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## **Maternity beyond metaphor: painting, the studio, and the lived experience of sexual difference in the work of Virginia Bodman**

### Abstract

This essay attends to the practice of painter Virginia Bodman (1954) to illuminate the gap between the operations of the maternal body as a metaphor for painting in phenomenology, and the lived experience of that body inside and outside the painter's studio. Structured in three sections, it offers close readings of works made by Virginia Bodman over a period of twenty-six years. Bodman had been a painter of considerable professional standing by the time she became pregnant with her first child in 1988. This essay considers the way in which the push and pull of liquid matter reveals a becoming-mother's negotiation of the transformation of the self and history in paint. In so doing, it mobilizes Griselda Pollock's (1999) argument that the mother/Other can be a site of political agency. To consider the complex questions of immersivity, professional identity, and time in the context of maternal experience is to enable a reappraisal of the radical conceptual value that Elkins (1999) and Merleau-Ponty (1961) assigned to the maternal body as a metaphor of painting and studio practice. This essay argues that the tangle of matter, movement, and memory in Bodman's dialogues with Picasso and Vaughan illuminate strategies to overcome this professional displacement.

**Keywords:** painting; drawing; maternity; phenomenology; feminism; studio;

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**Word Count 7333**

Many of the world's greatest thinkers have not reared families or formed close personal ties. This is true of Descartes, Newton, Locke, Pascal, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein

Anthony Storr (1989: ix).

We say that a human being is born the moment when something that was only virtually visible within the mother's body becomes at once visible for us and for itself. The painter's vision is an ongoing birth

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1993: 129).

This essay attends to the practice of painter Virginia Bodman (1954) to illuminate the gap between the operations of the maternal body as a metaphor for painting in phenomenology, and the lived experience of that body inside and outside the painter's studio. As Griselda Pollock has argued, the substitution and repression of the mother that has been vital to the power structures that underpin phallogocentric culture (Pollock 1999: 18). This paper argues that maternal experience remains excluded from models of artistic authenticity, despite its value as metaphor in continental philosophy. By affirming the creative, intellectual, and political worth of the lived experience of maternity, and parenthood more broadly, this essay challenges the negative perception of the impact of family on creative, professional life.

Virginia Bodman has laboured with oil paint for more than forty years. Her highly prolific studio practice is indebted to the inherent lure of that medium, which she and Mira Schor refer to as the 'erotics of paint' (1997: 169). For Bodman, painting has always been a means to think through the lived experience of sexual difference, interrogating the relationship between figure and ground, the body of the painter and the body of the canvas. This essay considers the physical accommodations that this practicing artist made once she became a mother and how she negotiated that transition through her painting. Contrary to the work of Morisot or Nicholson, however, Bodman's art does not include representations of her actual children. Unlike the work of Mary Kelly, it also does not deal directly with the process of mothering or

the detritus of childhood. Rather, to borrow from Griselda Pollock, it seeks to make a difference by reading the structures of difference implicated within the artist's practice (1999: 34). Its interrogation of maternal experience takes place at a structural level: in the push and pull of liquid matter that reveals a becoming mother's negotiation of the transformation of the self and history in paint.

This essay focusses on three works: the paintings *Family Photo* (2014) and *Monument* (1993–5), and a series of drawings entitled *Precious Papers* (1988). These artworks are explored in dialogue with the arguments of James Elkins, Elizabeth Grosz, Tim Ingold, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mira Schor, and Leo Steinberg. These thinkers have all elucidated the legacies of Western Rationalism for the discourse of art history, providing staunch critiques of the mastery and heteronormative masculinity that the canon attributes to artists. This body of practice and scholarship enables this essay to take up the arguments made by Griselda Pollock in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Arts Histories* (1999). Pollock's text draws on the inflection of maternal experience in the practices of male and female artists to argue that the mother/Other can be a site of political agency that transgresses the binaries laid down by patriarchal culture (1999: 18). Taking up Pollock's call to read against the grain of patriarchal ideologies, which 'manage sexual difference as a negation of our humanity, creativity and safety' (1999: 34), this essay insists upon on the specificity of the lived experience of maternity and its material, spatial, and temporal implications for studio practice. Through this lens, Bodman's practice reveals the ways in which phenomenology has disembodied the maternal, thereby compounding the displacement that maternity can elicit for female painters. Bodman circumvented this displacement through her strategic dialogue with the work of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Keith Vaughan (1912–1977), which helped her to reconnect with her sense of creative belonging, thereby enabling her to counter and learn from the gendered experience of change and uncertainty that comes with parenthood.

### **The working maternal body: the painter's studio, drawing, and time**

It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1993: 123–4).

