

Jill Skulina – MFA



Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art  
Dundee University

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## Introduction

I have come such a long way since the start of the MFA. Through my research I have discovered who I am as a mother and been able to separate the mother from the woman. I have learnt about the history of the domestic role of women and the varying views on mothers and motherhood. I have also been able to relate these to fairy tales, a subject I have been interested in for many years.

As well as personal discoveries I have had some revelations about how I work. I have a design background and have had a struggle consolidating design and fine art. While studying design I never felt I really fit in with the contemporary way of designing. The thought of sitting in front of a computer all day is not appealing. The only design I could really get to grips with was theatre design because it is still carried out in a traditional way, there is little to no computer use in the design process. It's usually drawn up on a drawing board and models made out of cereal boxes and balsa wood. You are also creating something from a narrative and you are there to help the director create an atmosphere, using scenery, lighting and costume. All these elements come together to make one piece.

I thought when I came to Fine Art I would have a feeling of belonging but it never really happened. I had a real fight with being trained in form and function and then being told I could create things that didn't have to do anything and didn't have to look good. I was also questioning the reason for art. I really found it baffling that I was receiving funding to sit in a studio making stuff, being totally self indulgent, when there are other people really struggling to live. I have put these thoughts behind me now after talks with tutors, and on reflection I see that I may be self indulgent now but when the Masters is over I will give back my time to others.

Through my research I have come a long way not only within my practice but also as a mother. I have discovered that I can be a good mother, while at the same time maintaining a healthy private life. In fact, if anything I think it makes me a better parent to have a life separate from my child.

"...symbolize the relation between the girl-child and her mother in a way which allowed the mother to be both a mother *and* a woman so that women were not forever competing for the unique place occupied by the mother, so that women could differentiate themselves from the mother, and so that women were not reduced to the maternal function." <sup>1</sup>

## Motherhood and the Domestic

The context of my work is firmly entrenched in who I am and who many women are. I am a mother. This title allows me access to wonders never known before, the joy on your child's face when you go to the park, the anxiety and heart break when your child's in hospital and sometimes your child can drive you so mad you want to put your head through a wall. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

" My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw edged nerves and blissful gratification." <sup>2</sup>

But the most boring discovery of all is the amount of domestic chores that appear. As a single woman I don't remember chores taking up that much of my life, but now any time I get to myself I spend cleaning. The bizarre thing is I actually look forward to it. Most of the time.

The chores.

Tidy    Put away toys    Put away pens    Clear up paint    Clear up spills  
Clear up accidents while potty training    Empty potty    Clean potty  
Look for lost Barbie's shoe    Find lost clasps/hair bobbles  
Clean toilet    Clean bath    Wash floor  
Put washing on    Hang out washing    Put dried washing away  
Fill the dishwasher    Empty the dishwasher  
Empty bins  
Hoover  
Change bed sheets  
Dust  
Go to Tesco's  
Make breakfast  
Pack lunch  
Make tea  
Bath  
Bed  
Read story  
Get up through the night to sooth nightmares/colds  
Start again



These chores and general daily routines sometimes have to be adapted to include a child attached to my person.

Making the tea with a child on my hip.  
At sewing machine with a child on my knee.  
Eating a meal with a child on my knee.

But in between all this is my daughter, who is an absolute joy to be with and she is the reason the chores need to be done so I don't mind that much. One job I did hate, more than any other, was sterilising and making up bottles. First the bottles, teats and lids had to be thoroughly cleaned. Then sterilised, the water was freezing, the bottles had to go in a certain way to fit them all in and without air bubbles. After they were sterilized I had to make up the formula without losing count of how many scoops had gone in.

