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Embracing
Motherhood:
No Little Thing

A Thesis Paper Submitted In Partial Fulfilment Of The
Requirements For The Degree Of Master of Design. 2025



Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing

By

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A CRITICAL AND PROCESS DOCUMENTATION THESIS PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF DESIGN

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Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that this research is conducted on the stolen, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the $x^w m \theta k^w \text{ə} y' \text{ə} m$ (Musqueam), $s k^w x - \text{wú}^7 \text{mesh} \text{ú} x \text{wumixw}$ (Squamish), and $s \text{ə} l' i l w' \text{ə} t a \text{?} \text{ɬ}$ (Tseil-Waututh), Nations. As a settler, an uninvited guest on this land, I recognize the ongoing harm and ethnic cleansing inflicted by colonizers upon the Indigenous people of this land. I am committed to opposing any form of oppression against Indigenous communities and individuals. I urge the colonizer government to return the land to the people.

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Dedication

To all the women and mothers in the world.

不要想着去改变世界 而是要让世界适应女人

Do not think about making women fit the world;
think about making the world fit women.

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Abstract

This Thesis project investigates the complexities of maternity experiences and the progression toward embracing motherhood. A series of artistic prepositional objects have been created as a means to express and reflect on the diverse lived experiences that encompass the act of giving birth. Incorporating a diverse range of materials (textiles, ceramics, glass) and techniques, this material practice work has been created in conjunction with design approaches such as speculative design, critical design, sensory design, and participatory design. Also a curatorial effort seeking to provide a site for reflection on the emotional, physical, and social complexities of childbirth and motherhood in a gallery setting, the project invites people to use their senses (sight, touch, smell, sound) to engage with the objects on display. Importantly, the endeavour aims to facilitate a shift away from the usual role taken on by audiences visiting exhibitions from passive toward active engagement. The intent is to create a means to open up reflection and conversation on maternal identity and potentially building emotional connections to the topic of motherhood.

Glossary of terms

Material practice A creative and research-based approach that explores the relationship between materials, processes, and meaning-making.

Maternity A broad term referring to the condition of being pregnant and the experiences surrounding childbirth and early motherhood. This concept extends beyond biological aspects, including the cultural, social, and political structures that shape maternal identities and experiences.

Motherhood A socially constructed and historically shifting role encompassing the expectations, responsibilities, and identities associated with being a mother.

Sensory Design A design approach prioritizes multisensory engagement, using tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, and spatial elements to create immersive experiences.

Speculative design A design methodology that imagines alternative futures, questioning existing social and cultural norms.

Embodiment The lived experience of the body as both a physical and social entity.

TERF Trans-exclusionary radical feminists exclude transgender women from their definition of womanhood. I do not support TERF ideology.

Research Questions

How can material practices and sensory design represent the embodied experiences of maternity and motherhood while challenging conventional narratives?

What are the ways in which my approaches can trigger, revisit and reflect on institutional motherhood?

Introduction

This project discusses the complexities of maternal experiences, focusing on pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum realities. It does so through a multisensory and material-based approach, incorporating ceramics, textiles, glass, 3D printing, and interactive installations to challenge traditional representations of motherhood. It is informed by feminist theories, sensory design principles, and critical design perspective, aiming to create a more in-depth and embodied understanding of maternity. In the following pages, I will discuss the complexities of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experiences through multisensory exhibition installations. From there, I will introduce my material explorations and design approaches. I will discuss both my sensory experiences through making and the ones I have attempted to invite audiences to engage with. Throughout my work, it has been set as a means to consider maternity's emotional, physical, and social complexities. Challenging passive viewing by creating an array of objects in glass, ceramics, and cloth and situating them in an immersive, participatory space, I have sought to challenge passive viewing, disrupt idealized portrayals of motherhood, and provide space for critical reflection.

My Entrance Point

I grew up in an Asian environment and began living in a Western society when I entered university. Looking back on my childhood and teenage years, I realize that even before I became aware of feminist consciousness, understood feminism, or recognized the existence of patriarchy, I was already questioning and doubting issues related to gender and societal expectations. I vividly remember the first time I learned about pregnancy and childbirth in kindergarten. I asked my mother, “Why do women have to give birth? Is it something they must do?” She responded, “Yes, it is something every woman has to go through.” I was utterly confused. I could not understand why childbirth was inescapable—why being born female meant this was an inevitable destiny, as certain as birth and death, without any choice. This fear of the unknown left me with complex emotions about being female, emotions I could not fully comprehend at the time. Even though I did not yet grasp the full significance of childbirth, I kept asking and wondering whether I had the right to choose not to give birth. Perhaps, at that age, I was simply afraid of pain. As I grew older, my questions multiplied. Why did the boys around me seem to easily please adults and receive more praise? Why did I constantly feel constrained? When complimenting me for being outspoken, outgoing, and easygoing, why did adults always add “like a boy” at the beginning or end of the sentence? Why were these qualities seen as inherently male? Why did my teachers reprimand girls more harshly for their mistakes, often saying, “How can a girl behave like this?” while dismissing boys’ shamelessness as typical for their age? Why did it seem like only mothers bore the responsibility of raising children? Why did my mother have to quit her job to take care of my brother and me, while my father could not even remember what grade we were in? Why must people fall in love? Why must they get married? Why are married women expected to have children? Why does being born female mean so many choices are already made for you?

I had too many questions, but my mother could not answer them. My teachers could not answer them. My classmates and friends had no answers either. Yet, I was desperate to understand what had been troubling me all these years—those subtle, pervasive moments of discomfort and distress. What, exactly, was tormenting me? In my final year of high school, I was introduced to feminist thought, which answered many of my lingering questions. I began to see that women could have choices. At 19, I moved to Vancouver, where Western feminist movements and ideologies continued to shape me. At the same time, feminist movements in Asia were also gaining momentum, influencing me from both directions. I realized that women could have more autonomy over their lives. Even as I learned more about the female body and childbirth, I remained fearful of it—not just because of the physical pain, as I had once thought, but because, within the framework of patriarchy and modern society, I did not see it as the right choice for myself. However, I now knew that I had the freedom to choose. I could remain unmarried and child-free, even if older generations in Asian society would criticize me for it. It was my right to make that decision. As I engaged in conversations with people around me and observed discussions online, I realized that many women still had very little knowledge about childbirth in all its dimensions. Mainstream media romanticizes childbirth, making it difficult for people to see and understand it objectively and comprehensively. That is how I began this project - to use design and art to present childbirth from multiple perspectives—through raw, embodied experiences that strip away the idealized portrayals and reveal the unfiltered reality of maternal experiences.

Reconstructing Motherhood

Feminist Position

Self-identity

As an intersectional and radical feminist embracing socialist feminism and drawing insights from cultural feminism, I ground my beliefs in a critical understanding of gender inequality and class oppression as inextricably linked within systems of capitalism and patriarchy. These patriarchal systems, as articulated by French existentialist philosopher, writer, social theorist, and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2015, p. 504) in *The Second Sex*, sustain gender relations that subordinate women, making women's oppression a fundamental structural issue rather than a secondary outcome of other societal hierarchies. My feminist position also explicitly rejects TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) ideology, recognizing the importance of inclusivity in feminist thought and action.

Intersectionality, as a critical theoretical framework, is fundamental to this understanding, which challenges dominant frameworks that simplify oppression by focusing on a single identity category in isolation. It provides a structural and analytical tool for examining how multiple social categories (including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and nationality) intersect and shape individual experiences, social hierarchies, and power dynamics (Hunter College Women's and Gender Studies Collective & Simalchik, 2017, p. 61). It emphasizes that everyone's unique position within an overlapping system of social identities, puts them to different levels of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality is a critical theoretical approach that supports women's and gender studies, feminist analysis, and activism (Hunter College Women's and Gender Studies Collective & Simalchik, 2017, p. 76). This acknowledges that oppression extends beyond gender; by shifting feminist discourse from a singular gender focus to a multidimensional framework, intersectionality highlights the complexity of

lived experiences and contributes to more inclusive research, more effective feminist critique, and more equitable activism (Hunter College Women's and Gender Studies Collective & Simalchik, 2017, p. 76).

My cultural feminism perspective complements Intersectionality by valuing motherhood and maternity while emphasizing their transformative potential in challenging patriarchal norms. Indirectly related but equally important, I acknowledge that socialist feminism underscores the inseparability of gender inequality from the structural inequalities caused by capitalism. I am not alone in my concern about class oppression, which is made worse by capitalism's intrinsically exploitative systems and interacts with patriarchal power structures to maintain gender hierarchies. Japanese sociologist Ueno Chizuko's analysis of modern capitalist society in *Patriarchy and Capitalism* identifies the deeply intertwined nature of patriarchal and capitalist systems. Women's labour, both domestic and professional, is systematically devalued under capitalism, reinforcing economic dependence and systemic inequality (Chizuko, 2020, p. 43). Chizuko argues that the oppression of women must be seen as a product of modern capitalist structures. In her work on patriarchy and capitalism, she illustrates how capitalism simultaneously relies on and perpetuates gender oppression (Chizuko, 2020, p. 13).

In this feminist position, I acknowledge that gender identities are fluid and socially constructed. The exclusion of transgender women from feminist spaces goes against the inclusive principles of intersectionality and ignores the common but distinct struggles that all women face under patriarchy. Based on these feminist theories and knowledge, I have developed this project through research and creative practice. While this study does not specifically address the experiences of transgender women, it is important to acknowledge and reject TERF ideology while considering the unique challenges that transgender women face.

On Institutional Motherhood & Experience of Motherhood

“Motherhood” refers to the institutional framework—the social system of child-bearing and childrearing built upon powerful symbolic elements including customs, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, morals, laws, and ideologies. “Mothering” refers to the personal, diverse experiences of being a mother across different races, classes, and contexts” (Hunter College Women’s and Gender Studies Collective & Simalchik, 2017, p. 164). Motherhood has long been regarded by society as a natural duty of women. However, the multiple dimensions of motherhood—including social expectations, bodily experiences, economic impacts, and cultural representations—raise questions about whether motherhood is inherently tied to female identity. Motherhood is not a natural or fixed female trait but rather a role shaped by social institutions. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (2015, p. 225), famously stated, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Within this framework, motherhood is constructed as the core value of a woman’s life, limiting her other possibilities. This social construction not only frames motherhood as a woman’s “destiny” but also reinforces this role through cultural, legal, and economic means, marginalizing women’s other identities in both family and society. American sociologist Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978, p.6), further explores the psychodynamics of motherhood, arguing that it is a product of cultural reproduction rather than a biological instinct. She points out that women are assigned an almost exclusive maternal role, which is a social and cultural transformation of their reproductive and breastfeeding capabilities. This gendered parenting model not only reinforces patriarchy but also perpetuates the unequal division of labour, where women are primarily responsible for caregiving while men are less involved. This unequal pattern not only restricts women’s development but also shapes children’s perceptions of gender roles, further entrenching gender

inequality in society. The complexities of motherhood go well beyond conventional scripts, revealing deeply ingrained tensions between social prescription and lived experience. Maternal self-denial, when celebrated as a virtue, has proven to entrench harmful cycles of repression that hurt both mother and child. As mothers suppress their autonomy and emotional needs, this cycle of self-denial gets transmitted across generations, causing harm to the very children it aims to nourish. Traditional parenting discourse has a proclivity for individualizing mothers' challenges, attributing challenges to personal failings rather than examining innate systemic issues (Griffin, 2001, p. 37).rather than examining innate systemic issues (Griffin, 2001, p. 37).

