

Martina Mullaney: Usually She is Disappointed

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We suffered terribly as we became our separate selves.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, 1931:163.

Anna, Anna, I am Anna, she kept repeating; and anyway I can't be ill or give way, because of Janet; I could vanish form the world tomorrow, and it wouldn't matter to anyone except to Janet. What then am I, Anna? –something that is necessary to Janet. But that is terrible, she thought, her fear becoming worse. That's bad for Janet. So try again: Who am I, Anna?

Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 1962:344.

To come into being, the Greek philosopher Empedokles argued, is to be a part of a mixture. To separate is to cease. Empedokles proposed that everything except fire, air, earth, and water is perishable. All four of these elements exist eternally, and are held together (suspended) in a solution which he called Love. The world as we know it can therefore only exist, he argued, when both Love and Strife are present: birth being the mixture and death being the separation of what had been mixed. In our current socio-political and socio-ecological climate, existence seems to have become increasingly preoccupied with strife, exposing us to an intensified sense of separation and loneliness, in spite of our shared vulnerability.

Usually she is disappointed (2018) by Martina Mullaney questions whether art can find a way of overcoming this atomizing isolation and resulting loss of sensitivity. Evolving over a period of 2 years, this collection of images attempts to make sense of the interconnected relationship between artist, mother and institution, between public, politics and compassion.

These concerns emerged from *Enemies of Good Art*, a project initiated by Mullaney in 2009, which took its title from the infamous quote by author Cyril Connolly, who, in his 1938 novel *Enemies of Promise*, asserted that “there is no more sombre an enemy of good art than the pram in the hall.”

Enemies of Good Art debates the issues arising from this infamous quote, through public meetings, seminars and workshops in order to temper the separation experienced by artists with children in the art world, and by proxy, within capitalist systems. This is achieved through developing public discussions and art based events that involve parent and child participation.

Driven by the realization that western, post-industrial social structures are not going to end well, Mullaney's creative practice has become increasingly concerned with finding visual and performative methodologies that might invoke a sense of solidarity between different publics, but particularly between the institution and the maternal. The causes of separation, her work suggests, are not just confined to war or totalitarian ideologies, they also reveal themselves daily in the failure to react to someone else's suffering, in refusing to understand the needs of others, in insensitivity and in eyes turned away from a silent ethical gaze.

The number of images that make up *Usually she is disappointed* reflect Mullaney's resolve to ensure that we cannot turn away, that we cannot be quietly ushered, screaming child in arms, towards the exit. She argues that we are all implicated and that, most importantly, we are living through a time and place loaded with implicit cultural boundaries; where restrictive social pressures continue to prevail and where the expectation to conform comes as much from within as from outside.

Mullaney's black and white compositions contain close up portraits from found images including French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray and feminist philosopher Helene Cixous as well as the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow and New York painter Carmen Herrera. These women were the catalytic agents for *Usually she is disappointed* and provide a context for Mullaney's thesis because they all share, to some extent, the belief that a breakdown (of the mind, of the body, of the art world, of an artwork, of society) is also a *breakthrough*. It can lead to a higher sense of understanding, releasing the architecture of the spirit from material and *maternal* confinement. This theme of breakdown, is, according to author Doris Lessing, a way of addressing and dismissing false dichotomies and divisions. (Lessing, 1962:8).

Lessing believed that Art during the Middle Ages was communal and un-individual. It came out of a group consciousness and did not have what she described as the "driving painful individuality of the bourgeois era". (Lessing, 1962:12) Like Lessing, Mullaney's work is concerned with moving beyond the egotism of individualism, turning instead to a form of art making concerned with expressing the need to take responsibility for each other rather than for our individual and separate selves.

This notion is exemplified in Mullaney's decision to include an image of Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old Indian dentist who died in Ireland in 2012 from a septic miscarriage in the collection of images that make up *Usually she is disappointed*. Halappanavar's miscarriage took seven days to unfold and in that time she had asked repeatedly to have a termination, knowing that, with ruptured membranes, her risk of contracting an infection would be very high. The medical team did not judge her life to be in danger, which was the only means by which a woman could have an abortion legally in Ireland. Up until 2018 the act of abortion, where there was no immediate physiological threat to the woman's life to continue the pregnancy, was a criminal offence punishable by life imprisonment. Halappanavar's unnecessary death caused substantial controversy in Ireland leading to protests and

marches, and later, she became one of the many women to be remembered by those who campaigned to repeal the Eighth Amendment, allowing abortion to take place.

Halappanavar's warm smile is adjacent to Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge; waving demurely in *Usually she is disappointed*. We are invited to consider the relationship between these two figures. A relationship that Mullaney further complicates when she includes a laughing/screaming found image of the American painter Alice Neel along with an image of the artist Paula Rego who famously locked her children out of her studio, as well as a portrait of a child by Dorothea Lange, living in the dust bowl of America during the Depression of the 1930s.

