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The Nightdress I Wore to Give Birth in: Performative Materialities and Maternal Intersubjectivities

It begins with a pale blue cotton nightdress from Mothercare; I don’t remember buying it, but suppose I must have done. Strange that I should have thought it necessary to buy a maternity nightdress to give birth in when nudity or a large t-shirt would have sufficed. I don’t wear nightdresses, or at least, not since I was a little girl and wore a long white nylon affair that caused a tingle of static electricity when mixed with the obligatory nylon bed sheets of the 1970s. Yet I gave birth to my son wearing a pale blue cotton nightdress from Mothercare.

Another story about materiality and childbirth. My mother tells me (although she is not a reliable witness) that when she gave birth to me in 1966 in a damp Victorian hospital in North London, she was left to labour alone with only an occasional check up from a young male doctor wearing a hand knitted Aran jumper. During the course of her labour, my mother, in much discomfort and distress, pulled at this young doctor’s jumper until it began to unravel. By the time I was born, she jokes; my mother had unraveled enough wool to knit an infant sized jumper for her new baby.

Introduction

What ties these two stories is the role of materiality as the stuff or substance of the performativity of childbirth. Together they tell of maternal relations evidenced and consolidated through materiality, of intersubjective experience and memory materialized, literally. Both the physical experience of birthing and the emotional memory of the performance of giving birth have an ambivalent and ambiguous relationship to death, horror, haunting and the uncanny. Birth stories are often traumatic, sometimes life threatening, and almost always overlaid and underpinned by an understanding of their generational impact, most specifically in terms of a matrilineage. This article analyses the performativity of materiality as the signifier of maternal intersubjectivities, engaging with texts that position new materialisms alongside the uncanny material and performative resonance of the nightdress worn to give birth in.

Performativity in this context can be seen as the attribute of objects and materiality to become the props of relational transactions; Pil and Galia Kollectiv (2010) position the performative potential of materiality as key to a critical engagement with object based sculpture. The language of objects becomes resonant when encountered as artwork; context and material manipulation imbue meaning and narrative so that their relational qualities become inter-relational here, these objects that perform as sculpture now engage in dialogue with each other and in a sense can be seen to become agents in their own performativity. New materialist thinking takes these attributes of objects and materiality further by proposing that this ‘stuff’ of relationality has agency in its own right. Since Sigmund Freud’s essay The Uncanny (1919), critical theorists, particularly feminist psychoanalytical writers such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva among others, have explored the uncanny as a conceptual space within which to potentially position the ambivalent experience of embodied femininity. In this article the uncanny is used as a term with its Freudian meaning of unhomliness, of that which should have remained hidden but has come to light, of the familiar made strange. Within this discussion I also acknowledges the supernatural implications and applications of the uncanny in horror and psychological terror, and in particular how these supernatural attributions have been culturally aligned to femininity as monstrous.

An analysis of four artworks that position the nightdress as a performative object resonant with maternal relations and intersubjective experience form the basis of this article: Megan Wynne’s Untitled (postpartum nightgown), a photographic image of the artist lying uncomfortably with her now three-year-old daughter tightly curled under the stretch fabric of the nightdress they both wear; Cornelia Parker’s Blue Shift, the nightdress worn by Mia Farrow in the horror film Rosemary’s Baby (Polanski 1968) mounted in a light box to float and glow eerily in the gallery space; Louise Bourgeois’ Cell VII where nightclothes and undergarments hang like pale ghosts trapped within a claustrophobic enclosure of heavy wooden doors; and my own The Nightdress I Wore to Give Birth In, in which the pale blue cotton nightdress that opens this essay, now performing as sculpture, combines with an assemblage of feminine objects camped out under the seemingly infinite stretch of cotton lycra maternity wear.

