

the image as a felt thing:

ambivalent gestures in motherhood and painting

By: **LAURA ROSENGREN**

BFA, Alberta University of the Arts, 2001
BEd, Mount Saint Vincent University, 2005
MA, Regent College, 2012

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abstract

In painting, the brush stroke is a record of the artist's hand, a convention that carries many associations. Accounts of art history often mythologize the solitary genius, while capitalist notions of innovation prioritize the fast, the next, and the new. As a counterpoint, this thesis project seeks to foreground the gestural repetitions and labours of craft and care work by combining and juxtaposing them with traditional painting practices. Two main concepts flow through the paper in support of this idea: the first is ambivalent care, and the second is the concept of the container. Ambivalence holds together conflicting ideas and mixed feelings. While this often results in temporary suspension or uncertainty, ambivalence fosters care by acknowledging complexity and holding dissonance together longer. It acts as a container. The artwork in this project integrates traditional painting practices, such as oil painting on canvas, with other methods, including needle felting and repurposing domestic detritus, widening the visual vocabulary of painting by creating gestural alternatives to the brushstroke. In addition to the visual and tactile marks they leave behind, these materials hold a history of gestures that inform and disrupt the reading of the work. Throughout the project, I investigate how a mixed material painting practice might express ambivalent acts of making, unmaking, and remaking that integrate the gestures of care labour into painting.

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*Fig. 1 **Folding Laundry.** Fabric dye, gesso, acrylic and oil paint, needle felted wool on canvas. 72 x 48". 2025.*

I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art.

Virginia Woolf

Diary entry April 20, 1919

introduction

As both an artist and a mother, I often work in a perpetual state of interruption, attempting to spin webs from the “loose, drifting material of life” (Woolf). Into my painting practice, I bring a tactile attention to the quotidian, repetitive, fragmentary and fleeting actions of motherhood. I’m interested in the small, often invisible repetitions and interruptions that accumulate and shape our lives. The paintings, such as in Fig. 1. *Folding Laundry*, reference domestic rituals, some familiar, some strange. These rituals are also physically embedded in the process of making and sometimes pictorially illegible, as in Fig. 3. *Blue House*. In my work, I’m not primarily interested in telling a singular story, but in evoking an affective and tactile response through the multiple small recognitions, repulsions and sensory engagements found in the interplay between images and materials. These juxtapositions attend to a maternal body’s ability to generate creative action through multiple overlapping, opposing, and invisible gestures: manual labour, paid labour, domestic labour, mental labour, creative labour, and body in labour.

Gesture is central to my project, both in the context of painting (the gestural mark or brushstroke) and in the performative sense of a bodily action that carries meaning. I explore how I might employ both conventional painting gestures, such as the expressive brushstroke or preparing a canvas, while also undoing or remaking them through interventions like scrubbing, puncturing or unstretching the canvas. The two main concepts I use to bring together painting with feminist interventions are ambivalent care and the container.

When talking about ambivalence,¹ I mean the holding together, rather than resolving, of contradictory ideas and feelings. This holding together is active, rather than passive, as is sometimes implied by the word. For example, the concept of home, often linked to care, can evoke a sense of comfort but also prompt feelings of limitation. In the section of my paper "*laboratory*," I consider how caring for a child while working in the studio is both a challenge and an opportunity. Many ways of working are not possible, which can be frustrating and difficult. However, through my practice, I explore how these forced limitations and dissonances can generate a sort of alchemy, with unexpected and new ways of creating.

In the section titled "*background: home is a container*," I reflect on my own formative contexts of ambivalence, which include conflicting social, religious, and political values. These experiences prompted a curiosity about the value of uncertainty and maintaining difference in the work of repair. In this section, I also consider how political and social concerns are not excluded from the personal or the home but are instead entangled and interdependent. To engage care within the various roles we inhabit (in family, in community, with the land), care needs to be able to contain incompatibilities and dissonances, and be both disruptive and reparative. In addition, I view ambivalence as ultimately relational, serving as a bridge where difference is maintained but held in proximity. In the section "methodology: thinking with care", I expand on these ideas and their role in my practice.

¹ Cambridge dictionary defines ambivalence as having two opposing feelings at the same time, or being uncertain about how you feel ("Ambivalent"). Merriam-Websters definitions read: "simultaneous and contradictory attitudes of feelings (such as attraction and repulsion) toward an object, person, or action. Also, "continual fluctuation (as between one thing and its opposite) and uncertainty as to which approach to follow ("Ambivalence").

The concept of the container is important because it allows my painting practice to hold diverse inputs drawn from both personal histories and those of feminist performance, painting and craft. Writer Ursula LeGuin, in “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” contends that a story need not be a linear arc with a hero and a resolution, but that a less patriarchal framework is the carrier bag as a way to hold together multiple (and contradictory) perspectives (Le Guin). As many writers have pointed out over the last decades, the history of art is not a linear story of cultural progress mainly achieved by men² (Nochlin, Hessel, Elkins). Instead, artistic histories, even the most specific ones, contain multiple and varied perspectives and might be better understood like a collage rather than a singular narrative. Meaning-making with this method is often slower and more diffuse.

Throughout the writing of this paper and in the development of my work, I have come to understand my process and practice through the lens of collage as a means to maintain separation and difference while simultaneously building relationships in the work. While it is challenging to define collage because it has been understood in various ways, a significant aspect is the juxtaposition of the unlike to transgress boundaries. Curator Yuval Etgar summarizes:

² The work that women do and have historically done, especially as artists and caregivers, and how it integrates into their lives has been an ongoing interest in my work. Mother/artists throughout history have faced competing demands on their art practice. Art historian Linda Nochlin's essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” initiated a conversation about how cultural systems create conditions of privilege that exclude female artists. More recently, writers such as Katy Hessel, Lauren Elkin, and Mary Gabriel have approached the subject differently, crafting art histories that focuses primarily on women's diverse contributions and demonstrating how, despite the challenges of systemic sexism, women have employed strategies of ambivalence to engage with their artistic disciplines while also challenging or remaining adjacent to them.

"Collage...is a practice defined by a continuous process of challenging the borders of the artistic spectrum and the visual field. This comes into play in formal terms relating to scale, spatial orientation and material composition, but also in ideological terms where hierarchies – social or other – can be undermined or inverted, and margins are constantly pulled into the centre" (Etgar 17).

The work of collage is to both soften boundaries and dismantle hierarchies. In my paper, I employ a collage-like strategy by juxtaposing sections of academic writing with interludes of image, process journaling, and poetic text. These different voices provide a contrasting texture and an additional entry point to the ideas I am exploring.

Similarly, in my painting practice, I include a mix of material inputs from oil paint, photography, chalk, needle-felted wool, and domestic detritus.³ The painting is like a container that holds both tactile and visual information, and it is a record of performative gestures: felting, painting, grooming, washing, among others. The materials and their applications hold diverse histories that range from the encumbered gestures of painting⁴ to the communal, calculated and repetitive marks of crafting, maintenance or caregiving. By collaging traditional painting materials and processes with those drawn from craft or carework, I am transgressing conventions in painting but also creating new relationships within and across various types of making.

³ Domestic detritus refers both to the scraps of home life (packaging, clothes, junk drawers) but also the assorted collections of children: string, sticks, scribbles, and most importantly unidentifiable shiny objects.

⁴ While there are many aspects of painting that have been critiqued, I'm thinking mostly about feminist critiques of gesture and the expressive mark. Curator Helen Molesworth in her essay "Painting with Ambivalence" asserts that it was art critics use of gendered descriptive language in the late 1960s and 70s that continued to equate "quality" abstract expressionist mark making with male gendered qualities such as muscular, assertive and unique.



