

mère-fille:

an archive of care

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis project, *mère-fille (mother-daughter): an archive of care*, I reflect on the evolving dynamics within family relationships through the photographic medium. By combining found archival photographs of maternal interactions with images I make in collaboration with my mother, the work centres on the embrace as a gesture of connection. My research draws from 19th-century hidden mother photography, exploring the tensions of both physical and emotional proximity and distance, reflecting on mortality and loss, and examining the historical undervaluing of women's care work. Photographs, video, and ceramics engage with the complexities of shifting roles that accompany aging, through both subject matter and material presence. Rooted in the slowness of analogue photography and ceramics-making, the project fosters care through collaboration and contemplation. The relationship between sculptural form and images unfolds as a dialogue between materials: porcelain embodies the fragility of care, while video introduces the underlying anxiety inherent to caring for someone.

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I acknowledge that my work has been created on the unceded and traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. As a white settler and an artist whose practice is rooted in care and connection, I extend my care and recognition to this land and its traumatic history.

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Fig. 1. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process image (in the studio)*, 2025.

Introduction

All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Susan Sontag's *On Photography* highlights how photography points to the transience of time, of life, and as such is a reminder of death (15). Photography is not only a means of preserving moments but also creating them—forming connections through image-making, and evoking emotion. I centre my practice on autobiographical images that express internal emotional states and value the medium's ability to materialize ephemeral moments. The process of photography itself can lend itself to fostering care and connection. I chose analogue photography to slow down collaboration, allowing for deeper engagement through the shared process of making an image together. Delving into relationships that are inherently complex yet rooted in love, such as family, allows for a mutual understanding through the shared act of making.

It was the loss of my father that led me to my MFA thesis project, *mère-fille: an archive of care*. There is something unnatural about losing a parent at the age of 24 and from that grief emerged an urgency to collaborate with my mother while she is still here. Photography became a tool to care for her in a meaningful way, especially after moving across the country, from Montréal to Vancouver, to pursue my studies and establish my career as an artist. The thesis project began as an effort to bridge that distance and foster our connection through conversation and artistic collaboration, where my mother agreed to be photographed and to discuss themes of aging and mortality. Echoing Sophie Calle's art-making, particularly her artist book *Rachel Monique*, an elegy to her mother, I create to ask challenging questions about kinship dynamics and mortality, transforming my vulnerability and anxieties into playful creativity. *mère-fille: an archive of care* is grounded in the intersection of care, my dual roles as daughter and artist, and situated within contemporary art and feminist discourse surrounding women's care work.

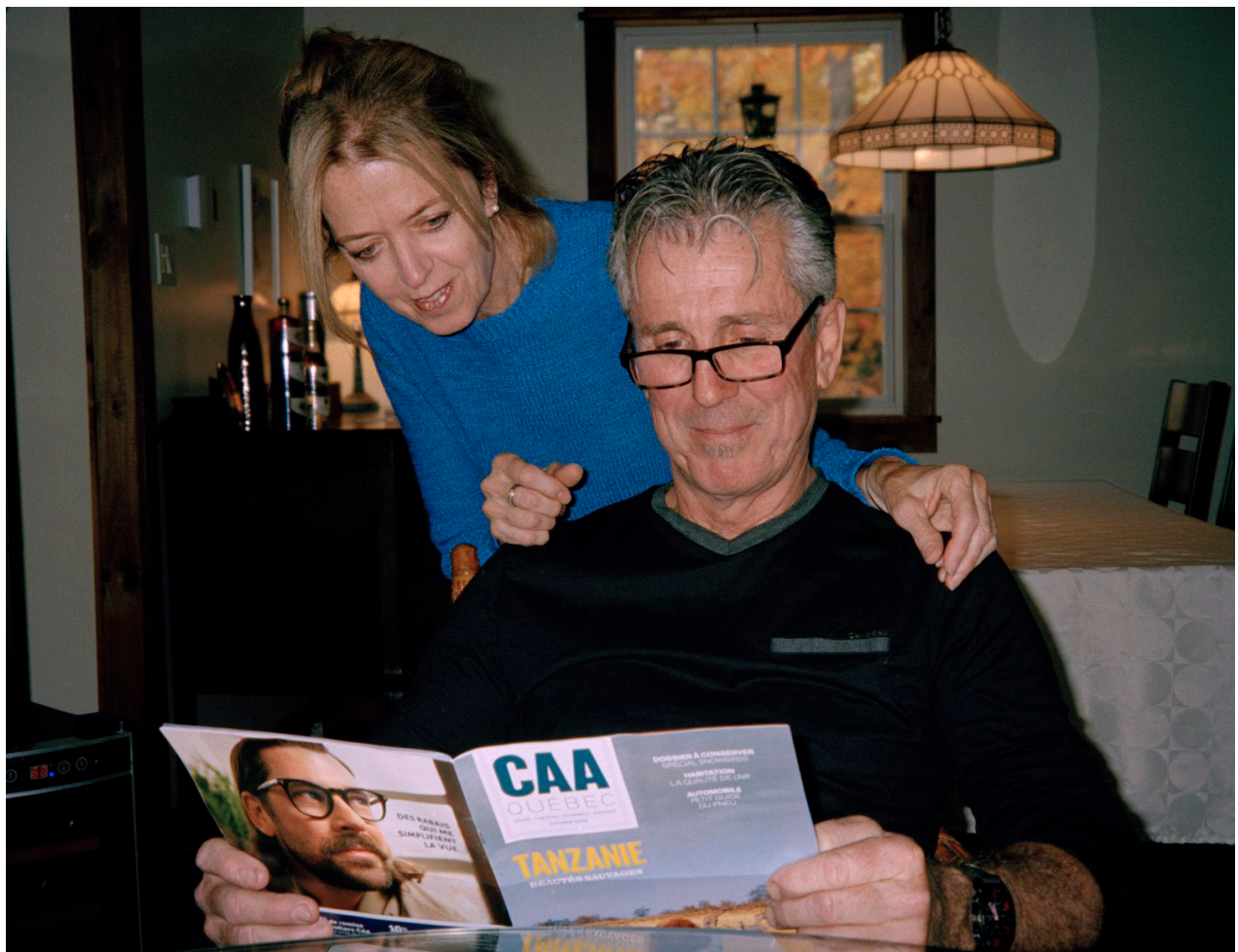


Fig. 3. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *The Family Project (detail)*, 2019.

Care as a Gendered Labour of Love

During the two-year MFA thesis research at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, I took on a journey of investigating ideas around care with my mother, with image-making as central to the practice. Through collecting found images, alongside experimenting with other mediums such as ceramics and video, I have explored care within our relationship, approaching it not only on an emotional level but also by attempting to materialize care.

