The Genre of Modern Motherhood

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I began documenting scenes of my life in the start of March 2020, just before Covid-19 swept through the world and changed all of our lives. Focusing on spaces I often inhabit and consider my own, I kept a practice of documenting each week with a reference photo I had captured; a scene I felt encapsulated that week, usually featuring objects and spaces. Through this project, I have recorded my own experience as a woman, mother, student, daughter, etc., but additionally the experiences of modern-day society and our collective journey through the past two years. Enhancing my personal narrative further, the *Quarantine Quilt* and the artist book, *Gestation of Solitude*, combine the graphic series with heirloom fabrics to create an enriched design which echoes between the pieces. I strengthen this work by tying it back to my research in feminist theory and praxis.

KEYWORDS: feminism, woodcut, printmaking, textile, motherhood, pandemic
THE GENRE OF MODERN MOTHERHOOD

NICOLE ARNOLD

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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THE GENRE OF MODERN MOTHERHOOD

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Finally, when I say that I could not have made it here without my parents, that is a considerable understatement. Not only would I quite literally not exist without them, but as a poor mother set up against an intensive academic program, the rigors of raising a child, a worldwide pandemic, and a few other bumps in the road – my child and I would not have survived, much less flourished in the last three years in Bloomington - Normal. I may not be able to ever repay them for the ways in which they both have supported us and made our dreams possible, but I hope they know how much their faith in me over the last several years means to me. In every way, I couldn’t do it without you.

Thank you all, from the bottom of my soul.

N.A.
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CHAPTER I: THE QUARANTINE QUILT

When I started the process of documenting my surroundings once a week in the spring of 2020, I was doing so to keep record of moments in spaces that I consider my own. I wanted to record my life as an artist and mother and show the ways in which these worlds collide and coexist. Early in the project, everything changed as Covid-19 began to spread worldwide. I watched headlines on my computer and felt like we were hurtling toward some sort of dystopian nightmare. I initiated the use of my computer, a common object shown throughout the series, as a method to speak directly to the viewer through text (Figure 1). The objects in our lives have a power to tell our stories, especially the objects that we surround ourselves with in our personal spaces. I find vast potential in the subtlety and versatility that communication through objects allows. There is a universality to daily scenes of life and the detritus we accumulate as humans.

My child and I relocated to our permanent home in Belleville, Illinois, to quarantine with my partner and his two children for the next several weeks. As I continued to document our lives, the practice of recording and processing images through a series of drawn and carved lines became a touchstone in the middle of chaos and confusion that ensued the summer of 2020. Each time I took an image on my phone for later use, it allowed me a brief instant to check in with
myself and my surroundings and mentally record the thought and emotion associated with the scene being captured.

The longer I documented our surroundings the more I saw the comfort of my family and the unique opportunity we were privileged to experience during great uncertainty. I grew my library of scenes and started to envision a quilt form reminiscent of the traditional log-cabin design. Emphasizing the red square in the center of the design, which historically represents the hearth, or the home (Figure 2) allowed the prints to integrate effectively in the log-cabin pattern.

My family, like many others in modern society, is blended. I have a child from a previous marriage and my partner has two children from previous relationships. Keeping a balance in our schedules in the time up to our leaving for graduate school was already complicated and moving two and a half hours away in the Fall of 2019 made it all a lot harder. The several weeks in quarantine allowed us a rare opportunity to exist all together in the same home. I watched the growth of my children’s relationships with one another, my own relationship with my two stepchildren, and my partner’s relationship with my child strengthened in a way it had never been permitted before due to our short bursts of togetherness. We enjoyed time in the back yard, tired of being trapped in the house constantly. Once, we found a baby opossum who had gotten trapped in a bucket. I looked on as our kids inspected the creature, wanting to ensure that it remained safe, unconcerned about their own safety (Figure 3). These scenes are simple memories but creating the woodcuts has allowed me to engrain them into my psyche in a way far beyond their initial real-life photo capture. The time that we share together.
now is much more limited, dependent on multiple school and weekend custody schedules, our trips home from Bloomington, and random acts of universal insanity. As the quilt has developed, it has connected me back to a time when we were all protected and thriving in one another’s company. The bonds that we grew in that time had an incredible influence on the strength of our family today.

In many ways, I think about these images as carved sketches. When I begin a drawing for a woodcut, it is first a process of establishing the objects in the space using the basic rules of drawing from reference such as positive and negative space, proximity, perspective, and composition. I do a minimum work-up of the scene, rendering everything with simple outlines. It is then in the carving that I utilize pattern, direction, light, line, and shadow to translate the image into the fully rendered woodcut. It is a process that helps me to break down the small moments of my life, to commit them to my memory and process their meaning not only for myself, but for my family and my fellow human navigating our chaotic world. My art making has always been intertwined with my mental health and this project magnified that correlation. Carving these images was a personal form of therapy.

After a spring and summer of quarantine, social justice movements, inept government leadership, and a lot of uncertainty, I returned to Bloomington to continue my graduate program. This time however, I was coming home alone. Because of the surge in Covid cases worldwide,
my child’s schooling stayed remote, and they remained in Edwardsville, Illinois with my mother, two hours away. There are several reasons why we chose this path, none of which I feel the need to defend or justify. As a parent working through her graduate program during a pandemic while simultaneously trying to ensure the best future for my nine-year old, myself, and keep my whole family safe, I allow myself this guilt-free privacy. Leaving my child was an exceedingly hard decision, but I am tremendously privileged to have had the ability to keep them safe in this way.

