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MOTHERS BEHIND CAMERAS:
MOTHER-ARTIST, MOTHER-CHILD DYADS IN
SALLY MANN'S *IMMEDIATE FAMILY* AND ELINOR CARUCCI'S *MOTHER*

BY
HAYLEY A. PIERPONT

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

FIRST READER: PROFESSOR JULIA LUM, SCRIPPS COLLEGE
SECOND READER: PROFESSOR JESSICA MCCOY, PITZER COLLEGE

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I. Introduction

Often my mother will offhandedly comment on her absence from our family photos. She finds herself—as many mothers do—behind the camera, documenting the result of her domestic labor and maternal condition. Women are often made invisible within narratives of their own family and domestic spaces, despite their role as creators and maintainers of those spaces. This perpetuation of invisibility is threaded throughout the history of artistic practices. The daily dramas; the artistic, physical, and emotional labor; the child-rearing mistakes and fears; the wet beds and bumped heads and nourishing and caring: all these maternal moments are traditionally absent in both vernacular family photo albums and fine art photography.¹ It is a paradoxical phenomenon: that the work and labor of women, and women artists, is hidden. Contemporary photographers Sally Mann and Elinor Carucci confront and unapologetically display their experience with motherhood through images of these daily dramas. Their work, while varied in approach and content, re-configures depictions of mother and child—which I will refer to as the mother-child dyad, a psychological concept as well as an iconographic trope in art history—to reflect the conditions of motherhood and address the perpetuation of invisibility more intimately.²

¹ Fine art photography as it is historically dominated by men.

² The mother-child dyad is both a biological, psychological relationship, and social relationship. Family physician Li Ping Marianne Tsang describes the relationship from a physical standpoint: “The mother-child dyad—the mother-offspring unit—share an intimate biological, social and psychological relationship. It is no surprise that infant social, emotional, and neurological development is shaped by the bond established between mother and child. The quality of this attachment, often reflected in the level of maternal emotional availability, maternal sensitivity and responsiveness to infant cues, determines how infants learn, form relationships, experience the world and regulate their emotions.” Psychologists and sociologists recognize the mother figure as a central part in a child’s development during infancy; the quality of the relationship is dependent on the mother’s “maternal emotional ability”, sensitivity, and responsiveness. The dyad—understood by sociologists to be any two individuals that maintain a sociologically significant relationship—finds representations in the art world most notably in the form of Madonna and child Christian iconography, an influence that will be later explored. In this thesis, the mother-child dyad refers to an intersubjective relationship of mother and child (typically infant) and the subsequent emotional and physical conditions that are represented in the art form. (Li Ping Marianne Tsang, David Chee Chin, Yoke Hwee Chan, and Helen Yu Chen, “Caring for the mother-child dyad as a family physician,” *Singapore medical journal* vol. 60,10 (2019), 497, doi:10.11622/smedj.2019128.)

There is another dyad present in these images: the dual identities of the mother-artist, a term I will use to describe artists who happen to be mothers (and whose work often deals with motherhood). This thesis will explore two bodies of work by two contemporary mother-artists: *Immediate Family* by Sally Mann, and *Mother* by Elinor Carucci. These two series, and four works in particular, address the symbiotic relationship of mother-child and mother-artist: Mann's *The Wet Bed* (Fig. 1) and *Lee's Dirty Hands* (Fig. 2), and Carucci's *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* (Fig. 3) and *I Will Protect You* (Fig. 4). In both Mann and Carucci's photography, the image of the child is explicit, but the image of the mother is harder to decipher. After contextualizing these four photographs in general theory on artistic and maternal labor and the medium of photography, followed by a deep visual analysis, it should become evident that Mann and Carucci's artistic work uses the child and the camera as mediums to produce images that reflect their singular experiences with motherhood.

Sally Mann captures the quotidian dramas of motherhood in her photography, specifically the work of *Immediate Family*: a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes. *Immediate Family* was an eight-year piecemeal exhibition and culminating 1992 monograph that includes the central works of analysis, *The Wet Bed* and *Lee's Dirty Hands*. The collection depicts Mann's three young children, Jessie, Emmett, and Virginia, engaged in play and innocence and mess over their idyllic childhood growing up on a farm in Lexington, Virginia. Fragments of Mann's own childhood also come through in these images, informed by her "laissez-faire, semi-neglected, rural upbringing," as she described in her memoir *Hold Still*.³ The resulting images are representations of memory and motherhood: Mann inhabits the space of mother-artist by presenting semi-autobiographical imagery of the mother-child(ren) dyad in which she is

³ Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, (Firsted. Mcnaughton Lease Books. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 151.

markedly absent.

Comparatively, the mother-child dyad is explicitly visualized in the work of Israeli American artist Elinor Carucci. Her 2013 monograph *Mother* presents a collection of 140 photographs from over eight years of child-rearing. The narrative arc of the images presents the highs and lows of her experience becoming a mother of twins, a photographic process she began when pregnant. Two images stand out as particularly reflective of the mother-artist, mother-child dyads: *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* and *I Will Protect You*. While the mother-child may be obscured in Mann's work, Carucci and her children (specifically her daughter, Emmanuelle) are unmistakably front and center in these two images, directly reproducing the dyad in symbolic and formal terms.

While the condition of motherhood is undeniably present in these four images, the degree to which the mother-artist is visible is more convoluted, or hidden. During my initial exploration of motherhood photography⁴—a term I will use to describe photography by mother-artists in which their experience of motherhood and the maternal condition is central to the subject—I came across the Victorian era photography method colloquially known as Hidden Mother photography.⁵ In this technique, photographers (oftentimes male) would conceal the mother as

⁴ A brief Google search of this term “motherhood photography” brings up images of contemporary studio portraiture, with mother and child joyfully embraced. As Camille CD writes on her photography site: “Motherhood photography sessions are a celebration of your role as a mother, the tender love you have for your children and the authentic connections you share with them. They create portraits rich in meaning, emotion-filled images preserving the most beautiful memories of your life. These portraits are treasures, and their value will only grow with time.” The distinction between a trend of motherhood studio photography and “motherhood photography” as it to be used in this essay is the emphasis that the artist is also a mother, and the subject is semi-autobiographical. (Camille CD, “What is Motherhood Photography? By NYC Motherhood Photographer,” *Camille CD Photography* (blog), November 19, 2019, <https://www.camillecd.photography/en/blog/what-is-motherhood-photography>.)

⁵ While little scholarship has been conducted regarding this practice, the term is, as stated, vernacularly referred to as “Hidden Mother” photography. The greatest exploration to date is Linda Fregni Nagler's 2013 printed collection *The Hidden Mother* (Fig. 5), an amalgamation of over 1,000 Victorian era tin-, ambro-, and daguerreo-types. Art Historian Geoffrey Batchen comments on this naming in a postface to *The Hidden Mother*: “Interestingly, although these supporting figures are sometimes indisputable male, they are invariably referred to as ‘hidden mother’ images in vernacular circles, as if the erasure of self that is enacted in such pictures is a manifestly feminine subject position, even a specifically maternal one.” Thus, the responsibility to produce public facing images of well-

she held or propped up her young child, stilling and securing the anxious infant during long exposure times. It's difficult to ignore the mothers' presence in these images, as she often leaves a silhouette under the cloth, a ghostlike outline. The mother "disappeared" under floral or neutral clothes, draped to become quite literally nothing more than supporting furniture. The effect was less than seamless, and the result was haunting images of mother-child. The shrouded mother figures "hide in plain sight,"⁶ as art historian Geoffrey Batchen puts it, making the "bulky, intrusive matrons"⁷ even more visible to us today. And yet, as viewers, we are asked to subscribe to this fallacy. This relationship between fallacy of the image and its conferment or acceptance by the viewer is an essential debate within theorizations on the medium of photography and is crucial to this analysis of motherhood photography. The concept of a mother's hidden body—representative of her work and care—became fundamental to photography of children and carried on even past a phasing out of this studio technique.

Photography as a medium has been likened by theorists to the maternal, as a vehicle of production and reproduction. The photographer leaves an imprint on an image in the same way a mother does so on her child. This kind of imprinting sits in conversation with photography's unique ability as a medium to reflect, capture, and occasion a physical and tangible moment in time. This thesis argues that motherhood-as-image is indexical of motherhood-in-practice, achieved through the surrogate gaze of the mother, specifically created through the use of the camera (lens). I will use this concept of the index based on the understanding that indexicality is

mannered children, before they're even old enough to develop personal identities or signifiers, becomes an exclusively maternal duty. Better yet, the practice also provides context to the need for the "legibility of the child" to come before the hand of the parent, or mother. (Geoffrey Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," In *The Hidden Mother*, by Linda Fregni Nagler, (Firsted. London: MACK, 2013), 6.)

⁶ Geoffrey Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," In *The Hidden Mother*, by Linda Fregni Nagler, (Firsted. London: MACK, 2013), 5.

⁷ Massimiliano Gioni, "Mothers of Invention," In *The Hidden Mother*, by Linda Fregni Nagler (Firsted. London: MACK, 2013), 2.

a “trace or imprint of the physical, a direct continuity,”⁸ established in American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s “taxonomy of signs.”⁹

Further, there are two forms of index(icality) that will be referenced in this thesis: the semiotic sign system in the photographic medium, and the ability of the photograph to serve as “proof,” even though an artistic, staged composition. This idea of trace and imprinting applies specifically to the medium of photography because of its mimetic nature. This mimesis is the ability to capture the “real world” through a very scientific process of light tracing the tangible onto a photosensitive plate or film, which is then reprinted into a newly physical object. This new physical object, the photograph, is thus a direct reflection of the condition to which it originally captured, a process unmatched in other artistic forms. While the photograph is also an icon, as it has this physical resemblance to what is being depicted, its capacity as an index is most applicable to this study of motherhood photography.