Prior to starting the MFA, my perspective of care within familial contexts was shaped by personal and relational experiences. Growing up as an only child in a single-parent household has influenced my view of family and the many roles we take on and exchange over time. It also defined and informed the close relationship I have with my mother. Experiences such as my father's illness and passing left me with unanswered questions, making me hyper aware of impermanence and death—a natural phenomenon that feels so unnatural.

A defining experience that deepened my understanding of care occurred during my teenage years, when I witnessed and assisted my mother as she cared for her own mother over the course of five years before her passing from Alzheimer's disease. This experience highlighted the complexities of aging and the shifting dynamics within familial relationships, as my mother became a caregiver—a complete reversal of roles. Through this caregiving, where a daughter was now taking care of her mother, I came to recognize acts of care to be complex, laborious, undervalued and—importantly—gendered. While these acts were grounded in love, the emotional and physical toll it took on both mother and daughter was evident. Through my research, I seek to explore the emotional dimensions of care within familial relationships.

In *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life*, author Alva Gotby frames care as labour: “reproductive labour has an important emotional aspect – the work of soothing children, providing company for the elderly, and maintaining intimate forms of sociality. This work is commonly known as ‘love’” (x). For Gotby, care becomes a labour-intensive act disguised as love, where “love entails an expectation of being constantly available to meet the emotional needs of people they [women] love” (10). In capitalist society, certain roles and responsibilities are assigned to mothers and daughters, and taking care of someone out of love does not mean it is easy or labour-free. Love and responsibility intersect as we navigate changing dynamics in parent-child relationships, and these roles are inherently gendered, where “women perform significant amounts of unwaged care work” (xvii). Gotby informs the way that I define care in this project: a labour of love that is both

complex and fluid. I understand care as an act, emotional or physical, big or small, often “unseen [in] everyday effort”, and recognize that it is not inherently one-sided, as “we are all dependent on one another” (4). Within mother-daughter relationships, care is often reciprocal and continuously evolving and this thesis project serves as a means towards understanding ever-shifting responsibilities and roles within them.

The fear of aging is shared and timeless. Born when my mother was 42, I find myself at 28, working on this project at a moment that feels timely, vulnerable, and overwhelming. *mère-fille: an archive of care* creates a space for my mother and I to share these fears, as she too faces a fear of aging and the changes it brings—physical, emotional, and social. Through image-making with analogue photography, a slow process that allows conversation, and physical interaction, we are adapting to our evolving roles, while contemplating this fear that resonates with so many of us. I am interested in what it means to work through the fear of aging and death with the person we care most about in this world.

Artist Sophie Calle has long been an inspiration to my practice. I am fascinated by her provocative investigations into others’ lives, which are voyeuristic, witty, vulnerable and beautiful. I first encountered her artist-book *Rachel Monique* (2012), in September 2023 as I began developing my MFA thesis project, and I felt it encapsulated her artistic approach. In this work, Calle memorializes her mother through photographs, text and archival images, integrating passages from her mother’s diaries—diaries her mother offered her in her final moments. Calle adds a playful yet profound touch to the book with a stamp that reads “Ce livre a été volé à Monique Sindler”—playing with the notion that this book, which holds her mother’s personal moments, has now been “stolen” (volé) and made public. One could argue Calle is an artist who excels at shocking and unsettling her audience. In *Rachel Monique*, she includes a series of video stills of her mother’s last breath (fig. 4). These images evoke a powerful emotional response, forcing us to confront our own reflections on mortality and loss. This series is poignant in the way that it is both vulnerable and audacious, capturing our attention in a way that echoes Calle’s ability to engage her audience in unexpected ways.

Her practice inspires my own vulnerability through the personal themes that I take up in my own artmaking, encouraging an exploration of personal and difficult subjects while embracing a playful approach—one that feels fun, experimental, and not overly serious.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.
The removed material is an image of a spread
from Sophie Calle's artist book *Rachel Monique*.

Fig. 4. Sophie Calle, *Rachel Monique (detail)*, Paris, Éditions Xavier Barral, 2017.

Clément Chéroux highlights this sense of playfulness in Sophie Calle: “[...] despite the unmistakable presence of death, the work of Sophie Calle is rarely morbid. Perhaps this is because she constantly compensates for the gravity of her subjects with a deliberately light approach”. Reflecting on loss and grief through art can create space for contrasts and paradoxes, such as experiencing sadness and loneliness alongside joy and connection. Calle’s work engenders layered emotions, and I imagine that creating these pieces allows the artist to process difficult, universal emotions. Similarly, I make art from a place of personal experience—not only as an opportunity to process what I am experiencing, but also with an interest in how familial intimacy shapes our identities and influences how we see the world. What role do mother-daughter relationships play in the formation of identity? We are raised with certain values and understandings of life, and later, we must navigate and differentiate our own beliefs from those we were taught.

As my mother and I collaborate on the thesis research together, our roles as mother and daughter intersect with those of artist and collaborator. Unlike Calle’s *Rachel Monique*, I wanted my mother to be an active participant in the project by making her co-artist, however, as time passed, I

came to realize that achieving this balance was more complex than I had anticipated. Susan Sontag writes “[a] photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights—to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on. (11)” *mère-fille: an archive of care* is not about capturing a specific moment, but rather about the experience of making the images itself—a process that acts as an intervention in our lives, an expression of care inviting us to discover what it means to care for one another. The relational dynamics of our connection are explored through conversation and the act of photography itself.

Photographing my mother inherently changes the power dynamic, leaving us to negotiate these new roles within the project, reflecting the shifting responsibilities we encounter in our relationship as we both age. This complex process requires ongoing effort to redefine our responsibilities to and with each other. In the project, I inevitably shape how she is represented, even as I aim to involve her in the process and share agency by listening to her ideas and desires. Despite these efforts, I believe that the role of the artist involves a level of interference and control over the direction and outcome of the photographs. As the artist, my vision guides the image-making and inevitably shapes what viewers perceive. This idea is reflected in *Untitled I (mère-fille series, 2024)* (fig. 5); my mother and I are depicted holding hands, our arms entangled in a grip that is both strong and tense. This image, informed by my personal experience, speaks to the desire to hold onto people or moments as they are, while also reflecting the complex nature of caring for someone. People navigate life with different needs and desires, and to care for another involves trying to understand the other’s needs while also acknowledging your own capabilities and limits. This photograph is directed by my own vision of care and would likely have been captured very differently from my mother’s viewpoint. The tension between interference and collaboration, as well as between control and care is pivotal to the thesis project. This dynamic surfaces in various phases of the *mère-fille: an archive of care*, as I delve into the complexities of care and family dynamics through autobiographical photographs and material exploration, where I share a glimpse into my experience of daughterhood.