Analysing these artworks as performative objects vibrant with the agency of materiality, with specific focus on how the maternality of agency in this context imbues materiality with uncanny resonance, I will be drawing on recent writing around feminism and new materialisms. In Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism (2014), Maurizia Boscagli positions clothing as the material signifier of femininity, and the choosing of clothes as a potentially radical act of non-conformity. On Mumsnet and other related online advice forums, when asking the question “what should I wear to give birth in?” women invariably focus on practicality, comfort, ease of breast feeding, ‘easy access’ for examination and for the final stages of birth, and on cheapness and disposability, most suggestions being a pack of two nighties from Primark at just £5 and a pack of five pairs of loose fitting knickers for £3. Type in “what should I wear to …..?” on Google and it gives you various options; a wedding, the races, my prom etc. under none of these topics do issues of practicality or comfort make an appearance. The nightdress purchased specifically for wearing to give birth in appears to be a non-conformative object, the conscious and deliberate decision to buy these specific objects, an act of agency that takes place outside of the conventions of femininity. As such, the materiality of the nightdress itself, its cheapness and its disposability, becomes the relational ‘stuff’ of the performance of giving birth; a signifier of maternal agency culturally positioned as non-conformative and uncertain. As Boscagli (2014) reminds us, shopping for clothes is an activity designated as acceptable for women, and fashion is the cultural terrain where femininity and modernist values of consumption become ideology. Women’s use of clothes turns them into a spectacle and becomes the site of fantasy and desire; yet within these narratives of woman as object, there is the possibility of denouncing such gender designations, of refusing to accept the place assigned for women and femininity.

Aligning the spectacle of the tactility of cloth to the commodification of pornography within the context of materiality as the visibility of femininity, Boscagli proposes, ‘The visual-tactile renegotiation of the real produces a new, potentially subversive form of femininity and female agency modelled in part on the object, rather than the male subject’ (2014: 91). It is my argument here that the visibility of materiality as a signifier of femininity is disrupted when positioned as an index of horror and of potential threat. As argued through Barbara Creed’s The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (1993) later in this article, the monstrous when presented as female and maternal positions the male viewer as passive disrupting the understanding of woman as sexualised victim. Cheapness, practicality and disposability as reasons for choosing a Primark (or Mothercare) nightdress as the object through which the specifically female act of giving birth will be enacted, undermine also the understanding of the performativity of femininity as a sexualised spectacle, thus opening the possibility for an alternate reading of materiality as resonant of an other sort of femaleness. In Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory (1988), Judith Butler proposes that gender (in this context, femininity in particular) is both performed and rehearsed, that there is a script that requires actualisation and reproduction in order to maintain the illusion. But this script is open to interpretation and may be enacted in various ways; to abandon the construct of femininity through active engagement with the materiality of a cheap cotton nightdress at a moment when femaleness would seem most present, points to the falsity of the illusion of gender. For this object, the nightdress, becomes a sort of talisman or fetish that both stands in for and enacts this moment of gender subversion.

Judith Butler (1988) developed our understanding of gender construction as an ongoing series of performative acts; clothing, outward appearance and restricted modes of behaviour being some of the key indicators of femininity, but the culturally liminal state of pregnancy and childbirth offer a conceptual space from which to disrupt the restrictions of gender construction through the performative potential of a different engagement with materiality. Jessica Benjamin (1995) positions maternal intersubjectivities as the active engagement of identification and recognition, the individual growing in and through their relationship to other subjects. This position allows for an analysis of the complexities of maternal identification as evidenced through the specific art works discussed here. Alexandra Kokoli’s recent publication on the feminist uncanny, The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice (2016), explores through an analysis of feminist artwork, the uncanny as the ambivalent space through which feminism engages with psychoanalysis. ‘The uncanny makes ideal vehicle for an arrangement marked by ambivalence and acts as a constant reminder that, even though feminism ended up revitalizing psychoanalysis through their critical encounter, the two are never quite at home with one another’ (Kokoli 2016: 4). Historically problematic for a feminist understanding of female embodiment, including pregnancy and childbirth, Kokoli’s repositioning of the uncanny as a psychoanalytic theory of liminal states and feminine material engagement provides a theoretical framework from within which encounters with art works positioned as maternal and psychologically ambiguous can be understood as both affective and uncanny.