I started structuring the form of a quilt and began to research fabrics. I was introduced to Tyvek, a material used for several things including house wrapping, billboards, and the production of personal protective equipment. The connections that Tyvek held to my project, ideas of home, safety, and protection felt timely and unignorable. The black woodcuts speak in their own language of pattern and mark making and this becomes softened against the fibrous, textured, white fabric (Figure 4).

There is a history of needlework in my lineage, my mother has made quilts all my life as well as various other sewing projects. While my grandmother didn’t quilt, I’ve been told she was studied in cross stitch and embroidery. My mother has made everything from Halloween costumes to full formal dresses and her collection of discarded scrap fabric was truly something to behold. In this time of economic strain, it has been important in my practice to utilize the
materials around me that I have free access to. These fabrics were lying in wait, some holding their own unique stories and others their stories lost to time, ready to be a part of something new.

My first collection of twenty-four prints rounded themselves out nicely into their own arc; they began with our thrust into the stay-home orders and envelope the fluctuations between chaotic social unrest and the banality of what had become of everyday life when much of the world was put on pause. They also include the deep connections that grew within our family, this was the longest amount of time that we had all been able to share the same space, like a “normal” family. Through a worldwide pandemic, economic strain, social unrest, and so much other chaos, our family had grown stronger. We spent our last day together playing video games in the living room (Figure 5). This is the last scene that portrays another person besides me, until the final image of the chronological body of work. The collection of prints included in the Quarantine Quilt concludes in late August, the point in which I left my partner and my stepchildren in Belleville, my child in Edwardsville, and I returned to Bloomington with our dog, cat, my prints, and three large bins of fabric to sort through.

Now, the images I was capturing were beginning to shift in their focus from shared family spaces to spaces which were often devoid of human company and focusing solely on me and my objects. At this point, I decided that this thing I was doing needed to be separated out into segments of time, which I would refer to as chapters. It was a story after all, my family’s
story told through my artistic lens, so calling them chapters seemed to fit naturally. I had no idea how long the project would last back then, like so much in the fall of 2020, it was impossible to predict. Working in this unknown in-between is something that has always scared the hell out of me and in some ways, that fear has also driven me to this practice. I did know that either I wasn’t done with the series, or it wasn’t done with me.

As I reflected on the documentation of my multiple homes and family in the first chapter, the images that included people felt imperfect and more personal than the images that only focused on objects and spaces. I wanted to find a way to make these figures stand out more in the quilt specifically, but I was unsure how at this point, so I turned my focus to continuing the story further.

Mid Fall, I began to sort through the fabrics from my mom, there were so many different patterns and colors and I wanted to arrange them into groups. I had already been organizing the first chapter’s images into categories based on the mood I associated with each scene, so it felt natural to attach a color to each specific mood to correlate with each print. I also allowed for a light and dark version of each of the initial categories, which include moments of transition, timelessness, tension, and togetherness. My main dissatisfaction was that the figures faded into the lines of the woodcut, especially on the Tyvek prints, and they lacked the distinction I felt they deserved. I
began to embroider around the figures, using the same color embroidery thread that
corresponded with the color code I had fabricated (Figure 6). This small distinction, subtle in
some colors and bold and unignorable in others, was the final piece I needed to make the figures
feel whole.
With the adept sewing skills of my mother, many months of planning, hours of collaboration, and a great amount of love and support from my family, the *Quarantine Quilt* (Figure 7) came to life from my imagination over these two years, representing the strength and perseverance of my family, and will remain a valued family treasure for years to come.

Figure 7: Quarantine Quilt displayed at University Galleries for the 2022 MFA Thesis Exhibition
CHAPTER II: GESTATION OF SOLITUDE

I was spending much more time alone, trying to remain safe and limiting my trips south as much as I could to maintain some level of isolation for my family back home as I remained in person for graduate duties in the print studio. I was also adjusting to a new semester of courses that were predominantly online, something I have always found difficult. I had begun working at a small size due to its easy mobility as well as the limited space in my traveling home studio, something that is essential to my practice to balance my responsibilities as a mother and artist. In this way, the series has remained consistent throughout and this ability to continue at a small size made ongoing work at home feasible. Not only could I carve the blocks at home, but I could also hand print them, an intimate act and an important aspect when working with limited studio and press access.

I could no longer distract myself with my kids and their needs, with maintenance of the house, or the many moving parts that kept our family running smoothly. I was alone, with only two low maintenance pets to care for. I continued into the fall semester, trying to keep up with classes, studio work, grad work, and the heavy burden that life in the pandemic still seems to bring on in waves, even two years after its first crashing blow. The more the stress piled up, the more I leaned on my bad habits, which was easier without a young child to around to sensor

Figure 8: I know I shouldn’t, but… August 28, 2020 – Bloomington, IL
myself for. I smoked cigarettes on my balcony (Figure 8), looking out at the neighborhood full of other families, poor and struggling, just like we were, terrified for the future. With plans well under way for the quilt, I tried to focus on the second chapter, as the reference log of images to sort through had grown substantially. But focusing had never yet stopped being difficult since the pandemic started.