While the debate over the reality or legitimacy of photographic “proof” is a separate, though relevant, discourse, the photograph still certifies the presence of whatever it is depicting. In this manner, the photograph is both a literal imprinting of light (physical world) onto the photographic medium (a chemical process), and evidence of the existence of the mother-artist who facilitates this process. Behind the lens, the mother navigates and determines what imprint will be visible to the viewer. The existence of the mother-artist is immaterially made visible, or

⁸ Tom Schofield, Marian Dörk, and Martyn Dade-Robertson, “Indexicality and Visualization: Exploring Analogies with Art, Cinema and Photography,” *Proceedings of the 9th ACM Conference on Creativity & Cognition (C&C '13)* (June 2013): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2466627.2466641>.

⁹ In semiotic terms, Charles Sanders Peirce proposes the use of three types of signs, as quoted by Schofield: icons, indices, and symbols. “... I had observed that the most frequently useful division of signs is by trichotomy into firstly Likenesses, or, as I prefer to say, Icons, which serve to represent their objects only in so far as they resemble them in themselves; secondly, Indices, which represent their objects independently of any resemblance to them, only by a virtue of real connections with them, and thirdly Symbols, which represent their objects, independently alike of any resemblance or any real connection, because dispositions or factitious habits of their interpreters insure their being so understood.” These terms also apply to the visual arts, specifically the medium of photography. (Schofield, “Indexicality and Visualization,” 177.)

seemingly indexed, through the mother-artist's biological and intersubjective relationship to the subject (child) and viewer. Artists, such as Mann and Carucci, use the "power of the index to provide strong associations of presence."¹⁰ Thus the image of motherhood serves as a kind of proof of motherhood itself.

The work of mother-artists such as Mann and Carucci combine two roles: that of parent and artist. The result is often intimate and emotional, reflective of a personal and individualistic mother-child relationship as it is depicted in the frame. Bridging the dyads of mother-artist and mother-child is the one consistent subject: the mother herself. It is thus through the parallel mediums of artist (in other words, photography and the camera), and the child, that the mother conspires to make visible her experiences of motherhood, a condition outside the immediate lived reality for many.

Curator Susan Bright, in quoting psychologist Shari Thurer, states:

For thousands of years, because of her awesome ability to spew forth a child, the mother has been feared and revered. She has been the subject of taboos and witch-hunts, mandatory pregnancy and confinement in a separate sphere. She has endured appalling insults and perpetual marginalization. She has also been the subject of glorious painting, chivalry and idealization. Through it all she has rarely been consulted. She is an object, not a subject.¹¹

Motherhood photography, however, can make the mother—the self—and motherhood the subject. It is imagery where the mother is both in front of and behind the camera, as evident in the four images central to this thesis.

Using references to psychoanalytic and feminist theory, as well as theories of photography and artistic labor, I will convey how the mother-artist's invisibility is partially addressed through the medium of photography, though only when she herself is the artist.

¹⁰ Schofield, "Indexicality and Visualization," 177.

¹¹ Susan Bright, *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* (London: Art Books Publ., 2013), 8.

Mann and Carucci's influence and identity are present on the surface of the image via their craftsmanship, and in the subject, whether as a reflection through their children or the presence of her own body. As writer Lindsey Harding notes, a picture's "mutuality between mother and child becomes conspiracy between mother and camera to use the child as a medium to make visible what cannot be seen on its own: the essence of motherhood."¹² While photography as an artistic medium uniquely parallels the maternal condition, and can thus reflect it, mothers are often still hidden or absent within their own art. And so, I wondered: How is this bridge to visibility constructed? And further, what does it mean to have the mother both behind and in front of the camera?

Labor and Delivery: (Pro)creativity in Motherhood Photography

This section examines photographic theory and the concepts of artistic and maternal labor to explain why photography is a critical medium for depicting motherhood. French philosopher Roland Barthes offers up his canonical theory on photography to help make sense of the photograph as an expression of the mother-child bond, specifically through Barthes' reflection on a photograph bringing the essence of his deceased mother to life, or its failure to do so. His 1980 book *Camera Lucida* explores photography's link to memory, specifically the memory of his mother, and more broadly, attempts to define the ontology of photography. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes uses maternal terms in his concept of the umbilical cord: "A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."¹³ Metaphorically, the

¹² Lindsey Harding, "Motherhood Reimagined: A Study of Domestic Photography in the Digital Age," *Photographies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2016.1146628>.

¹³ Roland Barthes and Geoff Dyer, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (Pbk.ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 80-81.

mother-artist is tethered to the subject, and the subject is tethered to the viewer, through this umbilical cord. It can also be applied in a technical manner: light is transferred through an “umbilical cord” to the camera— “photography uses and gives birth to light”¹⁴—and thus the image.

Barthes goes on to assert that “every photograph is a certificate of presence.”¹⁵ This aptly applies to an analysis of motherhood photography as well because the production of a “certification” justifies the maternal instinct to capture fleeting moments. This idea of certification of presence is another way to look at the concept of indices. The photographic process is a strategy the mother-artist uses to produce or create evidence of her involvement in the child rearing process (motherhood) and the artistic process. “This means that for the mother, images of her children confirm her engagement in motherhood at the same time that they capture children in a particular moment in time.”¹⁶ In the act of photographing, Mann and Carucci record and preserve moments of motherhood through which to look back on as “proof” of intimacy, and a discernable mother-child relationship.¹⁷

Complicating this certification is the material nature of photography. While there may be one original plate or negative, or digital file, the reproducibility of the image means there can be twins, triplets, and so on—multiple versions of this one image, of one moment. This

¹⁴ Berkeley Kaite, “Mothers at the Margins,” in *Mothering and Psychoanalysis: Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Petra Bueskens, (Demeter Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1rrd9n8.17>), 291.

¹⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.

¹⁶ Harding, “Motherhood Reimagined,” 112.

¹⁷ Photographic intimacy that relays the singular maternal experience is conceived through the physical and metaphorical umbilical cord, aided by the inherent unity of mother-child, a belief I will later explore. As English professor Berkeley Kaite states: “Intimacy thus conjoins something unseen with its emphatic presence, the visible domesticities.” This concept mirrors the “certification of the presence” as it utilizes the unseen, made visible through the tangible, to reproduce reflections of the maternal condition, or “visible domesticities.” And yet, the reproducibility of the photographic medium previously outlined manipulates the authenticity of the intimacy, creating “reproducible intimacy.” (Kaite, “Mothers at the Margins,” 288.) (Schofield, “Indexicality and Visualization,” 177.)

reproducibility, the birthing of multiples, parallels the mother's ability to procreate. Yet with photography, there is more agency over the resulting object (child versus photograph). While photography is acknowledged as a reflection of reality because of its physical continuity, the artist's manipulation is also an essential, contingent aspect of the medium. The common techniques of framing and cropping, changing exposure and aperture (manipulating light), dark room edits, and even more dramatic, digital postproduction edits, problematize photography's real or documentary quality.¹⁸

While neither Mann nor Carucci edited their photographs to an unrecognizable degree, they certainly engaged in staging, framing, choosing the camera settings, and other manipulation on the part of the artist. This has a direct effect on the resulting object (photograph), just as a mother's child-rearing choices have a direct effect on their child's social, emotional, and psychological development, even if the mother herself is never entirely reproducible through the child (not that that replication is a legitimate goal, either). In this way, photography is an essential medium through which to communicate the conditions of motherhood. Mann and Carucci are acutely aware of the limitations, and strengths, of the medium.

Bright writes about contemporary difficulties:

Artists working with photography are ... responding to a complex twenty-first-century backdrop of less-defined gender roles and less certainty when it comes to meaning and interpretation. And they do so at a time when we understand the polysemic nature of photography itself more than ever—indeed, when our concept of what the medium may be is at its very broadest. Fully aware of photography's expectations but also of its limitations, these artists revel in contradiction and ambiguity, embrace the performative aspect of their practice, and, crucially, foreground the role of subjectivity and self-

¹⁸ Further, it could be argued, and has been argued, that there is no such thing as documentary photography. Or, at the least, that the concept that photographs can display "truths" is hazy. Not only can a photograph create proof of something, such as a discernable mother-child relationship, but it can also fabricate it. As Tom Schofield notes: "Indexicality has a performative function, because the mere idea or knowledge that a representation may be indexical introduces a focus on the act itself of photography." This complication will be revisited in the conclusion. (Schofield, "Indexicality and Visualization," 177.)

referentiality. They work not only with the medium, but *within* it, with an acute understanding of its changing place, identity, definitions, attitudes, and approaches.¹⁹

Working within the medium, as mother-artists, Mann and Carucci's choices and craftsmanship are present in the (chemical) materiality developed in this multi-step process.

Photography's guise as a "real," physical medium—compared to the more artistic interpretations within drawing, painting, and other fine arts—means that the viewer must engage more closely with these reflections of motherhood, to sort out the truth for themselves. This in turn gives the mother-artist more liberty to use whatever subject and depiction she finds most relevant to her conditions(s) of motherhood. Mann especially recognizes the system at play—this distinction between the physical world and the image—stating that "Photographs economize the truth; they are always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time's continuum."²⁰ This consciousness is what allows Mann and Carucci to manipulate the optics of their image to make the commonplace conditions of motherhood more singular.²¹

I will now turn to ideas of labor to bridge the medium of photography and the representations of motherhood. Both photography and motherhood are generative processes, as center around an ability to produce, and reproduce, objects or things. And yet, they are not identical processes.

As Jungian analyst Juliet Miller explains:

The creative act may therefore be fundamentally different from the experience of procreativity, in that it has the ability, when working well, to bypass the language that speaks *about* and become a language that speaks *for* subjective experiences. This may be an important difference between procreativity and creativity that gets lost if we refer too easily to the "births" of books or poems or paintings. The book or the painting speaks for

¹⁹ Susan Bright, *Motherlode: Photography, Motherhood and Representation*, (Museum of Contemporary Photography and Columbia College Chicago, 2013. Exhibition essay), 2.

²⁰ Mann, *Hold Still*, 151.

²¹ Mann, *Hold Still*, 153.

the woman in a completely different way than the baby does. In a healthy society women should feel they can experience both.²²

Miller's argument reflects principles of my own: the mother should not have to choose between her child and her artistry. Neither Mann nor Carucci make this choice, even though at times, there may be tension between the needs of the artist versus the needs of the child. Instead, they employ their creativity via their art as a medium to understand their procreativity, their maternal condition.