Creed in The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (1993) challenges the notion of the female body as terrifying through a feminist reanalysis of Freud’s theory of castration fear and in relation Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject and the maternal. This analysis of the monstrous feminine as a construct of men’s fears, also presents an active female monster that positions the male viewer as passive, as such disrupting the understanding of woman as victim within the genre of horror. As with Creed’s Kristevan analysis of the abject maternal body as presented in horror films where the monstrousness of the female protagonist is evidenced through her maternal body, in the context of this article, it is the performativity of birthing that becomes the site/sight of horror. The monstrous maternal body terrifies and threatens, yet in doing so offers a conceptual space within which to revisualise the ambivalent experience of giving birth. The visual language of science fiction and horror presents an alternative reading of the fecund and (re)productive female body that embodies the uncanniness of birthing, and the disruptive potential of childbirth as a performative act. The nightdress in the context of this article, is positioned as a material signifier of maternal ambivalence and intersubjectivity; an understanding of the visual language of monstrous femininity as maternal body enables a feminist critical engagement with maternal ambivalence through a re-presentation of materiality as artwork.

The Alien Within: intersubjectivities and the ambivalent maternal experience

Megan Wynne is a contemporary artist from the US with two small daughters. Megan’s practice is centred around her collaboration with her daughters presented in photographic and video works that explore the ambivalent intergenerational experience of motherhood. The statement on her website reads;

In the work I use my maternal body as a site for exploring the interdependence of mother-child relationships. The mother is a place in which identities may be blurred, mirrored, or completely absorbed. (Wynne 2015)

In a series of photographic images, Megan and her daughters re-enact the birthing moment as mother and child experience the first separation, yet at the same time come to know each other as potential subjects. Jessica Benjamin has written at length on maternal intersubjectivities, proposing a rereading of established psychoanalytic theory to include the pre- and post-oedipal as a space of mutual recognition, as an exchange of loving care that bonds mother and infant. Maternity is thus intrinsically relational. In Benjamin’s theories, the other moves from a position of object, and becomes instead a subject with whom we must to some extent identify.

Intersubjective theory postulates that the other must be recognized as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other's presence. This means that we have a need for recognition and that we have a capacity to recognize others in return, thus making mutual recognition possible. (Benjamin1995: 2)

Benjamin traces the development of intersubjectivity through a child’s infanthood and early childhood, when mutual recognition prompts tensions caused by the conflict of connection and separation. The potential confrontation between mother and child at the moment of realisation of independent will, sets up the psychic framework from within which the child’s demands become threatening to the subjectivities of both through the process of reprimand.

Although she is now able to do more, the toddler is aware of what she can't do and what she can't make mother do - for example, stay with her instead of going out. Many of the power struggles that begin here (wanting the whole pear, not a slice) can be summed up as a demand: "Recognize my intent!" She will insist that mother share everything, participate in all her deeds, acquiesce to all her demands. The toddler is also up against the increased awareness of separateness, and, consequently, of vulnerability: she can move away from mother - but mother can also move away from her. (Benjamin 1995: 5)

Maternal intersubjectivities can be as problematic as they are constructive, and the conflicting emotions this engenders in both mother and child are often experienced as ambivalence. In Rozsika Parker’s Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence (1995) the relationship between mother and child is examined through the lens of acceptability. Cultural prohibitions disallow the recognition of aggression as an emotional response and, as a consequence, mothers often experience conflicting psychological states as they recognise in themselves negative feelings towards their child. Parker positions maternal ambivalence as;

[M]aternal emotions which the dominant cultural representations of motherhood render unacceptable, and which mothers themselves experience as both painful and unforgivable. I refer to the fleeting (or not so fleeting) feelings of hatred for a child that can grip a mother, the moment of recoil from a much-loved body, the desire to abandon, to smash the untouched plate of food into a toddler’s face, to yank a child’s arm while crossing the road, scrub too hard with a facecloth, change the lock against an adolescent, or the fantasy of hurling a howling baby out of the window. (Parker 1995: 77)

Parker goes on to examine a range of ambivalent experiences and emotions that women have towards their children within the context of cultural signifiers and theoretical analysis. In a section entitled ‘A Complete Alien’ maternal insecurities are discussed as a psychoanalytic projection from mother to unborn child; a woman may identify aspects of herself that she finds intolerable, unwanted feelings of rage and confusion, and project these onto the baby whilst still in the womb. She quotes a friend who said of her pregnancy: ‘I think I’ve been hijacked, …… Here is this tiny terrorist inside you saying ‘you will go to the baby clinic! Lay off the booze! Leave that cigarette alone! Do your breathing exercises! Clench that pelvic floor!’ (1995: 77). Parker also points out that a mother’s experience of the baby at birth is influenced by maternal and pre-natal representations, and that in order for a mother to abandon these unconscious fantasies, she must be able to take back her negative projections.

