

Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood

by

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Abstract

Nest, Rest, Shadows explores the surreal and embodied dimensions of motherhood and caregiving, translating its unseen experiences into material form through participatory engagement. Exhibited at OCAD University Grad Gallery, Toronto, the project examines caregiving as an imprint—a gesture that lingers beyond the moment of touch, existing between presence and absence, resilience and exhaustion. The work engages with rest as a radical act, challenging the relentless demands of caregiving and reframing maternal experiences as an assertion of agency rather than passive nurturing.

Clay, with its capacity to hold traces of touch, serves as both a vessel of memory and an ephemeral archive of care. The recurring motif of the clenched fist embodies both protection and defiance, blurring distinctions between intimacy and isolation, tenderness and endurance. Through audience participation, the work creates a shifting landscape of gestures, each imprint contributing to a shared dialogue on care, loss, and resilience.

Nest, Rest, Shadows asserts that caregiving is not only an act of service but a force that transforms space, memory, and identity, imprinting itself on both the body and collective consciousness.

Keywords: caregiving, maternal, participatory, rest, memory, resilience, performance

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To the hands that touched this work, the voices that shaped it, and the spaces that held it—I am grateful beyond words.

This research began as a study of motherhood but became a record of endurance, loss, and connection. It is both mine and not mine alone. To all those who have carried me through it—thank you.



Figure 1. *Within Light, Shadows Remain*, photograph by Setayesh Babaei.

Dedication

To Aila, my daughter, my beginning and my becoming. You are the breath within these pages, the imprint of every moment I have carried, the presence that turned absence into meaning. This work is yours before it is mine, written in the space between my arms holding you and my hands shaping this research.

To Soraya, my mother, for all that was given, for all that was unspoken. I carry your endurance in my hands, your tenderness in my voice, and your sacrifices in the spaces where absence once was. Through this work, I seek you, I honor you.

To Ghamar Sultan, my grandmother, whose voice reached me only through dreams but carried the weight of generations. May this be a thread that reconnects us across time.

To Afshin, my partner, whose unwavering presence became the foundation on which I could create. Thank you for holding both me and Aila, for taking care of me in the moments I forgot to care for myself, for every quiet act of love that asked for nothing in return. For understanding without words, for carrying what I could not, for standing beside me through every moment—I see you, I thank you, and I love you.

And to all the mothers before me—known and unknown, seen and unseen—whose love built worlds, whose labor shaped generations —this is for you.

To the mothers yet to come, may you inherit a world that sees you, honors you, and holds your labor with care. May your voice be heard, your presence felt, and your stories remembered.

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Statement of Contributions

This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on motherhood, caregiving, and rest through an autoethnographic and material-based inquiry. By integrating personal experience with broader cultural, historical, and theoretical frameworks, it foregrounds the maternal body as both an archive and a site of resistance. The methodology—spanning performance, sculpture, sound, printmaking, and writing—expands how maternal labor, endurance, and presence can be documented, materialized, and witnessed within contemporary art.

The project challenges traditional representations of caregiving by positioning rest not as absence, but as an act of defiance and renewal—intertwined with exhaustion, repetition, and quiet persistence. Care and rest are explored not as idealized or resolved states, but as unstable, embodied practices that carry both tenderness and tension. Drawing from feminist materialist perspectives, the project examines how touch, imprint, and repetition function as visual and conceptual metaphors for care. The integration of poetry, documentation, and participatory elements situates the work within a lineage of artists and thinkers who reclaim the visibility of mothering as a political, embodied, and creative act.

Through collaborations with other creatives—including sound-based work and interactive installations—this research moves beyond personal narrative into collective experience, recognizing caregiving as shared and ongoing labor. It also contributes to interdisciplinary conversations on materiality, memory, and the politics of care, engaging with fields such as feminist theory, affect studies, and contemporary sculpture.

By centering caregiving as both form and content, this research asserts that the maternal experience is not marginal to contemporary art but foundational to understanding endurance, transformation, and the traces we leave behind. It invites a reconsideration of how rest, presence, and absence—marked by contradiction and dissonance—shape both artistic and social structures, opening space for future inquiry into care, labor, and the surreal textures of lived experience.

Introduction



Figure 2. *Nestled in Pattern*, photograph by Setayesh Babaei.

Motherhood Happens on the Floor

Making tea. I drop the tea bag into hot water, watching it settle, expand, and release its essence. I should have used loose tea leaves, let them rest before drinking, but I only have tea bags today—quick, efficient, stripped of ceremony. I let it sit in the cup and prepare myself to write.

I am writing a story. Stories are reflections of who we are and what we have done with our time, our being, and our becoming. But I am not the main character—my daughter,

Aila, is. My mother is. My grandmother and the mothers before her. Through Aila, I am beginning to understand the depth of maternal bonds—the way they extend beyond generations, inherited invisibly yet profoundly present on an emotional level. Motherhood has dissolved the distances I once felt with the women before me. It has escaped time. I feel them with me, within me. I hear their pain before I hear my own. I carry their stories, just as they carried mine before I even existed.

I am from her,
You shift from me to you,
And I, from you, to mother.¹

Motherhood happens on the floor. It is where Aila plays, where I sit, where I rest, where I am closest to the earth. It is where the weight of caregiving settles into my body—where exhaustion and love press into the ground beneath me. It is where I create.

The floor is where a child first sees the world, where their hands meet dust and light, where they reach, crawl, and rise. It is the threshold between stillness and movement, between dependence and discovery. And it is where a mother bends, kneels, and lingers—holding, soothing, watching. The floor carries us both, absorbing our presence, our weight, our moments of surrender and becoming.

I began *Nest, Rest, Shadows* to give form to this weight—to the grayness and heaviness of motherhood that exists alongside the colorful and joyful moments of everyday life as a mother. My mother never spoke of sorrow, grief, or loss in her mothering. Neither did my grandmother. Their silences were not because motherhood caused their suffering, but because their role as mothers required them to conceal it. They carried their burdens quietly, their emotions carefully folded away into the corners of their daily routines. There was no space to share, to cry, to search for their own being. They were mothers, first and only. I knew what my mother did for us—her care, her sacrifices, the ways she softened the world around us—but I never knew what she did for herself. She believed

¹ Setayesh Babaei, *Stay Alive So That I May Stay Alive*, unpublished poem from personal journal, included in *Nest, Rest, Shadows* (thesis, OCAD University, 2025), 61.

that our happiness was a mirror of her own, that if we felt joy, she would feel it too. And so, she erased herself from the story.

