

TAKE MY LIFE – The fusion and separation in motherhood

Alma Winkler

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to explore motherhood, its existential issues and the complex and conflicting emotions that arise from lifelong kinship, as well as the separation and liberation between mother and child. I reflect on my own and others' experiences and what invisible social boundaries govern us. I also highlight the taboos connected to the subject in relation to our needs to deal with our desires to be loved and to love sincerely, and the sorrow that occurs in between.

I am addressing this topic with several different mediums that together, from different angles, defines the theme. There are drawings, sculptures, embroidery, dyed and printed fabric and performance. The main objects are two sculptures, a baby and a mother. Both sculptures are in life size and weight, are movable and will be activated when someone is interacting with them. The aim of the sculptures is to create a performative investigation together with an audience. By processing memories with body and mind I explore the subject intuitively.

Keywords: *motherhood, philosophy, taboo, textile, sculpture, ritual process, performance, art*

INTRODUCTION

Some moments you will remember all your life. Like when I felt the hairy little head trying to push out between my legs. When my newborn baby was shown to me for the first time, so I could see what she looked like. Crouched body. Squeezed face. Narrow eyes and a puffy mouth. Dark gooey hair and a flat nose. She was perfect. Then came the days when I tried to stay awake 24 hours a day to monitor that she survived. Because I knew that the responsibility was mine and that I would not be able to live with myself if I did not manage this task.

After giving birth I experienced that everything felt trivial compared to giving life and the mission to raise a human being. I have therefore chosen to work with the subject of motherhood and its profound existential issues, which compass the separation and liberation between mother and child, and the complex and conflicting emotions that arise from a lifelong kinship. As well as the difficulties we have in dealing with our own emotional needs and our deep desires to be loved and to love unconditionally, and the sorrow that occurs in between. By reflecting on my own and others' experiences I also want to highlight the taboos connected to the subject and reflect on what invisible social boundaries govern us.

When I started to formulate my thoughts on the subject of motherhood and analysed the pieces of art I currently was working on, I felt sadness, because I experienced that by analysing an artwork when it is still under process, the magic gets lost and, in the end, there is only an empty object left. But I also believe, or rather hope, that writing about the process will deepen my understanding of the subject and increase the meaning and depth of my work.

In my thesis, I reflect on the existential experience of giving life and identifying myself as a mother and connect to what has been written on the subject in philosophy. I have studied the view of motherhood in Western society historically, and how it has been processed in art. I also discuss the taboos that exist connected the subject and my resistance identifying myself as an artist working with the subject of motherhood. Following this, I describe my process and my artistic choices. In the conclusion I write about the insights the project has given me, and how I will exhibit my work.

Boundaries

The approach I have chosen for this essay is to build on my own experience of motherhood and I describe a mother who is biologically carrying and giving birth to her child. – although I know that the definition of being a mother can exist in several other ways. I will not make any comparisons with paternity; it is mentioned only to illustrate certain phenomena. The subject of patriarchy is another area that is not included in this analysis, but which of course has a large connection to many aspects of the theme.

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS ABOUT MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood in Philosophy

In the subject of philosophy, not much is written about motherhood and giving birth and there are reasons for this; the history of philosophy has consisted mainly of men, and a few nuns. A pregnant philosopher has been a bizarre impossibility, and 20th century stars Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) did not give birth to any children, and the theme of motherhood is often treated medically, biologically or politically. But in the year 2016 Södertörn University published a book about the philosophy of pregnancy,¹ and in March 2022 the philosopher Jonna Bornemark will publish a book on this theme.²

There are a few known philosophers in the area; Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, both active in mid-century France. They are central philosophers and authors in philosophical philosophy and gender theory. Simone de Beauvoir is best known for the book "The Second Sex"³ which is one of feminism's central classics where you find her famous quote "You are not born a woman, you become one." It should also be mentioned that both de Beauvoir and Kristeva lived in a male-dominated time and that the patriarchy of the Western world had a great influence on common attitudes to motherhood, work and career.

The fact that such a central experience as giving birth exists, but has not been given a proper place in the philosophical or artistic expressions, is remarkable. One reason for this is that women have hardly had any part in intellectual conversations and contexts, as they were not considered to be intended for it, or that women could even think in such complex forms. It becomes clear that experiences that only women have been exposed to has not been, and is still not, considered to be of interest.

“Compared to the other extreme of existence, death, our way into the world, birth, is a remarkably untold chapter in the history of Western culture.”⁴

Julia Kristeva has an interesting position. Although she is a world-famous fighter for gender equality and thus a recognized feminist, she has been heavily criticized for taking antifeminist positions on philosophical and political issues. Being influenced by researchers such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Kristeva has taken a unique and rather lonely path which, after all, has benefited the academic world. One of Kristeva's more crucial theories is *abjection*, a term used extensively in feminist research, among other things to clarify the boundary between the “self” and the “stranger”. As Kristeva describes in “Power of Horrors” abjection is about the infant's separation from the mother, in the creation of the “self” and one's own identity: “ ... I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself.”⁵ The concept of abjection investigates the space that arises between the separation of the “self” and everything else – both in matter and mentally.

¹ Bornemark & Smith, *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*.

² Bornemark, *Jag är himmel och hav: en filosofisk undersökning av graviditet, liv och jagets gränser* [I am heaven and sea: a philosophical study of pregnancy, life and the limits of the self]

³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

⁴ Rydal Jørgensen, Degel & Laurberg, *MOTHER! Origin of life*, p. 30

⁵ Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection in Power of Horrors*, p. 3

The Swedish philosopher Jonna Bornemark has written about the experience of pregnancy and birth. She describes the limit of the self in relation to other people. She became interested in the issue when she was pregnant and experienced that the mother and child are connected and within each other. Already as a philosophy student she saw how the view of existential issues was characterized by a strict Western tradition. To broaden her approach, she began to read history of religion and religious studies, where she encountered mysticism. In a radio program Jonna Bornemark states:

“We are born, we live and we die. But some women are also allowed to give life, which is an equally great existential experience.”⁶

Both Kristeva and Bornemark found it difficult to write about the experience of being pregnant, giving birth and being a mother in a philosophical language. To get around this, Kristeva decided to incorporate poems in the left column of her essay on motherhood, *Stabat Mater*, in order to capture her feelings of motherhood in another way than what was possible in a philosophical text.⁷ Bornemark had the same experience and began to write poetry to approach the subject.⁸

I have the same experience, but I use art as my medium.