Figure 1 (place image here)

Megan Wynne, ‘Untitled (postpartum nightgown)’ 2015

In Megan Wynne’s series of motherhood images, the child, now uncannily large, emerges through the materiality of cloth. In the image up for analysis here, Untitled (postpartum nightgown), Wynne’s youngest daughter lies on her mother’s chest, curled in foetal position, head upright, not yet turned for birthing, her feet protruding from below the hem of the nightdress worn for her daughter’s birth three years earlier. The girl’s face pressed against the fabric of the night dress emerges like a phantom or spiritualist photograph of a dead relative, or perhaps more aptly, in light of the focus of this discussion, like the creature in Alien (Scott 1979) that bursts its way through the stomach wall of its host. In The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Creed proposes that at their core, all science fiction horror films are a reworking of the primal scene (Creed 1993). Creed’s analysis of the film Alien points out that the birth of the alien creature through the stomach wall of the character Kane recalls the common misunderstanding by children that babies are born out of a woman’s stomach.

Wynne’s discomfort is evident both in her bodily discomposure, and through the shaky quality of the image itself. Although some women confess to have thoroughly enjoyed being pregnant, and would happily have stayed that way indefinitely, for some birth, as the foreseeable end to the liminal state of pregnancy, offers hope of relief from the physical stresses and strains of sharing their body with another. The horror that the child might never be born, that it might continue to grow inside its mother host to the point where the mother is subsumed/consumed entirely, or that the child be born monstrous, a physical manifestation of the mother’s hurt or rage, has a nightmare quality that haunts the narratives of motherhood, from myth and folklore, to its modern equivalent, science fiction and the horror movie. Creed references Marie-Hélèn Huet who wrote of the belief that mothers create monstrosities through the power of their imagination; Creed reads Huet as aligning tales from antiquity such as the birth of a fur covered daughter to a woman who saw a picture of John the Baptist in animal skins to films such as The Brood (Cronenberg 1979) where parthenogenetic offspring exist only as an extension of the mother’s identity; when she is calm, they are calm, when she is angry, they become enraged. This physical manifestation of a mother’s imagination or desire has been presented as inherently destructive, Creed argues, a symbolic representation of the horrifying results of permitting the mother too much power (Creed, 1993: 47). In Untitled (postpartum nightgown) the potential horror of giving birth to a three-year old proposed by the image sits uneasily alongside a reading of the desire to remain bonded to the child in a pre-natal psychic state. The image presents a monstrous interpretation of maternal ambivalence that Wynne and her daughter enact here through the transitional materiality of the nightdress.

Time, God and Horror: the psychology of maternal materiality

Figure 2 (place image here)

Cornelia Parker, ‘Blue Shift’, 2001

In 2001, when pregnant with her daughter, Cornelia Parker bought at auction the blue cotton nightdress Mia Farrow wore in the concluding scenes of Rosemary’s Baby (Polanski 1968). She understands that this purchase was a reflection of her own anxieties around pregnancy and childbirth; as Parker herself acknowledged in an interview with Alan Yentob for the BBC programme Imagine (2016), at 45 this pregnancy was both unexpected and potentially dangerous for mother and child.

