

Transcript

OU Economics seminar series: essential for what?

The artists

Shweta Bist:

I'm so happy to be here. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Shweta Bist. I'm a photographer currently living and working in New York City. I was born in New Delhi, India and relocated with my family to the US in 2013.

My work is an exploration of maternal subjectivity, in particular, the psychological experience of owning the maternal identity, the emotional labour of mothering, and how it is transformed, over time, as the needs of our children change.

So, when I was making this image, it had been over a year since the lockdown in New York. By this time, we had gotten into a routine with home-schooling and my husband's work and my own. I had started working on this project, the series from which this image is from.

But there was a sense of hopelessness about the pandemic, not knowing when it's going to end and when things would go back to normal. And so, I'm thinking about that, and also the fact that I was burdened with a lot of work. And funnily enough, this image came about a few months after my realization of how awful things were going in a sense.

It's like when you're thrown into the water, you're trying hard to stay alive. And it's only later that when you have a moment to think, that you're able to bring it all back and realise what you have gone through. So, I think this picture is quite universal. I thought this was an experience that I definitely would share with a lot of people. I was hoping that it did strike a chord with many other mothers and carers like me.

Yeah, so in effect that it is, and I just wanted to comment, quickly, if I may, about something Sarah said, and as she was speaking, I was nodding my head here. That this whole idea of care work not being considered economically productive, the one that is unpaid, is something that I have always had an issue with.

I was a stay-at-home mother for a very long time. And this is one of the reasons that I made the entire series in my home, and I still make a lot of images in my home, to kind of subvert that idea and the thinking that unpaid work, that care work, is not economically valuable.

So, I think that I'm really happy to be here and a part of this group and the exhibition, so thank you so much. This aligns very beautifully with my work.

Helen Acklam:

Thank you very much for having me. It's, yeah, it's great to be here. Thank you. So, this piece, called Strain, is from a project I've been working on since the beginning of the pandemic, really, where I returned to an area in South Wales that I grew up in. And in particular, to a place and an event which I hadn't really looked at, which was surrounded in shame. And it had to do with events in my teenage years.

So that's my space of making the work. And I'm using soil from a particular ground and this place in the Welsh valleys. And with that soil, I've been making pigments and making clay. And part of that process has been to strain the soil through various sieves and in this case, a piece of muslin, in order to make the clay.

This is a still, but there was a video of this work dripping through, until actually, the weight of the soil and the liquid broke the fabric and it collapsed. So, I was looking for that tipping point.

But I suppose, as you've been talking, I've been thinking about feminist work that I do and what I read about. And in particular, around the work of Julia Kristeva. The idea of woman as abject and how things are made abject by ourselves but also by society.

And once something is made abject and pushed to the back of the mind, oh, it's easier to be pushed to the back of the mind, it's easy to ignore, and it's easier to not come in to have a conscience about it.

So, I think with street people, for example, how easy it is or it can be just to walk past people because we've somehow made them abject. And because of events which happened to me, I believe that I was, particularly at that time, it was in the '80s, in South Wales, and it was very easy to be silenced and made abject.

And I guess, as I'm listening to you talking about the essential labour, how easy it is to not really think about certain areas as labour, as contributing, to put them out of-- to ignore, I suppose. How often do we think about the people who clean? Or who attend to in caring situations and as carers?

So that's really made me think quite a lot about that. How this is compartmentalised in the mind. And yes, so this is an ongoing project for me. And I suppose this represents the weight of something and the shape of something.

So, whether this is the weight of labour, or whether it's the weight of guilt, or the weight of shame, or whatever it is for each one of us, it was making this unseen ignored visible. So yeah, that's this work for me. Thank you.

Jess Baum:

The film I made was made during lockdown. I felt desperate to connect with other people. And like Helen, as well, I think that idea of being a pressurised container, somehow under strain, this feeling of kind of bubbling, something bubbling, not quite knowing what to do with oneself.

And I kind of just put it out there to other people. And for some reason, chose mothers because I suppose, I am a mother and wanted to know if it was something-- this idea of being a kind of boiling pot or a simmering pot, some people didn't feel simmering at all or boiling at all, if they'd like to make work with me.

And it's the first time I've worked in that way. And chose Medea, the music, because of that story, as well, of being pushed to the edge as a mother. And it's interesting again, Shweta, I make lots of work at home. Practically speaking, it's always been really helpful. But actually, it's a really creative place. I've always found, for me, the home.

And I can't remember. Maybe one of you knows, but somebody wrote, some art critic or somebody some time ago wrote, that the pushchair in the hallway was the ruin of artists. Maybe someone can remind me who said that.

But my pushchair can stay in the hallway, thank you very much, and I'll make work in it or around it. So, there you go. But thanks. It's lovely to be here.

Anna Ream:

I am a conceptual and documentary portrait photographer. And I'm based in the United States in Issaquah, Washington, which is near Seattle. My work centres on identity, both individual identity and social identity.

And the image that you have chosen, which one, I am so grateful to be included in this and really grateful to be a part of this and to see more about your own work and how my work fits into that context. The image is from a series that I have created called Madonnahood, which is using visual imagery, the visual language of Madonna art, to symbolise how motherhood is idealised.

And then I have taken experiences and realities of modern motherhood that I feel contradict that idealization. And this particular image is a friend of mine. And the IVF needles are actually needles from her IVF cycle that I turned into a crown and then took a portrait of her with them.

And that gives you a summary. And I'll keep it brief and end it there so that you can include all the other artists.

Clarice Concalves:

Thank you so much for having me here. I'm quite nervous, so I wrote some words, like really briefly, about the artwork. I'm a visual artist and single mother. I live and work in Taguatinga, Brasilia, Brazil. I have a BA in visual arts from the University of Brasilia. And since 2005, have been presenting my pictorial research in individual and collective shows, art fairs, and awards through the country and abroad.