I made a video of this process a couple of years ago when returning to university was a far off fantasy. I focus on the task rather than me doing it. I did this by setting the camera up on the kitchen worktop and aiming at the bottles so all the viewer can see is my hands putting the water and milk powder in the bottles. I am not important, making food for my child is. It is the one job that could not be saved for another day. Dishes and crumby carpets can wait, a hungry baby cannot. Within the video there is a nice rhythmic element, first the sound of 8 fluid ounces of water being poured into each of the 5 bottles and then the sound of the scoop, scrape and tap of powdered milk going in to the water.

"...the role of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a demeaning one, consisting of monotonous, fragmented work which brought no financial remuneration, let alone any recognition." <sup>3</sup>

Things haven't changed that much, only now as well as chores we have childcare and jobs to deal with. In those days women were happy to be housewives, taking care of children and the house. It meant they were fashionably in line with their middle class counterparts, whose husbands earned enough to allow their wives to stay home. But the lives of the working class wife would have been very different. They would have had "daily misery, poverty and exploitation"<sup>4</sup>.

These Cinderella's did not live in a fairy tale land and most believed that "real love wasn't riding off on a horse behind a, probably smelly, sheik. Real love was having a kind man who worked hard and handed over the wages. Real love was having children and bringing them up decent. It was growing old and having grandchildren. Real love was being a family" <sup>5</sup>

This is what I had until my daughter's dad and I split up and I can tell you it was a very dull frustrating life. I don't think I ever really loved him but I was very fond of him and I thought that would be enough. Quite an old-fashioned idea but he was the best offer I'd had in years so I thought I would take it. When we found out I was pregnant we had only known each other 3 weeks. After 3 months of dealing with the thought of single motherhood, he decided he wanted to take care of me, so we moved in together and he got a job. As with the working class husbands he handed over all his wages to me and he did indeed take care of me.

Obviously things changed once the baby arrived, up until then I had been a lady of leisure, being waited on hand and foot. When we brought my daughter home and my ex had gone back to work, I found it incredibly difficult to deal with losing my freedom. Things would have been bearable if I'd had my car but my then partner was using it to get to work. For someone who was always so independent it was very difficult to try and ignore your desires to get out to see friends or to leave the house with only a handbag. So you have to learn "self denial for the sake of their families"<sup>6</sup> or self-denial for the sake of your own sanity. I have learnt to keep my desires hidden even from myself. To let them out would probably lead to a life of resentment. I no longer see myself as an attractive, sexual woman but as a mum, whose only thought is for her daughter and whose idea of quality me time is a good night's sleep followed by some cleaning. I would now put spending time alone above time with friends. I do not expect men to find me attractive and even if they did I feel they would be put off by the fact I have a child. So I go through my life suppressing emotions and not allowing myself to get excited about anything for fear of being let down.

Being a single mum is far easier than being in a couple, although I suppose it depends on the couple. As part of a couple I found myself turning into a proper housewife. I would look after the baby and while she was down for a nap I would tidy up, I would make sure the dishes were washed and the house was



clean for my ex coming home from work. When we split up life became easier. I got my life back, there was no longer any expectations of what I should be doing, I could make decisions without having to consult anyone else and best of all I got one night, every second weekend, off. I no longer felt like a housewife and I started to think about my future as something more than a housekeeper and mother.

It is interesting to see the development through history of mundane household chores becoming something to take pride in, like a well-sewn garment or a delicious meal. While I was part of a couple these skills played a large part in my life.

“The mother could raise the family living standards not by bringing in an additional wage, but by manufacturing rather than buying necessary goods.<sup>7</sup>

Domestic manufacture was inefficient, but practical.”<sup>8</sup>

My mother used to make my clothes and toys, this skill was passed on to me, which I now use within my practise. I found a hand made pincushion in a sewing basket, which used to belong to my Granny, I found myself intrigued by this little thing. At the beginning of semester 2 I made pincushion after pincushion from my daughter’s old clothes and on some of them I used gold leaf to put words about motherhood. These were instinctual little thing but I think they were to do with a connection to previous generations and the words we keep bottled in.