In 1990, Bodman was among fifteen artists selected for *Mothers*, an open call exhibition curated by Angela Kingston at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. The exhibition rejected 'idyllic' images of mothers and mothering, and instead sought new modes of representation to foreground the lived experience of motherhood (Kingston 1990: 5). Bodman's *Precious Papers*, made in 1988 while expecting her first child, were shown alongside the work of Bobby Baker, Catherine Elwes, Marysia Lewandowska, Sher Rajah, and Jo Spence amongst others. At that point in her career, Bodman had studied painting as a postgraduate at the Royal College of Art, held a British School at Rome Scholarship, been the first Artist in Residence at Durham Cathedral, and been the subject of a solo show at the acclaimed Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool. Bodman was clearly a painter of considerable professional standing by the time she created *Precious Papers*. In *Mothers*, the artist stressed the way works, such as *Changes to the Landscape (Moon)* (Fig.1), had been a result of 'the physical and metaphorical implications of pregnancy', which had a direct impact on her 'choice of subject, materials and working process' (Kingston 1990: 35). Which poses the question, what are the physical and metaphorical implications of pregnancy for an oil painter? This brings me to the studio space in which a painter's making and being are continually intertwined.

In *What Painting Is*, Elkins draws on the transgressive material logic of alchemy to argue that painting is a 'bodily' practice that subordinates reason and works in excess of historicising art historical narratives (Elkins 1999: 161). The studio environment is vital to Elkins' reconfiguration of painting; it is not a vacant, impassive architectural site but the 'inside of the

body itself' (Elkins 1999: 161). Painters and their studios, Elkins argues, are indistinct parts of a pulsating organism, alive with fluid movements and obsessive gestures that give 'birth' to painting (Elkins 1999: 147–9). Through this birthing process, which returns the text to the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, the painter and painting journey toward as yet unknown outcomes, rather than the masterful execution of predetermined artefacts.

For Elkins, 'everything bears the marks of the [painter's] singular obsession' in the 'shadowy domain' of the 'smelly studio' (Elkins 1999: 147–9). As a precursor to thinking through the metaphor of birth in Elkin's vision of the studio, I want to argue that smell, which he rightly uses to underscore the embodied nature of that space, has a particular significance for a painter's experience of maternity. In the first trimester of pregnancy, however, the levels of oestrogen in a woman's body increase, bringing about a heightened sense of smell closely allied to nausea. Even if a becoming-mother can stomach the viscous odours of the painter's studio, oil-based paints, which can contain toxic substances such as lead and cadmium, and solvents are a sufficiently unknown quantity to deem them an unnecessary risk to a growing foetus. Therefore, Bodman had to take her practice out of the studio and embrace drawing for the duration of her pregnancy, and so the practical implications of pregnancy were first felt as the expulsion of the maternal body from the pulsating organism of the studio.

Drawing can be quick, transportable, and non-toxic, and so Bodman chose semi-transparent Japanese paper, typing paper, ink, water, and linseed oil to sustain her practice during her exile. These materials embedded a contrary, oppositional logic within the work that seemed to her to be indicative of the 'opposing concerns' which pregnancy brought (Kingston 1990: 35). Their properties lend themselves to the reduced mobility of the gestating body but also the expense and fragmented temporality of new parenthood: inks, pencils, and paper are cheap and can be easily picked up, worked, and brushes washed all in the space of a toddler's nap. Moreover,

the corporeal impact of maternal experience can be intuited in the luscious physicality of these drawings. *Body Swop* (Fig.2), for example, is imbued with a visual pleasure born of its cropped composition, large scale fluid brush work, and the incongruity of its materials. The drawing embodies the closeness of mother and child coming into being, as well as our wonder at the reproductive power of the gestating body alongside its fragility. As Bodman puts it, she mobilised the ‘graphic potential of the paper, as place, obscurer and revealer’ to inscribe the body of the paper with the maternal body of ‘earth’, engorged breasts, ‘inside and outside’ (Kingston 1990: 37). Mother and child are thus corpo-realized through placental ink and linseed oil on a ground that flits from the presence of paper as material to the absence of negative space, thereby performing the lived tension of presence and absence, known and unknown that is at the heart of pregnancy.

The *Precious Papers*, therefore, reveal the profoundly corpo-realizing process of pregnancy. For many women in the West, contraception mitigates the flows and rhythms of the body. A woman may decide to ‘plan’ a pregnancy and even a birth, but the body is a formidable and frequently recalcitrant force. It counters an endless media stream of glowing mothers-to-be with indigestion, pelvic girdle pain, sciatica, urine (the need to pass it or collect it in small bottles), and blood (the need to collect it in small bottles or to mop it up off the delivery room floor). Privacy goes out the window with the medical profession’s external measuring, monitoring, and internal prodding and poking. The well-meaning comments and questions from friends, family, and even strangers in the supermarket are directed to a body that has been displaced from the woman who inhabits it. This lived experience of the maternal body points to the vital significance of the headless bodies in the *Precious Paper* drawings, in *Woman* (Fig.3), *Changes to the Landscape* (Fig.4), and *Couple (ii)* (Fig.5). What these drawings embody is the lived reality of culture’s assimilation of women and nature during pregnancy: whatever we may have been in our former lives, we are now simply body.