Fig. 5. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled I* from *mère-fille* series, 2024.

The Embrace

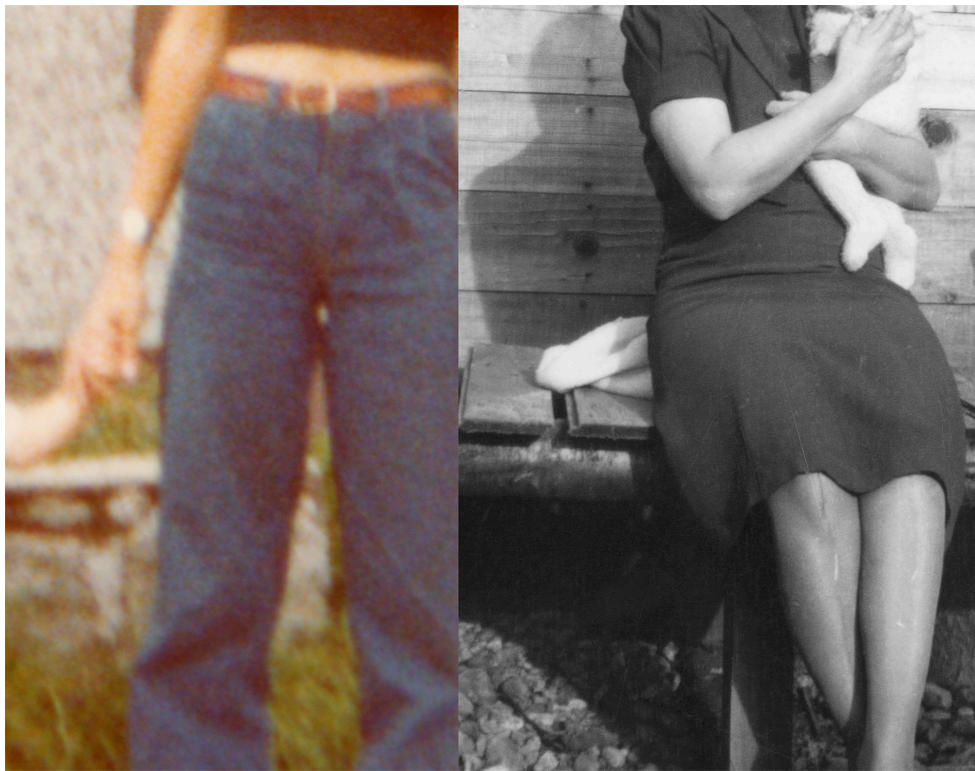


Fig. 6. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled V* from *mère-fille* series (crops of found archival photographs from the Vancouver Flea Market), 2024.

The embrace became a central symbol to the thesis project, as I considered how emotions and tensions are carried, both mentally and physically, and how we take on the weight of others' emotions. Gotby describes emotional labour as an embodied practice, emphasizing how we use the body not only to communicate emotions but also feel them physically and cognitively (4). "[Emotional Labour] is not only a mental practice; it is something that involves the body. We feel emotions in our bodies—from the tension of anger or anxiety to the warmth of joy" (4). The embrace symbolizes both care for others and a reminder of the importance of self-care, a delicate balance that is often forgotten. I was particularly drawn to the embrace because, despite the deep love in my relationship with my mother, physical intimacy has never been our instinctive way of expressing affection or care. The entangled embrace as depicted in *Untitled I (mère-fille series)* (fig. 5), felt like a playful and meaningful opportunity to explore this intimate gesture, reflects on how it appears in familial connections and how it can be used to express internal states.



Fig.7. Claudia Goulet-Blais *Care in Action (detail)*, MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.



Fig. 8. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Étreintes Maternelles, Care in Action (installation view)*, MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.



Fig. 9. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Care in Action* (installation view), MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.

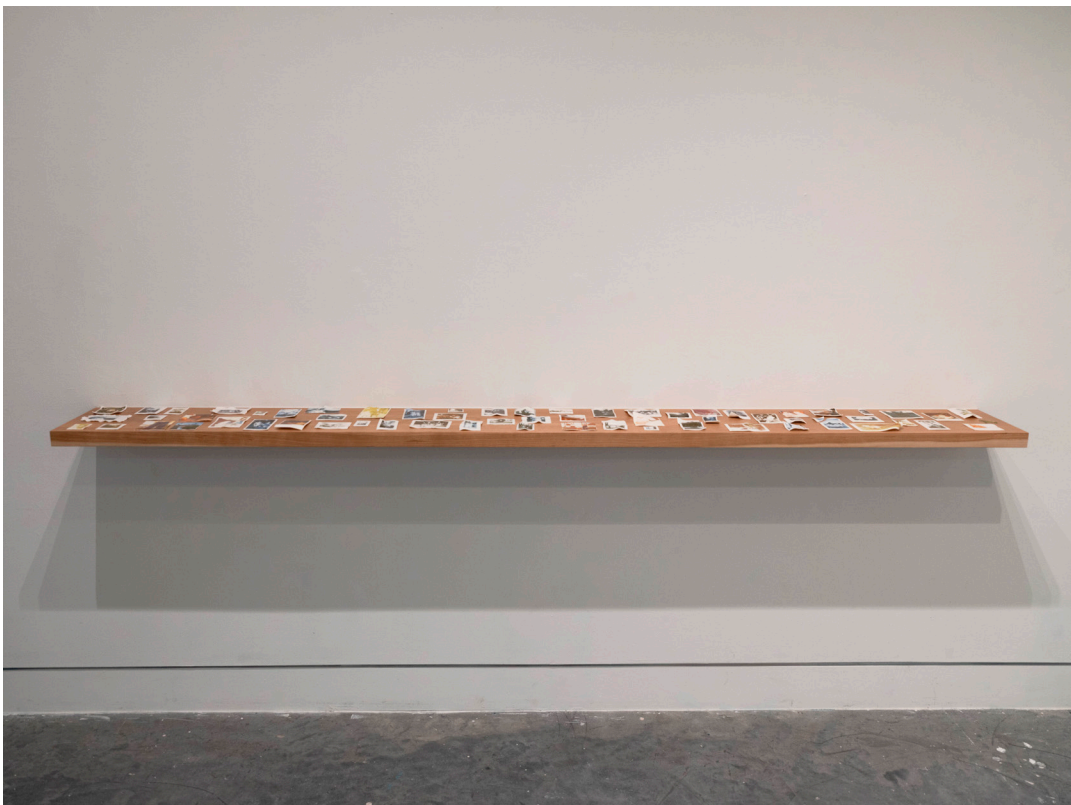


Fig. 10. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Étreintes Maternelles* (installation view), MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.

