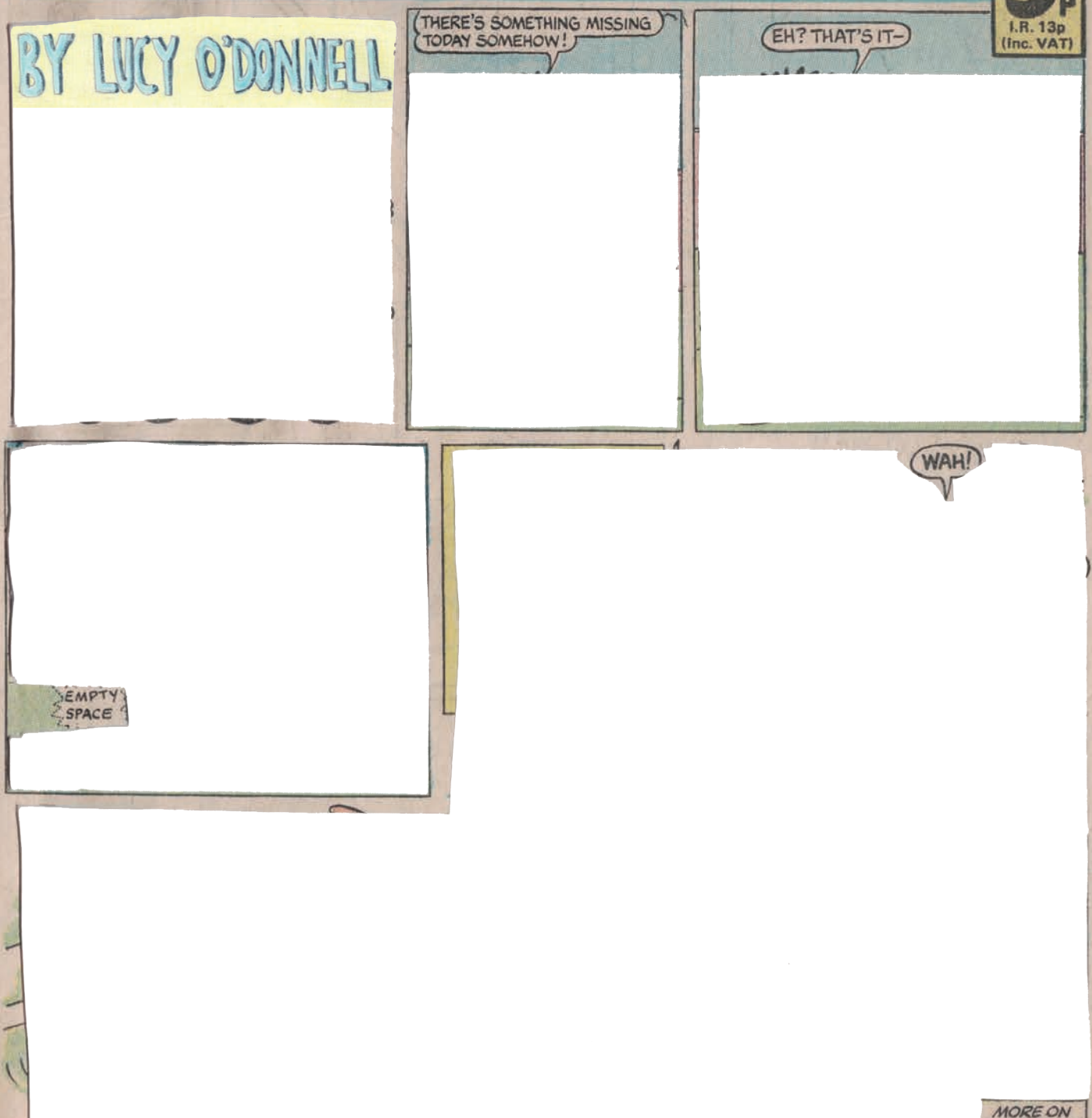
our little earth bound tales

No. 2046—OCT. 3rd. 1981 EVERY THURSDAY 9p I.R. 13p (Inc. VAT)

BY LUCY O'DONNELL



HMM! WONDER WHO THAT IS?

Later—

But—

THIS IS ALL TOO MUCH! I'M GOING TO HAVE A LIE-DOWN.

THUD!

So—

Soon—

FUME!

ACHE

WOW! THAT'S SOME MESS!

GULP! MUST HIDE!

Then—

CREAK!

CREAK!

Soon—

NOW WHERE IS HE?

AA...

GULP!

SO THERE YOU ARE!

HUH! I'M NOT...

Then—

NOW, I NEED A LONG WOODEN BOX TO FIT ON THE WINDOW-SILL.

Soon—

But—

NOW WE MUST FILL IT WITH SOIL.

So—

A few days later—

HOW?

Next—

SWOOP

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE. THAT IS THE QUESTION . . ."

BNO 30.6.84

DON'T CALL ME PATHETIC!

. . . HOPE IT'S BETTER SOON! HAW-HAW!

But, later—

GOT YOU!

One sentence later—

PRISON

But—

One night—

THERE'S NOT ENOUGH LIGHT IN THIS CAVE!

SEARCH!

Pa's wanting an idea—

But—

GROAN!

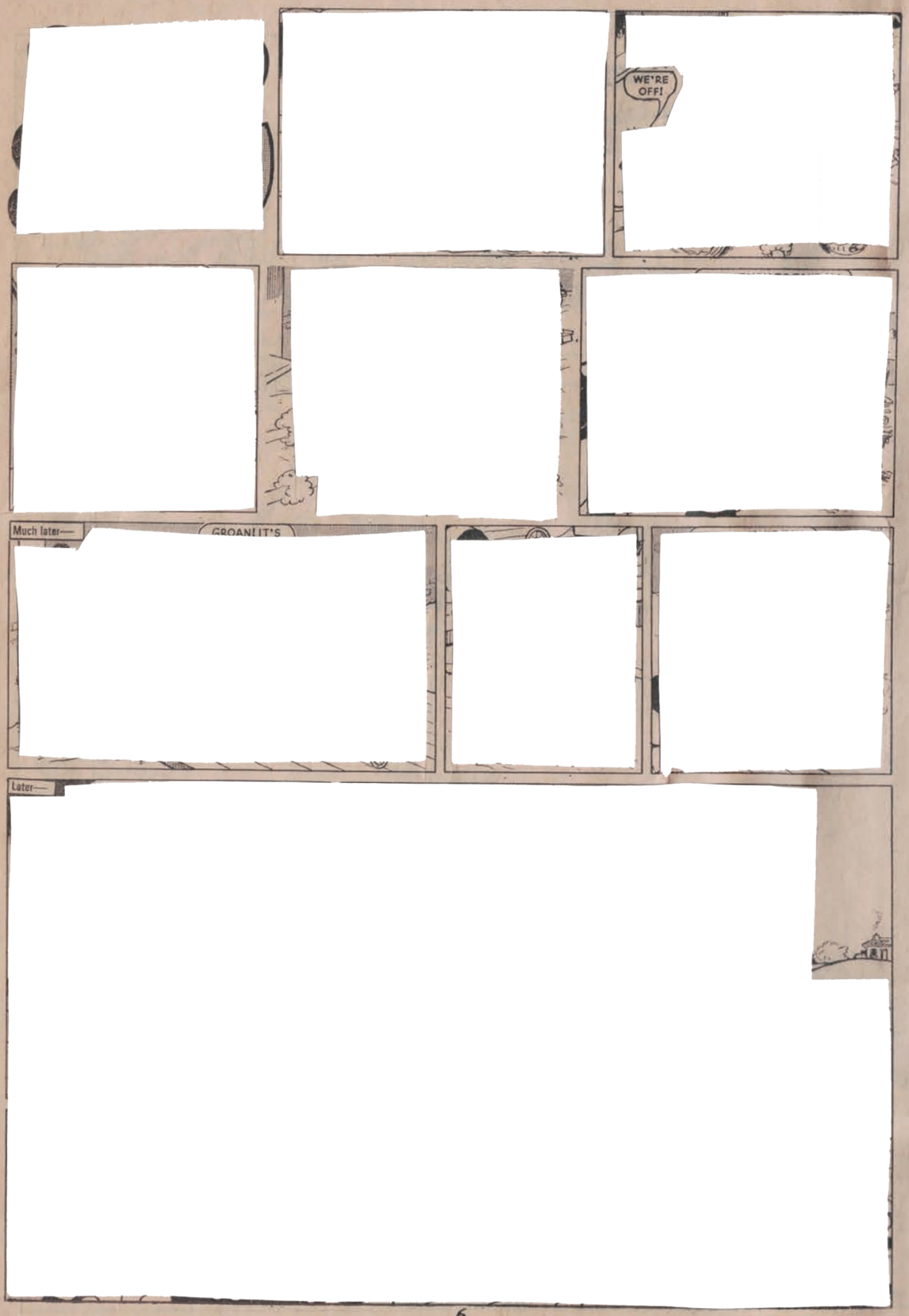
But—

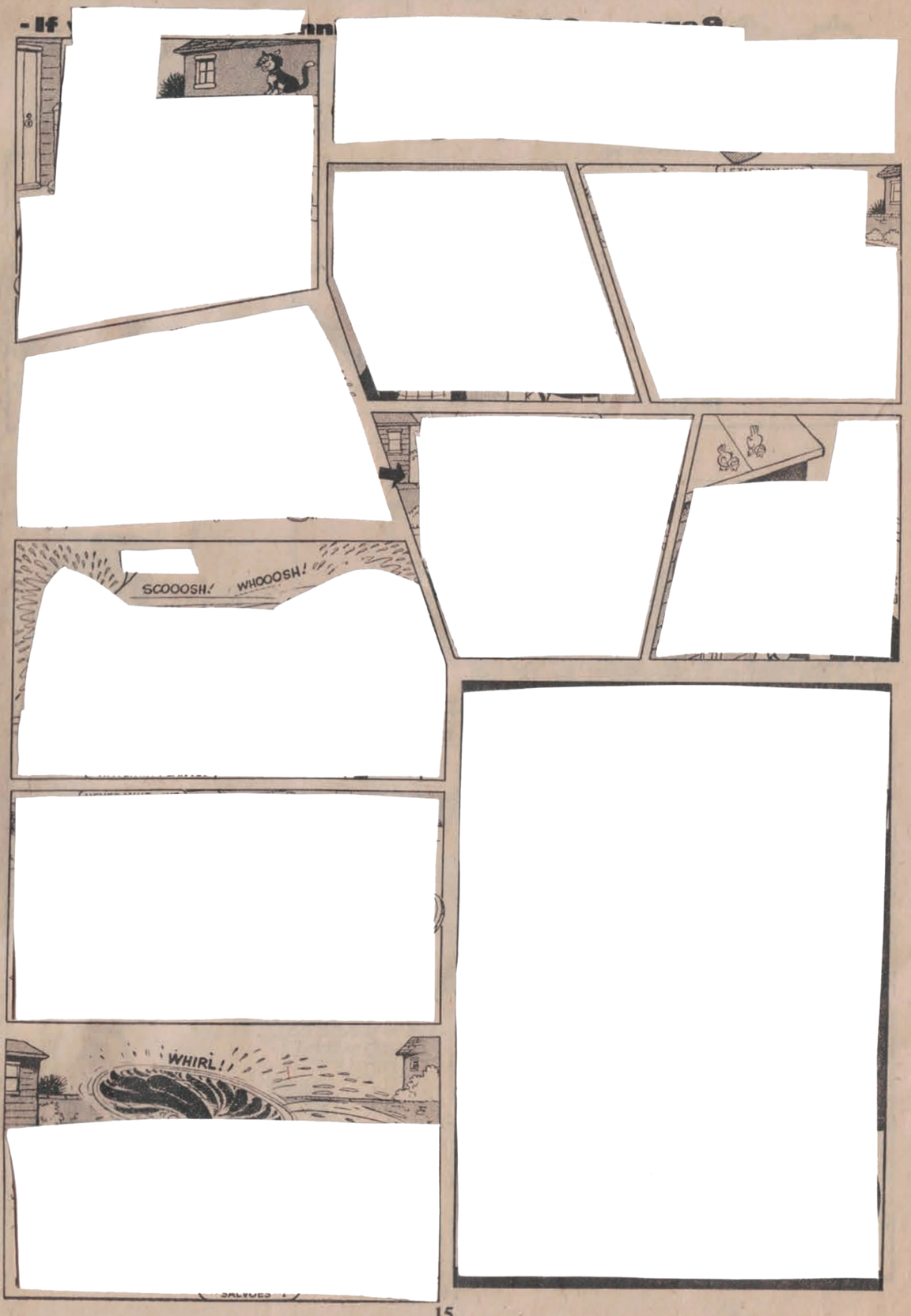
CRASH!

AARGH!

BAH!

BNO 8.8.81


WE'RE OFF!
Much later—
GROANLIT'S
Later—


SCOOOSH!
WHOOOSH!
WHIRL!!

"BABY-FACE"

THE CUTEST

So—

But—

READER'S VOICE

So—

OURN

Suddenly—

Soon—

At the police station—

Later—

Pa gives a demonstration—

Later—

Outside Hank's Store—

But—

TAKE THAT!

The bandits are shattered—

Later—

Inside—

And—

SPLOT!

Soon—

So—

WAH!

Shortly—

And so—

THUD!

Later—

THUD!

OH. NO!

RAGE!

YURK! I'M OFF!

DASH

SNIFF! SNIFF! SNIFF!

So—

SNIFF! SNIFF!

Through a cats' home—

Next—

DOG MEAT

DOG MEAT

DOG FOOD FACTORY

Finally—

SNIFF! SNIFF!

3

ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

HUH! I'D HARDLY STARTED MY STORY.

Next morning—

ER—I'VE GOT TO PUT THE WASHING OUT!

BEARS' CAVE

So—

BLAH! BORE! DRONE! WAFFLE! MOAN! GROAN! RHUBARB!

SORRY—DIDN'T HEAR A WORD YOU SAID.

THAT'S ME!

And—

But—

But—

IT MUST BE A BIG ONE—IT'S

Soon—

EXIT

THEY'RE ATTACKING!

Take

OOYAH!

... It DIDN'T!

CRASH!

PYIONG!

WHEEEEE!

FLUMP!

One quiet day—

I'VE LOST MY VOICE!

SO HAVE WE!

Later—

MMM . . .

ZONK!

MUFFLE

WHAT?

So—

But—

HOWL!

SCREECH!

GROAN!

Shortly—

OF COURSE. I'M GOING ON THE VERY HARD RUN!

Soon—

OH. DEAR!

WHIRL

Eventually—

ERK!

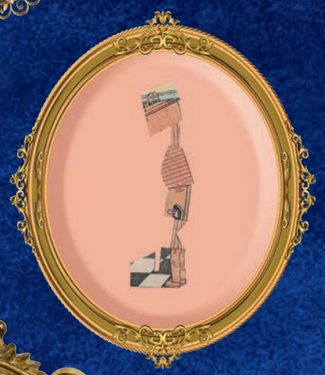
100 M.P.H.

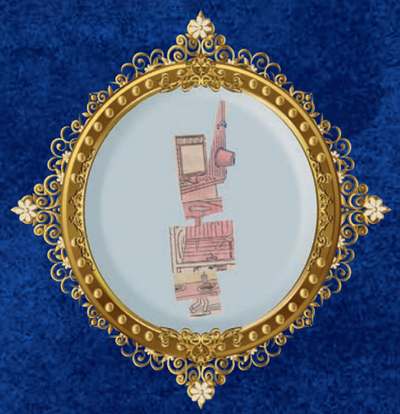
HELP!

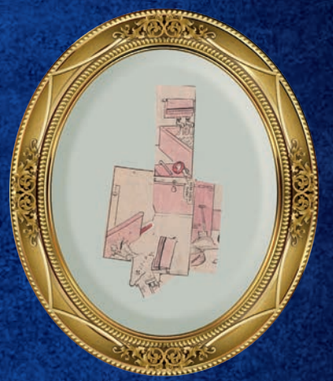
SPLAT!

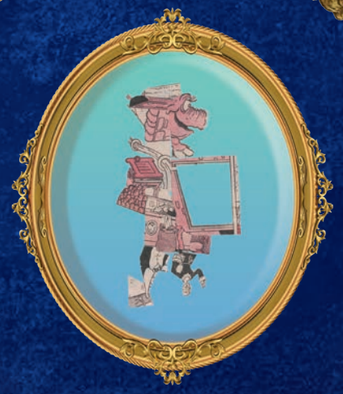
Later—

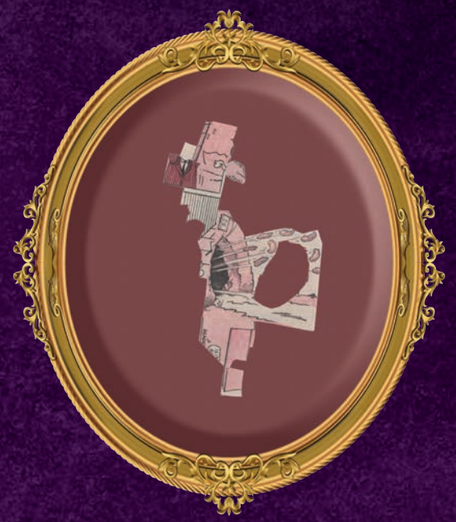
WH-WHAT?