*Fig. 2 Detail images from **Folding Laundry**. Fabric dye, gesso, acrylic and oil paint, needle felted wool on canvas. 72 x 48". 2025. In these two details, brushmarks and dripping paint are visible. Wool is needle felted through the canvas making it less distinguishable from painted marks except when viewed at close range. On the left a scrap is pinned to the canvas with safety pins, while on the right craft felt from my children and dried paint skins from my studio are collaged onto the canvas.*

As context for this work, ambivalent painting practices are discussed in the section “the gesture”, by considering feminist artists who have challenged gendered tropes such as the solitary genius or the heroic brushstroke. While abstraction and painting seemed to afford the possibility of a genderless expression in mid-century, curator Helen Molesworth writes that critics (who held gatekeeping powers) still used gendered language to describe the work of men and women (434). This language was to the detriment of women, causing many in the 1970s feminist art movement to reject

painting entirely and to prioritize the gestures of the female body through other media, notably performance, craft and film. My work draws on both the figurative and abstract traditions in painting, as well as feminist performance work. Today, the expanded field of painting makes space for this, where the conventions and categories that essentialize what painting is begin to break down. I identify with Bruce Grenville's term "performative painting" (62), where materials and processes are important in making meaning in the work.

In addition to collage, I also attend to tactility and materiality. My work is caught between the visual/cognitive (discerning the data of the image) and a tactile invitation to presence. In *The Eyes of the Skin*, writer Juhanni Pallasmaa talks about how our increasing devotion to the eye and images has weakened our collective responsibility and care for each other. He writes about how this increasing reliance on and promotion of the visual has become "cancerous", using words like "nihilist" or "narcissistic" to make the point that vision has a distancing and alienating effect. The power of the eye to take in and absorb large quantities of information means that it also becomes less connected to the body or emotions. "The hegemonic eye seeks domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world" (Pallasmaa 22). Conversely, touch, because it requires closeness and actual contact, counters these tendencies in powerful and important ways. Using materials like felt and fuzzy wool contrasts with the paint, invoking a sense of touch that draws the viewer in.

In the final section of my paper, I discuss the work in my thesis exhibition. In "the image as a felt thing," I explain the affective role of photographic references and how

collaging displaces or complicates their meaning. In “making work with a body”, I discuss using tactile materials to drive and disrupt an image's narrative flow by activating the sensory presence of the work. Here, I lean on what Lauren Elkin proposes as a feminist phenomenology toward making art that involves the body's experience. In my work, the performative aspects of caregiving and maintenance are repurposed as painterly gestures. In “spaces for losing and finding”, I describe the physical dialogue with materials as a way to think and decide what forms they can hold. Here, I also consider how installation might be a strategy to encounter the work as ‘more than’ or ‘other than’ painting. Through the interplay of the visual and the tactile, my hope is for meaning to be generated affectively through associations that can change and evolve with multiple encounters.



Fig 3 **Blue House.** Fabric dye, gesso, acrylic paint, needle felted wool on canvas. 72 x 41". 2025.

Home is a container.

*Bodies housed
in a thin, permeable architecture
where furniture accumulates, patterns
begin to bleed outside.*

*There is a lived-in space
where our seeing does not meet.*

*Where there is conversation,
but there is no talking.*

*A stillness
where people move about
in their own private realities: building,
yet unable to bridge a gap.*

*There is separateness, even
while we live together or work
or play together.*

*The things we accept so that we can be together.
The things we ignore so we can be together.*

background: home is a container

Care often contains a multiplicity of quiet paradoxes flowing beneath the surface. Our bodies hold complex, overlapping, and contradictory ways of being in the world. I feel this. I grew up in Northern Ontario, on the traditional territory of the Fort William First Nations. My community was comprised of working-class settlers: truck drivers, farmers, and foresters. We were also part of a small Christian community that largely adhered to separate sphere gender roles, with the women working in the home and the men outside. Our religious practices were intertwined with daily life, creating an abundantly generous and hospitable community, though one that was often restrictive and incongruous. On Sundays, for example, we always gathered in large groups to eat, attend services, and socialize. As a practice of care and rest, we were not allowed to work, shop, or play team sports. This prescription overlooked the ongoing expectation for women to continue their labour of service.

There were large Indigenous populations in and around the city of Thunder Bay, where I grew up. Thunder Bay served as a hub providing essential services and resources for the Fort William First Nation and many surrounding nations. Over the years, farms, industries, schools, and churches spread across the forests and fields of Anishinaabe territory. These actions were framed in the stories I heard rehearsed (in school, at home, on the news) as an effort to bring prosperity and care to Indigenous communities, but with averted eyes to the environmental and social damage inflicted.

The movements toward reconciliation and repair were layered with lingering racism, enthusiastic intentions, and political self-interest.⁵

Today, my experience of motherhood has been a space to more deeply understand care with ambivalence⁶, specifically as I consider its complex social and gendered histories. What does it mean to be a person who cares about the families we hold, the work we engage in, the various communities we exist within, or the land we inhabit? I relate to Leslie Jamison's description of motherhood in her autobiographical novel *Splinters*: "Sometimes motherhood tricked me into feeling virtuous because I was always taking care of someone. But it didn't make me virtuous at all. It made me feral and ruthless. It steeled me to do what needed to be done" (Jamison, 120). There is something visceral and emotional about the daily ambivalence in this quote. It is about motherhood but also seems to capture the conflicting feelings, the ambivalence, that shows up in the personal ways I navigate the larger social and political arenas of my life. It is an acknowledgement that my intentions and actions toward environmental justice or Indigenous reconciliation, for example, are often mixed and limited. But I think transparent recognitions also create space for openness and understanding.

⁵ A couple of examples include the ongoing struggle for repair after the 1960s Grassy Narrows mercury poisoning (Law) or the tragic deaths of seven teens in the 2000s who, like many from Northern communities, relocate temporarily in Thunder Bay for access to a high school education. (Talaga)

⁶ I first encountered the term ambivalence in art historian and psychotherapist Rosika Parkers book "Torn in Two: The Experiences of Maternal Ambivalence". In it she discusses how mothering is an endeavor characterized by intense and conflicting feelings which are often further magnified by "static and idealized" (2) representations of motherhood. There is little cultural space or understanding to express the negative feelings one has towards being a mother and this creates an unhelpful false binary of good or bad mother that exerts both internal and external pressure on individuals. (24) Her work gives voice to a variety of ambivalent expressions of motherhood which together give a more nuanced view of the experience while also untethering motherhood from outdated notions of a feminine ideal (26).



Fig. 4 **Fire Blankets** series. Acrylic paint, needle felted wool on canvas and chalk on canvas. Each painting is 32 x 44". 2024.

The series *Fire Blankets* holds some of these ideas. It was inspired by photos of my grandmother following a car accident in which she sustained severe burns and was hospitalized. At that time, she had five young children, was already grappling with chronic illness, and lived as a recent immigrant settler on a farm. The pictures I discovered, including those showing her entire face and upper body wrapped in bandages, indicate a difficult period in her life. Yet, they also had an oddly formal and celebratory feel (like those from a birthday party or wedding). This strange juxtaposition sparked my curiosity. While I share these anecdotes here as an example of how I draw on sources that are both familial and also at a remove from my own experience, I'm not interested in conveying a cohesive or even legible narrative in the paintings. My aim is to create an affective space that reflects the experience of ambivalence through collaged fragments of images, colour, surface treatment, and materiality.

My work begins in my own home, rooted in my personal history and daily rhythms. In the home, as in the community, we attempt to hold dissonance in order to prioritize relationships and a sense of identity and history. I often focus on the domestic space because it can feel like a separate world, especially after having children. It has edges; it contains life and a myriad of interrelations, operations, and hierarchies related to our survival and flourishing, but they often seem hidden or apart from the bigger events of the "outside world." However, it is a microcosm, a small world nested inside the larger one. I operate with the understanding that the outside world, with its current conflicts and confusions as well as social gains and innovations, is not separate but rather part of a continuous flow into and out of our bodies and homes.

methodology: thinking with ambivalent care

As I consider the political and social spaces of care that exist both inside and outside my home, I have increasingly turned to ambivalence as a methodology, a way to think with and about care. Ambivalence is a misunderstood word, frequently assumed to imply a lack of care. In her book *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, writer Maria Puig de la Bellacasa shows how it is not a posture of indifference. She anchors her book on a definition of care from Joan Tronto, who says care is “*everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’*” (qt in Puig de la Bellacasa, 3). She explains that care is not merely support or something warm and fuzzy but should contain challenge, dissonance, and disruption. Care holds conflicting feelings together *and* calls for engagement, as she writes, “Thinking in the world involves acknowledging our own involvements in perpetuating dominant values rather than retreating to the sheltered position of an enlightened outsider who knows better” (Puig de la Bellacasa 11). Employing care this way allows me to navigate contested histories and current realities as a participant who is never only one thing, and this shows up in how I work in the studio. It means there is a struggle to create a painting with care and attention toward multiple priorities while simultaneously trying to disrupt or reimagine its conventions. In the studio, I explore the possibilities of painting by employing various forms of material and performative gestures, such as fast gestural mark-making with slow, repetitive needle felting. I use tactility and materiality to disrupt the narrative flow of an image, but also draw the viewer closer through a desire to touch.