Maternity, as part of mothering, refers to the period of pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum phase. It encompasses the state of being a mother, including all aspects of reproduction, motherhood, and women's health (Cambridge University Press, 2025). Society has constructed a romanticized image of motherhood in stark opposition to lived experiences. Rather than acknowledging mothers' actual struggles, society has often dismissed their suffering as natural, sacred and blessed. This has created a profound disconnect between societal expectations and the realities of motherhood (Griffin, 2001, p. 37). Motherhood involves profound bodily experiences, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. However, these experiences are not entirely within an individual's control but are deeply influenced by medical, legal, and social disciplines. Severe maternal conditions, such as Hyperemesis Gravidarum (HEG), highlight the physical challenges and vulnerabilities of pregnancy that are often overlooked by societal depictions of motherhood. Society frequently assigns meaning to maternal suffering—whether through evolutionary, theological, or narrative explanations—while ignoring the undeniable reality of maternal pain (Karkowsky, 2020, p.23). This perspective reinforces harmful ideals, promoting the belief that suffering is an inherent and unavoidable part of the so-called “miracle of gestation” (Karkowsky, 2020, p.22). Pregnant women must not only endure physiological changes but also conform to societal expectations of being a “good mother,” fulfilling all responsibilities associated with motherhood,

or else face accusations of negligence. From decisions about breastfeeding to balancing family and career, from spending enough time with children to fulfilling educational responsibilities, every small choice a mother makes is subject to judgment. Modern society imposes extremely high parenting standards on mothers, requiring them to invest significant time, energy, and emotional resources, often making it difficult to reconcile these demands with professional life. For example, while breastfeeding is promoted for its health benefits to infants, it often overlooks the physical and psychological strain on mothers. Society's emphasis on breastfeeding frequently disregards a mother's personal circumstances and choices, even using it as a measure of maternal responsibility. Such social discipline not only limits women's autonomy but also intensifies the pressures and contradictions of motherhood. Institutional motherhood is a system constructed by a patriarchal society, prescribing women's roles and responsibilities in reproduction and child-rearing, often restricting their autonomy and diversity. Institutionalized motherhood operates as a patriarchal construct designed to regulate women's reproductive potential and maintain their subordination under male-dominated societal structures (Hunter College Women's and Gender Studies Collective & Simalchik, 2017, p. 167). Institutional motherhood reduces women to tools of socialized caregiving, but the actual experience of motherhood is often filled with contradictions, pressures, and conflicts. The actual experience of motherhood refers to women's personal and lived realities and experiences during pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. While patriarchal motherhood oppresses women through social norms, uncovering and validating these genuine maternal experiences can empower women to challenge and transcend these constraints, fostering a more authentic and self-determined approach to motherhood (hooks, 2000, p. 28-29).

Institutional motherhood is inherently contradictory. While society restricts women to narrowly defined maternal roles, it simultaneously dismisses the profound emotional and physical transformations they undergo during motherhood. This paradox both confines women to isolated maternal experiences and prevents society from truly understanding and supporting their authentic

needs. The maternal experience is complex and includes both physical and emotional challenges during pregnancy and childbirth. It also involves significant psychological, social, and cultural aspects that shape a mother's journey. This experience is highly personal, but it also holds universal importance. It includes major bodily changes, shifts in identity, and the challenge of managing societal expectations that often differ from real experiences. There is a clear gap between societal expectations and the realities of childbirth (Griffin, 2001, p. 39). Motherhood is not only a social role but also profoundly impacts women's economic status. In modern society, motherhood often conflicts with career development. Many women reduce their working hours or leave the workforce entirely after becoming mothers to take on primary caregiving responsibilities. This career interruption not only affects women's economic independence but also exposes them to increased discrimination and inequality in the workplace. Moreover, cultural representations of motherhood are often idealized or oversimplified. Mainstream media, both Western and Eastern, typically portrays motherhood as a blissful and fulfilling experience, ignoring its difficulties and challenges. Such representations not only obscure the true complexity of motherhood but also reinforce societal expectations through romanticized narratives, leaving women feeling guilty and inadequate when they fail to meet these idealized standards.

To break the singular narrative of motherhood, society must re-examine its definitions and expectations of the role. First, motherhood should not be seen as women's sole value or destiny, but as one of many possible identities they can choose. Second, the lived experiences of motherhood need to be heard and respected. By encouraging women to share their maternal stories, society can better understand the complexity and diversity of motherhood, thereby reducing unreasonable expectations and judgments. Finally, it is crucial to move beyond institutional motherhood and emphasize the experience of motherhood, valuing women's real experiences and the realities they face. This is also a significant aspect of this research project. The future of motherhood lies in transforming it from a compulsory social role into a free choice. By challenging

patriarchal control over motherhood, society can create more possibilities for women, allowing them to choose between motherhood, career, and personal development freely. The complexity of motherhood is reflected not only in its social construction, bodily experiences, and cultural representations but also in its profound impact on women's economic status and personal growth. By breaking the singular narrative of motherhood and granting women more autonomy, society can redefine motherhood as a voluntary role rather than an obligatory one.

Methodology

My Approach

My approach has been made up of research-creation situated in both art and design practices. Throughout my master's studies, I have incorporated a diverse array of materials (textiles, ceramics, glass). Trained originally as an artist, I have responded intuitively to the materials I use – creating forms connected to my concerns. I have done so in conjunction with and am highly aware of design approaches such as speculative design, sensory design, critical design, and participatory design. Taking this tack of moving fluidly between art and design has allowed me to shift the objects I create to sort through my own concerns to ones that have distinct 'design' functions - inviting participants/audiences to join me and engage their senses and reflect on the emotional, physical, and social complexities of childbirth and motherhood.

Material Practice

Materials are fundamental to everything (Howes & Laughlin, 2012, p.7). Material practice constitutes the core methodology in my research, offering a sensorial framework made up of tangible touch, smell, visual, and listening experiences that convey and evoke maternal experiences. The primary objectives of this project are to develop multiple exhibition installations, employing materials such as ceramics, glass, yarn, 3D printing, and mixed media to investigate themes of motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum experiences, and maternal identity. Using diverse materials such as textiles, ceramics, glass, and mixed media, I create an exhibition space that moves beyond traditional formats. Material practice enables multi-sensory interaction, highlighting the role of sensory design in expressing lived maternal realities (Howes & Laughlin, 2012, p.10).

Materials have the capacity to actively shape the work of artists. Their inherent characteristics influence the expression in the sculptural forms we create and put forward. Materials also have the capacity to evoke a wide range of sensory experiences for the people who take in art, playing a profound role in shaping our engagement with the artworks that are encountered. The texture, weight, temperature, and even scent of materials can serve as important mediums for interaction, making the experience multidimensional and immersive. “Our sense of touch alone tells us a great deal of material information” (Howes & Laughlin, p. 10). Materials not only enhance the expressive power of the artwork, but they also have the capacity to break one-way relationships between the viewer and the work, transforming the audience into co-creators of the experience (Barrett and Bolt, 2014, p.23). Through carefully selecting and intentionally using materials, artworks can convey specific themes and emotions while encouraging people to participate more actively as interpreters (Barrett and Bolt, 2014, p.24).

My creative practice emerges from the ongoing negotiation between my artist

and designer roles. From an artist's perspective, I explore materials such as ceramics, glass, and textiles, using their tactile and visual properties as a language to express the complexities of maternal experiences. I integrate sensory design into my work and incorporate participatory research methods into exhibitions from a designer's perspective. I invite participants to respond to questionnaires documenting their interactions with the exhibition and use their feedback to refine my work. The interplay between art and design strengthens my methodology, allowing me to build embodied experience.

Material-based practice demands time, patience, and an acceptance of unpredictability. The materials I use possess an inherent memory which unfolds over time. Through tactile contrasts and material tensions, my work encourages reflection on the often-unspoken physical and emotional dimensions of motherhood, making visible the invisible labour and care embedded in maternal roles. By engaging multiple senses, the exhibition becomes a space where personal memories, cultural narratives, and collective discussions intersect. This multi-sensory approach deepens the audience's understanding of maternal experiences while fostering a more inclusive and empathetic dialogue on motherhood.

Speculative and Critical Design

Design does not predict the future—instead, it serves as a tool for generating possibilities that we can critically examine, debate, and collaboratively shape into preferable futures (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.4). In my research, Speculative and Critical Design serves as a foundational methodology for interrogating dominant narratives surrounding motherhood and maternal experiences. This approach is employed to provoke reflection, challenge assumptions, and explore alternative perspectives on pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving. Through speculative sculptures, immersive installations, and material practice, I create sensory experiences that invite critical engagement with the complexities of maternity. The exhibitions function as provocations—raising questions about the physical, emotional, and societal dimensions of motherhood. This space challenges conventional exhibition practices by creating a dynamic space that disrupts passive viewing and instead fosters active engagement and personal reflection. This methodology aims to dismantle romanticized or reductive portrayals of maternal experiences often perpetuated by mainstream media, offering a more nuanced and embodied narrative (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.4-8).

My work seeks to challenge societal norms, values, and assumptions about motherhood, fostering informed decision-making and community-building among both mothers and the broader public. This involves creating spaces for dialogue, reflection, and understanding that bridge the gap between individual maternal experiences and societal perceptions. To achieve this, I integrate participatory design techniques that encourage audiences to actively engage with speculative scenarios rather than passively observe them. By inviting participants to share their perspectives—whether through interactive installations, sensory experiences, or surveys—I transform the process into a collaborative

process where meaning is produced collectively. By applying a speculative design perspective, I aim to provide participants and audiences with opportunities for reflection and new perspectives, engaging a broader audience in discussions emphasizing empathy and understanding of diverse maternal experiences. Speculative design has been widely explored to challenge assumptions and provoke critical discourse by creating alternative scenarios (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.34). By incorporating participatory elements, my work aligns with co-creative methodologies that encourage audiences to actively contribute to meaning-making rather than passively observe (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p. 6).

Participation Practice in Design

Participatory design methodology functions as a reflective and iterative process that shapes my practice (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p. 9, 12). In my exhibition *Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing*, I encouraged participants to move beyond passive observation by engaging with a survey. This participatory approach aligns with relational and participatory design principles, positioning the audience as active contributors rather than passive viewers. The survey asked questions to evaluate the exhibition's impact on participants' perceptions and experiences of motherhood. It asked about their personal connections to maternity and childbirth, including whether they have experienced pregnancy, are mothers, are raising children, are childfree by choice, plan to become parents, have supported someone through pregnancy or childbirth, or have no direct experience with these topics. The survey then examines how the exhibition has influenced participants' understanding of various aspects of maternity, including emotional, physical, societal, psychological, health-related, identity/self-perception, and gender expectations. It also included open-ended questions encouraging participants to reflect on how their interactions with the exhibits have shaped their perspectives and to share personal stories or insights related to the exhibition's themes. Additionally, participants were asked to rank the sensory elements—touch, sight, sound, and smell—based on their perceived impact, offering insights into the effectiveness of the exhibition's multisensory approach.

Material Narratives in My Practice

Engaging the Senses

The senses blend with memory, shaping our understanding by connecting past and present sensory experiences. The senses guide our movement through space, making perception an active process that involves interaction rather than passive observation. Sensory experiences are multisensory, as different senses merge and mingle one another. However, sensory perception varies from person to person, creating unique ways of experiencing the world. One sense can also amplify or trigger another, further enriching perception. To create meaningful experiences, designers must engage non-visual senses. Instead of merely delivering a message, design should focus on evoking emotions and fostering deeper connections (Lupton & Lipps, 2018, p.10).

Exhibited Works



Gestational Pulse

(Ceramics, 2024)

Gestational Pulse is a sensory and abstract sculptural form that explores the sensations of fetal movement through tactile engagement. Using slip and a piping bag, I created numerous small spikes while carving stretch mark patterns into the surface.