BUTCHER

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INTRODUCTION

This catalogue, *our little earth bound tales*, is a space where miscarriage or pregnancy without birth plays out, sharing stories untold and erased futures. It accompanies my solo show at the The Ballinglen Arts Foundation and Museum County Mayo, Ireland (November 2024 to January 2025). Here, I usher pregnancy without birth into sight and rethink uncertainty within the context of drawing and 'becoming'. This catalogue borrows tropes from comics and graphic novels. Usually printed on paper, it uses sequence to tell its story, with drawn illustrations set within a grid using its systematic, orderly chronology as a narrative making structure. This format gives the reader/viewer a certainty – that in following this system ensured one event follows another. With issues of (in)fertility, events are haphazard and regularly encounter loss. The work showing in *our little earth bound tales* looks to drawing, acknowledging its open-endedness as a powerful poetic communicative device to initiate ontological reflections around this loss. The work, despite not always 'looking like' drawing, borrows certain principles from it to be investigative, open-ended, and uncertain and, in doing so, enables erasure and loss as fundamental methods. The title of the show comes from a quote by German artist known as Wols, who saw smallness as sacred. His connection to drawing, small drawing in particular, prompts his tiny delicate nebulous drawn forms, as he describes 'we set down our little earth bound tales on small scraps of paper'.[i] Such a sensitively observed process had great resonance for me.

When moving house, I come across a box of old comics saved from my childhood stored in the attic. They felt familiar, full of adventures where characters navigate challenges and make mischief. The grid configuration has a reliability, framing events and replaying pictorial space for the characters to move over the comic pages, marking out their narratives in neat divisions and bringing them to equally neat conclusions. Drawing being both verb and noun sets it in the present, yet it also denotes a thing. When thinking about drawing as activity and material body I find Heidegger useful. Describing a sensibility of thingness that is inherently becoming, as it is moulded from and belonging to the 'world', Heidegger determines that *thingness* shows itself 'in its thinging from out of the worlding world'.[ii] My drawing practice had been driven by this complexity for a long time, excited by the potential of binding mark, trace, and experience. With the assertion of these principles drawing can unfold potential or, as Hélène Cixous maintains, as open-ended in its resistance to conclusion.[iii] Uncertainty and ambiguity are arguably at home within fine art drawing practice, a necessity when undertaking experimental and speculative activities. As a result, drawing is charged with potential, reflection, and creativity. If we accept the value of drawing's open-ended paradigm, we equally must accept productivity as not exclusively subject to results. However, Western social and economic structures emphasise certainties and default definitions that rely upon binaries and target-driven success conditioning. It is unsurprising then that fertility assumes set trajectories with productivity 'paying off', and that diversions from this, including miscarriage, should be anything less than an undercurrent.

Back in my attic looking at the comic's grid, it appeared to give the drawn events an ableist hew – the grid's rhythmic pace had a normative beat, driving outcomes and results; it upheld productivity and avoided uncertainty, thereby mimicking some type of capitalist conductor. These comics and their drawings did not feel like *thinging things*. Their drawings depicted a collection of familiar characters paused and laid in sequence to guide the reader/viewer through the unfolding narrative. The comic strip provided sequence and structure to the story, moving through episodes and inevitably arriving at an ending. I took the comics to the studio, and there I carefully removed information with a scalpel. Taking away the drawings in a comic was absurd, yet I had a strong desire to make physical voids in the paper. In cutting straight lines around the boxes and removing the illustrations from their frames, the grid structure became like a paper skeleton holding empty spaces. This process of erasure was a speculative one. Erasure is common in a drawing process – it is a method of rethinking. As I removed the comics content, looking/reading as I went, some words and images held potential in locating descriptions of loss, so I let them remain in place. The result was a comic book carcass retaining otiose ends, wasted space, time laboured, lost protagonists, ambiguity, and disjunctive bodies. In particular, the speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and narrator's voice lost their references; instead, in their unknown context, they became unnerving. Bones, holes, clocks, shouts of despair, cries of help, whimpers, howls, dinners left uneaten, eyes in the dark, puffs of smoke, speed tracks, smashed windows, brick walls, predatory sharks, tight rope walkers, dog meat, body parts, spills, and puddles were all preserved on the page to tell of a different story, one of pregnancy without birth.

Making this work gave me permission to face lost futures, rethink ableist narratives around fertility and pregnancy without birth. The gridded papery vacuums talked of erased events, yet the empty spaces were charged with precariousness, uncertainty, and ambiguity. When we use the term 'miscarriage' we acknowledge loss, an unexpected path wandered without intention or production. Pregnancy's rhetoric of productive nurturing diminishes the actuality of its precariousness. In pregnancy without birth, we lose faith in our value. Pregnancy corresponds to ableist structures which expel all that is uncertain and ambiguous, and fundamentally normative expectations prohibits difference. These values filter through our communities and saturate our language. They lurk hidden in plain sight. This binds us to normative expectations and, as a consequence, this suppression of difference shames us into a position of failure. It is important to acknowledge normative representations of pregnancy portray safe nurturing bodies as places which mirror ideals of home, belonging, and comfort. The complex interweaving of body, home, and shelter becomes compounded once more with scripts of women as home-makers. This concept has been revisited regularly since Louise Bourgeois' 1940s self-portrait drawings titled, *Femme Maison*, which pivoted the house as being both refuge and trap. 1970s America saw further use of this biographic narrative, where women brought domestic rituals into art making. *Womanhouse*, an important feminist pedagogical art-making project in Los Angeles, put unpaid domestic labour at its centre. A derelict house became an exhibition space renovated by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and their students. This project received criticism not only for its content, but also for the cultural fetishism of a specific type white and heterosexual woman. This was not its intention, however, rather the project wanted to negotiate how women had not been afforded the same opportunities to their male counterparts. The exhibition, *Womanhouse* at *Monnaie de Paris*, France (2017), and at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington (2018), uses this powerful subject again to draw attention to gender equality in art history. This extends Bourgeois' reflections on the dichotomy of the house as refuge and trap which, as highlighted by the exhibition, is also a space of inspiration, discovery, and reflection. In miscarriage, bodies can feel sabotaging and disobedient, as they rework these normative ideals of nurturing safety. Experiences of pregnancy without birth need legitimising as part of the precariousness of our bodies.

In the studio, the method of removal in exploring loss created a mass of disconnected comic illustrations and a vast amount of illustrative debris from building the papery skeleton pages. These disembodied illustrations sat in piles on my desk – they had a sense of expectancy and potential. I began using the illustrative remains taken from the pages to make house structures with arms, legs, and heads; these body/house forms were dysfunctional, holding unusual goings on, threatening activities, or curiously positioning domestic items. Homes/bodies became places filled with junk, ghost inhabitants, or scenarios which did not make sense. Other figures became curious cyborg types with domestic items for body parts.

Much of the body/house work used drawings from the comics that depicted houses, interiors, or domestic family activities, such as cleaning and eating, picking up on how we inhabit our bodies, or 'live' in them. In pregnancy, our bodies are modifying, making genetic pathways in the support of growth. However, early pregnancy loss can often be dismissed, becoming less relevant than later-term pregnancy loss because of growth and development. Pregnancy tests which measure early hormonal changes in your urine are used to confirm conception, and the use of this test often brings thoughts and conversations that question when the baby will arrive and what needs to completed beforehand. Healthcare provision, dates in the calendar, different examinations, and information gathering all accelerate a trajectory moving towards a very specific goal – a baby. In the context of pregnancy without birth, our bodies feel disobedient. However, there is no Cartesian split between body and mind, our bodies and minds are a union. We cannot separate how our bodies perform from the way we understand and engage with the world. It is through our bodies that knowledge is lived and embodied. These physical and physiological effects have a bearing on early pregnancy loss, yet

we receive prompts to dismiss early pregnancy as somehow holding less value. This connection with worth does not take up pro-life campaigns as to deny reproductive rights is an act of power assertion. Rather, I want to acknowledge a dichotomy where, on the one hand, we are asked to associate pregnancy with baby but, on the other, we are expected to brush off loss if it occurs in early term. How we think about our bodies manifests complex relationships bound by social cultural politics.

The sonographer's ultrasound scan is a milestone in pregnancy and this work, like my previous exhibition, is heavily influenced by the experience. The scan usually undertaken at around 12 weeks of pregnancy is used as a tool to check on growth and health. The technology mediates internal and external bodily worlds and the unreal is substantiated by animated images on the ultrasound screen. The internal body is revealed through the broadcast, where I become a cyborg through this episode of bionic peeping. Technology and body become curiously blurred in pregnancy. Through machines, we can look within us, hear heartbeats, monitor movements, survey 'typical' growth, and determine health conditions. For me, the ultrasound check was an event suspended in tension, bad news, and sorrow.

In order to get clarity in an ultrasound image, you need a full bladder. So, once the procedure is through, a pee takes first priority. I once saw a woman come out from the toilet with a look on her face that spoke a thousand words to me. Most people emerge from waiting areas armed with photographic print outs of proof of life in monochromatic wombs. The sonogram confirms what you cannot see. If you do not receive an endorsement of life, there is no offer to print your ultrasound image for taking away. For me, the event became ingrained in my memory as a dark room with investigative screens and silent suspense. The sonographer's scan creates a window for peering in and becomes an extension of how you understand yourself.

I wanted my work to focus on the time my body was pregnant. In early pregnancy loss, physiological changes disrupt your hormonal balance and difference occupies your ordinary. I wanted to make work that could suspend that time and the liminality of us as joint beings. In pregnancy without birth, there is no 'delivery' or baby 'currency'. If pregnancy suddenly halts, the matrixial becomings are totally overlooked. The changes taking place in your body are all but ignored, and qualification of m/other is at best ambiguous.

So, after cutting out the sequence of events from the comic strips, I began making collages from them. The series of lost events became figures built from parts of the removed comic illustrations. The figures were to become self-portraits depicting the complexity of m/other in pregnancy without birth. This development was significant in confronting the influence of social-cultural politics on our construction of identity. I thought over the interwoven mechanics of bodies, and the communicative value of body language. To play with form and posture felt like an important possibility in developing the work from its initial focus on body/house/dwelling. The self-portraits felt radically significant in depicting the union of becoming in early pregnancy which, from the 'outside', appeared unfluctuating and ordinary – the extraordinary was indeed an undercurrent. I felt that the construction method in making the figures could shape these biological changes. By separating the illustrations from linear, comic strip time and rebuilding the illustrations, they could become pauses of corporeal reflection. A whole collection of curious figures emerged. The cyborgs provided reflection on body and machine. Others pivoted on the empty space of my womb where the body in profile exaggerates its anticipatory becoming, however negative pictorial space inhabits the abdomen. Some self-portraits have animal characteristics, magnifying the curious sense of being something other than 'yourself'. Uncanny birds or pig-heads take over, kind of grotesque, with cave-like holes posing as bloated torsos fire out arrows – or are they sausages? Some works explicitly morph into child/other with a play on connective tissue and scale. I wanted a sense of tension in the duo and, for one childlike figure, its 'hair' is positioned in a way that makes it appear to be looking down in sorrow or shame. The other double or dual figure denotes similarity and connection with the two forms sporting matching top hats, the larger of the two or 'adult' waving its 'arms' in the air in animated despair.
Other figures behave like ghosts with outstretched wings hovering or propelled through the air with some invisible force. Another ghost-like figure whose legs appear to be missing, drives itself along on some weird flatbed like a hovercraft magically creating a cushion of air for its mobility. One poor soul has a downturned mouth, deep in an expression of sorrow. Its extreme despair resonates through its mouth as any other features appear to be absent. Some works have a phallus, and this shift of agency originates from a tumid displacement from intimate connection to one of instrumentality. A woman, with hairnet and ample bosom scuttles – half-woman/half-house her torso protrudes like a faun with ridiculously small legs that emphasise a preposterously heavy labour to mobilise. Another home structure is haunted with ghosts at the windows. This space has curious cranes lifting shipping container-like spaces around and any trace of figure is cast aside, so she becomes barely visible. All that is left is a head and some legs, the rest of her is over taken by empty spaces and dusty rooms. One particular work leads to a collection of cyborg figures. In combining a caravan, piles of soil, a garden fence, and a top hat, an endearing character hovers somehow in expectancy.
The cyborg works reflect the intertwined relationship of the m/other through a pairing with machine. As a series, the work highlights voids, empty feelings, barren wombs, and bouts of bad temper.

They are testimonials to the unfathomable dichotomy of embryo or foetus growth as small in scale, yet precious in their value. The relationship between scale and value are interwoven in art-making practice. Pictorial composition can be thought of as an organisation of forms and dynamics, helping us translate information and determining value and function. We relate to the world with an awareness of our physical being – are we bigger or smaller than the things around us? This helps us assert threat, fragility, hierarchy, and the sublime, for example. Our physical encounters are reflected in and understood through corporeal physicality. The self-portraits are made on A6-sized paper built from tiny tea pots, kitchen cupboards, and mini cupcakes. These small works challenge notions of importance once more by appearing as miniature portraits.

The role of the miniature portrait in Western art history celebrates, marks, and memorialises noteworthy people. The European miniature portrait dates back to the 1520s. These treasured items celebrated prestigious social positions and rituals were created around giving and receiving them. This type of portrait was bound for the noble, rich, and socially powerful. The material and scale of the miniature portrait honoured their subject suspended in luminous hues and was perfectly portable. Their scale, which could be as small as 3cm in height, was perfect in enabling close keeping and intimate connections. They appeared in wedding bracelets and memorial reflections of lost loved ones. Sometimes lavished with precious stones, such as diamonds, and known as *boîte à portrait*, translated as *box with a portrait*. Despite not having anything to do with a box, this refers to the munificent jewelled container safely enclosing an equally precious cargo.

I wanted to use a miniature portrait format to frame my pregnancy experiences as valuable. In adopting this small scale, I want the work to reconnect with how my visibility was in stark contrast to my pregnancy evolution and ending. In presenting these self-portraits, I want to mobilise the *failing* body from the social and cultural expectations of production condition pregnancy, where pregnancy equals baby. Contingencies for the precarious are reserved, which lead to the hasty redirection of patient care with limited space to admit loss.

In pregnancy without birth, medical care, language, and direction radically change; however, preciousness and bodily connection cannot shift as quickly. I want the miniatures to reform a corporeal significance through proportion, to speak of the precious other through a recognition of self (m/other).

I would like to send a huge thank you to all those who contributed to the catalogue. It has been a pleasure and honour to work with so many generous and committed people.

Among these texts you will find more self portraits scuttling over and breaking the following pages, think of these not as illustrations to the text but as page wanderers...

[i] Wols (1971). 'Aphorism', in Peter Inch and Annie Fatet (eds), *Wols: Aphorisms and Pictures*. Gillingham: Arc Press, pp. 46–47 (translation modified).

[ii] Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 181).

[iii] Cixous, H., & Catherine A. F. MacGillivray (1993). Without End no State of Drawingness no, rather: The Executioner's Taking off. *New Literary History*, 24(1), pp. 91–103. https://doi.org/10.2307/469272

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Lucy O'Donnell's exhibition is a strikingly evocative and tender exploration of the experience of pregnancy loss. The depiction of the emotional and bodily experiences that accompany the grief of losing a baby are perfectly on-point. The collection closely echoes themes that have emerged from our research on pregnancy loss at Queen's University Belfast.

A central theme in the experience of pregnancy loss, illustrated beautifully with the use of erasure in this exhibition, centres on the devastating experience of loss in relation to 'absence', 'vacant space', and 'nonexistence'. The participants in our research describe the sense of absence and vacant space that fills their lives when a much-wanted baby dies: the empty womb space where baby once dwelled; the blank ultrasound machines; the negative pregnancy tests; the absence of a body; and, centrally, the interrupted narrative of their baby's life, which they had affectionately imagined when they bought that little yellow baby-grow or watched toddlers in the park on sunny days. People who experience pregnancy loss describe the additional heartbreak of non-existence – an absence of evidence that their babies ever lived and their instinct to capture some proof that this is not so. These 'objects of loss' are items that prove existence. They speak of the beginnings of the narrative that was abruptly ended: an early scan photograph; a dated hospital discharge form; a tiny teddy bear to occupy the space where baby should have been.