The longer the project went on, the harder it became to keep up with the workload that accompanied my initial schedule. I was struggling mentally with a heavy depression, a potent cocktail of seasonal affective disorder, contemporary political climate, ongoing public health crisis, social injustice, and inequity; the list goes on and on. I’ve experienced multiple severe depressions in my adult life, and too many minor ones to keep any record of score. My partner was also fighting with his own demons back in Belleville while simultaneously trying to find secure employment mid pandemic. He was juggling remote learning with our youngest child and multiple Covid quarantines with our elder. Navigating all these things in the same place would have been stressful enough, doing it while one hundred and sixty miles apart almost destroyed us. We both struggled to communicate, both felt lonely and exhausted, and it was difficult to see any light at the end of the tunnel. Missing my partner has always been a difficult aspect of my fractured life, but missing my child was a new level of difficult, I often went in their room,
standing in the doorway (Figure 9) or sometimes even laying on their bed for a while thinking about how hard this all was, and worrying what the repercussions of this time apart might be on our relationship.

To top off the shit sandwich, we learned that our beloved dog had a typically aggressive form of cancer on one of her toes. She would ultimately need surgery to amputate the toe and intense care afterwards, but the fear of losing one of my best friends was overwhelming. The care that followed was an intimate experience that grew a new level of trust between us. Each day for multiple weeks we had to undress the wound, apply ointment, re-dress the paw, and then resecure it with medical tape and a sock for extra padding (Figure 10). Often at night I would have to wake up and deter her from licking and chewing on the bandaged foot.

Our pets are a vital part of our family dynamic and their company as a positive influence for me while I was distanced in Bloomington cannot be understated.

I had also formed close friendships with the two printmakers I was working with in my graduate program as we all braved the chaos of remote learning together. I have experienced my share of relationship trauma in my life thus far which has left me wary, especially of trios of friendships. These two women have shown me a new height of acceptance, love, support, and trust that I believe is truly unique in this world. Without their encouragement,
care, and honesty, I would not be the woman I am today. We would spend late nights at my
apartment, making food, playing games, drinking, and always allowing space for one another in any capacity we could. My kitchen would be a total wreck afterwards, things spilled on the floor, dishes and cups, the remanence of another successful good time (Figure 11). They always stayed and helped me clean up. In the moments when I felt the loneliest and most disconnected from my family, they were always available and understanding, ready to offer support and validation, or at times a distraction from the problems I couldn’t control and the things I couldn’t change.

With a profound level of peer support, the comfort of my pets, and a moderate dependence on outside substances (antidepressants, cannabis, caffeine, alcohol, etc.) I made it through the fall semester. I was always looking forward to the next weekend home, even though they had diminished substantially and began regularly devolving into disagreements surrounding domestic labor, work and finances, the distance, and our present housing situation. When I was finally able to travel home for winter break the tension was at a new high as my partner had unexpectedly lost his job and finances where increasingly strained. We “celebrated” the holidays with a picture of a Christmas tree I had drawn in crayon and taped on the wall, too exhausted and depressed to bother with anything more than that. The kids finally all got to spend time together,
the first period all together in months. As usual life was throwing me tiny silver linings to cling to with each crashing hardship.

The start of the new year brought on a renewed sense of nationwide dread when a group of unhinged civilians stormed the US Capitol in an attempted coup to keep Donald Trump in power. I watched on TV in horror as then President-elect Biden called for peace and order among the chaos (Figure 12). The culprits eventually failed, but it was a fresh wound on the gnarled mass of modern society. My depression waxed and waned, and I was starting to see patterns reflected in my menstrual cycle. A few years ago, I was prescribed anti-depressants for Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder, something that my doctor quickly brushed over, barely explaining what PMDD meant. I took the pills and things got better, so I left it at that. Simple. Eventually through the course of switching doctors and dosages being raised over time, I found myself in a stupor that I couldn’t shake. There’s a genetic test that can tell you which mood-altering drugs you are more and less sensitive to and this test revealed that my genetic makeup makes me unable to efficiently metabolize the particular drug I had been taking for years. It had steadily gone from helping me function, to turning me into a complete zombie. I weaned off and decided to reconnect with my body’s natural chemistry.
It didn’t take long for my mood to start swinging in some seemingly unpredictable ways. I remembered the PMDD and started looking for resources, stumbling across a podcast where a woman discussed her experience. She said it was like an emotional sunburn, discussed the way her depression was tied with her cycle, the struggles it could cause with relationships of all kinds. I got a flash of warmth through my skin as I listened, the way you do when you hear something that you know at your core to be true. It might not be a universal truth, but in that flash, it is so true to you. My period had always been something I hated dealing with, and for years I avoided it with different forms of birth control. As a mother of a child with a uterus, who will one day also carry the weight of menstruation, I felt a sense of obligation in connecting to this very unique and taboo experience in a way I never had in my early adult life. There was a lot of freedom in connecting and accepting a part of myself that I had run away from for so long (Figure 13).

Being able to identify these feelings more fully opened new avenues for managing and treating my PMDD in a way that continues to work well for me today. I also took a plunge I had been avoiding for years and began talking to a therapist. The time apart from my child, the stress of my long-distance relationship, more and more debt, pressures of school; it had all felt too heavy to carry alone. I needed professional help.
The spring of 2021 brought vaccinations, dandelions, and a renewed (though temporary) sense of optimism, at least I knew that summer would bring time back in Belleville with my family. It also meant that the worry surrounding Covid declined compared to the preceding months, public outdoor dining began to resume, and my fellow grads and I enjoyed beer and pickle chips out at a favorite local brewery. We discussed any and everything, joking, laughing, and reveling in the deep friendships we had built together.