... a woman who might have been,
Who would have been,
Who should have been...²

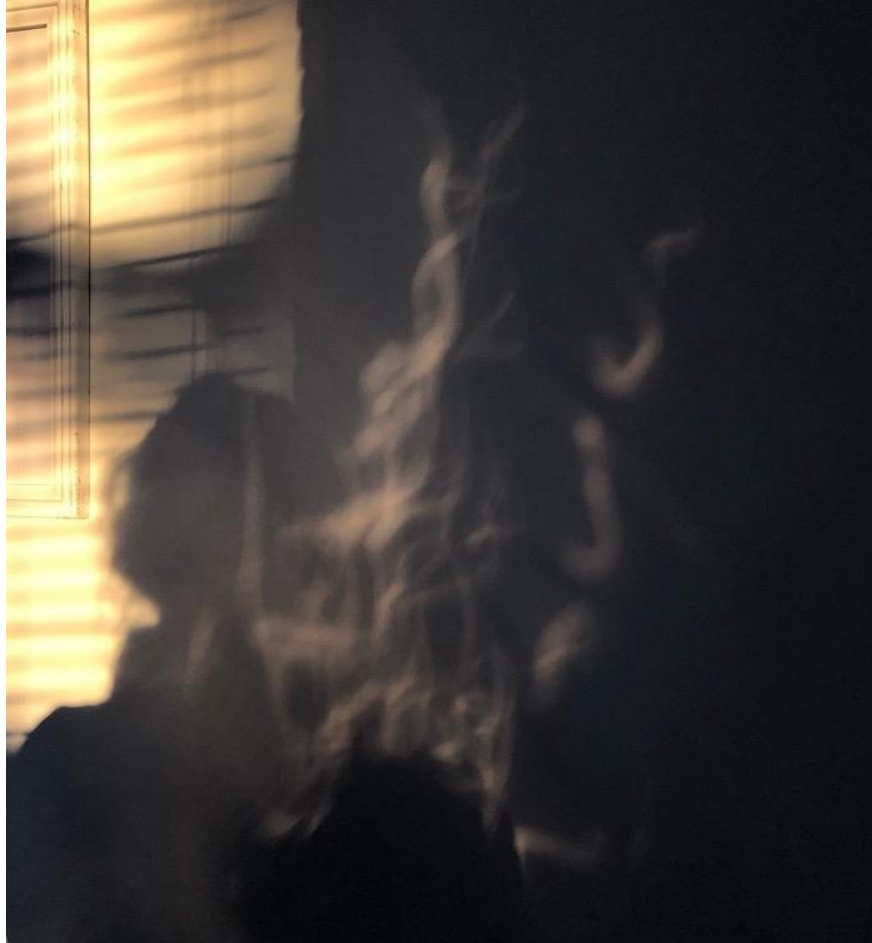


Figure 3. *Becoming*, photograph by Setayesh Babaei

The Disappearance and Reappearance of Self

Becoming a mother was the most deeply physical yet profoundly out-of-body experience I had ever endured. The transformation was immediate—one day I was myself, the next I was only a mother. I disappeared. And yet, I was more visible than ever, my body marked by motherhood, my time no longer my own. I had always taken care of others, but now,

² Setayesh Babaei, *Stay Alive So That I May Stay Alive*, unpublished poem from personal journal, included in *Nest, Rest, Shadows* (thesis, OCAD University, 2025), 63.

more than ever, I needed someone to care for me—to hold me, so I could hold Aila. It was my partner, her father, who held me. Who cared for me.

Somewhere within my mind,
A darkness opens, nameless.
Grief swells like breath itself,
Unbidden, unstoppable.
I was I,
Before I was a mother.³

It took me two years to find myself again, to recognize the duality of my existence. I am myself, and I am a mother.

Aila was a week overdue when I started my master's program. In my second class of the semester, I sat with her in my arms, feeding her while participating in discussions. At the time, I had no idea that motherhood would become the focus of my work. I was still committed to my undergraduate thesis, *Veins*, a speculative design project about buried urban rivers. But this time, I felt like I was the one buried, waiting to be uncovered, longing to be found.

I am the river.

Every project I touched, every concept I explored, led me back to caregiving. In my first semester, I made *Window Tree*, a project inspired by Robert Frost's poem *Tree at My Window*. I wrote:

"I carry one,
and she (the tree) carries many.
I look at her,
and she looks after me."⁴

³ Setayesh Babaei, *Stay Alive So That I May Stay Alive*, unpublished poem from personal journal, included in *Nest, Rest, Shadows* (thesis, OCAD University, 2025), 63.

⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Window Tree*, unpublished poem from personal journal, included in *Nest, Rest, Shadows* (thesis, OCAD University, 2025), 70.

Every idea I pursued returned me to motherhood. There was no escape, and no desire for one. I welcomed the pull, the waves drawing me deeper into an ocean of layered histories, of unseen labor, of resilience. It was only in my last semester that I saw the pattern clearly. I made the conscious decision to listen to my own voice and let *Nest, Rest, Shadows* emerge as a project that could explore the multidimensional aspects of motherhood and the postpartum experience. But framing my experience as research was a challenge.

My work has often been perceived as “too personal,” especially in its focus on motherhood and the embodied experience of caregiving. Some peers raised questions about whether a maternal lens might limit the work’s broader resonance. These conversations often emerged from individuals whose relationships to gender and caregiving differ from my own, which helped me recognize how personal and embodied narratives can be received in varied—and sometimes complex—ways. This reflects broader tensions in the field of autoethnography, where gendered and emotional research is sometimes marginalized within dominant academic frameworks. As *Advances in Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry* argues, such narratives challenge traditional boundaries of knowledge production and affirm the importance of lived experience, relationality, and affect in research.⁵

Instead of being seen as a strength, my intergenerational knowledge of motherhood was sometimes used to critique the project, as if my own lived experience was a limitation rather than an entry point to understanding caregiving. Yet, reflecting on my own story was essential—not as an act of isolation, but to think about others, to care for them, and to recognize the broader structures that shape our experiences.

It was in this tension between the personal and the collective, the intimate and the structural, that I found autoethnography, introduced to me by a mentor, to be the most valuable tool for structuring my research. It allowed me to explore how my experience of motherhood intersected with broader societal and cultural systems.

⁵ ony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Advances in Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry: Reflections on the Legacy of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

I began to ask myself:

How does my story fit within the larger narrative of motherhood?

Where does personal experience become communal experience?

At what point does caregiving shift from an individual act to a societal expectation?

For weeks, I sat with these questions during my long commutes home. I had always thought about them, but I had never spoken to them aloud. I had never framed them as research. Motherhood, rest, exhaustion, resistance, erasure—where did they intersect?

It was on one of those exhausted subway rides home, surrounded by other weary parents, that I found part of the answer: we are all burned out by the system. I realized that my work was not just about motherhood—it was about rest.

Rest as Resistance and Ritual

Rest became my guide. It became the lens through which I explored the complexities of caregiving. I rested, but I never released the shame I felt when resting. Where did this shame come from?

My mother prayed three times a day. That was her rest. Her mother did the same. They settled into their bodies to connect with something beyond themselves. They rested without guilt because they called it prayer. It was a responsibility they felt had to be done. I don't pray. I play, with Aila. Without realizing it, that is my prayer.

Space, Materiality, and Memory

Rituals have shaped my practice in profound ways. They have disciplined my work, structured my time, and given form to intangible experiences. Whether it was the repetitive act of imprinting hands into clay or the meditative process of arranging objects in space, each action became a ritual of remembering, of holding, of care.

In May 2024, my solo exhibition at Grad Gallery, Toronto became a space for reflection. Before installing the work, I spent hours just being in the space. I sat on the floor, studying the architecture—the cold concrete walls, the height, the light filtering through windows, the sound of the security door, the echoes of distant conversations. The next

day, I brought Aila's Persian rug into the space and unrolled it. I sat on it and practiced the same routine, repeatedly. Each time, I set a reminder for myself: Rest. Remember that you are making to heal. You are healing to make.



Figure 4. *Resting Memory*, Persian rug brought into the space prior to installation, photograph by Setayesh Babaei.

Through this process, I realized that rest is not just a pause. It is a radical act of care. It is a rejection of the expectation that mothers should always keep going. It is an archive of resistance, a reclamation of space, a refusal to disappear.⁶ As a mentor once told me, "Motherhood is your power." I thought of how, as a caregiver, the words of others become lifelines. Caring is a loop of giving and receiving—when we care for others, we are also asking to be cared for in return. The kindness, the words, the recognition of our labor—these are not just comforts, they are necessities.

I reach for my tea, now cold as always. At the bottom of my cup, the tea has darkened, leaving a layered imprint—a record of time, of settling, of quiet transformation.

⁶ Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022)

Influences and Research Foundations

Motherhood, rest, and caregiving are layered experiences, existing at the intersection of personal endurance and societal expectation. This research does not exist in isolation—it is part of an ongoing conversation among theorists, artists, and filmmakers who have explored similar themes through different lenses. The knowledge that is built here emerged from these overlapping perspectives, where texts, artworks, and films inform and challenge one another, creating a dynamic field of inquiry.

This chapter is divided into four sections: Literature Review of Key References, Art/Artist References, Personal and Collective Knowledge, and Film References—each tracing a particular thread of influence in this work.

Literature Review of Key References

The following texts are key influences on this research and body of work as they address the topics of rest, identity, and the politics of care. While Tricia Hersey’s *Rest Is Resistance* (2022) reclaims rest as a radical act against systemic exhaustion, emphasizing its necessity in the face of capitalist structures that devalue caregiving and emotional labor, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) explores the liminality of identity and how inherited histories shape the body, positioning personal narratives as sites of resistance and transformation.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right* (1997), edited by Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, challenges conventional perceptions of motherhood, illustrating how maternal experiences can become catalysts for political consciousness and activism.⁹ Together, these texts highlight the ways in which care and rest are not neutral but are shaped by power, gender, and historical trauma.