Emotional distress, grief, and trauma as common realities for parents experiencing pregnancy loss has been confirmed repeatedly by research evidence, however, social norms and support services do not always recognise this truth, especially for those who experience early loss. Unhelpful and insensitive comments such as 'you can always try again' or 'at least you know you can get pregnant' abound and do nothing to ease the suffering of those grieving the loss of a child. Pregnancy loss at any gestation can be a devastating loss for parents and, while recognition of its emotional impact is increasing, we have not yet reached a point where we can discuss it openly and sensitively. Neither have we reached a place where those experiencing such loss are held in satisfactory embrace by health professionals and social circles. Many parents describe the surreal and comic book-like realities into which they are thrown when their worst nightmare comes true. Suddenly, they must contend with medical jargon in which their baby has become 'fetal remains'. Their bodies become waiting rooms for the detection of 'missed' or 'complete' miscarriage. They are told to go home and wait or undergo invasive procedures to remove the 'products of conception'. Many are traumatised by and unprepared for the unexpected pain and 'treatment' they must endure to deliver what remains of their baby from their bodies. Many are often launched into a grief and depression that nobody told them to expect. Many face future pregnancies with unsupported apprehension and an anxious wait for that little heartbeat on the screen; a heartbeat that some fail to see again, and again, and again, and again. Many describe how the sense absence and bodily failure grows deeper and wider with each recurrent loss. While some are lucky enough to receive an understanding hug from an empathetic midwife, others are told that 'at least' they know they can get pregnant so they should go home and 'try again'. I will never forget the story of a woman who delivered her baby in an emergency room toilet. Holding what remained in a kidney dish, she asked a passing doctor what she should do with it. He told her to 'throw it in any bin'.

Pioneers among our health and care professionals, policy makers and charities are at last listening to the voices of parents bereaved by pregnancy loss and advocating for the use of sensitive language, supportive services, and compassionate care. Of central importance is helping parents to engage in memory making rituals, supporting them to process their emotional experiences with self-compassion, normalising the experiences of grief and healing, educating people about pregnancy loss, and opening conversations about loss and its impacts. Speaking openly about pregnancy loss is shifting the tides of stigma that force people into the depths of mental illness. Lucy O'Donnell's exhibition will undoubtedly open this much-needed conversation further.

[i] Queen's On Pregnancy Loss: https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/queens-on-pregnancy-loss/

ALICE MAHER

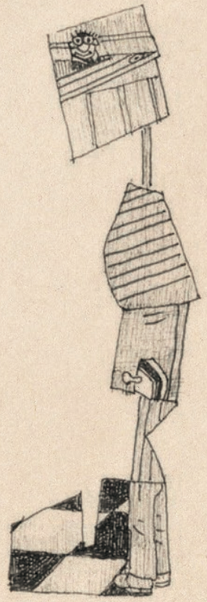
Title: The Changeling
Medium: Pencil, ink, crayon, charcoal on paper
Dimensions: 17 x 25 cm
Date: 2003

BRIAN FAY

Artist and Senior Lecturer at the School of Art and Design, Technological University Dublin.

This drawing is a response to Lucy O'Donnell's invitation to contribute to her catalogue 'our little earth bound tales'. The starting point for this drawing is Johannes Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, c.1663–64, oil on canvas, 49.6 x 40.3 cm. I began this drawing in 2010 as part of a series of responses to Vermeer. Each of my drawings traced the action of time on the materials and surface of his paintings. I was especially intrigued by the woman depicted in this painting as there is much contested scholarship as to whether the female figure may or may not be pregnant. One interpretation is that her outline is a result of a certain contemporaneous style of over coat/jacket and how it sits on top of the dress, another view is that she is indeed pregnant and that her reading of the letter adds to the pathos of a possible narrative, especially as she is depicted in front of a map which frequently suggested an absence of a partner. The fact that both sides are viable adds to the strength and self-contained mystery in the figure in Vermeer's painting more broadly. I recently worked into this drawing again in response to Lucy's work, isolating the figure from her background to accentuate her physicality and to hopefully increase the concentration of her pose and outline.

Title: Cracks drawing Vermeer Woman in Blue Reading a Letter
Medium: Digital drawing
Dimensions: Variable
Date: 2010-24



DR CHRISTINA KOLAITI
Senior Lecturer Photography at York St John University

REFLECTIONS ON LUCY O'DONNELL'S 'OUR LITTLE EARTH BOUND TALES' AND THE ART OF HOLDING A LIKENESS

O'Donnell's self-portrait miniature collages, made from comic books found in a box of childhood keepsakes, contemplate memories of uncertainty, pregnancy without birth and un-becoming.

Drawing upon 16th to 19th century portrait miniature collections held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, O'Donnell's work reminds us of the keepsake uniqueness of the tactile physical likeness.

our little earth bound tales positions such haptic uncertainties as the art of holding. Made in a deliberately understated size that fits in the palm of a hand 'to be held and viewed closely', O'Donnell's self-portraits speculate on the open-ended narrative of maternal attachment. Such playful encounters invite narratives of un-becoming to be held and caressed – just like mothers hold their children's hands – and to be shared with others as a 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' .

Unboxing motherhood

Recently, I found myself engulfed in a process of deciding to delete or keep 12,531 portrait snapshots stored on my iPhone's memory. This was a rather uneasy practice of instantaneous decision-making as the images – taken before my son's birth and up to his fourth birthday –were being separated in two different categories, 'to keep' or 'to delete'. As a full iPhone memory can make certain functions inoperative, it is necessary that some images are occasionally deleted to free up space in what resembles an impermanent storage of memories. Such metaphorical tensions are present in O'Donnell's work as subdued recollections of nurturing and loss, encountered by the ever-present impossibility of motherhood in sight of a body that cannot carry life.

After deleting, I often thought about these portrait memories. I sometimes located them in the 'recently deleted' folder and retrieved them back into the phone's memory storage. Amongst them was a 24-week pregnant selfie of my cousin dressed in long red evening attire in broad daylight and wearing matching red nail varnish and lipstick. Taken in a mirror with her mobile phone camera just a few moments before she shared this with me, this carefully composed self-reflection dispersed a disturbing sense of familiar anticipation, which conveyed the tangled web of parallel observers sometimes mothers are. Yet, ever since the upturning of events through the unexpected loss of the pregnancy, I have frequently speculated how the unmet expectancy changed the course of this story and in which of the two categories is this image now placed – was it kept or deleted? Which fragment of memory will this portrait forever represent?

After the emptying of my photographs from the memory storage of my phone – they now sit on an iCloud server that could be anywhere in the world – I still find myself experiencing a sense of loss and often try to locate them either on my phone or in my memory. Yet this emptiness is not without a function. These portraits are backed up pixels of information at the intersection between digital presence and physical absence. Nevertheless, I miss my portraits being physically present and accessible; the iPhone has deconstructed the somewhere-ness of the photographic album's record keeping into a simultaneous everywhere-ness and nowhere-ness. It's an almost non-place of backed up memories deliberating an unconscious mind alienated by the disorderly nature of 12,531 snapshots, the subversion of the 'family album', and of traditional forms of storytelling.

O'Donnell's work our little earth bound tales facilitates a familiar sense of duality through the visual disruption of the narrative flow of the Beano's pages. Deliberately crafted blank spaces, fragmented dialogues, parallel observations, physical erasures and re-compositions suggest a paradox; a constant apprehension of an emptiness awaiting to be filled and an act of unpicking a disarranged incohesive narrative, the sorting of 12,531 photographs. Through a disorderly arrangement of events, the pencil, the scalpel and the eraser facilitate a methodological excavation of glimpses reminiscent to the very first childhood experiences. The back-and-forth turning of the Beano's pages resembles an impeccable effort of meaning-making between implicit and explicit memory, an interplay between the storied and the lived experience, the anticipated and the unmet.

Such a process of meaning-making is in fact located in the physical structures of the brain, which during the first years of life develops millions of neurological connections for every living second. Such a period of rapid proliferation defined by countless connections, interruptions, and re-organisations of matter shapes the very first and lifelong sense of self and the world. At its core lies maternal attachment; the act of holding each other close forms memories of being held, nurtured, loved. Such fragments of memory instigated by a box of childhood keepsakes found in O'Donnell's attic initiated a speculative process of meaning-making, a symbolic unboxing of events, a non-figurative carte-de-visite, a self-portrait. Placed carefully in a tiny ornamental golden frame, this self-portrait is honoured, protected and displayed for viewing.

Nevertheless, the storied narrative is not the point of arrival nor resolution in O'Donnell's work. In a seemingly fragmented inconclusive account, the self, the artist, will be infinitely imagined in her studio, working through a continuous array of possibilities made by marks and erasures, whose traces remain visible on the page, just like the very first time our childhood hand once held the pencil and, with the softest grip, spelled the letters ᔑᒧᑎ then erased it, and tried again.

[i] Victoria and Albert Museum (2024) Portraits Miniatures. Available at: https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/portrait-miniatures (Accessed: 27 September 2024).

[ii] Definition of attachment theory: Bowlby, J. (1969) Attachment. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Loss. New York: Basic Books.
ibid, p.94

[iii] Augé, M. (2023) Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity. Translated by John Howe. New York; London: Verso Books.

CATHERINE BAKER

Is an Associate Professor in Art and Health at Birmingham City University (BCU) in the UK. Based at Birmingham School of Art, she is the Faculty Chair for Ethics and Research Integrity and set up and co-led the Material Encounters Research Cluster.

Many years ago, I met Lucy at a drawing conference and we stayed in touch, not regularly but often enough to mean that we didn't slip back into the realm of being strangers. So, in 2024, when she invited me to make a response to her exhibition *our little earth bound tales*, my immediate response was to say yes and consider carefully how I might correspond.

Shared documentation of Lucy's drawings, writing, and relevant research texts helped me to align my thoughts. I made a piece of work as a response to what she shared with me, but it isn't just a reply, in many ways it felt as if it was made with Lucy, for Lucy, as a thing for her to think on.

My making started with a plywood object that mapped the space that emerged between a stake and sapling that I had photographed and developed into a photopolymer print five years earlier (see Figure 1).

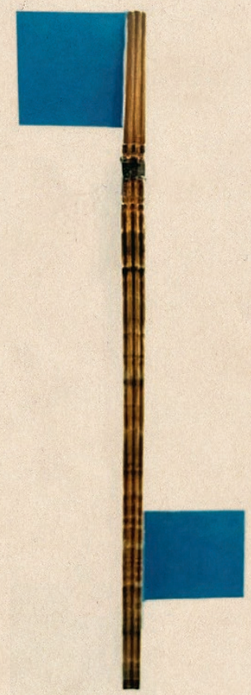
Title: Dust Drawn (ongoing series)
Medium: Charcoal on aged lining paper
Dimensions: 55 x 30 cm
Date: 2024

Eventually, after many subsequent visits to photograph the sapling, I saw that it had pulled free of the stake to which it was yoked. The space that opened up between the two entities became my focus.

A once living tree, now formed into a stake, is returned to the earth but now exists as a static support designed to force an upright growth pattern in a living thing but can no longer grow itself.

What emerged in just over a year of watching the young tree was that the vigorous youth of the sapling would eventually see it break free to grow how it was intended and in response to environmental conditions rather than lashed to a strained aesthetic. Tether-free, it leans away, opening up a gap that is full and weighty. Here sits an expectation that the sapling will be straight, that it will grow as we expect trees to – predictable and with vertical certainty. This isn't what happened, and it isn't what frequently happens – things don't do what we might expect them to. This gap, now realised as a solid and layered wooden body, holds a collaged and drawn photograph of another tree on each side. The drawn intervention describes the wound caused when a living branch is severed – bark forms in concentric lines around the point of detachment that are skin-like in their folds. Whilst this piece of writing is not intended to be an explanation, it does instead act as a way of thinking about meeting points along a path of exploration by two artists, absent from each other in both time and geography. In releasing the comic content of the *Beano* with a scalpel, the artist Lucy O'Donnell reveals a new narrative, one of severed parts – bodily entities somewhat unrecognisable but, nevertheless, pink and fleshy. Still contained in the grid-like framework of the comic, a sequence remains yet it feels inside out, like a body reversed when the inner fabric of the body is now exposed to the air and the outside world, much like the severed branch end. Excavated orifices emerge that, despite being bound by the grid, describe the turbulent domestic scenes of a life lived inside out. Apertures and exit points are arranged repeatedly, acting as openings through which to peer into but also to escape through, but which is it? Open windows and doors nod to this uncertain activity of inviting scrutiny or facilitating flight.

The artwork that I produced in correspondence is constructed to be fixed to a gallery wall via two blue 'squares' that are made from the blue material that shrouds the body in surgery. Covering the body entirely, the blueness renders it invisible in many ways, with the hidden body only accessible via a cut in the blue surface. The cut aperture could be considered to reveal a troublesome body, that which is to be 'improved or fixed', if such a thing is even possible, through the invasive nature of surgical practice. Where a palimpsest of new wounds are made as a byproduct of looking at the internal and unseen workings of the body in the flesh. *our little earth bound tales* sees the artist as archaeologist – excavating, removing, and exorcising in order to assign the printed comic surface a new narrative. Freed from the structure and rib-tickling beginnings of the *Beano*, the now unfettered parts are contemplated, separated, and stripped back, revealing vital connections that were always there but only reachable then exposed through a particular kind of experience.



Title: Small Blue
Medium: Plywood, surgical cloth, paper, ink, pencil
Dimensions: 11 x 33.5 x 7 cm
Date: 2024

DR. DEBORAH HARTY

Is an artist-researcher investigating the premise that drawing is phenomenology.
She is currently Chair of the Drawing Research Group at Loughborough University, co-director of the Drawing Research Network and the online journal TRACEY drawing and visualisation research.

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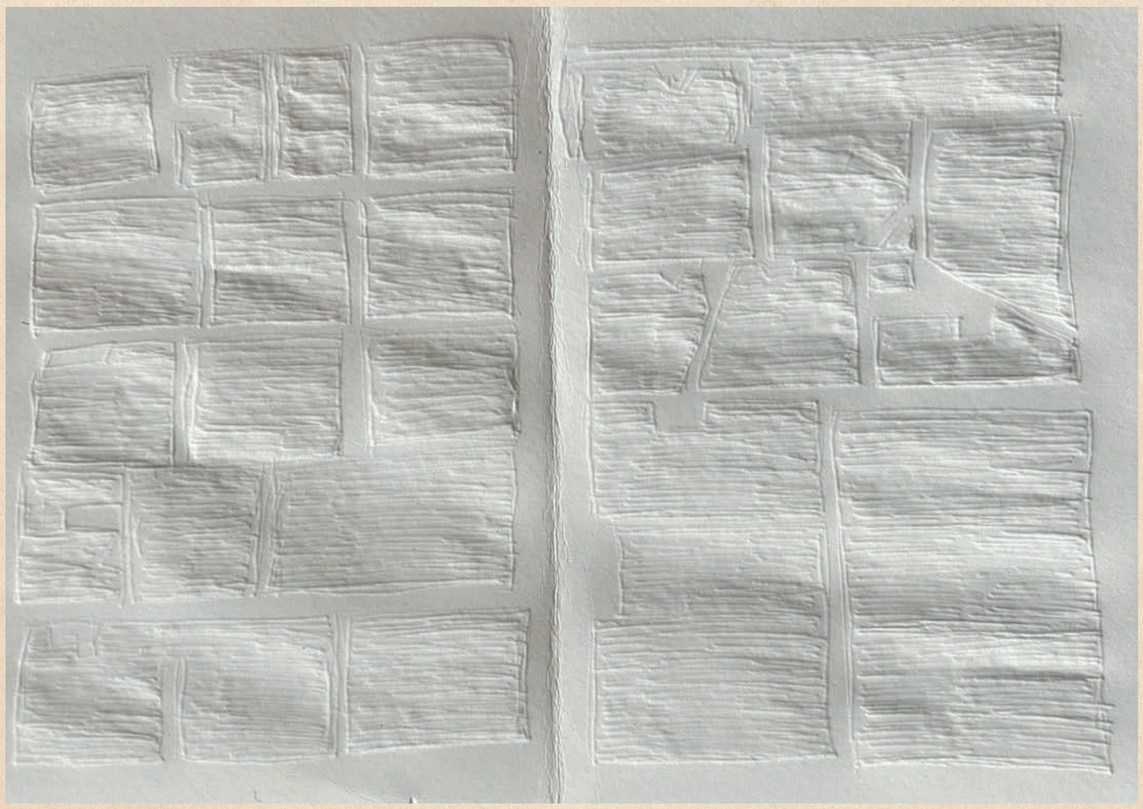
TRACEY: ojs.lboro.ac.uk/index.php/TRACEY
DRN: blog.lboro.ac.uk/tracey

IMPR[IN]T

Loss implies that something is taken away, an act or incident without control, unwanted and regrettable, it happens *to* you. In contrast, erasure implies a deliberate act of removing or obliterating,[i] an act initiated *by* you.
A long-utilised drawing act, made famous by Robert Rauschenberg's erasing of Willem de Kooning's drawing in 1953,[ii] erasure is utilised in drawing as a form of correction, to bring the light back into darkness, to turn back the time. The comic works of Lucy O'Donnell trace this path of drawing's erasure: a deliberate and savage act of cutting and dissecting the comic imagery, removing the narrative, and forcing it to cease before it had the chance to unfold. This act resonates with the experience of baby loss, the sudden removal of anticipated experiences, of a life that will never now be lived.
The act of erasing the imagery is an act of taking charge, taking back control, an acknowledgement of the mother-in-loss. The erasure, however, is never fully complete, leaving behind the trace of its presence in the absence. Such is the line of the experience of baby loss, as it marks and resonates it traces a lifetime of lost experiences. Erasure is the means of communication in the comic works, where the spaces exist as a *no longer* rather than a *never there*, a series of connected absent narratives tracing unrealised potential. The erasure of the comic narratives, only to be fragmented and reconfigured in the self-portrait miniatures, traces these feelings of the once shared; remaining in the never fully erased, they form a part of the self as a never completely lost. In the movement of these fragments to the miniatures, Lucy is reclaiming, making visible and tangible the experience and the trace of the baby that never became the other.
The life that was carried draws the trace that remains in the self in perpetuity.