In mid-May of 2021, my child and I were reunited. I had finished my spring semester and was now able to manage their last few weeks of remote third grade while I decompressed from the semester. We enjoyed the ease of being back in one another’s company. I will never voluntarily separate from my child again in that way, until they are much older and running away from me. For the first few nights back, I would sneak into their room, making sure they were really there (Figure 14).

My original intention was for this to be the end of the story, as this is where the chronological woodcut images end, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Chapter two had become a nine-month long residency in solitude where I was forced to face my inner demons and some outer demons as well. This time felt important to record not only for me, but for my family. It was a testament to
how difficult it was to miss them, how I am not myself without them, and the work that I did to better understand myself in that period so that I can be a better mother and partner.

When I look back at the work I made during this time, I can appreciate how the practice of making these woodcuts allowed me to organize and process through the events and emotions that accompanied them. Through many civil uprisings of all kinds, separation from loved ones, physical and mental health problems, carving intuitively to represent a balance of light and dark through line and pattern has allowed me to connect fully with those experiences in a deeply powerful way. In chapter two, there is an increase to first-person perspective through the prints as I push the viewer into my frame of view (Figure 15) Through decades of training, practice, and undeniable natural talent, I have developed an instinctual eye for a strong and engaging composition. Using my camera as the view finder, I’ve honed the skill to capture small compelling shots of my surroundings. This ability creates a cohesiveness throughout the series allowing me to carry the viewer along on my journey with me, seeing what I see and feeling what I feel.

The text that accompanies each image, as in chapter one, represents the day, location, and the inner monologue that I had as I captured the reference shot. The woodcuts become strengthened by my narrative as I can further direct the viewer to the subtle ups and downs of my...
experiences. I am giving direct access to my unfiltered thoughts, at times allowing an uncomfortable vulnerability. I recognize this vulnerability as an important part of the work of uncovering the harder parts of motherhood that have long been overshadowed by our collective idea of what the mothering experience is supposed to look like.

Throughout the series, there is also text in the woodcuts themselves at times. This is my way of infusing the work with small humors, by replacing brand names with simple labels such as “computer” and “television” or labeling a billboard as “sign” (Figure 16). When I am using text to represent a newspaper headline or document, it often becomes simplified, making it more easily digestible in the small, woodcut format. Allowing text to invade the woodcuts lets me communicate directly in a way that is inseparable from the prints themselves. I can choose to omit the text of my inner monologue, but this text will always remain in the block.

Like with the quilt in chapter one, I felt the push to represent my narrative fully in a chronological way, searching for ways to enrich the work with my own version of feminism. The
collection of prints had always been diaristic, but these more personally spoke of my experience rather than my family’s as in chapter one. An accordion style artist book (Figure 17) felt like the perfect mode of delivering the prints, all placed in a line it would be easy for the images to blur together in the viewer’s mind, the way this time alone had started to feel blurred for me. It was important to me that this book connected with the quilt in some way, and I still had strips of fabric remaining from the log cabin design process. I adhered the strips to my book covers, mimicking the geometric lines in the quilt, separating the colors into their color families again, and accenting the center with red squares (Figure 18). I brought the strips inside the book, using them to disguise paper seams and border specific prints. Dividing the book is a handwritten self-reflective entry of my experience during this time. This practice of consolidating my time alone into a book has helped me process and honor the discoveries that time gave me, even though I could not see them while I was inside it. I know myself more fully after this period of isolation from those I work hard to care for (Figure 19).

Together, the Quarantine Quilt and the artist book, Gestation of Solitude (Figure 20) represent approximately a year and half of time where I documented my surroundings, focusing on subjects such as mental and physical health, poverty, domestic labor, and my own journey through a pandemic that still affects so many lives. While the series of prints stands on their own, the enhancement with the use of utterly feminist
materials and techniques allows this work to live in a unique space that honors traditional styles of making as well as challenging the sexist ideologies that plague those traditions.

Figure 19: Book fully spread and detail of handwritten entry
Figure 20: View of Gestation of Solitude and the Quarantine Quilt, displayed at University Galleries for the 2022 MFA Thesis Exhibition
CHAPTER III: HOMES LOST: COLUMBUS DRIVE

The summer flew by too quickly, I had allowed my weekly practice of recording scenes to fade, the scene of my child sleeping in their room would be the last in the series. I felt that this created a nice break in the visual narrative, plus I had amassed a huge back log of reference images to work through and wanted to spend the summer enjoying my partner, our kids, and a large stack of research books that had been waiting for me. My partner and I found our way through the conflicts, both fully committed to making it to the other side of my graduate school career, together. Our housing situation, however, was still a growing problem.

The house we had been living in was owned by my partner’s mother and stepfather, an inherited property that they owed nothing on, save for yearly taxes. We had been struggling for a long time, trying to make ends meet the best we could in this split existence. Bills in Bloomington and bills in Belleville piled up, without the stimulus money and the added emergency food stamp benefits, I don’t know how we would have survived that summer. We tried to pay rent when we could, but we were often drowning, barely managing to keep the lights on and food in the fridge.

My partner had found work with a fantastic tech company, they recognized his tremendous talent for self-teaching and unique skillset, and he began to steadily build a position of importance for himself there. We were just one academic year away from being in the same place after five years of some version of long-distance. When the summer ended and it was time for my child and I to return to Bloomington, there was a renewed sense that we could get through it as long as we were together.
That feeling quickly faded at the end of August, when my partner woke up to an eviction letter taped to our door. The communication between him and his parents had entirely broken down, too much anger in the way on either side to be effective. Eventually, he was served papers and the eviction would hold. Fortunately, we had been offered an avenue to a rent-to-own home that was perfect for our combined family needs. We left the house on Columbus Drive in December of 2021, continuing to remove the remainder of our things over the first two weeks of January. He was served again, this time if our things weren’t out in the next two days, they would pursue us for damages and court fees. I rushed back to Belleville to help him save what we could.