Pregnancy and Childbirth – An Existential Experience

I remember that when I gave birth to my first child, I screamed for Mom. Purely instinctive. Who could help me there and then? I probably thought I was going to die. I have never experienced anything as surreal and painful as when I gave birth to my children.

It is an alien experience to be pregnant. First you are one. A solitary person who has its own personal appearance, peculiarities and life experiences. Then you suddenly become two (or more) but at the same time you are still one. One, plus one more. After a while, "plus one more" becomes more clear. Both for others and for the mother. It starts to show and it starts to be felt. You are still your own person but you are also two. You grow as your baby grows. It is the baby that makes you grow.

You get new habits, your look changes, you feel different, and you do not recognise yourself. You have a new identity. Because suddenly you are no longer completely in your own possession and your surroundings start to treat you differently. You are now the "pregnant woman" carrying something valuable, something sacred. Now, you're just a body. Probably you are more of a body than you were before. But your body is no longer just yours. It is also the baby's. Nevertheless, the child and the mother are not the same. They do not experience the same thing, even though they live in the same body. Jonna Bornemark describes this in her essay *Life beyond Individuality: A-subjective Experience in Pregnancy*.

⁶ Bornemark, *Gravid – ett existentiellt tillstånd* [Pregnant – an existential condition] (my translation)

⁷ Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*

⁸ Bornemark, *Gravid – ett existentiellt tillstånd* [Pregnant – an existential condition]

”I have an outer experience that is mine and not yours; I don’t have your hearing and sensing. But when I eat, I eat for you, and when I breathe, I breathe for you. I try to understand, but understanding is already at a distance, already in a logic of being two. I am, and we are.”⁹

This is where the relationship between mother and child begins. Every movement that the child makes, the mother feels from within her body, as if it were a part of herself that moves, and when the mother moves, the child feels it as part of its existence. What the mother eats is ingested by the child and what the mother feels affects the child's mood. Both the feelings and the bodies go into each other, but both the mother and the child have their own experience. Now, perhaps, the mother try to connect with her child. Talk to the child, sing for it, touch it. Probably she's wondering about who the little person living inside her is. What the child will look like and what characteristics it has. Through imagination, she tries to create a bond with the child in an attempt to make the surreal experience more real.

But this is just the beginning. After this comes childbirth. In the radio program *Summer* (03-08-2017) Bornemark discusses further on the theme and her coined term *passivity*: "Activity and passivity are two sides of the same coin. We are never just victims or perpetrators in our lives. We are always both.”¹⁰

”Just like pregnancy, giving birth is a paradoxical experience: if I try to take control, every kind of control will disappear. If I try to fight or escape pain, I will become tense and pain will increase. Paradoxically, only through letting go can a certain kind of control take place. Only through actively choosing passivity, can one work with and not against labour pains. Passivity is here not “to do nothing” but to follow what comes from beyond consciousness.”¹¹

What is this experience if not an existential one? To be divided into two individuals from having previously been two in one body. To experience the most surreal experience and pain. To see your child for the first time. To put oneself all aside to let someone else take the lead in all situations and at the same time be dependent on others. Experience your whole body change once again. Having pain in the most intimate parts of your body. Not being enough for the task. Not even knowing who you are. It is said it takes one to two years to restore the body. But it is not possible to restore the body, nor the mind. That is a lie.

This reminds me think of postpartum depression and baby blues that usually occur three days after the baby is born where the mother may have feelings of mood swings and anxiety. This is explained by the fact that hormone levels in the body change after the baby is born. This is certainly true, just as many other emotional states described in women are largely due to hormones. But do we not then diminish external reasons of emotions? Things that have happened to the woman or things that she is thinking of? Who would not be shocked by the experience of giving birth to a child?

⁹ Bornemark, *Life beyond Individuality: A-subjective Experience in Pregnancy*, p. 267

¹⁰ Bornemark, *Jonna Bornemark, Sommar*, [Summer] (my translation)

¹¹ Bornemark, *Life beyond Individuality: A-subjective Experience in Pregnancy*, p. 267-268

Jonna Bornemark writes about different kinds of subjectivities. You go through different subjectivities, *a-subjectivities*, *pre-subjectivities* and so on. I interpret it as different kinds of self, self-images or identities. This make me think about myself before I had children. The self when I was pregnant. The self when I became a mother and the self when the children are no longer small and so on. One's self-image and identity changes so rapidly and drastically with the various states one is involved in and also others' image of the person.

Now they are not two in one body anymore. They are separated, and two new identities are born. The woman's identity as a pregnant woman has changed and she is now a mother with all the new experiences and expectations that this entails. Her central focus, which was inside her body is now outside her and the child is its own and for the first time alone. The child's reality is no longer just the mother's warm interior, her voice and movements. Reality now appears different. All senses become different. New sounds, new smells, and the sight that before this was a completely unused sense.

”It turns out that some of the rhythms that had always been there, of the mother’s heartbeat and breathing, could disappear, whereas others stay (such as the rhythm of one’s own heartbeat). But these rhythms can also—in a new way—come back when one is held close to their mother’s chest. ¹²

A new experience begins. An experience of two persons in their own bodies. A long-awaited liberation but also a painful separation. The baby is still dependent on the mother (and the mother of the baby). The mother's body still belongs to the baby and she still has to give of herself for her baby to survive. The dependence and intertwining of the two bodies continues even after birth. The relationship that started during pregnancy deepens and their bodies are still united. By the mother's full attention to the baby, by physical closeness and by nursing and breastfeeding. I would say this is a bigger effort than being pregnant, both mentally and physically. The mother can no longer control her time or body. Not even when she is allowed to sleep or go to the toilet, and by breastfeeding she shares her energy with the baby. The child continues to take a share of her. The mother's body is no longer only her own. It also becomes the child's. The mother gives a part of herself to the child. She gives a part of her life.¹³

¹² Bornemark, *Life beyond Individuality: A-subjective Experience in Pregnancy*. p. 257

¹³ This is true of many creatures on earth. The movie *My Octopus Teacher* is about an octopus. In the film, the octopus gets fertilised and then hides in a cave to let her eggs and fry live off her. When the fry are ready to manage on their own, there is nothing left of the mother. She gave her life to her children (Ehrlich & Reed, *My Octopus Teacher*).