Hersey challenges the notion that exhaustion is an inevitable state for women and caregivers: “Rest disrupts the lie that our worth is tied to productivity. To reclaim rest is

⁷ Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022).

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

⁹ Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997).

to reclaim our humanity” (Hersey 2022, 23)¹⁰. Anzaldúa, in contrast, focuses on the labor embedded in identity itself—how existence at the intersection of multiple histories requires constant negotiation. She describes identity as: “A struggle of borders, where one body holds many histories—some visible, some erased, all still present” (Anzaldúa 1987, 99).¹¹ Finally, *The Politics of Motherhood* examines how motherhood, often dismissed as private and apolitical, serves as a site of activism and resistance. The book documents how women across different contexts—from public housing projects in Las Vegas to the environmental justice movement at Love Canal—have mobilized through their roles as mothers. The editors argue that “Motherhood often redefines and revitalizes a woman’s political consciousness” (Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor 1997, 45).¹² Through a series of narratives, the collection illustrates how caregiving roles have propelled women into political activism—whether advocating for housing rights, environmental justice, or social equity. In doing so, it reframes maternal labor as a catalyst for civic engagement, one that extends beyond the domestic sphere to influence broader social and political movements.

In dialogue with one another, these texts illuminate how caregiving is not solely a personal duty but a societal force—one that is both indispensable and undervalued. Collectively, they reinforce the urgency of rethinking rest, motherhood, and identity beyond traditional frameworks, offering perspectives that inform this research’s approach to materiality, labor, and endurance.

Art/Artist References

The artists whose work has most influenced shaping this research include Robert Gober, Vessna Perunovich, and Marguerite Humeau—each engage with the body as an archive of care, memory, and trauma. Through sculpture, installation, and performance, these artists examine how materiality preserves memory, how domesticity becomes uncanny, and how the maternal body carries both personal and historical weight.

¹⁰ Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, 23.

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 99.

¹² Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 45.

Robert Gober's work, particularly his altered domestic objects, disrupts the assumed safety of caregiving spaces. His *Untitled Crib* (1987) transforms an infant's crib into an unsettling form, subverting its association with protection and security.¹³ Curator Ann Temkin notes: "Gober's sculptures disrupt the sense of safety we associate with domestic objects, suggesting something lurking beneath the surface—anxiety, loss, trauma" (Temkin 2014, 16).¹⁴



Figure 5. *Untitled (Crib)*, Robert Gober, photograph courtesy of the artist and Artnet.¹⁵

¹³ Robert Gober, *Untitled Crib* (1987), in *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, ed. Ann Temkin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

¹⁴ Ann Temkin, *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 16.

¹⁵ Robert Gober, *X Crib* (1987), photograph courtesy of the artist and Artnet, accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.artnet.com/artists/robert-gober/x-crib-6FL9-i1H_eEeSPNHT2h9gA2.

Vessna Perunovich explores the tensions between migration, care, and displacement, positioning home as something transient rather than fixed. Her installation *Borderless* (2010) resonates with this research's exploration of rest as both an ephemeral and essential act.¹⁶ She reflects: "Home is a transient space, a construct shaped by longing, memory, and exile. The body becomes a vessel of care, of holding and being held, even in displacement" (Perunovich 2010, 45).

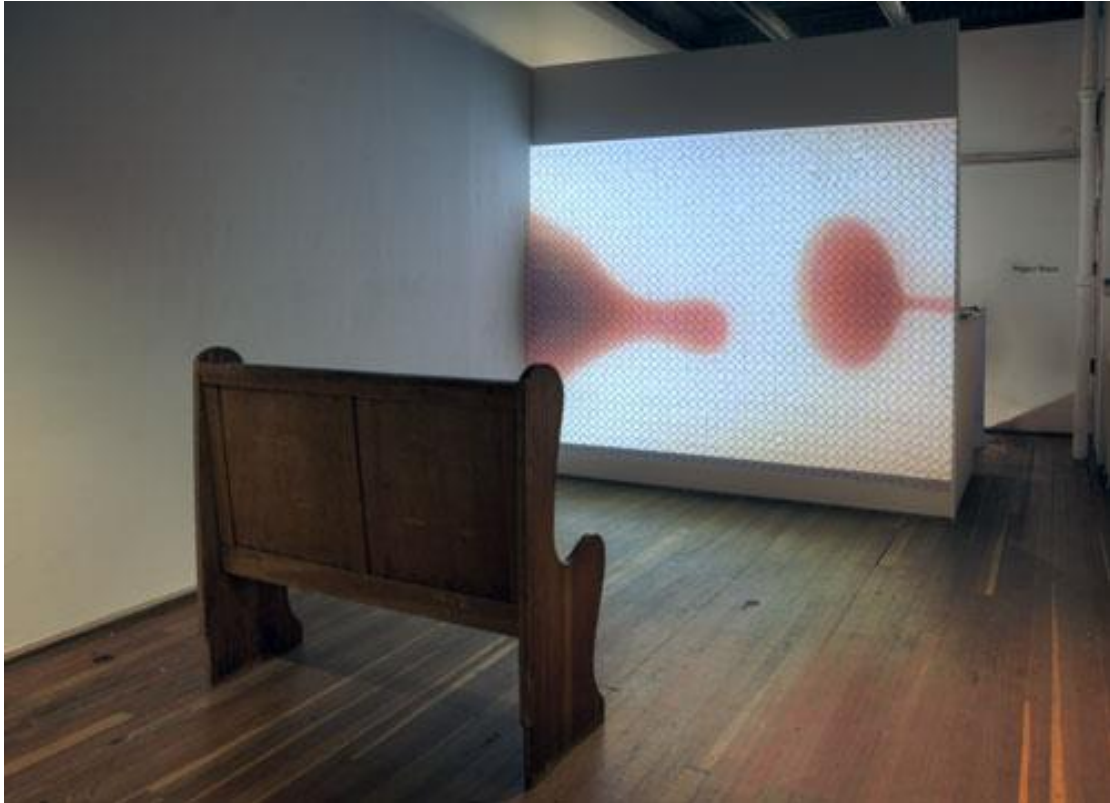


Figure 6. *Borderless* (Stride Main Space), 2008, by Vessna Perunovich. Photograph by M.N. Hutchinson.¹⁷

Marguerite Humeau's series *Birth Canal* (2018) reimagines the maternal body as both prehistoric and futuristic, emphasizing its simultaneous fragility and resilience.¹⁸ Her work frames the maternal form as a site of endurance, survival, and transformation. Curator Cecilia Alemani describes her approach as: "A form of speculative anthropology,

¹⁶ Vessna Perunovich, *Borderless* (2019), in *Borderless: Art and Migration* (Toronto: Mercer Union, 2019), <https://www.vessnaperunovich.ca>.

¹⁷ Vessna Perunovich, *Borderless* (Stride Main Space) (2008), photograph by M.N. Hutchinson, Stride Gallery, accessed April 1, 2025, https://stride.ab.ca/arc/archive_2008/vessna_perunovich_main/vessna_perunovich_images.htm.

¹⁸ Marguerite Humeau, *Birth Canal* (2022), in *Marguerite Humeau: Birth Canal* (New York: High Line Art, 2022).

where the maternal body is imagined as both a prehistoric relic and an entity of the future, at once fragile and indestructible” (Alemani 2022, 39).¹⁹



Figure 7. *Birth Canal* (2018), by Marguerite Humeau. Photograph courtesy of the artist & Brooklyn Rail²⁰

These artists contribute to an understanding of materiality in relation to caregiving: Gober through the transformation of domestic objects, Perunovich through the embodied experience of care across borders, and Humeau through the speculative reimagining of the maternal body. Their works provide a conceptual lineage for this research, reinforcing its focus on caregiving as an act of presence, endurance, and memory.

Film References

Film serves as a crucial lens for examining the complexities of maternal endurance, sacrifice, and haunting. Three films—*Dark Water* (2002), *Ringu* (1998), and *Beloved* (1998)—depict mothers navigating spaces of grief, protection, and the unresolved burdens of care.

¹⁹ Cecilia Alemani, *Marguerite Humeau: Birth Canal* (New York: High Line Art, 2022), 39.

²⁰ Marguerite Humeau, *Birth Canal* (2018), photograph by M.N. Hutchinson, in Nicholas Heskes, "Marguerite Humeau: Birth Canal," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2018, <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/12/artseen/Marguerite-HumeauBirth-Canal>.