Fig. 1: Ceramic sculpture
Gestational Pulse



Fig. 2 & 3 & 4 & 5:
Ceramic sculpture
Gestational Pulse



Fig. 6 & 7: Ceramic sculpture
Gestational Pulse

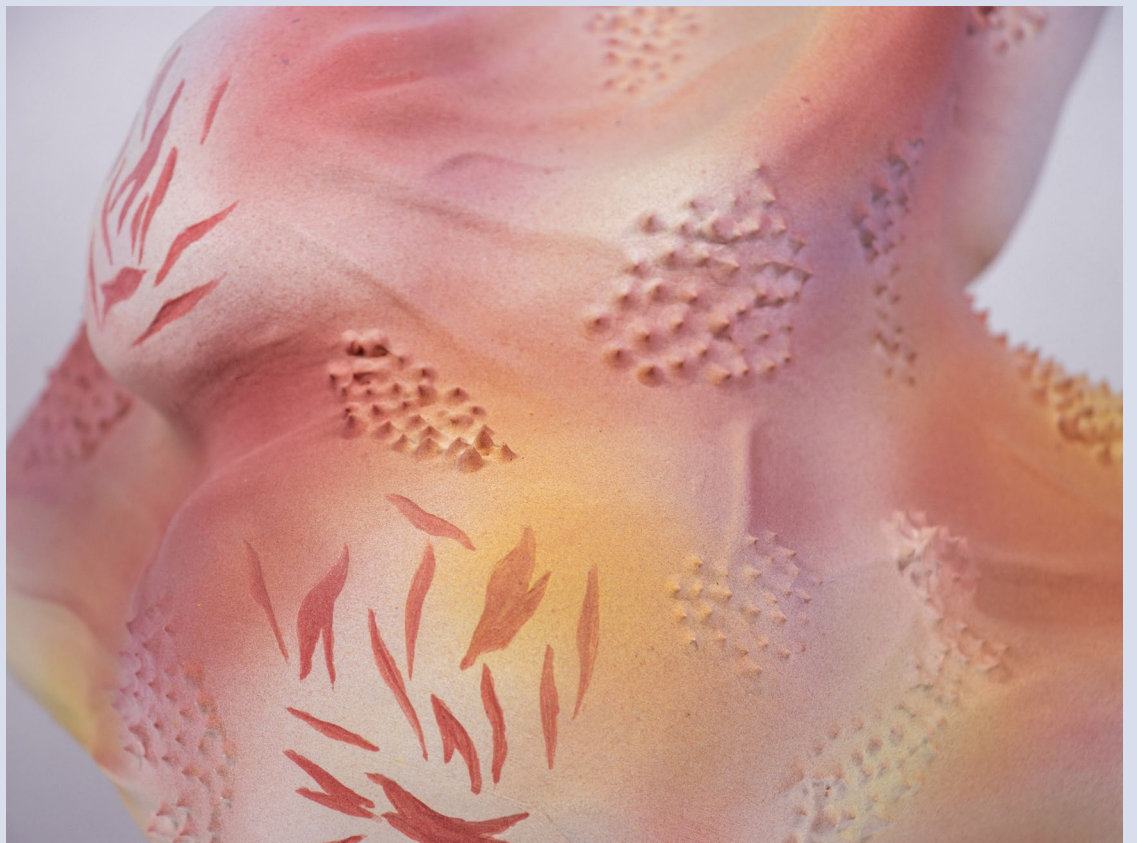
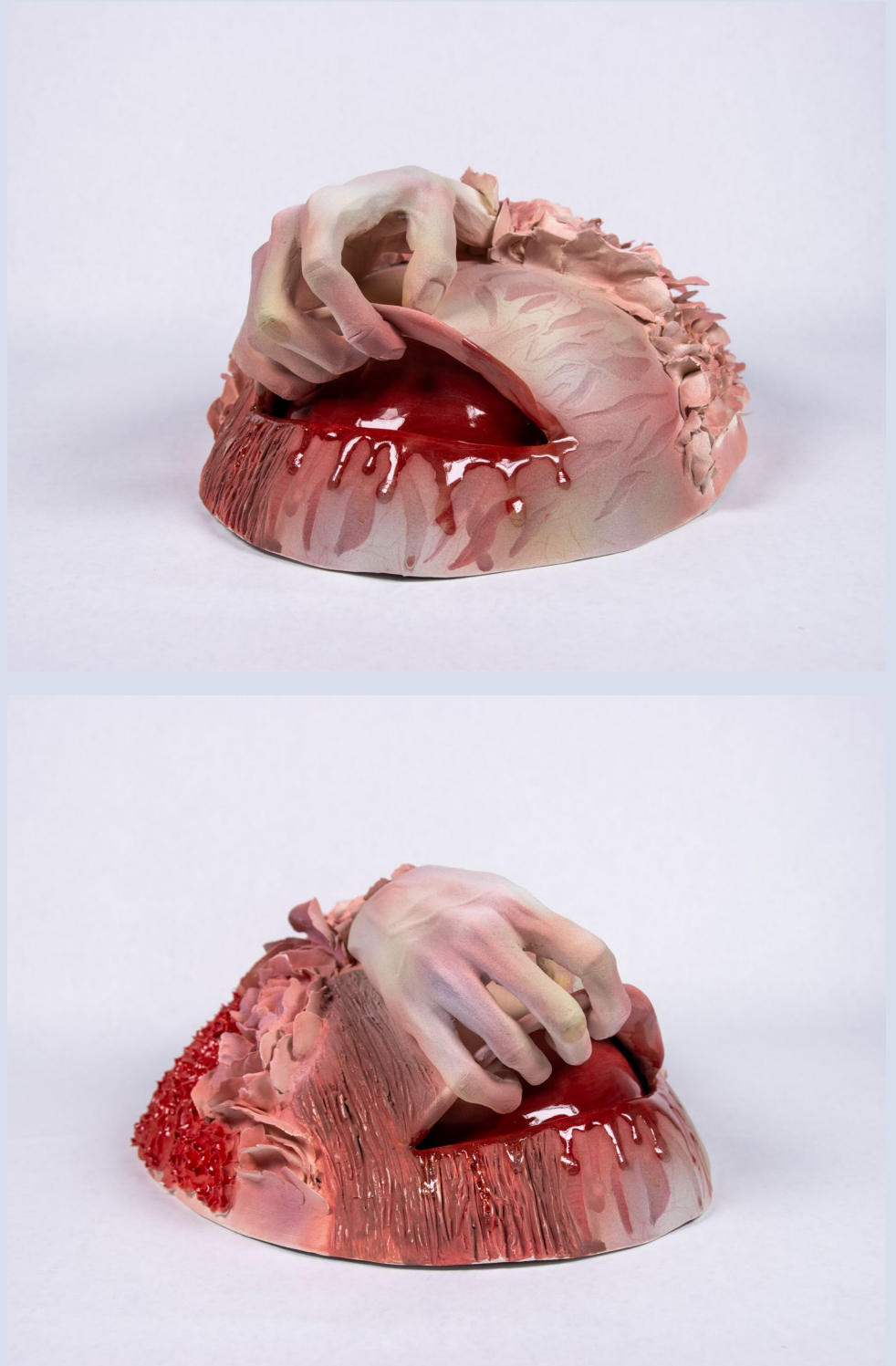


Fig. 8 & 9 : Ceramic sculpture
Gestational Pulse



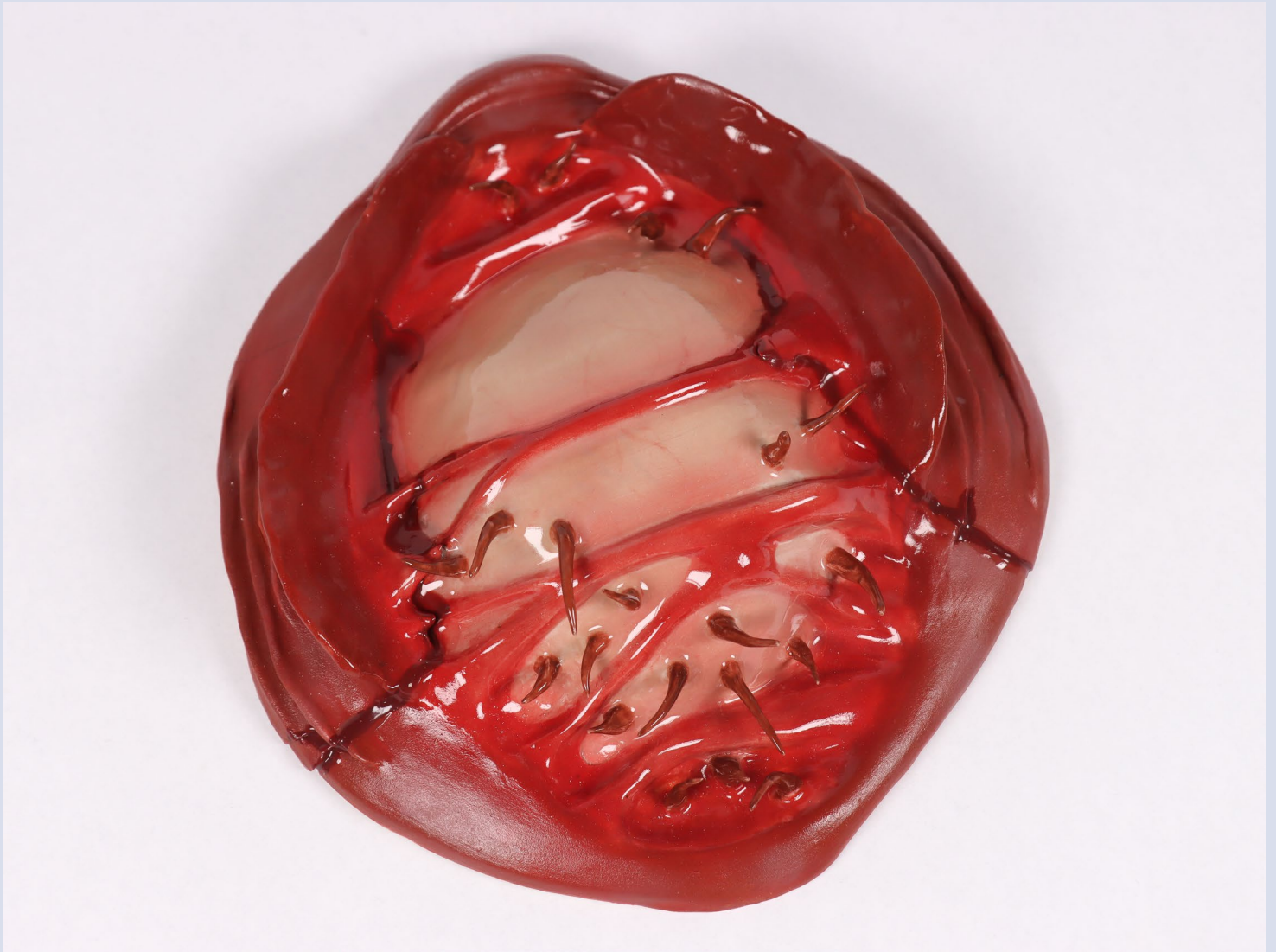
C-Section

(Ceramics, 2024)

C-section is a cross-section sculpture of a cesarean delivery featuring a hand pulling open the mother's body. It is a sensory and surreal form of work that symbolizes both the physical and emotional toll of labour. The surface comprises layered, petal-like forms stacked upon one another alongside rough and uneven textures.



Fig. 12 & 13 & 14: Ceramic sculpture C-Section



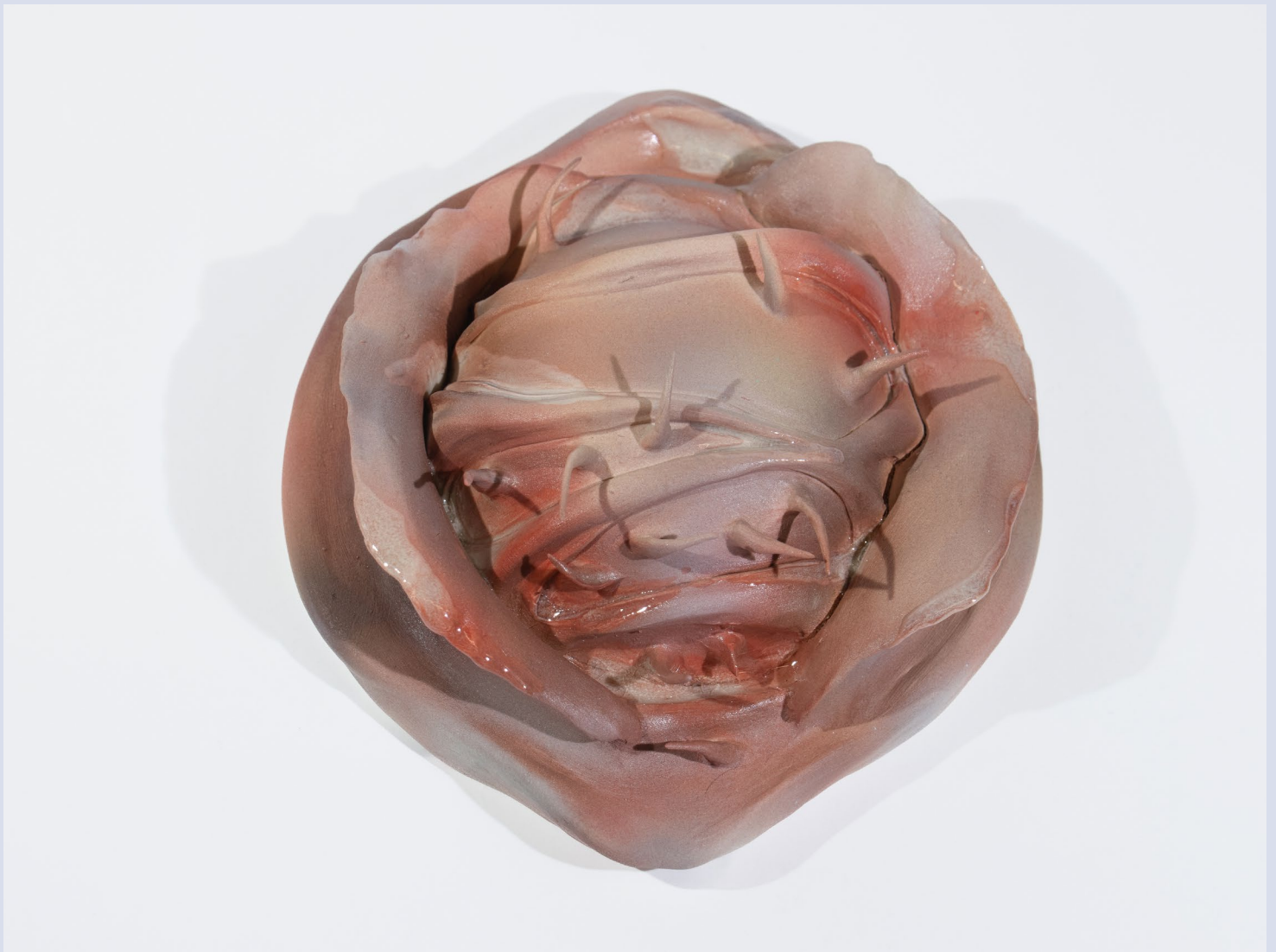
Tearing I

(Ceramics, 2024)

Tearing is a sensory and representational sculptural form representing natural childbirth's intense physical and emotional threshold. The surface features numerous sharp spikes and torn textures.