When we were faced with leaving the house that we met in, where our kids became siblings, and we became a family, I knew that I wanted to do something to pay tribute to the space and give myself a sense of closure. I brought along the prints I had made there, scenes of our family together, the constant

Figure 21: still image from the Homes Lost: Columbus Drive documentation project

Figure 22: still image from the Homes Lost: Columbus Drive documentation project
mess, and images that were
evidence to the growth we had
shared in the house. I installed the
prints where they originated, now
mostly empty besides the large
trash bags that littered the edges of
each room and the remaining
items we’d leave behind. The
photographs show the urgency of our situation through the stark and disheveled rooms
contrasting with the prints which show scenes of the space being lived in (Figures 21, 22, 23).
They aren’t impeccable photos, the rush to finish keeping me from my natural inclination for a
search for perfection. I had also hoped to record all of the Columbus Drive prints, but with
limited time and equipment at my disposal I did what I was able.

In addition to this photo series, I still had a number of woodcuts left to carve that depicted
Columbus Drive. Carving them into dynamic light and shadow as I had in the previous woodcuts
felt disingenuous as I didn’t feel
the same kind of connection to
these spaces anymore. The
eviction process and legal threats
caus[ed] total estrangement from
my partner’s parents; a damage
that is still active.
The drawings that remained of Columbus Drive were things I didn’t want committed to my memory as they were, like the rest of the images in the series had been. I wanted to be able to analyze less and work through them quickly, never wanting to return to the hopelessness and chaos we found there at times (Figure 24). I began only carving the outlines that I initially would draw to lay out the scene, essentially what would leave a negative image when inked up and printed. This inversion felt subtle but powerful compared to the other fully rendered scenes.

Though I enjoyed the negative scenes, I believed this collection of prints could still give more of a narrative. I began adding text inside the outlines, similar to the phrases I had been titling the rest of the images throughout the series with. This text reflects my mental dialog at the moment the reference photo was taken, specifically focusing on the tension this situation caused between my partner and myself (Figure 25). Through the addition of these words and phrases, I was better able to understand and accept the situation and move forward from it. I can’t get that space back, its memory in my mind fades more every day. The unique and simplified processing of the remaining prints and the photo series both offered an outlet for my mental unrest around the eviction and estrangement and filled me with a sense of closure and acceptance that I could not otherwise find in this situation. When I look at this set of prints now, I am reminded of the great adversity my partner and I have fought through in the last
three years. While at their initial making, they elicited feelings of anger and discomfort for me, I now look at them with a sense of pride in the things we have overcome together.

Chapter three has allowed me access to a sense of closure that I’ve never felt activated in my art practice before. These events are all ones that gave me little control, there was something healing in having control over the sharing of our story, even when we lacked the control to direct it. By displaying the images and the prints jointly in the gallery (Figure 26) I have given the viewer an inside look into the sense of pain and loss that come with eviction, something that plagues so many in our country. I have additionally allowed space to appreciate our time in the house on Columbus Drive and the growth we accomplished there. I also disrupted the chronology of the series by removing the images from their original place in my individual timeline, grouping them outside of that narrative.

Figure 26: Columbus Drive: Homes Lost displayed at University Galleries for the 2022 MFA Thesis Exhibition
CHAPTER IV: INFLUENCES

This work is a summation of my own experiences, as well as the stories of those I hold closest to me. There is no bigger influence than my family because they make me a mother and allow me to share our experiences, however that’s not to say that they are the sole influence. This is one core struggle between mother, woman, and artist; each identity comes with its own all-encompassing societal description of how we are supposed to act and move through life. How can anyone embody even one, let alone all three at once? This is what led me to embrace feminism.

I had a general idea that it was difficult to be a woman while growing up, that society put different barriers up for women than it did for men, that it expected different things from each gender, and anyone who identified outside of that narrow, binary realm often wasn’t considered at all. When I found my way back into higher education after the birth of my child in 2011, I now had to reckon with these ideas in a more real way. The first artist I chose to research was Käthe Kollwitz in my intro to drawing class. I was immediately pulled to her because not only was she a woman and mother, but she was also an incredibly expressive artist. As I learned about her life and family, I understood that expressive mark more clearly. Kollwitz’s life was full of tragedy, growing up in Germany in the early half of the twentieth century she witnessed famine, illness, poverty, and the deaths of not only her son, but also her grandson due to war (Whitner, 2016, p. 13).

Even in the face of great anguish, Kollwitz used her work as a tool to spread awareness about the conditions of the working class and the social oppressions these people faced. This is a quality that is unique to printmaking in that it allows the artist to produce multiple images from one matrix. The multiples can then be spread far and wide, giving them a more ample and
diverse audience. This is one of the significant reasons that I utilize printmaking in my practice, by reproducing multiple prints I am able to spread them further into the world. Persisting with the old ways of making relief prints and engaging the materials in the intimate nature of applying hand pressure for printing is an act of resistance in a society focused on the commodification and mass production of goods for profit. Printmaking allows me to slow down and fully participate with this truly democratic process. I am also able to augment and transform the prints with other materials and methods of making to better participate with their feminist nature more directly as with the Quarantine Quilt and Gestations of Solitude.