[i] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2024, Oxford University Press. Available at: https://www.oed.com/dictionary erasure_n?tab=meaning_and_use#5390506 (Accessed: 04/10/24).

[ii] Rauschenberg, R. 1953, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, [erased graphite on paper, with label by Jasper Johns], Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco. Available at: https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/40/642 (Accessed: 04/10/24).



Title: IMPR[IN]T
Dimensions: 29 x 42 cm
Medium: embossed drawing on cartridge paper
Date: 2024

COLLABORATION: ISABEL DAVIS & ANNA BUREL

Isabel Davis is a Research Theme Leader, Collections and Culture Natural History Museum.
Senior Visiting Research Fellow, School of Arts and Communication Design, University of Reading.
Honorary Research Fellow, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Birkbeck, University of London

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Anna is a visual artist and illustrator working in multi media ranging from collage and drawing to sculpture. Her present work is mostly concerned with issues surrounding health and the (in)fertile body within a historical perspective.

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CONCEIVING HISTORIES

This image is one of the illustrations that didn't make it into our illustrated book, *Conceiving Histories: Trying for Pregnancy Past and Present*, which will be out in early 2025 with MIT Press. I (Isabel) am a cultural historian and Anna is a visual artist. We have been collaborating since 2015 on the topic of fertility health – trying to conceive, un-pregnancy, and pregnancy loss. We have been using our collaboration to produce new ways of thinking about the unreproductive body – past, present, and future. We held an exhibition in 2017 called 'Conceiving Histories', we now have the book coming out, and our work in-progress is a deck of conversation cards about fertility health and trying for parenthood. Anna's illustrations for the book are, like this one, paper and photograph collages and they foreground the befuddlement of those stuck in the in-between of trying to conceive.

Anna and I often think about the idea of the stork that delivers babies – that icon of cutesy marketing whose origins I haven't yet fathomed, despite my best efforts in the historical archives. But, in Anna's image here, the stork doesn't deliver a baby, and instead it takes the place of the swan logo of the Swan Vesta matchbox. In the book, the matchbox turns up in a section on memoir about a fancy-dress costume I once made. I use the story as a way into discussion of maternity wear and how performative it can seem, especially when you're on the outside of the exclusive 'baby and bump club' looking in. The history I explore in this section of the book on the performance of pregnancy is an eighteenth-century fashion for looking pregnant with a prosthetic tummy piece referred to as 'the Pad'. What an amazing idea: everyone could look pregnant and get pregnancy's cultural cachet as a joke for a day to subvert the motherhood cult.

But I like the image even without the textual explanation. I love the scale disparities that Anna has brought into the book in her collages. Here, an empty box hovers in the area reserved in comic strips for thought bubbles, and the symbolism of the enormous matches is for the viewer to fathom: the burn-out, the constant reiterative extinguishing, the chances wasted. Throughout our work, we aim not for self-pity, but rather humour, wonder, and curiosity. Art and history together, we find, make an interesting separate space in which to think about the self and its puzzles. At the points where I found it frustrating not to know, to be unable to see into either my body or my future, I found historical archives a great consolation and it has been a joy finding amazing histories and working with Anna to bring them to life in different ways.

You can find out more about us, the *Conceiving Histories* book, and our other work on the web (isabeldavis.co.uk) and Instagram (@drbel @annasuzanneburel).

Title: Running out
Medium: Paper collage
Dimensions: 210 x 297 mm
Date: 2021

JANE BURNS
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GRAPHIC MEDICINE: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

Graphic Medicine is a relatively new subject area, which is described as an interdisciplinary field that explores the intersection between the medium of comics and the discourse on healthcare. It involves using comics to tell personal stories of illness and health, combining the explicit meaning of words with the abstract expressiveness of art to create a unique, multi-layered language. This approach makes complex medical and health-related topics more approachable and emotionally impactful.[i] Dr Ian Williams, a British physician and comic artist, is a pivotal figure in the field as he coined the term 'Graphic Medicine' and established the Graphic Medicine website (www.graphicmedicine.org). This website is the focal point for the Graphic Medicine community where resources, reviews, courses, and conference news are shared.

Graphic Medicine includes a wide range of materials, such as graphic memoirs of illness, educational comics for students and patients, academic papers, and therapeutic workshops involving comic creation. The origin of the term Graphic Medicine was not meant to connote the foregrounding of doctors over other healthcare professionals or over patients or comic artists, but rather the suggestion that use of comics might have some sort of therapeutic potential – 'medicine' as in the bottled panacea rather than the profession.[ii]

Graphic Medicine transcends the fields of medicine and medical education; it serves the health professional's development and the ordinary person who wants to understand and learn more about all aspects of the life cycle: health, wellbeing, disease, grief, and death. Graphic Medicine draws together cartoonists, healthcare practitioners, scholars, patients, librarians, people with disabilities, family members, and the general public to explore the role that the medium of comics can have in improving understanding, practice, and the patient's agency in relation to health, medicine, and disability.

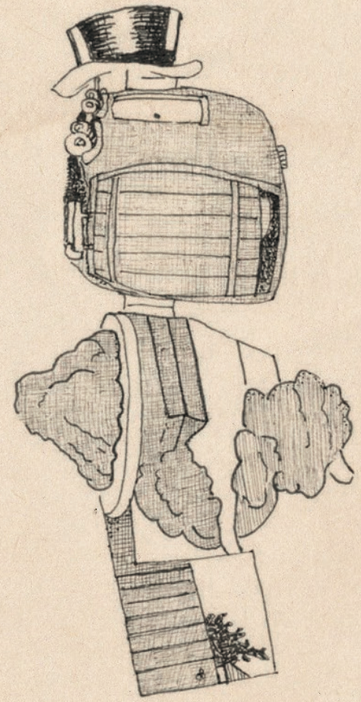
Graphic Medicine is characterised by two distinct attributes that classify publications within this field: (1) the topics addressed pertain to various aspects of health and well-being, and (2) the publications are presented using the same format as comics. Comics allow multiple perspectives to be viewed simultaneously; the ability to self-identify with characters and storylines; and engagement with complex emotional ideas in an accessible format. This is key to their impact.[iii]

Graphic Medicine deliberately departs from the standard medical discourse. The choice of comic as a presentation format is an intentional one. Comics are a medium that can hold conflicting ideas in tension, such as the internal-external dialogue enabled by the convention of the thought bubble. They are also able to make the patient experience visible in an environment where patients are sometimes told to be quiet and listen to the experts.[iv]

When we engage with Lucy O'Donnell's work, we see the application of comics structure as scaffold to help direct the narrative of loss pregnancy without birth. She adapts material/sections from other comics material to orientate the story. We do this when trying to make sense of the world, especially when experiencing loss and trauma. In the process of trying to explain to ourselves, we initially look to see what similar experiences exist. We use the stories of others to validate or express our feelings – if we are not alone in our suffering then perhaps it will be more bearable. However, the incompleteness of deliberate open spaces by O'Donnell illustrates that the stories of others can only fill a small portion of the understanding, as each experience is different to each person each time. The use of the comic skeleton instantly makes the format recognisable and engaging. It is perhaps the initial conduit to connect to other stories to manage our experience and to connect with others. Comics allow us to tell stories and share narratives on multiple levels – the reader engages with the text, but is also given insights via the expressions and thought bubbles of the characters, who often say one thing but think another. Comics allow the reader to literally see themselves in the story, to become emotionally involved, and to even feel responsible for the characters.[v]

The perspective of Graphic Medicine is very different from most educational resources in that the content is developed by people who have lived experience with disability or illness. The history of medicine is officially recorded by its practitioners or researchers and not its victims – the sick, like the poor, leave few archives behind them. Graphic medicine can allow for more voices in medical fields; it can reduce the distance between patient and doctor; and it follows the principles of universal design by offering easily understood explanations of medical information. The use of comics as a format to engage with health literacy has applications for the patient's or ordinary person's education, but it can also serve as a valuable resource for healthcare professionals.

The Graphic Medicine 15th International Conference was held at the Technological University of the Shannon, Athlone, Ireland. This was a 3-day event from July 16th– 18th 2024 with the first day consisting of pre-conference workshops, entitled 'Comics as a way of Thinking', 'Developing a Graphic Medicine Collection', and 'Graphic Medicine for Healthcare Professionals'. The full conference had two Keynote Speakers, eight workshops, 27 full conference papers, 21 lightning talks, and 15 posters. Two-hundred delegates from 25 countries travelled to Ireland to participate in the conference, share ideas, and form new collaborations. This conference brought delegates from many different fields (medicine, healthcare, the arts, comics educators, policy makers, librarians), people who had experienced illness or care for others, and those who were curious about this new area.



[i] Czerwiec, M. K., Williams, I., Squier, S. M., Green, M. J., Myers, K. R., & Smith, S. T. (2015). Graphic medicine manifesto. Pennsylvania State University Press

[ii] Williams, I. (2007). 'What is "Graphic Medicine"?' Graphic Medicine. https://www.graphicmedicine.org/why-graphic-medicine/

[iii] Cohn, N. (2013). The visual language of comics: Introduction to the structure and cognition of sequential images (Illustrated edition). Bloomsbury Academic.

[iv] Czerwiec, M. K. (2018). Representing AIDS in comics. AMA Journal of Ethics, 20(2), 199–205. https://doi.org/10.1001/journalofethics.2018.20.2.mnar1-1802

[v] Smyth, T. (2022). Teaching with comics and graphic novels: Fun and engaging strategies to improve close reading and critical thinking in every classroom (1st edition). Routledge.

JASON WILSHER-MILLS

Jason Wilsher-Mills is an artist, who creates sculptures and digital installations, which tell his own story as a working-class disabled person, who grew up in 1970s Wakefield, West Yorkshire. His work is best described as 'I, Daniel Blake' meets 'The Beano'.

jwmartist.co.uk

I have known Lucy for nearly 20 years. Firstly, as a teaching colleague and most recently as a fellow artist. I respect and connect with her work, because it taps into many facets of my own practice as she uses the same tools and triggers which inform my own sculptures and 2D work. There is the British comic book influence, which she subverts to tell a story of grief, illness, and healing. I do something similar by applying drawing and British popular culture imagery to detail my own illness and disability.

She deploys the broad strokes of the comic book format to communicate her own experiences, using the most democratic forms of art to convey her own complex story as a cathartic experience, which provides personal healing, and also as a way of helping others who have experienced loss.

Lucy uses humour to tell the most difficult narrative, the miscarriage of a child and subsequent illness, and this is one of the reasons that I so readily engage with her work, because my own practice is about taking childhood trauma and the language of working-class culture and British comic books from the 1970s to tell a serious story.

She understands that 'shouty' work is not always the best vehicle to instigate change and healing. The smiles that are instigated by her work provide opportunities for reflection, education, and healing.

I admire the fact that she is unafraid to tackle taboo subjects, such as miscarriage, which is sadly such a fundamental part of life but is very rarely spoken about as it engenders an air of 'uncomfortableness' as to what is the right thing to say. A tragedy happens and we are not able to talk about it because of the fear of saying the right thing, or indeed fearing saying the wrong thing.

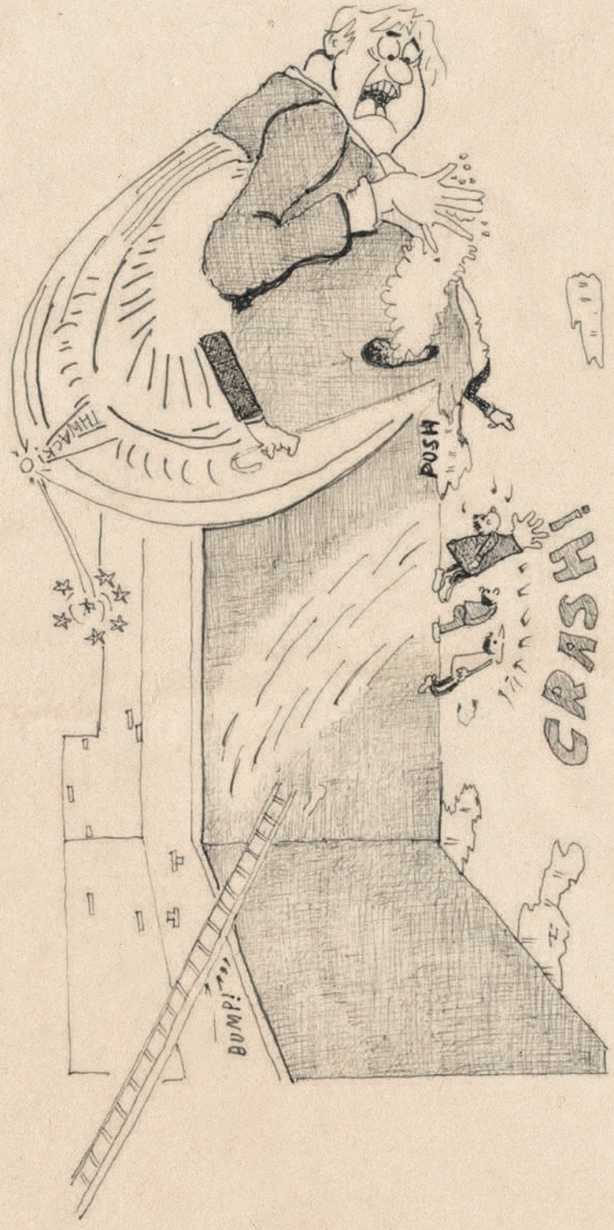
Lucy uses the colour, humour, and artwork of comic books and twists the narrative, so that her work can tackle this most difficult subject head on. The subject that we are afraid to talk about. She uses the joy and vitality of the drawings to drive her narratives, which provide comfort for both the artist and the viewer. There is a familiarity which connects with childhood memories of the joy of reading the *Beano* and *The Dandy*.

The comic book drawings and collages are not afraid to have bare space, so there is almost a skeletal feeling to the constructions. There is so much to see, and you must really look at Lucy's work, really focus and contemplate, as the narratives can sometimes be hidden in plain sight.

Lucy's work is successful as it forms a complete and cohesive narrative, whilst engaging with a group that have otherwise not had an opportunity to express their own private tragedies. I fully support and applaud Lucy connecting with hard-to-reach groups, such as Pavee Mothers, a resource to help support Traveller women during and after pregnancy. She is not an artist who hides away in her studio as she urgently wants to engage and help others. Her work is a banner, a totem, which she shares with diverse communities to encourage people to talk about their own experiences, as well as a way to bring women who have shared experiences together.

Her work is important, as it details real lives and how we live them. The nostalgic aspect helps the viewer to open up and engage with the subject matter in a safe manner.

As an artist it inspires me and forces me to consider how narratives can be shared in my own practice. Her work challenges me as an artist and, possibly most importantly, it makes me feel something and it makes me think. I love that her practice is based on the principles of drawing, which is why it resonates so profoundly with me.



JENNIFER SCURO

Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Molloy University in New York.
She is the author of The Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing Project: A Phenomenology of Miscarriage (Rowman & Littlefield International, Feb 2017) and Addressing Ableism: Philosophical Questions via Disability Studies (Lexington Books, Oct 2017). Her current research is on the intersection of trauma and disability.

APPENDIX BY JENNIFER SCURO: IL Y A

The *il y a*[i] is a concept to indicate a thereness in/of being, given to all that exists that does not have a 'face', in which there is no trace of the human or of human *remains*.[ii] It is a concept that haunts me in much of what I do in my own work as I try to reclaim meaning from the meaninglessness of loss, from the radical interruption of no longer finding a place in the world or a way to ground (much less to root) my sense of self. There is this magnetised heaviness and struggle with inertia that is in *our little earth bound tales* that I recognise as a need to find meaning against the brute *il y a* of being.

'Your thought could be characterized as an attempt to get out of what you call the formless or *Il y a*, that is, the phenomenon of the impersonal, without generosity. How does being go from nonsense to "something which is"?' – asks a journalist a few years before the death of the philosopher (1986).