My high school education also ties me to past generations as I also have quite a retro qualification in higher Fabrics and Fashion (Home Economics), which is a 1980’s version of domestic education. On reflection I also feel my undergraduate degree in interior design is ties to the same history. The need to take pride in my home and surroundings is important to me.

“The passive acceptance of a middle class ideology of domesticity does not explain the popularity of domestic education amongst working-class girls and women. For them, domestic education was a way they actively sought to redefine their status as women within the household.”<sup>9</sup>

I believe this education is why we as women are predisposed to taking charge of the home. It’s an inbuilt need, which has been ingrained over generations, to take pride in our surroundings. I known not all women feel this way but for me



this domestic connection to the past is a big part of who I am. Sometimes you've just got to ignore the urge to pick up the vacuum and get on with other things. Unless it's in the name of art.

After rediscovering the video of the baby formula, I decided to video myself partaking in other household chores, the most successful of which is me vacuuming my living room. I placed the camera on the floor so I would only capture the activity and my legs. As with the other video I am not important, it's the chore that is the focus. By videoing the vacuuming to use within my work it makes the task almost worthwhile. I am doing what females do best. Multitasking. What a talent, to make art while at the same time getting the domestic jobs done.

Earlier I mention self-denial but what do I mean by this? Basically I mean the denial of a sex life, for fear of being less of a mother or a bad mother. Why do we as women put these restrictions on ourselves? Is it worry about what other people think? Why would anyone be less of a mother because she is not virginal? Is it men that like to think of us this way? As with domestic pride, is my view of motherhood inbuilt?

“the perfect mother is a mother and a virgin and is idealised as asexual. The cult of the Virgin Mary affirms that motherhood should be unsullied by sexuality and that mothers should not be sexual”<sup>10</sup>

If anything I have a responsibility to my daughter to be having a good sex/romantic life so she doesn't grow up thinking she shouldn't have sex or have good relationships. Also when she is older she will see that I can relate to any issues she has rather than being someone who hasn't got a clue because she hasn't 'done it' in a decade. I have a fear that when I do, eventually, have romance in my life, while in the heat of the moment, tragedy will strike. Like with Juliette Binoche's character in *Chocolat*, when she finally gets to sleep with Johnny Depp there is a boat fire, which she thinks her daughter is caught in. So she might have got her sex but her happiness is brought crumbling down with sheer maternal panic. Afterwards the guilt would be huge and the whole thing would not have been worth it. Getting past the guilt is the main hurdle.

“ only a mother who feels entitled to be a person in her own right can ever be seen as such by her child...”<sup>11</sup>

There are many parts to me, as there are with everyone, but at the moment domestic/home life is playing a bigger part than it used to. I have been looking at/for the lost selves and have been finding ways for them to resurface. Reducing the opportunity for self-denial. I have recently been letting myself go a bit more and I am now trying to see myself less as a mother and more as a woman who has a child. I found that I was turning into my mother. She has had no relationships (as far as I am aware) in the last 13 years since her and my dad split up and all signs of her being a sexual person have all but vanished. My time has not come for this kind of self-denial and neither should it come.





## Fairy Tales

As mentioned in the introduction fairy tales have been of interest to me for some time, initially I read the various versions of fairy tales e.g. Rashin Coatie the Scottish version of Cinderella and ‘Sun, Moon and Talia’ Giambattista Basile’s early version of Sleeping Beauty. This version is much darker than the Charles Perrault version we know today. Talia (Beauty) has her virginity taken by a passing King while she is sleeping, she later gives birth to twins (Sun and Moon). She doesn’t awaken with a kiss but with one of her children sucking the splinter out of her finger mistaking it for a breast. Further on in the tale the Queen finds out about her husband’s indiscretion and arranges for the twins and Talia to be taken to the kitchen and cooked and served to the King.

