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A Pandemic Pregnancy: A Postpartum MFA

by Carla Ann Lipkin



About the Artist

Carla Lipkin holds a Master of Landscape Architecture from the University of Toronto and just recently completed her Master of Fine Art from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2023. She lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Her current body of work studies the trajectory of emotions that arise through caregiving and relationships, as experienced by a synesthete.

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Birth is not merely that which divides women from themselves, so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself

—Rachel Cusk

Peripartum

March 2020. We are in lockdown. I am in the third semester of my MFA. I am working full-time. I am working from home. I am MFA-ing from home. I am living at home. I am terrified at home. I am claustrophobic at home. I am frustrated at home. I am depressed at home. I am weeping at home. I can see the light from home. I cannot see the light from home (see Fig. 1 – 2).

I fight with my spouse.

I kiss my dog.

I bake.

I cook.

I want to do everything except make art.

But I can't do anything except make art.

I turn inward.

I remember once consoling a friend who had just immigrated to Toronto from Cape Town, South Africa. She missed the ocean, the mountains, and the beauty of her hometown. She didn't know how she could be happy without them. I immigrated here from Johannesburg, we did not have the mountains or ocean. I told her that she needed to build her fulfillment from within. How easy and vapid a life to be easily satiated from that which lies outside of ourselves. How wildly powerful it is to have built content from within ourselves, to have built rich inner lives to accompany us through every moment,

to have winter (and now a pandemic) to retreat inside ourselves and grow, bloom, and flourish.

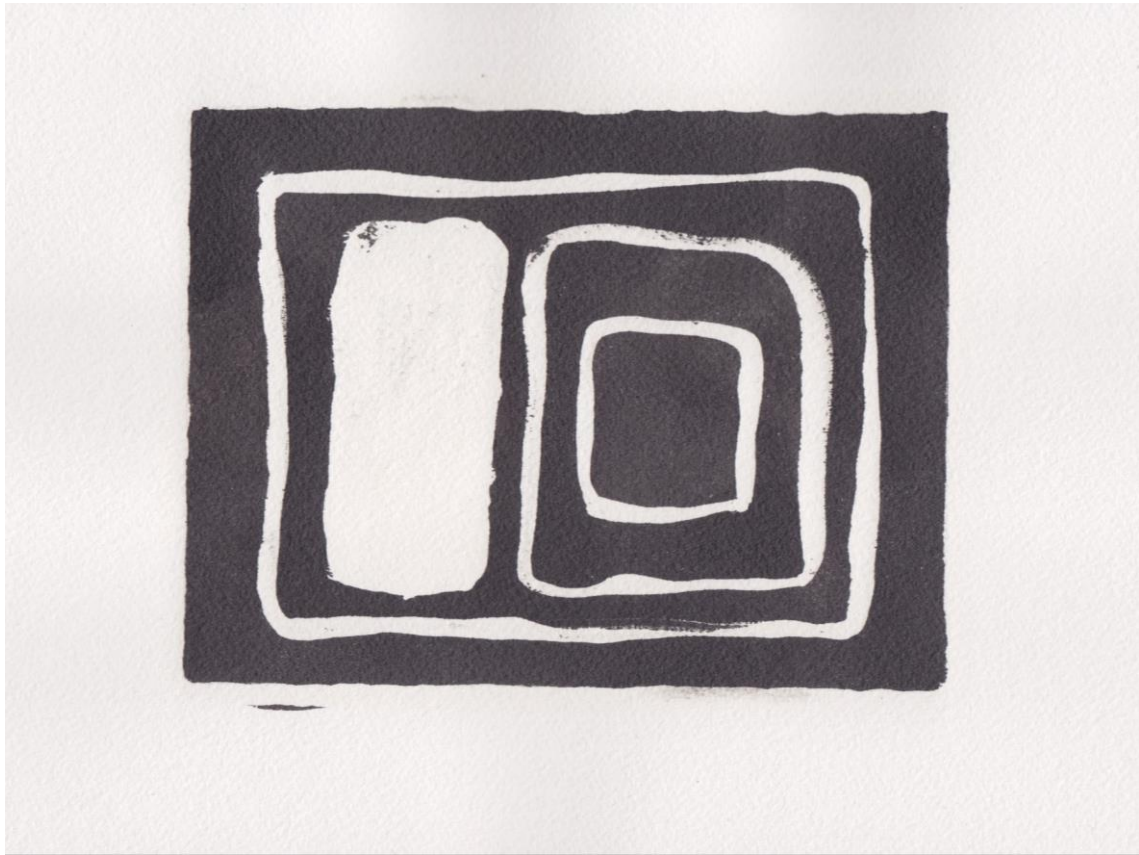


Figure 1. Lipkin, Carla. *A box in a box, next to a void in a box*. 2020. 9" x 12", ink on paper.