As the critical reception of Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* (2001) attests, speaking of anything other than the 'magic' of pregnancy and childbirth—the bewilderment, the isolation, the trauma of birth—is still viewed as betrayal of the children that women's body bring into the world. This led Kingston to curate a show of works like no other 'that grapples productively with difficulties and tensions; anger, fear, guilt and frustrations', which are mixed up with the 'profound love' that can be invoked by the maternal experience (Kingston 1990: 5). As Lewandowska states in the catalogue,

The question is how to reconcile the intensity of one's own experience as a mother with any activity outside of it, especially professional ambition. Do we have to continue to reproduce the stereotype which asks us to separate those spheres? (Kingston 1990: 37).

These spheres are still separate as the socio-economic conditions of neo-liberalism, which are founded on rationalism's division of culture and nature, and which continue to posit parenthood as an obstacle to productivity and childcare as a business not a right. Materials, studios, and time all need to be offset against the economic impact of becoming a parent. The reproductive capacity of the body therefore remains at odds with the desire for creative and intellectual (bodily) labour.

Time is a material that not only facilitates but also legitimates artistic and intellectual labour. In a guest lecture given at the New York State Writers Institute in 2007, H  l  ne Cixous stresses the significance of time for writing and offers a model for other writers that 'follows the sun [...] like the early bird':

At about six in the morning I'm already half through the first tenth of the work of the day. That is, I write, I start writing but I have to have conditions, I write at length without interruptions as if I were a runner, a marathon runner. And so I will write about let's say for about eight to ten hours without a stop and then I drop, as a marathon runner. So if I don't have that expanse of time then I don't even start [...] so when I write I write in a way in which many classic French writers did, that is endlessly for weeks, which makes writing difficult, I have to cut a large chunk of time in order to achieve something. And that's it and when I don't write



I sleep and when I sleep dream which means I write. Which means I simply exchange types of writing, day writing, night writing, etcetera without a stop (Cixous 2007).

For Cixous, writing is a feat of physical endurance in which time, the self, and the body are inexorably bound together. Likening her writing practice to that of a ‘painter’, the model she offers speaks of her entreaty to write the body as a marker of sexual difference but it also invokes a model of discrete intellectual activity grounded in the grand romantic tradition of French novelists. Listening to Cixous’ lecture, it is hard not to hear the same privilege in Elkins’ romantic construction of the space and time of the studio:

Waking each morning and going into a room suffused with the penetrating sharp odour of turpentine and oil, standing at the same table so covered with clotted paints that it no longer has a level spot for a coffee cup, looking at the same creaking easel spattered with the same colours—that is the daily experience of serious painters, and it is what tempts insanity (Elkins 1999: 161).

From Elkin’s anti-rationalist perspective, the presence of the body in the time and space of the studio is instrumental to the authenticity of the process of oil painting, just as it is for Cixous in the case of writing. As the materials of *Precious Papers* attest, however, a pregnant woman cannot be ‘shut up with oils and solvents’ (Elkins 1999: 161): her body expels her from the painter’s studio along with the artistic and professional identity it legitimates. As pregnancy gives way to parenthood, the one material the artist-mother and father struggle to acquire is time.

Elkins’ recourse to the maternal body sits, in part, within the lineage of ‘Eye and Mind’ by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1961). Merleau-Ponty’s essay countered the privilege Western Rationalism had given to reason by assigning a radical conceptual value to the gestation of the maternal body. He employs the privileged signifier of nature to imagine the unveiling of the world through paint, which passes from the ‘virtual’ visibility of ‘the mother’s body’ into actual visibility ‘for us and for itself’ (Johnson 1993: 129). Elkins’ draws on the proximity of gestation and death in alchemy to build on Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the ‘painter’s vision’ is ‘an

ongoing birth' (Johnson 1993: 129). Two passages of *What Painting Is* merit attention here.

First, in a wonderfully corpulent paragraph, Elkins writes:

Fermentation is yeasty death. A body that burns becomes lifeless power, but a body that ferments rots and the room fills with unbearable stench. As it swells, there is a strange and fascinating rhyme between a belly distended with swampy gases and a belly swollen with a growing child. To the alchemists fermentation was full of digestion, pregnancy, and new life. A vessel called a uterus was considered best for fermentation, but alchemists mimicked the womb by packing their sealed vessels in manure [which gives off heat], and even by placing vials in horses' vaginas. In general, vessels were sealed in imitation of the closed womb, and opened in imitation of Caesarean section. In art this corresponds to the inner drama of the private work, known only to the eyes of the person creating it, and the suddenly public work, rashly opened to public inspection. Everything private and wordless happens in the closed studio. The work is nourished there, kept alive and slowly grown: but there is always the impending moment when the inner dialogue between subjective thought and its silent embodiment will be ripped apart, and the materialized thought will become the object of someone's gaze (Elkins 1999: 143–4).