I wanted to learn more about the meanings behind these stories as, despite their differences, they all had similar threads running through them. I came across books like ‘*Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*’ by Jack Zipes, ‘*The Uses of Enchantment; The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*’ by Bruno Bettelheim and ‘*Spinning Straw Into Gold: What Fairy Tales Reveal About the Transformations In a Woman’s Life*’ by Joan Gould. Each bringing a different view to the history and symbolism of fairy tales. Zipes hoped fairy tales would answer the questions “what does it take to bring about happiness? And is happiness only found in fairy tales?” Bettelheim was quite Freudian in his interpretations and Gould compared the many female characters within fairy tales to the three stages in a woman’s life:- the maiden, the matron and the crone. She also referred to modern social climates, such as single parenthood and divorce.

The topic of fairy tales does not make any visual impact within my work; it is more an underlying suggestion. It comes out in small things like the use of gold thread in sewn objects, the time taken to make pieces is representative of the passage of time from one stage of life to another. In fairy tales the stages are usually childhood to woman hood, in the case of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White the transition is spent asleep, with the trauma of puberty too much to cope with.

“THIS IS EVERY GIRL’S DREAM: to fall asleep at the beginning of adolescence, when life becomes perplexing, and skip the whole rigmarole of dating and spurning and yearning and guarding herself, which can lead to disaster. When she’s ready, she’ll wake as a woman, her problems resolved and the perfect man leaning over the bed.”<sup>12</sup>

Cinderella on the other hand works her way through adolescence with hard, never ending domestic chores, until such a time when the Prince arrives to present her with the glass slipper, a symbol of her impending womanhood. The glass slipper represents virginity and by putting her foot into the brittle shoe Cinderella is giving herself to the Prince and the transition from maiden to matron is almost complete. I feel I have passed from maiden, to matron, to crone and back again in recent years. I have gone from being a matron within a relationship, to a no sexed single mother crone and back to my adolescence, with a newly awakened passion. And the shoe element of Cinderella is becoming symbolic of the recent flourish.

Within Cinderella there is also an interesting relationship between herself, her stepmother and the virtuous, dead birth mother. The stepmother and the birth mother, in some interpretations, are the same person. The mother appears as two separate people in the hormonal mind of Cinderella. The birth mother is seen as the ‘good mother’, serene and loving but as Cinderella approaches adolescence she perceives her mother differently, she becomes the ‘bad mother’ who is herself a sexual being. With the start of menstruation Cinderella is now the same as her mother. The arrival of the good spirit or godmother, show the return of good feeling toward the birth mother. We can see by restrictions put on Cinderella that the godmother is only doing what any mother would do, telling her daughter to be home by a certain time.

“If Cinderella makes an impression on parents, it can help them accept that as an inescapable step in their child’s development towards true maturity, they must seem for a time to have turned into bad parents. The story also tells that when the child has attained his true identity, the good parents will be resuscitated in his mind, prove much more powerful, and replace permanently the image of the bad parents.”<sup>13</sup>

It is this side of fairy tales I find particularly interesting, the way the stories are beautifully imaginative and fanciful but have gender and familial relationships at the core.



## My Practice

At the start of the masters I used the boxed dolls of my undergraduate as my first step. I had been away from university for 3 years when I returned and the dolls were the last works I had created.

“while a doll locked in a case may be preserved for millions of visitors, an untouched doll is only half an experience”<sup>14</sup>

I wanted to separate the dolls from the boxes to give them the full experience; to let them be loved. So with this as my starting point I began to research the history of dolls. But I was actually more interested in the habitat of the dolls; the box, the packaging, dolls houses, Wendy houses etc. I began to think about why I made the dolls in the first place; hoping this would give me a better understanding of what form the container should take. My inspiration for making the figures was a doll my mother made me when I was two. This playmate brought back memories of a happy childhood in a loving family home. These thoughts led me to believe the house would be the best symbol to use. The house embodies what the dolls were really about, comfort, warmth and love.

