

Closeness is a Diffuse Border

Hannah Valentine

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He comes out, is put on her chest, above her heart, sticky. And the flesh that follows, put under a Kōwhai tree. And then another boy, and this time the placenta under a Rewarewa. The spine of its leaf twisted, curled, coming away from life and pressed into wax. He nurtured, unfurling.

Hannah Valentine is in the throes of motherhood. Somehow – *still* – an uncomfortable topic to critically engage with. We struggle, worrying that it will be dismissed, belittled, limiting. We see books on motherhood in the self-help section rather than the philosophy section. The mother figure is painted as one to overcome – she’s irrelevant, cringe, stuck at home with a tea towel and mush for brains. Previous identities and roles are discarded by others, with society thinking that once someone is a mother, they’re not of much use for anything else. For that figure, motherhood itself and the baggage that comes with it can be things to overcome, things to push away and escape from. Feminists have fought against this, of course, bringing the domestic, the body, the personal into art, culture and theory, but motherhood is still viewed as a niche concern for ‘women artists’ and ‘women audiences’ not for the likes of monumental, history-making, traction-making work. As if it could never have to do with important intellectual pursuits, as if it wasn’t foundational to humanity, as if it couldn’t teach us about life itself, or how to live well.

Valentine has been a mother for three years. Her two boys have been growing in a house in Tauranga, with a garden, and with space underneath for Valentine’s studio. A home encircled by a wooden fence. From this world, things have emerged into Valentine’s art: the Rewarewa leaf, pumpkin seeds and little Kōwhai leaves joined by their slender stems. They’re casts, or impressions, in bronze. Direct figurative representations, like these solid mirrors of objects, are new to her practice.

The leaves, both Rewarewa and Kōwhai, come from the trees which have grown over her sons’ placentas in the backyard. The pumpkin seeds represent her son’s first food after breastmilk – marking a transition, the beginning of weaning him off herself. For a month he was so taken with its sweetness that he ate nothing else. These are records of moments of transition as children, and parents grow. These are moments of mothering that pass quickly, often observed. Here they’re set in bronze – so solid, so present and lasting.

Valentine has also bought things from the past. She’s spent months braiding blue cotton thread, a material she remembers her mother sewing with when she was little, into delicate ropes. The plinths her bronze sculptures rest on are topped with the rimu floorboards of her family home, saved by her father and passed on.

Hazelnuts, scattered through the show, reach into Valentine’s Irish whakapapa. The hazel is one of the most important trees in Irish folklore – it is the tree of wisdom. In legend, nine hazel trees grew around the well at the end – or the heart – of the world, where the seven rivers of Ireland originate. In *Nurture*, one hazelnut from each of the trees is stacked, together performing an impossible feat of balance. In the various iterations of the tale, the nuts hold the wisdom of the world, and when imbibed that wisdom is

transferred. It is said that stringing hazelnuts around one's house can enlist the help of faerie folk, bring good luck or aid with fertility. Placing hazel twigs on your windowsill protects against storms. And of course, they're symbols of nurture – inside the hard outer shell, hazelnuts are sweet and sustaining.

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Today, motherhood is more fodder for visual culture obsessed with aestheticism. There's the beige baby phenomenon, where instead of colourful chaos, babies are brought up in a strict regimen of beige clothing, toys and bedrooms. It's like quiet luxury for babies, a "perfect" aesthetic, which commentators have called "sad". There are Insta-mommies who share only overexposed images of spotless children in white linen. There are trad-wives who simultaneously reclaim and reinforce expectations of mothers at home as they bake in expensive designer dresses, perfectly made up. There are endless articles and buzz words on how parenting should be done, and trends to follow, which come with products, pushed algorithmically from every angle – white noise machines which attach to baby cots, apparently helping them to sleep – helpful maybe, but babies slept, or didn't sleep, much before we could clip speakers next to them.

British sociologist Angela McRobbie has described a "neo-liberal intensification of mothering" a phenomenon in which overwhelmingly middle-class, white, well-adjusted mothers appear to have perfect jobs, perfect husbands, perfect marriages and glows of self-satisfaction which are then broadcast through social media. Competition and individual responsibility are key components of today's neoliberalism, and the manufacturing of "perfection" in motherhood then sets an expectation. These charades become measuring sticks which make other women feel like failures.

Here, the symbols of motherhood are modest, tactile and timeless. Who hasn't scooped seeds out of a pumpkin's belly, feeling the sticky strings trying to hold them in? Who hasn't seen the work of a needle and thread in a home, repairing a tear, reattaching a button, or most magic of all, turning fabric into a garment? At times, they're veiled – the spiral of *Being, over and over*, was made by coiling the wax around a broomstick. These symbols do not belong to the world of capitalism or idealism. They instead belong to things touched, worked with the hand, and remembered. They're the debris of intimate moments, acts of love in the home. Mothering then, is cast not as an aestheticization, but rather as something to feel – something to experience bodily.

Valentine's work has always called us to embody life, and tethered us to the real and tangible as an antithesis of living in a world where a digital overlay creates new, differing realities. Its surfaces, almost always holding the impressions of her fingers, have called us to the fact that our bodies shape our experience of the world. There's been invitations to touch, to hold and to play. To engage with Valentine's practice is to re-tether yourself to the physical, tactile world. Hand moulded works are present here too – sculptures that maintain the energy of how they were made – pulled, pushed, squished, twisted. In connecting this with motherhood, she has registered with great sensitivity the phenomenological experience of it. In tethering motherhood to physical things, Valentine reasserts that we live in messy organic sticky bodies.

Early in her book *The Argonauts* a pregnant Maggie Nelson feels her body profoundly altered. As pregnancy has its way with her body, she feels a radical intimacy with, and alienation from it. At the same time society seems to congratulate her, for making children, for breeding, for upholding American ideals and the nuclear family. “How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?” she asks. Through the pages, she proceeds to recast motherhood not as the socially expected trap she once believed it was, but something joyful, hard won, intellectually demanding and a form of creative and philosophical labour. The forming of her family became not something which took away from her work, but a frame and canvas for it. Here, Valentine has similarly applied the lens of her practice to motherhood.

For Valentine, at the core of motherhood is a palatable joy. This is most present in *Rattle (sparks of delight)* which grew out of watching her youngest shake a rattle for the first time. She watched his delight – a pure sensorial joy play across his face – as he discovered his hand could act in the world and make noise. A similar moment of connection is captured by the stanza in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge’s poem *Matter* from which the show’s title comes:

Closeness is a diffuse border between herself and you, a metonymy of sliding lullaby syllables through an upstairs window, whether voice incarnates love or you coalesce into love's matter-archetype by singing.

Text by Gabi Lardies

Gabi Lardies first met Hannah Valentine when both were studying at Elam in 2017. Now, Gabi is a writer based in Tāmaki Makaurau. She’s written for *The Spinoff*, *Metro*, *New Zealand Geographic*, *The Guardian*, *North & South* and others. She has also contributed to books such as *Dwelling in the Margins: Art Publishing in Aotearoa* by Gloria Books, *Chez Derriere: Snacks*, and *Huarere: Weather Eye, Weather Ear* by Te Tuhi. Gabi is also an occasional book designer.