Fig. 16 & 17 & 18: Ceramic sculpture Tearng I



Tearing II

(Ceramics, 2024)

Tearing is a sensory and representational sculptural form representing natural childbirth's intense physical and emotional threshold. The surface features numerous sharp spikes and torn textures.



Fig. 20 & 21: Ceramic
sculpture Tearng II



Uterus Series: Echoes of the Womb

(Borosilicate glass, 2024, 13 pieces)

Uterus Series: Echoes of the Womb is a collection of small glass sculptures. Each form operates as a speculative reproductive narrative, representing different stages and conditions of the uterus. This work explores themes of reproductive health and the evolving maternal body. Some of the pieces depict a uterus nurturing a child, while others portray forms that are post-miscarriage, missing an ovary, or awaiting surgical removal.



Fig. 23 & 24 & 25 & 26: Uterus
Series: Echoes of the Womb



Fig. 27 & 28 & 29 & 30 & 31
& 32 & 33 & 34 & 35: Uterus
Series: Echoes of the Womb



Fig. 36 & 37 & 38 & 39 : Uterus
Series: Echoes of the Womb



Engorged

(Textile, yarn, 3D-printed structure, Arduino, pumps, silk tubes, metal wires, 2024)

Engorged is a textile-based installation work that incorporates critical design interventions and explores the physical and emotional complexities of breastfeeding. The installation features crocheted breast forms supported by a 3D-printed structure. The soft yarn contrasts with the firm internal frame. Participants can press textured buttons, activating a pump system that moves liquid through translucent pipes, mimicking breastfeeding. Thin red metal wires and red silk tubes are woven into the fabric and a combination of soft and hard materials.



Fig. 41: Engorged

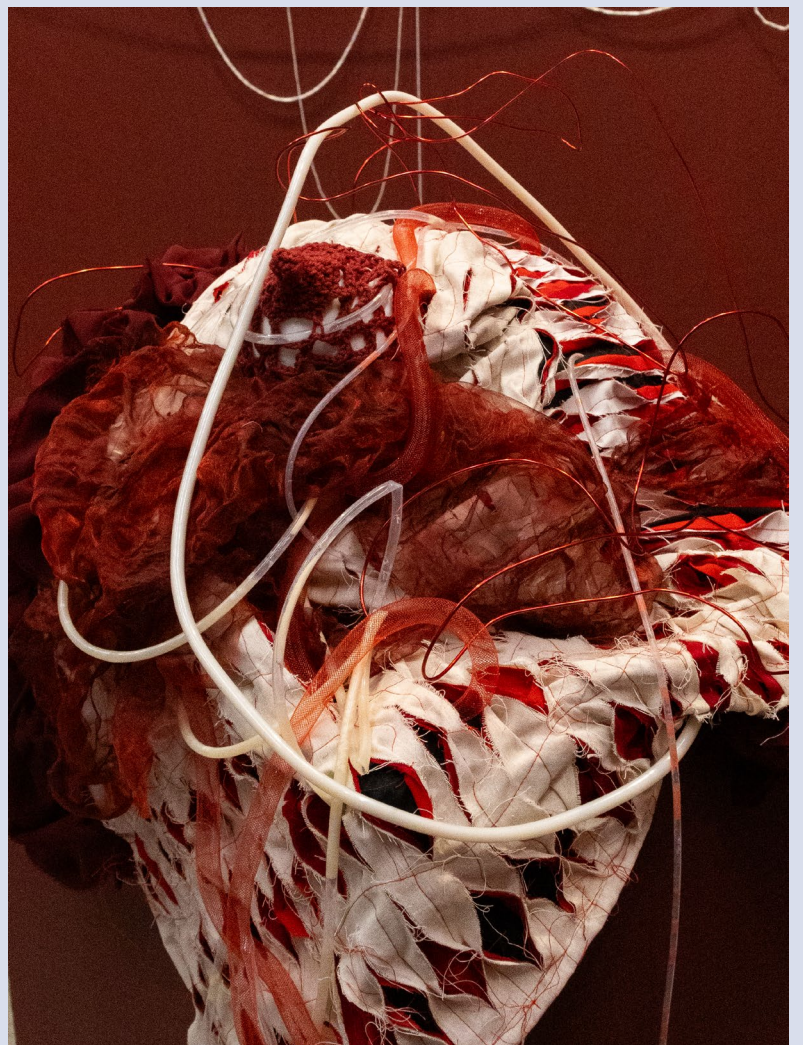
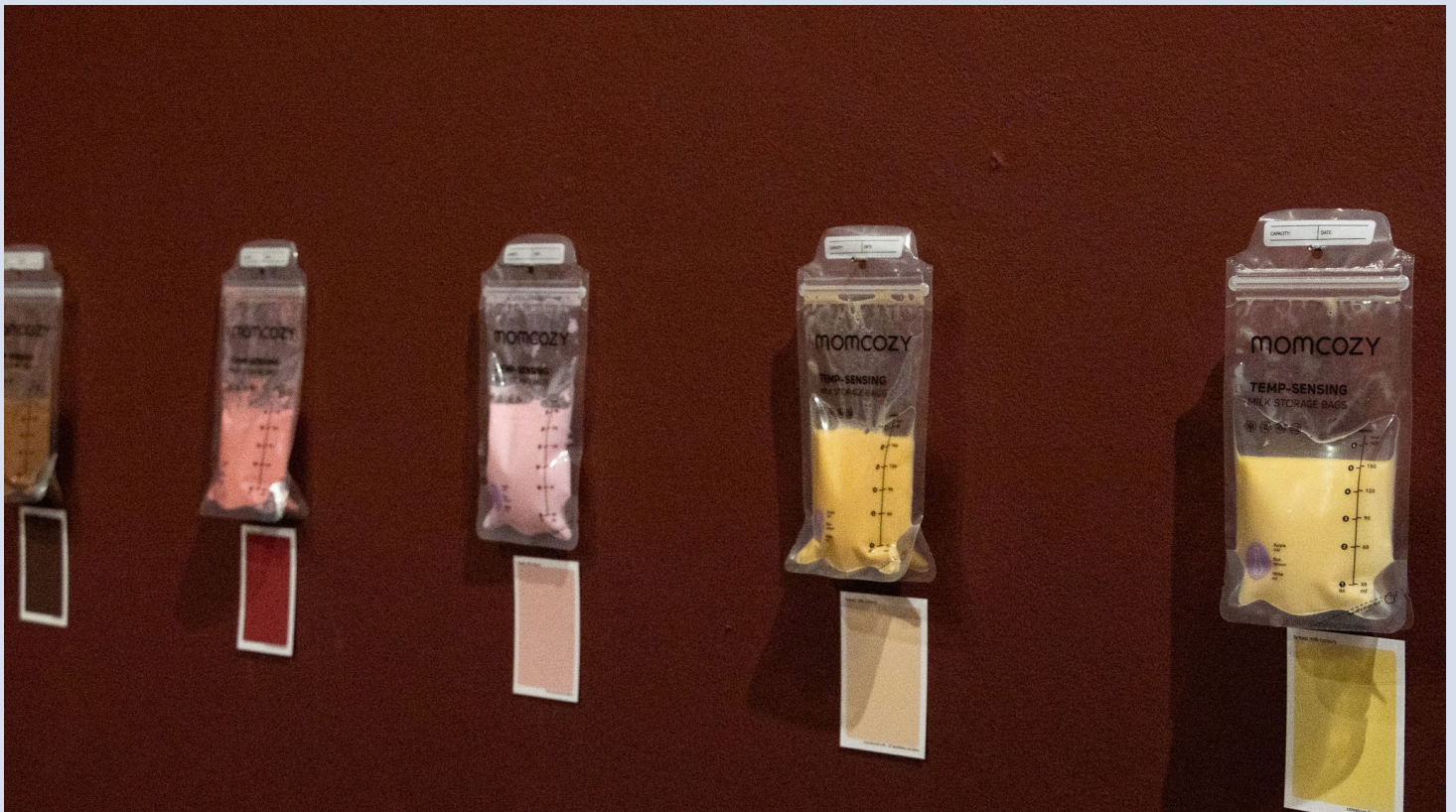


Fig. 42 & 43: Engorged



Fig. 44 & 45: Engorged



Breastmilk Colours

(Breastmilk storage bags, soymilk, food colour dye, breastmilk colour cards, 2024)

Breastmilk Colours is an installation that features breastmilk storage bags filled with soy milk, each tinted with food colouring to reflect the natural variations in breastmilk shades. The bags are paired with corresponding colour swatches, referencing breastmilk colour charts. This work shows the diverse and changing nature of breastmilk, influenced by factors like diet, hydration, and health.

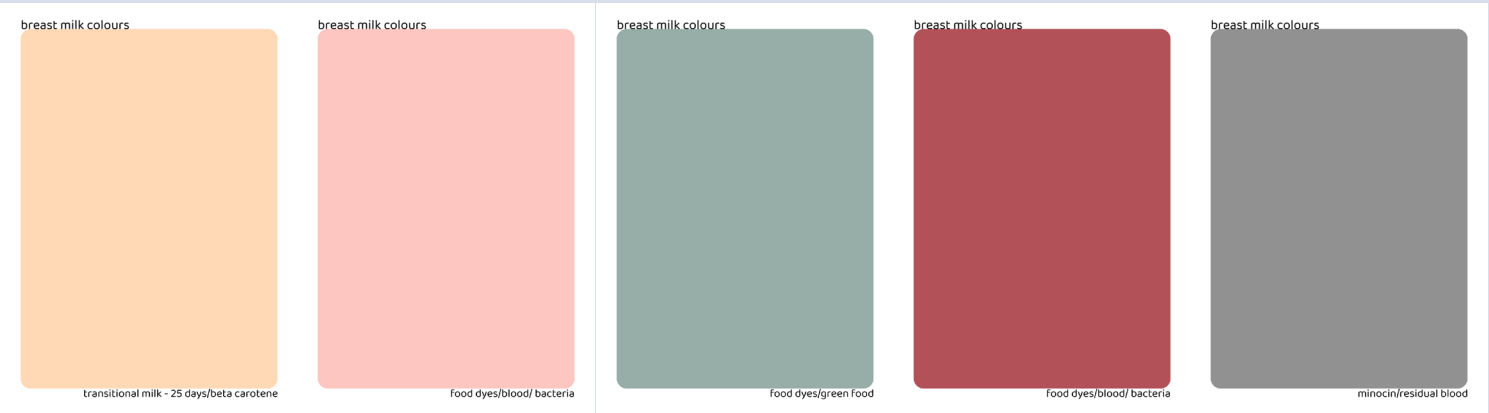
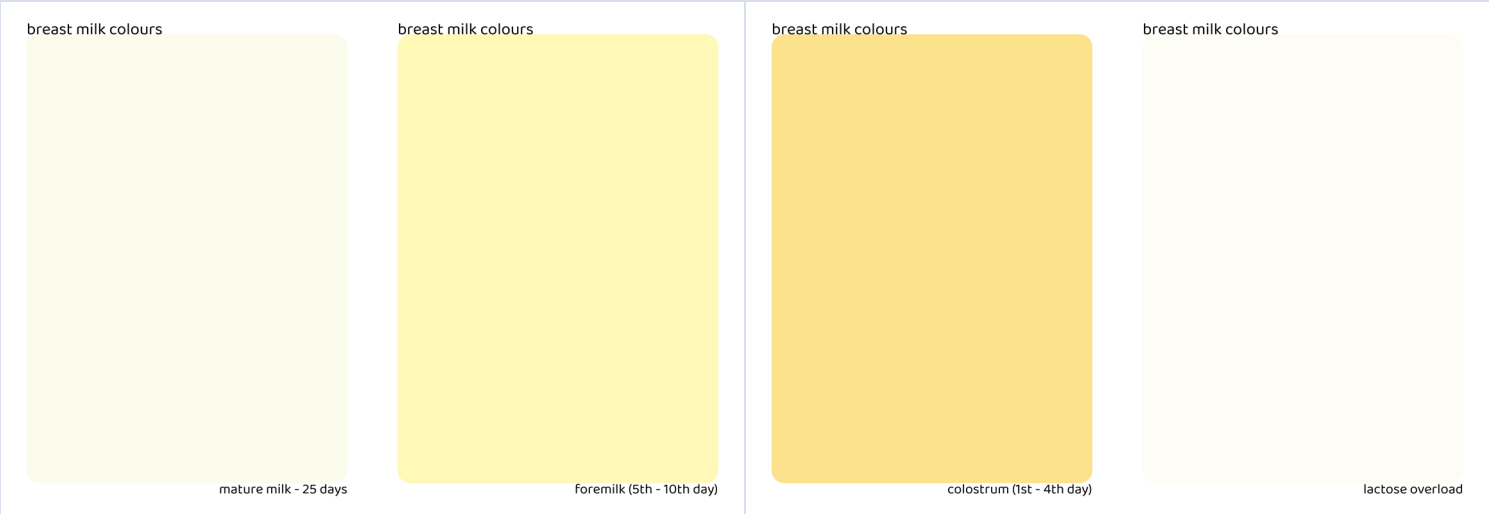