And [Emmanuel] Levinas replies: 'in this horrifying experience of nothingness, the theme of "*il y a*" roots the construction of the subject, which, from out of the *neutre*, will assert itself, arise, and pose itself. From the "*il y a*," which is an enveloping presence of anonymity, weighing heavily upon the human being, subjectivity emerges despite what annuls it.'[iii]

Emmanuel Levinas, an existentialist philosopher, writing to/against Heidegger after the Shoah in his phenomenological work, notes how there is an ultimate fragility of the 'I' as I might think of myself. Levinasian ethics is existential and the 'I' is 'always already' open to exteriority – the interruption, the demand of an other who is fully Other in alterity. That other who 'appears to me' or becomes 'proximal to me' interrupting the everyday, as a 'face', or at least recognised as an other who demands my attention, is also not comprehended or consumed as a face (because the 'face to face remains an ultimate situation').[iv]

Title: il y a
Medium: Ink and acrylic, with stamps and thumbtack,
Dimensions: Unknown
Date: 2013

The *il y a* brings a trauma and an insomnia into the self as it subsists: 'in the night, where we are riven to it [...] we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer this or that; there is not "something". But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.'[v] It is Levinas challenging Heidegger's *es gibt*: the givenness of being, one of the many ways in which Levinas overturns Heidegger's existential ontology with an ethical metaphysics that gestures to what is *beyond Being*[vi] in how we are passing in and for a world to which we will not return.

Up against the *il y a*, it is a disconnection but yet not the kind that is also a free floating as if one were lost in space; it is the inhumanity of existence weighted down and crushing without intention, indifferent to all affect (affection/affectation) that could be laid upon it. Or, perhaps, a fundamental terror underwriting all desire for meaning in any attempt we make to resist and conspire against it. It is the black hole that begets grief and thieves all intentionality.

Against the *il y a* is an existential *election* of the self by the alterity that is fully other, that – as Levinas delicately frames it – is a relation that is first a demand of radical exteriority, the *one-for-the-other*. The relation of self to the other in Levinasian ethics is a fundamentally asymmetrical relation, an intimacy 'in opposition to ... inhumanity' that is also, 'the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy'.[vii]

Specifically, Levinas argues, there

> is a radical difference between the suffering in the other, where it is unforgivable to me, solicits me and calls me, and suffering in me ... It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century ... can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle.[viii]

The ethico-existential principality of the other as other in a face-to-face relation is beyond that which any 'I' could subsume and yet, that face of the other is a command – an existential and infinite obligation that the self has to the other in a radical alterity – to respond, for responsibility. And the *il y a* is the placeholder concept for all that is in the cruel bareness of being that has 'no face'. It is the indifferent hum of existence that cannot be essentialised into an understanding.[ix] The magnitude of the *il y a* is not betrayed by the smallness of each piece in the series at hand; against the *il y a*, we are offered a 'primordial goodness' and a 'non-in-difference'[x] given to the intimacy of the work in *our little earth bound tales*.

I think that Levinas might have hoped that *fecundity*[xi] would function as a refuge from and in resistance to the horror of the blank, dark hum of the il y a. For Levinas, with fecundity, there is the unique, ethico-ontological moment in which there is the birth of a 'son.' Levinas places this value of fecundity as a special phenomenon, as 'the transcendence *of trans-substantiation*, [in which] *the I* is, *in the child*, an other'[xii] that will also, always be fully Other (emphasis added). Levinas named this resistance as his critique of Heidegger, 'having broken with the philosophy of the Neuter: with the Heideggerian being of the existent'.[xiii] Levinas' fecundity is part of the ultimate 'intrigue' of being but then places whatever of the feminine other in relation to that 'paternity, as a primordial effectuation of time'.[xiv]

Yet, in resistance, we follow Cixous as she writes, 'There are thousands of ways of living one's pregnancy' and 'her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble.'[xv] Without this bearing of the son, in how we are already in passing through this 'world to which one will not return', the meaninglessness of the *il y a* is also the erasure of meaning. In a loss of fecundity, we face the terror that chafes the blankness of all being in its *dynamism*.[xvi]

But this is not a work of despair.

> An amorphous non-I sweeps away the I into an absolute future where it escapes itself and loses its position as a subject. Its 'intention' no longer goes forth unto the *light*. Wholly passion, it is compassion for the passivity, the suffering, the evanescence of the tender. Being moved [Attendrissement] suffering without suffering, it is consoled already, complacent in its suffering. Being moved is a pity, that is ... a pleasure, a suffering transformed into happiness – voluptuosity. ... Voluptuosity, as profanation, discovers the hidden as hidden.[xvii]

Perhaps in Levinas' 'voluptuosity' is just what makes *our little earth bound tales* such a gift.[xviii]

There is a ‘profanity’ in its potency to move us to pity, but that it is an announcement to a depth of affect for loss and suffering. It is a series borne out of a wholeness of passion and tenderness that draws out what is ‘hidden’ under the crush of the *il y a*. These configurations in small frames signal both a wake and a vigilance, an evocation and an envisaging of being without an evasion of response-ability to an other beyond imagining.[xix]

Cixous, Hélène. (reprinted 2001). “The Laugh of the Medusa” excerpted in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to PostModernism*. R. Kearney & D. Rasmussen, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., pp. 388-399.

Derrida, Jacques. (1999). *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*. P. Brault & M. Naas, trans., Stanford UP.

Irigaray, Luce. (1999). *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. University of Texas Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

_____ (1981). *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. A. Lingis, trans., Duquesne UP.

_____ (1994). *Outside the Subject*. M.B. Smith, trans. California: Stanford University Press.

_____ (1998).

[i] Edith Wyschogrod in *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (Fordham UP, 2000), in her ‘Key to Special Terminology’ says of the *il y a*: ‘Levinas uses *il y a* to designate the being that persists in the face of the destruction of the world, a presence despite the absence of individual things, the sheer fact of being when there is nothing at all’ (p. 244). There is some notation in the literature that Levinas always uses the term *il y a* in the lowercase, and so the name of this series, *our little earth bound tales* is also in the lowercase.

[ii] In his eulogy to Levinas, Jacques Derrida reframes Levinasian ethico-existential metaphysics into an ethics of hospitality that adds an interesting hermeneutical interpretation of Levinas’ original complex. In this reframing, the other is both diachronous and an-archic to the synchrony and monotony of the self as it is ‘self-same’. Derrida plays out the paradoxicality of this radical self/Other relation in that the ‘host’ can also be held ‘hostage’ by the infinite demand of the other in relation to the self, as the other comes upon the self (Derrida, Jacques [1999]. *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*. P. Brault & M. Naas, trans., Stanford UP).

[iii] From Falque, E. & A. Sackin-Poll (2023). ‘The Resistance of Presence’ in *Continental Philosophy Review* 56, pp. 113–143. DOI: 10.1007/s11007-022-09569-w (quotation: pp. 136–37), citing Levinas, ‘La proximité de l’autre’ (Conversation with Anne-Catherine Benchelah [1986] in *Alterité et transcendence*, op. cit., pp. 109–110).

[iv] Levinas, Emmanuel (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. A. Lingis, trans., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

[v] Falque & Sackin-Poll (2023) quoting Levinas, *Existence and Existents*. A. Lingis, trans., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978), p. 115.

[vi] Levinas’ often gestured in his ethical metaphysics to a significance ‘beyond Being’, outside of the self and not to be essentialised in any way. See *Otherwise Than Being*, ‘The beyond being, being’s *other* or the *otherwise than being*, here situated in diachrony, here expressed in infinity … showing itself in the said, always shows itself there enigmatically, [and] is already betrayed’ (Levinas, Emmanuel [1991]. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. A. Lingis, trans., Duquesne UP, p. 19)

[vii] Levinas, Emmanuel (1998). *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, trans., New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 98–99.

[viii] Levinas, Emmanuel (1998). *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, trans., New York: Columbia University Press, p. 94.

[ix] As Luce Irigaray reads it in *The Forgetting of Air In Martin Heidegger*, ‘the open expanse … the copula, … is left to a space of neutralization – *il y a*. Left serenely suspended in a renunciation of all effectuation. In a mourning that gives rise [for Heidegger] to contemplation’ (pp. 88–89). Irigaray notes here that the German ‘*es gibt*’ would be a mistranslation of what is indicated by this ‘givenness’ of being, hence the concept *Il y a* serves as a more precise placeholder Luce [1999]. *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. University of Texas Press).

[x] Levinas, Emmanuel (1998). *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, trans., New York: Columbia University Press, p. 194.

[xi] In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas engages the concept of fecundity: ‘Fecundity is to be set up as an ontological category. … The son is not only my work … nor is he my property. … I do not have my child: I am my child. … [The] son is not me; and yet I *am* my son.’ (Levinas, Emmanuel [1969]. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. A Lingis, trans., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, p. 277)

[xii] Ibid, p. 267.

[xiii] Ibid, p. 298.

[xiv] Ibid, p. 247.

[xv] Cixous, Hélène (reprinted 2001). ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to PostModernism*. R. Kearney & D. Rasmussen, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., pp. 388–399 (quotations, pp. 397, 389).

[xvi] While Levinas refers to *dynamism* when referring to the swell of response-ability that emerges when an other comes in close proximity, when writing about Kant, he references the ‘spontaneity’ and ‘surplus’ in being that is made passive in language and signification. It is an excess that always evokes interrogation in a way that, as Levinas states, ‘Behind being and its monstration, there is note already heard the resonance of the other significations forgotten in ontology’ (Levinas, Emmanuel [1969]. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. A Lingis, trans., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, p. 38).

[xvii] Ibid, pp. 259–60.

[xviii] Thank you to Rebecca Carey and Brian Bajzek for reviewing and discussing the draft of this piece for me.

[xvx] Irigaray also addresses the *il y a*, ‘the copula, the *hypokeimenon* … is left a space of neutralization – *il y a*. … In a mourning that gives rise to contemplation’ (Irigaray, Luce. [1999]. *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. University of Texas Press, p. 89).

JESSICA HEPBURN

Author of The Pursuit of Motherhood, 21 Miles: swimming in search of the meaning of motherhood; and Save Me from the Waves & Founder of Fertility Fest.

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I’m delighted to extend my support and solidarity to Lucy O’Donnell for her solo show and her exceptional creative contribution to the discourse around conception, miscarriage, and baby loss. As the Founder of Fertility Fest – the world’s first arts festival dedicated to fertility and infertility – and the author of three books which detail my own personal pursuit of motherhood, I not only understand at an elemental level the visceral emotions which Lucy’s art conveys, but I also know the important contribution it makes to the public discourse around this silent epidemic. Her work offers a window to her world whilst also shining a light on our own individual stories of loss and grief. And it contributes to both the personal and collective healing from this trauma.
It is important work in the world. Original, outstanding, and needed.

DR JOE GRAHAM

An artist and academic with a focus on drawing. Currently Associate Professor in the Department of Art & Design at the American University of Sharjah, he is a graduate of Chelsea College of Art & Design, the Slade School of Fine Art and Loughborough University.

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THE PROMISE OF DRAWING

Loss

What does it mean to present a series of small drawings constructed only from the delicately cut-out sections of a comic? Presumably, it means a great many things, different for each of us beholding them, and different again for the maker of these works. But while this rather banal sounding statement is undoubtedly true, it does not tell us much, if anything, about the nature of this work. And that is a pity, because, by virtue of its joyfully papery mode of appearance, this artwork announces that it definitely does mean *something*, even if we aren't entirely sure from our initial glance what precisely that thing is. To look for this elusive thing in a short piece of written text is a tall order, but perhaps, on this occasion, we can think of the number of words as akin to the number of lines in a drawing: the trick is not to keep count, but to pass through them at every available opportunity.

Looking carefully at the drawings, we first all realise that they are beautifully made – and not only with respect to the carefully cut sections we see arrayed everywhere, but in the fact that forms are *repeated*, itself a hallmark of the beautiful.[i] We can also see that some bits of the comic used as source material are missing while others are not. With that in mind, let's begin our reflection by employing an old chestnut beloved by those who write on art – the play between presence and absence, otherwise understood as the fold or *différence* that is always already occurring in artworks such as this.[ii] True enough, producing a series of drawings made from the pages of a comic in such a cheerily cut-up manner draws our attention to the fact that something is clearly absent. We see drawings constructed in negative fashion: blocky sections of the comic are removed leaving gridded frames, prior contents now absent from our gaze. And then we look at other drawings and realise the opposite statement is also true, folded cleanly back from the first. Instead of bits of comic cut out, we see bits of comic stuck down, composed, and arranged to make wonderfully figurative forms – 'self-portraits' as the artist describes them – produced in positive fashion from sections sliced and prised from elsewhere. Here we have drawing as the unending play of difference, as the theoretical realisation of difference and as the act of deferring (deferred).

But does this bring an end to our reflections on the work? Hardly. For one thing, there is the context to consider. This artwork is a development of an earlier work by Lucy O'Donnell, *The Partly Present Mother*. As the title suggests, we now have a very real sort of meaning to consider. Loss initiated from pregnancy without birth, to be precise. And from this, we realise that, despite being on the right track with our reflection on the themes above, the game of folding and deferring has left us tinkering on the outside, looking in.

So we begin again, examining this series of small works for clues to meaning, but this time with the aid of another theoretical approach, one which is rather more metaphysical in scope.[iii] This particular theory asks us to pay close attention to the work in aesthetic terms and, in so doing, requires we reflect on something else entirely: the relationship between the surface and the background, between a reality that remains everywhere removed from our grasp and a messy phenomenal world that rises to meet us at every available chance. In this theory, works of art are compound objects: entities that *mean* precisely on the basis that they combine us as beholders with the palpable physical object that we see, plus a background that is indirectly engaged, all of which creates a new aesthetic object – the artwork itself. In putting the oblique and baffling drama between reality and its phenomenal shadow into play via a series of endlessly nested objects, this theory suggests that the game of hide and seek described previously is taking place on the interior of this new aesthetic object. On the *interior* of the artwork, in other words. This new object is a form with a structure, one which is utterly unable to be reduced to the missing and the seen. For this theory, art and aesthetics are the paradigmatic way in which such metaphysical drama is understood.

A question now arises: how does a philosophical theory of objects help us better understand small drawings constructed from little else but the delicately cut-out sections of a comic? Answer: by examining this artwork as a series, and by engaging with the multiplied figuration it entails.

Retrieval

Let's start with the obvious figure: the one that appears in the self-portrait drawings, constructed from sections of comic that are supple and sinuous in character. These figures are clearly figures, for they do not share the blocky configuration of the cut-out squares in the other drawings. Aside from placing into question the earlier assumption that the figure-like configurations of one drawing are made from the cut-out sections we can see removed in another (even though we know this to be true), this clear image of the figure lets the thing which is being drawn 'loose', as it were. But we only ever see this thing obliquely, indirectly. We never directly stare it directly in the face. It appears in the self-portraits assembled from sections cut elsewhere: leaning out to meet the edge of the paper, turned inwards with the force of each slice. It appears in the cut-out grids, where each empty space is active, *lifelike*, moving in its frame. It appears in the shared similarities in form and content, surface and material, observed across the series as a whole. It appears square and sinuous, blocky and round, present and absent all at once. It observes us and we observe it in its multitude. But, in our looking, we realise that, whatever it is, it belongs less and less to the comic substrate which birthed it, and more and more to the outer limits of our gaze. A gaze which now finds itself looking beyond the edge of each cut and through the gaps and fissures they create. Towards a place that lies beyond the surface of the paper, but which the artwork has now *estranged*, meaning brought forward, into our domain.[iv]

In referring to the figure, I am of course referring to that which the artist has *drawn*. Despite the title and the context of this work, we do not really know what this thing is in precise terms, beyond the fact that it speaks of bodily figuration in various cut-up ways. And that is precisely the point: art is experienceable but not *knowable*, at least not in the sense which we accord to the sciences. Rather than tell us what we already know, or confirm that which we assume, these figurative artworks endlessly transport us beyond the surface of the picture plane towards a place we yearn to know, but which remains forever other, and elsewise enclosed.

And so we find we are playing a new kind of game. One which is rather metaphysical in its scope, for it gathers the drawer, the beholder, the drawing (noun), and that which is drawn simultaneously, every time we think of, practice, behold or refer to *drawing*. As I have described elsewhere, this fourfold gathering can provide us with knowledge of these things, and these things only:

i) that we are beholders of the drawing

ii) that the drawing we behold is a palpable thing, a drawing (noun)

iii) that within this drawing there is something, some partly-palpable *idea*, which has been deliberately drawn, pictured, diagrammed, put there, and that

iv) engaging the shape of this idea on this occasion means we are promised to engage the shape of another closely related idea again in the future, albeit drawn elsewhere and otherwise.[v]

The promise of drawing is the unending flow of becoming that drawing is when considered in the round. It is the silent vow kept by all those who, like the maker of these drawings, have kept the pictures coming. Despite all the odds, and despite all the difficulties encountered on the road.

[i] Scarry, Elaine (1999). *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

[ii] Perrone, Jeff (1979) *Working Through, Fold by Fold*, Artforum, vol.17, no.5

[iii] Harman, Graham (2020) *Art and Objects*, Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press.