After her son’s death in World War I, Kollwitz was even more determined to give her art and her son’s legacy a universal importance. She was commissioned by humanitarian socialist causes concerning women in the time between world wars. She created two series of prints, A Weavers Uprising and The Peasants War, both dealing with themes of oppression and uprising, and focusing on female figures as the center for revolution (Whitner, 2016, p. 14). In many ways, Kollwitz was my first feminist artist role model. I had never seen works about motherhood that were so full of expression, and not an expression of joy or fulfillment, but one of struggle, great sorrow, and fear. Seeing these works allowed me access to the idea that I could connect art and the realities of motherhood, I could show the various sides of this experience and how one influences the other, how there is a give and a pull. Love and hate.

Being a mother to a young child also pushed me to feminism. I had always leaned in to seeking out feminist role models for myself in my young adult life, but I advanced my knowledge of feminist theory and practice more as I progressed in the ranks of academia. These issues had a growing importance to me as a parent embarking on a complicated world and doing my best to arm my children for their futures. In my first graduate level feminism course, my
knowledge of the language, theory, and history of feminism was further expanded. Reading authors such as Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, the collected works edited by Moyra Davis, and so many more. I gradually accumulated more and more feminist literature, focusing my attention on the voices of women of color, as they have repeatedly been overshadowed in feminist groups throughout history (Figure 28). I was determined to re-evaluate every choice that I made as a mother to raise my children in a way that honored these ideals. It’s not enough to fight our oppressive capitalistic and patriarchal society ourselves, we must give the next generations all the tools that we have crafted to identify these structures and resist them.

Generally, the archetype of the mother conjures ideas of patience, selflessness, and deep innate knowledge on most, if not all, things in life. We each have our own general idea of what a mother is “supposed” to be, usually this is heavily based on our own mothers and what they gave us or did not. But there is another influence that weighs profoundly on all our respective notions of motherhood, one that is insidious and formidable - the patriarchy. Adrienne Rich, an accomplished American poet, essayist, feminist, and mother calls this the “institution of motherhood”. Rich discusses our long held societal views on motherhood and juxtaposes them with her own lived experiences to reveal the ways in which women have been devalued and diminished through history.
“This institution – the foundation of human society as we know it – allowed me only certain views, certain expectations, whether embodied in the booklet in my obstetrician’s waiting room, the novels I had read, my mother-in-law’s approval, my memories of my own mother, the Sistine Madonna or she of the Michelangelo Pietà, the floating notion that a woman pregnant is a woman calm in her fulfillment or, simply, a woman waiting.” (Rich, 1986, p.39)

Rich expresses the expectations that a patriarchal society places upon women, whether they choose motherhood or not. Women who reject motherhood are met with negativity and suspicion. A dichotomy of “good or evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure” is forced upon women by the masculine imagination (Rich, 1986, p.34). She discusses our role in our own subversion, as this system cannot persist without women actively feeding into it. “Certainly the mother serves the interests of the patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions.” (Rich, 1987, p.45) I cannot imagine anything further from the way I hope to raise our children. My partner and I have chosen a lifestyle in which we pursue our passions rather than the general capitalistic driven idea of success. These ideals have been held above all else by the majority Americans for so long and denying them is another way in which my family resists. This lifestyle has caused us pain and struggle, it has led to estrangement from family and sizable debt, but it has also allowed us to find the greatest joys that come from knowing ourselves and following the practices we find most fulfilling. It has allowed us to form genuine connections based on mutual respect and trust. We both try to instill this passion in our children, impressing on them the importance of being themselves, prioritizing life over property, and supporting and caring for undervalued communities around us.
Reflecting on my own childhood and the ways in which I was parented has also been an important element in my work and research. My family was always in the upper-middle class when I was young, my two siblings and I were raised in a town well known for its whiteness and privilege. We had what we needed, were never disappointed on a birthday or holiday, and when I was very young my mom stayed home full time with us, as my dad was able to support the five of us with his income alone. We were always encouraged to make the most use out of what we had. Things were always fixed before they were replaced, even if the fix was questionable. Sometime things went into my engineer dad’s basement space and never came back out. While in my childhood I often found this distressing, as an adult I can understand the larger picture, the financial burden of broken items with three kids, and appreciate the lasting impression this model of living still has on me. It makes things that had been broken even more special when fixed; they have been resurrected.

I found echoes of this in writing from bell hooks, focusing on the “old ways” of living: growing your own food, keeping chickens for eggs, homemade soaps, jams, and butter. She also talks of how “nothing was ever thrown away and everything has a use.” (hooks, 2000, p.14). We as a society have reached a pinnacle in a cycle of capitalistic greed and waste, being kept at dismal heights due to our collective participation and complacency in consumerism. My partner
and I embrace ideas of making the most of what we have in our daily lives, growing plants for food in our garage, fixing things when they break, and always reusing what we can of our excess for a new purpose (Figure 28). This is an act of resistance for our family, to find joy, peace, and meaning in simple living.

Early in my adult life and my academic career, I divorced my child’s father and embarked on single motherhood. This decision placed me and my child firmly below the poverty line, where we would stay for years, and still remain, due to my status as a full-time student. I became more and more aware of our finances and relied heavily on child support payments and welfare, something that left me with a lot of shame. In *Class Matters*, hooks discusses a tension between the way her faith taught her to identify with the poor, while secular society showed her the poor were to be harassed and demonized. She says,

“On one hand, from a spiritual perspective, we were taught to think of the poor as the chosen ones, closer to the divine, ever worthy in the sight of God, but on the other hand, we knew that in the real-world being poor was never considered a blessing. The fact that being poor was seen as a cause for shame prevented it from being an occasion for celebration.”