The two bodies of work, *Care in Action* and *Étreintes Maternelles (Maternal Embrace)* (fig. 8,9,10) that I installed for the State of Practice Exhibition (2024) in the Michael O'Brian Exhibition Commons at Emily Carr University of Art + Design explore the concept of the embrace through found archival photographs as well as photographs that I made with my mother. For *Care in Action* (fig. 9), I asked my mother to perform for the camera, guiding her through an exploration of movement and gestures. The final three images were composed of in-camera analogue double exposures, a technique chosen to express a ghostly presence and sense of impermanence. I appear in only one of the photographs (fig. 7), my arms tightly holding onto my mother. Am I holding on to the mother I've always depended on? Or am I holding on in fear of losing her? Is this an effort of navigating the distance between us?

While *Care in Action* reflects the relationship with my mother, my work resonates more broadly to the unique and complex nature of maternal relationships experienced by many. Through my exploration of body language in found photos collected from the Vancouver Flea Market, I took a particular interest in the depictions of mother-child connections expressed through touch and embrace. These anonymous archival objects bring their own historical context to my project and enter a dialogue with my personal narratives. Informed by my interpretation of these images as representations of mother-child connections. I cropped some of the images as I observed the physical interactions depicted, focusing on stances that convey either affection, distance, or ambivalence (fig. 6). In turn they shaped and helped focus my own photographs. As Susan Sontag describes it, "[t]o collect photographs is to collect the world" (3). The themes of care, aging and mortality are shared human experiences that manifest in people's lives very differently.

Within my research, I am interested in the experience of both mother and daughter. Artist Ahndraya Parlato's *Who is Changed and who is Dead* has informed my perspective on shifting maternal relationships through her photographs and narration from her dual roles as both a mother and a daughter. She draws out the complexities of negotiating the many aspects of connection to her children and her own mother who has passed. She makes clear how relationships with mothers shape our identity and influence how we will be mothers in turn. The book shares autobiographical elements and broader reflections on mortality, gender roles, and the everyday in motherhood, through staged photographs and others more candid that guide the viewer through a visual and textual narrative. Parlato deals with themes of death and loss: "I'm

scared of dying because you need me. I'm scared of dying because I have so much curiosity about the people you will become and the thought of not experiencing that is heart-wrenching. And, of course, the scariest scenario of all – your death – which I imagine as the hardest thing I could be asked to endure” (11). The fear she expresses speaks to the vulnerability and anxieties of motherhood and to the dynamic between mother and child. Parlato's reflections on daughterhood and loss, particularly the feeling of guilt resonates with me: “I think about how sometimes I used to feel uncomfortable having fun when you were alive, and I knew you were sitting alone in your apartment” (95). By producing this sense of guilt so common, I relate to this feeling as a daughter living far away from her mother. My thesis project has required a conscious effort to communicate more openly with my mother, to travel to see each other and prioritize time together for making photographs. This ongoing exchange has brought up conversations about our roles within this project and the evolving nature of our mother-daughter relationship through distance, aging and shared experiences of loss. Gotby reinforces this idea of guilt: “Feminist writings on care often mention the feeling of guilt as a corollary of love. Even though it is a negative emotion, one that people try to avoid, it is closely connected to love” (11). She also describes the family as a “place of intense feeling, and the most important source of emotional wellbeing, but it also continually produces pain, trauma, and disappointment, as well as investment in ideologies of love and labour” (1). These contrasting ideologies and emotions described by Gotby bring forth the anxieties within a dynamic of love that I strive to convey in my photographs, particularly through the means of body language.

Materializing Care Through Porcelain



Fig. 11. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Étreintes Maternelles (detail)*, 2024. MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.

The found photos that I have been collecting since the start of my thesis project appear in *Étreintes Maternelles* (fig. 11) as photo-transfers onto porcelain, where the photograph's three-dimensionality is emphasized through materiality. I was initially drawn to porcelain for its fragility, and my associations with domestic objects found in a kitchen armoire — untouched, protected, perhaps reserved for special occasions, as decorations holding memories, or as a family heirloom. Porcelain objects are typically cared for in a home, and I wanted to explore that association in relation to the found photographs I had been collecting — photos discarded, either bought at estate sales or given away to collectors from flea markets. It fascinates me that once-cherished memories and photographs are for sale, at my disposal to look through and select depictions of mother-child connections. I want to handle these photo-objects with the care they deserve through installation and material exploration.

My process for transferring images on ceramics involves printing the images on a film-coated paper using a decal transfer technique, creating a waterslide transfer onto the porcelain (fig.12). These pieces, shaped from cut slabs, and glazed, are designed to mimic the appearance of paper photo prints, while allowing the embodied physical process of making them naturally form the crinkles and waves of the ceramics. I displayed over 50 pieces on a handmade cherry wood shelf, where spending time with the sequence is essential to the viewing experience (fig.10). After this iteration, I began exploring various shapes and sizes for these porcelain photographs, eventually experimenting with displaying them on the floor—transforming the viewer's experience completely by requiring them to look down and carefully navigate around the pieces — hopefully with care (fig.13). I appreciate the contrast of the fragile objects on a concrete floor—a juxtaposition that resonates with the photographs of my mother, which embody a care that is loving, yet layered with complexity. I do not alter the original narratives of the found photographs, but to reframe them, creating a dialogue between past and present as well as their imagery and my personal narrative. Ultimately, *mère-fille: an archive of care* explores the meaning of care through materials and representation. The materiality of porcelain becomes a symbol of care—valuing both the discarded images and the embraces they depict.

I position my thesis project in conversation with artists and theorists who examine the physicality of photography as well as the role of vernacular imagery in contemporary art. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart's *Photographs Objects Histories* (2024) is a pivotal influence in how I



Fig. 12. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process Image* (decal transfers on porcelain), 2024.



Fig. 13. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process Image* (floor installation), 2024.

approach the medium of photography not only as images but also as material objects through photo transfers on ceramics. In the book's introduction, the authors examine the materiality of photography from different angles, such as the physicality of the surface, which includes the paper, plasticity and chemistry. They also consider the presentational form such as albums, frames or mounts, as well as the physical traces of usage and time that leave marks on the photo objects. The authors explain how materiality has often been overlooked in photography's history but argue that it is deeply embedded in the photograph's characteristics. They highlight that "[a]cknowledging the material makes the act of viewing more complex and more difficult, as the act of viewing cannot any longer be processed in the same way" (14-15). This notion resonates with my exploration, where from a distance, the porcelain pieces can convey the illusion of paper, leading the viewer to acknowledge the material aspect of the work.