The photographic works in this thesis employ dual notions of the word labor: labor as in work (artistic work) and labor as in child-rearing (birthing, raising, nurturing, etc.). Labor, in both physical and emotional forms, is a structure of motherhood welcomed and rejected to varying degrees, and this becomes visible in motherhood photography. While childbirth may be seen as the first and most important act of labor a mother experiences, the role of mothering is imbued with intense responsibilities and criticism that carries through all acts of labor in a mother's life. Many creative processes—specifically (analog) photography—are oftentimes paralleled to birth: conception, production or creation, labor or birthing.²³ Miller speaks to this tension between generative processes: “Procreation and motherhood are central creative experiences for women, but they are neither the only ones, nor are they the straightforwardly satisfying experiences that our society would like to believe,”²⁴ giving reason to the too-often assumed constraint that womanhood equates motherhood. The birth of the image on behalf of the mother-artist is exactly the kind of labored artistic process that makes photography a unique medium to trace subjecthood, intense seeing, and labor.

²² Juliet Miller, *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents: Psychotherapy, Art and Destruction*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 50.

²³ Returning to the Barthenian umbilical cord and Kaite's analysis: “Photography uses and gives birth to light” (Kaite, “Mothers at the Margins,” 291).

²⁴ Miller, *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents*, 35.

Specific Absence: The Work of Sally Mann and Elinor Carucci

The maternal figure is one of specific absence — Susan Bright, *Home Truths*

Bright's words are, essentially, the summation of not only Barthes's theory and Hidden Mother photography, but also the work of Sally Mann and Elinor Carucci. Whether the mother-artist's touch is a visual presence, it is almost always muffled, unidentifiable, or "not exactly seeable."²⁵ Mann and Carucci are two contemporary artists whose works revolve around the mutual implications of visibility, the mother-child dyad and inherent dependency, generative processes, and labor. Overwhelmingly, their work in part emphatically makes visible their role as mother. This thesis argues that Mann and Carucci's photographs—*The Wet Bed*, *Lee's Dirty Hands*, *Trying to protect Emmanuelle*, and *I Will Protect You*—are semi-autobiographical, even if the mother-artist is not physically present in the image, because they are indexical of the condition of motherhood. Adopting feminist and memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch's words to describe the nature of these photographs: "...the exchange of looks that structure a complicated form of self-portraiture which reveals the self as necessarily relational and familial as well as fragmented and dispersed. Just as the family picture can be read as a self-portrait, so the self-portrait always includes the other"²⁶ The duality of otherness and familiarity, closeness and distance, of the self-portrait is what makes these images semi-autobiographical. They demonstrate a familiar physicality through the body of the child or mother, which are real and tangible beings. And yet, as the mother must distance herself through the camera to capture her compositions of the mother-child dyad, she distances the subject from the true events. While

²⁵ Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 4.

²⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 83.

the photograph reveals a reality in biological terms, the “essence” of motherhood that it reflects is more complex.

While Mann and Carucci differ in technique, approach, and aesthetics, both engage in a controlled form of looking that mediates the mother-child relationship through the camera lens.²⁷ Mann, working primarily in the 1980s and 90s, uses large format, analog, black and white imagery to capture images of her children in which she never physically appears before the camera. Carucci is a more recent photographer that works digitally, and in color, to capture self-timed images of her and her children. Both artists work out of the comfort and privacy of their homes—Lexington, Virginia, and New York City, respectively—and in this same way capture similar “home truths.”²⁸ To recenter the four images in this analysis within art historical scholarship I will present a contextualizing discussion of feminist artwork predating Mann and Carucci and interject parallels between their work and artistic tropes such as the Madonna and child iconography and Hidden Mother photography. This thesis will thus explore why Mann and Carucci’s works are exemplary case studies of motherhood photography as it attempts to understand and make visible the contemporary dialectics of mother-child, mother-artist dyads through the camera.

The medium of photography helps to mirror the societal beliefs that a mother’s work is invisible work, that mothers are meant to *stay* hidden. The foundation of this thesis’s exploration of motherhood photography is the umbilical cord: light to camera (to image), mother to child.

²⁷ As Marianne Hirsch, professor of English and writer on feminist theory and memory studies, describes it: “The mother with a camera ... engages in a more active and controlling form of looking. The optical instrument interrupts the reflective process, fixing it, flattening it, making it static rather than dynamic, perhaps distorting the images, certainly complicating it.” (Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 157)

²⁸ *Home Truths* is the title of Susan Bright’s 2014 exhibition (in full *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*), which aimed to challenge stereotypes of motherhood, and happens to feature the work of Elinor Carucci. The term “home truth”, as defined by Merriam Webster dictionary, is “an unpleasant fact that jars the sensibilities” or “a statement of undisputed fact.”

The metaphorical umbilical cord tethers mother to child through the use of the photographic medium. In capturing brief moments of motherhood via the child, or the mother-child, Mann and Carucci employ the intensely seeing eye of the mother and of the photographer, or camera, which become one in the same. The oneness of mother-artist and of mother-child are at odds in the practice of motherhood photography, and this tension produces photographs worthy of pregnant pauses. The mother-artists are, inherently, anticipating and pushing against a loss of contact between mother and child, and image and object. The magnifying lens of the camera—used to present and preserve the moments of motherhood, which are often left out of public narratives—demands a sense of separation and distance. This extrication is likely impossible to achieve, particularly given the metaphorical umbilical cord that tethers photographers to photographic subject, and subject to viewers. As English professor Berkeley Kaite puts it, “Mothering is characterized by dialects of presence and absence...,”²⁹ just as motherhood photography is characterized by the dialects of mother-artist and mother-child. Through the use of the camera and child, motherhood photography, specifically the work of Sally Mann and Elinor Carucci, addresses the specific absence of the maternal figure, making the mother-artists’ artistic, emotional, and maternal labor more visible.

II. Good Mother? Good Artist? The Anxieties of Medium and Maker

The photographic, artistic processes of the mother-artist, the maker, are at odds with the needs of the mother-child. At some point in the photo taking and making process, the mother-artist must distance herself from her child, halting care. This tension causes a great deal of

²⁹ Kaite, “Mothers at the Margins,” 291.

anxiety within the maker, even if only subconsciously, as the mother attempts to navigate the needs of the artist, and the demands of the medium, within the needs of the child.

In this section, I will briefly outline psychoanalytic theories regarding the needs of mother and child, and explain the intense consciousness that is required when photographing children, particularly one's own. I will also use feminist art history to contextualize why the topic of motherhood in art was able to gain traction, prior to, and making room for, Mann and Carucci's work. Central to this section is the presence, complication, and influence of anxiety, particularly on behalf of the mother-artist.

The conflicts and uncertainties of being both mother and artist are central to Mann and Carucci's bodies of work, in aspects as direct as the titles. *Immediate Family* and *Mother* are explicit references to the domestic sphere. And yet, they may not be as straightforward as they appear. *Immediate Family* is a very logical title for Mann's collection, depicting her own children in a place where she herself grew up. The images are personal and illustrate an intimate and contiguous environment. Through depictions of her nuclear family, Mann is able to capture moments of motherhood via moments of childhood, an age that is often considered fleeting. And thus, *Immediate Family* takes on a new meaning if we are to understand it as Mann's urgent attempt to capture a specific moment in her children's life: infancy and growing up. Images of children especially are often understood as an attempt to prevent the death and loss of the child.³⁰ Images of children are also often accompanied by a sense of fetishization, which relates to the maternal body as well, as Berkeley Kaite explores in *Mothers at the Margins*, though death nor fetishization are not topics I am interested in pursuing in this thesis. Instead, recentering on the maternal experience, the moments of infancy and growing up that Mann photographs

³⁰ Some historic trends went so far as to photograph children postmortem; this practice was particularly contemporaneous with the Hidden Mother photography.

demonstrate a slip(page) of time that required her involvement as mother possibly more than any other moment. As she anxiously confronts and captures these fleeting scenes, she freezes her children in a state of dependency. The family, and mother, is made perpetual through the photograph.

For Carucci, *Mother* is also a logical title for her monograph of images exclusively documenting her journey becoming a mother of twins. Her identity as mother is the subject of the photographs, regardless of who is or isn't present in the compositions. But she is also documenting this learning curve of mothering, adopting this role of mother as she works.

Carucci writes:

At the same time that I was getting to know my babies, falling in love with them, I was also getting to know myself better. Motherhood revealed the best and worst in me. I was filled with so many emotions ... I felt and saw so much in those first months—the beauty and ugliness, the tears and laughter, the extremes you come to know when you're a new parent. I tried somehow to deal with it all through my camera, hoping to portray the complexity of motherhood as honestly as I could.³¹

Carucci is also a mother to the image(s), conceiving and birthing them. Carucci notes a parallel between motherhood and photography, in that both are all-consuming. She “put[s] herself on hold” in both positions; prior to having children, photography was the all-consuming process she was most tethered to.³² While the title of “mother”—both for Carucci as an individual, and this body of work—appears innate, it is also a subjective term. For Carucci, it is a title she is gifting to and requiring of herself, declaring it through this work, staking her presence just as Mann has.

Following this introduction to the nuances and implications of Mann and Carucci's work, I will examine the psychological context of being a mother-artist, particularly the guilt and anxiety often felt, as well as the public scrutiny many mother-artists must endure. This guilt

³¹ Elinor Carucci, *Mother*, (Munich: Prestel, 2013), n.p.

³² Carucci, *Mother*, n.p.

often associated with the decision to be a mother and an artist, which Carucci especially communicates, is a product of a socially constructed image of a “good mother,” as in exclusively meeting the needs of the child.³³ Much scholarship surrounding representations of motherhood utilizes psychoanalysis to make sense of the mother-child dyad, such as Juliet Miller’s *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents: Psychotherapy, Art, and Destruction* and Berkeley Kaite’s *Mothering and Psychoanalysis: Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*, both of which I’ve turned to for context in this thesis.³⁴ These psychoanalytic theorizations frame and define the challenges of the mother-artist. While the needs of the child and mother are both present, and influential, it is the condition of the mother-artist that I will explore through the work of Mann and Carucci.

