, and it is heavy. During my performance, as I dragged the cloak, I hung my head, and slumped forward, taking slow and careful steps. Walking and wearing the cloak, it dragged on the ground, getting caught on the boardwalk and branches, getting dirty. In this way, I visibly carried my grief through the landscape — a landscape full of memories — and I carried it until I was too tired to carry it any longer.

Grief Cloak represents a very personal experience, my experience of losing my mother. In doing so, it participates in a feminist practice, one of telling women's stories. Performing with the grief cloak allowed for many new discoveries. It provided the opportunity to collaborate with other artists; I partnered with two artists in my community to assist me with the video and documentation of the cloak. Our first day of filming was sunny and cold, about -10 degrees Celsius. We worked from 10 am until 4:30 pm doing both still photography and moving video footage. There was snow on the ground in most areas. I had not anticipated the shadows cast by the bright sun but was pleasantly surprised by the result. I had also not considered the wind, which as it turned out, provided its own activation of the cloak, billowing and moving around me. The cloak filling with air and expanding, and then moving and collapsing, seemed a reiteration for my intentions with the smocking and stitching that I also use in my research — an expansion and compression of

space, form, and material. Like lungs filling with breath and then exhaling, the wind caused the cloak to repeatedly fill with air and then compress around me.

The performance was hard work. That evening, I was physically and emotionally drained. I felt chilled and exhausted, which lasted a few days. My muscles were sore which made sense from carrying the weight of the cloak over an extended time, but emotionally the performative act of tending to grief resulted in an overwhelming sense of fatigue. I came to the realization that making this work, although a statement about the heaviness of grief, was also about letting go of the grief I have personally been carrying for many years.

Grief Cloak represents the weight of grief that we are required to carry throughout normal everyday tasks and routines; our grief is invisible to everyone around us and yet presses down on our bodies, minds, hearts. In contrast, the object *Grief Cloak*- as a representation and embodiment of grief- is highly visible. The bold bright colour palette of *Grief Cloak* contrasts the bleakness and despair we often associate with grief itself. This contrast is in direct reference to the idea of holding on and letting go, and to the moments when responsibilities shift, and when caregiving requires you to take a step back. In my experience, motherhood doesn't end, it transforms.



Figure 10: *Grief Cloak* performance, photo by Annie France Noel

The physical making of *Grief Cloak* expanded on my previous research by beginning with a sewing pattern. I roughly followed the pattern but enlarged and exaggerated the length of the garment considerably. As in my process with smocking, I began with a pattern but chose not to follow it precisely. For *Grief Cloak*, I was thinking about the weight and the heaviness of emotion; the cloak acts as a metaphor for feelings which can overwhelm. Made with canvas, acrylic paint, and acrylic markers, the garment pieces were painted on the floor and then sewn together. The iconography is inspired by the stitching of smocking patterns, translating vocabulary between mediums. As well, the outline of many hands/rubber gloves move across the canvas; rubber gloves are meant to suggest the domestic labour of women which often goes unnoticed.



Figure 11: *Grief Cloak*, in progress

The act of performance, in this case wearing my painting and moving through landscape, is also a process for exploring grief. There are many layers of process in this piece of research: the thought involved in the conceptual planning; the tactile act of making/painting/cutting/sewing; the wearing and draping of the garment; the walking and movement involved in the activation; and the documentation or archive of the activity. Each of these steps is a process in the creative act of making.

This research has opened many new lines of questioning for me, in particular the idea of activating painting by inserting my physical body into it. This idea allows for a continuation of the creative process using my body as a material. The action of wearing this painted cloak and activating the painting in this way is an exciting new direction in my research which I intend to continue after completing the MFA program.



Figure 12: *Grief Cloak* performance, photo by Annie France Noel

Foundations of Exploration

This section examines the key foundations of exploration I draw on in my research practice to articulate and represent the main themes of my investigation.