Second, Elkins develops these points, drawing on the operations of the metaphor of the maternal body to configure the relationship between artist and artwork in the studio that is,

just as intimate, and much more confused, than the relationship between a mother and her unborn child. The mother knows that the child is inside her, and she hopes that the child is intact as it grows. An artist, on the other hand, may not be sure of any categories—there is no clear difference between the artist and the half-formed work. Neither is in control, neither clearly 'makes' the other. The 'experiment' of art changes the experimenter, and there is no hope of understanding what happens because there is no 'I' that can absorb and control concepts—nothing has meaning except for the substances themselves. All that is known with certainty is the flow of fluids, back and forth from the tubes to the palette, from the brush to the canvas (Elkins 1999: 166).

The fluid operations of the maternal body form a vital instrument in Elkins' immersive physicality of the studio, mobilising metaphors of gestation, privacy, touch, birth, and unveiling to reject the historicizing, master narratives that the history of art has inherited from Western rationalism. It is an immensely powerful and necessary argument that, together with 'Eye and Mind', can be read via Pollock's call for the mobilization of the mother as a site of political agency; they are texts that 'read for the mother across the board, in the work of artists who are men and women' (Pollock 1999: 18). As she says in *Differencing*, 'this position of *apparent* alterity—the view from elsewhere/voice of the Other/Mother' facilitates a process of

destabilisation. It enables scholars to read ‘against the paternal grain’ by deconstructing ‘the oppositions of inside/outside, norm/difference which ultimately condense on to the binary pair man/woman’ (Pollock 1999: 8–18). More recently, the destabilizing power of the figure of the mother has been substantiated by the work of American immunologist, J. Lee Nelson. Nelson’s research maps ‘microchimeric’ phenomena, where a small number of cells are exchanged between mother and fetus during pregnancy (Nelson 2012). These cells continue to live on in their respective hosts, crossing generations between mother, child, and maternal grandmother, and actively work to protect those bodies throughout adulthood. The ‘bond’ of the maternal is thus not merely a bi-product of bio-chemically induced emotions but literally a lived matrilineage for men as well as women.

Our mothers stay with us, as we do with them, and we are thus beholden to uncover those specificities and differences of maternal experience, which, as Pollock reminds us, ‘are not the one difference that phallic logic decrees’ (Pollock 1999: 18). What *Precious Papers* reveals is the spectre of rationalism in the phenomenology of painting, which obscures the difficulty of lending the body to the world, when that body has been displaced and is no longer yours to lend. As Florentien Verhage argues in ‘The Vision of the Artist/Mother: The Strange Creativity of Painting and Pregnancy’, phenomenology runs the risk of incorporating the ‘body-container as the only relevant aspect of a mother’s experience’ rather than giving pregnant women ‘the perceptual and discursive agency of a creative lived body’ (2013: 301–3). In addition, Brian O’Doherty has argued ‘studio time is defined by [a] mobile cluster of tenses’ (Fortnum 2013: 74–5). Just as the studio is not a passive environment in which work emerges through making, woman’s ‘sensing body’ and ‘subjectivity’ are active agents in the formation of a fetus (Verhage 2013: 315). The ‘actual working’ maternal ‘body’ cannot be divorced from the intertwining of its ‘vision and movement’; it is not private or discrete but acts as an instrument of temporal and spatial rupture from studio practice (are these further quotes from Verhage?).

*Precious Papers* thus reveals the disembodiment of the maternal in phenomenology's discourse on painting.

### **Matrilineage, Patrilineage, and the Freedom to Act**

In order to approach Bodman's negotiation of maternal experience, which moves beyond the impasse outlined above, this section introduces the painting *Monument* (1993–5; Fig.6), via its beginnings in the *Precious Papers*. The drawings *Couple, Father and Son* (Fig.7), *Father and Sons* (Fig.8), and *Man* (Fig.9), which were all made in 1988, return to Bodman's earlier engagement with the 'great draughtsman' (Bodman, 2014), British painter Keith Vaughan. Bodman first encountered Vaughan in the mid-1970s, when she saw his *Harvest Assembly* (1956; Fig.10) as an undergraduate. Vaughan's practice offered her a model of how an oil painter could sustain a practice in adverse circumstances. During Vaughan's National Service, when he was stationed with the British Army's Non-Combatant Corps from 1941 until the end of the War, access to materials was limited; 'living in tents and cramped barrack-room quarters', Vaughan had to radically rethink his way of working and 'make do' (Vann and Hastings 2010: 149). As a result, his engagement with drawing and gouache began in 'earnest' (Vann and Hastings 2010: 149), and he made works, such as *Blue Figure Study* (1974-1976; Fig. 11), using this format until the end of his life.

