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lucy o'donnell
SITTING WITH UNCERTAINTY



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Turning the Material: Miscarriage,
Not Knowing and Matter

Sitting with Uncertainty, produced by Lucy O'Donnell between 2018 and 2019, draws the unseen trauma and grief of miscarriage into the realm of the visible. The process of making this lived experience of sexual difference tangible for others is vital in a culture in the UK that still struggles to grasp the significance of this predominantly private medicalised event. Gesture and graphite on paper transform the private rhythms, sensations, flows, and matter of the body in the closed space of the studio. The act of doing so should not be mistaken for therapy, which only ever places art in the service of forgetting. Rather, it is a means to sustain and share the absent presence which has come into being for an (m) other.

The freedom to share this experience from a position of safety, through processes of material-led exploration or other forms, is a profound privilege. The transition of this work from the private space of the studio to the public realms of exhibition and publication walks a political tight-rope because to articulate one woman's bereavement for the benefit of others could quite easily be mobilised by those who would deny women choice over their reproductive rights. The proximity

given to abortion and miscarriage in Law in conservative US States, such as Alabama, and countries, such as Egypt, El Salvador, and the Philippines, imprisons women unless they can prove that the inability to carry their pregnancy to term was spontaneous.¹ In many respects this legislation is the most extreme manifestation of the responsibility assigned to pregnant women, which presupposes that they are somehow in conscious control of their physical bodies while denying them a right to autonomy over them. The cultural, medical, and political forces that structure the experience of miscarriage for women turn on this presumption of de facto control over the body, which is part and parcel of a wider ideological framework that discriminates against disability, obesity, and represses the natural process of aging in order to deny death. A new, hysterical era of normativity ushered in by wearable technological devices such as smart watches and fitness trackers polices the body according to the data it produces. Sensory awareness of the body, regardless of gender, is giving way to the mapping, monitoring, and assessment of O2 sats, heart rates, and sleep patterns. Moreover, for many women in the West, the body's flows and rhythms have been mitigated by oestrogen and progesterone based contraception. The decision to 'plan' a pregnancy and even a birth is often, therefore, a confrontation with the body's hitherto unfelt physicality and recalcitrance. The grief felt when a pregnancy does not carry to term is then

compounded by this context, which takes hold of mourning and transforms it into guilt by attributing blame to a body that refused to be subjugated to conscious will. As O'Donnell says, 'You and your body did not do its job and your baby has been let down [...] by you.'²

The four drawings clustered within *Sitting with Uncertainty* are a corporealization of this experience; its grid formations work through this expectation of control while the individual, intensely worked drawings deny any sense of containment. Some can be read from left to right, imbuing them with a temporal logic, and yet each work augments the restlessness of the grid that Rosalind Krauss famously described via the paintings of Agnes Martin.³ The viewer's gaze lurches in fits and starts between gestures, images, and surfaces that resolutely insist upon the bodily matter of mother and child. The gestalt of the work is not a coherent whole but a fractured narrative that again and again displaces hope to perform the irrevocable rupture of the one from the other.

The scale, monochrome, and formlessness of some drawings invoke the sonographic image which, as O'Donnell explains, 'gives you access to the private domain of your body, to the place your baby dwells'. The cellular forms emerge through the negative space surrounded by hard angular graphite lines that score the paper with palpable aggression. Here, the darkness of the mother's body is not a soft, fluid space of nurture but a site of violent reproach: 'you have fucked up'.⁴ Elsewhere, repeated ovoid forms are

conjoined, sit side by side or overlay one another, as if circling something that the artist is desperately trying to conjure from the page.

As a woman and mother this work is difficult to bear; it compels me to reflect with sadness and regret on my own reproductive history. One in four women experience miscarriage, one in a hundred has three in a row; some suffer four in the later stages of pregnancy, which is nothing short of brutal. More than once, while writing this essay, I have been compelled to reach out and physically draw my own child close to me to be assured of his continued life force. This visceral yearning for my son speaks of the inextricable bond between mother and child, and this is what is at stake in these drawings. This is no more apparent than in the integral section of work formed by O'Donnell's daughter Daisy's drawings. Their presence articulates the promise that each of O'Donnell's pregnancies held: the potential for a further bond between a mother and a vibrant, intelligent, loving, funny little human being.⁵ The inclusion of Daisy's drawings stands as a testimony to what might have come into being but also lends additional weight to O'Donnell's lament for these babies, as these losses are not hers alone but are shared within her family. The artist therefore not only has to reconcile her own grief and that of her partner, but also her daughter's mourning for a much longed for sibling who she now crosses out or, as Derrida would have it, places under erasure, thereby sustaining them and her relationship

to them as neither there nor not there.⁶ The vitality of the drawings clustered within *Sitting with Uncertainty*, as well as their animate materials and gestures, simultaneously seek to disavow the death blow that transformed O'Donnell's babies into 'material of conception'. The failure of these drawings catches them in a tension between animate and inanimate matter.

To speak as a colleague, who has worked alongside O'Donnell during the production of this body of work, prompts reflection on the continued need to recognise our collegiate and pedagogical responsibilities to one another as feminists. The drive to find a voice through which to articulate the hitherto occluded experiences of sexual difference in the academy brings a new critical lens to discourse practice-based research. The Fine Art Masters programme that O'Donnell and I devised champions the agency of materials and the body, as well as the need to let go of the desire to control of predetermined ideas and to give oneself up to uncertainty as a positive means to unlock, interrogate, and develop an art practice. It is a curriculum that draws on artists, such as Emma Cocker, Elizabeth Fisher, and Rebecca Fortnum, and thinkers, such as Jane Bennet, Elizabeth Grosz, Tim Ingold, James Elkins, and Merleau-Ponty. *Sitting with Uncertainty* is a searing example of the unfolding of embodied knowledge through making in which the artist and their work journey through the not yet known. In this instance, however, the relevance of Merleau-Ponty stems not only

from his famous intertwining of vision, movement, and uncertainty but from the means by which he configures painting as an 'ongoing birth'.⁷ His revolutionary ontology constitutes the body as a generative site of knowledge and assigns a positive value intended to supplement, if not supplant, the distance and dissection of Western Rationalism. Forty years later, this notion of painter as genetrix has been taken up by James Elkins, who intertwines matter, space, and the artist in the womb of the studio, via his famous recourse to alchemy in *What Painting Is* (1999).⁸ *Sitting with Uncertainty*, however, puts a question mark beside the efficacy of the body conceived by Merleau-Ponty and Elkins. It is a body of work that problematizes the notion of artist/work/studio as a genetrix for women, revealing the normative expectations that can belie even the most radical of philosophical gestures.

¹ A comprehensive picture of the regulation of women's reproductive rights across the globe can be accessed via <https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws> Last Accessed 09/09/2019.

² Lucy O'Donnell, (2019).

³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Harvard, Mass: MIT Press, 1986).

⁴ Lucy O'Donnell, (2019) my emphasis.

⁵ I wish to stress that this 'promise' should be distinguished from any claim of 'ensoulment' as advocated by the Pro-Life movement. For further reading see Chapter 6 'Stem Cells and the Culture of Life' in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 82–93.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, (1998) *Of Grammatology*, pp 19.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, (1961) 1993. 'Eye and Mind', in Galen A. Johnson ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 129.

⁸ Elkins, James, 1999. *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting. Using the Language of Alchemy*. London: Routledge.