Care

Caring, as a form of knowledge and as a feminist practice, is one of my core reasons for making art. In her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, feminist philosopher, Sara Ahmed, writes about the importance of caring for ourselves. She asserts that the act of self-care is a feminist expression. As mothers, and caregivers, are so often left caring for others, putting others before themselves, the small and private act of recording one's own experience, in a notebook — or in my case, in large soft textile painted sculptures — is an expression of feminist care. It can also be a refusal; it is an attempt to defy societally imposed pressures placed on women, to look or act a certain way. This defiance through artistic expression may allow for the taking of space, as in the way Ahmed describes her mentor, the great feminist philosopher, bell hooks. On her blog, *Feminist Killjoys*, Ahmed writes a loving and heartfelt tribute to hooks. When describing the creativity of the legendary hooks, Ahmed says,

To write is how she spills out, spills over, the intensity of sorrow, filling it up, stuffing it where she can, where she is, the places she has, under the bed, in the pillow cases, among her underwear, under, in, among; hidden with her delicates, her other things. In putting her writing there, her thoughts and feelings tumbling out, what she hears, 'bits and pieces of conversation', she exceeds the space she has been given, the concerns she is supposed to have, the corners, the edges of the room. (feministkilljoys)

She exceeds the space she has been given. This sentence resonates strongly with me. It is powerful to hear a brilliant woman describing the work of another woman with such strength and presence. In doing so it allows the work to demand even more space, becoming larger and

stronger, filling the room and beyond. My studio is where I claim my space. In the studio, I choose to work with slow methodical stitching and mark making alongside my painting. For me, the act of making follows my personal experience as a woman, mother, and daughter; my work is filled with every feeling I can't carry anymore. My art practice can be defined as a feminist expression of care.



Figure 13: *Caring Hands*, 2024, two colour digital Jacquard weaving, cotton

Diary

I feel strongly that daily studio practice over time can read as a journal. Whether I am weaving, drawing, or painting, my practice becomes a private way to document my thoughts and feelings, and to preserve and collect my ideas. In this respect, I am inspired by Sheila Hicks. Hicks has travelled the globe in her continued and longstanding efforts to blur the boundaries between art and craft with her ground-breaking fibre installations. On a smaller scale, Hicks lives and travels with a portable loom, creating small studies and weavings, which she refers to as ‘minimes’. She has done this consistently throughout her lifetime, often with fabrics from her own household or that were given to her by friends. The small weavings read like a diary of her daily thoughts, inspirations, and travels. The small works are not necessarily studies for larger work; they exist independently as works of their own right. These small works continue to provide the artist with a way to document her thoughts, as a daily journal of making. The materiality of these small works inspires my own practice; the sheer volume of materials and experimentations, as well the continued use of this small-scale investigation over several decades of practice is an ongoing inspiration.

An artist who consistently kept a written diary alongside her studio work is Anne Truitt. A sculptor and painter, Truitt’s journals are filled with meditations on family, solitude, art, and motherhood. Truitt’s daily writings juxtapose the demands of domestic life with more formal concerns of creative process. In *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist*, Truitt shares personal experiences of motherhood and care.

Frida Kahlo, Charlotte Salomon, and Ruth Asawa all kept illustrated ‘diaries’ of their experiences. Furthermore, Magdalena Abakanowicz once said that her body of work was “like a diary of my life, with all its disappointments and longings.” (10) I find great inspiration in these artists who bravely sought to record their experience through writing, painting, weaving, and sculpting, as daily practice. It is only through their creative pursuits in the form of visual diaries that their stories remain to be shared as powerful documentation of women’s lived experience.

I think of my research — my expression — much in the same way Rebecca Solnit speaks about writing,

Writing is often treated as a project of making things, one piece at a time, but you write from who you are and what you care about and what true voice is yours and from leaving all the false voices and wrong notes behind, and so underneath the task of writing a particular piece is the general one of making a self who can make the work you are meant to make. (122)

Like Solnit, through making I discover more about myself. It is my intention with my paintings to demonstrate that there is strength in vulnerability. While physical bodies are temporary, bodies of knowledge remain and are passed on through familial lineage. My three-dimensional paintings hold the ideas and knowledge and wisdom that are carried on through matrilineal lines.