Ambivalent care is a juxtaposition that also serves as a bridge, expressing a relationship while holding onto separation or difference. Writer Lauren Elkin, in her book *Art Monsters: unruly bodies in feminist art*, talks about the usefulness of the grammatical slash⁷ for expressing multiple conflicting or separating ideas. It is a division yet a relation that creates both distance and dialogue. She poetically expresses, "The slash is the first person tipped over: the first person joining me to the person beside me, or me to you. Across the slash we can find each other" (xiv). Her book juxtaposes female artists, writers, and artists from very different timelines, styles, and feminisms to seek new connections rather than create more opposition. Through unusual proximities, she uncovers feminisms in unexpected places and forges fresh lineages and alliances among female artists. Like Ursula Le Guin's "Carrier Bag" theory, this research method proposes an alternative way to tell a story that allows for excesses and diversions while also finding value in the margins. Le Guin's essay rejects conquest as a necessary or first metaphor for story (or civilization) and instead uses the metaphor of "carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle" (234) to complicate conventional notions of story. As she suggests, a story is better understood as a container rather than an arc that holds an unfolding series of relationships and events, like a constellation, allowing room for new connections and unexpected interpretations. These ideas have helped me understand my work through the lens of collage, mixing materials, image fragments and processes. Through unlikely combinations, new relationships and associations are made while differences and incompatibilities remain.

⁷ Elkin is referring to the element of punctuation, /, otherwise known as stroke or solidus.

Finally, I have turned to the word ambivalence for both my thinking and making because it represents an affective state that, while difficult, also holds possibility. It is a response to being caught between, creating a stuck pressure or state of suspension and uncertainty. In Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings*, she draws on numerous artistic examples of "affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings and other sites of emotional negativity" (1) in books and movies as a means to register something about our current cultural state. The emotions she discusses, such as irritation, paranoia or envy, are minor characters that do not lead to rousing action but function as a social diagnostic to the felt stuckness of a late capitalist cultural economy (Ngai, 12). She believes there is something significant socially and politically about weak or passive responses and asks us to consider what they are pointing toward. She wonders if they are a form of protest or reaction to the multiple and unchecked forms of control we are under. I agree with this assessment. However, this stasis and uncertainty are also generative because they necessitate a pause for deeper reflection, corrections and repair.

Uncertainty can be a form of care and a way to cultivate relationships. In writer Rachel Jones's essay "On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again, and Letting Be," she talks about how the desire for certitude acts as a mechanism of control and absorption and is often motivated by fear. When I think that I now know something previously unknown or unfamiliar, then I assume a sort of control (that is often false). Assuming knowledge stops genuine dialogue and curiosity while undermining the person I am talking with. She says approaching a connection where the other can remain somewhat unknown is a more ethical way to proceed (26).

Jones's argument is partly rooted in Luce Irigaray's discussion of wonder as an "ethical priority" (19), where one can meet the other with interest and desire but not limit them within our knowledge capacities. This approach is important to me in both my relationships and my work in the studio. Listening to materials as they "tell us what forms they can hold" (26) means there is often much waiting, a sense of the provisional or the unfinished. In contrast to the cultural demand for fast, simple, and clear, uncertainty as part of my art practice requires methods that are slow and involve failure, inconsistency, and switching directions.

context: the laboratory



Fig. 5 Images from my home and home studio.

My studio is in my home. I am immersed in a laboratory among the mundane, the domestic, and the quotidian. Imposed on the painting act are calculations and measurements – the length of a TV show or nap, the space between meals and baths. The realities of caregiving, such as constant interruptions and diverted attention shape new rhythms of making. Art and life coalesce.



Fig. 6 Miniature cardboard turtle home constructed by Finn Rosengren, age 5.



Fig. 7 My children working alongside me in the studio.

Life in a home with children involves many rituals, repetitions, and repairs. The movements can be both hurried and painfully slow, but I believe it is in these spaces where the mundane and mysterious intersect. I often work alongside my children or in their wake after they are off to school or bed. Their drawings and assemblages are visual cues that are always in my periphery. Their materials, cast-offs, and curious hands often drift into my projects, creating an exchange of influence that artist Lenka Clayton calls "the reframing of parenthood as a valuable site for creative practice, rather than an obstruction to be overcome" (Clayton). This quote comes from a project she began in 2013 called the *Artist Residency in Motherhood*, a self-directed residency

aimed at exploring the creative potential and integration of motherhood. I participated in her project in 2021, and it is a mindset shift that has remained with me.

A 2020 exhibit at the Vancouver Contemporary Art Gallery further highlighted this concept of art/life integration in several works. *The Artist's Studio is Her Bedroom* exhibit featured artists whose work challenges patriarchal and capitalist notions of art-making and labour while highlighting collectivity and provisionality. For example, the artist duo Leisure (Meredith Carruthers and Susannah Wesley) looks to women's histories, particularly those of female mother/artists, and allows these histories to inform their practice.



Fig. 8 Leisure (Susannah Wesley and Meredith Carruthers), ***Conversations with Magic Forms***, sand, plaster, feathers, glitter, 2017. Image courtesy of the Meredith Carruthers and Susah Wesley.

In their work, *Conversations with Magic Forms*, Leisure provided a set of instructions for the gallery to gather materials like sand, plaster, feathers, and glitter, inviting people (especially children) to create the exhibit with them (see fig.8). In this piece, they drew on Benjamin Nicholson's educational theory of "loose parts," where individuals learn through free play and association (Leisure). Their work, along with others in the exhibition, underscored the fluidity and challenges of being an artist and a parent, where sculpture, laundry, children, and rocks coexist within the studio home.

Integrating these ideas into my painting practice has involved working in small spaces, in short bursts, with materials on hand and, in doing so, assigning value to the small, the peripheral, and the mundane. I have intentionally incorporated the materials and processes drawn from my everyday experiences, including domestic detritus, into the language of my paintings.

For example, in *The Blue String* (fig. 9), I embed elements of my children's drawings and the leftover bits from their craft projects into my collages. In *folding laundry* (see detail in Figure 10), I used a cut-up sweater and safety vest to build out the painting. Using these materials brings attention to the materiality of the painting, its tactility, and its surface. Like any painting, the materials speak to where and how the work was made in a way that disrupts a one-dimensional understanding of painting.



Fig. 9 **The Blue String**, mixed media collage on paper, 22 x 17", 2024



Fig. 10 Artwork detail of **Folding Laundry** (Fig 1) showing integration of felted sweaters.

But why paint? While it is not always conducive to my working environment, I am attracted to the substance of paint: the sticky, the smooth, the thin, and the washy, as well as what it can achieve visually through brushmarks and colour. The use of felt and other non-paint materials comes from a desire to deepen the tactile sensory engagement with the painting. But I am also interested in the rituals and repetitions found in painting that mimic care work. James Elkins gets at this impulse in his book, *What Painting Is*, where he describes painting by comparing it to alchemy. In the laboratory, the alchemist carefully attends to materials and processes, often in ritualistic

ways that cannot be easily replicated despite copious notes on their experiments. The alchemists had elaborate theories on how to transform matter (most popularly from base metal to gold), and this prescientific work is comparable to painting in that it holds the belief that discovery will occur in the ritual processes and repeated labour of making marks with materials. This analogy links art making to care work, where work is done, undone, and redone, with the belief that slow, repetitive, and often uncertain work will be generative and transformative.