TABOOS IN MOTHERHOOD

My general idea of being a mother has probably mainly revolved around the little child, the baby. A small child wants to be carried around all the time. It can be heavy and exhausting but at the same time it is easy. Feeds, sleep, comfort, change diapers. Maybe play for a while or look in a book. Sometimes boring but not complicated. With time it gets more complicated. How do you relate to an older child? What are the needs of an older child? And how do I make the child feel loved? And then there is the feeling of not knowing the child or wondering who that person really is. Maybe the child is a disappointment? Can you as a mother have such feelings? May you think about my child as ugly? Annoying? Boring? Stupid? Can you be ashamed of your child? There are contradictions between what we think maternity should be and how it really is. It is interesting to reflect on what thoughts and emotions are taboo. What is society's image of a normally functioning human being? When does a person do something abnormal? And when do you cross the border?

I have noticed that the subject of motherhood is very charged, both for myself and for others. People often become uncomfortable when talking about it and there can be many reasons for that. It is a private issue where there are strong emotions and opinions. There are some prejudices that I myself obviously also have, which is why I think it has been so difficult for me to approach the subject. Maybe this is why I think it's so interesting and want to explore it. Because it is charged, infected and almost taboo to work with in the fields of art.

Parts of the subject of motherhood that are taboo to touch on include who can become a mother. Today the matter is more related to who has the rights to use artificial fertilisation or the issue of surrogacy. I also think of other topics in motherhood that may feel taboo to talk about, such as miscarriage, abortion, adoption. Then we can move on to the feelings of being ashamed of birth injuries of the mother, postpartum depression, malformations of the baby or a worry about how the child will develop, or if the mother does not think the child is beautiful. There are also many external factors that affect how the mother will feel about the child, such as financial and emotional factors. The author, philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir believes that many women regard the child as a burden and experience that “the child devours their power, life and happiness” and enslaves them. The child appears as a tyrant and the woman views it with hostility because it threatens her entire existence. The hostility can even turn into open hatred that can lead to neglect or abuse. But most often, the mother feels a sense of duty and demands for decency that make her fight against the hostility.

Nothing Should Compete with the Work of Art

As a mother, the woman today must, besides taking care of her children, also make a career and be successful in life. She should have a beautiful home, make healthy food, keep the kids clean, and be a fun mum. At the same time, she should have a good figure, be there for her partner, and be a sexual being. She should both free herself and bake buns. Today, the context around children is linked to the child's rights and what the mother (and father) should live up to. There are high demands from society and there are high demands from the immediate environment and from the mother herself. And eventually even from the child.

This does not fit into the image of an unbound artist. An artist must be able to devote all her time and thought to art in order to be able to do good art. I also perceive that the subject tends to diminish the one who takes on the subject – to just being a mother. It is not considered a heavy and difficult substance and it lowers the status of the person who treats it and it gives a fear of not being taken seriously.

In *The Guardian*, Hettie Judah¹⁴ writes in an article about artists who are also mothers and that there are several aspects that makes this combination extra problematic. For example, spending time on work that does not necessarily bring any income for several months, years or even ever, is hard to justify when you are also responsible for providing for your children. The art world is also not adept for anyone responsible for young children with early evenings at home with supper, bath and bedtime. "How can you attend your own show's launch party if it clashes with children's bathtime?"¹⁵

Judah refers to her essay *Full, Messy and Beautiful* where she interviewed 50 artists from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and areas in England about their experiences at various stages of motherhood, from late pregnancy to grandparenthood.

"Giving birth and taking care of a baby is only the beginning. Childcare involves more than being physically present in a space and tending your offspring. Caring for children takes mental energy – the logistics of who, what, where, when – it involves anticipating children's needs, keeping them fed, educated, attended to, delivered, collected, inoculated, medicated. All this is physical and mental energy that is no longer being used for art."¹⁶

Her conclusion is that many of the artists she interviewed felt they needed to keep the two sides of their identity separate, "as though they were somehow operating beneath the radar: secret mothers, infiltrating the house of art."¹⁷ They also expressed that when they had been away from the market of art for a long time due to taking care of children, it was difficult to fight their way back for new opportunities. The fear of no longer having anything to offer strikes at their self-esteem. In addition to the fact that the economy is uncertain, art demands everything of the practitioner, and a child competes with the artistic expression. And nothing should compete with the work of art.

¹⁴ Judah, *Motherhood is taboo in the art world – it's as if we've sold out: female artists on the impact of having kids*

¹⁵ Judah, *Motherhood is taboo in the art world – it's as if we've sold out: female artists on the impact of having kids*

¹⁶ Judah, *Full, Messy and Beautiful*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Judah, *Motherhood is taboo in the art world – it's as if we've sold out: female artists on the impact of having kids*

MOTHERHOOD IN HISTORY AND ART

Motherhood in History

Our view of motherhood has been and continues to be influenced by several factors. It is worth looking at our history to clarify and explain the mother image of today. In our Western society, the myth of the good mother has long been central. The myth is based on the notion that women have an innate motherly love, that motherhood is the woman's primary identity and that a mother always sacrifices herself for others and puts her own needs last.

“The capacity of the female body to perform the greatest miracle of existence, creating a new human life, has over the centuries been idealised and romanticised as the natural and divine meaning of women’s lives.”¹⁸



Image 1. *Virgin and Child*. (Joos Van Cleve, approx. 1525)

The image of the loving and self-sacrificing mother stretches far back in history and has been conveyed in ancient mythologies and in religion, as for example the Madonna image in Christianity. Here motherhood is the woman's most important identity, and she should always sacrifice herself for her children. This cultural heritage is quite unchanged from generation to generation and still has great significance on how we think about motherhood. Even if we see only these as fictional stories, they influence the opinions we carry with us.

¹⁸ Laneth, “The Good Mother – A Shifting Historical Ideal”, in *MOTHER! Origin of life*, p. 86

Motherhood has been treated in all times, in ancient mythologies, religion as well as in political ideology. Clear examples of how the image of blessed motherhood has been used as propaganda are posters from both the Soviet Union and from Germany during World War II.