As Carucci writes in her introduction to *Mother*: “Sometimes the act of taking a photo became a split second of guilt—a split second during which I neglected the children.”³⁵ In order to engage in her artistry, the mother-artist must abandon the temporal needs of the child for the development of the image. However, this separation between mothering and photographing may not be easily achieved or resolved. Carucci goes on to explain that: “It took a few years for the photographer and the mother in me to learn to coexist. The two did not always agree; the mother in me usually won out. But sometimes, to my surprise, my two identities empowered each other, especially when I acknowledged the positive effect my work had on the children.”³⁶ Carucci’s comment supports this thesis’s claim that mother and artist are not mutually exclusive, but it also acknowledges that the mother-artist’s practice is fully entrenched in the needs of the child,

³³ Miller, *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents*, 40.

³⁴ As stated in the introduction, the mother-child dyad is also examined from a very scientific, biological perspective, particularly as it pertains to post-partum transitions and the psychological, emotional, and social development of the child.

³⁵ Carucci, *Mother*, n.p.

³⁶ Carucci, *Mother*, n.p.

contemporaneous with the needs of the artist. Further, this split second of “neglect” for the sake of the photograph is a fear that both Carucci and Mann, and all mother-artists (particularly photographers), must reckon with.

Mann especially was met with intense ridicule for her “neglectful” images. It was compositions like *The Wet Bed* and *Lee’s Dirty Hand* that sparked a controversial reception of *Immediate Family*. Critics from the *New York Times* claimed maltreatment and child pornography. For Mann, these “disturbing” images were a possible escape from the fears and turbulence of child rearing, as if she “... stare[d] them straight in the face but at a remove—on paper, in a photograph” she could remove the power her rambling anxieties had over her.³⁷ As a mother-artist, she didn’t realize that photographing her nude children would garner such backlash. According to Mann, she simply took the photographs because her children were around, and she felt a need to take pictures as a way to save something.³⁸

Carucci, instead, was very conscious of this possible criticism from the outset. In talking with Bright, she explains that she wanted to photograph sensual connection to her children but was challenged to avoid making her work “weird or provocative.”³⁹ Because of this, her work intentionally avoids photographing her children in the nude, a practice Mann’s work embraces. As Carucci explains, the complexity of photographing adults versus photographing children lies in the absence of legitimate consent. Given the children’s young age, they have less autonomy over the image than the mother-artist.

³⁷ Mann, *Hold Still*, 114.

³⁸ Sally Mann, “Photographer Sally Mann shares life behind iconic images,” interview by Charlie Rose, *CBS Mornings*, May 12, 2015, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfPBfqE9sCs>.

³⁹ Elinor Carucci, “Elinor Carucci in Conversation with Susan Bright,” interview by Susan Bright, *School of Visual Arts*, February 7, 2014, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liUD6FMew4Y>

Both Mann and Carucci must also come to terms with a fear of resentment: that their children may not like the representations they put out into the world, or that they may feel like their mother didn't capture the "right" moments.⁴⁰ This difficulty of leaving out the "right" moments can also be understood as the "normal" moments, as in the genuine vernacular, snapshot family photography.⁴¹ Carucci admits all her photographs are taken as art. This role of capturing the "normal"—such as the birthday parties and the holidays—falls on Carucci's husband Eran, also a photographer. This is important to note because it demonstrates how both artists understand their photographs as art, first and foremost. Despite their artwork being indices of motherhood, they are also inherently artistic representations that intentionally and metaphysically use the influence of the index to communicate a closeness or condition.

At the same time that photography allows for a closeness and memorialization of mother and child, it also provides an occasion for the mother-artist to confront the child as a separate being, connected but apart from the mother, no longer physically bound by a biological umbilical cord. As Hirsch puts it, photography reveals the family's unconscious optics.⁴² A cumulation of images of family—in this case, fine art photography of the mother-artists' children—provides physical re-framing of moments and memories, allowing individuals to look back and acknowledge respective beliefs, anxieties, desires, regrets, and other complicated emotions in parent-child relations, particularly mother-child relations. The fear of being a bad mother in exchange for being a good artist is sometimes resolved through the resulting photographs

⁴⁰ While Mann's children are grown, and have confirmed they overwhelmingly support and approve of Mann's images, Carucci's children are still young. However, she notes that her son and daughter both agree that the photographing used to annoy and upset them, but now they "feel good" when they see the images. Some they like, some they don't, but as her son acknowledged, the photographs let mother and child spend more time together (Carucci, *Mother*, n.p.).

⁴¹ In other words, not fine art photography—images where ISO and exposure and composition are not at the forefront.

⁴² Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 177.

because images of children often “freeze children in a state of dependency, and in doing so, reinforce maternal worth.”⁴³

A photographer herself, Harding describes why the camera provides this separation:

Memories, routines, expectations, and to-do list items prevent me from accessing the distance I need to see motherhood and make visible its essence. I turn to photography to simultaneously remain connected to and create distance from my maternal experience. My decision to use photography as a critical thinking device fits into a larger context of women employing photography to better understand their identities, relationships, and roles.⁴⁴

This frozen state—or the more sentimental reference, the fleeting moment—mentioned by Harding is prized by many, particularly as it’s understood as an archival practice of the family. As Carucci writes: “There is a certain power in a photograph’s ability to freeze a moment in time ... Taking photos is a desperate attempt to deal with the pain of knowing that I will not always be able to protect them [her children]. My images are a way to both keep them mine and to keep me theirs, keep me *there*.”⁴⁵ This tension between closeness and distancing, both needed to create images of motherhood, complicates the practice of the mother-artist, particularly mother-photographer.

Next in this section, I will introduce a very brief history of feminist art practices to contextualize Mann and Carucci’s work as women artists. The success and work of Mann and Carucci rejects a patriarchal, pre-feminism idea that mothers cannot be artists, and vice versa.⁴⁶ Seminal academic work such as Linda Nochlin’s 1971 *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*—the answer to which, oversimplified, is that there was no access to institutional art

⁴³ Harding, “Motherhood Reimagined,” 118.

⁴⁴ Harding, “Motherhood Reimagined,” 109.

⁴⁵ Carucci, *Mother*, n.p.

⁴⁶ Returning to the issue of public scrutiny, the immediate public response surrounding the images in *Immediate Family*, and the judgement placed on Mann’s mothering skills over her artistic vision and practice (the aspect of her work that *should* be talked about over anything else), is reminiscent of much of the patriarchal assumptions regarding artists who happen to be mothers, and mothers who happen to be artists—being that they can only be one.

spheres for women—further contextualizes the struggle female artists face: “And while great achievement is rare and difficult at best, it is still rarer and more difficult if, while you work, you must at the same time wrestle with inner demons of self-doubt and guilt and outer monsters of ridicule or patronizing encouragement, neither of which have any specific connection with the quality of the art work as such.”⁴⁷ Though rejections of the belief that motherhood and artistry are mutually exclusive existed before the 1970s second wave of feminism, the celebration of the female body that dominated that period had dramatic impacts on the production of feminist productions of maternal art.⁴⁸

Despite an increase in artists dealing with what it means to be a woman, the issue of what it means to be a mother was still largely avoided. Early artists, such as Elaine Reichek, Kiki Smith, and Mary Kelly, and the collective Mother Art, helped broach the topic of motherhood and the maternal experience of the mother-artist, particularly through the visual expression of domestic labors and spaces that evolved out of the 1960’s and 70’s. Mary Kelly’s 1973-79 text and object based series *Post-Partum Document* (Fig. 7) is often marked as the first major, and most influential, work of maternal art as it moves between the “voices of mother, child, and analytical observer,” as stated on her website.⁴⁹ By presenting and altering a range of materials and objects from the six year period after her son’s birth—from dirty diapers, to hospital records,

⁴⁷ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, (1st ed. Icon Editions. New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 155.

<https://archive.org/details/womenartpoweroth0000noch/page/162/mode/2up>

⁴⁸ Overwhelmingly, both the (invisible) work of the mother and the creative work of the artist are devalued in society, seen as labor unworthy of high(er) praise. This inaccurately accounts for the intense physical process that is required by photography: the staging; the sourcing of props and lighting; the adjustment to camera settings; the physical snapshotting, either with the insertion and exposure of a negative plate or film, or the click of a button; the incredibly meticulous, chemical development, and printing, of film; the printing of the digital image; and other nuances. None of these moments are explicitly evident in a photograph, particularly to the public’s eye, hence the medium’s delayed recognition as a fine art.

⁴⁹ Mary Kelly, “Post-partum Document, 1973-79,” Mary Kelly, accessed Dec 1, 2021, <https://www.marykellyartist.com/post-partum-document-1973-79>.

baby clothes, early drawings and writings—Kelly uses artifacts to analyze physically, intellectually, and emotionally her motherly ambivalence and development of relationship with her child. Despite Kelly’s work utilizing mediums other than photography, the essential indexicality of the series is indicative of the same kind of imprint utilized in mother-artists’ photography. This formative work preceded Mann by just over a decade (Carucci by almost three) and paved the way for what creative expression about the mother-artist, mother-child dyad can look like, affirming that it can and should be explored.

Feminist attitudes toward motherhood framed this moment in time in when empowered female artists took on the challenge of making their experiences as maternal figures valued subjects for their artwork. Feminist motherhood, as explored by art historian Andrea Liss, is “... helping that person [child] without losing yourself in the process. Motherhood requires at least two people. Feminist motherhood recognizes that the mother is still a woman, a person.”⁵⁰ This recognition that the mother-artist is both singular and independent, and engaged in an intersubjective relationship between mother and child, is at the crux of my analysis of the dialect of the mother-artist and mother-child dyads.

III. Hidden In Plain Sight: Sally Mann’s *Immediate Family*

The complex set of conditions and emotions associated with motherhood are on full display in Sally Mann’s *The Wet Bed* and *Lee’s Dirty Hands*, both from *Immediate Family*. Mann, often acknowledged as one of the greatest American photographers, has produced some of the most iconic imagery of children to date, and yet she is rarely acknowledged as producing some of the most iconic imagery of motherhood. (This is likely in part due to her physical

⁵⁰ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, (NED-New edition. University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 152.

absence from the frame.) In this section, I will provide a visual analysis of Mann's *The Wet Bed* and *Lee's Dirty Hands*, complimented by a parallel to Hidden Mother photography, details of Mann's antiquated photographic practice, and her own anecdotes, to demonstrate how her labor and presence is hidden in plain sight.