On first inspection, *Harvest Assembly* works traditional associations between land, labour, and masculinity. The musculature of the figures signals their gender; however, they do not act upon the landscape or the viewer. The beginnings of Vaughan's forms can be situated art historically in the figures of Matisse and Picasso but the farm workers' gaze dissociates them from one another, the viewer, and the semi-abstract agricultural landscape in which they have been placed. The power normally ascribed to the mastery of the male body and its gaze is thus circumscribed by this displacement. Instead, their wistful and introspective reverie leaves them

subject to the gaze of the viewer and the stuff of nature that blurs the boundaries between the matter of the body, paint, and landscape. As Vaughan reflected in his journal, 'it is a commonplace that one's body belongs more to the environment, to nature more than to one's self' (Vann and Hastings 2010: 10). Vaughan's work provides an early register of the 'erotics of paint' that has been so fundamental to Bodman's practice.

It is *Harvest Assembly's* interplay of male bodies on agricultural and painterly ground that firmly plants a hook in this painting for Bodman, as it appeals to her own beginnings as a child in Wiltshire and what she describes as the 'interchangeable' relationship between the body and the land (Godfrey 2007: 13). As Rosemary Betterton points out in her essay on Bodman's landscape-based work of the 2000s, 'Bodman names two intertwined sources for her practice, being a woman and growing up on the family farm' (Betterton 2007: 7). Bodman's mother prevented her daughter from inheriting any part of her family's land or property. Works such as *Thicket* (2002–4; Fig.12) therefore lament her mother's complicity in the perpetuation of patriarchal privilege and, as Betterton concludes, 'enact her continued belonging to and loss of the farm to which she has no formal right' (Betterton 2007: 7).

It is in this context that Betterton makes a particular point of Bodman's emphasis on painting as a form of agency because, as she says, to paint is to 'make a space in which to act' (Betterton 2007: 7). I want to draw on Betterton's emphasis here to claim that Vaughan's painterly registers and representations of the male figure had been a means to negotiate the paternal lineage that the artist believed marked the tangled weave of agriculture, painting, and maternity. Each of these experiences had been inflected by issues of 'male succession' that became heightened by pregnancy and motherhood. In 1988, Bodman's negotiation of her displacement from the landscape of her childhood had been supplemented by the awareness that, like her own mother before her, motherhood had made her an instrument of the male line's

perpetuity. The headless figures in *Precious Papers* drawings, *Woman and Man* (1988; Fig.13), *Woman and Man (ii)* (1988; Fig.14), and *Father and Son* (1988; Fig.8), and *Man* (1988; Fig.9) pull the masculine figures into the paper's ground and the physicality of the marks laid upon it. To confine these figures within material realm of the body of the drawing is to deny them the power and privilege ascribed to pure reason.

These painterly strategies in Bodman's drawings finally bring me to the painting, *Monument*. Bodman still describes this painting as a work of 'particular importance' (Bodman, 2014). Begun after the birth of her second son in 1993, Bodman looked to *Precious Papers* for this painting's beginnings, which composes three male figures on a canvas of an almost equivalent scale to *Harvest Assembly*. The effacement of traditional heroic masculinity, which can be intuited in Vaughan's painting, is materially appropriated and developed by *Monument*. It is one of a number of works that the artist would later group under the title, *Painting Out Patriarchy*. The title, *Monument*, recollects the hours Bodman sat as a child gazing at a family memorial in the church of St Michael and All Angels in Urchfont, near Devizes. This memorial includes the busts of a mother and father but omits the names of the female line from the family's historical record. This early exposure to the exclusion of women from the right to property and history resonates through the material operations of *Monument* and *Family Photo*. *Monument* shifts the balance of figure and ground in *Harvest Assembly*, however, to engulf the body of the figure within the painting through a process the artist described as 'painting out' (Bodman 2014, October 25). Working with the canvas on the floor, the artist 'obliterated' the Vaughan-inspired male figures she initially set down on the canvas, pushing them back into the ground, actively concealing them within the body of the painting. In reproduction, their form is barely perceptible at all. Any attempt to trace their image is interceded by a confrontation with matter, the opaque colour of oxide of chromium, and the earthy vibrancy of spectrum red and purple-brown-black impasto that the artist has so intensely worked, all of

which are arrested by a broad passage of light green. The neck, shoulders, and right arm are all that remain of the left-hand figure, while above and to the right it is possible to trace the outline of a flat, rounded Vaughan-like figure in the background of the painting beneath the wax laden purple-brown-black. All that remains of the third figure is a ‘sword-like’ vertical form that bisects the canvas; another index of the heroic mythologies of masculinity imbibed via countless outings to castles and museums with arms and armoury that peppered the childhood of Bodman’s sons (Bodman 2014, October 25).