Figure 14: Studio floor with daily drawings, acrylic on paper, 2023

Colour

Colour is an important defining characteristic of my research. Over many years of my painting practice, I have built a strong relationship to colour. Painter, Amy Sillman, describes colour as a “wild card, a powerful force, a feminine or anarchistic *other*...”. (62) My approach to colour is based on intuition. Colour choices are intuitive reactions evolved from decades of my painting practice. As the authors of *A Philosophical Perspective on Intuition as a Method Within Artistic Process* (2018) state, “Intuition reveals movement and change- perpetual becoming.” (Palazuelos, Fonseca, Oliveira 2) I think of colour as an independent material; I consider colour to be active. My colours become characters and hold space. I find a freedom in colour, and in the act of painting, which is an escape from the responsibilities of caregiving. When I am painting, I temporarily let go of my role and responsibility of mother and parent; colour allows me to be myself. Amy Sillman also says, “Color represents all good things on Earth: beauty, awe, surprise, romance, freedom, innocence, gay politics, civil rights.” (62) Colour brings viewers into the work and can evoke powerful sensations of familiarity or nostalgia. Bright colours are meant to imbue the work with a sense of childhood or innocence, a playfulness, or joy. Colour has personality and acts as a formal element to the work. Through intuition, I enable colour to speak, have meaning, take form.

In *The Story of Art Without Men*, Katy Hessel beautifully describes the work of Alma Thomas, as she writes,

Thomas’s paintings pulsate with strokes that sing, dance and bounce off the canvas. You can tell she loved colour through the many ways she interpreted it- monochromatically or rainbow-like; as swirls or in strips- just as she said in 1972: ‘a world without colour would seem dead. Colour, for me, is life.’ (288)

This notion of colour as life resonates strongly. Whether I am depicting emotions of sadness or joy, colour allows me to be present in the work. Colour is freedom to interpret

difficult feelings that I have no other way to explore and process. Colour represents my mother, my children, my grandmother, myself.



Figure 15: Weaving detail, mixed media

Glitch

In my research, I see weaving as a parallel to life and loss: weaving appears fragile yet possesses an inherent structure which gives it strength. At most points of intersection, the threads meet and form a connection, but occasionally there is an imperfection, a glitch, where threads fail to connect. Most weavers would consider this an error. I prefer to challenge that concept and instead consider what possibilities may exist in the glitch as a space for potential innovation and experimentation.

In *Glitch Feminism*, a feminist manifesto written by Legacy Russell, the author dives into the exploration of identity through the divide between the real and digital world, what Russell refers to as the ‘glitch’. Although Russell uses the term ‘glitch’ to represent ideas around identity, sex, gender, and belonging, I intentionally reappropriate the term with very personal associations to my mother’s loss of memory due to Alzheimer’s. I associate the idea of glitch with threads of memory, and the moment a memory disappears when threads fail to make a connection.

Glitch makes room for imagining new realities. Glitch is a radical form of resistance. I identify the glitch in my work as the imperfection, the letting go of control, to search for new beginnings. The way Russell talks about physical bodies I relate to material form. In embracing the glitch, the unknown, only then are we able to create new unknowns.

My work, *Life Raft* (2023) is an example of embracing the unknown in my studio practice and research. This piece went through many stages and iterations in the making. Deconstructed and reassembled by weaving the painted canvas components back together, in its finished form, *Life Raft* is life size, and vaguely resembles a personal floatation device, yet this raft does not float. For me personally, *Life Raft* signifies a soft place to land. The title implies a contradiction; this *Life Raft* may break your fall but won’t save you from the danger of drowning.

Life Raft began as a large piece of raw unstretched canvas. I painted it on the floor with watered down fluid acrylic paints, and then cut it up in long strips and sewed the strips into large tubes and stuffed the tubes with quilt batting. To rejoin the pieces, I warped my large tapestry loom with cotton string and wove the canvas tubes together. The string acts as drawing on the surface —the skin — of the painting.



Figure 16: *Life Raft*, in progress



Figure 17: *Life Raft*, in progress



Figure 18: *Life Raft*, 2023

Body

Life Form (2023), roughly human scale, is meant to suggest an abstract body moving in space; hung at human height, viewers interact with the bulging form. The pregnant egg shape is intended to imbue the work with a sense of new beginning, of possibility.

Life Form is a three-dimensional soft sculpture that hangs suspended from the ceiling from a thin braided rope; it spins slowly on its axis. Made from several pieces of painted and stitched canvas sewn together, *Life Form* is stuffed with four pillows. Smocking is visible on the surface, accentuating the handmade quality. The painted grid is also visible, existing in relationship to the abstract expressionist painted surface. Gravity and shadow play a role in the finished work. The bulk of the piece, seemingly hanging by a single thread, may suggest a tension between weight and weightlessness.