My production addresses themes such as socialization, sexuality, motherhood, and normality in their respective performances within the social context, as a reflection of my poetic research around bodily experiences.

My main medium of materialization is painting. Although, increasingly performative processes have been part of the creation of these images in painting through dance, video, and photography. I'm a member of the Martiz collective, an art collective formed by mother artists from the state of Distrito Federal in Brazil that develops human interventions in the city.

And about this artwork, II Prosthetic. This term means to consider a substance or real thing what is just an abstraction or a fiction. [INAUDIBLE] of artwork. In my artwork titles, I like to open to sensorial readings to the image, more than just bringing a literal explanation.

And in this case, it's kind of like a joke because care work, reproductive work, sustaining life management, domestic labour are not recognised or valued in our society. Even though every living human being was birthed, nurtured, and kept alive into adulthood mostly by women.

I live in a colonial, classist, and racist society. In my country, it's common for upper-class people to pay lower-class women to take care of their kids and their home, mostly Black poor women, and mostly, they are very mistreated with no labour rights or childcare for their own kids. So, the colonial imagery is still very present and very recent. I had in my family history, as a daughter of a White woman from a middle-class family. My mother was raised mostly by housekeepers in the culture mirrored in the United States culture.

My grandmother had already passed away, bought the propaganda, I'm not going to quote the corporation responsible for that, but I know you can relate to what it is, at the time, that used to encourage women to not breastfeed their children for aesthetic reasons, and also the excuse that breast milk was weak.

So, my mother and her brother were not breastfed by my grandmother. They were fed with powdered milk and stuff. Due to that, my mother has very fragile teeth and all her life, I remember seeing her metallic smile and always spending a lot of time, money, and time with dentists.

But I also remember that my mother once told me, she, for a brief time, had taken milk from a wet nurse black woman. So, I got this narrative with me for a long time. And when that became a mother, I could not breastfeed my own baby due to a malformation, very profound cleft lip.

So, I spent months obsessed with milk and trying all the pumps that were available in the market and pumping milk for hours a day, every day very few quantity, with the hope that after this first surgery I could still breastfeed him, but I couldn't.

I was getting psychologically depressed and losing hair and slimming, so after five months, I gave up. So, this thing, breastfeed, was something very moving to me. And then I had the urge to produce this image that bring all those stories in the form of cure, but also mirror many other similar stories and oppressions around the globe.

I was very happy to know that this image and its content could represent much more and be a place to bring discussion and visibility for such a taboo in our society. Thank you very much for this selection and congratulations to organisers and participants.

Marianne Lepine:

Hello, hi, I'm Marianne from Brazil. Thank you for having me too. I'm a single mother too. And there are these themes that are very important to me, like feminism and motherhood and being a single mother. But I never knew how to put this in my art.

I'm a painter and I paint. I always painted more decorative things. I was painting still lives from observation, but things like flowers and objects from home and things like that. And then during the pandemic, I had to stay at home with my daughter. And the schools were closed for nearly two years here in Brazil.

So, but this was from 2020. It's kind of the beginning. Well, it was the worst part because the schools were closed, and I couldn't even well, let my daughter with my mother because my mother was also scared of the virus and everything.

So, I was at home alone with her for a very long time and just taking cooking and doing the housework and all these things. And then I was painting a lot too. But I was painting the things that were around me, like in my home.

And then I ended up painting this, which was a bit different from what I used to do because I used to do things that were more colorful and happy. And then and then I realised that it had an impact. A lot of people commented on this when I posted it on Instagram.

And so, I realised that-- well, I don't know. I managed to put something that was going on with me in the painting. And it was good because from then I started to paint. I kind of found that I managed to find how to put a little bit of what I wanted to say in my art.

Yara Ligiero:

Hi, nice to meet you. Yes, I'd like to say a few words. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm Yara Ligiéro. I'm a visual artist and also art educator. I have a diploma degree at bazar de vale. I'm Brazilian.

So, for me-- you were talking about the house, for me, it's like it's my workplace. And it's a paradox because as a mother, as a single mother, it's a place very-- it has a huge paradox between the work being-- I have to feed my daughter. I have to cook, and I have to clean the house.

But it's also a place of joy. I really like to raise my daughter and to do a lot of things with her. It's also the place I create. It's the place I paint. So, my work has not been shown here, but it's basically a short video, a very nice frame of a daily play between the mother and the daughter, where you can only see my hands playing as a spider. It's called aranha, spider in Portuguese.

And you can see my daughter's face reacting enjoying the performance. It's actually her expression, her reaction, that can make believe the spider. And that's the magic about it. So, it's a very light frame of the home place. So yeah, thank you.

Sara Stevano:

I'm really impressed with everything that I've seen. And I think that this is exactly what we need in order to reclaim the meanings of essential work. So, it's very impressive. I found it all very interesting, and it was great to hear all of the artists who spoke about themselves and their work.

So, I would like to say, perhaps, a couple of things. So one is, I think for me, one cross-cutting message is, the complexity of social reproduction work in the home and in other places. And in a way, it is this paradox that social reproduction work is absolutely essential but always made invisible. But also, particularly when we think about the social reproduction work that takes place in the home, that is also essential and necessary, but at the same time, insufficient, and I think that feeling of exhaustion, the tipping point, and the crisis of social reproduction that emerges from many of the art pieces that I've seen, it's exactly about that.

And it connects with the question that Yara was posing to you just now that in a way, the COVID-19 pandemic did not create anything new from this perspective. So, all of these vulnerabilities and inequalities so were there before. And what we saw during the pandemic, is just an exacerbation of all of this. That is very clear from my perspective. And I think it's something that comes across what others have represented in their art and said as well.