I had a dream before I even knew I was coming back to do the MFA about my final show. It was a dolls house about one and a half metres high and the same squared, had two floors and no outer walls. Most of the rooms housed TV screens showing domestic scenes, one room contained the doll my mum made. This dream had influenced my choice to focus on the house. But I had, in previous years, thought of a fairy tale brothel, so the house structure was in my mind already.

Also this dream inspired me to make the video mentioned in the first section, making up baby formula, a job which took 5 minutes but felt like 20. Two years on and I will be using this video within my master's show. I want to bring my domestic life into my practice because I like to use memories and experiences within my work, I exhausted the past in my final undergraduate year so now I am dealing with the present. As nothing is happening to me these days I have to work with what I've got which is domesticity.



After making many small maquettes of houses showing different scales and landscapes I decided I should start working on a bigger scale, so I began to build a gang hut type structures using a table, blankets and cardboard. The house I ended up building has quite a designerly quality about it, mainly down to the thought that went into how it would actually be constructed, rather than how it would feel. I made a tall house, internally big enough for someone to fit inside but with no way of getting inside, except an arm stretched in through the window. Previously I made a house half the size, a child could fit snugly inside but again there's no way in. Initially I felt the house was the beginning of my final piece and that it would be the nucleus for all subsequent ideas. As I mentioned the house was a tall structure, built in the same way and from the same cardboard, I had used to box up my undergraduate dolls. I also selected three lines from Sun, Moon and Talia, using gold leaf I wrote these on the side of the house. The gold has connections to many fairy tales, such as Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold and Rapunzel with her long golden hair. Also within the house I hung the pincushions I talked about previously, by gold thread. The subtle use of gold within the work shows a glimpse the fantasy world behind the domestic work.

I started to bind the tall house with thread, after a couple of days decided to bind the smaller house to it. Representing the bond between mother and child, the love and closeness between the two, but also the cumbersome nature of motherhood, where nothing can be done quickly or without a certain amount of forward thinking.

I spent a week walking around the houses, wrapping them with thread, fabric and wool, but I didn't like it and I ended up undoing it all and winding it up into a ball. It's just wasn't beautiful enough. It looked like a big mess and I just wanted to tidy up. As the reason for binding it up was instinctual, my instincts were telling me to stop. When I started binding the house it felt like a demonstration of self-denial. I am now in the process of deconstructing the house and focusing on the ball/balls. The balls are more symbolic of freedom; they are still bound but are able to move about freely. The house is an obvious symbol of domesticity; no longer need it to show my ideas. I feel I have now done enough research to trust that whatever I make will reflect the work I have been doing.

I have been extending the idea of the pincushions and have made paper patterns of domestic tools to sew and stuff.

Kettle  
Cup  
Plate  
Pans  
Knife  
Wooden spoon  
Hormone Balance pills  
Vibrator  
Whisk  
Baby cup  
Washing machine  
Dishwasher  
Washing line  
Cheese grater

On some of these sewn domestic tools I have embroidered parts of phone texts that have been the trigger in my recent transformation from mother to woman with child. I have also been trying different materials, like paper kitchen towels and baby wipes.

I don't think these objects are particularly successful, something is missing from them and I think they are too interpretive. I believe the most successful work I have done so far are the two videos, which is bizarre because the one thing I hate is video art. I can never be bothered to stand and watch it. So for me to be producing videos is somewhat of a revelation. The 2 videos say what I want better than anything else I have done. I have learnt you have to go with the medium which is going to get the idea across in the best way possible. So I might not be getting to sit sewing but I am producing better work.

## Conclusion

Even as I write this I am plagued by interruptions, not from my child but from my ex wondering how to deal with our hysterical child. I was in full on writing mode but my mind is now wondering if I should go and pick my daughter up to save her from an afternoon with a grown man in a huff with her. It is this thought that separate men and women. Women would just deal with the offending child and not interrupt the other half/ex with this problem. Men on the other hand would not let the thought of their child's needs interrupt the job in hand. This may be a sweeping generalisation, but having experienced it and spoken to other men on the subject I believe it to be true. It is taking all my mental energy to keep myself in front of this computer.