Life Form is in dialogue with contemporary visual artist, Alicja Kwade, whose practice questions social structures and unravels perceptions of reality, exploring an expression of the world which offers new ways to think about form, space, and material. I am drawn to how she explains matter, with an openness and curiosity, “Everything could have another form. Matter can be considered as random aggregations in space and time, with plenty of nothingness in between.” (46) In my work, *Life Form*, I attempt an abstract representation of a body moving through transitory states.



Figure 19: *Life Form*, 2023

Weighted Blanket (2023) represents a bed — warmth, protection — that you cannot access. Life size and hanging on the wall, it is intended to suggest the absence of the body; a comfort that is uncomfortable. The softness is meant to imply that bodies don't have hard edges.

For *Weighted Blanket*, I rolled out a large swath of unstretched and unprimed canvas on the floor, painting and staining it with watered down and thinned acrylic paint. Soaking and staining it to achieve watercolour blending effects, I added dry brush marks in other areas. I then stitched it horizontally in several cascading rolls which billow out, creating a softness, much like a warm comforter or a bed. The rolls sag. Left unstuffed, the draping canvas holds its shape due to the stiffness of the paint giving it body.



Figure 20: *Weighted Blanket*, 2023

The blanket metaphor fills the piece with thoughts of softness and care, whether from the perspective of memory of childhood, or as a parent. This concept carries through into *Swaddle* (2022), a small sculptural painting made from canvas, acrylic paint, and embroidery floss. *Swaddle* is meant to be hung on a wall at eye level. It is intended to evoke maternal feelings of responsibility, worry, fear, and is just the right size for cradling in your arms as you would an infant, softly swaying, providing comfort. The title comes from the wrapping of the canvas, giving the illusion of gently protecting whatever is inside.

In making this piece, I began with drawing a grid and stitched the canvas according to a smocking pattern, and then proceeded to paint it. Next, I removed all the stitching and painted it again. I then began to smock the piece a second time, but without following the pattern. It began to take shape, at which point I gathered the edges and fastened it to an inner wooden structure, stuffing it with fabric remnants. At this point the piece seemed to develop its own agency; the soft three-dimensional mound seemed to come alive.

Swaddle's bright colour palette contrasts the emotional maternal heaviness in the work. Soft tactile objects can recall the nostalgia of childhood and home with memories of warmth, comfort, safety, and protection. Personally, this piece signifies a letting go. It made me realize I cannot control everything, not my children's experiences, not my mother's. It confirmed that I make artwork that is reciprocal to my life experience.



Figure 21: *Swaddle*, 2022



Figure 22: Weaving a painting



Figure 23: Smocking a painting

Conclusion

My grief often revealed itself as a feeling of utter loneliness. In *The Lonely City* (2016), Olivia Laing writes about Virginia Woolf's description of loneliness, musing whether "it didn't drive one to consider some of the larger questions of what it is to be alive." (Laing 5) My research also considers these questions.

Once again, I reference the brilliant scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, who writes,

In indigenous ways of knowing, we say that a thing cannot be understood until it is known by all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit. (vii)

This way of understanding resonates with my approach to studio practice; I research with my brain, hands, eyes, and heart. My art practice utilizes painting and traditional textile techniques to acknowledge, manage, and process feelings; art becomes a daily activity to harness grief and complicated emotions.

During my MFA research, I have investigated traditional craft practices and explored their reorganization within the realm of painting as a way of visually making order to better understand my emotional experiences and maternal kinship relationships. The foundation of my research is built on matrilineal knowledge, emotion, intuition, a commitment to dedicated daily studio practice, and an abundance of care.

Writing this paper alongside my studio research has been a welcomed surprise; the process of writing about my research mirrors my process of making in many ways. As in the studio research, in writing I build a composition of thoughts and ideas and restructure those separate components into a cohesive whole. Similar to my studio work, writing challenges many parts of my brain. It requires an understanding in mind, body, emotion, and spirit in order to translate my intentions from visual into written language. I have fully welcomed and enjoyed this translation and look forward to continuing my writing practice alongside my studio research in the years to come.