I make art, and my inner world expands.

I make art and my inner world calms down.

I make art and I feel strong.

The semester ends, and I am lost and relieved. We learned the news that our summer residency in Vancouver has been cancelled. I decide to take a leave of absence.



Figure 2. Lipkin, Carla. *Attempt to Fly 1*. 2020. 9"x12", ink on paper.

December 2020. I learn that I am pregnant. I am terrified of getting COVID while pregnant. I don't know if my nausea is from nerves or hormones. The news tells us that pregnant women have compromised immune systems and are more susceptible to severe disease and preterm birth. My anxiety skyrockets. Vaccines are approved for emergency use. Pregnant women are excluded from trials and are left to make the decision alone. Theoretically, it is safe, they say. Brave and desperate pregnant women begin to take the vaccine. Nothing happens. Data begins to pour in. No serious side effects. I get my first vaccine in May of 2021. I get my second in July of 2021.

18 August, 2021. My baby is born via unplanned c-section after 17 hours of labour. I get it, I understand, I am so tired I can't keep my eyes open, but I can't take my eyes off of him. A knot in his umbilical cord 3 inches from its connection to him. I am in awe of the universe for not allowing him to make his way out as planned, keeping him safe, and keeping him alive. "He's going to ride with you mama" the nurses tell me as they wheel us out of the OR into recovery.

Postpartum

I had been obsessive about whether to choose motherhood or not. It did not come naturally to me, I was not a person who dreamed of having children one day. When my friends began to have babies I was relieved it wasn't me. I did not consider myself a person who could handle it. I was too emotional and sensitive, comfortable with small goals, ambitious *enough* but not *driven*. Didn't I need to be *driven*? My perception is that all my life, people have spoken about parenting, the verb, and this word made me feel tired and bored. They never spoke about *motherhood*. When I think back, if they did, I wouldn't have had a second thought... Or perhaps they did but I was not yet tuned in to listen.

At the first sight of my son I am euphoric. I am ready, I am DRIVEN. I will do anything for this mysterious creature. I cannot imagine that I would have chosen another life. I am voraciously in love with life. I am inspired and elated and ...a mess. My mind is in chaos. I am experiencing everything concurrently without rest, without separation. All moments are one. There are no compartments. There is no sense. I am tethered to only one thing, but both of us are untethered and floating into the abyss of this new world. How can we find ground?

Before my baby turns one, I return to my MFA. I begin my thesis research. I begin to clean up the mess of my internal world. I begin to understand what has happened. I read about the mind, I read about motherhood and the mind. Wilfred R. Bion's theory Container/Contained explains that in my unconscious I am lending my mind to my baby until he is no longer fragmented (2004). His mind has not yet formed, and I contain all his fears, frustration, and progress. I take in his world, process it, and return it to him in manageable pieces, bit by bit. According to Pediatrician turned Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, I am holding dark and desperate thoughts and images. He writes that "If left for too long without familiar or human contact they [babies] have experiences which we can only describe by such words as "going to pieces, falling forever, dying and dying and dying, losing all vestige of hope of the renewal of contacts" (Winnicott 1987, 86).