Image 2. Propaganda poster from the Soviet Union, *Glory to the Mother-Heroine*. (1944)



Image 3. *The Aryan Family*. (Wolfgang Willrich, 1930)

In modern history Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Erich Fromm (1900–1980) are considered as the leading figures in sociology and psychology. Here, the differences in women's and man's intellect and meaning in life are explored. The catalogue for the exhibition MOTHER! cites Erich Fromm:

“Mother is the home we come from, she is nature, soil, the ocean; father does not represent any such natural home. He has little connection with the child in the first years of its life, and his importance to the child in this early period cannot be compared with that of the mother. But while the father does not represent the natural world, he represents the other pole of human existence, the world of thought, of man-made things, of law and order, of discipline, of travel and adventure. Father is the one who teaches the child, who shows him the road into the world.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, see Rydal Jørgensen, Degel & Laurberg, *MOTHER! Origin of life*, p. 88.

Similar views on gender differences were promoted by Aksel Tofte, a psychiatrist from Denmark, in his book on *Sexual Hygiene*.

“As in physique, the woman is also less intellectually developed than the man, and is in many ways akin to the child. This is important in her role as a mother, given that she retains a greater understanding of the child, whereas the man, given his advanced development, diverges from the child and is thereby alienated in relationship to it.”²⁰

The subordination of women has a long history. Traditional religions such as Catholicism, fundamentalist Protestantism, Islam and Jewish Orthodox teachings have subordinate roles for women, and in philosophy and psychoanalysis women are often associated with madness while men are associated with intelligence, courage and independence.

Motherhood in Art

The theme of Motherhood has been a subject that has been addressed in religion as well as in political ideology. The oldest depiction of a human being is a sculpture of which is interpreted as a symbol of fertility and it is estimated to be 40,000 years old. Marie Laurberg, who is head of research and curator at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, writes in her contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition MOTHER! in 2021:

“Art history abounds with portraits of the artist’s mother/.../But what about the artist herself as a mother? What about the experience of being a mother? The theme is interesting because motherhood as a lived experience has historically been a problematic source of artistic inspiration. Mother or artist, either/or, was the choice faced by women...”²¹

The depiction of the artist's mother has been part of art history, painted by male artists. But female artists' own experiences of motherhood have been rare. In the 1920s, there was a small group of female artists working on the theme as a part of expressionism where artists expressed their own individual perspective and inner feelings. It was then new to process the subject based on the relationship between the mother and the child. Since the feminist movement of the 1970's there has been a theme that the child makes the artist bound which was a reaction to that woman's place in society, including that of the mother.

“Before feminist art of the 1970s, there are vanishingly few images of childbirth in western art. So few, in fact, that it appears to be a visual taboo.”²²

²⁰ Tofte, *Seksuel hygiejne: Haandbog i seksuel oplysning* [Sexual hygiene: Handbook of sexual enlightenment], Nyttebøger 1941, see Rydal Jørgensen, Degel & Laurberg, *MOTHER! Origin of life*, p. 88.

²¹ Laurberg, *Mother!*, p. 25.

²² Rydal Jørgensen, Degel & Laurberg, *MOTHER! Origin of life*, p. 30.

Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938) is an example of how female artists in the 20th century began to explore motherhood from new perspectives. In the painting *The Abandoned Doll* (1921) the mother tenderly drying her naked daughter who begins to grow from childhood and become a woman. The girl wears a bow in her hair, as does her doll lying on the floor at her feet. At the same time as she leaves the doll stage to move on into adulthood, she leaves the stage of being her mother's doll. The mother wears black clothes that symbolize grief over a time lost when she lets her daughter become her own. This painting by Valadon can be interpreted in terms of personal identity – how so much of a mother's identity is focused on being a mother to her children, and then how this changes over time, when the children are grow up, leave home etcetera.



Image 4. *The Abandoned Doll*. (Valadon, Suzanne, 1921)

I recognize the feeling even though I do not have a child at that age yet. My oldest daughter is rapidly growing away from me is obvious. It is with sadness that I think about it, even though I naturally want her to grow up and become an adult woman with a life of her own. Perhaps it is also a reminder that I myself am getting older and that the time as a parent of small children, which I have longed for for so long, will soon be over. And I can not regain it.

I would also like to mention a few other artists that I am inspired by, who have worked with the theme of motherhood. Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) had an incredible ability to portray strong feelings on motherhood in her drawings and sculptures. In her art she captures grief of lost children, but also tenderness and cheerful love. Vera Nilsson (1888 – 1979) portrayed her daughter in her paintings, which not overly emotional. With a mother's gaze she instead captures those moments when life stops and you look at your child with an outside view, which indicates the beauty of the fact that even everyday life can sometimes reminiscent of the magic in life. Louise Bourgeois (1911 - 2010) has worked on the theme of motherhood in her art in an interesting and a complex way. She has used several different mediums and materials and also worked with sculptural textile bodies covered with fabrics taken from her life. Marianne Lindeberg De Geer, born in 1946, is another artist who has worked with the theme of motherhood in for instance paintings with self-portraits together with her child, but the work of art that touched me intensely is her sound installation *I am Thinking About Myself* which I heard in the summer of 2021 at Wanås Art's sculpture park in Småland. As I was walking in the sculpture park, I heard a child calling for its mother, which made me think that the child couldn't find its mother. Later I realized that it was a sound installation, but despite that I was moved, and I got a strong feeling that I had to go home to my children.

THE PROCESS – PRACTICAL ARTWORK TAKES SHAPE

My method

When making art, I want to feel free. I see creation as a way to reflect in a state between thought and feelings. Not having to adapt to the limitations of a spoken language. My method is process-oriented where, based on an idea, I let desire spontaneity and curiosity guide my work. In this way I investigate the subject intuitively.

As the work progresses, I try to trust that things will fall into place and that it will make sense. I never sketch or plan my work beforehand, instead I follow my intuition and try to trust that the process leads me to an answer. I usually think that I have to dare to get lost in order to find something new. When it comes to choosing materials, I often start from the material's characteristics. What they symbolize or its history. I collect physical materials and objects that I find in my immediate surroundings in the same way as I collect experiences, memories and stories from life.

To me, the process is a significant part of the artwork. It's not just my process in the Studio that interests me. The process also continues into the exhibition and possibly even after that.

Magic in Life

This connects to my curiosity about what in a work of art gives its intrinsic meaning. In the beginning of my MA degree, before I realised that my project was going to be about motherhood, my interest revolved around a desire to investigate the sanctification of objects and ritual processes.

In our secularized society, life has been rationalized and demystified, and it leaves a void, a longing for meaning. Based on the idea that we have a need for and a lack of rituals I wanted to re-mystify the approach to life through art and I had an idea of a ritual process of creation and how it can charge objects or an artefact. I wanted to explore if sanctifications of objects and actions can give a work of art a deeper meaning. If magic can arise in an object in its making.