(hooks, 2000, p.41)

I had to come to terms with the fact that we were now poor and struggling, barely making it paycheck to paycheck. When we moved for school, we found an old and worn apartment

Figure 29: Home again? Which home again? July 25, 2020 – Bloomington, IL
building in a neighborhood known for its surrounding poverty and low rent (Figure 29). We still received child support and assistance from my parents, another incredible privilege, but one that comes with guilt. The tension between these two things has led to immense pressure to perform, perfect, and persevere through anything and everything. It has also led to an inclination for self-sabotage and the shame that hooks discusses.

It took me a long time to settle with guilt. There was a lot of guilt in single motherhood, more in being a poor single mother, and even ten times more in being a poor single mother pursuing a career as an artist. These feelings weigh on me as I carve each woodcut, I can chip away at it, chomp it down, and process it into something unique and compelling, proving my internalized shame wrong. The guilt still pokes in at times and I remind myself that the stories of mothers, my story included, are rich and vital and need to be shared. Sharing our experiences brings the culmination of our hard-earned knowledge and the history of our struggle into the light. Rich writes, “The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through.” (Rich, 1986, p.24) I aim to destroy those masks with my work, make them entirely unrecognizable for future generations so they may have a chance to form their own notions on motherhood, ones that allow us to embrace and share our flaws (Figure 30). These new notions must be complex,
intersectional, and welcoming to all who identify as mother, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, or any other institutionally enforced identifier.

Myrel Chernick, mother and multi-media artist, talks of her young desire to abstain from motherhood as so many women of her generation who “watched my own talented mother subordinate herself to husband and family, I swore that would not be my life. My life would be devoted to my art.” (Buller, 2016, p.256). A younger version of myself felt this way as well, my mother was never able to pursue the career she wanted in art. She was ushered into a “practical” field of study by her parents, where she briefly worked before becoming a full time stay at home mom. Chernick then talks of how this desire changed for her, and she became the mother of infant twins at the age of thirty-four. She had to go through a long period of readjustment to enmesh motherhood into her practice.

I had become a mother before I had any true aspirations of being an artist, but I still had to navigate these feelings Chernick expresses, “was I a bad mother because I felt the pull of my creative life? Because I adored my children but resented their overwhelming neediness?” (Buller, 2016, p.256). In the early days of motherhood, I resolved to working late into the night, often getting little sleep to maintain my roles as mother, student, and artist. Mothers are asked to give everything to our children, but I felt a pull to give back to my own creative nature as well, just as strong as the pull to my young child. Motherhood comes with contradiction, as Rich describes it, “My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves and blissful gratification.” (Rich, 1986, p. 21). I feel these same inconsistencies within my relationship to my art practice, compounding with the uncertainties and guilt of pursuing a field many consider unimportant. Chernick speaks of the shift to focus her work on validating her
decision to become a mother, the urge to celebrate and question motherhood, as well as challenging the images of motherhood in popular culture. (Buller, 2016, p.258) While initially I used my art practice as a way to escape my role as mother, it developed into a method of coping with the hardships of motherhood, and finally into a way to discuss the subtleties of this experience. It is in being able to acknowledge both the annoyance at the fruit they forgot in the freezer (Figure 31) and allowing the delight of discovering our kids playing and experimenting with the small things that they get to hold power over, that allows me to express this duality of being a mother. The further I’ve come in life, the stronger the need for me to connect art and motherhood has become.

Often when I have immersed in the stories of other practicing mother artists, both of the past and present, I’ve found myself still searching for stories like my own. I was not an artist who became a mother, rather a mother who came back to art in the very early years of motherhood. As my child and family have grown, my practice has followed and I have fought to keep these multiple facets in balance, not always successfully. This does not mean that I am not subject to the same unique ambivalence of those who had a working practice prior to motherhood must negotiate. It does mean that I embarked on the journey to artist knowing that it would have to be a fight and that there was an unreasonable expectation for me to give myself
fully to both art and motherhood if I wanted to succeed at either. There was never an option not to be a mother and an artist in tandem.

Knowing these things brought me a sense of responsibility to tie my identity as a mother to my identity as an artist. Motherhood has been the most influential role I’ve played in my life; those are the experiences in which I am most knowledgeable and comfortable. In the PBS special, *Artbound: Artist and Mother*, painter and mother Rebecca Campbell discusses feeling a responsibility to tackle motherhood in her work and summarizes with this, “I think I could be much more subtle and strategic about the way I wear my motherhood, but the problem is, that doesn’t really help those around you. And if I can help somebody else who I don’t even know by being a mother out loud, then that’s my privilege.” (2018) I too felt this pull of accountability to loudly include motherhood in my art practice, because I have the freedom and privilege to express the many sides of my identity without repercussion due to my whiteness, idealized body size, and security within a largely supportive - both emotionally and financially - family. I choose to use that power to illustrate all the different sides to this experience to the best of my ability, through scenes of my own life and objects. By giving myself permission to focus on my wellbeing, I am again resisting the societal forces that keep us perpetually overworked and miserable.