Other images Mullaney selects from visual art and culture include a found image of the artist Catherine Opie, breast feeding her child, the cultural theorist Stuart Hall holding one of his children, Leonard Cohen with an arm around a dog. Amidst these found images, Mullaney captures fragments from her own experiences. Glimpses of the artist's daughter are visible alongside a line of washing, a pet dog, kittens, a flock of sea gulls, toys, a monkey carrying her baby in a tree, morning light in a small sitting room.

Through these diverse groupings of images Mullaney explores the idea of the maternal, the experience of motherhood and the histories of feminism in all their complexity. This vast array of figures and creatures, spaces and times engenders what ecologist David Abram calls a "felt relation with other forms of sentience." (Abram, 2010, p.235).

Mullaney amplifies the importance of these interconnected relationships through the use of text. Written in white on a black background beside each image is the word 'seminal'. The etymology of seminal, according to Mullaney, comes from the term 'of seed' or semen. Figuratively, the term in the 17th century was used to mean 'full of possibilities.' Mullaney notes that there is no feminine equivalent to the word seminal. Her decision, therefore, to place this term beside images that reflect the poetry of the everyday, the experience of separation, the economic and practical demands of childcare, familial relationships, celebrity, domesticity and loneliness, are part of Mullaney's on-going search to make a more thorough and less binary representation of what it means to be an artist parent, or, more specifically, what it means to be a mother.

The images comment on the exclusion of women from the Academy, their prosaic nature a reaction to the biologically driven representations of motherhood seen within the Academy. What defines one person as a mother doesn't necessarily define another as a mother, and, more often than not, representations of motherhood within the academy (if they are present at all) prevent viewers from seeing the multiple subjectivities of the maternal.

Applying the term seminal to the seemingly arbitrary collection of images Mullaney has collated to make *Usually she is disappointed*, comments on the patriarchal nature of language

and reveals what it means to experience the hypocrisies and dualities, hierarchies and insecurities of a neoliberal and capitalist art world, a world which often hides behind what Mullaney describes in her writing as a bohemian veneer, where solidarity is implied, but not necessarily offered and rarely experienced.

Each of Mullaney's black and white compositions tend to show only a fragment of a whole, a dog's nose, a child's arm, a rainbow in a park, and, more frequently, the quiet corners of domestic interiors: a small window, the television at night, a glimpse through trees of a precarious bathroom extension, a draughty skylight. These elements reveal part of a longer story, a memory, a secret. Many Modernist thinkers such as E.M. Forster and Margaret Schlegel were wary of the sentiment that gathered around domesticity, familial relationships and belongings, believing that material possessions were a false form of allegiance. But possessions are a symptom not a cause, a symptom of having no fuller sense of belonging.

Virginia Woolf's house was packed with strange items inducing a kind of claustrophobia and demanding that the sentimental ties they represented be honoured. Daily life as an artist and mother living through this period in history is honoured in Mullaney's work in two ways. Firstly, through her decision to define each of her selected images as seminal and secondly by disseminating those seminal images across social media platforms.

Exhibiting new work daily on social media allows Mullaney to remain connected to her fragmented artistic community, a community which was established in London and beyond before motherhood. In so doing, she reaches out to those artists and parents who no longer live in the major cities where they once studied and led promising careers. This is because more often than not these cities can no longer offer them the support they need to survive as artist parents.

Using social media as a tool to circulate her work also helped Mullaney to initiate further discussions on what it means to inhabit the world as an artist and a mother, two worlds so often characterized by very separate duties and roles. By opening up this discussion she continues the conversations she originally started with *Enemies of Good Art*, and, through these conversations, she, along with those with whom she engages, experience a momentary catharsis from the singular archaisms they are required to adhere to.

Usually she is disappointed bears witness, therefore, to the fact that our lives exceed the categories that organise our relationships to power and to each other. Each image contains, in an abstract sense, an echo of Mullaney's interior state of mind, and those of the ideas and characters, who inspire, anger, love and challenge her. As our encounters with the world and others become increasingly mediated as predictive and prescriptive, Mullaney represents personal, political, global and local narratives that are impossible to organise into what Guattari (1989) calls reductionist, stereotypical order-worlds.

By giving credence to the lived experience of the artist mother, Mullaney shows us a space of becoming rather than a space imbued with discrete and exclusive categories of being. This space of becoming sits between experience and expression, existence and essence: the fertile, complex and anarchic spaces of Love and Strife in which we *actually* live. Hers are the locations where acts of love are as much acts of defiance, where we are “both more and less than the categories that name and divide us” (Finn, 1992). It is in this space of awareness and becoming that, as Woolf points out, “our life adjusts itself to the majestic march of the day across the sky.” (Woolf, 1931:184) For Mullaney, the sky may be darkening, but the door still opens, the door goes on opening.

References:

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