Through shaping the porcelain, my presence is imprinted in every fold, tear, and crinkle, embedding my touch permanently in the pieces. This intimacy aligns with Edwards and Hart's assertion that "[m]ateriality also extends the indexicality of the image through both bodily interaction with the photo-object, especially the tactile, and through interventions with the indexical image" (13). I emphasize how photographs hold "traces of [their] former material lives", carrying their own histories (5). My interest in working with found photographs stems from a curiosity about their past lives. What were their authors' intentions? How were they cared for? While focusing on the embraces between mother and child for content when selecting these images, the physical qualities of the photographs are also essential to my considerations. In *Photographs Objects Histories* (2024), historian Glenn Willumson's essay "Making Meaning: Displaced materiality in the library and art museum" encapsulates my interest in collecting discarded archival photographs. He writes: "Although [photographs] are initially treasured for their ability to reproduce a person, an event or a location, the passage of time is not kind to photographs. As connection is lost and memory fades, photographs are quickly stored in boxes and albums. They are moved to attics and basements until, eventually, they become merely discarded objects" (62). I am particularly interested in how the found photographs I work with, once discarded from private spaces, now exist in my practice. This idea of shifting contexts from private to public is a central idea discussed in Willumson's essay.

Porcelain became my material of choice for this project due to its permanence and the value

that people often attach to it. This idea of caring for these photographs that were once discarded and are now transformed into porcelain objects is central to the research. It echoes Edwards and Hart's idea that materiality and content of an image should both be considered. They suggest, "there is a need to break, conceptually, the dominance of image content and look at the physical attributes of the photograph that influence content in the arrangement and projection of visual information" (2). Through the making of these porcelain photo-objects, I was struck by how my personal conception of memory, shaped by experiences of illness and loss, as well as the fear of forgetting, had created a strong attachment to strangers' stories that are embedded in these object-photographs.

Taking the Image Off the Wall

As I began to reflect on the materiality of photography—particularly through my exploration of bridging sculpture and photography through photo transfer methods on ceramics—considerations of installation methods became central not only to how I present my work in a space but also to my creative process. I now think about how I want to engage both the exhibition space and the viewer even before I begin making the work. Since preparing for the State of Practice Exhibition, I have been interested in taking the photograph off the wall and expanding it into the space, challenging the conventional idea of a two-dimensional image while highlighting the three-dimensional qualities of photographic medium. For State of Practice, I built a 12-foot shelf out of cherry wood (fig. 10) and created three photo-holders (fig. 14) from the same material to suspend my photographs two inches away from the wall. I was drawn to cherry wood for its natural ability to change color with time, a quality that resonated with themes of evolving roles through aging. I was pleasantly surprised by how this transformation manifested physically after only a few weeks of installation, the porcelain pieces displayed on the shelf had left subtle traces on the wood, revealing the impact of the light even in a space that was not directly exposed to a window (fig. 15).

With the porcelain photo-objects, the shelf and the holders, I aimed to move the photographic image beyond the flatness of the wall. I printed the photographs held by the wooden structures on Masa paper, a material that offered movement and a delicateness that connected to the fragility of the porcelain and contributed conceptually to the work. My goal for the materials and installation methods was for them to contribute meaningfully to the project rather than serving solely as presentation tools.



Fig. 14. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Care in Action* (detail of installation view), MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.



Fig. 15. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process Image (deinstall of Étreintes Maternelles)*, MFA State of Practice Exhibition, 2024.



Fig. 16. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process Image (mold making for slip casting porcelain)*, 2024.



Fig. 17. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process Image (small porcelain chain links)*, 2025.



Fig. 18. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Process Image (large porcelain chain links)*, 2025.

With my interest in giving the photographic image a sculptural presence, I found inspiration from Leslie Hewitt's *Still Life Series*. In this work, Hewitt arranges books, wood and printed images on the floor, then frames and positions the still-life photographs against the gallery wall in a way that seamlessly integrates them into the physical space (fig. 19). This subtle yet compelling play between two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements influences my approach for the MFA Thesis Exhibition.

In view of the exhibition and wanting to further explore various installation methods and their impact on the viewing experience, I learned the skills of mold making and slip casting porcelain, a material that remains integral to my investigation of care (fig. 16). I envision creating porcelain chains where two will be composed of small links (fig. 17) and installed in a way that creates the illusion of suspending a photograph. I will also make larger chain links (fig.18) to form structures that will support two dibond-mounted photographs, allowing them to be propped up and lean against a wall. Once again, I will be experimenting with how photography can exist—three dimensionally—in a space and how this allows *mère-fille: an archive of care* to exist at the intersection of sculpture and photography.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.
The removed material is an installation
photograph of Leslie Hewitt's *Untitled (Delicate)*
from *Still Life Series* at Sikkema Malloy Jenkins.

Fig. 19. Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Delicate)* from *Still Life Series (detail)*, 2013. Sikkema Malloy Jenkins, smjny.com/winter-2015-group.

Embracing Error



Fig. 20. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled IV* from *mère-fille* series, 2024.

A significant challenge of working with analogue photography is the anticipation of the outcome, which can be both stressful and disappointing. Yet, there is also a sense of thrill and reward in this uncertainty, especially when an image turns out as expected or even surpasses expectations. This tension became particularly heightened in my thesis project, where my collaboration with my mother imposed limitations on our photo sessions. Since we could only make photographs together during my visits to Québec and her visits to British Columbia, each opportunity took on a sense of importance that left very little space for error or failure. I had to make the most of each opportunity, exposing multiple rolls per visit while hoping for the best results.

One of the most pivotal moments in this project arose from an error. *Untitled IV (mère-fille series, 2024)* (Fig. 20) resulted from an accidental double exposure. I had intended to take both a portrait of my mother and a self-portrait, but instead, I overlaid the two images onto the same frame without noticing, as I was working behind the camera while also being in the photographs myself. When I received the developed film in Vancouver, weeks after my visit, I initially saw this as a failure. The two portraits were fused together, making it impossible to view them separately as I had originally intended. I was also unable to reshoot the portraits as I was now thousands of miles away. Disappointed, I was quick to dismiss the image. However, during a meeting with my supervisors, I shared the image with them, and they encouraged me to reconsider it. They saw something powerful in the emotional impact of the double portrait rather than simply being representational.