Figure 8. *Dark Water* (Film Still), 2002, directed by Hideo Nakata

Hideo Nakata's *Dark Water* (2002) portrays motherhood as an inevitable site of sacrifice.²¹ The protagonist ultimately offers herself to a vengeful ghost to protect her child, a narrative that mirrors the silent burdens many mothers carry. Film scholar Sarah Arnold describes this portrayal as: "The mother's monstrosity does not lie in her desire to annihilate, but in her relentless devotion. Her role is not that of villain or victim, but of someone permanently altered by the act of mothering" (Arnold 2013, 117).²²

Similarly, *Ringu* (1998) interrogates the limits of maternal protection, showing that even a mother's best efforts cannot always break the cycle of inherited trauma.²³ The film critiques the expectation that mothers must always shield their children, revealing the structural and supernatural forces that shape maternal care.

Beloved (1998), adapted from Toni Morrison's novel, explores the intergenerational hauntings of trauma and sacrifice, where a mother is literally haunted by the daughter she lost.²⁴ In a pivotal moment, the protagonist Sethe reflects: "Love is or it ain't. Thin love

²¹ *Dark Water*, directed by Hideo Nakata, 2002; Tokyo: Toho Studios.

²² Sarah Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 117.

²³ *Ringu*, directed by Hideo Nakata, 1998; Tokyo: Toho Studios.

²⁴ *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme, 1998; Los Angeles, CA: Touchstone Pictures.

ain't love at all" (Morrison 1987, 164).²⁵ This notion encapsulates the extremes of motherhood—its sacrifices, its impossibilities, and its inescapable imprint on identity.

These films collectively frame caregiving as something that extends beyond the individual, beyond life and death—a burden and a gift that lingers across generations.

Personal and Collective Knowledge



Figure 9. Pre-exhibition setup with materials, tools, and personal items, including a stroller used for transport, 2024.

One of the most transformative resources in navigating my dual role as a mother and artist has been the *Artist/Mother Podcast*. During long walks with my daughter or commutes between home and studio, the voices of other artist-mothers became companions—offering insight, humor, and a sense of solidarity. What began as passive listening evolved into an embodied experience of community building. These episodes did more than provide advice; they offered affirmation that making and mothering could coexist, blur into each other, and even generate a deeper form of artistic knowing. The podcast became both a learning tool and a healing space. Through it, I encountered a range of contemporary artists negotiating caregiving, vulnerability, identity, and resistance through creative work.

²⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 164.



Figure 10. *Shady Chinese Proverbs*, 2016, by Amy Wong. Image courtesy of the artist and amy-wong.net.²⁶

Amy Wong, a Toronto-based artist and faculty member at OCAD University, was first introduced to me through a recommendation by a mentor. I encountered her work in person at the Onsite Gallery in her project *Shady Chinese Proverbs* (2023), a series of screen-printed banners featuring reinterpretations of traditional Chinese proverbs.²⁷ The installation was both humorous and confrontational, drawing attention to cultural stereotypes and the politics of language. In *Shady Chinese Proverbs*, Wong reclaims and reconfigures these cultural tools to critique systems of power while grounding the work in lived experience and playfulness. In an interview on the *Artist/Mother Podcast*, Wong reflected on how motherhood and burnout shifted her practice toward a slower, more intuitive rhythm.²⁸ She spoke about embracing the “leakiness and messiness” of both life and art, challenging perfectionism and honoring care as a mode of resistance. In *Tussle*

²⁶ Amy Wong, *Shady Chinese Proverbs* (2023–2024), ink and watercolour on paper, each drawing 5.5" x 8.5", <https://amy-wong.net/Shady-Chinese-Proverbs>.

²⁷ Amy Wong, *Shady Chinese Proverbs* (2023), in *Other Tongues: Part I – Communication*, Onsite Gallery, Toronto, <https://www.ocadu.ca/events-and-exhibitions/other-tongues-part-i-communication>.

²⁸ Amy Wong, interview by Kaylan Buteyn, *Artist/Mother Podcast*, March 21, 2022, <https://artistmotherpodcast.com/podcast/122-embracing-the-leakiness-and-messiness-of-our-days-with-amy-wong/>.

Magazine, she remarked, “I want the painting process to feel free. I don’t want to keep cleaning up after myself.”²⁹ This refusal to sanitize or contain aligns with the ethos I strive for in my own practice: to let the messiness of caregiving—its repetitions and ruptures—surface in material form. Her approach resonates with my desire to embrace the complexity of caregiving, allowing process, contradiction, tension, and humor to coexist.



Figure 11. *Lifeline* (Image Still), 2019–2020, by Julie Gladstone. Knit faux velvet with cotton embroidery, from a video performance with audio track (vocals and keyboard) by the artist. Produced by Mark Andrade. Image courtesy of the artist and artistmotherpodcast.com.³⁰

Julie Gladstone’s work similarly resists the romanticization of motherhood. Her 2023 exhibition *You Are Not Wonderful Just Because You Are a Mother* takes its title from her interview on the *Artist/Mother Podcast*, where she unpacked the complex entanglements of maternal identity, expectation, and failure.³¹ Gladstone is not interested in idealized portrayals of motherhood; instead, her mixed-media paintings and installations suggest a

²⁹ Amy Wong, interview by Ashley Johnson, *Tussle Magazine*, 2021, <https://www.tusslemagazine.com/single-post/interview-with-amy-wong>.

³⁰ Julie Gladstone, *Lifeline* (Image Still), 2019–2020, knit faux velvet with cotton embroidery, from a video performance with audio track (vocals and keyboard) by the artist, produced by Mark Andrade; image courtesy of the artist and *Artist/Mother Podcast*, <https://artistmotherpodcast.com/you-are-not-wonderful-just-because-you-are-a-mother/>.

³¹ Julie Gladstone, *You Are Not Wonderful Just Because You Are a Mother* (2023), mixed media, in *Artist/Mother Podcast*, March 2023, <https://artistmotherpodcast.com/you-are-not-wonderful-just-because-you-are-a-mother/>.

more fragmented and honest experience—one marked by contradiction, disorientation, and psychic multiplicity. In the podcast, she explains that making art as a mother is not merely about documenting the role, but surviving it.³² Her work helped me feel seen—not just as an artist trying to represent motherhood, but as someone navigating it, piece by piece.



Figure 12. *Trisha*, 2018, by Vivek Shraya. Image courtesy of the artist and vivekshraya.com.³³

While not a mother herself, artist and writer Vivek Shraya’s photographic project *Trisha* (2016) offers an intimate dialogue between daughter and mother across time. In a series of carefully staged images, Shraya re-creates old photographs of her mother by inserting herself into her place. Wearing her mother’s clothing and mirroring her posture, she simultaneously honors maternal presence and asserts her identity as a trans woman. On her website, Shraya reflects: “I wanted to wear my mother’s beauty—to inhabit it, to celebrate it.”³⁴ In this work, caregiving is reimagined as intergenerational recognition, a tender act of mirroring across timelines and gender. *Trisha* is not only an homage to a mother’s life before motherhood, but also a meditation on how identity, memory, and inheritance are carried and transformed. For me, it underscored how caregiving is never confined to one identity or definition—it is a collaborative gesture, shaped by longing, proximity, and becoming.

Together, these artists expand the possibilities of what caregiving can look like in contemporary art. Their practices, like mine, insist on presence over perfection, on

³² Julie Gladstone, interview by Kaylan Buteyn, *Artist/Mother Podcast*, March 2023, <https://artistmotherpodcast.com/you-are-not-wonderful-just-because-you-are-a-mother/>.

³³ Vivek Shraya, *Trisha* (2018), photographic series, image courtesy of the artist and [vivekshraya.com](https://www.vivekshraya.com).

³⁴ Vivek Shraya, *Trisha* (2016), photographic series, <https://www.vivekshraya.com/projects/visual/trisha/>.

process over product. In learning from them, I found kinship—not in shared outcomes, but in shared commitments to visibility, vulnerability, and care.

Through these texts, artworks, films, and knowledges a pattern emerges—motherhood as a site of endurance, rest as an act of resistance, and caregiving as a force that transcends time. What began as personal reflections in my work has become a larger exploration of collective experiences, informed by historical and cultural narratives. Each of these references reinforces the idea that care is never just about the present moment. It is intergenerational, shaped by histories of migration, trauma, and sacrifice. It is embodied in objects, whether a crib, a home, or a haunted space. It is performed in rituals of rest, resistance, and survival.