In these two photographs, *The Wet Bed* and *Lee's Dirty Hands*, a singular figure occupies the frame, visually: Mann's child(ren). Mann's own hidden nature is intentional, as she chooses to physically remain behind the camera. Yet, she strains to demonstrate her labor through this artistic mode. As Batchen has theorized "... A hidden mother continually haunts the economy of our desires, a homemade phantom who can never be acknowledged, except surreptitiously, through inadequate proxies."⁵¹ Through these proxy representations, or indexical imagery, and surrogate gaze, mothers behind cameras enact an "endless reciprocity of the visible and the invisible."⁵² Yet, the intersubjectivity between the mother-artist and child is captured through intuitive gestures and artistic choices, etched in the medium of photography.

The throws of motherhood are manifested in Mann's 1987 platinum print *The Wet Bed*. In this photograph, her youngest daughter Virginia lays nude in slumber. Sprawled, as if she were falling, the toddler nearly floats on the barren bed. Her eyes and lips are sealed in sleep. Her hands, drawing fists, grab at nothing as her arms mimic the wings of a transient cherub. Her tussle of light hair is propped on a flattened pillow, the pillowcase crumpling up around her face before dropping into the intense vignette, nearly taking her left hand with it. She has either rejected a heavily scrunched macrame-esque blanket to the end of the mattress, or was never covered with it to begin. (It is not unusual to see Mann's children unclothed, and in this case, not abnormal to be uncovered in bed either.) The blanket takes up significantly more space than the

⁵¹ Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 7.

⁵² Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 4.

figure and is far more vibrant as well: a bright white blob against the surrounding greyscale. The texture of the blanket, the wrinkles in the sheets, and the satin sheen of the bed skirt give acute depth to this solitary scene. Adding further intrigue is the distant baby doll splayed on the ground in the lower right corner of the frame. Wearing an upturned dress with crooked legs, the doll almost mirrors Virginia's form. It is as if Virginia has dropped the doll off the bed as she crawled in, abandoning her play, in need of respite. She appears unawakenable, encased in a protective vignette of darkness, nearly levitating if not for this grounding doll.

Mann's particular, labor-intensive photography process creates these nostalgic compositions, equally ethereal and moody. Mann almost always produces black and white imagery. "It's harder," she tells CBS reporter Charlie Rose in an interview, "but that's not why I like it."⁵³ She explains it helps her get right to the essence of what she's photographing, as she is not distracted by color. This exacting mindset is part of what makes her craft so effective. Narrowed in on the photographic process at nearly all moments, Mann describes how she sees everything in black and white, and has imagined herself having an embedded viewfinder of an eye, blocking out 8x10 frames wherever she looks. This 8x10 format imagery is her main mode of photography. In most instances, she uses a traditional large format camera in the field, and a meticulous wet collodion process. She therefore must be incredibly intentional with her composition and settings, as the process is laborious and the camera unwieldy.

Mann is a very "literary photographer," as reviewer Lucy Sante identifies her.⁵⁴ Sante explains how Mann's practice was inspired by photographer Michael Miley's 19th century plates found in an attic at Washington and Lee University, which Mann subsequently began to clean

⁵³ Mann, interview by Charlie Rose.

⁵⁴ Lucy Sante, "Mann's River," *New York Review of Books*, (October 11, 2018), 1, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/11/sally-manns-river/>

and print (thousands of them). Mann was deeply informed by this experience, finding that some of his work was taken on the same banks of the Maury River that backdrop so many of the photographs in *Immediate Family*. This process, in Sante's words, "introduced her to the beauty of the collodion process, embodying the passage of time, and establishing artistic roots for her right in the place where she had lived nearly all her life."⁵⁵ Mann's work has a commitment to the past in approach and process.⁵⁶ The taxing and antiquated wet collodion process is at odds with her desire to capture fleeting moments, but is also that what produces the intimate, dream-like sequences of her compositions.

The scene in *The Wet Bed* is undeniably peaceful and intimate. Ripping the viewer out of this trance is the title subject: the wet bed. Emanating from the figure to the edge of the bed is a large stain, drying and darkened around the edges. Presumably, a urine stain. It may not even be Virginia's, it may not be wet at the time of the photograph, but it was at some point. Through this composition, Mann forces us viewers to question the lengths to which she will go as an artist at the risk of her ability to mother. She received endless critique and judgement for images such as this, and the following, depicting her children in pain or discomfort for the gain of a "perfect" image. But Mann fabricated this image: the stain in *The Wet Bed* is nothing more than a pool of Coca Cola soda spilled on the mattress by Mann herself. It is not a reality in and of itself; it is a

⁵⁵ Sante, "Mann's River," 1.

⁵⁶ Her work also has references to the pictorialism movement of the late 19th century, which, in photographic terms, aimed to make more emotive and "poetic" images, that specifically pertained to the art object's "object hood." "Photography as expression was understood to be a reflection of personal values of conduct and experience, based on the notion of aesthetic significance and tradition ... Common to these manifestations was a belief that facts were useless per se, and that they acquired significance only when they were interpreted as symbols of experiences otherwise incapable of communication." This interest in symbols in relation to facts sits nicely in conversation with the "taxonomy of signs" that provides a framework for photography's indexical qualities in this thesis. The platinum print, the process used in *The Wet Bed*, particularly appealed to pictorialists, as it opposed the commercialist gelatin silver print process, instead favoring "beautifully rendered soft and eloquently subtle tonal values." Pictorialist photography, in this manner, often appeared as more graphic works that prioritized "light and touch." Mann's work, in process and aesthetics, references this art movement. (Peter C. Bunnell, "Pictorial Photography," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 51, no. 2 (1992), 11, 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3774688>.)

reality she desperately wishes to convey (the inevitable many wet beds a mother must clean). She must do so through a labored process of staging to even begin to make her private domesticities visible to the viewer. She mocks the viewer in this way and in the process, asks us to consider the mother-artist's ability to distance herself enough to use photography as a device that makes visible the "essence" of motherhood.

Mann didn't turn to her children, her maternal experiences, for inspiration for quite some time. Transfixed on narratives of Southern roots, she primarily photographed landscapes early in her career. This transition to the subject of motherhood came gradually.

As Mann explains:

Why it took me so long to find the abundant and untapped artistic wealth within family life, I don't know. I took a few pictures with the 8x10 inch camera when Emmett was a baby, but for years I shot the under-appreciated and extraordinary domestic scenes of any mother's life with the point-and-shoot ... I missed so many opportunities, now tantalizingly fading away in the scrapbooks. The puking, the pets, and the toilet training, the never-ending toilet training. Maybe at first I didn't see those things as art because, with young babies in the house, you remove your 'photography eyes,' as Linda Connor once called the sensibility that allows ecstatic vision.⁵⁷

Mann believes good photographs are gifts, often from her children. However, she did not look to her children until 1985, when she tried to set up a self-portrait of herself giving birth to her youngest, Virginia, a laborious process amid physical labor. Her very meticulous photography process resulted in what she called a dud: the light was blocked, the newborn baby blurry, and overall, she was dissatisfied with the image. But she notes that it wasn't a total loss as it was "the birth of the family pictures, breathing life into the notion that photographs, and sometimes good ones, could be made everywhere, even in the most seemingly commonplace or fraught moments."⁵⁸ She found a manner in which allow her "photographic eyes" to investigate the daily

⁵⁷ Mann, *Hold Still*, 105-107.

⁵⁸ Mann, *Hold Still*, 111.

dramas (such as a wet bed) that are quite fraught, as she says, but nevertheless implicit reflections of the maternal condition. Mann soon elevated her family photography to that of her art, using the 8x10 to capture fleeting moments, sometimes staging them, sometimes just being in the right place at the right time.

Like *The Wet Bed*, Mann's 1986 photograph *Lee's Dirty Hands* shows an infant, Virginia, in the nude, this time laying on her side in a nest of tangled bed sheets. A simple greyscale featuring very little dark tones provides brightness and effervescence to the image. Virginia has similar cherubic qualities as in *The Wet Bed*. Her plump, smooth legs and belly settle amongst a cloud-like, celestial landscape of bed sheets, the darker cloth creating a ring that mimics that of a halo. The rolls of the infant's twisted torso and baby fat are crisp, it's navel and toes remarkably clear and noticeable. The image is a vision of serenity, interrupted suddenly by a trademark unsettling quality.⁵⁹ On the infant's left thigh is a series of fingerprints, a handprint really, indicating a grasp that aggressively covers the left bottom of the infant, pulling it out of its slumber and safety. The marks are themselves indices of fingerprints, and as we culturally come to recognize them: identity. Yet, the identity of the hand and of the infant are obscured (though, presumably, this is "Lee's" hand). It would be easy to assume this is a bruise if not for the title referencing "dirty hands." The infant's feet, particularly her right foot, show signs of dirt, though the virgin white sheet is nearly untouched. This dirty hand is evident sneaking out of the right side of the frame, in a blur, an escape. The hand, in its hasty exit, proves it is not supposed to be

⁵⁹ This "trademark unsettling quality" could also be referred to as the "punctum" of the image, according to Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. While the complimentary "studium" is, rather simply, the subject of the image, the punctum is the detail that punctuates the subject to reveal a deeper meaning. As Barthes writes: "A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer 'anything whatever.' This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock ... the reading of the *punctum* (of the pricked photograph, so to speak) is at once brief and active." This sharp "pricking" of the senses, caused by an obscure detail within the image, is what garners an emotional response from the viewer. (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.)

there. Whether it is trying to escape or reaching back again for another touch, Mann has stopped this hand's encroachment with her lens, her intensely seeing eye.

Mann's characteristic, intentional "neglect" is present in this image. She faced extreme public scrutiny for seemingly prioritizing the photograph over the care of her child.