I started to elevate what actions and objects go beyond the ordinary or are even sacred. What gives an object its value, in addition to the economic value, and can a person's connection to an object increase the affective value. Can a person somehow be in an object, and not just in the body that is human? As, for example, in photographs of a person or if someone has owned or used an object, or maybe even blown her spirit into it. Is a part of that person transferred to the object? This is what is called *magical thinking*.²³

Wrapping of Time

I looked around for belongings that I have saved in my home. Things that I associate with special occasions or places and reflected on how they made me feel. For as long as I can remember, I have added meaning and value to objects. Who they have belonged to, what they have been through or how they came into my possession has given the object a meaning. I feel despair over the fact that moments that I value disappear the same moment they arise. Fragmented memories may remain, but usually not even that. But an object can evoke memories and for a while help me to remember and feel the feelings I felt then.

I wanted to capture those moments when life feels strong and we live fully. I wanted to preserve the experience of being present and explore questions about how we experience time and space. I wanted to take time to rest in memories and not to feel the stress connected to that the moments had already disappeared. I started to wrap some precious possessions in strips of fabric. Layer on layer. Through this bodily act I could stay in the memories and experience them again, and at the same time explore the subject intuitively. This became a ritual act of processing significant memories with my body and mind.

I started to dye and print fabrics in stripes. And then, with these striped fabrics I, through the wrapping, created new shapes and patterns that give the objects new sculptural dimensions and layers of timelines. Stripes of timelines that intertwine into each other. Time that goes straight, around, here and there, stops or disappears.

But wrapping objects became a sentimental and painful process. What happens when the objects are hidden away and become something else? When the objects were wrapped, I could no longer see them and remember and feel their holiness. The items I value the most I could not even bring myself to wrap. It felt like I buried the objects. As if I had to move on. What had I gotten myself into?

²³ *Magical thinking* is a term that describes the belief that you can influence events or the behavior of others with your thoughts and desires or with the help of rituals.

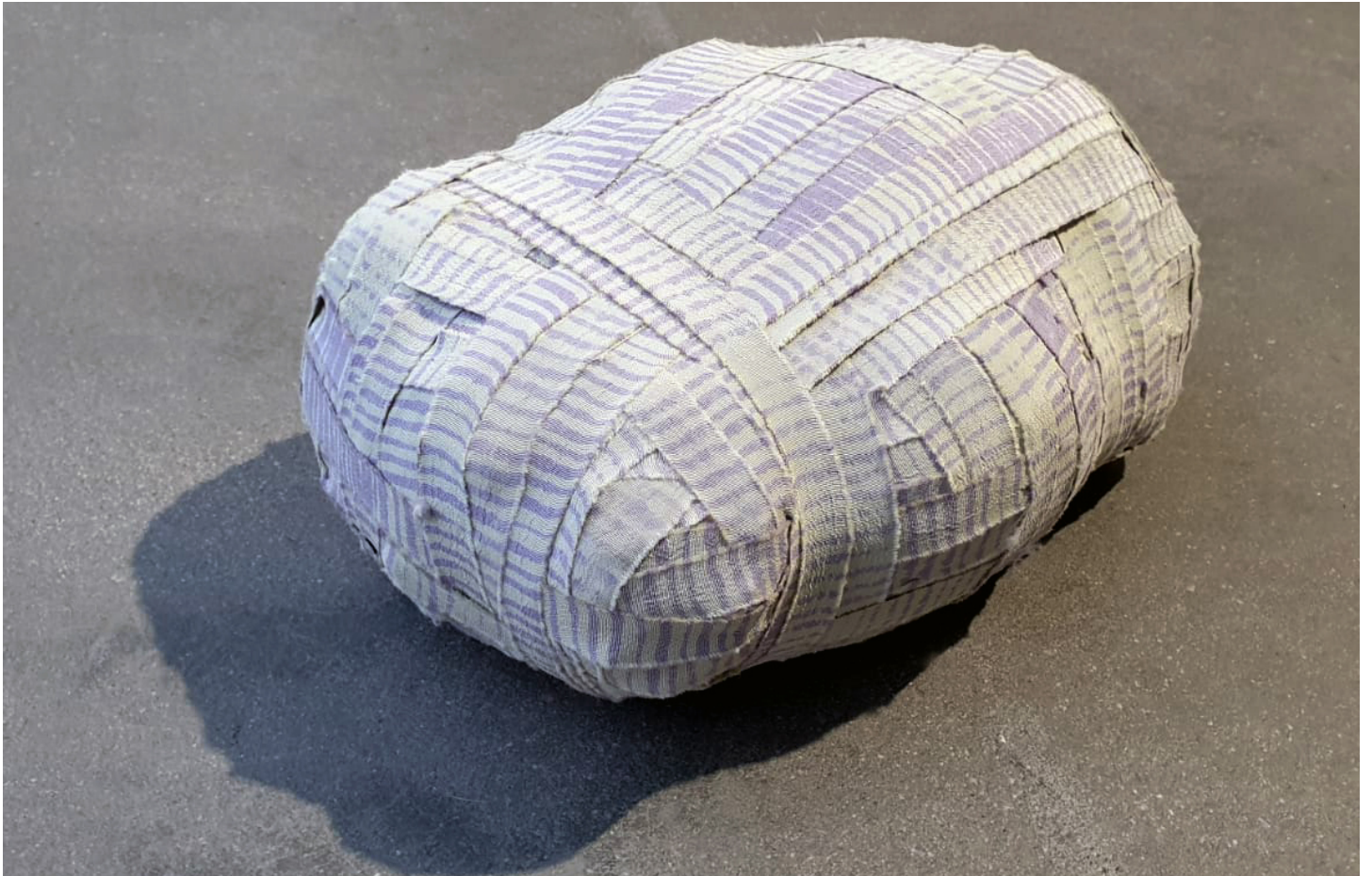


Image 5. *Wrapping Of Time*. (Alma Winkler, 2020)



Image 6. *Wrapping Of Time*. (Alma Winkler, 2020)



Image 7. *Wrapping Of Time*. (Alma Winkler, 2020)



Image 8. *Wrapping Of Time*. (Alma Winkler, 2020)

With these wrapped objects, I could later see a common thread in this project. Even when my master project changed orientation to the subject of motherhood, I continued to process experiences and memories from my life through a ritual creative process. And the search for sanctification in objects by placing significant objects inside my works of art.