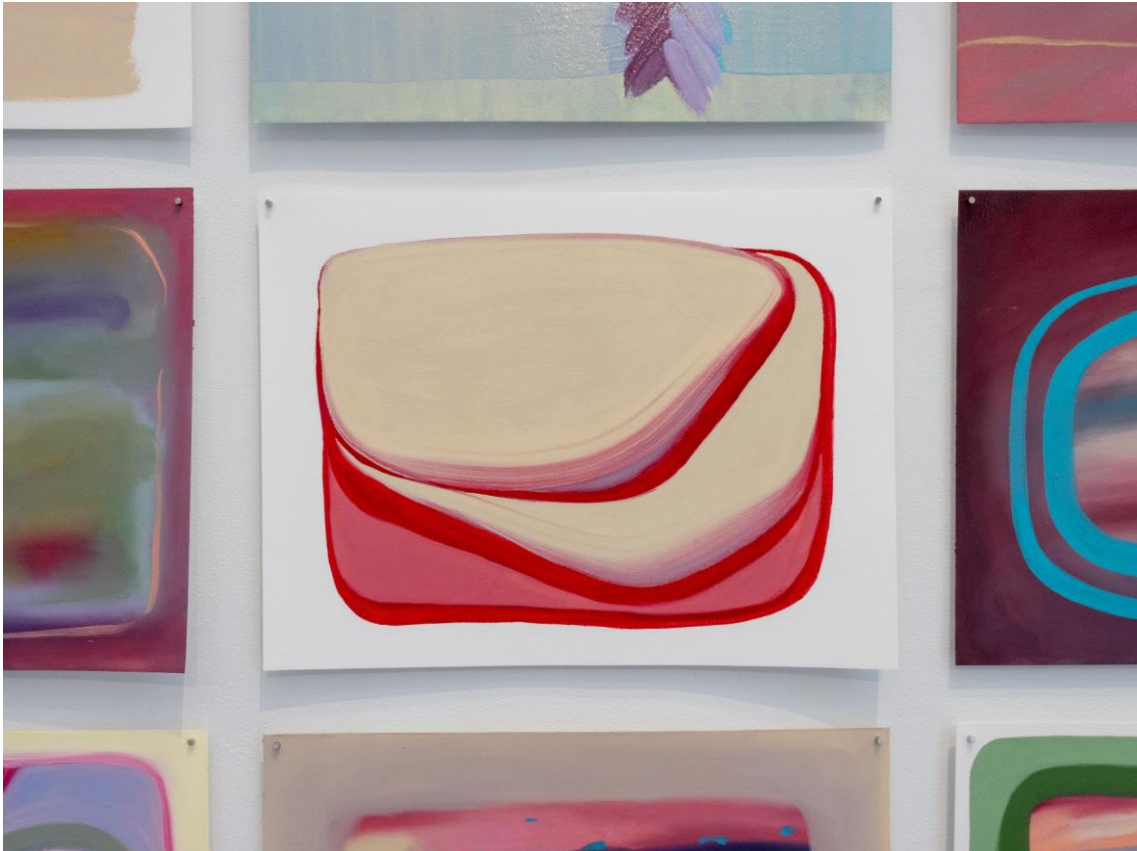


Figure 3. Lipkin, Carla. Detail from *A Battle of Helplessness*. 2023. 144, 12"x16", oil on paper.

I recognize that all of this has been contained in my inner world for the last year. Some of the chaos is mine, and some is not. I am desperate to sort through it. My MFA becomes my place to do this. I learn wonderful things. Of these things, I learned that I am synesthetic. I learned that I think and feel in shapes and colours. I indulge my tendencies to want to paint intimacy, and my work begins to track and study the trajectory of emotions that arise through caregiving, as experienced by a synesthete. These paintings are an outward manifestation of my inner visual perception of the intimate, beautiful, explosive, awful, and perfect moments with my baby.



Figure 4. Lipkin, Carla. Detail from *A Battle of Helplessness*, 2023, 144 x 12"x16", oil on paper.

Abstraction allows for the moving through transformation, it is important as an open-ended framework. It allows for habitation within the liminal spaces that weave between thoughts and moments. Full shapes, soft shapes, part shapes. Abstraction offers a fluid way of working congruent with the maternal warping of time and space. There is a relational composition that oscillates between thinking about my body and my mind. There is gentle placement of forms and there is also harsh juxtaposition. I use colour and repetition to express ongoingness, newness, fragmentation, and containment. There are closed forms and moments where they are broken open. This speaks to the cycle of feeling in control and then losing control, leaking sanity resulting in overwhelm and chaos. They are made as close to the lived experience throughout the day as they can be. There is a feeling of going to pieces and getting put back together again and again. There is blurriness, and there is sharpness.

I am working with the ever-present, ever-shifting memory of my son, the memory that is always being erased and rerecorded. The only way to work with this fact is to work quickly, simply and directly, not overthinking, just moving through these eternally morphing states. I have been able to do this by using oil paint on paper, completing each painting in a single sitting. I paint on a small scale, a scale conducive to motherhood, a

scale that favours the limited resources I have both in my internal and external spaces. I paint with oil paint, wet on wet. The fluidity of the paint satisfies the fluidity of my thoughts. The different colours I paint with touch each other very carefully, or very abruptly, sometimes blending into one another, sometimes remaining separate, disconnected.



Figure 5. Lipkin, Carla. Detail shot of *A Battle of Helplessness*. 2023. 144, 12"x16", oil on paper.

I am using the form to echo bodily movements, the sensing of intimacy between two bodies once connected (see Fig. 3 – 6). I am also speaking about the grief of this being lost. As Rachel Cusk has put it so poignantly “we are still so close to our sundering that neither of us seems entire: the painful stump of our jointness, livid and fresh, remains” (Cusk 2003, 56). They encapsulate the continuous acts of attempting and failing, both as parent and child, speaking to the void of knowledge yet unknown but soon to be revealed the unlearned lesson, skill or fact. They are inquisitive inquiries into biological processes, making sense of molecular changes unavailable to be witnessed. They speak to the testing of new thresholds and unpredictable vortexes. They speak to the handling and holding of so much, and the relief of letting it all go.

July 2023. My final installation comprises 144 oil paintings on paper, each particular to its moment. They are installed in an alcove in a grid, the viewer immersed. I stand in the space, look at my mind that envelopes me, and I am completely tethered to the ground.



Figure 6. Lipkin, Carla. Installation shot of *A Battle of Helplessness*. 2023. 144, 12”x16”, oil on paper.

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