For me, these conversations have provided a framework for understanding my own experiences—not as isolated struggles, but as part of a broader lineage of caregiving. The exhaustion I have felt, the duality of presence and erasure, the tension between love and sacrifice—all of these are deeply embedded in cultural and artistic histories. By weaving together these narratives, this thesis project becomes not just a personal exploration but an act of remembering, of witnessing, and of insisting on the importance of rest, care, and the unseen labor that sustains us all.

Resting as Resistance: Materiality, Ritual, and Shared Labor

The Process Work

Autoethnographic & Embodied Research

This research emerges from the entanglement of self-reflection, material engagement, and participatory methods. The approach is centred around autoethnography, a methodology that foregrounds lived experience as a site of critical inquiry. By intertwining personal narratives with broader cultural, historical, and political contexts, autoethnography allows for the documentation, reflection, and materialization of the experience of motherhood. This process is deeply shaped by feminist discourse on the maternal body, rest, and caregiving, as well as by artistic interventions that challenge the erasure of caregiving labor.

Motherhood, in both its personal and collective dimensions, serves as the central axis of this research. The maternal body is not simply a biological entity but a social inscription—a body encoded by cultural expectations, labor, and historical memory. Benigno Trigo, in *Remembering Maternal Bodies*, describes maternal writing as an act of translation, a means of giving voice to a body that exists between presence and absence (Trigo 2006, 112)³⁵. This aligns with Cherrie Moraga's conception of maternal writing as both "wounded and wounding," reflecting the ruptures and reconfigurations of identity through mothering. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga writes, "The relationship between mother and daughter stands at the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world" (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983, 56).³⁶ Her words underscore the political and generational dimensions of maternal experience, recognizing both its inherited pain and transformative potential. The interest in the context of this

³⁵ Benigno Trigo, *Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Women's Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 112.

³⁶ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 56.

research lies in continuously navigating these tensions—between visibility and invisibility, self and other, exhaustion and endurance.

Documentation as a Form of Maternal Witnessing

A fundamental component of this research is documentation—an archive of presence that captures both the mundane and monumental aspects of caregiving. Documentation is not passive; rather, it serves as an active witnessing of motherhood, an autoethnographic testimony that resists the erasure of caregiving labor.



Figure 13. *Rocking Aila to Sleep*, 2022.³⁷

³⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Rocking Aila to Sleep* (2022), photograph, documenting the artist's mother practicing a traditional Iranian method of soothing an infant by rocking them on her feet.

At the outset, as is common among many mothers, documentation initially centered on capturing every moment of a child's life. However, as the research developed, the focus shifted from recording the child's life alone to documenting the shared experience of caregiving—mother and child, father and child, and the interconnectedness of care. This reframing moves beyond the notion of caregiving as an isolated act, instead positioning it as a relational and collective experience. The documentation process also evolved into a collaborative effort, incorporating the perspectives and labor of classmates, fellow artists, and mentors.

The act of holding the camera, of observing and recording, became an extension of caregiving itself—acknowledging that care extends beyond the immediate family unit into wider communities of support and witnessing. This approach resonates with themes explored in *Supervision: On Motherhood and Surveillance*, a collection edited by Sophie Hamacher and Jessica Hankey. Rea McNamara, in her article “The Unnatural Link Between Mothering and Technological Surveillance,” reflects on how, after the birth of her daughter, the camera became an extension of her body, mediating the intimate and sometimes conflicted relationship between caregiving and observation. McNamara highlights the tension between maternal intuition and technological monitoring, drawing attention to the politics embedded in the act of watching and being watched.³⁸

Similarly, *Designing Motherhood* emphasizes how artistic representations of maternal rest, exhaustion, and care create counter-narratives to dominant cultural framings of motherhood. These visual and conceptual strategies challenge the idealization and invisibilization of maternal labor by offering nuanced and grounded depictions of the lived experience of caregiving.³⁹

Through this collaborative and embodied approach to documentation, this research not only archives maternal presence but also reconfigures the notion of who bears witness to caregiving labor. By engaging a community in the act of documentation, it challenges

³⁸ Rea McNamara, “The Unnatural Link Between Mothering and Technological Surveillance,” *Hyperallergic*, June 30, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/942513/the-unnatural-link-between-mothering-and-technological-surveillance/>.

³⁹ *Designing Motherhood*, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://designingmotherhood.org>.

dominant narratives and foregrounds the shared, nonlinear, and often messy reality of care.

Performing Rest: Maternal Exhaustion as Material

Rest is not merely an absence of work; it is an embodied resistance, a refusal to conform to the demands of relentless productivity that often define contemporary motherhood.

This research embraces performance and durational practices as a means of investigating maternal exhaustion, caregiving, and bodily endurance. The maternal body, as theorized by Karen Barad, is not a static entity but an entangled phenomenon—one that is continuously shaped by forces both visible and invisible (Barad 2012).⁴⁰ This perspective is central to the practice, where exhaustion is not only articulated but also lived, felt, and materialized in the body.

The floor emerges as a recurring motif, representing both the physical and emotional labor of caregiving. It is where care unfolds, where play occurs, where exhaustion takes form. Black and white dominate the visual language, embodying the monumental weight of caregiving and the stark contrasts between joy and depletion. The repetition of gestures—rocking, feeding, carrying, resting—mirrors the cyclical, unending structure of motherhood.

This approach draws inspiration from Carolee Schneemann, whose performances disrupted conventional boundaries between the maternal body and artistic expression.

Her iconic performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), in which she draws a written text from her body, asserts the maternal body as a living archive of experience. Schneemann positions the female body as a contested site of meaning, resistance, and struggle. As she stated in an interview, “Our bodies are the coherence between labor and pleasure, all of a piece” (Schneemann 2002, 206).⁴¹ This understanding resonates with the focus of this research—framing caregiving, rest, and endurance not as passive states but as political

⁴⁰ Karen Barad, *Transmaterialities: Trans/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 206.

acts that disrupt dominant narratives which confine maternal labor to the private and invisible.



Figure 14. Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll* (Documentation Still), 1975. Performance still. © Carolee Schneemann. Image courtesy of Tate.⁴²

X-Ray Architecture & The Ghostly Imprint of Motherhood

The concept of maternal absence-presence is central to this research. Beatriz Colomina's *X-Ray Architecture* (2019) examines how illness and vulnerability leave subtle but enduring marks on space, drawing attention to the body's material and spatial traces.⁴³ This framework deeply informs my own understanding of caregiving and motherhood as forms of unseen labor—where acts of care, though often invisible, imprint themselves on both the caregiver and the environment.

This notion of trace and absence finds poignant articulation in Robert Gober's *Untitled* (1999–2000), a sculpture of an industrial sink pierced by disembodied childlike legs clad in white socks and sandals. Emerging from its smooth porcelain and concrete surface, the limbs appear lifeless and eerily tender, suspended between play and

⁴² Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975, screenprint with handwriting, Tate, London, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282>.

⁴³ Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019).

pathology. The sink—a domestic, hygienic fixture—is transformed into a site of spectral memory. The absent child haunts the form, much like caregiving itself haunts the spaces where it occurs, its labor absorbed by the walls, the floors, the objects. Gober’s work does not illustrate care, but rather the echo of it—what is left behind, the body made partial by attention withheld or loss endured.⁴⁴



Figure 15. *Untitled*, 1990, by Robert Gober. Wax, human hair, and fabric. Image courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

Similarly, Vessna Perunovich’s *Unattainable Shores* (2016) layers themes of distance, migration, and maternal longing through minimal but potent symbolism.⁴⁵ A pair of toddler’s shoes sits inside an old metal bathtub filled with sand—an evocative stand-in for a child, for movement halted, for land unreachable. The installation speaks to the

⁴⁴ Robert Gober, *Untitled* (1999–2000), The Menil Collection, Houston, <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/7813-untitled>.

⁴⁵ Vessna Perunovich, *Unattainable Shores*, 2016, installation, <https://www.vessnaperunovich.ca/sculptures-installations>.

emotional geography of caregiving across borders—how love and responsibility stretch, erode, and root us in unexpected places. The shoes, small and still, carry the presence of absence, much like the caregiver who is always near, yet often unseen.



