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Reflections on Lucy O'Donnell's '*our little earthbound tales*' and the art of holding a likeness.

Christina Kolaiti

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 earthbound 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*'ⁱ, O'Donnell's self-portraits speculate on the open-ended narrative of maternal attachmentⁱⁱ. 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, fostering a '*lasting psychological connectedness between human beings*'ⁱⁱⁱ.

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 and sometimes located them in the 'recently deleted' folder, retrieving 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, 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^{iv} 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 earthbound 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 every living second.^v 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,^{vi} 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  then erased it, and tried again.^{vii}

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.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p.94

^{iv} Augé, M. (2023) *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. New York; London: Verso Books.

v Centre for The Developing Child, Harvard University (2007) '*InBrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development*'. Available at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/> (Accessed: 27 September 2024).

vi "Carte-de-visite: A small photographic portrait mounted on a card, 3 1/2 by 2 1/4 inches, so-called due to the purpose for which they were first proposed (1861)". Oxford English Dictionary (2024) *Carte-de-visite*. Available at: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/carte-de-visite_n?tab=meaning_and_use#10000707. (Accessed: 27 September 2024).

vii  Anagram of the word Mum, written by the author's son in a Mother's Day card. This is a custom font made from 5-year-old Orestes' own handwriting.