Fig. 47 & 48 & 49:
Breastmilk Colours

Material as a Language of Embodied Experience

Materials possess their own inherent memory, constraints, and possibilities. In my practice, working with ceramics, glass, textiles, and yarn as an approach has allowed me to explore these materials in a different way - to think about sensory and emotional dimensions of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experiences while working with materials. Each material carries unique physical properties that shape the creative process and how audiences interact with the work. By testing these materials' limits, I seek to experiment with the possibilities of materials and reflect on them through sensory exploration.

Working with Ceramics

Ceramic creation is a process that requires meticulous touch and precise timing. This material undergoes multiple physical transformations: it is soft and malleable when wet, fragile when dry, and permanently solid after firing. The entire transformation process demands careful control and constant adjustments, as each stage affects the final form of the work. A creator working in ceramics must remain patient and develop a close connection with the material. During the making process, the moisture levels of the slip and the clay body of the sculpture need to be kept similar to prevent cracking during drying. To protect the surface of the work from scratches, I place it in a storage box lined with plaster for slow drying. I also sprinkle water on the plaster base to maintain humidity inside the box, ensuring an ideal slow-drying effect. This method helps achieve the desired outcome while preserving the integrity of the piece.

In my creative practice, I have been exploring ways to push the boundaries of ceramics, making full use of the properties of clay in its different states. My approaches to evoke the senses shifted based on the forms I created.

When I work with clay, I feel it's cool, damp surface responding to my touch. As I knead and shape it, its temperature gradually matches mine, and its moisture diminishes with every movement. Clay carries both temperature and memory. Every action a ceramist takes leaves a mark. In my first ceramics class, my instructor told me, "Clay knows everything." Every motion made before firing remains visible in the final piece—clay remembers. At different stages of drying, it emits distinct scents. Freshly fired ceramics produce soft, bell-like chimes when removed from the kiln, creating an intriguing sound.



Evoking and Depicting Fetal Movement (waiting, anticipation)

In a sculpture depicting fetal movement, I used slip and a piping bag to create numerous small spikes while carving stretch mark patterns into the surface. Viewers can touch the piece, feeling the slight prick of the spikes and the uneven texture of the stretch marks, allowing them to connect with the experiences of pregnancy. The prickling sensation we know comes with touching

spiky things evokes the inevitable physical discomfort and challenges of motherhood, while the textured stretch marks work to indicate and metaphorically represent the lasting imprints motherhood leaves on the body, reminding viewers that motherhood is not just a temporary phase but a profound transformation of a woman's body and identity.

Evoking and Depicting Natural Childbirth (a threshold experience)

In a sculpture representing natural childbirth, I created numerous sharp spikes and torn textures on the surface again. These elements were intended to evoke pain upon touch and to make viewers hesitate before engaging with the piece. By eliciting both physical discomfort and psychological hesitation, the sculpture conveys the intense sensations and fears associated with childbirth.

Evoking and Depicting Cesarean Delivery (a threshold experience)

In a cross-section sculpture of cesarean delivery, a hand is featured pulling open the mother's body, literally evoking this surgical intervention and way of delivering a child. Symbolizing the emotional and physical toll of labour. The sculpture's surface comprises layered, petal-like forms stacked upon one another alongside rough and uneven textures. These tactile elements make viewers instinctively cautious about touching the piece. During the making process, I handled these delicate components with great care, as they remained fragile both before and after firing—a single misstep could shatter them. This sense of fragility and vulnerability mirrors the birthing experience itself—a process that is painful, arduous, and precarious. The careful, almost anxious handling required during the sculpting process reflects the delicate balance between strength and vulnerability that defines childbirth.

Working in Glass

Glasswork is a process that requires precision, control, and an acute awareness of temperature changes. The material shifts between states—molten and fluid when heated, rigid and fragile when cooled—demanding constant adaptation from the maker. Glass requires tools and external forces, such as gravity, to guide its form. As a glass sculpture grows larger, the rod I hold becomes shorter. My hands move closer to the fire, the heat intensifies, and it becomes harder to maintain control for long periods. Glass, like clay, has memory. If it is not evenly heated throughout the process, it develops cracks when cooled.

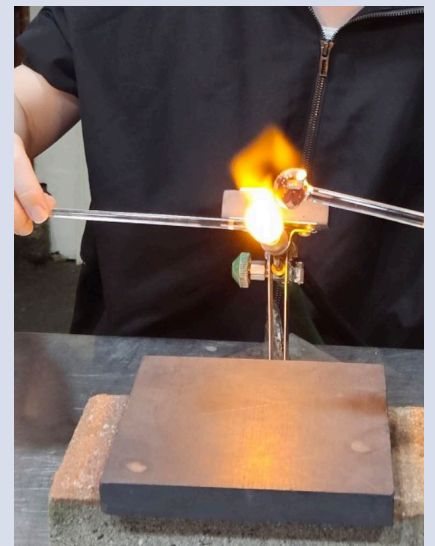


Fig. 51 & 52 & 53: Glass firing process

Unlike clay, molten glass has no distinct smell, but working with it requires IR Shade goggles to see clearly through the flame, which makes the result more unpredictable. In my creative practice, I explore the unique properties of glass to express themes of fragility, vulnerability, and preciousness. Throughout my Masters, I have created a series of glass sculptures representing various stages and conditions of the uterus. Some depict a uterus nurturing a child, while others show forms that are post-miscarriage, missing an ovary, or awaiting surgical removal. Each sculpture explores distinct narratives of reproductive health and the evolving states of the maternal body. Using flame-working techniques with borosilicate glass, I shape these intricate forms under intense heat, allowing the material to stretch, fuse, and solidify into delicate structures. The high-temperature process introduces an element of chance, as the final appearance of the glass—its translucency, texture, and internal details—only becomes apparent after the gradual cooling process known as annealing. The material properties of glass add to the conceptual depth of these works. Its transparency suggests exposure and vulnerability. Its hardened state contrasts with the softness of the organ it represents. The colour variations mimic the hues of tissue and blood. These colours create a visceral connection to the experiences depicted. This series challenges conventional representations of the uterus. It moves beyond idealized images of pregnancy. It includes narratives of loss, medical intervention, and bodily absence. The unpredictability of glass reflects the uncertainties of reproductive experiences. Each sculpture represents the changing realities of the maternal body. It invites viewers to engage with these themes visually and emotionally.

Working with Textile and Yarn

Textile creation is an intimate and repetitive process that demands patience and precision. Yarn and fabric remain flexible and adaptable, allowing for continuous reworking. The acts of sewing, weaving, knotting, and crocheting build upon themselves over time, and their varied textures subtly influence how I use them. As I create through touch, I also develop an emotional connection with these materials. The repetitive motion of crocheting, the soft texture of the yarn against my fingertips, and the slow accumulation of form create a process where each small action builds toward something much larger. This gradual accumulation mirrors maternal labour—each task may seem insignificant on its own, yet over time, they add up to an immense, exhausting responsibility. The contrast between the flexible fibre and the rigid 3D-printed structure introduces an unexpected tactile experience that exists both in the physical act of making and in the narratives my work conveys. In the case of working with yarn, this process mirrors the tender interactions between a mother and child, where touch fosters a bond that is both gentle and warm. My textile installation explores the theme of breastfeeding. Participants are invited to interact with the piece by pressing buttons, which activate pumps connected to an Arduino system, causing milk to flow through soft tubes. The flow of liquid in this piece

simulates the physical act of breastfeeding and the interactive bond between mother and child. The sensation of handling fabric and yarn during the making process reminded me of a mother's gentle touch as she caresses her child, fostering an emotional connection through physical interaction. This tenderness and warmth are integral to both the artwork and the act of breastfeeding itself. The installation also highlights the challenges and discomforts of breastfeeding. The buttons feature an uneven, textured surface, representing the physical strain on the mother's breasts. Emerging from beneath the fabric, soft crocheted breasts are supported by a rigid 3D-printed structure, reflecting how a mother's breasts can become engorged and painful during lactation. This contrast between the soft yarn and the firm internal structure invites the audience to consider the physical discomfort and difficulties mothers experience while nursing. Red silk tubes are also featured in this installation as a means of symbolizing the pain and potential bleeding that can occur during breastfeeding. To heighten the tension between softness and restraint, I also incorporated thin red metal wires into the fabric, disrupting the otherwise delicate and pliable textures. This choice reflects the emotional and cultural pressures surrounding breastfeeding. Not all mothers can produce breast milk easily, yet societal expectations often place undue blame on them, particularly in cultures where breastfeeding is considered the superior or "natural" choice. In many cases, mothers who struggle with milk production are urged to undergo treatments or traditional remedies, enduring physical and emotional hardship that is frequently overlooked. The metal wires represent the societal constraints on mothers' autonomy. Many mothers struggle to choose between breastfeeding and formula feeding due to family expectations or social pressures. The wires intertwine with the fabric and yarn. They symbolize the invisible barriers that limit a mother's control over her body and choices. This installation recreates the sensory experience of breastfeeding. It also challenges traditional narratives that romanticize it while ignoring maternal struggles. Interactive elements, contrasting textures, and symbolic materials encourage viewers to engage with the unseen difficulties of motherhood. The piece fosters awareness of the physical and emotional burdens mothers carry.

Unexpected Insights

Working with diverse materials has led to unexpected insights that reshaped my approach to sensory engagement. Initially, I viewed my work as representing maternal experiences through tangible forms. Through the act of making, however, I discovered that materials themselves dictate their own narratives. Glass, despite its apparent fragility, resists control—its final form remains unpredictable until the annealing process finishes. This unpredictability mirrors the uncertainties of pregnancy and childbirth, where outcomes cannot be predetermined or controlled. Another insight emerged from audience interactions with my works. When encountering Gestational Pulse, participants often hesitated before touching the surface, anticipating pain from its spiky texture. This response revealed how sensory anticipation shapes physical engagement.