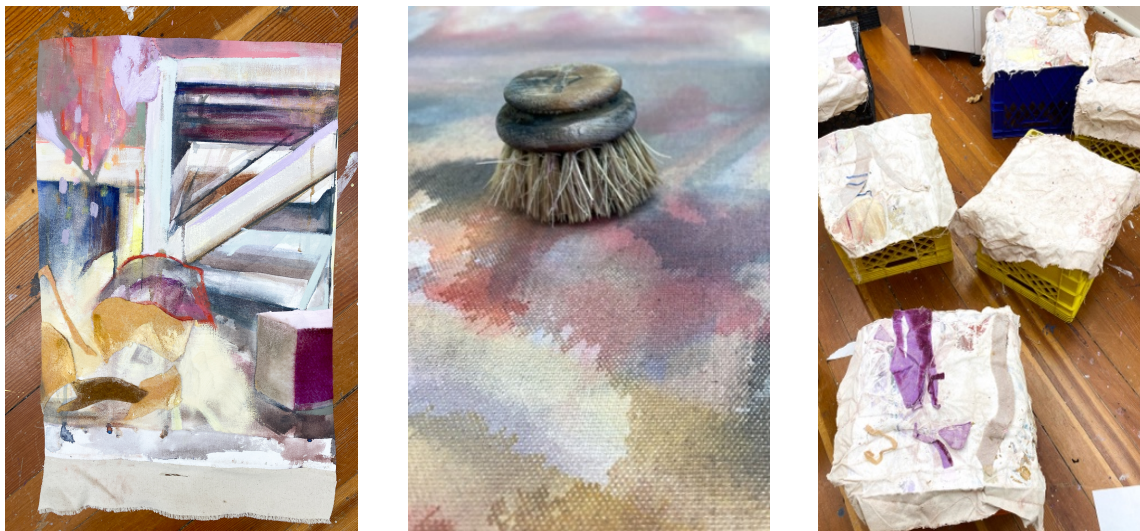


Fig. 11 These images show the process of cutting up and washing the painting **Wish** that I made in 2021 depicting a woman hanging laundry. The first image is a cut out section of the original, the second was taken while hand washing the canvas, and the third shows sections of the painting drying after being washed in the washing machine.

Two elements of care work that I bring to my painting practice are repetition and maintenance labour. The images in Fig. 11 present an example of a process from early in my MFA program, where I explored what this might look like in painting. I took apart a large painting I had created the previous year of a woman hanging laundry. I cut it up and placed it in the washing machine. I was thinking about feminist performance artist

and mother Mierles Laderman Ukeles, who wrote "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969," distinguishing between development and maintenance.⁸ She writes that while culture typically prioritizes innovation and "pure individual creation," maintenance is "what takes all the fucking time" (Ukeles). In other words, we spotlight myths of the heroic and genius because they make better stories (LeGuin) and obscure acts of repetition, maintenance, and uncertainty that support creative production.⁹

In making, unmaking and remaking, there is a repetition that becomes like a ritual handling of materials. After the painting was cut up, I scrubbed the old paint, brushed the matted felt, and re-stretched the canvas on smaller stretchers. The work that evolved from this process was a series of diptychs called "Knee Deep" (Fig. 12 and 13), where I paired figurative sketches of people knee-deep in the river alongside the washed canvases. With water and washing as the conceptual through line, these pairings suggested stories and created associations with painting and felt across the works. I used deliberate and performative gestures of maintenance and care (washing, grooming, felting) to both repair something old and create something new.

⁸ Ukeles is known for highlighting service and maintenance work, beginning for her with caregiving but then also extending that to public service and museum supports. She has been an artist in residence at the NY department of sanitation since 1977. She also performed acts of maintenance, such as scrubbing the steps of the Hartford Atheneum in a show curated by Lucy Lippard in 1970. (Steinhauer)

⁹ These mythologies of the great artist obfuscate the hidden privileges that simultaneously create gender, race, class and many other disparities (Leary; Nochlin). That is, it takes a level of privilege and support to make the type of art that has achieved cultural status.



Fig. 12. ***Knee Deep #1***, Oil and wool on reclaimed canvas and oil on paper, 11 x 24", 2023



Fig. 13. Installation image from the series "***Knee Deep***" series. Grad gallery at Emily Carr University, November 2023.

Continuing with this desire to hold together opposing gestures, I created a series of nine pieces titled *At the Water* for the State of Practice exhibition (see Figure 11). One of my goals in this series was to integrate the narrative suggested by figuration with the material processes of repetition and disruption. I challenged myself with prolonged, careful drawing¹⁰, constantly introducing various interruptions and interventions that disrupted the drawing process. In these works, I repeatedly drew the same image—a woman collecting water from the river—using pastel or charcoal. Felting and dyeing the canvases served as interruptions that hindered legibility and the ability to re-draw specific areas. This act of unfixing a narrative image with materials, making it less straightforward to read, opened up a creative challenge and emotional potential. The non-paint materials acted as limitations for both the viewer and me. I was interested in seeing if I could bring a sense of ritual and care to ground the practice while simultaneously dislodging or blurring the deep grooves that repetitive actions can create.

¹⁰ In the spring of 2024, I discovered drawing marathons, an activity which originated at the New York Studio School. While I have not officially participated in one (for several weeks you spend long days with observational drawing) I began to inhabit some of the principles and techniques into my practice. I drew the same still life for several hours, drew it again for several hours. Then cut up both drawing in half and attached to each other. I then began the process of “repairing” the drawings with several more hours of observational drawing on each new piece. This process deepened my appreciation for the work of making.

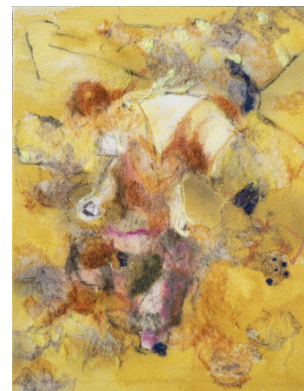
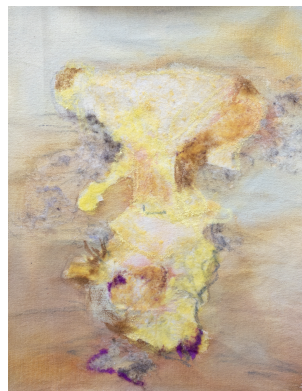
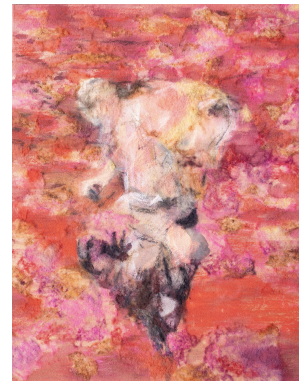
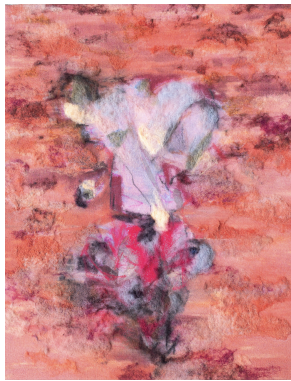
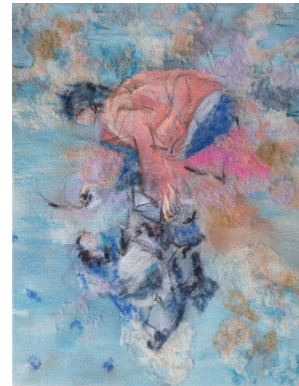


Fig. 14. ***At the River*** series, (#1-9) wool, felt, dye, chalk on canvas, each work 14 x 11. 2024

One outcome of this project was learning more about the value of tactile knowledge. I noticed that feeling the drawings with my hands, through different tools (chalk, paint, felt), was as important as looking. It seemed that tactile sensory inputs balanced the cognitive controls of visual processing. When I viewed the finished work as a whole, the repetition appeared too dominant, and the sense of disruption was less evident. As I began my thesis project, I wanted to explore ways to expand the space of the image within the painting.

context: the gesture



Fig 15 Image documenting the process of needle felting on canvas

Needle felting, in particular, mimics a certain experience of motherhood for me. It is slow, soft, imprecise as well as sharp and disruptive. It gets under the skin and pierces the surface of the image over and over.