Baby Feet

The pandemic and working from home was a challenging period. It was hard to resist hanging out with my partner and my youngest child who also were at home due to parental leave. I felt that nothing was as meaningful as being with them. I felt that if I was going to make art it had to be about something that really grabs me. I didn't want to be guided by fictitious or real expectations and thoughts on what are the right topics, materials and so on. I decided to make something out of clay.

It ended up in a pair of small feet, the ones of my youngest daughter. I did it secretly at home in my little studio.²⁴ I wanted to preserve the time that was now, when she was still small, and her feet were soft and chubby. I have the same feeling with the older children, about the time they are in now which is absolutely unique and wonderful in its own way. There and then it became clear to me – I can't let go of certain thoughts regarding my despair over the fact that moments I value disappear the same moment they arise.



Image 9. Sculpted baby feet in clay, (Alma Winkler, 2020)

²⁴ Secretly, probably because I was working on a topic that was not part of my art ideal. Both the subject of motherhood and the naturalist expression were not something I wanted to be associated with.

At the same time, I was aware that the baby feet were reminiscent of commercial casts and footprints of baby feet that parents make to remember how small their baby was. Despite this, or maybe because of this, I wanted to continue with this theme. My aversion to the subject made me want to dig deeper into why these conflicting feelings arose, and I started to sketch pictures regarding my feelings of being a mother.



Image 10. Sketch in coal. (Alma Winkler, 2021)



Image 11. Sketch in coal. (Alma Winkler, 2021)

Take My Life

Take my life was the title I gave the work with pearl embroidered breasts. Breasts that give life. Undefeated in its effectiveness. Those who provide safety. Who can comfort and calm at all times and make a child completely let go of her surroundings, her worries, her pain, in an instant. But which also gives off all my energy. I gave my energy to the baby by breastfeeding but also by nursing and my time. It gave me sleep deprivation and lack of freedom, both physically and mentally because the child's existence took all my mental activity. Everything revolved around the child and my previous life was gone. I gave my life to the child. And I wanted to. I wanted to give my life because it filled me with life. Here the title of my thesis appeared. "Take My Life" included the whole experience of being a mother. Take my life. You can have it. I want you to.

The nipples are made of golden glass beads as a tribute to the excellence of the breasts. They are embroidered on an old pillowcase. (The first pillowcase I got when I moved away from home, from my mother.) It is dark red with small golden ornaments.



Image 12. *Take My Life*. (Alma Winkler, 2021)

The Baby Sculpture

I started shaping an infant in life size made of wadding. I put objects in the baby sculpture, stones and fossils, that I collected together with my kid's at my mother's summer house. These objects activated and reinforced a meaning to the sculpture. The heaviest stone is in the bum. One stone in the head. One for the heart. A fossil as a spine, and one small stone in each hand and one in each heel. This makes the body parts heavy and they must be held together, as when carrying an infant.

I discovered that when I held it, it reminded me of holding a real child. My body remembered, and this made me emotional. As a result, I did sometimes carry around the sculpture in my studio, hugged and kissed it. This made me feel like a freak. Like a mentally ill or demented person carrying around a doll.²⁵ Why could I not just devote myself to art without interfering with my private life as a mother? These were two topics that should be kept separate.

²⁵ I felt like a person who carries a so-called *reborn doll* which is a lifelike doll that some use as a substitute for a real baby. "Studies suggest that doll therapy can reinforce feelings of attachment and emotional wellbeing in some patients with dementia. Many reborn collectors similarly point to the therapeutic benefits of their dolls for managing mental health conditions like anxiety and depression. (Korducki, "People don't get it': inside the world of hyper-realistic baby doll collecting")

I was ashamed. Both because I created a baby that I carried around, and also of the whole subject. This made me reflect on the social boundaries in our society. There are unspoken but clear boundaries on what is considered normal to do, perhaps especially connected to basic needs, such as our longing to be loved, confirmed and cared for.

I had a feeling that the subject of motherhood was not "good enough" to work with in the field of art, that it is not considered as an interesting and heavy subject. I had a built-in compass of what topics I did not want to be associated with. When I read texts on the subject, I discovered that other artists had the same thoughts, as in Judah's conclusion of her investigation among 50 artists, artists feel a need to separate the two sides of their identity.²⁶ (See section on taboos.)

Anyhow, I enjoyed working with the baby sculpture. The skin of the baby sculpture is made from fabric strips that I took from ragged rag rugs, a gift from my mother. I sew on the strips, one at a time as a slow painting in textile and it became a skin that encapsulates the body of the sculpture.



Image 13. The baby sculpture. (Alma Winkler, 2021)

²⁶ Judah, *Full, Messy and Beautiful*

Ragged Rag Rugs

I disassemble the rag rugs that I have laid out on the floor. They have been trampled and worn for years and now I tear them up.

When I unwrap the crumpled, narrow strips of fabric, I am met by all sorts of patterns. Washed-out striped shirts and floral dresses, stained tablecloths, the old-fashioned curtains of the summer house, a paisly-patterned outgrown blouse. The patterns of the fabrics make me fantasize about who has owned them and what they were used for until they were no longer considered able to fulfill its function and became a new function, as carpets. Together they carry stories and such a strong feeling of a home, of tenderness, memories and life. This made me feel hopeful and confident that these strips can speak for themselves if I just let them do it. I give them a new meaning. To me, this has layers of symbolism.²⁷



Image 14. Close up of baby sculpture. (Alma Winkler, 2021)

²⁷ The rag rug symbolizes the home and the knowledge that is interwoven between generations, just like the knowledge of giving birth and taking care of children.

Performance at Louisiana

In the summer of 2021, I went to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art to see the exhibition MOR! (MOTHER!). I don't remember when the idea came that the baby sculpture would accompany me on the journey but the reason was that it was its creation that led me there. When I put it in my backpack, it felt quite awkward, but when I picked it up at the exhibition I felt really uneasy. People watched, sneaking from a distance, and I fantasized about what they were thinking – if I was disturbed or just a part of the exhibition.

There and then, I completely lost the logic with this performance. In my studio the motive had been clear, but at the exhibition it felt more like a show-off. I felt like a freak and that was maybe the reason why I did it? I wanted to explore the boundaries for what acceptable to do in public spaces. Will a guard ask me to leave? I imagined that they would literally throw me out, and suddenly it all felt like a game. The feelings of taboo became stronger and the motherly feelings were reduced. It was an interesting experience to bring my artwork from the studio out into the public. It became something else and new questions arose – How do you bring the intimate feeling from the work in the studio into a public space?