From that point on, I began to actively embrace the mistake of the double exposure, reframing it as a deliberate artistic method. This led to the development of my State of Practice series, *Care in Action*, which was intentionally built around in-camera analogue double exposures. I gave up having full control on the final outcome of the image, allowing the unpredictability of the process to shape the work. What began as an accident transformed into a visual choice. In this series, the double exposures emphasize the movement of the embrace in care and self-care while also creating a ghostly presence that speaks to the themes of absence, loss, fading memory, and the act of holding on (fig. 9). This approach allowed me to let go of traditional photographic conventions that I previously followed closely, inviting me to reconsider my relationship to the image and embrace the lack of control embedded in analogue processes.

This method will once again appear in for the MFA Thesis Exhibition, where I have created a double-exposed portrait of my mother and myself for *Untitled VI (Hidden Daughter series)* (fig. 21). Through this technique, I explore both similarities and differences between us, pointing to the passage of time and the evolving nature of our relationship. I appreciate the double exposure for its layering of frames that closely aligns with the layers of complexity innate care and relationships.



Fig. 21. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled VI* from *Hidden Daughter series*, 2025.

Hidden Daughter

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.
The removed material are detail images from
Laura Larson's *Hidden Mother* artist book.

Fig. 22. Laura Larson, *Hidden Mother (detail)*, Baltimore, Saint Lucy Books, 2017.

Although initially driven by personal experience, the project has evolved through engagement with artistic and theoretical frameworks, sparking new reflections on the complexities and dualities within familial relationships of care. In *They Call it Love*, Gotby frames care as labour, emphasizing its inherently gendered nature. She explains that “[t]hrough the framework of gender complementarity, women’s emotional skill is seen as something men lack” and as a result of this “emotional deskilling” men are “excused from carrying out emotional labour while appearing as ‘self-made’ and not owing anything to people who have cared for them” (69-70). Gotby highlights how societal norms and ideologies, which characterize women as motherly or caring, have historically excused men from these responsibilities.

Reading Parlato’s *Who is Changed and who is Dead* I was reminded of 19th century photography—specifically daguerreotypes and tintypes of children—where mothers, hidden by drapes, would hold their children still during long exposure times to prevent blurring (fig. 22). These images are striking in their awkwardness and eeriness, but they also serve as poignant symbols of care. The mother’s role is essential, yet she is masked, present but unseen. This notion of the maternal figure, both visible but out of focus, resonates with the ways in which women’s care work has been historically undervalued and overlooked. This concept of *hidden mother* became a pivotal moment during the second year of my thesis research, in turn inspiring my latest photographs with my mother.

I began researching this historical genre and discovered Laura Larson’s artist book *Hidden Mother*. The book weaves together fragments of historical context, personal narratives, poetry, and a curated selection of historical photographs depicting women hidden by fabric while holding babies and young children as their photograph was being captured (fig. 23). Larson fittingly asks, “Why would they not simply take a photograph of the child with the mother?” (12). While these thoughts are compelling, I found myself drawn, once again, to the embrace — the various ways mothers held their children, the closeness and the distance captured in these images. This inspired me to use the embrace and fabric as a visual metaphor in my own photographs, where I became the hidden daughter. Reflecting on the shifting roles within my relationship with my mother, I see how the way we care for one another has transformed over time. From my mother raising me alone and walking me to school each day, to now myself worrying about her from afar, our dynamic has evolved. This negotiation of responsibilities and roles is discussed by Lori A. McGraw and Alexis

J.Walker in *Negotiating Care: Ties Between Aging Mothers and Their Caregiving Daughters* (2004), where they expose the challenge with “balancing expectations that women — both mothers and daughters — have ambitions and independent needs of their own” (326). It is a difficult reality to navigate in finding the balance between personal aspirations and family ties.

In *Untitled III (Hidden Daughter series, 2025)* (fig. 24), I use fabric to obscure my presence in the photograph while still reaching out to hold onto my mother. The embrace here feels uncertain, light and distanced, whereas in another image from that series *Untitled I (Hidden Daughter series, 2025)*, (fig. 25), we are both hidden, disappearing into the drapery, trying to hold on to one another. In *Untitled IV (Hidden Daughter series, 2025)* (fig. 26), the fabric covering my body takes on the form of a veil—evoking a person in mourning. Here, the embrace, holding on, becomes central again, offering a reflection on future loss. Fabric is a material I explore in various colors and patterns, using its ability to conceal bodies—much like in *hidden mother* photography—while also evoking associations with funerals and mortality, all while emphasizing the hands and the embrace that remain uncovered (fig. 24, 25, 26).