There is a certain ambivalence to making paintings in a contemporary context where the genre has been pronounced "dead" several times over the past few decades. Contemporary discourses have questioned notions of greatness, genius, and progress, dismantling the hierarchies that once elevated painting. For example, critic Raphael Rubinstein coined the term "provisional painting" to describe the painting practices of artists like Raoul DeKeyser and Mary Heilman, who subvert notions of the heroic in painting by creating work that is small-scale, tentative, or appearing unskilled (Rubinstein).

Even in its prime, painting was an ambivalent activity for many women. Many self-identifying feminist artists of previous decades refused to paint because it was too steeped in patriarchal narratives. By contrast, many female painters remained 'apolitical' to avoid being labelled as women painters and having their work misread or dismissed (Hessel 332; Gabriel). However, what if that was an unnecessary dichotomy? In her essay, "Baggage Reclaim: Some Thoughts on Feminism and Painting", author Rebecca Fortnum argues that historically, all painting done by women is relevant to contemporary feminist discourse because it reflects more accurately the multiplicity of women's experiences¹¹. Fortnum's essay points to painters whose work contributes to understanding and engaging with feminisms through this more expansive lens, such as Dana Schutz and Jutta Koether (25). Similarly, artist Amy Sillman writes specifically about the value of Abstract Expressionism for her practice, even while acknowledging

¹¹ Many early feminists engendered the same kind of exclusivity they were trying to combat. They often dismissed the concerns of Black or Indigenous women whose fights were multilayered or less one dimensional (Hessel, 332; Elkin, 53).

and poking fun at its legacy of gendered mark-making (113). These artists reshape the vocabularies of painting through gestures that draw on the particulars of real life while still engaging with its conventions.¹² In my work, I aim for a similar approach that also considers specific domestic materiality and processes as a way to embed “the particulars of real life”.

In “Entangled: Two Views on Contemporary Canadian Painting”, curator Bruce Grenville writes about another ambivalent approach to painting: *performative painting*, work that pays greater attention to materials and process rather than signification. The artists he discusses engage with the conceptual frameworks of representation that connect us to language and ideas while simultaneously challenging them (Grenville 62). Similarly, the artists I discuss in this section have influenced my thinking about painting by aiming to hold together the performative gestures of painting while also undoing them through feminist interventions.

Amy Sillman and Charlene Von Heyl, whose work slips between abstraction and figuration, have influenced me through their use and 'misuse' of the painterly gesture. They use humour and humility, inserting references from comics or pop culture while rooting themselves within the long traditions of formalist painting. From Charlene von Heyl, I borrowed the idea of switching directions in a painting to disrupt stasis (*A Brush with... Charline von Heyl*). I might quickly and intuitively work up a narrative image with

¹² More examples of this are found in Helen Molesworth’s essay “Ambivalent Painting” and her discussion of Howardena Pindell, Joan Snyder and Mary Heilman as artists working in this period making abstract paintings but rebelling against its conventions toward “seriousness” and “good taste” by their subversive use of colour and self-critical methods. For example, Snyder’s abundant use of pink or Pindell’s use of glitter and a hole puncher to destroy her images, signaled both a defiant use of materials. (434)

paint and then interrupt the image with slow, careful felting. Like Sillman, I often wash out or paint over highly developed sections to destabilize a stuck feeling and ‘find’ the image through new avenues (Clark).



Fig. 16. Charline von Heyl, **Woman No.2**, acrylic, oil and charcoal on linen. 82 x 78", 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.



Fig. 17. Amy Sillman, **Untitled (blue, black)**, acrylic and ink on linen, 59 x 55", 2023.

I have also drawn strategies of interruption from artist Karin Mamma Andersson. Like many of the artists I admire, there is a narrative quality to Mamma Andersson's work that never quite tells a story, but instead offers an atmosphere. I am drawn to the affective space and darkness she uses, which complicate an otherwise ordinary domestic painting. Andersson creates work that is evocative of a memory, of a time and place that you cannot quite pin down. It is both nostalgic and alien; the paint is thick and thin, and you are often both inside and outside the image in her works. Her paintings

offer a window into a world simultaneously stopped by an indiscernible shape or flat paint application.



Fig. 18 Mamma Andersson, *Travelling in the Family*, 2003. Oil on panel, 92 x 122cm. Photo credit: Per-Erik Adamsson. Courtesy of the artist and Galleri Magnus Karlsson.

Canadian artists like Angela Teng and Colleen Heslin also use the language of formalist painting, but create works that use the materials or processes of textiles and craft. They work in opposite yet related ways. Teng crochets paint, yet the materiality, although critical to her project, is not always immediately apparent, while Heslin's works appear from a distance to be large abstract paintings, not dyed fabric that is sewn together (Gallpen; "Angela Teng | Artists"). Their work creates new material

vocabularies and helps to shape different, more entangled perspectives on the histories of making.



Fig. 19. Angela Teng, **Somersault**, Crocheted acrylic on aluminum panel. 34 x 27 1/2". 2020.



Fig. 20. Colleen Heslin, **Overlapping Thoughts and Feelings**, dye on sewn canvas, 86 x 72". 2018.

Another artist who works with textiles and references the legacy of modernist painting with its significant and decisive gestures is Luanne Martineau. I am particularly fascinated with her commitment to a skilled use of felting as a conceptual means to convey humour and critique of art history. Her piece, *Parasite Buttress*, has a pink felt body with soft folds and fingers and a large white stripe after Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* painting. *Voice of Fire* embodies a heroic male painterly gesture with its confident minimalist "zip," but in Martineau's work, *Parasite Buttress*, the zip is felted

into the wrinkly pink body of her work (Adler and Madill). With its excesses and ruffles, the stripe becomes strange, funny and wilted. Her work holds together opposing histories and techniques, and a third thing emerges that is neither traditional painting nor craft.

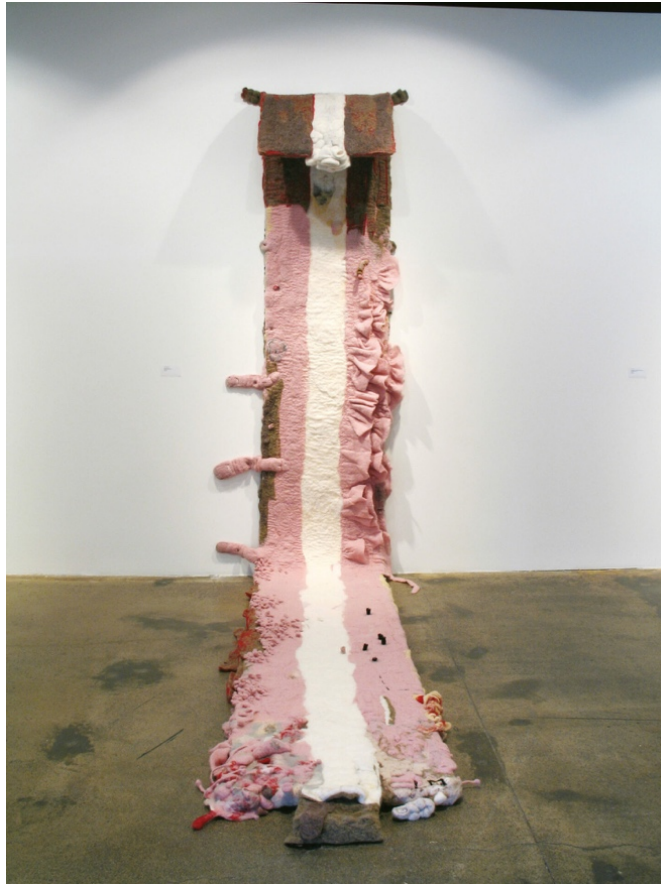


Fig. 21 Luanne Martineau, ***Parasite Butress***, wool, dye, bed foam, 2005.