Another reflection brought up in the *Artbound* documentary is the mother artist’s use of materials and an inclination to connect these typically non-traditional materials into a relationship with art about motherhood. Some examples offered are Mary Kelly’s use of diapers and baby food in *Post-Partum Document* and Anna Maria Maiolino’s use of food in *Por um fio (By a Thread)*. It is not simply about depicting mothers in art, but of analyzing the complex and extensive spectrum of materials and feelings that come along with that territory. There becomes
a deep connection with the materials being used and the meaning those materials hold, allowing them to activate one another.

By engaging sewing in my practice, I am directly tapping into a deep history of a strongly feminist practice. In *Threads of Life*, Clare Hunter discusses the history of textiles around the world and highlights its connection specifically to womanly experiences, beginning with her own. She speaks of the connection she shared with her mother as she learned different techniques, “From when I was very young my mother lured me into a love of sewing. I would spend hours coaxing flat cloth to yield to my design jabbing the needle in and out and untangling the thread that twisted and knotted until, eventually, I found a rhythm of my own that could settle smooth in my hands” (Hunter, 2019, p. 275) Hunter then goes on to theorize that her mother used this shared activity as a way to keep her occupied and out of trouble, but that it also allowed her an outlet for self-expression.

I heavily related to this portion of Hunter’s writing, as this had been my experience while work on the quilt with my mother. I had practiced sewing off and on in my young life, always observing my mother’s projects and thinking up my own. Hunter follows “As a shared language, needlework transmits – through techniques, coded symbols, fabrics and colour – the unedited stories not just of women, but often of those marginalized by oppression and prejudice.” (Hunter, 2019, p. 276) Needlework provides us with history of women asserting their presence in the way that was deemed acceptable at the time in the hope that their stories would persist and be heard by future generations. With the fabrics both in the quilt and the artist book, I am directly engaging with this historically feminist practice. I am also preserving this work in my own voice, not only for my family but for future generations that wonder about this controversial and complicated time in history.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

At the start of this practice, I never could have foreseen what was to come. When the pandemic struck our society, we were all tasked with looking at the destructive ways we have been conditioned to live and the repercussions it has had on our collective mental and physical well-being. As I documented my personal spaces and the events of the past two years, I was able to grasp many various aspects of this experience. I was also able to find many ways of resisting the pull to fall complacent in a society riddled with consumerism and injustice. There has been an ebb and a flow to the fear, anxiety, and overall attention given to the still continuing Covid-19 pandemic.

Quarantine in that initial six months felt both like a wave of both ice and fire. In some ways, being at home all the time with our kids, so much freedom to find our own pace, was a refreshing and needed experience. We all felt frozen in space. Our bonds were solidified in new ways within our family, our kids grew closer, and my partner and I found an ease in being in the same place for a long time.

Together we discussed the heightened tensions in the nation. When George Floyd was murdered in the street at the end of May, the country was struck with the wave of fire, together ignited with marches and protests, demanding justice (Figure 32). It was never about justice for this one man alone, but for all and any who have been

Figure 32: Nothing is fine, and it never has been. May 30, 2020 - Belleville
on the receiving end of racist language or action. This moment was a tipping point for so many because there is no “maybe” in supporting racism and inequity.

Raising children in these times requires resiliency of all sorts. We as parents must always be learning and pushing for a better and more equitable future, that is our responsibility to them. We are also responsible for the mundane and daily tasks of care. We must make dinner, do the dishes (Figure 33), keep the house neat and clean while our psyches are in shambles. This important work of mothering takes patience and energy, it drains and drains, leaving the caretaker depleted and unable to care for themselves.

When the quarantine was over and I returned to live by myself, I spiraled into depression over the separation from my children and partner, the weight of the raging pandemic, and the intense experience of being thrust into a largely remote world. I used this time to advance my knowledge on the feminist theories surrounding motherhood, art, and the collision of the two. Reading and studying literature and theory enriched my focus and determination to live, and teach my children how to live, a feminist life. It’s not enough to work to change the world, this task is long and hard, the next generation must learn to fight with us, and they must learn to do it now.
Curator Helen Molesworth in *Artbound* poses the question in two ways, something I find vital to the conversation. She asks what being an artist does to motherhood, and also what the idea of motherhood can do to our collective idea of the artist (2018). Both perspectives have to be considered in a discussion on building a new and inclusive model of both artist and mother for future generations. With this body of woodcuts that invade my personal spaces and thoughts I’m offering the viewer direct access to the connections I am making as an artist and mother. I am putting them firmly in my shoes and showing them how I see the world. While the general consensus is that being and artist and a mother are incompatible, I find that far from accurate. I find so many connections between my mothering and art practice now, that it seems impossible to divide the two.

Throughout my graduate research, I have repeatedly come up against the patriarchal fallacy that a mother must give their all to their children, leaving nothing left for their own creative endeavors. When I think about my love for my art practice and my love for my children, they are much the same. If I neglect my children I am not fulfilled as a mother, if I neglect my practice, I am equally unfulfilled as an artist. Both of these aspects are vital to my role in this world. I love my practice as if it were another child who needs just as much care and attention as the ones standing before me. I’m actively resisting pressure from a patriarchal society that tells us that as mothers we are small and unworthy of a voice, that we should be relegated to the domestic spheres and child rearing alone, that we lack knowledge and skill in topics outside this realm. There is no straight path forward for mother artists, our needs are as diverse as our individual families. We must continue to practice, to make our voices heard, to take up space with our stories and work, and to always support one another in our journey to a more equitable future.
REFERENCES