Figure 16. *Unattainable Shores*, 2016, by Vessna Perunovich. Toddler's shoes, antique metal child's bathtub, and sand. Image courtesy of the artist and vessnaperunovich.ca.

Together, these works frame caregiving as a material and emotional imprint—unfixed, fragmentary, but persistent. Through domestic objects rendered strange, they invite viewers to notice what is usually overlooked: the silent, repetitive gestures that define care, and the psychic weight of those who give without always being seen. In conversation with Colomina's theory, they render the maternal not as a static identity, but as an active architecture of memory and touch.

The Rhythms of Care: Motherhood as Ritual

Motherhood is inherently structured by rhythms—the repetitive gestures of feeding, holding, soothing, and enduring. These cycles of care serve as a foundational methodology within this research, translating ephemeral acts into material form.

Through imprinting—whether in clay, fabric, or the residue of touch—this research captures the ways in which caregiving leaves behind traces, both tangible and intangible. This notion aligns with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), where

identity is described as a struggle of borders, a body that holds multiple histories—some visible, others erased.⁴⁶

Similarly, caregiving functions as an imprint, a history inscribed onto the body, a memory that lingers in objects and gestures. These traces, though often overlooked, carry the weight of care, reinforcing the cyclical, embodied nature of maternal labor.

Process as Research

The methodology employed in this research is not linear but cyclical, shaped by lived experience, material engagement, and participation. Autoethnography situates the maternal body within broader cultural and historical narratives, while documentation functions as an act of witnessing, resisting the erasure of caregiving labor.

Material experimentation—through clay, fabric, and imprinting—translates ephemeral experiences into tangible forms, reinforcing the monumental weight of everyday acts of care. Through this process, the research does not merely analyze motherhood, rest, and caregiving—it enacts them.

It is a continuous negotiation of presence, absence, and endurance, where the maternal body is not only a site of labor but also a site of resistance, transformation, and storytelling.

Materials + Ideas: Process-Based Inquiry

This research is built on an evolving dialogue between materiality, process, and concept. Materials are not regarded as passive objects but as active collaborators, each carrying its own history, memory, and imprint. Every technique and material—cement, fabric, plaster, aluminum, video, photography, sound, performance, and printmaking—serves as a vessel for storytelling, embodying the physical and emotional weight of caregiving.

⁴⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

The act of making is inseparable from the act of thinking, just as the gestures of care and labor within motherhood are inseparable from identity and embodiment. The following section examines how material choices emerge from lived experiences, memories, and deep theoretical inquiries. Methods such as casting, pressing, folding, layering, and imprinting mirror the acts of caregiving, repetition, and endurance.

These processes align with feminist materialist perspectives, where the body, labor, and material are not separate but entangled. Moving between physical engagement and conceptual reflection, this research investigates how care leaves traces, how rest resists erasure, and how play becomes a method of mark-making.

Between Artificial and Real Touch: The Presence of Clay

Before entering the current practice, years were spent behind a screen—designing, rendering, and constructing digital spaces that never materialized in the physical world. The hands moved a mouse, clicked keys, and arranged pixels. These gestures, though productive, were disembodied. The shift back to touch began not in the studio, but at the kitchen table—watching Aila shape her world from bits of play dough. Her small hands pressing, layering, tearing, and sculpting awakened something long dormant: a longing for tactility, for resistance, for material that pushed back.



Figure 17. *Aila Playing with Playdough*, 2024⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Aila Playing with Playdough*, 2024, photograph.

It was through these daily, improvised rituals of play—rolling colors together, sharing tools, shaping with joy—that clay slowly returned to my own hands. In the quiet act of making beside her, I remembered the material’s patience, its vulnerability, and its power to record. Holding the natural clay later, the sensation was no longer unfamiliar. The weight of the clay yielding and resisting echoed the rhythms I had witnessed with her—reminding me that returning to clay was also a return to presence, intimacy, and embodied time.

In this context, clay emerged as a material of reflection and resistance. Unlike rigid structures, it does not push back with opposition—it listens. It receives. It records the force of the hand, the hesitation of fingers, the pressure of care. These qualities mirror how caregiving imprints itself invisibly on the body and psyche.

The experience of molding clay—allowing it to shift under pressure—parallels the experience of mothering: adapting, shaping, holding space for another while being transformed in return. In this practice, touch is not only a tool for shaping but a form of remembering. Whether pressing into clay or folding cloth, each mark left behind becomes evidence of presence and care. The material remembers where we have been, and in turn, invites us to stay a little longer—with the work, with ourselves, and with each other.

Folding and Unfolding: Printmaking as a Ritual of Care

Folding is an ordinary act, yet it carries an intimate weight. It is a gesture of order, a ritual of care, and a means of creating comfort. No two individuals fold in the same way—each fold is personal, shaped by habit, memory, and the way hands move through fabric. Though the act is repetitive, it is never identical; each motion reveals subtle differences, making each fold both familiar and singular.

This uniqueness within repetition became central to the exploration of printmaking as a form of invisible archiving, where the marks left behind capture the quiet, unnoticed rhythms of caregiving. Within the printmaking process, folded garments were inked and pressed onto paper, allowing their creases and contours to emerge with stark clarity. Prints transformed what was once hidden within the folds into something seen—like an

X-ray, exposing layers of absence and presence. They recorded time, labor, and care in ways that words often fail to express. The lines pressed into the surface recalled the repetitive motions of caregiving: the weight of a child against the body, the imprint of sleepless nights, the habitual smoothing of fabric, the instinctive gestures of holding and releasing.



Figure 18. *First Folded Baby Shirt Print*, 2024, print by Setayesh Babaei. Printed at the press using black ink on paper.⁴⁸

This method aligns with Beatriz Colomina’s analysis in *X-Ray Architecture* (2019), where she argues that transparency is not merely an effect imposed upon an object but a condition already present—“the object is already transparent, and the X-rays allow us to see it as such” (Colomina 2019, 120). In this sense, print-based work functions like an X-ray, revealing what is already inscribed in the material: care, time, and invisible labor. It acts as a spectral archive, preserving the ephemeral, the worn, and the touched. Each print becomes an artifact of care, a residue of a moment, an index of repetitive yet deeply personal gestures.⁴⁹

Beyond printmaking, folding was further explored through performance—each time enacting the gesture differently, unfolding and refolding fabric in new ways. The act became meditative, each fold a quiet assertion of presence, a means of organizing chaos, of finding momentary rest.

⁴⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *First Folded Baby Shirt Print*, 2025, black ink on paper, printed at the press.

⁴⁹ Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 120.



Figure 19. *Folding Clothes (Performance Still)*, 2024, performance by Setayesh Babaei. Photograph by Luke Ge Lu⁵⁰

Folding is often dismissed as mundane, yet in caregiving, it is an intimate act of tending—an act of closure, of preparation, of transition. It is a ritual that bridges exhaustion and renewal, much like caregiving itself—a task that never ends but constantly reshapes itself in response to the body, the child, the space, the moment. In this way, folding extends beyond function—it becomes a language of care, a choreography of hands, and a gesture of continuity. Whether through printmaking or performance, it embodies both repetition and variation, holding within it the histories of those who fold and those for whom folding is done.

Fabric as Memory: Stains, Imprints, and the Maternal Body

Fabric holds—even if only for a moment. It absorbs, remembers, and bears witness. Unlike surfaces that erase, fabric retains what touches it: the warmth of a body, the weight of a hand, the stains of daily life. It does not resist; it receives. At the start of this project, fabric emerged as a site of inscription. Aila's blanket, stained with breastmilk, became an unintentional archive of care—proof of sleepless nights, nourishment, and the quiet labor of the body. These marks, often seen as accidents, were, in fact, records of presence, a relationship unfolding in time. The use of fabric in this work aligns with ideas of material memory and bodily inscription explored in feminist discourse.

⁵⁰ Setayesh Babaei, *Folding Clothes (Performance Still)*, 2025, performance, photograph by Luke Ge Lu.

In *On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, Karen Barad (2012) theorizes touch not as a mere point of contact, but as an entangled event where “an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused” (Barad, 153)⁵¹. Touch, for Barad, is a site where boundaries blur and identities are reconfigured through intra-action. Similarly, the stained blankets and folded garments in this work function as sites of maternal memory, holding onto the marks of presence, labor, and care—not just as individual experiences, but as entangled histories.