Image 15. An investigative performance during the exhibition "MOR!" (Mother!) at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, (Alma Winkler, 2021)

The Mother Sculpture

I create hands. Copies of my own hands. When I hold the hand against my cheek I become sad. I feel the need to be small, cared for and loved. In the same way as the baby sculpture gave me feelings of holding my child, the hand against my cheek gives the feeling of being cared for.

The idea of a mother sculpture come from a photograph where I lie in the grass and my three children climb on me. When I saw the photo, it struck me that this was an archetype image of motherhood. The mother who should just be there, like a rock. I imagined that I with this image could convey the image of motherhood. However, I did not know how, or in what material or medium. I came to think of the baby sculpture and how its significance had developed during the creation. I thought of testing this with a mother sculpture, in natural size and weight, just like the baby. As a dialogue between mother and child. A mother – was that me? I decided that the mother would be a self-portrait.



Image 16. A foot from the mother sculpture, in process. (Alma Winkler, 2021)

I remember very well what a foot looks like. Where it is hard or soft. How it moves and where it bends. But sometimes I get unsure. In the evenings when I go to sleep, I try to figure out how my body is constructed. How soft my thighs are when I squeeze them, how the knees become squared when they are bent, how the collarbones go all the way out to the shoulders, and how the ribs are angled towards the waist and muscles take over around the internal soft organs. And the breasts, which are heavy but also hollow. It is important that I capture that expression in the sculpture. They must follow the sculptures movements and the law of gravity. Just like the baby sculpture, the mother sculpture must be given weight, and therefore I have chosen to shape the body parts around stones and metal.

It is interesting to sculpt in textile materials and in this way understand the body's anatomy. The method is similar to how to sculpt in clay or other soft materials, but with textiles it is possible to reshape through threads that are pulled in different directions and by press together the textile so that it becomes compact and hard, I can give it a different character than a soft fluffy textile shape. This reminiscent of the structure of a body, with its various layers of skin, fat, muscle and skeleton – it is both soft and hard. I have built up the body piece by piece and layer by layer. It even has intestines and a heart. I wonder why I go into details that no one else will notice. Will it affect the experience of the finished artwork? Does it have any impact of the interpretation of the work, or is it just part of an artistic process of understanding what is inside us? Or an attempt to bring an object to life? What makes a person a person. ²⁸



Image 17. Mother sculpture in process. (Alma Winkler, 2022)

²⁸ Golem is a creature made of clay, endowed with life through the magic of the holy words. The name Golem comes originally from the Hebrew word “galmi”, which means unformed mass, or embryo. In legends the golem saves the Jewish people from persecution or death, others stories ends with tragic results.

It was difficult to get the body parts together and the joints had to be able to move and bend properly. The details has taken time to make. The ears, the breasts and the womb. It needs to look real, but not too obvious. Suddenly it struck me that the sculpture became too naturalistic, and that I find this expression very difficult. Why did I make it so realistic? For who? So pointless. It conveys no emotions. But I am happy to say that this lead to something positive. Now I dare to destroy it. I dare to paint it and tear it apart. Maybe this is when it happens? When the artwork gets its magic? I came to the conclusion that the sculpture was only my canvas. Instead of stretching a canvas, I shaped a body that I would cover with color and emotions.

Well, then we got there, to the skin. How to cover that nasty synthetic wadding. This proved to be a great challenge. I knew I would cover it with soft fabric, but I did not know what fabric. My first idea was to dress the sculpture with a solid fabric that I would paint, maybe with small stories or symbolic images. Another idea was to use fabrics from my grandmother's old clothes, or maybe from my own. But I did not want the pattern of the skin to take the attention away from the baby sculpture or overshadow the forms of the mother sculpture. Instead, I wanted to find something that emphasized the mother and child relationship.