*Monument* pulls itself into being through an intertwining of liquid motion and (art) historical matter. As such, it performs what Barb Bolt describes as a ‘visual stutter’; substance and image, form and content are suspended in a to-ing and fro-ing of pictorial space that simultaneously reveal and conceal its object (Bolt 2003: 46–7). What makes *Monument* a painting of particular importance is that its resolution as a work of art depends upon its ability to sustain the contradictory forces at work in its material operations. Bodman’s commitment to the ‘erotics of paint’ is vital here. As Schor argues, ‘women artists have been impelled to resist visual pleasure in painting, moving from investigations of mark making and from involvement with material toward a strictly instrumental use of imagery appropriated from other, presumably less lascivious media’ (1997: 166). *Monument* does not reject the resources grouped under the banner of patriarchy outright, but rather synthesizes these art historical precedents, drawing on their visual pleasure as opportunities with which to act.

The outcomes of these bodily actions are not predetermined by ‘deliberation or conscious decision’ but happen, to invoke Elizabeth Grosz’s references to Henri Bergson, ‘through indetermination, through the capacity they bring to the material world and objects to make them useful for life in ways that cannot be specified in advance’ (Grosz 2010: 149–50). It is this indeterminacy that she argues can facilitate the most ‘intense’ expressions of freedom,

which are, as Grosz states, not indexical of the subject's emancipation from oppressive constraint: what has been imagined as the 'freedom from' (Grosz 2010: 140–1). Rather, it should be comprehended as the 'freedom to', which is the ability to articulate the 'intimate intensity' and 'uniqueness of our situation and our own position within it' in such a way that those 'acts become capable of transforming that being' (Grosz 2010: 147–8).

It is this synergy of being, movement, matter, and transformation that bring Schor and Elkins into play once more. For the to-ing and fro-ing, which is at the heart of the performative encounter with *Monument*, invokes the distinction they make between the art historical and painterly gaze (Elkins 1999: 97). While a historian may stand stationary viewing a static painted artefact, Elkins maintains that a painter 're-enacts the motions' that go into making paintings by 'following them' with their own body (Elkins 1999: 97). Conceptually, Grosz and *What Painting Is* provide a lifeline that can circumvent a becoming-mother's displacement from the site and time of the studio. The painter's compulsion to 'move with the painting', to trace its play of gesture and facture that animate its surface is nothing other than the bodily memory of the process of painting itself (Elkins 1999: 97). It is this bodily recall that intertwines the vision and movement of the past within that of the present, which enables the displaced painter becoming-mother to sustain a connection with the practices and processes from which they have been estranged.

The final part of this essay builds on this proposition, turning to one of Bodman's more recent works, *Family Photo* (2014), to map its negotiation and transformation of the later maternal experience through its engagement with historical works of art.

**Levelling the ground: mastery, sexual difference, and studio led practice**



Incidents of paint linger in the working mind of the painter as continuous thrills, as possibilities, like words you may soon use in a sentence, and—in a manner that seems to exist outside of spoken language—as beacons of hope to any human being for whom visuality is the site of questions and answers about existence

Mira Schor (1997: 155).

*Family Photo* (2014; Fig.15) measures a little over two by two meters. At the time of its making, Bodman had been thinking through the conventions of family photography. Her father had been a keen amateur photographer; he had a large format camera and involved his children in taking pictures and developing them in his makeshift darkroom in the family bathroom. From its freshly painted surface, five faceless figures stare out in a painterly assault of vibrant colour, forthright application, and modernist scale. Its palette of pink, Indian red, and alizarin crimson is punctuated by five broad brush strokes of light green across the chest and upper arm of a seated figure in the foreground. This colour register and the cropping of the figures by the canvas feel instantly familiar, calling to mind *Monument*.

In both paintings, the term ‘foreground’ is something of a misnomer, since there is no stable spatial relationship between the plane of the canvas and the bodies that are on it. In the case of *Family Photo*, its striking hues and gestures put the painting in ‘motion’, as Elkins would say (Elkins 1999: 97). They vie for the viewer’s attention by shifting from direct, broad alla prima strokes to more sketchy, translucent, glazed surfaces. As a result, the viewer’s eye cannot rest; drawn in a counter clockwise direction, it travels from the bottom centre up along the wheelchair figure, back into the deep recesses of the painting’s space across two, possibly masculine, forms. One of these figures perches precariously legs akimbo, the other is stands up right, almost to attention. The head of this figure is cropped by the canvas like a clumsy snapshot. To their left, on the edge of the painting a magenta and cobalt violet female form hovers, half in and half outside the picture, again cropped by the canvas. The placement of her arm, stance, and dress cast her as a maternal figure from whom the viewer’s gaze is abruptly wrenched by the light green of the figure seated in the foreground. There appears to be no

rapport between these figures of difference. It is a fictitious family bound together by painted matter and yet also made discrete by the absence of a shared gaze. Like a family photograph, the painting coheres upon the object of this shared vision, the camera bearer/viewer. But, more than this, the painting's synthesis of scale and pictorial operations immediately call to mind one of the signature works of the twentieth century, *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