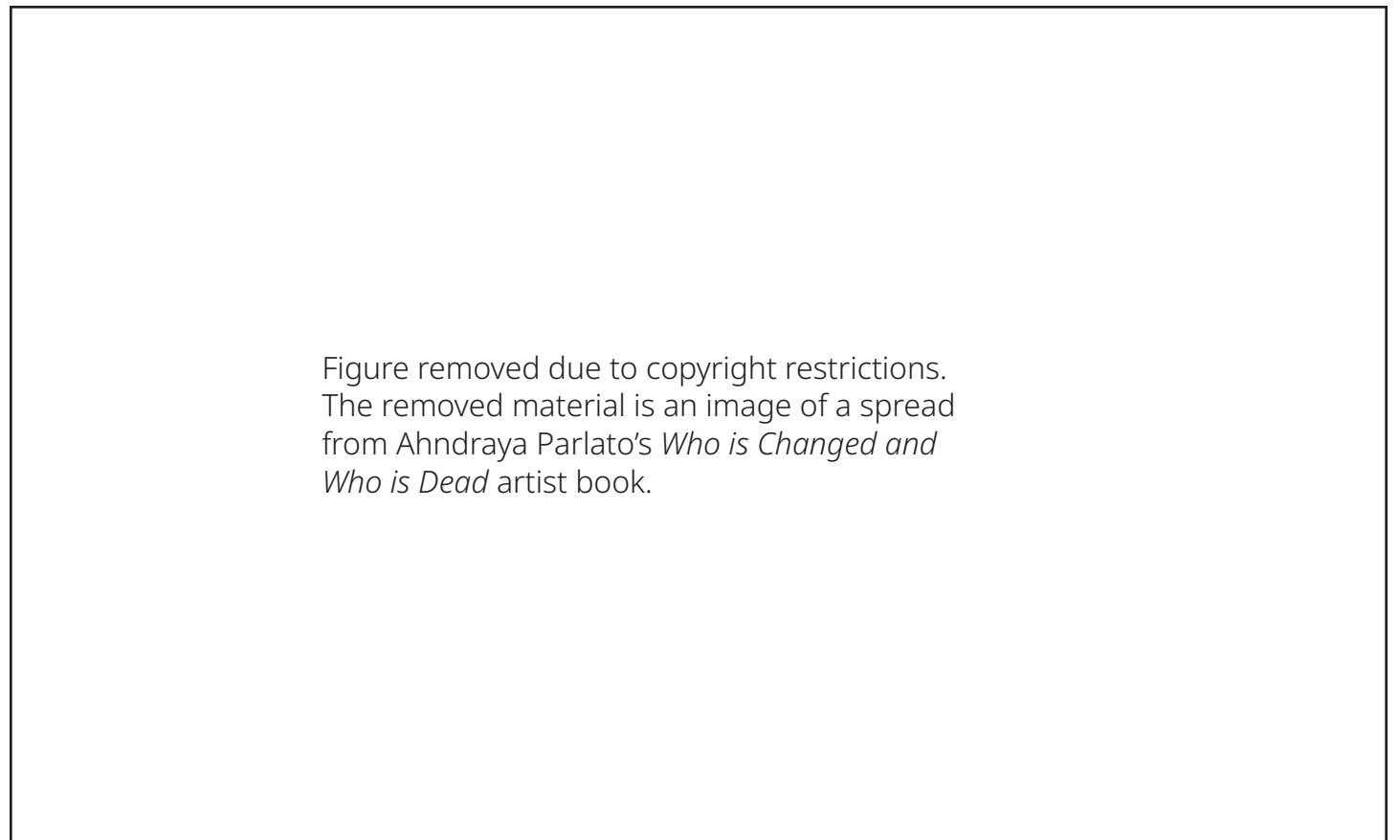


Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.
The removed material is an image of a spread
from Ahndraya Parlato's *Who is Changed and
Who is Dead* artist book.

Fig. 23. Ahndraya Parlato, *Who is Changed and Who is Dead (detail)*, MACK, 2021.



Fig. 24. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled III* from *Hidden Daughter series*), 2025.



Fig. 25. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled I* from *Hidden Daughter series*, 2025.



Fig. 26. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled IV* from *Hidden Daughter* series, 2025.

Careful Surveillance

you sleeping?

*Going to bef
Bed*

*a guy was ringing my doorbell
I did not answer
but I saw thru my bedroom window*

*oh shit
should you call police?*

*my heart is beating out of my chest
I have a headache*

call L

he's gone

*did he stop ringing?
are you sure?*

yes he stopped

scary

that was 2:45AM my time

*I would text L
ya that's crazy*

I texted him

was the guy in a car?

don't text him

*did he ring lots?
did the guy see you when u looked in the window?*

*I was sound asleep
Do not sure how many times
but about 3*

I'll call you



Fig. 27. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *You Sleeping? series* (video still), 2025.

On April 14th, 2024, an unsettling incident occurred in the middle of the night. A man rang my mother's doorbell numerous times, and when she looked out the window, she saw him step back a few feet and point his arm towards the front door, visibly waiting for someone to answer. This situation felt unusual for the small, quiet city where she lives—a residential area far from any bars or businesses. Perhaps it was nothing more than a drunk man trying to find his way home, but it was enough to frighten my mother who texted me in a panic. At that moment, I felt powerless and scared myself. She ended up calling the police, and the next day, I asked a friend to help her set up surveillance cameras around her house.

What I did not anticipate was that a body of work would emerge from this situation (fig. 27, 28). As I began receiving Blink¹ notifications for every movement the cameras detected—my mother leaving for work everyday, a car driving by, a cat wandering in the middle of the night, the mail carrier dropping off a package, the neighbour mowing his lawn—I started to connect this overwhelming feeling to the anxieties I was experiencing as a daughter. These anxieties were tied to shifting roles and the helplessness that comes with feeling like I have no control. I decided to reconfigure this experience into a video and photo installation, hoping it would help me navigate these emotions and bring out the layered, complex nature I was aiming for with *mère-fille: an archive of care*.

At first, surveillance served as a means of bridging the physical distance between us, allowing me to check on my mother from afar and ease my concerns about her being alone. However, over time I began to question this “solution”. It not only introduced a new form of anxiety into my daily life, with constant notifications throughout the day and night, but it also prompted me to reconsider the inherently voyeuristic nature of surveillance, even when employed for personal usage. My mother had consented to being monitored, but what about the mail carrier, the neighbours walking by or her visitors? On one hand, there is a certain intrigue in observing scenes from a distance—a sense of closeness and nostalgia evoked by watching my old neighbourhood, observing my mother's routine, and recalling the winter snow that I deeply miss. Nevertheless, in contemporary society, surveillance has become overused, as David Danks notes in his essay “*Ubiquitous Surveillance and the Politics of Refusal*”, “We have operated as a country, as a society, and as individuals under the assumption that ubiquitous surveillance was primarily the province of law

1 Amazon. *Blink Home Monitor app*. blinkforhome.com/blink-app.

enforcement. We now must adapt to a world in which it is readily available to everyone” (244). Installing surveillance cameras at my mother’s house seemed to be logical—normal—to ensure her safety. Yet, it is disconcerting that an act as voyeuristic as watching someone has been normalized. Out of respect for my neighbours and others captured in the footage, I exclusively used footage from individuals from whom I have consent. Nonetheless, footage of all these individuals, license plates, banal daily scenes, remain stored on my hard drive, and potentially in Amazon’s database, given that Blink is owned by this enterprise. As Dank reminds us, “[p]erhaps the most important kind of activism is personal and social, in that we can make individual choices to fight the slide into ubiquitous surveillance. Before buying a “smart home assistant” such as Amazon Echo, we should learn about the ways in which it does (or does not) support corporate surveillance” (246). It is interesting to contextualize how certain usage of photography and video can contribute to the proliferation of ubiquitous surveillance, even when that is not the user’s intention.

Avoiding surveillance and being captured on camera, whether by entering an establishment or simply being in public space, has become increasingly difficult. Is it therefore wrong to install cameras in front of a residence to ensure security and document potential incidents? This remains a question I have yet to answer. However, employing this technology in my final installation—a medium in which I have little experience—felt important in addressing tensions of care in my thesis project. It also raises concerns that I had not previously contemplated. What are the implications of the act of looking through a camera? The digital medium contrasts with the porcelain material I utilized for its fragile, tangible quality—one that I associate with care. This juxtaposition also engages with the physicality of photography versus the video image, which remains digitally presented on a screen, creating a sense of distance and a more passive, voyeuristic gaze for the viewer. I experience this distance myself when watching surveillance footage of my mother, despite my intention to engage and help.



Fig. 28. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Untitled I* from *You Sleeping?* series (detail), 2025.