For the artists I have referenced and in my own work, engaging painting with ambivalence allows for a practice that situates itself within the language and history of painting, while also moving beyond and blurring its boundaries with other practices. They combine image references, painting techniques and gestures, which has given

me, as an artist, a certain freedom from developing "a style" or over-committing to a way of making marks. By integrating the gestures of craft and domestic life into my painting practice, I engage in a "performative painting" that takes seriously both the painting itself and the conditions of its making. These gestures are not always obvious; however, by naming them, I am also naming how I make work, holding specific female experiences and histories inside the practice of painting.

thesis project



Fig. 22. “**Fracture, Fold, Fray**”. Michael O’Brien Gallery, Emily Carr University, Vancouver, BC., 2025. Top: Installation view of **Housewife**, **Blue House** and **Folding Laundry**. Bottom left: **Container**. Bottom right detail images of floor sculpture for **Housewife** and **Blue House**.

*And here I think about work, the labour of hands and what they build and
nurture and bring into being.*

*In making, unmaking and remaking
(a painting, a home)
there is commitment
to care that gestures towards,
that speaks.*

*And yet, I find it hard to be direct or create
clear lines, demarcations*

*I am drawn toward things that are slippery
– water, memory, spirit –
things that can be held but never completely contained.*

Can the marks reflect this?

*I wonder if I can make a familiar space still hold yet become like the
moment you begin to see things strange so that a warm feeling is opened
wider and becomes heat.*

The work for the final thesis exhibition includes paintings suspended from shelf-like brackets that hang loosely away from the wall, resembling the pages of a script or book. Created on unstretched and partially gessoed canvas, these works evoke domestic narratives and sometimes spill beyond their borders, extending onto the floor. In this way, the painted images acquire material and tactile presence, shifting between painting and object. In each piece, I explore the slippery space between the internal and external, the public and private. The images, materials and processes all combine in various configurations of abstraction and representation to reflect the multiple affective experiences of home.

Similar to earlier projects, my process for the work in the thesis exhibition vacillates between planned and intuitive gestures. Over the course of the MFA program and inspired by Medrie McPhee and her use of a matrix¹³, I developed a scaffolding for my process in the studio, which I will discuss in the following sections. In “the image as a felt thing,” I describe how and why I work with photography and collage. For the paintings in the thesis exhibition, the process begins with selecting, drawing and collaging images in my sketchbook as a way to prepare and think with my hands. In the section “making work with a body,” I talk about the painting strategies and methods I used in making the thesis work, as well as reflecting on the role of touch and tactility in building these paintings. Finally, I reflect on the often circuitous journey of making,

¹³ Medrie McPhee’s most recent bodies of work use deconstructed thrift store clothes to create new surfaces. They are glued onto her canvas, gessoed and then remade by painting onto the new surface. This process of deconstruction and erasing (gessoing turns them white) is her matrix to which she can respond. She works on this “matrix” intuitively, responsively and improvisationally. (MacPhee)

unmaking and remaking in the section “spaces for losing and finding.” I discuss the process and choices in putting together the installation.



Fig. 23 **green paper** from the series **"colouring pages"**, mixed media collage and digital print, 15 x 22", 2024.

Accessing my own archive of images is a way to look at old stories and their performance and staging. What is it that shifts over time, and what persists, what is transmitted and what is lost? In my work, I adopt a posture toward the image as a kind of accumulation, whereby the image is transformed and transgressed over time.

1 – image as a felt thing

Although not always explicit, my paintings begin their life from photographic fragments—figurative scenes of people engaged in domestic work or play. They are mundane, everyday images that I collage and draw until the narratives they contain become less familiar, more uncertain, or open-ended. The juxtaposition of different images, or photographic images with drawings, shapes, and colours, creates new and unexpected associations. It empties the photo of its usual story, rearranges, and proposes something new that still retains something of the original. Photographs can often feel fact-like, even knowing how easy they are to manipulate; they make an idea tangible and seem concrete. Collaging still allows the 'fact' of an image to be perceived, but also undermines it because the intervention calls attention to itself. There is poetry to collage that opens us up affectively because the images become associative and multiple, accessed through an intuitive knowledge. Documentary photos often serve as a stand-in for remembering, whether in family or community archives. Its work is to embed specific memories or stories more deeply. Collaging infuses them with doubt and contradiction, a way to question a clear, quick narrative or singular perspective on an event.

In my work, I use mainly personal photographs, but ones that span several generations, because I feel a kind of permission to play with my own artifacts in a way that I would not with the stories of strangers. Images compel me because of a certain ambiguity or strangeness. I find the dated wallpapers, unfamiliar gestures, and cramped architectures of old photos to be moving as I think about the ways we are formed and

shaped by the objects around us. I am curious about the fixtures that create a home environment and how they work on us. But there is more. Some images call out with an explicit strength, and some images I feel viscerally, emotionally, even (but not always) when they are of unfamiliar people and places¹⁴. In *Camera Lucida*, French philosopher Roland Barthes talks about approaching photographs with "studium," a Latin word that means a general interest or enthusiasm for the information or formal qualities contained in the image (26). He goes on to describe the "problem" of affect he was having with certain photos where there is "this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (26). He names this disruption the "punctum". It is "sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice" (27). I respond to this idea of punctum as a wound or irritation that moves me toward a photo and starts a process of excavation, transcription, rearrangement and accumulation.

While collaged and coloured photographs often serve as the starting point for my painting practice, they have also evolved into a separate body of work. Fig. 24 shows several mixed media collages from a series called *Colouring Pages* made from personal photos, household and studio scraps, along with my children's art supplies and their drawings. The collages are repeatedly re-photographed and printed, creating a kind of distancing and distortion, but also resulting in a flattening of the surfaces. This process involves several iterations of making prints and reanimating them with fresh materials.

¹⁴ Even though I use family photographs, I have collected many that are very old, and I am not certain who the people or place are.

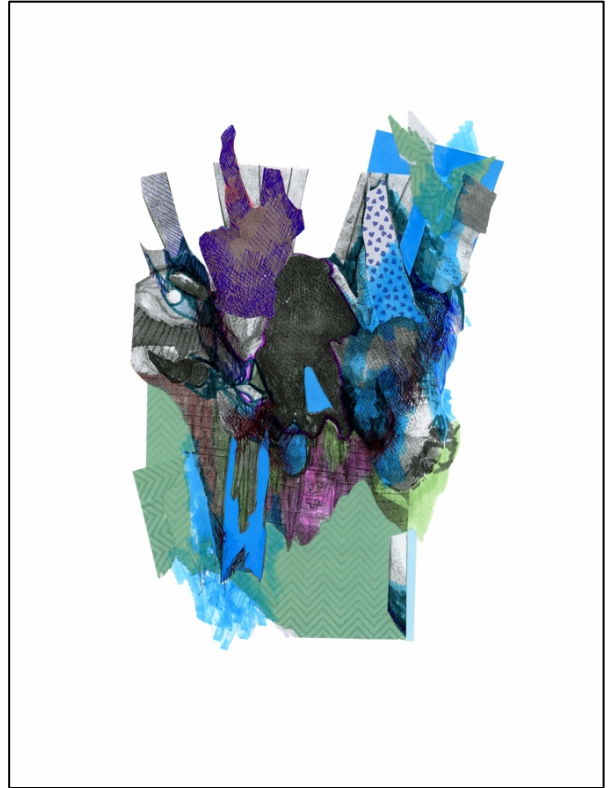
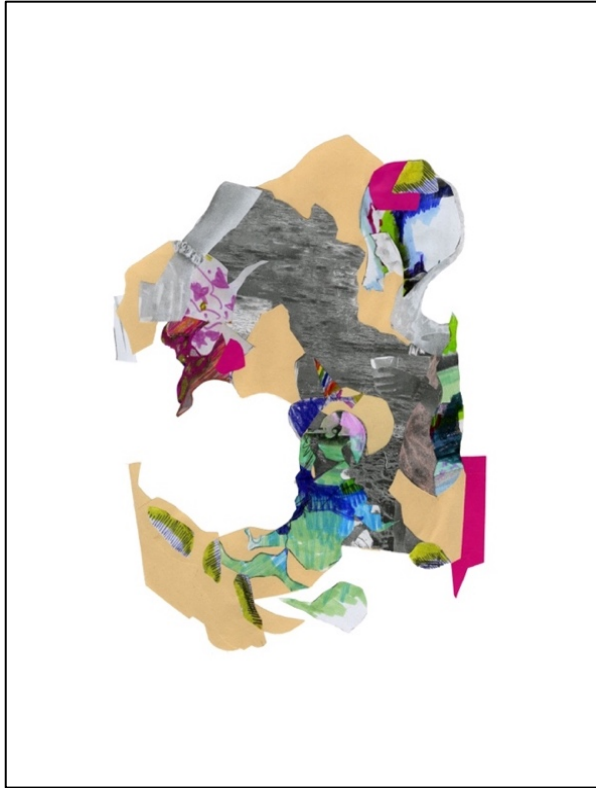


Fig. 24 Collages from the series **Colouring Pages**. Top left: **drinking water**, top right: **crowded house**, bottom left, **ghost hands**, bottom right: **tulips**. Mixed media collage and digital print, each 22 x 15, 2024.