Figure 24: *Grief Cloak*, spring, photo by Annie France Noel

Performing with the cloak a second time, in the spring, was a vastly different experience from activating the cloak during the winter. This day was warm and sunny. The grass was green and speckled with yellow dandelions; colour was popping up everywhere. The air was filled with the spring sounds of birds chirping. I felt lighter, and the cloak didn't seem as heavy. As I removed the cloak at the end of the day, I realized that going through the many stages of process in this piece allowed me to shed the weight of grief. I felt happy and content, which to me signified a rebirth, or a regeneration, of mind, body, and spirit.

As I prepare to install *Grief Cloak* for the thesis exhibition, I am aware of the varying degrees of how this piece exists, as both an art object as well as a time-based activity. It carries some of the dirt and debris from the walks outside, visual reminders of the actions that are now part of its history. I have learned so much from this work that I will carry forward in my research. I am reminded once again of the idea of transformation — of a natural evolution — that exists as old ways of thinking are left behind, making space for new ideas. Rather than an ending, *Grief Cloak* signifies a new beginning.



Figure 25: *Grief Cloak*, pictured with the artist, Sackville studio



Figure 26: *Grief Cloak*, Home studio in Sackville, New Brunswick

Final Reflection

As I reflect on my time in the MFA program, I am astonished at how much my practice has stretched and evolved. Two years ago, I could never have imagined incorporating performance into my painting practice. I began the program with the intention of exploring matrilineal textile production as a way of processing grief. I conducted this exploration through heavy experimentation of material and process, which led to deeper inquiry into space, form, body, and time. Collapsing and expanding paint and canvas with stitching and weaving techniques allowed me to access a wider vocabulary of visual language around themes of motherhood, grief, and love. It was this deep sustained period of questioning and experimentation that led me to my final thesis project, *Grief Cloak*.

For the thesis exhibition, *Grief Cloak* was suspended from the ceiling in the atrium, touching the floor. To further suggest the absence of the body, I filled the cavity of the cloak with several pieces of smocked canvas; these pieces could barely be contained by the garment and were tumbling out onto the floor.

In addition to the cloak, two photographs of the performances of the cloak were installed in the hallway to the atrium, as well as an eight-minute video on a small monitor. It was important to include these three components to fully describe how this piece exists as both an object and an archive of its activation through performance, however I can see many possibilities for other configurations in future exhibitions of this piece.

My intention is to continue my research in performance art and specifically the idea of inserting my body into my work as a material. I intend to expand on my investigation of grief into other forms and structures for loss and mourning.

There is performative potential in all my material explorations that deal with complex emotions. I begin with a very reflective practice on personal experience, consider how that informs my thought process, build on how that translates into my visual practice, and lastly how it relates within a larger political and intellectual context.

Documentation of Thesis Exhibition



Figure 27: Video documentation of *Grief Cloak*, 2023-2024



Figure 28: Thesis installation, July 2024



Figures 29 and 30: Thesis installation, hallway, July 2024



Figure 31: Thesis installation, high wall



Figure 32: *Grief Cloak*, with smocked details



Figure 33: *Grief Cloak*, detail, back view



Figure 34: *Grief Cloak*, back view



Figure 35: *Grief Cloak*, painted details



Figure 36: *Grief Cloak* with interior smocked and woven details



Figure 37: *Grief Cloak*, detail



Figure 38: *Grief Cloak*, detail



Figure 39: *Grief Cloak*, detail, chest area with smocking



Figure 40: *Grief Cloak*, detail

Bibliography

“Citation is feminist memory.” ~Sara Ahmed

Ahmed, Sara. *Feminist Killjoys*. In Conversation with Judith Butler, July 26, 2023.

In my paper I choose to cite women and other marginalized voices who have been overlooked, ignored, and excluded from dominant histories. My intention to do so is a feminist act.