[iv] Young, Michael (2019). 'The Aesthetics of Abstraction' in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses Across Art, Architecture and Philosophy*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

[v] Graham, Joe (2021). *The Being of Drawing*, London: Marmalade Publishers of Visual Theory.

KATHERINE GRESSEL

Katherine Gressel is a NYC-based independent curator, artist and writer focused on public/site-specific art. Recent work includes The Art of Infertility & Infertility a Curation.

curatorsintl.org/about/collaborators/6407-katherine-gressel

Katherine looks forward to supporting Lucy's work as part of her upcoming project with Maria Novotny, *In a State of IF*. This show brings together work that acknowledges fertility treatments and the struggle to define, celebrate and grieve what is being created, or lost, throughout this process. It addresses this state of liminality, considering the unique potential to create healing, empathy and understanding through sharing personal narratives and experiences; expressing complex feelings around embryos, IVF, and reproductive loss. At a critical political moment, the exhibition will also explore the important role artists can play in organizing and advocacy efforts around access to fertility treatments. Curators Gressel and Novotny bring a personal sensitivity to the subject matter based on their own family-building experiences and as infertility researchers, mentors and advocates.

LAURA GODFREY-ISAACS

Artist, midwife, writer, activist, Jewish mother

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Comic books or graphic novels generally masquerade as fun, or at least as innocuous works of art identified mostly with childhood. However, when exploring this form, it's clear that for women creators it is a genre that has been used to cover some extremely serious subjects – most of which aren't fun at all. For example, Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother* (2012) a domestic drama exploring her fraught relationship to her mother; Henny Beaumont's *Hole in the Heart* (2016) an account of giving birth unexpectedly to a child with Down's Syndrome; and *Finding the Light* (2024) by Marian Henley, which covers sexual assault. There are countless others that tackle subjects as diverse as child abuse and birth trauma. You name it and there will be a female graphic artist who has covered it. Therefore, it reveals that graphic work as a gendered practice is a form far from being 'fun', although it is one that employs humour as a transgressive element injected into most works. So, comics or graphic narratives by women could be characterised as a form which consistently helps us to process some of the darker experiences of our lives.

It is not surprising then that Lucy would choose to reference comics in a further enquiry into pregnancy loss. Whatever euphemism we might employ, there is no appropriate term for the completely hollowing out of expectations, both physical and emotional, which we go through at the end of a pregnancy or birth that results in the death of a child.

This is an experience I have shared as a woman who has had two 'miscarriages' and as a midwife who has supported and counselled many women through the experience. Knowing that one in four pregnancies will result in a loss does not make it a universal experience. A common one, yes, but the range of circumstances is immense. From an early loss, when we barely know we are pregnant, to losses that we elect to have. Or those we have to endure as a full-blown labour along with all the necessary paperwork after: registering a birth, then a death, and arranging a burial or even a postmortem. Although we are more open about discussing these experiences and recent developments, such as being able to obtain a pregnancy loss certificate for a baby lost before 24 weeks gestation, are a welcome acknowledgment, it still remains a largely hidden event – endured and processed in private with precious little support or ritual to enable us through the grieving process.

Graphic works and comic books often take a grid-like form, as they do in this series – the action is read from left to right. This satisfies our need for a narrative structure that's linear and clear: beginning, middle, and end. As with the story board form employed in film, we expect the same in life – pregnancy, birth, and childhood, an arc from birth that positions death a long way ahead. And we plan for this the minute we know we are pregnant. That's partly why there is so much rupture with a miscarriage or baby loss. The life arc is interrupted, ended – often brutally. We're left with a blank space, where a life should have unfolded.

In Lucy's drawings, we see this blank space explicitly crying out for content where there is none. Details are erased, scrubbed out. Hints and signs of what lurks underneath in no way satisfy our need for clarity and information. In a way, the traces, the tantalising fragments, amplify the emptiness, and the bits of text that remain further enforce the message: 'gone forever', 'empty space'. Other textural remnants suggest catastrophe and disaster – 'bone yard', 'avalanche' – further articulating the devastation of loss.

In addition to comics operating in a feminist space, and for children and others who continue to love them into adulthood, there is a tendency to employ graphic methods in healthcare to help communicate difficult subjects by conveying information in an easy to digest format. Graphic Medicine is a distinct movement which has developed to encompass infographics for public health campaigns, as well as personal narratives that cover medical or bodily themes. Lucy's work fits into this area, though obliquely, as an act of negation. She subverts the form by using 'found' comics, and then renders them useless. They are impossible to 'read' or enjoy, as they provide no information. Unfinished in nature, they frustrate the gaze.

We may wish for closure and the pleasure of a happy ending in Lucy's work, but we are left with no such satisfaction. Instead, we're in a perpetual state of suspended animation and wondering. Will she fill in the blanks, will we recover the narrative? However, these beautiful, haunting works speak volumes about her experience, and mine too – the blank, empty space of loss can never truly be filled.

LAURA SEFTEL

ATR-BC, Founder of the Secret Club Project, Women Artists on Pregnancy Loss and author of Grief Unseen: Healing Pregnancy Loss Through the Arts, Northampton Massachusetts.

SecretClubProject

Following a pregnancy loss, it is common not just to feel sad but also to become mired in misplaced guilt, shame and a unrelenting sense of failure. Awkward platitudes from friends, family and healthcare providers can deepen this sense of isolation. Sherokee Ilse a pioneering pregnancy loss educator highlights the deafening silence following each of her own losses. For Lucy O'Donnell putting issues and experiences of loss at the centre of her work is significant in helping to normalize conversation around pregnancy loss. Here through the drawings in our little earth bound tales, experiences of loss become articulated and irritated in their series; sounding presence and purpose. For Lucy putting drawing at the centre of her work interrogates its significance to bring things into the world which voice the reverse.

DR MARIA NOVOTNY

Associate Professor of English; Co-Director of The ART of Infertility; Co-Editor of Infertilities, A Curation

Grief has no rules. It suddenly sneaks up on you, without warning, without any ability to prepare for the wind to be knocked out of you. It can drown you. Leave you silent.

The grief associated with reproductive loss is perhaps unlike anything else I have experienced. Not only did it shape what I do professionally, but it has become so ingrained into my every day that it is simply who I am. It is as if I have two pulses: one that gives me life and one that gives me deep pause.

Sitting with Uncertainty, a collection of small, gridded drawings Lucy made in 2019, reminds me of how accustomed I have become to grief. I have never been pregnant. Never had a miscarriage; never saw two pink lines. My infertility is 'unexplained'. These are griefs I have learned to mourn but are also griefs that have never left. Rather they weave together forming the backbone to my core.

My 5-year-old adopted daughter asks, 'Why can't I have a sister?' 'Why can't you have babies?' These are questions I cannot answer. Another grievance I carry in my core.

But then I remember, 'I am not alone.' The World Health Organization reports that 1 in 6 adults worldwide, roughly 17.5% of the population, will be affected by infertility in their lifetime. 1 in 4 persons will experience a miscarriage. Here, I am. This is me.

Discussing reproductive loss from the perspective of the collective – how many it touches – helps me reframe Lucy's work into a narrative of the collective. Each drawing frames one person's grief. Collectively, we share a cultural narrative around unspoken reproductive loss and grief.

Art helps make these unspeakable moments visible to us and to those who may simply not be aware of the reality that – even though it may be unseen – we share a collective loss. The words at times can be too much; too much finality in saying those words 'no longer pregnant', 'never pregnant', 'not yet pregnant'. Art transcends the need to categorise the loss. Art allows for the embrace of the liminal and the non-linear.

Sitting with Uncertainty makes clear the lack of order, lack of sensemaking, lack of language that arrives with reproductive loss. It urges us to think and share in new forms, new futures, new imaginations. This is what is so freeing about Lucy O'Donnell's work.

The ability to represent the experience of reproductive loss without the confines of cultural expectations is what is perhaps most needed in a time when 'I'm so sorry for your loss' is an echo in the voids of grief.

As someone then with my own infertility experience and who has worked for the last ten years with infertile patients who have created art as a way to cope with the immense grief of another failed cycle, a sudden miscarriage, a wait to see a fertility doctor, a partner reluctant to 'move on' to adoption, Lucy's work amplifies the moments of grief unseen. Here, in her new work, *our little earth bound tales*, Lucy thinks about those whose infertility sits outside of typical pregnancy narratives. It gives its own language to the unfathomable moments of loss and, importantly, as a collective series of drawings reminds viewers of how grief builds and remains a pulse amongst those of us who are navigating grief with the unknown.

MARITA HENNESSY

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Pregnancy Loss Research Group (PLRG)

At the Pregnancy Loss Research Group, we lead national research to better understand pregnancy loss experiences and impacts, and the development of resources and evidence-based advice and interventions to improve health care and health and social outcomes for women, babies, and their families. Our research spans all types of pregnancy and infant loss, including first trimester miscarriage, second trimester miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, molar pregnancy, multiple pregnancy complications, stillbirth, termination of pregnancy, early neonatal death, and pregnancy after loss. Conducting research which is relevant to people with lived experience, means that practice and policy is central to what we do. We actively collaborate with key organisations and groups to support the conduct and dissemination of our work across Ireland and beyond. We are committed to sharing information about our research, and pregnancy loss more broadly, in diverse ways to break the silence and stigma around pregnancy loss and maximise the impact of our work.

Arts-based approaches and the sharing of lived experiences hold much potential in enhancing awareness and affecting change in policy and practice. In sharing stories untold and erased futures in this collection, Lucy's work facilitates conversations around miscarriage and pregnancy without birth. While shedding light into her own experience of miscarriage, her work also encourages the audience to draw their own interpretations and meanings from it – individually or collectively through generating discussions and shared meanings and language around pregnancy without birth. This is particularly powerful as people can experience pregnancy loss differently. The grid format of Lucy's work in her previous collection 'Sitting with Uncertainty' and now this new collection offers rigidity and certainty, while accommodating difference. Though focused on miscarriage and pregnancy without birth, Lucy's work has relevance for other forms of pregnancy loss. We need to attend to the continuum of pregnancy experiences including those that end in any form of loss, as part of, but not limited to, efforts to address stigma.[i,ii] Themes permeating Lucy's work, such as stigma, shame, silence, failure, grief, loss, uncertainty, ambiguity, liminality, and invisibility, resonate with those from our own research, particularly around people's experience of recurrent miscarriage.[iii]

Both the subject and the method resonate with us as researchers, clinicians, and educators. In Lucy's current collection, we are particularly drawn in by the use of comics within miniatures (or 'limnings'). As a medium, comics are well-suited to the discussion of difficult, taboo, complex, or ambiguous topics,[iv] including pregnancy without birth. We recently collaborated with an illustrator on our first 'comic' or graphic narrative – *Why my baby died* [v] – to share bereaved parents' experience and views about how they be involved in maternity hospital perinatal death reviews in ways that benefit them and the review process itself to affect change in policies and practices. While we admit to a certain discomfort around the use of the term 'comic' in relation to this topic, the work has been well received and engaged diverse audiences.

The need to enhance awareness and education around pregnancy loss and perinatal death arises across almost all the studies that we have conducted.[vi] While we have tended to focus on developing and implementing training programmes for health professionals (with work ongoing), we have recently turned our attention to working with young people to explore how we could embed education around pregnancy loss and perinatal death within second level education. We are underpinning this work within a reproductive justice framework. Arts-based approaches, such as Lucy's, which include comics, zines, and collages could be used to engage this target group as viewers and also as creators.

Lucy uses miniatures to give space to loss – the potential emptiness and loss of possibility[vii] that can permeate miscarriage experiences. The use of miniatures also resonates given the value placed on mementoes and memory-making in bereavement care[viii] – miniatures were historically used as reminders of cherished loved ones or to commemorate births or deaths, amongst other uses. The miniatures in this collection provide windows into experiences and feelings as prompts for further action. Through erasure, Lucy has created space for us all to consider pregnancy without birth and recast our expectations and social norms surrounding pregnancy. Throughout this collection, Lucy again demonstrates miscarriage 'matters and mattering'.[ix]

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[viii] O'Connell, O., Meaney, S., & O'Donoghue, K. (2016). Caring for parents at the time of stillbirth: How can we do better? Women and Birth, 29(4), 345–349.

[ix] O'Donnell, L. (2018). The magnified glass of liberation: A review of fictional drawings. Drawing, Research, Theory, Practice, 3(1), 47–62.

MISCARRIAGE ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

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miscarriage.ie

The Miscarriage Association of Ireland was set up in 1988 by Hilary Frazer, when she had a miscarriage and she realised there was no support for families who had miscarriages in Ireland. Hilary placed an advertisement in the paper because she was so heartbroken and traumatised. Stephanie Blandford from the north side of Dublin answered the advertisement and so The Miscarriage Association of Ireland was born.

The Association is a registered charity set up and run with the support of women and men who have experienced the loss of a baby through miscarriage. We offer peer support to bereaved parents through our different services that include telephone support, in-person meetings, zoom meetings, and the production of an information booklet for distribution in Irish hospitals.

The aims of the organisation include:
• Increasing awareness in the general public that all pregnancy loss is a bereavement, and that the length of the pregnancy is not related to the depth of grief and sense of loss experienced.

• Providing support, help, and information to women and their families when they have had or are having a miscarriage and feel the need for help.

• Encouraging women and their partners to openly and freely express their feelings, to allow themselves to cry and grieve without fear of being told they are overreacting or to 'shake themselves out of it'.

• Promoting the sharing of mutual experiences and knowledge.

• Learning more so that others may suffer less.

The organisation is currently holding in-person support meetings in the following areas: Dublin, Carlow, Dundalk, Galway, Athlone, Limerick, Clare, and Cork. For people who cannot access these meetings, we also hold a zoom meeting every second month. You can find all the information about in person meetings, telephone support numbers, and the book of remembrance on our website, www.miscarriage.ie. We also have a Facebook and Instagram page. If you would like to contact us to find out more about what we do and how we can help, please email us at info@miscarriage.ie

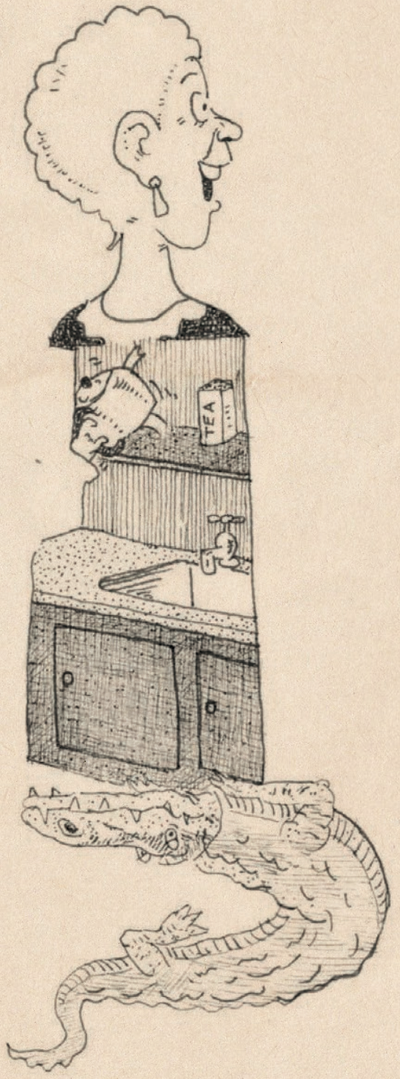
We would like to wish Lucy the very best of luck with her show and thank her for bringing the topic of baby loss to the public's attention through her art.

NATIONAL WOMEN'S COUNCIL OF IRELAND

nwci.ie

Pregnancy loss affects approximately one in five pregnancies in Ireland. Despite the immense mental anguish and physical experience of loss that accompany pregnancy without birth, investigations are not routinely carried out, except in the case of recurrent miscarriage. This can leave women with questions about why it happened, and fears around it happening again. There is a societal reluctance to speak about miscarriage. Pregnancy announcements are normally postponed until after 12 weeks in case of miscarriage. This means that women who experience miscarriage often suffer in silence and may feel that they must return to their normal lives as if nothing had happened. This can add to the sense of deep loss, the sense of not having a pregnancy, not having a baby, and not even being able to talk about it. The National Women's Council (NWC) recently published a report on the mental health of women in the perinatal (before, during, and after childbirth) period. One of our key recommendations was the improvement of perinatal bereavement and trauma services.

With one in five women experiencing mental health difficulties during this period, including as a result of pregnancy loss, it is crucial that women are provided with and can access the various support they need during this time. In particular, women with lived experience of pregnancy loss found that bereavement services and mental health services were not well-integrated into the services they encountered. Many women and families had experiences in the health service which compounded their feelings of upset and anger. In Ireland's first Maternity Bereavement Experience Survey in 2022, respondents expressed a desire for dedicated spaces in hospitals for grieving parents; more consistent communication across services involved in their care; additional support for physical and mental health; and more support for partners. NWC warmly welcomes this show by Lucy O'Donnell, which brings the conversation about pregnancy loss out into the open. It provides an opportunity for women who have experienced miscarriage to connect with others via the medium of art.