Design, Curation, Participation, and Practice

From Touch to Transformation: The
Evolution of Maternal Narratives

The Exhibition

Title: Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing

Photo Document

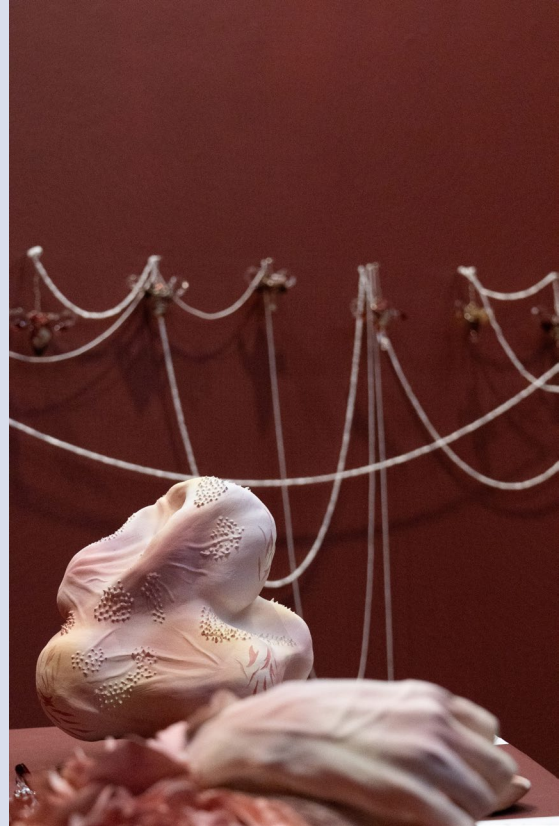
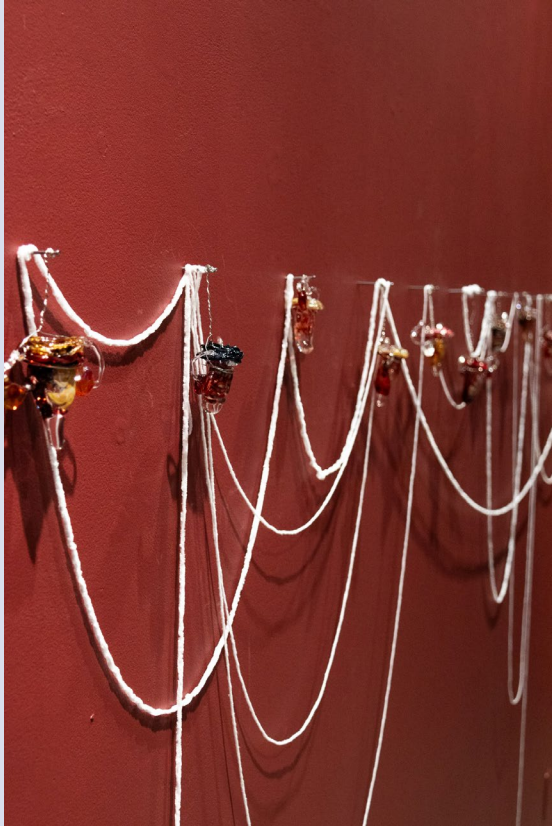
Photos of the Exhibition



Fig. 54: Exhibition



Fig. 55 & 56: Exhibition





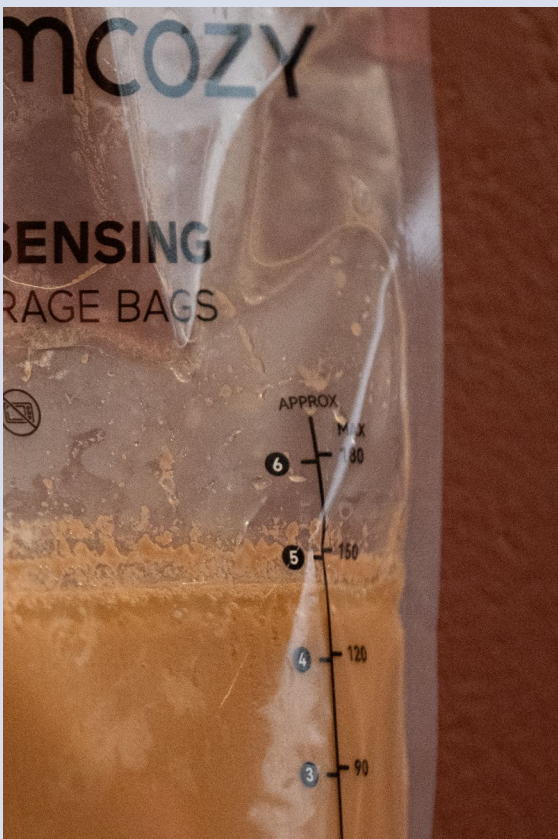




Fig. 71 & 72 : Exhibition







Fig. 81: Exhibition



Fig. 82 & 83 : Exhibition

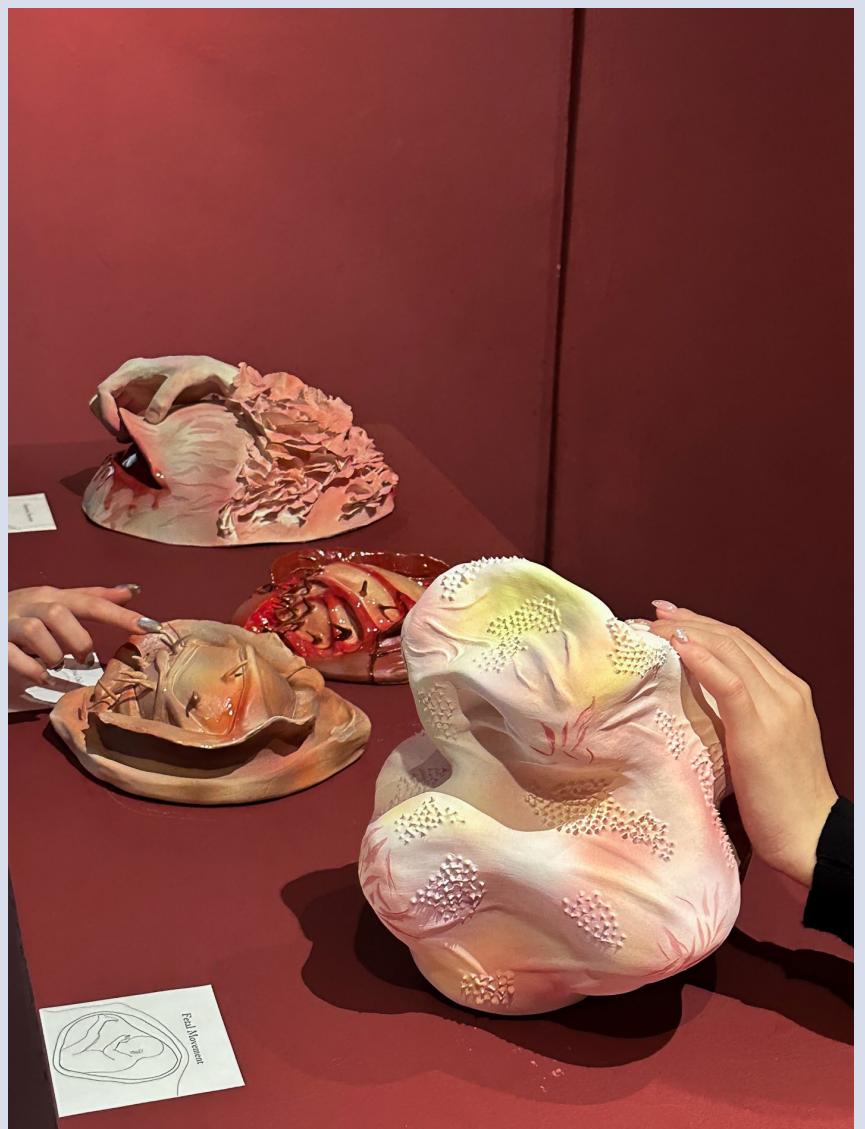


Fig. 84 & 85: Exhibition

Consent Form Zine

INVITATION & STUDY PURPOSE

You are invited to participate in an on-line survey that is part of a research study at Emily Carr University. The purpose of the Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing research study is to explore the complexities of maternal experiences through sensory design and material practice, creating an immersive experience for participants. This study is taking place to fill the requirements of thesis for a student researcher. If you are aged 19 and above you are welcome to participate in this survey.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

This survey consists of 8 questions and is expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Participants will be asked to reflect on their personal experiences, sensory interactions with the exhibits, and their perspectives on maternity. Your participation in this on-line survey is voluntary. You may choose to answer as many questions as you wish, or stop at any time. By answering the questions in the survey, you are agreeing to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you choose not to complete the survey. Once the response is submitted, it cannot be withdrawn.

SURVEY RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in students' thesis. In any publication, the data will be presented in aggregate forms. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Your responses will be used for research purposes, including analysis for thesis, improving the exhibition, and informing future research. All feedback will be collected anonymously, and no personal identifying information will be shared or published.

CONTACT FOR COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS

You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time, either during the exhibition or while completing the survey. If you experience any discomfort or triggers during the exhibition, please reach out to Counseling Services (counseling@ecu.ca) for support.

QR CODES:

- Survey: <https://forms.office.com/r/USW0ghbH7>
- Exhibition: <https://mboq.wildan.com/r/embracing-motherhood-1>

Approval:

This survey has been approved by the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board (ECU-REB#100569) as of November 14, 2024.

Student Investigator: Qianxuan Chen
Faculty Supervisor: Helene Day Fraser

Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing

CONSENT FORM

On-Line Survey

Fig. 86 & 87: Consent Form Zine

5. How did interacting with the exhibits affect your understanding of motherhood?

6. Please rank the sensory elements in order of how much they impacted your experience of the exhibition.

- ☐ Touch
☐ Sight
☐ Sound
☐ Smell

7. If you're comfortable, please share any stories or reflections related to the themes of the exhibition.

Embracing Motherhood No Little Thing

Emily Carr University of Art and Design

Principal Investigator:

Faculty supervisor: Hélène Day Fraser
 Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media
 Emily Carr University of Art and Design
 hfraser@ecuad.ca

Other Researchers:

Student Investigator: Qianxuan Chen
 Faculty of MDes Interdisciplinary Design
 Emily Carr University of Art and Design
 qchen45898@ecuad.ca

Please return the survey when you're done and leave it here.

Informed Consent for On-Line Surveys

INVITATION & PROJECT DESCRIPTION You are invited to participate in an on-line survey that is part of a research study at Emily Carr University. The purpose of the Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing research study is to explore the complexities of maternal experiences through sensory design and material practice, creating an immersive experience for participants. This study is taking place to fill the requirements of thesis for a student researcher. If you are aged 16 and above you are welcome to participate in this survey.

WHAT'S INVOLVED This survey consists of 8 questions and is expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Participants will be asked to reflect on their personal experiences, sensory interactions with the exhibits, and their perspectives on maternity. Your participation in this on-line survey is voluntary. You may choose to answer as many questions as you wish, or stop at any time. By answering the questions in the survey, you are agreeing to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you choose not to complete the survey. Once the response is submitted, it cannot be withdrawn. The survey asks for no direct identifiers and all the data collected will be kept confidential. The information that you provide will be summarized, in an anonymous format. It is possible, though unlikely, that you may be identifiable through the information that you provide. Raw data collected in this survey will be kept in secure storage at Emily Carr University for five years following the conclusion of this study, after which time it will be destroyed.

SURVEY RESULTS Results of this study may be published in students' thesis. In any publication, the data will be presented in aggregate forms. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Your responses will be used for research purposes, including analysis for thesis, improving the exhibition, and informing future research. All feedback will be collected anonymously, and no personal identifying information will be shared or published. By choosing to enter the exhibition and provide your responses, you consent to participate and allow us to use your feedback for research and analysis. Study results will be available by Qianxuan Chen. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the project lead (qchen45898@ecuad.ca).

CONTACT FOR COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time, either during the exhibition or while completing the survey. If you experience any discomfort or triggers during the exhibition, please reach out to Counselling Services (counselling@ecuad.ca; <https://www.ecuad.ca/student-life/student-services/counselling> or Counselling BC (CounsellingBC.com) for support.

This survey has been approved by the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board ECU-REB#100589 as of November 14, 2024.

1. How did interacting with the exhibits make you feel? Did it inspire any reflections on pregnancy, childbirth, or motherhood?