Conclusion

I invite a final reflection on Roland Barthes' *Winter Garden Photograph*—the image of his mother that he writes about in *Camera Lucida* but never reveals. Barthes states that, to others, it would be an “indifferent picture” as no viewer can share his deeply personal attachment (73). This observation speaks to a challenge in autobiographical photography: How can we translate personal experience into images that resonate with others? Barthes suggests that a photograph is successful when it creates an emotional response. This challenge has been at the centre of the making of *mère-fille: an archive of care*, guiding my approach to the balance between the personal and the universal.

In my image-making, I engage with universal themes—loss, mortality, and aging—that everyone, in some form, must confront. In presenting my own experiences, I create a space for reflection, inviting viewers to engage with these themes through their own interpretations to these shared experiences. Formal decisions such as obscuring faces, offer moments of pause and entry into the narrative. Based on my own experience engaging with other artists' work, such as Sophie Calle's images of her mother (fig. 4.), photographs rooted in personal narrative can resonate deeply with viewers when photographs remain open-ended and capable of evoking affective responses.

Beyond my journey of exploring care with my mother through photographic processes, my art-making has also included researching, collecting found imagery, experimenting with ceramics and video, cumulating into an archive of care. Gotby's reflections on the relational, political, and embodied dimensions of emotional life have impacted how I come to understand care not only as an intimate, relational practice but also as a gendered negotiation. My MFA thesis project was also influenced by 19th-century *hidden mother* photography, where the embrace and feminist perspective became even more central. By embracing error as a method and experimenting with various installation methods, I have evolved my photographic practice into one where imagery, materiality, physicality, and conceptual frameworks are inseparable, each continuously informing the others.

My MFA journey has confronted me to introspection and creative exploration, focusing on emotional resonance and inviting viewers into a dialogue about care, loss, and physical connection. It has not only broadened my technical skills spanning from photography, ceramics and video, but has also expanded my conceptual inquiries. As I leave Emily Carr University of Art + Design, I do so with ambition and a continued interest in furthering my research on care through the history of

hidden mother photography, as well as pushing my video experimentation with surveillance. I am particularly interested in the intersection of technology and care, looking at how caring for someone can translate through text messages, email, surveillance, and social media platforms. As I move forward, I will continue to work closely with those I care for through artistic collaboration, recognizing the importance of connection and how much there is to learn about oneself through these shared experiences.

***Thesis Exhibition
Documentation***



Fig. 29. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Hidden Daughter* and *Entre ce qui nous sépare, ce qui nous lie* (*Between what separates us, what unites us*) (installation view), MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.



Fig. 30. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Hidden Daughter (detail)*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.



Fig. 31. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Hidden Daughter (detail)*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.



Fig. 32. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Hidden Daughter (detail)*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.



Fig. 33. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Hidden Daughter (detail)*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.



Fig. 34. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *Entre ce qui nous sépare, ce qui nous lie* (Between what separates us, what unites us) (detail), MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.



Fig. 35. Claudia Goulet-Blais, *You Sleeping?* (installation view), MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2025.

Reflection

For the Thesis Exhibition (2025) at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design's Michael O'Brian Exhibition Commons, I presented the bodies of works *Hidden Daughter* (fig. 29-33), *Entre ce qui nous sépare, ce qui nous lie* (*Between what separates us, what unites us*) (fig. 29, 34), and *You Sleeping?* (fig. 35). Once installed together, these three projects formed their own archive of care, where each medium was used to explore a different facet of the mother-child relationship. Photographs, video, and ceramics engaged with the complexities of shifting roles that accompany aging, through both subject matter and material presence. The relationship between sculptural form and image unfolded as a dialogue between materials: porcelain embodied the fragility of care, while video introduced the underlying anxiety inherent to caring for someone. Rooted in the slowness of analog photography and ceramics-making, the project produced care through collaboration and by providing time for reflection. By combining found archival photographs of maternal interactions with images created in collaboration with my mother, the work centered on the embrace as a gesture of connection. With inspiration from 19th-century *hidden mother* photography, the *Hidden Daughter* series explores the tensions of both physical and emotional proximity and distance, reflecting on mortality and loss, and examining the historical undervaluing of women's care work.

While my installation was on view, I had the pleasure of numerous studio visits and conversations with visitors in the space. I was excited to notice the various ways people experienced the work differently and how much conversation it generated without needing direct context from me. It was meaningful to see the work spark reflections, emotions and dialogues. I learned a lot through these exchanges and appreciated the generosity people brought to their viewing experience. Everyone carries their own experiences of family and relationships, and themes of aging, connection, touch, and anxiety seemed to resonate in different ways as viewers moved through the installation. I also noticed people's curiosity about the materials, specifically the porcelain—viewers often took time to realize what the material was, creating a slower, more contemplative way of engaging with the work. This was interesting to witness, especially with my approach to sculptural form, as I begin to explore various materials and approaches into a single space. The process of installing confirmed how much I enjoy the challenge of working site-specifically and how much the exhibition context, whether a university, a white cube gallery, or an experimental space, shapes the way work is experienced. I find these shifts exciting and generative for my practice.

Through various conversations during the exhibition, and particularly during my thesis defense, I realized that while care has been central to my thesis project, the nuanced emotional and relational dynamics expressed through gesture and body language were perhaps even more central as expressions of psychological states within relationships. Although I began this project rooted in personal experience, I now feel the desire to move beyond it, centering the work more within contexts of psychology, and larger theoretical concepts such as the *mother as other*. During my defense, the idea that my mother is not only herself or my mother, but rather a stand-in for a broader concept of *mother* was something that resonated with me and pointed me towards a new direction for future research.

Another important insight from my defense was around the idea of embracing error. While I have embraced a lack of control in my process of image-making, especially with the double-exposure and the performance aspects of my photographs, through answering the questions on this part of my work, I realized that the overall installation is still quite controlled in the end. This made me recognize the potential of how much further I could go in allowing chance, glitch, and unpredictability into my methodology as it relates to the reality of human experience and relationships.

The thesis defense was an inspiring and motivating moment. My panel—Birthe Piontek, Randy Lee Cutler, Gonzalo Reyes Rodriguez and Lisa Baldissera—asked smart, thoughtful, and challenging questions that not only affirmed the work I have done but also opened many exciting paths for future exploration. Their engagement and feedback, with both my installation and thesis support document, focused not only on the successful aspects but also on what could evolve, providing me with ideas for how to engage within the same research terrain from other perspectives.

As I work towards my next creative projects, I will continue to work closely with the people and dynamics that shape my life, but with new strategies for how I approach and share my experience. My MFA has transformed how I think about personal experience in my practice; it will remain central but will focus more on larger conceptual frameworks and perhaps even involve other people outside of my immediate circle. I feel motivated by the evolution of my practice through this program and am excited to continue developing new ways of thinking and working that build on my experience at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

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