She writes that:

Not only was the distinction between the real children and the images difficult for people, but so also was the distinction between the images and their creator, whom some found immoral. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that I believe my morality should have no bearing on the discussion of the pictures I made. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I actually *was*, as some *New York Times* letter writers suggested, "manipulative," "sick," "twisted," "vulgar." Even if I were all of those things, it should make no difference in the way the work is viewed ... Part of the artist's job is to make the commonplace singular, to project a different interpretation onto the conventional. With the family pictures, I may have done some of that.⁶⁰

Mann's work is at the intersection of the drama around the mother-artist. She was producing images of naked children, a practice central to the work of sentimental Victorian era imagery, "just as the nation was experiencing a moral panic concerning child pornography, coming on the heels of the repressed-memory craze."⁶¹ Mann's images weren't sentimental enough to be viewed as charming or even documentary, despite how stubbornly they depicted her family's domestic routines and childhood dramas. And further, she is dealing with the complicated nature of the photograph and the slippage between object and subject, the distinction between the image and reality, and creator, that is often misconstrued.

Despite so much intentionality, Mann's presence in these works, her labor, is hidden in plain sight. It is indexical via her craftsmanship and her profound compositions, beautifully reflective of her role as mother and artist. She is remarkably absent from her photographs, visually that is. She is an "intrusive matron," just as the Hidden Mothers are, but her presence is

⁶⁰ Mann, *Hold Still*, 153.

⁶¹ Sante, "Mann's River," 1.

much more seamless. Allegations of neglect spark out of this lack of understanding that the camera lens is in fact the mother-artist's intensely seeing eye: a surrogate gaze. Contrary to perceptions levied by public backlash, Mann's images are "pregnant" as Harding would attribute.

Her explanation as to why the photograph is "pregnant" is the epitome of Mann's work:

In pictures of their children, mothers are visible on the surface not only in any genetic resemblances, but also in the decisions that went into taking or having the pictures taken: the clothes the child wears, the setting, the occasion — whether planned or spontaneous. So the frame not only captures the child, but also discloses the mother's inherent involvement in that seizure"⁶²

We fail to consider that—or more appropriately, fail to commend that—Mann's eyes never leave her child. Despite critiques of maltreatment or neglect, Mann is framing, watching, and observing her children through the lens finder. And as Hirsch described it, the more active and controlled form of looking enables the child and mother to read the work as a reflection.⁶³ This control Hirsch speaks of can be better understood as concern and awareness, surveillance enacted through the lens. She is never quite distanced from her subject. The lens mediates, and reflects this relationship of mother-child, and mother-artist (furthermore, mother and camera), the symbiotic relationships, two parallel dyads, center to the analysis of motherhood photography.

IV. "Me Is Them:" Elinor Carucci's *Mother*

Unlike Mann, Carucci renders herself a visible subject in her compositions, specifically in *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* and *I Will Protect You*. Her photographs are a complimentary form of self-portraiture to Mann's, studies of self (mother-artist) and the blurring of individuality between mother and child. In this section, I will provide a visual analysis of Carucci's *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* and *I Will Protect You*, complimented by a parallel to Madonna and child

⁶² Harding, "Motherhood Reimag(in)ed," 115.

⁶³ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 157.

imagery, Carucci's digital photographic practice, and interviews and anecdotes from the artist, to explore the inherent entanglement of the mother-child dyad, as it is positioned against the mother-artist.

In an interview with Bright, Carucci explains she felt as if she wasn't doing enough as a young mother. She also notes feeling angry at Madonna and child imagery because it perpetuates a vision of beauty and joy—which she also says is reflected in celebrity images of motherhood—that is not always accurate. To note, I am not interested in the direct analysis of lasting religious undertones in the work of contemporary mother-artists such as Mann and Carucci. The only religious component that is applicable to the work in this thesis is the idea of the “icon.” In the case of motherhood photography, we can apply an alternative understanding of icon: a representative symbol.⁶⁴ While the image of Madonna and child may be used as an idol (image of Madonna and child *as* Madonna and child) the image of motherhood in photography can be seen as a representative symbol of the maternal experience.

It is difficult to divorce the mother-child dyad from this trope, just as it is difficult to divorce mother from child in the production of these images. Nearly all portraits of a mother holding her offspring evoke the Christian iconography, whether consciously or not, particularly as it serves as the visual ideal of maternal experience in Judeo-Christian and Western contexts.⁶⁵

Despite the aesthetic influence of Madonna and child in these two images, Carucci's work

⁶⁴ An icon, as defined by Peirce, looks exactly like the object it represents. In this consideration, the image of Madonna and child represents *the* Madonna and child through its physical likeness, as stated. Comparatively, the symbol, according to Peirce, represents the object, but may do so independently of the physical similarity or likeness due to the viewer or society's culturally conditioned understanding of relevant imagery. Thus, the viewer of the symbol can (or should be able to) deduce meaning from an image simply based on its visually symbolic implications.

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, “Hidden Mothers,” in *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography*, (1st ed. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 218-219. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/mono/10.4324/9780429356810-17/hidden-mothers-geoffrey-batchen>.

suggests that not all aspects of motherhood are beautiful, and in the process produces semi-autobiographical images reflective of motherhood-in-practice.

The bodily agency of the mother, and child, particularly as it pertains to public versus private occupation, complicates the dynamic of mother and child. A mother's body, even if not photographed, becomes public property as it is shared with her children through whatever lengths it takes to properly care for said children (or be a "good mother"), in the home or in public.⁶⁶ Carucci notes that she feels she and her children are one unit: "me is them."⁶⁷ This oneness is idealized in the Madonna and child imagery, but also complicated in motherhood photography that attempts to both separate and preserve the mother-child in its artistic representation of the dyad. It comes back to this division of private and public life, or the lack thereof. This photographic project, *Mother*, desperately tries to relay maternal realities, and for Carucci, it successfully does.

In an interview with American photographer Aaron Shuman, Carucci said:

They're [her photographs] really genuine. They're so genuine that I myself am struck by the truths that they tell me. That's not to say that they're not planned sometimes; I will go back to a situation or shoot in a certain light. But if they're false or we're pretending to the camera—which does happen from time to time—it doesn't work, and I don't publish them. So, they're really honest, but not always spontaneous.⁶⁸

Images of motherhood are a breach of this private-public tension because they unveil the parts of motherhood that are "not supposed" to be acknowledged.

There is a sense of timelessness to Carucci's 2006 image *Trying to protect Emmanuelle*.

In this moment of nurture, Carucci stands, gripping her young daughter Emmanuelle close to her naked skin as she lays restlessly against the new mother's chest. Emmanuelle is no longer a

⁶⁶ Carucci, interview by Bright.

⁶⁷ Carucci, interview by Bright.

⁶⁸ Elinor Carucci, "'All of Me' - An Interview with Elinor Carucci," interview by Aaron Schuman, *Hotshoe International*, no. 163 (Dec./Jan. 2010), n.p. <https://www.aaronshuman.com/carucciinterview.html>

newborn: she has grown and developed a full head of curly, brunette locks and small baby teeth peeking out from behind her gaping lips. Carucci as a physical figure is unignorable in *Trying to protect Emmanuelle*. While she begins to blur at the edges, the image's tight aperture focusing in on Emmanuelle's bright face—she is undeniably as present as Emmanuelle. Together, they take up most of the frame and are remarkably centered. The corners of the image vignette slightly, interrupted by a dark border on the left edge which disturbs the trancelike state of mother and daughter. While the colors are bright and natural—olive skin of Carucci and paper paleness of her daughter, strikingly dark hair, light pink fabric, and a slate blue background—the scene remains soft.

Trying to protect Emmanuelle is almost peaceful and serene; at first glance it presents an impassivity of sorts. Carucci denies that any of her images are passive, however, despite whatever indifference a composition imbues. An image of calm is nothing more than Carucci trying to exert control over everyday drama. And yet, Carucci grasps at her daughter in an almost frantic manner in *Trying to protect Emmanuelle*. Her fingers strain to keep a solid grip, digging into her daughter's armpit and causing the baby pink shirt to ride and wriggle up Emmanuelle's chest. Carucci's other arm extends out of the frame, presumably carrying Emmanuelle's bottom. Her daughter's right fist nuzzles into Carucci's armpit, her forearm censoring Carucci's bare breasts. Carucci bestows a puckered kiss onto Emmanuelle's head.

Emmanuelle is in no pain, visually at least. In fact, the infant looks nearly at ease, comforted in her mother's arms: no dried tears or flushed face or any sign of distress. And yet, it is as if Carucci has just scooped her daughter up from a slip or a bump on the head. The title—*Trying to protect Emmanuelle*—implies Carucci has inherently failed, or is failing, to protect Emmanuelle. She looms above her daughter while lifting her up: a push and pull. Carucci's eyes

are downcast, even closed, whereas Emmanuelle is wide-eyed. In a literal sense, Emmanuelle's bright, slate blue eyes are fixed open, but further, her face, with her open mouth and eyes cast beyond our frame of reference, displays a wide-eyed naivety. It is the potentially harmful curiosity of a young child, curiosity that may lead to moments Carucci claims to try and protect her from.

The scene *is* intensely reminiscent of Madonna and child imagery, despite Carucci's expressed frustration with the trope. The image of Mary, shroud in cloth, clutching her often nude infant, presents a state of unity and fulfillment. This visualization is present in many modern and contemporary images of mother-child—such as Catherine Opie's implicit 2004 *Self Portrait/Nursing* (Fig. 8) and Julia Margaret Cameron's explicit, though not autobiographical, 1864 *Madonna with Children* (Fig. 9)—but artists often move the imagery into an uncanny space of sensuality and consciousness.

Miller addresses this topic of iconography:

The image of the mother-child dyad as a self-contained oneness dominated by the needs of the child is not simply the result of society's needs and projections and the development of psychoanalytic theories, but is also underpinned by centuries of images of mother and child [such as Renaissance imagery of Virgin and Child] ... that have the power to move us and to resonate with our desire for completeness and for fusion.⁶⁹

The oneness Miller speaks of is what translates throughout all mother-child imagery. Even in scenes where the mother is absent, such as *The Wet Bed* and *Lee's Dirty Hands*, or scenes that implicitly reference the structural imagery of Madonna and Child, such as *I Will Protect You*, the mother and child remain a unit because of their relationship of artist and subject. It is, again, this Barthenian umbilical cord that is tethering mother to child through the light to lens process, resulting in a creative, physical, emotional reciprocity.