2. Which aspects did this exhibition change your perceptions or ideas about the maternal experience? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Childbirth
☐ Pregnancy
☐ Postpartum
☐ Motherhood roles
☐ Emotional challenges
☐ Physical challenges
☐ Societal expectations
☐ Other_____

3. How would you describe your relationship with maternity and childbirth? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Experienced pregnancy
☐ A mother
☐ Have raised or am raising children
☐ Intentionally childfree (childfree by choice)
☐ Planning to become a parent in the future
☐ Have supported someone through pregnancy/childbirth
☐ No direct experience with maternity or childbirth
☐ Prefer not to answer
☐ Other_____

4. Which aspects of maternity did the exhibition change or challenge for you? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Emotional
☐ Physical
☐ Societal
☐ Psychological
☐ Health-related
☐ Identity/Self-perception
☐ Gender expectations
☐ Other_____

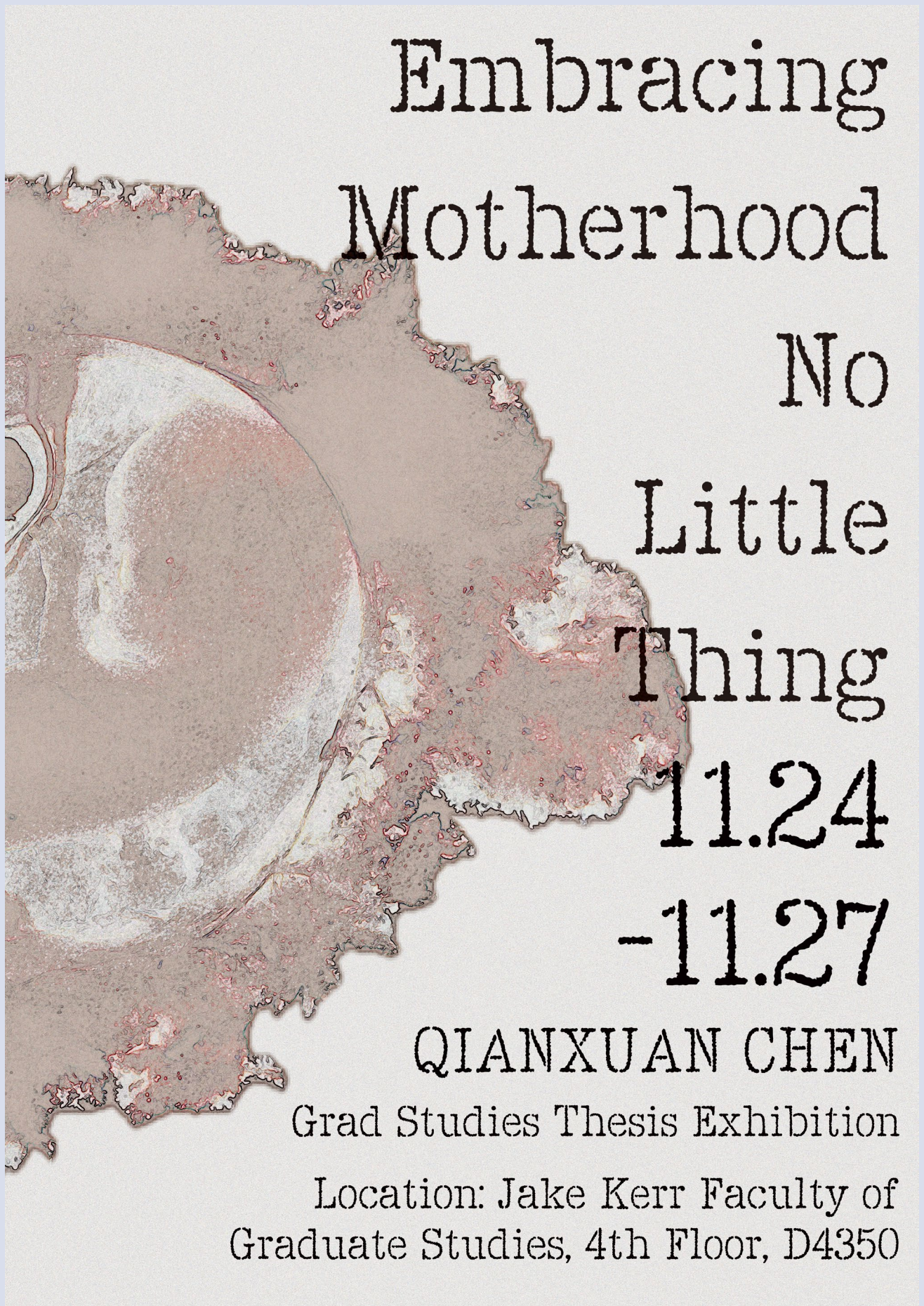


Fig. 90 & 91 (image on next page): Exhibition Poster and Notice to participants

Notice to Exhibition Participants

Faculty supervisor: Hélène Day Fraser

Student Investigator: Qianxuan Chen

Faculty of MDes Interdisciplinary Design

Emily Carr University of Art and Design

By entering the exhibition and completing the survey, you consent to participate in this research. Your responses will be anonymous and used only for academic research and exhibition refinement.

Participation in the exhibition is voluntary, and you may leave at any time. Completing the survey is optional and not required for participation. Please see the details inside the exhibition.

Thank you for attending this exhibition. Your participation in this experience and the accompanying survey contributes to research exploring the complexities of maternal experiences.

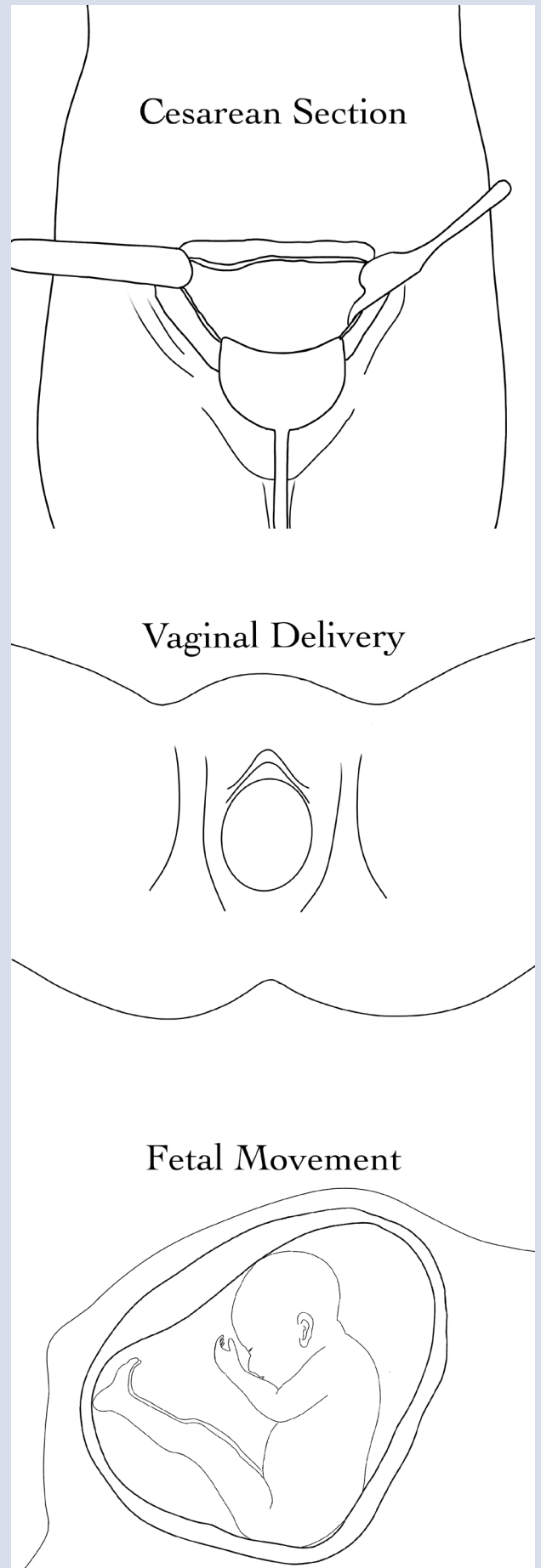




Fig. 95 & 96 & 97: Survey and consent form placed in the exhibition

Drawing on Design Approaches

Early on in my Masters, I was aware that I wanted to be able to situate my material practice in an installation format that invited active engagement and consideration. Approaches found in speculative and critical design practices and participatory design research served as great examples for me to work off of. These frameworks encouraged me to think beyond traditional exhibition formats and explore how materiality, interaction, and audience agency shape meaning. Participatory design emphasizes the importance of incorporating participant feedback into the work's evolution. Taking a cue from this design area, I was mindful of creating an exhibition responsive to diverse experiences. Considering the role of sensory engagement and material practice in evoking embodied experiences, I created an interactive exhibition that integrates ceramic and glass sculptures, sound elements, and tactile interactions to invite emotional responses and consequently deeper reflections on maternity.

A Speculative-Sensory-Participatory Exhibition

First hosted at Emily Carr University in Jake Kerr Faculty of Graduate Studies in a 4th-floor gallery/critic space, Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing features a series of tactile, immersive installations constructed using diverse materials and techniques, including ceramics, textiles, glass, 3D printing, Arduino, and mixed media. This designed space explores the multifaceted realities of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experiences and invites audiences to actively engage with and reflect on the emotional, physical, and social complexities of maternity. It includes the ceramic sculptures of fetal movement, cesarean delivery, and natural childbirth; the textile installations made of crochet, sewing, and mixed media; and the delicate glass uterus sculptures that I describe in the sections above (see pages 32). Moving beyond traditional visual representation, and static curated exhibition, I sought to create an exhibition

that engages multiple senses (sight, touch, and sound) and creates an immersive experience that fosters personal reflection and emotional connections on experiences of maternity. My intent was to design an experience that fostered empathy, understanding, and a deeper appreciation for the resilience and complexity of motherhood. Challenging passive viewing practices and inviting the audience to participate and engage, my intent has been, from very early on, to critique the idealized or oversimplified narratives of maternity that are often perpetuated by mainstream media. I have also seen this work as a way to provide a platform for inclusive dialogue about motherhood, encouraging visitors to reconsider their perceptions of maternal identity.

Rethinking Maternal Representation

Motherhood is not merely a biological state but a socially constructed role shaped by cultural expectations and institutional frameworks. *Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing* was a means for me to provide a site for questioning the ways in which maternal identity is often reduced to idealized narratives, challenging the invisibility of maternal labour, pain, and bodily changes. Unlike mainstream portrayals that often simplify or romanticize childbirth, my intent has been to present a nuanced and multifaceted perspective, shedding light on the complexities, struggles, and profound transformations that accompany maternity - a site to reflect on and empathize with the realities of motherhood. I also wanted to provide people who are unfamiliar with childbirth with a more profound appreciation of the experience.

In addition to educating the general public, my hope was that by providing a more nuanced and authentic connection to the sensory experiences of maternity, I would also be able to create a space that made mothers feel seen and understood while also educating the public about the realities of maternity.

Rethinking Form Giving - Through Participatory Feedback

Participatory research practices often use a range of tactics to engage participants and invite responses. Drawing on examples in this field, I have made space in my exhibition format and curation for participants to respond. In my first iteration of *Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing* this inclusion of a request for comments from the passers-by (who became participants) was in the form of a questionnaire. The feedback I received has been incredibly helpful to me as I consider how to further refine my objects and exhibition approach. I have found myself reassessing the effectiveness of my material and spatial choices and provision for sensory cues.

One participant shared that the sculptures and the accompanying sounds reminded her of her experience carrying her daughter. In particular, the fetal heart sounds that played immediately brought her back to the moment she first heard that sound during pregnancy. Another participant noted, “The C-section sculpture made me aware of how little we talk about the trauma that comes with birth (Author’s own survey, 2024).” These insights have led me to review the effectiveness of my material selections in conveying the complexities of motherhood.

Through this process, I found myself reevaluating how my spatial design choices shaped audience perception. Several participants shared personal memories of their own childbirth experiences, prompting them to question: “Why such significant topics remain underrepresented in societal discourse (Author’s own survey, 2024).” Others found the visual comparisons particularly striking, with one stating, “I found the ceramic pieces placed next to the diagrams to be a powerful comparison (Author’s own survey, 2024).”

Participation in the exhibition also expanded my understanding of sensory cues and their emotional impact. Many participants reflected on and empathized

with the realities of motherhood, while also engaging in deeper contemplation about maternity and childbirth. The people who visited the gallery were generous - their feedback was deeply personal and reflective. One visitor noted, “A lot of pain involved (Author’s own survey, 2024),” while another emphasized that “physical challenges were what stood out to me the most (Author’s own survey, 2024).” Others described how the exhibition prompted introspection, with one participant sharing, “It allowed me to return to it, reflect on my experiences—something about loss and time in it all (Author’s own survey, 2024).” Additionally, many participants found the exhibition highly educational, particularly the breast milk project, with most noting they had never considered the diverse range of colors breast milk can exhibit. As one visitor said, “The exhibition provides more concrete ideas of real-life changes (Author’s own survey, 2024).”

All of this feedback has led me to understand participation not only expands the understanding of the piece engaged with but also includes multiple experiences and multiple voices in the storytelling. The anonymous comments made in the survey have contributed to a shared understanding of motherhood, confirming the fact that mother experiences are not singular but complex, fluid, and subjective.

Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing demonstrates how participation enriches depth and relevance. Participation bridges the gap between the artist, the artwork, and the audience, creating a shared space where diverse experiences of motherhood can be explored and understood. This approach not only strengthens my work’s conceptual framework but also emphasizes the importance of audience engagement in creating meaningful and impactful designs.