Within the thesis exhibition *Nest, Rest, Shadows*, the thesis exhibition, fabric serves as a living archive. Viewers clean their hands on cloth after working with clay, leaving behind stains that are then displayed on the gallery wall. For a moment, the fabric holds their touch before it fades into memory. These cloths—once clean, now marked—form a collective imprint, a quiet testament to presence, labor, and the traces left behind.



Figure 20. *Mādar*, 2023, by Setayesh Babaei. Cement objects on stained baby blanket.⁵²

⁵¹ Karen Barad, “On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 153.

⁵² Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar*, 2023, cement objects on stained baby blanket

The Weight of Motherhood: Cement as Monument and Memory

The exploration of motherhood extends into its monumental and commemorative dimensions. Cement—cold, heavy, unyielding—became a critical material in this practice, encapsulating the paradox of motherhood: its endurance, its burdens, its permanence. The material itself resists change; once cast, it holds its form, much like the weight of caregiving that settles into the body and refuses to be undone.

The earliest engagement with cement in this project involved casting infant items—objects of care and dependency—into hardened, immovable forms. These pieces, placed on white blankets stained with breastmilk, created a stark contrast between the softness of nurture and the unyielding nature of the material. The cement-cast objects, stripped of their original function, became artifacts of memory, transforming the ephemerality of caregiving into something fixed and lasting.



Figure 21. Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar* (detail), 2023. Cement infant objects. Photograph by Thoreau Bakker.

Cement, like motherhood, is an act of imprinting. It records weight, pressure, and touch, embedding presence into its form. In this way, it echoes the exploration of material memory in fabric and printmaking—where traces are left behind, whether in stains, folds, or pressed surfaces. Unlike fabric, which absorbs and carries the residue of interaction,

cement freezes a moment in time, making the intangible visible, the fleeting permanent. The tension between permanence and loss, care and weight, is central to the use of cement in this work.

The act of casting became a ritual of preservation, of holding onto what is inevitably slipping away. This echoes the commemorative impulse found in sculptural practices that engage with themes of absence and remembrance. Antony Gormley's *Between You and Me* explores similar notions of embodied memory, where human forms emerge from and dissolve into their material, suggesting presence through absence.⁵³



Figure 22. Antony Gormley, *Asian Field*, 2003. Fired clay figures. Installation view, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 2023. Courtesy of Antony Gormley Studio.

In its first iterations, cement did not just monumentalize—it mourned, it remembered, it insisted on the gravity of the maternal experience. It carried the weight of exhaustion and endurance, the beauty and burden of holding another life. This material, chosen for its unforgiving nature, ultimately served as a site of healing—through making, through shaping, through the act of transforming care into something tangible, something that could not be erased.

⁵³ Antony Gormley, *Between You and Me* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium, 2017).

Videography and Photography: Traces of Maternal Presence

Photography and videography in this work function as both documentation and reflection, capturing the ephemeral and persistent traces of caregiving. Through these mediums, the repetition of gestures, the mirroring of movements, and the embodied history of mothering across generations are explored. This practice is informed by an ongoing search for intergenerational echoes—the ways in which mother, child, and grandmother share gestures, patterns, and physical traits that connect them beyond language.



Figure 23. *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows (Window Installation)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Graduate Gallery, Toronto. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.⁵⁴

One of the most intimate photographic series in this body of work documents a mother's hand interacting and mirroring her infant's during breastfeeding sessions. As the child reaches for the mother, the mother instinctively reaches back, their hands forming a quiet

⁵⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows (Window Installation)*, 2024, Graduate Gallery, Toronto. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

dialogue of touch. In these moments, the recognition of inherited motions becomes striking—fingers, so small and unfamiliar, still carrying something of the mother, of the grandmother, of the women before them. Here, the exploration extends beyond biology to a study of unconscious gestures, the ways in which care is passed down through bodies, through hands that have held, soothed, and supported over generations.



Figure 24. *My hands and my mother's* (Aila's grandmother). 2024. Photograph by Setayesh Babaei.⁵⁵

This inquiry was further developed through a photographic series capturing a grandmother's hands, documenting the same mirrored gestures once shared between mother and child. The resulting images form a layered exploration of caregiving—a visual lineage of touch that articulates the continuity of maternal care across generations. Within this context, hands transcend their physicality to become embodied records of labor, affection, and intergenerational memory. As demonstrated in *The Lost Tradition*, the maternal figure—long marginalized or erased in literary history—has only recently been reclaimed, particularly through matrilineal narratives that foreground generational ties. While ancient literatures depicted empowered mother-daughter relationships, patriarchal systems in subsequent Western traditions often silenced or absented the maternal presence. It is not until the late twentieth century, with the rise of feminist literary scholarship, that “the lost mother is found,” and maternal relationships are re-

⁵⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *My Hands and My Mother's* (Aila's Grandmother), 2024, photograph.

inscribed with nuance, complexity, and agency.⁵⁶⁵⁷ Echoing this cultural and textual recovery, the visual gestures shared across generations in my work act as a counter-archive, resisting erasure and asserting the visibility of caregiving women. These gestures propose a tactile record of maternal endurance—one that extends into time-based work, where the rhythms and repetitions of care are explored through duration and embodied observation.

In a solo exhibition, a slowed-down video of a child at a playground was presented, recorded from a fixed position on the ground. The camera followed the child on a swing, each rise and return stretching the interval between presence and disappearance. The stillness of the camera—anchored, observant—evoked the maternal posture of watching, holding space, and anticipating return. The only sound in the gallery was the child’s voice singing *Happy Birthday*, slowed and unaccompanied. Through the distortion of time and intimacy, the video constructed a suspended space in which the act of play became an archive of maternal care—one marked not by constancy, but by cycles of separation and reunion.

This work resonates with what Mary Jacobus calls *feminist melancholia*, a longing structured around absence, repetition, and the maternal trace. In her reading of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, Jacobus identifies a “tender clinging” to lost or impossible love, a refusal to relinquish affective attachment even in its most painful form.⁵⁸ Wollstonecraft’s writing, like the suspended motion of the swing, is animated by a desire to “keep the I alive” through correspondence, imagination, and memory—acts which resist the disintegration of self brought on by loss.⁵⁹ The maternal, in this context, is not located in plenitude but in its residue: in the “temporary death of absence,” in the melancholic imprint left by love that cannot be fully held.⁶⁰ The swing’s

⁵⁶⁵⁶ Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly, eds., *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 8.

⁵⁷ Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, eds., *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980)

⁵⁸ Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁰ Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 80.

arc thus becomes a metaphor for this deferred rhythm of attachment—the child disappears into distance, only to return, echoing Wollstonecraft’s own psychic and textual attempts to remain connected to love, despite abandonment. Positioned as both observer and surrogate, the viewer shares in this tension, caught in the quiet ache of watching, waiting. In this way, the video imagines caregiving not as constant presence, but as a haunting rhythm—anchored in love, animated by loss.



Figure 25. *Fall Me Fly* (Video Installation), 2024, by Setayesh Babaei.⁶¹

The interplay between height, distance, and risk reflects the unspoken tensions of caregiving: the need to let go, the inevitability of separation, and the enduring tether that remains. The audience, positioned at the swing’s base, shares in this perspective of anticipation and release, bearing witness to the quiet ache of watching, waiting. Through both photography and film, this work captures these traces of care—not as grand gestures

⁶¹ Setayesh Babaei, *Fall Me Fly* (Video Installation), 2024.

but as the unnoticed, habitual movements that form the foundation of mothering. Hands that change, that hold and release, that mirror each other across time. Eyes that watch, that measure distance, that recognize their own reflection in the next generation. These are the marks of care, recorded in touch, in movement, in the lingering imprints of presence.