⁶⁹ Miller, *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents*, 43.

When comparing this image *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* to a classical Madonna and child image such as Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (Fig. 10), the aesthetic similarities become clear. Both display the cheek to forehead touch, the clutching of the infant's bottom and armpit, even the same rosy, olive, and grey-blue tones. There are departures, such as the reverse nudity and the indirect gaze, though most Madonna and child depictions feature down or side cast eyes for both figures. The faint chiaroscuro element in *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* that highlights her daughter's face and Carucci's hollowed and structured cheek and collarbone is a further reference to canonical Renaissance religious imagery.

Bright quotes Carucci in analyzing her work:

The early pictures of the pregnancy, birth and the newborn months are intense cinematic, almost literary scenarios—sometimes full of fear, sometimes tender—but they also evoke centuries of painted and sculptured depictions of mothers and their children. “You really get the tradition of what we’re used to seeing – motherhood as portrait, Madonna and child,” explains Carucci. “You really see those beautiful magical moments where you cannot believe the connection and the physical warmth of the baby in your hands. On the other hand, you go through difficult times – you’re tired, the constant need to breastfeed them. This I feel is less documented in photography and I am shocked by how those moments live side by side.”⁷⁰

The symbiotic nature, the push and pull, of this mother-child relationship is emphasized in the cyclical composition of the two figures. From Emmanuelle's bright and open face comes Carucci's eager hand, grounding the scene and pulling the eye down from the lightness. The eye then traces Emmanuelle's bent arm up towards Carucci's shoulder, shooting along her illuminated nape around to her puckered lips, once again connecting her to her daughter and completing the visual and emotional cyclical image.

This co-dependence, particularly of mother and daughter, is something very familiar in Carucci's work. She began photographing her mother at age fifteen: her first subject.⁷¹ This

⁷⁰ Bright, *Home Truths*, 62.

⁷¹ Carucci grew up in Israel, immigrating to New York in 1995 where she continues to live and work to this day.

practice of intimate family documentation, primarily of her relationship with her parents and her husband Eran, became her 2002 book *Closer*. It was natural for Carucci to photograph her pregnancy, as she started with her mother and was then becoming a mother herself. Following a “happy pregnancy,” as she called it, and a high-risk cesarean delivery—during which she continued to photograph for fear of forgetting the moment, pain and all, to the dismay of delivery nurses—she started to photograph the complexities of motherhood and child rearing very quickly,⁷² as evident in *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* and *I Will Protect You*.

Two years after *Trying To protect Emmanuelle* Carucci makes a promise, one of assertion instead of doubt, in her 2008 photograph *I Will Protect You*. Again, she and now older Emmanuelle engage in an intimate embrace, more intense and mysterious than *Trying To protect Emmanuelle*, despite the directness of the title. This image is darkness and lightness with little in between. The chiaroscuro of the first image is ramped up immensely in this: Emmanuelle’s slumbering face and white and pink eyelet dress are illuminated; Carucci’s hovering, nearly hidden head is slightly visible; and the rest falls into a void of almost vantablack background.

There is a greater vertical sense to the composition of *I Will Protect You*, less of a symbiotic or cyclical relationship. Carucci is giving more yet her daughter is less engaged. Emmanuelle is in slumber, one reason as to why she is less codependent, but she is also slightly grown: her brown locks now long and her facial features more defined and less open. She is growing away from Carucci. This shift is represented by an intense black linear, yet amorphous, divide above Emmanuelle’s head. Carucci is quite literally watching over Emmanuelle. This compositional choice indicates a shift in relationship and responsibility. Carucci’s role as a

⁷² Carucci, interview by Bright.

mother has changed. She can no longer, and no longer needs to, always have a grasp on her daughter, this is now a time for observance, for intense seeing through the surrogate gaze.

This inevitable and required shift between mother-child expressed in *I Will Protect You* is rejected by Carucci. Her hands slip into frame, almost out of nowhere. Emmanuelle's body takes up most of the lower two-thirds of the scene as she sits with her head slumped at a ninety-degree angle. She would likely fall if not for Carucci's supporting hand, which cups her daughter's shoulder and props up her cheek. It is a gentle touch, gingerly held away from her daughter's body only just skimming the fabric of her dress. Carucci's other hand melts into the darkness but lingers long enough to indicate she's brushing the hair from Emmanuelle's tired face, revealing her sealed lips and eyelids. The urgency is replaced by peaceful observation. Photography is her way to stay in her growing children's life, to maintain the umbilical cord.

Carucci could have very easily cropped the image at the top of Emmanuelle's head. Her presence would have still been implied—we can likely infer that these are her hands—had she removed her face. Her face itself is distorted by leaning at an angle that shows little more than the contour of her nose and cheek, and the line of her brow. It is barely an anthropomorphic feature. Her face floats like a mask, a blob of light reflecting off her daughter's illumination before her own black tendrils slip into the foreground, peeking along the right edge of the image to indicate that there is in fact a physical feature connecting these hands to this face to this mothering body.

The scene in both photographs is meticulously composed, complete with a studio lighting set up. The majority of Carucci's work is digital and colored, and for the most part produced as archival pigment prints. With Mann's work, there was an ability to pose and stage her subjects, as she was often behind the camera. While the limitations of film were an entirely different

challenge, Carucci is met with the issues of self-portraiture. The images in which she is visually absent, and there are quite a few, are more “intuitive” or spontaneous because she doesn’t have to allot the same amount of preparative staging.⁷³ Oftentimes, for images she is the subject of, particularly images inside the home, she organizes lights and a tripoded camera ahead of time.⁷⁴ In most of the images in *Mother*, Carucci only had time to take one or two frames before putting the camera down and returning to her child, before “going back to being a mother.”⁷⁵ She expresses guilt for even taking the pictures and denies herself from indulging in more “neglectful”⁷⁶ mothering by taking more frames. She became a “quick photographer”⁷⁷ in this sense, balancing meticulous settings with the need to capture fleeting moments.

In *Trying to protect Emmanuelle*, we see Carucci’s uncertainty and desperation regarding her new role as mother. She references art historical imagery to reinforce the presumed relationship and responsibility she has taken on, but also diverts this trope. *I Will Protect You* presents a narrative of separation and severance. What these two parallel images show is a transition in the dyad, and they do so through a transition in composition and craft. Resolving a fear that motherhood would eclipse her photography, Carucci realized that motherhood “became a window into so much of what I feel life is really about. It distilled everything to its essence, allowing me to go as deeply as I could with another person and with myself, enriching me both as an individual and as an artist.”⁷⁸ Carucci’s images merge an intuitive snapshot quality with an

⁷³ Carucci, interview by Bright.

⁷⁴ This set up is required to facilitate her self-portraiture. Early in her career—during her *Diary of a Dancer* series in which she documents her time as a professional belly dancer—she would hand the camera to strangers, but ultimately involved her husband Eran to produce more successful photographs. Eran would press the shutter and initiate the self-timer after Carucci set up the angle and settings, as she still wanted the photos to be her own. This is the same process used in the *Mother* images.

⁷⁵ Carucci, interview by Bright.

⁷⁶ Carucci, interview by Bright.

⁷⁷ Carucci, interview by Bright.

⁷⁸ Bright, *Home Truths*, 22.

intensely staged theatrical flair.⁷⁹ Both *Trying to protect Emmanuelle* and *I Will Protect You* make visible (literally and figuratively) the responsibilities Carucci meets daily. Depicting the mother-child as a symbiotic relationship entangled with the mother-artist, Carucci presents herself as an individual, an artist, and a mother, all at once.

V. Conclusion

The works of Mann and Carucci included in this thesis are pregnant bodies;⁸⁰ their images become pregnant by being inhabited by both mother and child, becoming physical objects fraught with immaterial significance. The mutuality of the mother-child dyad is reflected in photographs that “let mothers recognize that they are mother” and the act of this looking and seeing “blurs boundaries between mother and child, creating a pregnant body.”⁸¹ This in turn creates images indexical of motherhood-in-practice, and becomes a wider reflection of the conditions of motherhood.⁸² The mother-artists’ involvement in creating the subject—children, and thus motherhood—and object—photograph—makes their position as mother more visible.

As Mann and Carucci themselves have established, the photographing of children is, essentially, a seizure of fleeting moments. These moments, whether it be a wet bed or a sweet embrace, give “proof” to the condition of motherhood. The sense of ephemerality of childhood is

⁷⁹ Carucci notes in her interview with Bright that she finds family albums (vernacular snapshot photography) inspiring because she’s allowed to look at them in a “pure” kind of way without consideration of formal qualities, price, or competition. She also describes her influences, saying she’s always looked to photographers who photograph their children for inspiration, even before having her own, such as Emmet Gowin, Nicholas Nixon, Tierney Gearon, and most notably, Sally Mann. The theatrics of the staged image with the sense of spontaneity is a major link between these two artists.

⁸⁰ Re-referencing Harding’s quote: “In pictures of their children, mothers are visible on the surface not only in any genetic resemblances, but also in the decisions that went into taking or having the pictures taken: the clothes the child wears, the setting, the occasion — whether planned or spontaneous. So the frame not only captures the child, but also discloses the mother’s inherent involvement in that seizure” (Harding, “Motherhood Reimag(in)ed,” 115.)

⁸¹ Harding, “Motherhood Reimag(in)ed,” 115.

⁸² I do recognize that this thesis analyzes the work of two relatively Western, heterosexual, cisgender women. This topic of motherhood photography would be complemented by a larger discussion around non-white, non-heteronormative experiences with mothering in art.

situated in a conversation about the loss of condition (whether that be motherhood or childhood, and, in other words, the death of these conditions). These analyses suggest that there will be a time in which a mother's child no longer exists as a child, and no longer exists at all. This sense of death is not the loss that is applicable to the images of motherhood in this thesis. Bright accurately explains that the loss in motherhood photography is not, in fact, about death, but instead about losing contact—contact between mother and child, and contact between image and object.⁸³ What all these images and these two artists try to make sense of is how to continue their presence in their child's life both in a very involved manner and from an inevitably removed perspective, and how to use the camera lens as a manner of mediation. The inevitable loss of contact is addressed in the medium of photography because it continues the use of the umbilical cord, of light, of viewership, of mothering, past its point of relevance or reality.