In each iteration, different elements are emphasized while others are obscured, somewhat akin to the experience of remembering the same moment over time.

Drawing, tracing, and transcribing images in this way allows for an ambivalent knowing of images. It slows recognition or the ability to understand the image quickly. Flat images also begin to possess a different presence through materials such as felt and fibre, and through the acts of marking and erasing. I am interested in how recognition is interrupted or distilled by the sensory world of repetition and slowly made objects.

Paint becomes a skin that contains a body. It is a slow accumulation, an aging vessel, and an unfolding over time.



Fig. 25. **Container**, Oil paint, fabric dye, chalk, needle felted wool, synthetic felt, wood and canvas, 76" x 48". 2025.

2 – making work with a body

The desire to give my paintings a multilayered sense of the body is one reason that wool felt has found its way into my work. Felting is a textile process where fibres are knotted into one another rather than applied on top. In my work, I generally felt wool into the fabric of the canvas (although sometimes quite loosely). The use of felt and paint together involves laborious and sometimes futile experimentation to make these disparate materials work together. How do I needle-felt a resistant painted surface (and why would I want to)? There is a material and procedural incompatibility, but one that feels akin to the struggle of ambivalence. The desire to have these materials coexist is a way to expand my painting practice to include my experiences of motherhood and the long tactile histories of women working with their hands. The disruptions and incompatibilities of felting wool into a painting speak conflicting languages, but I also want the materials to sit beside and support one another, like the grammatical slash. Paint/felt. Although I am not striving for seamlessness when I use paint and wool, I also aim for moments where the two materials sing together and where felt becomes indistinguishable from the paint.

For the works in the thesis exhibition, I created a matrix for beginning the paintings that included applying gesso to only some parts of the surface, thereby preserving areas of raw canvas for felting. I dyed the canvas and the wool with predetermined colour palettes and used oil paint only on the gessoed areas of the canvas. As the work progressed, there was more crossover between the paint and felt.



Fig. 26. Process image of **Container** showing dyed and partially gessoed canvas.



Fig. 27. Process image of **Container** showing the beginning of needle felting the canvas

While gesso is typically applied over the entire canvas for surface preparation, I used it directly, like paint and embedded figurative references and shapes to form a base composition. Initially, I engaged with a reference image, but responded to the shapes and values in a flattened, abstract manner. Sometimes, I chose to paint only the light-valued shapes with gesso; at other times, I focused on the negative space. By applying gesso selectively to certain parts of the canvas and leaving porous, permeable areas, I could more easily felt wool into the canvas. This approach further complicated the viewer's ability to interpret the figurative reference but also created an accumulation of visible marks and repairs.

Wool felted into the canvas punctures through its surface and becomes a part of it. Likewise, dye integrates into the fibres of a fabric, becoming inseparable. Working the canvas in two ways allows the work to be experienced visually as both image and object while also creating a tactile residue that facilitates another type of embodied encounter in the dialogue between materiality and image. I am particularly interested in the work activating a form of tactile association and a related affective experience for the viewer. For example, the felt contains the domestic softness of worn fabrics or bedding, but also reads in areas like mould or decay. I want the works to contain both of these associations. In *Tactile Analytics*, writer Patricia Alvarez Astacio asks if there is a way to think via tactility. What is the method or process by which we understand with our skin and hands? Is there a way we can learn about history and culture and derive meaning through touch that extends beyond immediate pleasure or intimacy?

Alvarez Astacio discusses something deeply rooted in the body, a knowledge or learning acquired through repeated tactile experiences, distinguishing this learning from a form of touch that requires vision, such as a step-by-step tutorial or diagram on how to create something (20). Her investigation aligns with my interest in the gesture of painting and what is conveyed or learned through repeated engagement with mark-making. It embodies the kind of alchemy learned from painting, and by paying attention to the tactile experiences of working with sticky paint versus fluid paint or making rapid movements versus slower ones. Within these traditions of applying paint to canvas, I introduce the tactile knowledge and repetitions of fibre craft. The felted fibres of stained wool knotted to the open weave of painted canvas call attention to an unfamiliar gesture in painting. Similarly, incorporating repetitive domestic gestures such as scrubbing,

folding, and hanging into my painting practice layers another dimension of the body's experience within the painting's fabric. The repeated process of painting in and washing out leaves traces of the struggle to both reveal and obscure. These materials and processes accumulate, making the narrative images underneath them ambiguous.



Fig. 28. Detail images of **Container**.

In her book *Art Monsters*, writer Lauren Elkin contemplates what it might mean to create work with a female body. While she acknowledges the difficulty and debate many feminist thinkers have had with creating such a category, she also sees value in exploring language specific to women's experiences. She proposed the term "feminist phenomenology" (52) for creative practices that draw on female bodily experience. She chooses the word "monster" as a verb to explore ways that women have opted not to escape their womanhood as artists through virtuosity or talent but rather to dive deeper

into whatever that might mean (9). "In this new form, the term tells us something about what it is art does: it makes the familiar strange, wakes us from our habits, enables us to envision other ways of being, and lets the body and the imagination speak and dream outside the strict boundaries placed on them by society, patriarchy, internalized misogyny." (14) What was important for me in this book was the idea that how I create work always involves attention to various ways of being in the world with a body. This attention is why the gesture is significant: what movements have I inherited or learned that I bring into this work, and how do they leave a mark? Here, I am thinking about the gestures of painting, as well as the gestures I currently inhabit as a caregiver moving through the daily rituals of home, and how that might show up in my painting practice.

For the works in the thesis exhibition, painting becomes a container, holding together the tactile histories of materials, gestures, and image-making strategies from various spheres of influence. I use my tools, inspired by Lauren Elkin's words, as "a strategy for making work that reaches us viscerally, which overflows its container and threatens, in response, to make us overflow our own" (61). By using felt, fabric, and other domestic accumulations alongside paint, I attempt to both rupture and repair the skin of the painting. I want the paintings to become "monstered" in the sense described by Elkins above, in a way that evokes both visceral and affective responses in their presence.



Fig. 29. **House Wife**, Fabric dye, gesso, acrylic and oil paint, needle felted wool on canvas, 72 x 48", Felted wool and assorted fabrics, dim variable, 2025

"It is, rather, how can the image point away from what we know, towards something we may not even know how to name" (Elkin 33).

3 - spaces for losing and finding

There is something important for me in the struggle to find an image: drawing and erasing, painting over and scraping away, felting in and tearing away. It is a physical navigation and tactile conversation that cannot arrive without negotiation. Many artists, including the duo Leisure, whose aptly titled exhibit “Having Ideas by Handling Materials,” talk about how thought is generated and developed through repeated contact with materials. In my paintings, I often paint the figures, settings, spaces, and shapes multiple times, covering, cutting them up, or rearranging them to understand what they are or where they go next.