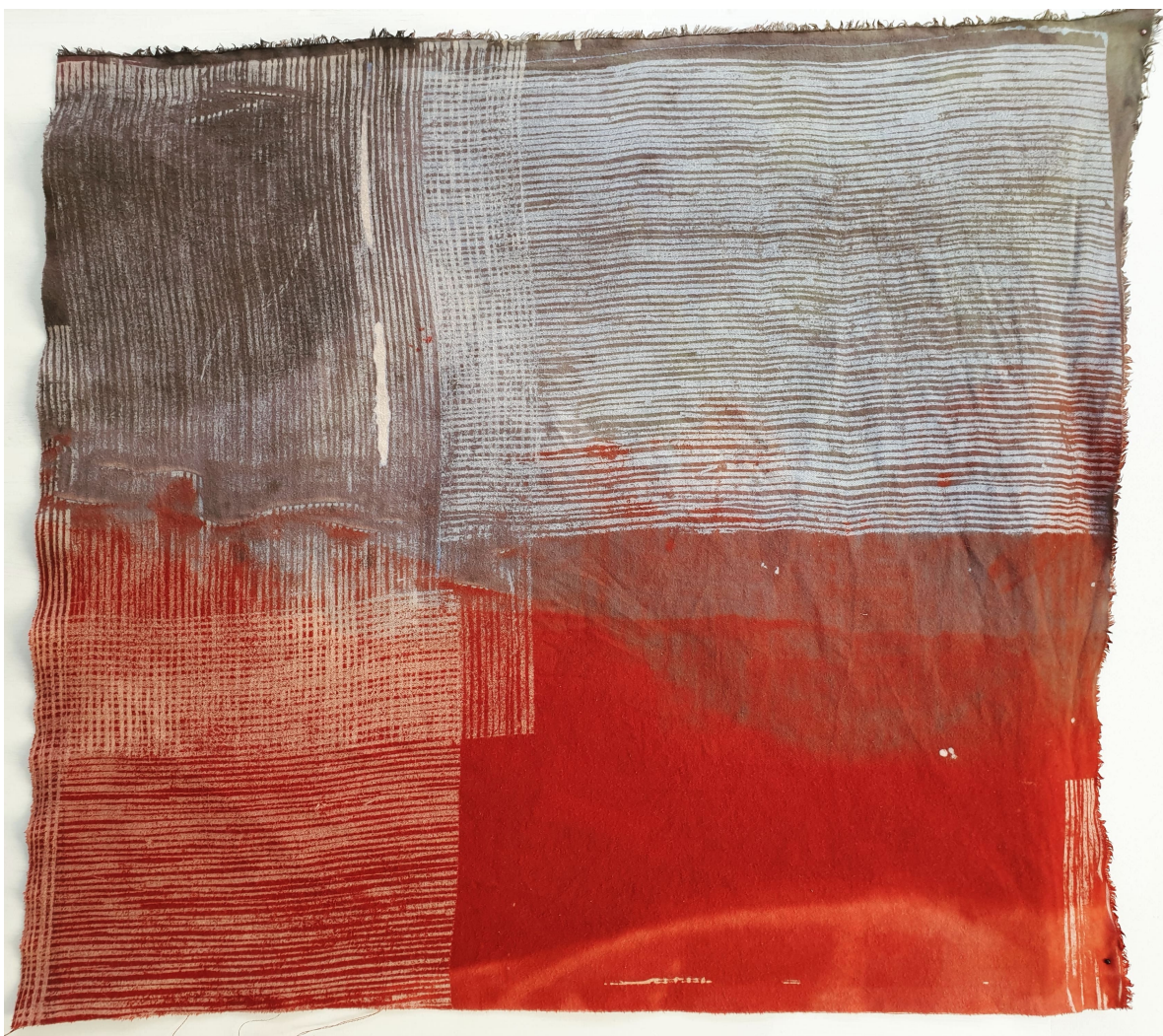


Image 18. Painted and printed fabric, made to be skin on the mother sculpture. (Alma Winkler, 2022)

Finally, I decided to print fabric in stripes which I could form around the body parts to emphasise the shapes of the sculpture as with hatching.²⁹ I chose flannel as fabric and painted and printed with reactive colors, which dyes the fabric but retain the surface and softness of the fabric. I tore the fabric into strips, like the strips from the rag rugs that the baby sculpture's skin is made of. As with the objects in *Wrapping of Time* (see above), time is a central part of the meaning in this work. The stripes symbolize generations, just like annual rings on a tree or the different layers in the earth's crust.



Image 18. Mother sculpture in process. (Alma Winkler, 2022)

²⁹ Hatching is an artistic technique used to indicate shape, depth and shadows in drawings by using parallel lines.

CONCLUSION

This project is about the existential questions that arise from the experience of being transformed from one existence, to become two, and then being forced to split into two separate individuals in a painful, but long-awaited liberation that continues all life. It's about love and sorrow – feelings so close that I sometimes cannot tell the difference. It's about the symbiosis between mother and child and the struggle to become one's own. That I sometimes want to tear myself free and the next moment merge into a fusion. How I want my children to stay small and dependent, but at the same time wish to see them grow up, become independent and experience life fully. I'm intensely aware of that I soon will lose the role that I now daily try to live up to, and I mourn in advance. One day, soon, I will not be as needed and loved.

In this project I have investigated motherhood by studying the subject from a social-historical and art-historical perspective. I have also studied what philosophers have written (and not written) on the subject and how artists have related to motherhood. I have processed the theme by writing and thinking, but above all, by creating art. I have used several different mediums that together, from different angles, define the theme. There are drawings, sculptures, embroidery, dyed and printed fabric, and performance. The sculptures are movable and are activated when someone is interacting with them and the aim is to create a performative investigation together with the audience at Konstfack Spring Exhibition in May 2022.

Having thought that I had left the subject of rituals which was my focus in the beginning of my master project, I now see that in my work with motherhood I continued to search for the magic in life. My work is a ritual process as to understand and embrace my experience of becoming and identifying myself as a mother. By creating art through craft, I could methodically approach the subject. With repeated actions, both through body and mind, I processed the subject intuitively. The next step to do is to figure out how to install the installation and how the performance should be presented by letting my children interact with the sculptures. This I will film and analyse. After this I will continue my research in front of, and together with the audience at Konstfack spring exhibition 2022. My idea is that children will interact with the “mother sculpture” and at the same time I will carry the “baby sculpture” and possibly invite visitors to do as well.

The immersion into the subject of motherhood has been enriching but also challenging. It has at times been a heavy and painful work where I have confronted my inner personal views of motherhood, and my feelings of embarrassment and vanity. The project explores an area that I have perceived as taboo in the art world, and I have noticed that this has had a strong impact on my feelings connected to my creative process. I am pleased that I have managed to overcome the taboo and instead turned into my advantage by exploring the feeling of shame just as I have explored other emotions that occurred during my process.

Motherhood as a subject has not been sufficiently emphasized in art, philosophy and social sciences, in comparison with the importance it has for humans and life itself. As far as I know, no research in art has been done about motherhood from a mother's perspective. My work can hopefully give the viewer thoughts about the attitude to motherhood in modern society. Being born is an existential experience, but even so is the experience of giving life and becoming a mother. Because the two experiences, giving birth and being born, are so close to each other and since everyone has a relationship with their mother, I imagine that this is a topic that everyone can relate to in some way – the longing to be loved, confirmed and cared for. Or the longing to free oneself. Not to be dependent. Perhaps most people can also recognize the desire to take care of and love someone sincerely.

However, in recent years I have observed an increased interest in the subject in the field of culture. In the summer of 2021 I visited Louisiana's Museum of Modern art for the exhibition *MOR! (MOTHER!)*, and in the fall of 2021 I went to *Stockholm Film Festival* which had motherhood as its central theme. This month, March of 2022 Jonna Bornemark will release her poetically and philosophically investigative book on pregnancy and childbirth. I contacted her and asked if I could read it in advance and if it had been possible I would have quoted the entire book. The subject of motherhood has been difficult to grasp, and it has been a challenge to define what is relevant to include in this project. There is so much that I have not mentioned in this essay due to lack of space and time. Books, essays, movies and documentaries that I have read and seen, but also more, that I would like to take part of. With that said, I would like to emphasize the enormous joy this project has given me. It has been very interesting, and it has given me knowledge and insights. I will for sure continue to work with this theme in the future.

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- Image 4. Valadon, Suzanne, *The Abandoned Doll* [oil on canvas, 51 x 32 in.], 1921
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- Image 5. Winkler, Alma, *Wrapping Of Time* [objects wrapped in textile], Stockholm, 2020
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- Image 9. Winkler, Alma, (No title) [Sculpted baby feet in clay], Stockholm, 2020
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