When I was pregnant I bought the shift that Mia Farrow wears in Rosemary's Baby. It's a very clever film: she could be giving birth to the devil or just being hormonal. It could be in her mind. It's a psychological thriller rather than a horror film. In a way I was obviously dealing with my own anxiety about being pregnant, but it was also typical of me to go and buy this nightgown because I was doing a show in Turin. I saw the shift and its sweat stains as the inverse of the Turin Shroud: the opposite of the Immaculate Conception, a rape that ends with the birth of the devil. (Parker 2016)

The night dress is mounted in a frosted light box and lit to glow uncannily so the pale blue garment appears to float like an apparition, saintly apparel for the mother of God, or as Parker points out, perhaps for the mother of the devil. Through the materiality of cloth, the cultural signifiers of the genre of horror and the mysticism of religion, this object embodies the ambivalence and ambiguities that surround the depiction of pregnancy and childbirth in historic and contemporary culture.

In the film Rosemary’s Baby (Polanski 1968) the character played by Mia Farrow becomes pregnant whilst drugged by what appears to be the devil conjured up by a satanic group including her eccentric neighbours and her complicit husband. A very difficult pregnancy and growing interference from the eccentric neighbours arouse suspicion in the Farrow character; when she finally goes into labour her fears are confirmed as she is again drugged for the birth, and the child removed. The concluding scenes of the film, where Farrow wears the nightdress Parker eventually bought, depict a woman torn by conflicting emotions of love and hate. As she tracks the faint cries of her child through the apartment, in the blue nightdress, with bare feet and a kitchen knife, the understanding of maternal bonds are thrown into question as instinct -- she knows it is her child she hears -- and horror collide. Farrow’s character intends to kill the baby she conceived with the devil, but upon approaching the black lace cot, and finally coming face to face with her son, she is overcome with the desire to mother the child and drops the knife.

Parker’s Blue Shift has a transcendental aesthetic, it directly references historical images of the Virgin Mary, blue being the preferred colour of the virgin’s robes due to its rarity as a pigment and its symbolic alignment with heaven. The positioning of the nightdress in the lightbox, floating upright with the sleeves/arms slightly akimbo, mimics the Virgin Mary in many classic Catholic paintings of the assumption. My own experience of birth was on one level a mystical type of epiphany, in the maternal bliss and tranquillity experienced post-birth I aligned this specific bodily encounter to that of the birth of a divine being, positioning myself by default as the Mother of God. The lack of cultural signifiers other than the Virgin Birth perhaps helps to culturally position this experience. The understanding that the child is both God and the devil, both saviour and tormentor, and that joy and pain can be present in fluctuating proximity are witnessed as material evidence in the sculptural artwork Blue Shift.

Interestingly, in the interview of Cornelia Parker by Lisa Tickner published in Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice(2004), Tickner relates the experience of time, pre and post motherhood, as like that of a bolt of cloth:

I felt very much before I had children that time was like a bolt of cloth. There might be more or less of it but it had an even consistency, whereas once I had children time was like an unpicked garment. You had to think, 'Well, this is a sleeve, what can I do with a sleeve?' Or, 'This is a bigger bit, this is a morning, a bit that goes right across the shoulders, I might be able to do something with this. (Tickner, 2004: 66)

Returning to my mother’s anecdote about my own birth and her unknowing alignment of the unravelling of the young doctor’s Aran jumper to the unravelling of her own sense of self as she laboured alone, this temporal and performative narrative reflects Tickner’s understanding of the materiality of time. Until the advent of Primark and other low price clothing stores (and perhaps before the introduction of the marvellous all purpose ‘babygro’) it was tradition to knit for one’s own baby, and for the babies of friends and relatives. This may have primarily been due to economic reasons, but also reflects Marcel Mauss’ concept of the gift as a token of exchange and reconciliation as first introduced in The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies (2011). Knitting is of course a craft skill positioned as feminine (despite historical evidence to the contrary) and my own mother followed suit, knitting prodigiously for myself, my sister, cousins and the children of friends, and also for my son. I too knitted many jumpers over the years for my fast growing son, but as a feminist artist I was conscious of the place this skill had in the history of feminist art practice, and of the historical connotations implicit in the process and materiality of knitting. I was conscious also of the potential for knitting needles to become instruments to inflict harm, and of their contextual history as the tools for self-induced and back street abortions.

Material engagement with knitting is disruptive, my mother deconstructed the doctor’s jumper over the duration of her labour. Agency was transferred from woman to wool and wool to woman within the temporal space of labour. The disruptive nature of the wool itself has become the ‘stuff’ of the narrative of my birth, an intersubjective psychic construction that places maternal agency in the realm of the material.