“Housewife” is a work that held uncertainty while I was making it, and also changed directions after it was “finished.” It followed the same general concerns, reference materials, and processes as works such as “Container” or “Folding Laundry,” but the direction remained somewhat unclear or ambiguous. The reference image, which I have been looking at for some time, depicts a woman throwing a bucket of water, perhaps from cleaning or mopping, from the steps of her home. The image was strange because a family also posed behind her on the steps. They appear to inhabit two different moments – one is caught in action doing a chore, tossing out some water, while the other is stiffly posed and seems aware of being photographed. My initial impulse in working with this image leaned toward reimaging something more representational and narrative and collaging in other characters or elements. I wanted to highlight the dissonance between action spilling out into the world and those protectively blocked or hidden. I painted a whale emerging out of the water or being released by the woman. The emerging image had a sort of mythic feel and felt wrong. I

washed out a lot of that image and began to layer on more paint, at one point throwing paint at the canvas. This move prompted a quick association with Jackson Pollock. I could picture the famous images of him at work tossing paint from his bucket, arms similarly blurred by fast gestural movements.

Another layer emerged as I recalled reading about Janet Sobel, a painter from the same era as the women in this reference photo, whose innovative and unusual work utilized an all-over composition that impacted Jackson Pollock. Sobel was briefly spotlighted in the 1950s New York art world by influential critic Clement Greenberg and others. Like many women of that era, she was simultaneously celebrated and undermined in the same few sentences. Greenberg wrote that he “furtively” admired her “primitive” and “unschooled” work, yet credited her as having been an influence on Jackson Pollock. (Greenberg qtd in Levin). Jackson Pollock saw her work several times before making the techniques he saw in her work his own, and he became very well known because of them. Sobel, however, was minimized by Greenberg, who saw her to be of little consequence, calling her just a “housewife” from Brooklyn (Levin). I’m less interested in either Pollock’s or Sobel’s actual work than in the multiple and tangled narratives surrounding them – the stories that were told to generate or temper reception and enthusiasm toward each of their works. In addition, it linked the ambivalence embedded in both care work and painting by finding common ground and humour in the gestures of “important painters” and housewives.

It isn’t essential to know this story when looking at the painting. I usually resist offering narratives because it limits the engagement and experience of a work to one

thing. But I share it here to illustrate how ideas and meaning evolve for me, slowly over time and through responsive acts of making.



Fig. 30. Detail images from **Housewife** (fig. 29).

The final step of the work in this thesis project was organized around noticing what the work was becoming and thinking through how it would live in the exhibition installation. I did not stretch my canvases as I worked on them, partly because I needed them to be flexible and move around to various stations in my studio. I hung them from dowels, pinned them to my wall, laid them on the floor to dye, and put them over Styrofoam to felt. Prompted by the collage work I had been doing on paper, I wondered how these paintings might also come apart or move beyond the edges of the rectangular frame. The support presents the image and signals a convention and a

lineage. Without the stretcher bars, is a painted canvas still a painting? If it is not, what is it?



Fig. 31 Installation images from **Housewife** (left) and **Folding Laundry** (right)

Understanding the work I am presenting as both a painting and an object has presented its challenges. By losing the stretcher bars of the canvas, the canvas itself takes on more visual weight, as does the hanging and installation. The painting is no longer only a flat surface; its support and placement also become part of the work's language. I wanted to explore this in these works, but the elements I was adding began

to compete for attention. Thinking through the installation has been a big part of my learning and challenge.

After exploring several different methods for hanging the work, including building triangular construction trusses from which to hang the work, I opted to keep the work tethered to the wall. While I was exploring the objectness of the painting, I did not want to lose engagement with the pictorial space of the canvas. I wanted the viewer to experience both the imagined space of the image and simultaneously be brought back into awareness of its reality as an object. By hanging the canvas away from the wall a short distance, it ripples and moves, and you become more aware of its edges and the parts that are extending and spilling out of it. The fibre elements became sculptural, and in the case of *the housewife*, they began to exist as separate yet related elements.

conclusion

I began this thesis project with the intention of exploring a feminist approach to painting, one that considers the complex and often conflicting experiences of the female body and motherhood. At the outset, this seemed challenging because it did not feel like a natural pairing, given the artistic legacies of feminist art and painting. Gesture and mark-making carry expressive potential, but also connotations of the heroic, the solitary, and the masculine. However, painting practices have evolved over the last few decades, where boundaries between disciplines blur and painting conventions are increasingly malleable, allowing for divergent practices to intersect. For me, this has resulted in a painting practice that prioritizes process and materiality, where I incorporate the gestural repetitions and labour of craft and care work.

My experiences of both motherhood and painting, as well as an increasingly polarized socio-political landscape, have led me to consider how ambivalence might be a type of active care that is both generative and reparative. I want my practice to encompass the multiple, the mixed and the conflicting. I was often asked whether 'ambivalence' was the right word for this project, given its passive and negative connotations. However, it was a word that remained close despite my attempts to move away from it. Throughout the MFA, I found that it is both aspects of ambivalence—the holding together of dissonance and the staying with uncertainty longer—that are integral to care and engagement.

In the studio, using opposing materials and processes created numerous problems, uncertainties, and a sense of being stuck. However, by staying with the

tensions, new developments occurred in my work. For example, after struggling with the limitations of combining both felt and paint on stretched and gessoed surfaces, I began working on dyed and unstretched canvas. I also started cutting the canvas, collaging it, and deviating from the conventional rectangular shape more freely. These interventions were both more creatively interesting and technically successful. The installation and expanding materiality of my work continues to grow from there, blurring the lines between painting, textiles and sculpture.

Reading Ursula Le Guin's "Carrier Bag" theory was an important moment partway through the MFA that led me to understand how a strategy of collage could reflect the incongruous and non-linear experiences of motherhood and care work. I embraced processes that intersected and overlapped with my caretaking work—for example, working with my kids in the studio and allowing their materials to drift into mine. I generated collaged works through the more conventional means of deconstructing and recombining photos, but also began to include household and crafting scraps. And over time, using a tiny needle to felt wool became a recurrent tool. In these ways, the gestures of traditional painting with a brush were juxtaposed with the repetitive and historically gendered gestures of cleaning, care-giving and craft labour. By bringing together ideas, images, materials, and processes, even though they might contradict or seem unrelated, I have begun to expand the visual vocabulary of gestural marks and processes in my work.

In addition to collage, thinking more deeply about tactility was another meaningful development and helped me link materiality to the idea of care. Images have been important to how I *see* and *understand*, but engaging the tactile in the

production and presentation of the painting made the image a "*felt*" thing, in both senses of the word. Even if only evoked, touch closes a distance and requires proximity. Closeness also invites an affective or care response – it is harder to be indifferent when you are near. And care includes the dissonant--*felt*ing and collaging domestic scraps became a way to "monster" the painting by puncturing the integrity of the painted image and creating disruptions, irregularities and spills.

Moving forward with these ideas, I am interested in exploring the interplay of tactility, technology, and image further. In my thesis defence, I referenced an Instagram post that said "what you cannot touch, you will one day stop seeing" (@fakewhale_xyz). The post discussed the excesses of cell phone photography. Today, the digital photo no longer helps one remember; its sheer mass and accumulation make us forget. This is an idea that I find very compelling – the relationship between the visual and tactile alongside accumulation and forgetting, memory and care. I'm curious how non-tactile (digital) archives might impact our sense of story, and what a tactile engagement with images and story looks like today.

My paintings contain open-ended stories, often set within a domestic space. As a result of completing this project, I am interested in learning how to better locate my work in a moment where gendered binaries are diminishing and feminist concerns intersect with race, land, spirituality, language and more. Nadiah Riviera Fella writes that "the domestic sphere of traditional motherhood cannot comfortably exist with larger existential threats outside their doors, whether global pandemic, ecological destruction or the toxic legacies of colonization" (26). While I have been considering feminism and motherhood through the intersection of painting and textiles for some time, I am curious

about exploring how these complex legacies and current realities become more visibly entangled in my practice.

As I move into the next phase of my practice, I will continue to explore ways in which painting can hold multiple and diverse strategies. While I have talked about the container and holding together, I think I'm most excited about the places where the container spills, where the painting opens up and becomes something else. And I'm equally interested in diving further into expanding the gaps created by uncertainty and unknowing, places in the painting process or image that I don't recognize.

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