NUALA CLARKE

Artist

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INSTANCE TWO: AS ABOVE SO BELOW.

Excerpted from, Clarke, Nuala.Instance Two: As Above So Below. Irish Moss of a Dead Man's Skull, The Owl Circus, December 2024, pp. 51–57.

I moved to a small town on the coast of North Mayo. Almost immediately (the rush precipitated by my age) I became pregnant.

I can't say that I knew, but I did spend the first weeks cajoling myself out of catastrophes. Then, the ovals of their lit faces in the dark, his face, the way she turned off the sound of the heartbeat. The news welled up in them. I wanted to rewind, enjoy the sight and sound from the inside of my body, but they rushed on. No space for joy when the future of her life was not to be.

From then I proceeded through all the rapid stages, all the steps to be taken. Delicate and sharp, the interactions, procedures, and floodings. I needed time. There was none. Then came sleepless nights, separation, misunderstanding. I dragged cloth from the sand and hung the tattered shreds on the clothesline. He created blame for himself where none was necessary.

Two years like that. I was stuck, failing to recover from the loss. I had forgotten the cure.[i] The body between me and the work, the insubstantial weight of the child on my chest, stuck at my throat. It was time to draw it out of there.

Rule: This time the scale of the work was smaller (the grief could be cupped in my hands), and the number of paintings wasn't determined.

The work was divided into body (*Internalum*) and sky (*Sky Colour'd*) paintings. The sense of the internal body and the electric blue patch in among the greys of cloud. Together they made *As Above So Below*, Hermes Trismegistus's description of how the alchemist feels on the inside, sees on the outside, knows of the upside and of the not side.

Internalum, paintings of the body, sensing into dark interior spaces to see, not distinguish between blood, organ, imagination, feeling, emotion, the primordial, or history, no elevation of one aspect over the other. I perceived the interactions, how they connected, where they separated. Internal and um, the neutral, non-gendered body.

At the same time, when that process within my own body became unbearable, I sensed into the space that passes through and around and above the body, universal, expansive, absolute. I eased my pain with the perfect mixture of blue. Delicate. *Sky Colour'd*.

The quality of grief and loss was different than with the Breakup Paintings. The loss of our futures, of the dream I held tightly since I was twelve when my baby brother was born, of a populated life in the home. Different from the retro grief of the breakup of a difficult relationship, it came in green waves of physical pain, barren brown numbness, circled back in tangled red thoughts, repeated itself. Not sequential. Any pleasure came with an underlay of sharpness, a fine stab. Grief addressed did not stay lying down as a settled layer but needled its way back to pick open the fine point again. Not so easily liberated. The work asked for all the layers. For many paintings. For precisions. Once begun, paintings spent time in an unfinished state, as the interior of interiors. Staying open, resisting the closing movement. In time all the elements lined up around a central axis. An unstated spine, a breastbone, an umbilicus to hold the veils in place. Colour increased, a reversal of the reduction that had happened, an inclusion of everything.

I left this body of work with the same discovering as during *Instance One: The Breakup Paintings*. Making the work changed an internal configuration; my being belonged to the world more fully. I looked and felt different. I regained an ease of movement, my organs realigned. I lost the brow furrow, could smile and breathe again. I could feel the air around me. My chemistry functioned symbiotically with my environment.

[i] The cure refers to a chapter and body of work discussed earlier in the book, *Instance One: The Breakup Paintings*, both an instance of grief and an instance of using painting to examine and heal.

Internalum (i)

Internalum (iii)

Sky Colour'd (v)

NUTURE HEALTH

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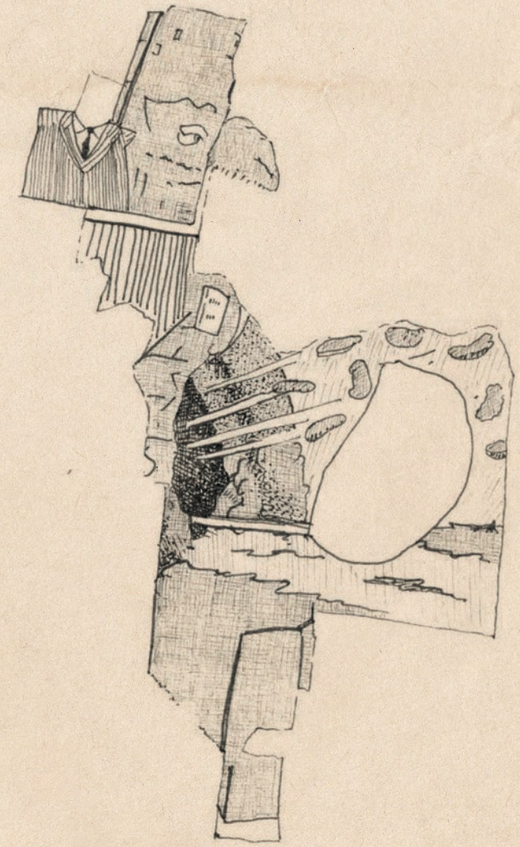
Nurture Health provides professional counselling support services to women and partners navigating all aspects of pregnancy, fertility, childbirth, loss, perimenopause and menopause. It has been a pleasure to support Lucy O'Donnell's work around pregnancy without birth or miscarriage. We are always so grateful for woman like her who take an interest in supporting other women and talk about the essence and reality of the potential struggles of women's mental health. We wish Lucy all the best with the her show *our little earth bound tales*.



PAVEE POINT - TRAVELLER AND ROMA CENTRE

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TRAVELLER WOMEN AND PREGNANCY LOSS

Similar to other indigenous and minority ethnic women, Traveller women experience inequality of access, participation, and outcomes in perinatal health; this includes higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidity as well as higher rates of miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal death. There are a number of factors which contribute to this – systemic racism, lack of proactive policy measures within mainstream policy and service provision – in addition to a lack of ethnic equality data.

Lynsey Kavanagh, Co-Director Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre, explains that, in research carried out in 2012, over half of 75 Traveller women interviewed disclosed they had experienced at least one miscarriage. Over one-sixth of those Traveller women disclosed that they had experienced an infant death. These experiences were reported as significant life events for Traveller women, which had a considerable impact on their overall health and well-being and, in particular, informed how they navigated subsequent pregnancies.

Lack of engagement with mainstream mental health services was evident with only two Traveller women disclosing they had received mental health supports from designated services. The remaining women report seeking mental health support from GPs. This is in line with findings from the All Ireland Traveller Health Study 2010 which shows that GPs were more likely than any other health services to engage with Travellers, although discrimination also exists in this context.

'Pregnancy loss does not invoke a singular, universal "Traveller" experience or have a uniform essence,' explains Lynsey. Yet, while each experience is unique, there are a number of commonalities which are traced across all Traveller women's narratives. Like other women, Traveller women experience pregnancy loss as a traumatic life event, but two distinct reasons contribute to this – Traveller women conceptualise this event as the death of their child, and then the various barriers encountered in engaging with health services, including the way in which they recall being treated by health services during and after their loss, compound their trauma.

These experiences of self are told through stories of loss: loss of baby and an imagined future; loss of self-identity; loss of health and well-being; loss of bodily autonomy; and loss of confidence in medical professionals.

Every Traveller woman in this study disclosed that they continue to memorialise their infant's death and fantasise about an alternative future with their lost child, including visualising their children alongside family members such as siblings. This imagining indicated that bereavements and losses are integrated into Traveller women's ongoing lives, in which they are accompanied by grief that becomes heightened during anniversaries or other significant moments in their lives.

In 2014, further qualitative narrative-based research indicated that Traveller women's experiences of pregnancy and loss are mediated by discrimination, racism, sexism, and marginalisation. It highlighted Traveller women's experiences of disrespectful and abusive treatment by health services during and after pregnancy loss; this includes neglect, abandonment, non-consensual treatment, and discrimination. It argues that Traveller women's experiences of pregnancy loss are shaped and pronounced by gendered racism and suggests that these experiences are racialized obstetric violence on the basis of gender and ethnicity.

Traveller women, like many women, overwhelmingly described not being listened to by medical professionals leaving the women feeling rejected, dismissed, and ultimately ignored.

This study demonstrated that Traveller women's experiences are not unique within the Irish context, but the gendered racialization and devaluation of Traveller women by the State has resulted in starkly different realities and experiences for Traveller women than for the general population. The study used an intersectional lens to highlight the particularities of Traveller women's experiences and illuminated the ways in which minority ethnic women's experiences of obstetric violence are racialized. It has argued that racism and discrimination on the basis of gender and ethnicity have been normalised globally and, as a result, instances of mistreatment in maternity settings have become overlooked or accepted by institutional actors, health practitioners, as well as indigenous and minority ethnic women themselves.

'Traveller women live with loss every day; with loss wrapping itself around the entire community through high infant mortality rates, high suicide rates, lower life expectancy and higher rates of mortality at all stages of the life course. The research is about the ways in which intersectional forms of structural violence seep into institutions, creating the conditions in which disrespect, mistreatment, and abuse are *felt* by Traveller women at a time in which support is most needed,' said Lynsey.

It is only by listening to Travellers and their experiences and by including Travellers in the design and delivery of services that we can bring about positive change. This is something our project, Pavee Mothers, promotes along with other programmes within Pavee Point (www.paveemothers.ie)

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has been working to challenge racism and promote Traveller and Roma inclusion in Ireland since 1985. The organisation works from a community development perspective and promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. The organisation is comprised of Travellers, Roma, and members of the majority population, who work together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion, marginalisation, and racism. Working for social justice, solidarity, and human rights, the central aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improving the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers and Roma.

Kavanagh, Lynsey (2018) 'Standing alongside' and in solidarity with Traveller women: minority ethnic women's narratives of racialized obstetric violence. PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth. C

DR REBECCA FEASEY

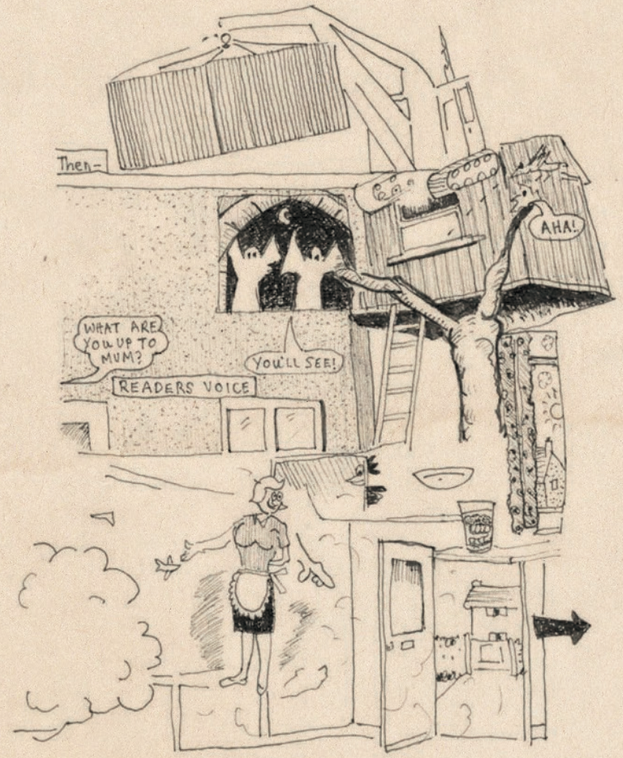
Subject Leader in Media and Critical Studies,
Bath School of Art, Film and Media, Bath Spa University

The chronology of my academic research in feminist media studies is a compartmentalised consideration of various themes, topics, debates, and case studies, from sartorial choices through to gossip discourses and teen representations through to romantic heroes. And then came motherhood, and my personal and professional worlds aligned. Such research can again be compartmentalised, enabling a consideration of pregnancy and the maternal role in films, radio advertising, print, broadcast news, the magazine sector, social media advice literature, and television. Compartmentalised again via genres and platforms, budgets and contexts. There exists an exhaustive array of serene and struggling figures waiting to be discovered and laid bare for audiences and academics alike.

And although media-motherhood studies has paid particular attention to the representation of women as maternal figures in the entertainment arena, what is routinely missing from such research is an exploration of unsuccessful or unconventional pregnancy stories, and narratives of non-traditional family building and loss. While four out of five IVF cycles fail, one in four women in the UK will lose a baby during pregnancy and labour, and this is as true for women using assisted reproductive treatments and technologies as it is for those who conceive naturally.

A missed miscarriage, secondary infertility, I become part of club I didn't ask to join, and my personal and professional worlds again align. My work on infertility and non-traditional family building takes into account the sensitivities around the language of loss; the various classifications and categorisations that span countries and territories; terminology around assisted reproductive treatments and technologies; global and local data relating to pregnancy, miscarriage, and stillbirth; the longstanding and ubiquitous link between womanhood and motherhood; and the hierarchies of family building in a pro-natal period.

I theorise but try not to think. I rationalise data and statistics while trying not to feel. I research and write and congratulate myself for maintaining scholarly distance. But objectivity and professionalism are a mask I have chosen to wear. Others look to self-help groups and sympathetic voices to support their grief and healing; I force myself to interrogate. My professional world is ordered and orderly, the chronology of academic progress is evident, but it is surface and appearance that veils the hurt, chaos, and confusion that comes from loss. Lucy O'Donnell's 'Our Little Earth Bound Tales' exhibition reminds us that while we cannot escape the chronology of our experiences, systematic grid after systematic grid, we have to find a way to control our own narrative, not necessarily the final frame we hoped for, but one we can be content with.



RÓISÍN STACK

Writer and theatre maker originally from Mayo, now living in Co. Clare. Her first solo show, No Woman is an Island, premiered at Dublin Theatre Festival 2023.

roisinstack.com

You don't want to wear the same knickers you wore that day. Or do you?

Do I? Maybe it's good to get it out of the way. They're all black anyway – I'm not even sure I can identify the exact ones. I grab a pair, any pair, and try to think about other things. My hands are cold against my thighs. All extremities suffer in this weather.

It's 2021 and I'm in the midst of writing a show about solitude or rather, the female experience of it. My starting point was an innocent inquiry into gendered solitude, motivated by the judgements attached to words like 'bachelor' and 'spinster' but, a few months into this research, I miscarry and solitude takes on a whole new meaning.

The woman who miscarries early doesn't exist in the Irish system: she is alone in her grief. In Ireland, a pregnant woman is entitled to free healthcare commencing at twelve weeks. When you attend the doctor after a miscarriage prior to twelve weeks you may have to pee into a small jar. You may have to sit in a room watching tiny red fibres float in your urine while the doctor confirms that there is 'definitely no pregnancy anyway' and then you will certainly have to pay the €60 fee because you haven't reached the twelve week initiation into The System.

Underwear on, extremities slowly coming to room temperature, I avoid writing by looking at various online courses I could undertake. I'm particularly interested in one called *The Multiverse and Creativity*. Despite a keen and persistent inability to grasp basic concepts of space, physics, or general science, I click on, enjoying the questions that are thrown my way.

If the world is determined by the movements of the atoms that constitute our bodies and the objects around us, then how can we have freedom of thought and action?

It doesn't feel as though I've had the liberty of thinking things through. My body took me by surprise – announcing itself pregnant, then announcing itself miscarrying. I vibrate with various emotions, held together by electromagnetic force.

How might life have been different?

I like to think that there are other universes in which I'm some of the things I cannot be here: successful, Parisian, brave, mother, homeowner, mellow, sophisticated, fulfilled, sexually liberated. I could go on.

But this is no good. This will not do.
Any clothes. Grab any clothes, for fuck's sake.

I'll wear something sleek and sexy, I decide, something I would not have worn last week as I dragged my feet and my tired cramping body from bed to bathroom to kettle. I hold a pair of black pleather trousers in my hands and immediately feel old and desperate.

It's 2021 and I'm writing a show about solitude in my underwear after the blood has stopped. I start to put words down on paper, to consider the corporeal experience of isolation as a woman who has, in theory at least, the ability to produce life: to be *with child*. And to be without. And to lose.

It's around this time that I come across *All the Thoughts I Ever Had*. I'm immediately drawn into the honesty of Lucy's experience, the fusing of forms (performance/presentation) and the idea of creating a 'pensive and reflective' discourse – all elements I'm trying to hone in my own work. Lucy becomes one of many women artists and thinkers who not only inform my work but also provide company in an otherwise isolating state.

During this period, I think a lot about time, about how my experience of it differs wildly from my husband's. I've long had the feeling of running out of it, held regret about all the time I've wasted, not as a potential mother but as an artist and a human on the planet. This is surely why I'm drawn to the idea of the multiverse: it's reassuring to think that, somewhere else, I spent it all wisely.

Can anything novel happen in a clockwork universe?

The poet Mary Oliver referred to the clock as that white spider belly which steers us through each day and keeps us fettered to a thousand notions of obligations. The ancient Greeks had two gods for time: the male god Chronos, god of chronology and successive time, and his sister Kairos, goddess of cyclical time. The writer Izzy Williams posits that while women are inextricably linked to cyclical time, *Chronos's linearity is easier to understand, monetise and experience, and therefore, has been elevated as the more valuable category of time.'* Left alone, we experience both of these concepts and the tension between them.