Painted by Pablo Picasso in 1907, *Demoiselles d'Avignon* is in many respects the worst cultural reference for this essay (Fig.16). To draw inference from this canonical work gives the appearance of a somewhat lazy historicising impulse, and runs the risk of negating the value of an artwork by a woman through reading its 'idealisation' of and 'identification' with a heroic figure of masculinity (Pollock 1999: 9). More troubling than this, Picasso, as Pollock has identified, had been a key exponent of Modernism's 'virile' and 'autogenetic' artistic identity, 'claiming creativity' for artists who were men 'by a radical displacement of the maternal feminine in imageries of prostitutional and lesbian bodies' (Pollock 1999: 35). In this paradigm, the 'body of the painter' is a male actant who subjugates the body of woman either literally, via the representation of the nude, or metaphorically on the 'supine' body of the canvas (Pollock 1992: 140–1). As Carol Duncan argues in respect of *Demoiselles* in her 1973 survey of pre-war vanguard art,

No other modern work reveals more of the rock foundation of sexist anti-humanism or goes further or deeper to justify and celebrate the domination of women by men (1982: 305).

Viewed through this lens, the image of *Demoiselles* is equivalent to a statement of authority through which the body of the 'monstrous feminine' is tamed and contained by the brush/body of the male artist (Duncan 1989: 172). Bodman's work is a direct outcome of her feminist politics; for years, she has interrogated the same dichotomy of man-culture/woman-nature that Duncan's detects in Picasso's 'horrible image' (1982: 305). Any reference to *Demoiselles* in this context would appear to be wholly incompatible with the artist's politics. And yet, while

she did not have *Demoiselles* in mind when she painted *Family Photo*, Bodman was ‘thrilled’ by the possibility of a formal relationship between the two pictures:

*Demoiselles* has always been a big favourite of mine and is on my Desert Island Discs list of paintings which I could not do without. I was fortunate in having a really marvellous Art History lecturer at Birmingham [1974-1977], Dr. George Nozlopy [...] He had a deep knowledge French painting from Impressionism to Cubism—I am still using and adding to that knowledge today—I owe him a great deal still (2014).

To pursue, rather than ignore the contradiction that sits between Bodman, Duncan, and Pollock’s responses to *Demoiselles*, is to argue that even the most canonical of modernist paintings, which are diametrically opposed to the articulation of the maternal, can be appropriated to that end. This contradiction illuminates alternate modes of vision: one that looks for what a static image fixed on a two-dimensional surface means; the other, as Elkins has argued, looks for what the work *does* as it physically unfolds in an interplay of real and pictorial space (1999: 97).

In 1972, in his classic essay, ‘The Philosophical Brothel’, Leo Steinberg argues that the ‘content’ of Picasso’s painting is the ‘sum (incommensurable) of its internal and outgoing relationships’ not merely the final image contained by its surface (Steinberg 1988: 73). This significant corrective to modernist analyses reclaims *Demoiselles* from the historical value assigned to it as the first cubist painting, rearticulating it within the realm of bodily, uncertain material exploration that takes place within the studio. Steinberg meticulously tracks the way that the composition of *Demoiselles* unfolds through nineteen working drawings, thereby constructing an analysis of the picture that not only undermines the efficacy of Western rationalist thought but also the default virile sexuality of the male artist.

Two male figures were instrumental to the early drawings for the painting that would become *Demoiselles*: a ‘medical student’ and a ‘downy lipped sailor’ (Fig.17). The former, who holds a book and a skull, is the lynchpin of the painting’s incoming and outgoing relationships; he is

not 'absent' from the final painting but, as Steinberg puts it, incorporated into the place of the viewer (Steinberg 1988: 74). While the viewer's position is undoubtedly male, Steinberg argues it is one of alienation not mastery. This allegorical figure tries to know the world from a distance, through the 'dissection' of 'chilling analysis' and 'intellectual enquiry' but fails and 'the knowing man at the curtain, becomes the outsider' (Steinberg 1988: 74). It is he who cannot participate, who is the subject of the combined, interrogative gaze of the *Demoiselles* that 'directly assaults' the viewer with the 'sexual charge' that is at the core of the 'traumatic encounter' enacted by the painting (Steinberg 1988: 74).