These mother-artists behind the camera enact a reciprocity of visible and invisible, specifically through the mother-child.⁸⁴ As Mann and Carucci reflect themselves through their children, both claim their images are often gifts from their children. A quote from Mann's *Immediate Family* summarizes this in a manner that is applicable to both Mann and Carucci's work: "They [her children] have been involved in the creative process since infancy. At times, it is difficult to say exactly who makes the pictures. Some are gifts to me from my children ... When the good pictures come, we hope they tell truths, but truths 'told slant' ... For me, those pointed lessons of impermanence are softened by the unchanging scape of my life, the durable realities ..."⁸⁵ This idea that photographs are gifts from their children implies that the mother-child dyad is inextricably intact. The mother-artists barely see their work as their own; it is,

⁸³ Bright, interview with Carucci.

⁸⁴ To call back to Batchen's analysis: mothers behind cameras enact an "endless reciprocity of the visible and the invisible." (Batchen, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 4.)

⁸⁵ Sally Mann, *Immediate Family*, (1st ed. New York: Aperture, 1992), n.p.

instead, a collaboration, but it is not a real collaboration. The mother-artist engages in five recognizable actions while photographing that the child is not capable of: “taking, looking at, storing, displaying, and sharing the images.”⁸⁶ The resulting images unite the intricate, laborious work of the mother-artist with the unconscious “work” of the child (an infant in most of these images), a figure with little to no autonomy, individuality, or creative consciousness, all qualities the mother-artist demonstrates.

The central works of Mann and Carucci in this thesis put an emphasis on a transference of energy and influence, a reciprocity: the mother producing her children, staging her imagery, working behind and in front of the camera to facilitate this “umbilical cord” that upholds the mother-artist in her practice of depicting the mother-child. The labor that is required in this process is pushed to the forefront of the imagery. This in turn complicates the more familiar tropes, such as the sentimental and flawless Madonna and child, despite its lasting aesthetic influences,⁸⁷ and at the forefront: the Hidden Mother. As Miller summarizes: “Although this idyllic image of motherhood is not one that contemporary artists are now particularly interested in addressing, surrounded as they are by the reality of modern motherhood with all its tensions and pressures and ambiguities, this idealized image of mother and baby in a fused state is still very present in our culture.”⁸⁸ The presumed harmony, peace, and satisfaction of mother-child relations is addressed in this photography by the mother-artist.

Even though reflections of motherhood may be present in the work of Mann and Carucci, and other photographers preoccupied with motherhood, this does not necessarily mean a truth is

⁸⁶ Harding, “Motherhood Reimag(in)Ed,” 112.

⁸⁷ It is near impossible to view an image of mother and child without this iconography coming to mind, an indication of the influence Western male artists have on the canon, even more reason as to why images of motherhood by mothers are essential.

⁸⁸ Miller, *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents*, 44.

revealed. The objectivity required to divulge this “truth” may require that the mother-child and mother-artist extricate themselves from the dyad to be able to document and control this space as an artist. While Carucci believes her photographs are inherently genuine and representative of her experience with motherhood, Mann is much more skeptical. Despite being grounded by “durable realities,” she wonders “How can a sentient person of the modern age mistake photography for reality?”⁸⁹ To make sense of this divisiveness, it may be fair to assume that all representations of motherhood, Mann and Carucci’s included, depict “slanted truths,” an image of some version of reality that is inherently tainted by the ramifications of the medium. While the mother is what bridges and tethers the two subjects of artistry and child, this means that the mother is also inherently always a part of these interactions and depictions, incapable of finding the distance and ambivalence needed to reveal a “truth.” This thesis uncovers that the dialectics of mother-artist and mother-child are held intact through these images. Still, the spatial and temporal conditions of motherhood,⁹⁰ the impermanence of the moment and time of that experience, are etched on the negative or digital file. Their images of motherhood are recorded in an effort of preservation, illumination, or, inherently, visibility.

⁸⁹ Mann, *Hold Still*, 151.

⁹⁰ Temporal and spatial meaning the physical demands of motherhood; the space her body takes up; the ever-changing needs of the child, and the fact that their needs will dissipate; the emotional occupation; most notably, the labor.

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Sally Mann, *The Wet Bed*, 1987, platinum print, 19 ¾ in. x 23 ¼ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/wet-bed-15559>.



Figure 2. Sally Mann, *Lee's Dirty Hands*, 1986, RC/gelatin silver print, 7.99 in. x 9.96 in. Unknown Collection, <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/sally-mann-1951-lees-dirty-hand-tirage-argentique-81-c-cc14ea7bef>.



Figure 3. Elinor Carucci, *Trying to protect Emmanuelle*, 2006, archival pigment print. Unknown Collection, <http://www.elinorcarucci.com/mother.php#0>.



Figure 4. Elinor Carucci, *I Will Protect You*, 2008, archival pigment print, 22 in. x 17 in. Edwynn Houk Gallery, <https://www.houkgallery.com/exhibitions/45/works/artworks-65474-elinor-carucci-i-will-protect-you-2008/>.



Figure 5. Keith Bros Fine Art Studios, late 1800's. Iowa, USA. Unknown collection, <https://ridiculouslyinteresting.com/2012/01/05/hidden-mothers-in-victorian-portraits/>



Figure 6. Linda Fregni Nagler, *The Hidden Mother*, (excerpt from page 164-165), 2013, collection of 1,002 photographs (archival prints such as daguerreotypes, tintypes, cartes de visite, cabinet cards). <https://mackbooks.co.uk/products/the-hidden-mother-br-linda-fregni-nagler>.

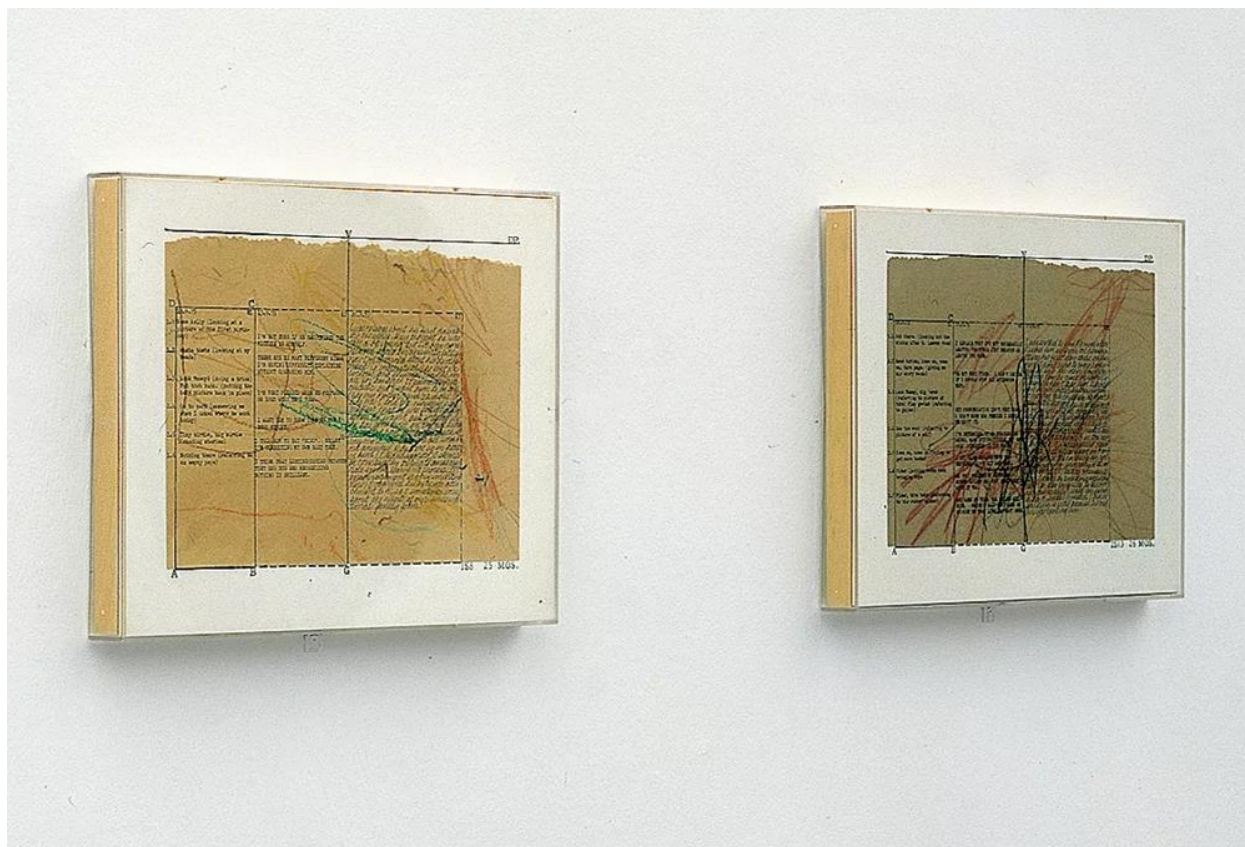


Figure 7. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Documentation III*, 1975, transitional objects, diary and diagram, installation: Perspex units, white cards, sugar paper, crayon, 13 units, 11 in. x 14 in. Tate Modern (various collections), <https://www.marykellyartist.com/post-partum-document-1973-79>



Figure 8. Catherine Opie, *Self Portrait/Nursing*, 2004, chromogenic print, 40 in. x 31 in. Guggenheim Museum, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/14666>.



Figure 9. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Madonna with Children*, 1864, albu­men silver print, 10.5 in. x 8 5/8 in. Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/julia-margaret-cameron-madonna-with-children-1864/.



Figure 10. Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, 1512-1513, oil on canvas, 104 in. x 77 in. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, <https://gemaeldegalerie.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/gemaeldegalerie-alte-meister-old-masters-picture-gallery-and-skulpturensammlung-sculpture-collection-up-to-1800/>.