Evan Calder Williams’ essay Hostile Object Theory (2011) proposes that an antisocial and disruptive agency is at play when objects that are supposed to help us instead turn against us in a manner that implies intentionality on the part of the object itself. The projection of an ambivalent agency onto objects and materiality previously considered to have been inanimate echoes the thinking of many new materialist theorists. However, a closer examination of Calder Williams’ text reveals the possibility of illicit sabotage on the part of those engaged with the production of objects through the manipulation of materiality. Unseen, and therefore often misrecognised, this sabotage has become attributed to folkloric or supernatural beings: gremlins, mischievous sprites, evil goblins etc. Applying Calder Williams’ ideas to this feminist investigation of the uncanny resonance of materiality, it is interesting to consider the many superstitions around the potentially harmful agency of the morally unconstrained female body, in European myth and folklore there was a fear that menstruating women in a dairy would turn the milk sour for example. It must be noted also that there are very many real life cases where women have harmed or even killed their children through the use of a knitting needle. The most famous case was in 1973 in south Dublin when an eleven year-old girl gave birth to her father’s baby that her mother then preceded to stab 40 times with a knitting needle until dead. The baby’s body was disposed of and found later by local boys, causing a media sensation (The Guardian 2010).

Oh Mother Where Art Thou: memory and materiality

Figure 3, (place image here)

Louise Bourgeois, ‘Cell VII’, 1998

In the 1990s Louise Bourgeois made a series of enclosed sculptural spaces she entitled The Cells; these spaces contained collections of objects and fragments of materiality that Bourgeois had collected and constructed over the long period of her life as an artist. Many of these objects were remnants from her childhood and early adult life as a wife and mother. In an interview for The Economist in 2010, Jerry Gorovoy, Bourgeois’ studio assistant, talked of Bourgeois’ obsession for accumulating the material evidence of her life; ‘Clothes have a memory and a history. She wanted to process them all’. In Cell VII this need to process memory through the presentation of personal objects and items of clothing manifests through the ghostly presence of a nightdress, camisole, slip and shift, the starchly laundered underclothes of a time now past. These garments hang from weathered bones and hooks reminiscent of a butcher’s shop or torture chamber. The claustrophobic space with its clutter of carefully manipulated objects, has an overriding sense of threat, like a scene from an unmade horror film, or ghost story, props waiting to be animated in an ambiguous narrative of maternal care.

In interviews over the years, Bourgeois was very vocal about the psychological traumas of her own childhood; her father’s open infidelity and her mother’s physical pain and emotional distress, and of the impact this had on the creation of The Cells. However, we know very little about her experiences of pregnancy and childbirth; she had three sons, two of whom she conceived, carried and birthed, one was adopted. We are therefore left to project our own understanding of the psychological impact this had on the artist as she negotiated maternity and creativity in the home, in the studio, and through her production of sculpture. In Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of The Cells, Crone and Schaesberg (2008) position this reading of the performative quality of the objects in The Cells as ‘the phantoms of the viewer’s imagination’ (2008: 98). In Cell VII the nightdress and undergarments perform a specific kind of remembering, they evidence the intersubjective experience of maternity through the personalised materiality of clothing.

Despite the fact that the objects in the Cells are all evidently borrowed from a seemingly familiar real world, they systematically resist being slotted into any perceptual experiences that we have on hand as knowledge. The deconstruction or, if you wish, the defunctionalisation of all these objects is effected by an extremely subtle shift of meaning -- they increase reality without yielding to the dictates of truth… (Crone and Schaesberg, 2008: 96/97)

Bourgeois may tell us little about her own experience of motherhood, yet the eloquence of the suspended clothing in this work resonates the intergenerational processes of maternal identification.