Have you ever wondered why one thing happens and not the other?

When you reach 12 weeks, you will no longer pay for appointments and scans. You will be assigned a midwife. You will pass Go. When you reach 12 weeks, you will be handed a large green folder and ushered to and from phlebotomy and radiology like a valuable soldier of Capitalism but, until then, you're alone in your experience. You will bed down in a universe of your own making: cornflakes, cats, competitive reality television. You will battle nausea, anxiety, and the constant monitoring for blood, by yourself. The State will only bring you to her bosom when you have proven yourself viable.

It's 2021 and I'm writing a show about solitude, in my underwear after the blood has stopped and before – long before – I'm endowed with a big green folder. I'm trying not to be too dramatic. I'm trying not to overthink it. I'm trying to imagine a multiplicity of universes and timelines unfolding ad infinitum but can't tell if that's soothing or stressful.

I put down the pleather trousers.

I cast about for clothes that might fit whoever I am today.
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.
.
.
.
.
Eventually
I am dressed
in something loose.

DR. TAMARIN NORWOOD

Tamarin is the author of The Song of the Whole Wide World (2024), a memoir interpreting the brief life of her baby son. As a Leverhulme Research Fellow she is working with national baby loss charities to understand how families create meaning following baby loss.

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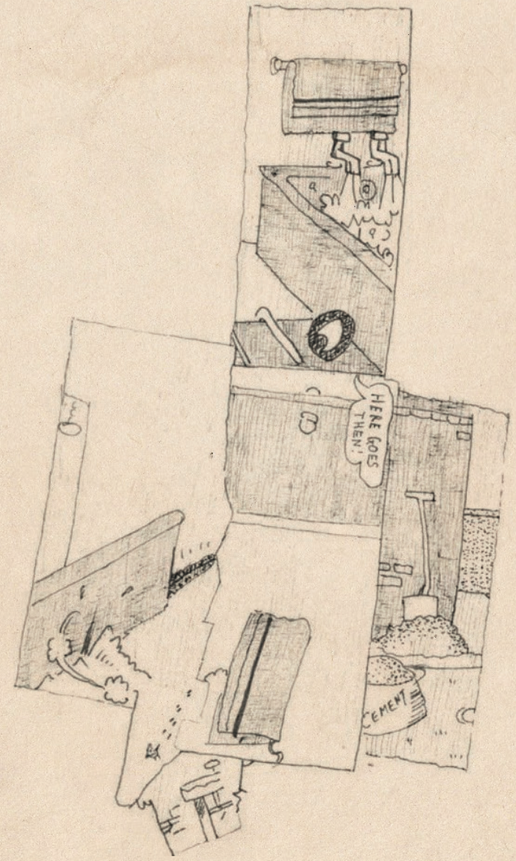
Lucy's meticulous artwork is part of a vital conversation about what it means when birth and death arrive together. Such events are not only unthinkably sad, they also stand to teach us much about what it means to be human, and Lucy's work quietly insists that we should listen to these tales, and not look away.



TANIA KOVATS

Professor at University of Dundee. Her practice and research as an artist is an exploration of our experience of landscape, increasingly with an environmental focus. Her work includes temporary and permanent sculptural works often in the public realm, drawing, and writing, that currently consider her preoccupation with water, rivers, seas and oceans. Kovats is an advocate for drawing in its expanded field, as a highly significant tool of thinking and expression, that provides an infinite and varied means of communication that continues to be expanded and enriched by practitioners. Her works are in both public and private collections in the UK and abroad, including Arts Council, Jupiter Artland, The British Council, Government Art Collection, the National Maritime Museum Greenwich, and the V&A.

@kovats66

MOONFLOWERS: NO WAXING FULL WANING

I can't speak to the grief of pregnancy without a child. I look at Lucy's work and am in awe of what drawing can do to translate experience into non-verbal communication. I see proof of this again and again. I see how drawing can share, and somehow restore through the seeing, making, unmaking, and remaking. In drawing, we can unpick our experience. Gently we take it apart, noticing, repairing, and mending.

I carry a different grief of parenting. The arrival of my son blew my world apart. He was an eclipse. It meant navigating the loss of what was. This became literally so. Our first summer together we camped on a headland in Cornwall for the 1999 eclipse, waiting for the moon's shadow to pass over us. I have a photo taken in the moments of darkness where everything is shadowed except for his smiling moonface.

When he learnt to walk, he walked away from me. His first steps were his own pleasure at his new movement, not looking for my approval or pleasure in his achievement. He has individualised well. All his years I have held a sense of loss with every celebrated milestone that sinks into the gap opening up between us. We tend not to talk about loss in this way. His departure blew everything apart for the second time. My known world collapsed and erupting with a wild destructive energy taking his place that wanted to destroy, crush, and amputate everything left behind to help numb the pain. I found myself stripped bare enough to be open to a creative energy that wasn't entirely mine that found, held, and danced with me, even as I turned to ash.

Things fall apart
Things break
Things heal back together again

I broke again recently. A bone this time. Rendered immobile, in terrifying physical pain, completely vulnerable. I was told the most important thing was to do nothing, my hardest thing to do. Trauma has its own way of moving into your body and staying there. Traumas collate, seek each other out to form woven layers of damage feeding off each other, re-surfacing in ways you can't predict.

notice make unmake remake
I count my recovery in moons. It seems gentler than months or years.

Drawings are full of lines of connection that weave themselves into strong structures, cobwebs, tapestries, the lines on your palm. Domestic lines criss-cross on the chopping board. Each drawing is a net we have made and mended to catch something of value to us.

At this time of year, I take the last of my summer blooms, my favourite dahlia flower heads, into the studio to preserve them. I memorialise them by placing them on paper, puddling them in water, soaking and compressing them into paper. There is a lot of tending that goes on to make these drawings, like drawings I garden or nurse. Checking them, changing the blotting paper beneath them, puddling more water, caring for them, allowing them some air, before reapplying the weight that merges them into the paper. I would not be able to draw them as flowers, so I ask them to draw themselves. The natural dyes of the flower are released and stain the paper. They become blooming wounds, ghost flowers, memorials to the sweet joys of late summer.
I started to make these works as I became postmenopausal. The works mark the end of my body's fertility and my menstrual cycle stopping; a clock that has been keeping regular time since I was ten years old, which was also the year of my body's first trauma.

I made this one thinking about Lucy.

Title: Moonflowers - No Waxing Full Waning
Medium: Blotting paper, dahlia flower head
Dimensions: 21 X 29 cm
Date: 2024

DR SUZANNE HEANEY

PhD in the healthcare experiences of parents on the island of Ireland who have a termination of pregnancy following a fetal anomaly diagnosis, Queen's University Belfast. Midwife and NI Co-ordinator for charity, Antenatal Results and Choices

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Loss and grief are part of life. Throughout our lives, we all lose and grieve for loved ones and those experiences are unique to each individual. The death of a child, however, is one of the most stressful and devastating life events any parent can experience, and the grief process can be a difficult and complicated experience, whatever the stage, age, or circumstances of the child's death. Losing a child goes against the natural order of things. It is the loss of hopes, dreams, and potential for a future never to be realised.

Losing a baby through a termination for medical reasons (TFMR) is a specific type of baby loss. Based on the experience of 33 parents, the majority of whom lost their baby at around 20 weeks gestation, my PhD research highlights and confirms how traumatic and life-altering this loss was and how it impacted on parents' emotional, physical, and psychological health and well-being.

Being told there is a possibility your baby will die in utero or soon after birth is known to trigger grief-related feelings and behaviours that are referred to in literature as 'anticipatory grief'. This was evident in many parents' accounts of their reactions to the initial news that their baby's health was potentially compromised and they were catapulted into a state of anxiety and turmoil about the future. When the diagnosis and prognosis were confirmed, often after an agonising wait, many parents described a sense of being 'disconnected', 'adrift', 'not belonging', 'suspended in time', and 'disoriented', all of which are associated with coping reactions to stress-related grief or trauma.

Every baby was a wanted and an already much-loved baby, which made the decision to terminate the pregnancy very challenging. Parents described themselves facing a moral dilemma and compared it with 'Sophie's choice'. The parents' awareness of the wider public discourse, and indeed the views of friends and family, concerning abortion made the decision, for many, to have a TFMR even more difficult. Many felt guilt about their decision and feared being judged. This highlights the complex role stigma, real or perceived, can play in individuals' experiences which can impact on how parents grieve and mourn their loss. Many parents in this study reported high and prolonged levels of trauma symptoms, stress and grief with others experiencing specific complexities linked to guilt, shame, and self-silencing.

The absence of support or lack of acknowledgement of the loss of a much-wanted baby can lead to disenfranchised or complicated grief for parents. Following their discharge from hospital, many parents felt there was a lack of support for TFMR as a specific baby loss within the community setting. Some women described what they perceived as a hierarchy or division between those who 'deserved' to publicly grieve and talk about their baby loss and those who did not, based on the type of loss they had suffered. Parents who have had a TFMR want to be treated with compassion and as people who have lost a baby, as well as not being judged by others who have never had to face such circumstances. Lucy O'Donnell's work is powerful and inclusive, creating a space to open up conversations about all types of pregnancy related loss.

Significant life events, such as pregnancy loss, impact on how people perceive themselves, how they perceive others, and how they perceive the world. The words in the poem, 'A Lifetime of Love', are a collation of direct quotes from parent interviews. While each parent's experience was unique, there are common themes about the key points in a journey no parent wants to make and how that journey has impacted on them. It is a poem about love and grief and the legacy of love.

A Lifetime of Love

There's something wrong with your baby.
It was like a bomb exploding in my head, in my heart.
I was still alive and I could feel the pain.
A feeling of drowning, being adrift, suspended in time.
This was happening to someone else, not to me.
I could hear someone screaming – it was me.

We were in denial, hoping and praying our baby would be fine.
We thought we had run every scenario through our minds but
We never once imagined what we were told.
We were shocked. We couldn't take it in.
And when they finally made it clear to us our hearts shattered.
We were devastated. We were scared.

I can still feel the pain and the darkness.
The feeling of drowning and anger,
Being told you have a choice, when there isn't really a choice.
Just Sophie's choice. No good outcome whatever you chose.
You don't really realise how strong your connection and love is
For the baby you have yet to meet,
Until you are faced with the worst decision in your life

Somehow, we pulled ourselves together.
We had to do what we both thought would be best for our baby
Even though we would be robbed of our hopes and dreams for her.
It was agonising. But we didn't want her to suffer.
We know in our hearts, that we made the right decision.
The mother and father in each of us knows.
But it doesn't make it any easier.

We can never do the midwives justice with our words.
They cared for us compassionately as parents losing a baby.
They helped us make memories which we will treasure forever.
Just being able to hold her was all we could ask for.
To know that she was real. That she existed.
We were so filled with love for our beautiful baby girl.

Losing our baby has changed us and the way we look at things.
All those things we used to think were so important.
But when the worst thing happens to you, you think differently.
Our lives have changed. We have changed.
It has changed our relationships with others.
We will never be the same people we were
But we're learning to live with the people we are now.

We are a family, but not as we should have been.
Losing our baby could have been the reason we stopped living.
But having her and losing her is the reason we still get up in the morning.
Although we never got to know her,
We know what it was and is to love her.
She is part of our family's story and we will always remember her.
She has left us a lifetime of love.

SALLY BUTCHER

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Miscarriage is conventionally seen as an arrest, a break from the normative linear passage of pregnancy, resulting in an unexpected end to the typical progressive narrative towards birthing motherhood. This breaking is epitomised in Lucy's cutting, as characters and objects are removed from the boundaries of the comic layout. She leaves this empty gridded format visible, highlighting its structured borders that usually guide us through the narrative, framing a conclusive story with a satisfactory ending. Yet the constructed images she makes from these edits embrace an ambiguity[i] that we are asked to address as she continues cutting, sticking, drawing, and re-framing. Leaving bits behind and making strange new juxtapositions, she shows us many parts of the process as she searches for unconventional expressions of this often-overlooked experience and its frequently neglected bodies.

I am also interested in this ambiguity of bodies, spaces, and temporalities within reproduction. As an (in)fertile (m)other, my artistic PhD research practice explores female infertility. An overarching framework perhaps, with undefined beginning and end, this encompasses a broad range of uncertain experiences from trying (and 'failing') to conceive, repeat miscarriage, and involuntary childlessness. Its readily medicalised rhetoric and clinically structured spaces frequently force out an elusiveness that needs to be recognised in its own representation.

In my own search for what is hidden here, I explore the public online fertility forum where women share alternative articulations of their present (in)fertile experience that wrestles with normative reproduction rhetoric. This sits alongside investigations into the private realities of my own domestic space where my (past?) (in)fertile experience still lingers. Dust fills my work – a substance which gathers in these archived areas, from a metaphorical exchange of 'baby dust' sprinkling hopeful future imaginaries through the virtual forum, to the real dirty debris that has gathered in my home as traces of the past 'lost' years of infertility.

I am interested in how this amorphous form can signify the shape of (in)fertility and its own non-indexical representation to its absent subject. Like Lucy's attention to the gridded structure, my drawings remain caught between the edges of lining paper. They attempt to invite closer encounters with the imperceptible and the intimate around the complexities of *disembodied* loss – articulating my own failures to conceive, holding a loss of something that never was and may never be. Aside these, Lucy's extracted solid but convoluted collaged forms feel to me like a meeting of miscarriage's tensions between an *embodied* experience of real corporeal passing and conceptualisations of a loss of what might have been.[ii] Her disorientated and disrupted domestic bodies represent this multiplicity as they are cut and caught in the limbo of life – balancing, holding, and supporting, whilst being simultaneously squashed between walls and under doors.

Both our drawings seem to waver between observation and imagination in making. With a more defined line, Lucy's re-joined misfitted figures are then pieced together across new positive and negative spaces. Staying with the space of ambiguity, they become punctuated with creative confusion from a childlike world of the unexpected, like characters who repeatedly piece themselves (ourselves) back together again, appearing seemingly unharmed, but with narrative lives of productive adulthood, challenged.

I am driven by the ways in which Art can show us these conditions that so often remain unseen and unspoken, and unresolved. I believe it is the spaces opened by artistic language that enable us to articulate these disjointed identities which sit outside of these narrated, linear frameworks of normative motherhood and, I hope, help construct new dialogues around conceptual complexities, through the materiality of making.

[i] See Browne, Victoria *Pregnancy Without Birth: A Feminist Philosophy of Miscarriage*. Bloomsbury Academic (London New York, 2023), p. 77–100 for a powerful articulation of miscarriage as an encounter with ambiguity.

[ii] See ibid.

Title: Dust Drawn (ongoing series)
Medium: Charcoal on aged lining paper
Dimensions: 55cm x 300 cm
Date: 2024

TIM INGOLD CBE, FBA, FRSE

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I congratulate Lucy O'Donnell on her exhibition, 'our little earth bound tales', at The Ballinglen Arts Foundation and Museum. Her work is driven by an understanding of drawing as a way of becoming, inspired in part by my article 'The textility of making' (2010). In this article, I shift the focus from ready-made objects to the processes of their generation and dissolution, a shift that requires us to follow materials as they flow, mix, and mutate. I thank Lucy for sharing her ideas and wish her every success with her ongoing practice-led research, supported by Arts and Disability Connect Scheme/Arts & Disability Ireland, which supports artists with disabilities to develop ambitious practice.

ÚNA FORDE

Managing Director of The Ballinglen Arts Foundation & Ballinglen Museum of Art

We are delighted to announce Lucy O'Donnell's exhibition, 'Our Little Earth Bound Tales', here at Ballinglen Art Gallery and Museum. This show puts drawing at its center to explore the medium within the context of loss and pregnancy without birth. The title of the show is 'Our Little Earth Bound Tales', a phrase taken from a quote from the German artist Wols who writes about drawing, describing how 'we set down our little earth bound tales on small scraps of paper'. Lucy's first residency as a fellow of Ballinglen Arts Foundation took place in 2007, with further residencies following in 2011, 2013, 2018, 2019, and 2023. Artwork she started during her 2019 residency initiated this exhibition, where very small drawings of the sea were later built into large monochromatic grids. These were used in her work, 'Sitting with Uncertainty', which reflected spaces of grief and loss from multiple miscarriages. The small drawings of the sea gave Lucy a starting point in her practice to work with removal, as she took away areas of heavily labored graphite, leaving its traces behind. These drawings developed a range of possibilities for her to work with loss in the contexts of drawing and miscarriage. Some works in the show have a stillness in their grief, whilst others use humor. When visiting Lucy's studio here at Ballinglen, I always admire her process and thinking, so thoughtful, beautiful, relevant but still fun – this epitomises Lucy! We're so looking forward to the show and hope you get to visit. The Gallery's beautiful light and space creates the perfect intimacy for her work.

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Printed and Published in Great Britain by D.C. THOMSON & CO., LTD., 185 Fl
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ISBN: 978-1-0369-0082-3