Discomfort - as a Means to Bring Forward Needed Conversations

on milk

Material challenges posed significant difficulties in creating simulated breast milk. Initial attempts with acrylic paint were abandoned due to precipitation. A later trial using milk powder and food colouring led to severe separation after being left overnight. Eventually, a mixture of soy milk and food colouring produced the desired visual effect. However, after three days, the soy milk spoiled, releasing an unpleasant odour.

While I initially saw this spoilage as a flaw, it became an unexpected element that shaped audience reactions. Some participants found the lingering scent of spoiled soy milk and paint disruptive, while others believed these sensory elements heightened the exhibition's immersive quality. One visitor's remark struck me deeply: "It smells quite the same as an abortion room(Author's own survey, 2024)." This unexpected visceral reaction underscored how scent and discomfort could evoke deeply embedded memories, reinforcing the exhibition's goal of making hidden maternal experiences tangible. Rather than diminishing the work, the unintended interplay between scent and memory deepened audience engagement, creating a more embodied reflection on childbirth, loss, and transformation.

The glass fetuses caused a deep but hard-to-describe unease. Though delicate and translucent, they stirred strong emotions that many found difficult to articulate. One participant expressed this tension directly: “They look like vessels, like vases. But when I remember that they are wombs, the emotions become much more complicated (Author’s own survey, 2024).”

This reaction resonated with the broader themes of the work. While the glass sculptures initially conveyed beauty and containment, their meaning transformed as participants discovered they embodied various forms of uterine trauma and loss. This realization evoked a quiet yet undeniable unease—forcing a confrontation with life’s vulnerability and impermanence. The participant’s recognition of these symbolic wounds deepened her emotional connection, elevating the sculptures from mere objects of contemplation into vessels carrying unspoken narratives of grief, resilience, and bodily memory.

**The Things I Have
Learned
and Will Take with
Me
as I Move Forward
with This Work**

One of the most valuable insights I gained was how challenging yet essential it is to create installations that invite physical interaction. Allowing participants to engage directly—whether through touch, movement, or sensory immersion—revealed the complexity of bodily experiences in ways that static displays could not. My initial hesitation about letting people physically interact with fragile materials, such as ceramic and glass sculptures, evolved as the exhibition progressed. I came to accept that breakage could become part of the exhibition experience, leading to unexpected insights. Inspired by participatory design principles, I now see how engagement fosters deeper connections between audiences and maternal experiences. Future works will continue experimenting with forms that shift, respond, and invite sensory exploration.

Material as a Critical Medium

From a design perspective, one of the most valuable insights I gained is that design possibilities can break away from traditional approaches prioritizing usability and problem-solving. Parallel to methods used in Critical and Speculative design my approach invited uncertainty and interpretation. The breastmilk simulation was not designed to replicate lactation precisely—rather, it aimed to evoke visceral and unpredictable reactions ranging from discomfort to recognition. The Glass Uterus series challenged societal norms by making the familiar strange; through “making strange,” new ideas and ways of thinking about the subject at hand are revealed. (Danto, 1981; Seago & Dunne, 1999). Its transparency and fragility disrupted traditional views of the womb as solely a place of safety and nourishment. Participants’ responses—through personal stories, moments of discomfort, or unexpected emotional reactions, showed that the works served as catalysts for critical reflection rather than prescriptive statements. The sensory qualities of my materials became a means of activating

embodied memory and emotional resonance in participants. My experience creating and watching the reactions and interactions with the breastmilk colours installation has demonstrated to me how scent and memory intertwine, transforming the installation into a space for personal recollection rather than mere visual representation. This unintended interplay between scent and memory strengthened the exhibition's goal: making hidden maternal experiences tangible through material practice.

Rethinking the Narrative of Maternity and Motherhood

From a feminist perspective, motherhood needs to be deconstructed and reimagined as something diverse, fluid, and centred on individual agency, not merely a fixed social role. Each mother's experience is unique and profoundly influenced by culture, class, and gender identity. Motherhood should be a choice—one that society supports rather than enforces through obligation. Moving beyond traditional boundaries, motherhood should be understood as a decentralized and gender-inclusive concept, challenging the assumption that it belongs exclusively to biological women. Motherhood can be collective, shared, and detached from the nuclear family. Motherhood should not be viewed as an individual woman's burden but as a shared responsibility, where collective support and community care are essential for transforming societal norms around parenting (hooks, 2000, p. 13-16). Society needs to recognize motherhood as labour, not a natural duty and create systems for shared, supported childcare. The freedom to opt out of motherhood is also essential—women should be able to choose a child-free life without facing social stigma.

Mainstream culture often romanticizes motherhood by promoting unrealistic ideals, such as the notion that a mother's love is selfless and infinite, that mothers must always be gentle, patient, and giving, and that a good mother must

perfectly balance career and family. These myths create an impossible ideal mother standard, triggering maternal anxiety and making mothers constantly feel they are not good enough. Society must challenge these narratives and recognize motherhood as a personal choice. Motherhood is complex—mothers experience exhaustion, frustration, and sometimes even regret, and these emotions are completely valid. Mothers have the right to prioritize themselves; motherhood shouldn't demand complete self-sacrifice. Parenting is a collective responsibility, not just the duty of an individual mother. Redefining motherhood requires fundamental changes across legal, economic, cultural, and social spheres to ensure it becomes respected, supported, and valued instead of exploited.

Expanding and Refining Future Exhibition Curation

My intention with *Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing* is to create a repeatable format to engage diverse audiences, allowing for multiple, multifaceted realities of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experiences to emerge. My first exhibition provided invaluable lessons in logistics, material limitations, and spatial design. The interactive textile piece, *Engorged*, required technical refinements to enhance the tactile experience, while the glass sculptures benefited from rethinking how they are suspended for greater audience engagement. Future installations will incorporate stronger technical solutions, such as improving the Arduino-driven pumping system and refining the layout to enhance immersion. Additionally, I will explore the use of scent as a conceptual layer, further embedding the sensory realities of maternity into the exhibition space. These improvements will ensure that my work continues to function as a critical and participatory platform, challenging dominant narratives and offering new ways of experiencing the complexities of motherhood.

Reflections on Creation and Transformation

Throughout this process, I challenged conventional approaches to fragile artworks by encouraging physical engagement, even at the risk of damage. While I initially worried that breakage would compromise the work, I came to embrace it as an essential aspect of interaction—one that resonates deeply with themes of pregnancy and childbirth, where transformation and vulnerability are inherent. The exhibition evolved beyond my singular perspective into a dynamic space that welcomed and incorporated audience responses and interpretations. From a design perspective, this work departs from design's traditional problem-solving role, instead adopting a critical approach that challenges established narratives and provokes thought. Combining immersive and speculative elements, the work dissolves the boundaries between art and design, exploring their overlapping territories rather than treating them as distinct fields. By testing the limits of materials—ceramics, glass, and textiles—the work simultaneously expands the possibilities for integrating art and design, exploring how both disciplines can meaningfully engage with personal and social issues.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey - Online Version

Embracing Motherhood

No Little Thing

Emily Carr University of Art and Design

Faculty of MDes Interdisciplinary Design

Faculty supervisor: Hélène Day Fraser

Student Investigator: Qianxuan Chen

* Required

Informed Consent for On-Line Surveys

Project Title: Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing

INVITATION & PROJECT DESCRIPTION You are invited to participate in an on-line survey that is part of a research study at Emily Carr University. The purpose of the *Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing* research study is to explore the complexities of maternal experiences through sensory design and material practice, creating an immersive experience for participants. This study is taking place to fill the requirements of thesis for a student researcher. If you are aged 19 and above you are welcome to participate in this survey.

WHAT'S INVOLVED This survey consists of 8 questions and is expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Participants will be asked to reflect on their personal experiences, sensory interactions with the exhibits, and their perspectives on maternity. Your participation in this on-line survey is voluntary. You may choose to answer as many questions as you wish, or stop at any time. By answering the questions in the survey, you are agreeing to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you choose not to complete the survey. Once the response is submitted, it cannot be withdrawn. The survey asks for no direct identifiers and all the data collected will be kept confidential. The information that you provide will be summarized, in an anonymous format. It is possible, though unlikely, that you may be identifiable through the information that you provide. Raw data collected in this survey will be kept in secure storage at Emily Carr University for five years following the conclusion of this study, after which time it will be destroyed.

SURVEY RESULTS Results of this study may be published in students' thesis. In any publication, the data will be presented in aggregate forms. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Your responses will be used for research purposes, including analysis for thesis, improving the exhibition, and informing future research. All feedback will be collected anonymously, and no personal identifying information will be shared or published. By choosing to enter the exhibition and provide your responses, you consent to participate and allow us to use your feedback for research and analysis. Study results will be available by Qianxuan Chen, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the project lead (qchen45898@ecuad.ca).

CONTACT FOR COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time, either during the exhibition or while completing the survey. If you experience any discomfort or triggers during the exhibition, please reach out to Counselling Services (counselling@ecuad.ca; <https://www.ecuad.ca/student-life/student-services/counselling>) or Counselling BC ([CounsellingBC.com](https://www.counsellingbc.com)) for support.

This survey has been approved by the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board ECU-REB#100589 as of November 14, 2024.

1. How did interacting with the exhibits make you feel? Did it inspire any reflections on pregnancy, childbirth, or motherhood? *

2. Which aspects did this exhibition change your perceptions or ideas about the maternal experience? *

Select all that apply

- ☐ Childbirth
- ☐ Pregnancy
- ☐ Postpartum
- ☐ Motherhood roles
- ☐ Emotional challenges
- ☐ Physical challenges
- ☐ Societal expectations
- ☐ Other

3. If you choose other in previous question, please specify.

1. How did interacting with the exhibits make you feel? Did it inspire any reflections on pregnancy, childbirth, or motherhood? *

2. Which aspects did this exhibition change your perceptions or ideas about the maternal experience? *

Select all that apply

- ☐ Childbirth
- ☐ Pregnancy
- ☐ Postpartum
- ☐ Motherhood roles
- ☐ Emotional challenges
- ☐ Physical challenges
- ☐ Societal expectations
- ☐ Other

3. If you choose other in previous question, please specify.

4. How would you describe your relationship with maternity and childbirth? *

Select all that apply

- ☐ Experienced pregnancy
- ☐ A mother
- ☐ Have raised or am raising children
- ☐ Intentionally childfree (childfree by choice)
- ☐ Planning to become a parent in the future
- ☐ Have supported someone through pregnancy/childbirth
- ☐ No direct experience with maternity or childbirth
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other

5. If you choose other in previous question, please specify.

6. Which aspects of maternity did the exhibition change or challenge for you? *

Select all that apply

- ☐ Emotional
- ☐ Physical
- ☐ Societal
- ☐ Psychological
- ☐ Health-related
- ☐ Identity/Self-perception
- ☐ Gender expectations
- ☐ Other

Appendix B

TCPS Core 2 Certificate



Fig. 102: Certificate of
TCPS 2: CORE 2022

Appendix C

REB Approval

Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board (ECU-REB)

Research + Industry Office
520 East 1st Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5T0H2

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ethics@ecuad.ca



CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

The Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board approves the following project:

File #	Title	Principle Investigator:	Other Investigators
100589	Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing	Helene Day Fraser	Qianxuan Chen

The current approval dates are:

Approval Date	Expiration Date
November 14, 2024	May 30, 2025

The nature of the approval is as follows:

Type of Event	Type of Review	Approved Documents
New Approval Process	Delegated Review	Online survey (questions with consent preamble); exhibition notice; application

It is the researchers' responsibility to meet all research ethics requirements in the jurisdictions in which the research takes place. The procedures and protocols described in this certification must be followed closely. Note the following conditions associated with this approval:

- For multi-site or partnered research, researchers are required to comply with all research ethics requirements that apply. Researchers are expected to share notice of this approval with partners, sites of research, or other research ethics review boards, as applicable.
- If changes to the approved application and documents are required by new partners, sites of research or other research ethics boards, researchers are required to inform the ECU-REB of these changes.

Researchers are required to report anticipated changes, adverse incidents, and project completion for further research ethics review. All reporting is managed through the research portal on the Research Management System Process Pathways Romeo - <https://ecuad.researchservicesoffice.com/>. Login and complete "event" reports for changes, adverse conditions, renewals, and the completion of this research ethics file.

This research ethics approval is in compliance with Tri-Council guidelines (TCSP2 2022) and Emily Carr University policies and procedures.

Nick Conbere
Review Chair, Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board
Emily Carr University of Art + Design

Appendix D

Works Consulted

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Embracing Motherhood: No Little Thing

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