To escape the feelings of guilt and annoyance at the interruptions I try to access the fantasyland in my head. A land where I have a fantastically creative, well paid job, live in New York and can afford a nanny. I also go out to fabulous clubs and dance the night away, do lunch and have wonderful romances. And I can wear heels without becoming a cripple. Alternatively I live in 1950's musical with Gene Kelly, where the surroundings are colourful, it's not weird to sing and dance whenever the mood takes you and I look like Ava Gardener.

Within my work I try to combine the fantasy with the domestic world. Somehow showing the unfulfilled, unrealistic inner desires within the reality of life. Also bringing together the far-fetched fantasies that will never (should never) happen but also the small more achievable dreams, like going out dancing, guilt free flirting, listening to music or going to the cinema. Being able to make art while doing all the domestic jobs that need to be done is part being able to mix drudgery with the interesting parts of life.

Transforming myself from a virginal mother to a woman with a child and from under to post graduate has been fairly swift. I have achieved both of these simultaneously. The research for the Masters has not only shaped my work but my view of myself as a parent. The fantasies in my head no longer need to stay there, I now have the confidence to bite the bullet and forge ahead to bigger opportunities and to actually have a personal life.

I have noticed while reading over this piece there are a number of conflicts that appear in my work. Conflicts between fine art and design; motherhood

and womanhood; video art and craft/sewing; fantasy and life. I hope to show these dualities in the presentation of my final show, either by consolidating or contrasting them.

Once I leave the security of this higher education bubble I am into a whole new world of trying to combine dreams with reality. At the moment this is fairly easy, we are settled, my daughters in nursery, I have family close by for babysitting and my fortnightly Saturday of freedom, when she goes to the ex. But now I have dreams of travel and of working in places far from here. A trip to Japan or a move to the Netherlands are not seeming like far off fantasies but journeys that could become reality. Then the real struggle begins, of how to keep everyone happy and how do I cope with no physical family support. The main gripe will be from my ex, obviously he will miss our daughter and I will miss her time with him. But bold steps have to be taken to have the dream and I see bigger things for my child and I than staying in a small fife village.

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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> Whitford (1991). Quoted in *Identity and difference*. 245.
- <sup>2</sup> Rich, A. (1977). Quoted in *Identity and difference*. 244.
- <sup>3</sup> Oakley, A. (1974). Quoted in *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 63.
- <sup>4</sup> Purvis, J. (1989) Quoted in *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 63.
- <sup>5</sup> Powell, M.(1977)Quoted in *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 62.
- <sup>6</sup> Fee,T. (1976) Quoted in *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 63.
- <sup>7</sup> Turner, B. (1930) Quoted in *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 65.
- <sup>8</sup> Bourke, J. *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 65.
- <sup>9</sup> Bourke, J. *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*. 68.
- <sup>10</sup> Woodard, K. *Identity and difference*. 250.
- <sup>11</sup> Benjamin, J. Quoted in *Identity and difference*. 274.
- <sup>12</sup> Gould, J. *Spinning straw into gold*. 106.
- <sup>13</sup> Bettelheim, B. *The uses of enchantment*. 276.
- <sup>14</sup> Fox, C. *The doll*. 20.

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## List of illustrations

All photographs taken by author.

### **Page 3**

2 small Egyptian models of mother and child from an Egyptology exhibition at the Altes Museum, Berlin.

Still from Bottles video.

### **Page 6**

Pincushions.

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Still from Hoovering video.

### **Page 11**

Statue of Talia in the Altes National Galerie, Berlin.

### **Page 15**

Maquette of dream.

Still from Bottles video

### **Page 17**

Balls made from old duvet covers.

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