Steinberg perceives the figure of the downy lipped sailor to be key to the trauma at work in the painting (Fig.18). Picasso, he tells us had a 'fleeting' identification with this 'mild and shy' youth prior to his removal from the working drawings (Steinberg 1988: 37). This gentle 'seaman' had been 'inadequate as a personification of vice; more likely a timid candidate for sexual initiation' (Steinberg 1988: 37). Viewed through this lens, *Demoiselles* can speak, not of the mastery of masculine sexuality, but of its codification. The embodied, uncertain logic of the studio facilitates a reading of *Demoiselles* that can transgress the dichotomy of culture-man-subject/nature-woman-object by drawing attention to a process that, in Steinberg's words, transforms 'the mysterious honing of sexuality which is a man's body' and 'broods on the difference between possessing and being possessed by one's sex' (Steinberg 1988: 40-3). Inculcation into the codes that marry mastery and masculinity may afford considerable power and privilege, but it also excludes and obscures those dimensions of subjectivity which culture has deemed extraneous to normative definitions of 'man'. The Western canon is built on both sides of this exclusion and attention to it can level the ground on which hierarchies of gender and knowledge are built.

To view *Demoiselles* as a material exploration of emergent masculine sexuality, rather than the execution of artistic and sexual mastery opens up a critical space for Bodman's dialogue with it in three ways. First, the absence of a rapport between the figures in *Family Photo*, their scale and interrogation of the viewer, which are unwittingly appropriated from the pictorial devices catalyzed by the incorporation of Picasso's medical student, perform the absent presence of the mother in the visual histories of the family. The family photographer is the agent who composes the image and is, therefore, embedded in its making, but as such they are also complicit in their removal from the document that passes into family history. As Bodman recalled in a conversation with me in April 2019, she is missing from almost all of the photographs of her sons as they were growing up. The magenta and cobalt violet figure who hovers on the edge of the canvas, the scrutiny of the viewer (after *Demoiselles*), and the facture that traces the painting's emergence all speak to this complex interplay of visual pleasure and the alienation of the maternal subject in history's patrilineal context. As such, it captures something akin to what Marianne Hirsch has named the familial look:

Within the family, as I look I am always also looked at, seen, scrutinized, surveyed, monitored. Familial subjectivity is constructed relationally, and in these relations I am always both self and other(ed), both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object: I am subjected and objectified (Hirsch 1997, 9–11).

Second, it liberates the visual pleasure that painting hitherto proscribed within the limits of the heterosexual masculinity that Schor describes. Indeed, as the recent resurgence in painting as a means to explore the embodied experience of gender has shown, this retreat into ideational content takes the canon at its word (Betterton 2004). As Pollock astutely noted in *Differencing*, the canon is,

A discursive formation which constitutes the objects/texts it selects as the products of artistic mastery and thereby, contributes to the legitimation of white masculinity's exclusive identification with creativity and Culture (1999: 9).

What Pollock detects in this discursive formation are the gendered effects of 'hylomorphic' modes of thought, which Tim Ingold explores in the now classic *The Perception of the*

*Environment* (2001): ‘The kind of thinking we call Western’ he explains ‘is founded in a claim to the subordination of nature by human powers of reason. Entailed in this claim is a notion of making things as an imprinting of prior conceptual design upon a raw material substrate’ (Ingold 2001: 78–80). Bodman’s dialogue with *Demoiselles*, therefore, facilitates a further appraisal of the gap between studio and conceptual historical knowledge, thereby testifying to the irrelevance of the heteronormative structures constructed for painting by the canon.

Finally, Picasso’s incorporation of the knowledge bearing rational student and sailor within the operational matter of the painting draws the viewer into the work, and thus rejects the detached reflection upon which Western thought is built. Instead, knowledge in *Demoiselles* is generated through an immersion in the tumultuous experience of the painting. Through this performance of ‘liquid thought’, the studio rejects the dualism of reason over matter, just as the figure of the mother traverses gender boundaries, and practice for the artist/mother-parent immersion generate new insights into interplay of sexual difference, culture, and philosophy.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has considered how the push and pull of liquid matter can reveal a becoming-mother’s negotiation of the transformation of the self and history in paint. By attending to the specificity of one artist’s practice, it has revealed the limits of phenomenology’s maternal metaphors and the residues of rationalism’s romantic construction of discrete intellectual production that lie within immersive models of studio practice. In particular, it has drawn attention to the corporeal specificity of the economic, temporal, and spatial constraints placed upon on the lived body by maternity and its implication for painters. To move beyond this impasse, this essay has argued how the lingering possibilities of art historical precedents can offer the means to negotiate the lived experience of maternity through painting and negate women’s physical and temporal displacement from the studio. In doing so, it has sought to

contribute to the continued critique of the detachment of embodied, lived experience from knowledge production that has been instrumental to the denigration of the humanity and creativity of women. It counters the exclusion of the mother/Other by affirming the creative and intellectual significance of work derived from an engagement with the family and more piecemeal modes of working as a means to sustain a practice. To do so is to hopefully offer a precedent through which young professionals can envisage a working life where experience born of the family not only matters, but can also aid their processes of thinking and making regardless of discipline. For this reason, a continued interrogation of the creative and intellectual worth of maternity and parenthood remains a vital imperative for feminist interventions in culture, politics, and society.

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