Figure 41: Studio, Emily Carr University of Art & Design campus, July 2023

- Abakanowicz, Magdalena. *Magdalena Abakanowicz*. Tate, 2022.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Notes on Grief*. Knopf, 2021.
- Ahmed, Sara. Feminism as Lifework: A Dedication to bell hooks. *Feministkilljoys*, <https://feministkilljoys.com/>. Accessed February 12, 2023.
- Ahmed, Sara. In Conversation with Judith Butler. *Feministkilljoys*, <https://feministkilljoys.com/>. Accessed July 26, 2023.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Barber, Elizabeth Wayland. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 years: Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1994, New York.
- Beckwith, Naomi, et al., editors. *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to be Seen*. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Delmonico Books Prestel, 2018.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Black, Anthea, et al., editors. *The New Politics of the Handmade*. Bloomsbury, 2021.
- Bradford, Katherine. "Flying Woman: The Paintings of Katherine Bradford." Curated by Jamie DeSimone, June 25-September 11, 2022, Portland Museum of Art, Maine.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. "Liza Lou: Working Through". *Liza Lou*, Rizzoli Electra, 2022.
- Chicago, Judy. *Judy Chicago: HERSTORY*. Phaidon, 2023.
- Collins, Lisa. *Stitching Love and Loss: A Gee's Bend Quilt*. University of Washington Press, 2023.
- Coyote, Ivan. *Rebent Sinner*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021.
- Davis, Heather, editor. *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.
- Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Vintage Books, 2005.
- Driscoll, Rosalyn. *The Sensing Body in the Visual Arts*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020.
- Ephameron. *Us Two Together*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.

Gabriel, Mary. *Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*. First edition, Little, Brown and Company, 2018.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Chaos, Territory, Art*. Columbia University Press, 2020.

Hammond, Harmony, et al. *Harmony Hammond: Material Witness: Five Decades of Art*. Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum; Gregory R. Miller & Co, 2019.

Han, Byung-Chul. *The Scent of Time*. Polity Press, 2017.

Hessel, Katy. *The Story of Art (Without Men)*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2023.

Hicks, Sheila, and Michael Gauthier. *Sheila Hicks: lignes de vie = lifelines*. Centre Pompidou, 2018, Paris.

Hicks, Sheila, et al., editors. *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*. Fifth edition, published by Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 2018.

Hooks, bell. *All About Love*. Harper Collins, 2001, New York.

Hustvedt, Siri. *Mothers, Fathers, and Others*. Simon and Schuster, 2021.

Judah, Hettie. *How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers (and other parents)*. Lund Humphries, 2022, London.

Kwade, Alicja. "The Great Attractor". *Art In America*, November 2017, pp 46-47.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*. First Paperback edition, Milkweed, Editions, 2013.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Gathering Moss*. OSU Press, 2003.

Laing, Olivia. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. Picador, 2016.

Liss, Andrea. *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.

Maclear, Kyo. *Birds, Art, Life*. Doubleday Canada, 2017.

Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019. November 22, 2019- February 20, 2022, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA.

Mandell, Hinda, editor. *Crafting Dissent: Handicraft as Protest from the American Revolution to the Pussyhats*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Palazuelos, Fonseca, Oliveira. "A Philosophical Perspective on Intuition as a Method of Artistic Process". *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication*, Vol 5, No 1, 2018.

Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Bloomsbury, 2010.

Powers, Harriet. *Pictorial Quilt*. 1895-98, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Porter, Jenelle, et al., editors. *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-Present*. DelMonico Books, Prestel Publishing and Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 2014.

Ringgold, Faith. *Tapestry Maquette*. 1988, New York Public Library, New York City.

Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso, 2020.

Siegel, Katy, editor. *The Heroine Paint: After Frankenthaler*. Gagosian Gallery 2015.

Sillman, Amy. *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings*. After 8 books, 2022.

Sillman, Amy. *The ALL-OVER*. Dancing Foxes Press, 2017.

Smith-Stewart, Amy, curator. *52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone*. The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2022.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Recollections of my Nonexistence*. Penguin Random House, 2020.

Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Stockholder, Jessica. *Jessica Stockholder*. Phaidon Press, 2018.

Szewczuk, Monika, et al. *Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters*. Mousse Publishing, 2019.

Thanhauser, Sofi. *Worn: A People's History of Clothing*. Vintage books, 2023.

Toplis, Allison. *The Hidden History of the Smock Frock*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

Truitt, Anne. *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist*. First Scribner trade paperback edition, Scribner, 2013.