A Cautionary Tale: the uncanny sculptural object

In 1995, aged 28, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy. The labour was straightforward; it took seven hours and required no medical intervention. I had read the appropriate literature on birthing, had prepared myself as best I could, yet I was totally unprepared for the imaginary processes that I underwent during that intensive seven hours of labour. In the days leading up to my son’s birth I had been reading Bram Stoker’s Dracula, (1897); I inhaled a massive one and a half canisters of gas and air (nitrous oxide) during my labour, and as a consequence began to hallucinate quite early into the process. In retrospect I should perhaps have been reading something a little less monstrous!

Figure 4, (place image here)

Paula Chambers, ‘The Nightdress I Wore To Give Birth In’, 2016

The sculpture The Nightdress I Wore To Give Birth In is an amalgamation of ‘feminine’ objects that perform collaboratively to convey something of the haunted quality of my experience of labour. The nightdress itself, the blue cotton shift from Mothercare that opens this article, has been stretched over a white kitchen chair, broken through overuse; a child’s clear dome umbrella wedged through the shattered seat of the chair stretches the nightdress further. Dress, chair and umbrella are strapped securely to a small blue hand trolley designed for transporting unwieldy luggage. Off balance, tipped as if preparing to undertake a journey of some sort, this ensemble of unlikely objects is lit red from beneath, the glow emanating through the dress highlighting the ribs of the umbrella and broken seat of the chair, resonant of the bodily invasions depicted in science fiction horror. The twisted grey electrical cord snaking its way from between the legs and wheels of chair and trolley towards the power giving wall socket, mimics both the umbilical bond between mother and child, and the dystopian possibilities of mechanised birthing.

The anthropomorphic quality of chairs can have an uncanniness when performing as sculpture; the differentiation between subject and object is broken down; the ensuing identification with the previously considered inanimate prompts an attribution of agency onto objects. The objects appear now in the subject’s consciousness as independent actants in their own private narratives. It is this unseen, yet imagined drama that instigates uncanny recognition; we know that furniture should not act independently, yet here it appears to do just that, much like poltergeist phenomena, table turning, or stage magic. Discussing the paraconceptual work of Susan Hiller in The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice, Alexandra Kokoli (2016) identifies the defamiliarisation common to the uncanny, as present in feminist art work that goes beyond the limitations of conceptualism by ‘moving sideways’ to include the paranormal, an area where the feminine has been conversely privileged (2016: 73). The ambiguity of the supernatural when adopted as a creative feminist strategy, takes advantage of the ‘off stage’ possibilities for insight and self-reflection. Kokoli examines Freud’s original text through its many (re)interpretations to discover a space in the margins where the uncanny presents the possibility for a visual language for feminist artists that goes beyond the purity of the conceptual, to embrace the sociological, psychological and the personal (2016: 73).

Conclusion

Referencing the rise of interest in object-oriented philosophy, Pil and Galia Kollectiv (2010) situate object based sculptural assemblage as ‘somewhere between theatrical props waiting to be activated and material phenomena closed to human access.’ They go on to propose that the performative qualities of object based sculpture is due partly to the ambiguous relationship between the idea that art transcends materiality through its concept led ideology, yet at the same time requires a material presence through which to present conceptual ideas. The dematerialisation of the art object manifest in the economics of the art market, alongside the rise of relational practices, require the object as prop, to delineate space and stage a social situation. These sculptural objects then, ‘stand in for a human presence on a stage set constructed for us to navigate’’. (2010: 3).

It is this ability of objects to perform as if mimicking subjects that prompts the uncanny encounter that Freud described as the jolt of recognition in the familiar made strange. And it is perhaps this uncanny encounter with the materiality of maternity that prompts a haunted recognition of the inherent ambivalence of the intersubjective maternal experience of childbirth. In referencing the monstrous as a radically disruptive cultural signifier for the ambivalent maternal experience the four art works analysed here present an ambiguous narrative of maternity that does not conform to culturally acceptable forms of presentation of the maternal experience, and as such offer a rereading of the birthing experience as one that is full of pain, terror and uncertainty, as much as it full of joy, pleasure and fulfilment. It would seem that the nightdress as worn to give birth in, transcends its materiality as a disposable, practical, economic solution to an unknown encounter with a specifically female experience, and becomes, once transformed through the processes of becoming sculpture, an embodiment of the performativity of childbirth with all its physical and psychological horror.

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