The Journal as a Living Archive: Writing Motherhood into Space

In this research, writing functions not merely as private reflection but as an embodied act—an inscription of memory, labor, and presence onto material surfaces. What began as a personal journal documenting the experience of mothering evolved into an integral component of installation work, transforming personal history into a collective experience. In one exhibition, sections of handwritten journal entries in Persian cascaded down large paper scrolls, resembling unfolding letters. The repetitive act of writing—each stroke of ink pressed into paper—materialized the unseen, making the private experience of mothering legible within public space. These scrolls were positioned on either side of a child’s rug, which unfurled from the wall to the floor, marking a transition from vertical presence to horizontal rest. Beneath the rug, a blank sheet of paper was placed—an invitation for the audience to leave their own traces. The space under the rug, traditionally a site of secrecy and concealment, became a place of shared vulnerability. This offering mirrored the quiet, unspoken layers of caregiving, where much remains undocumented yet profoundly felt.

The idea of writing as an extension of the maternal body—of language as a vessel for caregiving—resonates with Mary Jacobus’s analysis in *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis*.⁶² Reflecting on Melanie Klein’s *Narrative of a Child Analysis*, Jacobus examines the case of “Richard,” a ten-year-old boy whose psychoanalytic treatment involved daily drawing sessions.⁶³ Through these drawings, Richard produced what Jacobus describes as a “fragmented representation of the maternal body,” revealing deep ambivalence, psychic conflict, and

⁶² Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 189.

⁶³ Melanie Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961).

symbolic dismemberment.⁶⁴ Rather than offering a coherent image of the mother, the drawings convey maternal absence, distortion, and rupture—what Jacobus calls a “missing theory of signs,” in which the maternal figure becomes a site of loss and unresolved meaning.

In contrast, my installation of maternal journal entries resists fragmentation. By presenting a continuous flow of handwritten or typed text within the gallery, the work insists on the presence of caregiving experience—both conceptually and materially. Where Richard’s images reflect the dismantling of the maternal body through scattered symbols, this work acts as a counter-gesture: one of reassembly and endurance. Just as Klein attributed a “magic gesture” to the child’s act of drawing—a way to imagine, destroy, and reform—so too does this work use language as a gesture of care. Here, writing does not serve to tear apart, but to hold together: to preserve the maternal in rhythm, form, and voice.

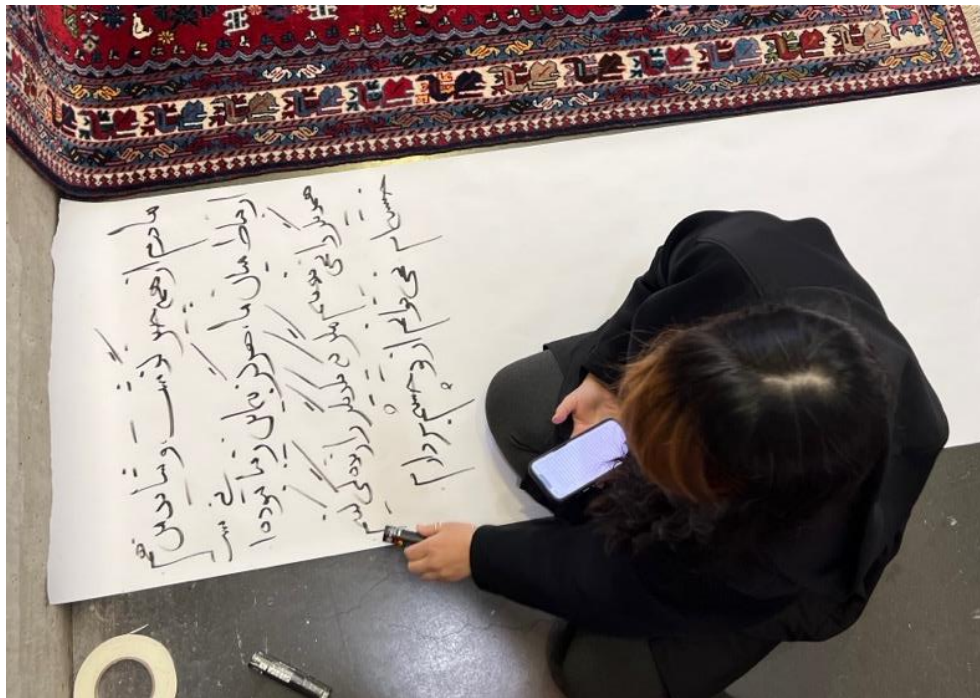


Figure 26. *Mādar: Rest in Progress (Writing Performance)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Exhibition view. Photograph by Luke Ge Lu⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 212.

⁶⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest in Progress (Writing Performance)*, 2024, exhibition view. Photograph by Luke Ge Lu.

Poetry, too, functions as a means of distilling the essence of motherhood into language. Unlike prose, poetry allows for breath, rhythm, and the elasticity of time that defines maternal experience. The lines, “Your breath flows into mine, / My body bends, my hands tighten,”⁶⁶ encapsulate the physicality of caregiving—its weight, its tension, and its intimacy. The body of the mother, the body of the child, and the body of the poem fold into one another, forming an inseparable link. This structure informs the poetry within this work—words looping back, pausing, stretching—mirroring the way caregiving unfolds through memory and presence in a continuous dialogue.

Rewriting the journal by hand, enlarging it, and placing it within the exhibition was not merely an aesthetic decision but a ritual. Each letter, drawn again and again, became a mark of endurance, much like the repetitive acts of care that define mothering. The ink pressed into paper, the stains absorbed into fabric, and the imprint of words on space all function as traces of presence, refusing erasure. By inviting the audience to contribute their own words beneath the rug, the installation extended beyond personal narrative into a shared dialogue on caregiving, memory, and loss.



Figure 27. *Mādar: Rest in Progress (Interactive Installation View)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Exhibition view.⁶⁷

Much like the clay, fabric, and other materials within this practice, language became a site of accumulation—stories layered upon one another, histories pressing into the surface

⁶⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *My Child My Soul*, unpublished poem, included in *Nest, Rest, Shadows* (thesis, OCAD University, 2025), 72.

⁶⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest in Progress (Interactive Installation View)*, 2024, exhibition view.

of the work. This act of writing—of leaving marks, of documenting what is often overlooked—was not simply an extension of personal experience but an offering. It acknowledged that motherhood, with all its silence and speech, is not a singular story. It is many.

Sandcasting and the Weight of Care: Aluminum Baby Bottles

The process of sand casting is an act of both precision and surrender. It begins with an impression—an object pressed into sand, leaving behind its negative form, a temporary void awaiting transformation. Molten aluminum is poured into this fragile mold, filling the absence with heat, weight, and permanence. As the material cools and solidifies, it preserves not only the shape of the object but also the process of its making—its failures, its scars, its unpredictability. This act of casting mirrors the unseen labor of caregiving, where repetition, endurance, and transformation shape both the caregiver and the cared-for.

Within this practice, baby bottles—symbols of nourishment, dependence, and care—were cast in aluminum, stripped of their original function, and turned into weighty relics. Left raw and unrefined, these objects bore the evidence of their creation. The gating systems, the vents, and the rough, unfinished surfaces were not removed but preserved as integral to the form. Sharp edges remained; some bottles still carried traces of burnt sand, an imprint of the process that refused to be erased. These details, often discarded in conventional casting, became essential to the work, acting as a material metaphor for the ways in which caregiving marks the body, the mind, and the spaces it inhabits.

Rebecca Schneider, in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, argues that remains—whether bodies, objects, or gestures—do not simply represent labor; they transmit it. Rather than being inert evidence, they function as affective carriers, sites where time, touch, and repetition are materially inscribed.⁶⁸ Drawing on theories of affect and embodied memory, Schneider shows how the body and its traces can act as “live” gestures—indexical marks that do not document from a

⁶⁸ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 36.

distance, but remain entangled with the very acts they register.⁶⁹ This conception resonates deeply with the cast aluminum bottles in my work. They do not smooth over the evidence of their making. Instead, the scars of process—feeders, seams, surface ruptures—remain visible, much like the subtle inscriptions care leaves on the body: the shift in posture, the pressure in breath, the chronic ache in the hands.

These bottles are not simply finished objects; they are remains of care—not in the sense of leftover or discarded, but in the sense, Schneider describes: as ongoing, live articulations of labor.⁷⁰ Their material presence bears the imprint of exhaustion, repetition, and touch. They are haunted not only by their origin, but by the durational labor of caregiving they metaphorically and materially carry. Rather than fixing memory in place, they gesture—like a reenacted movement or a repeated phrase—toward an affective archive of care: not static, but still pulsing, still aching.

The arrangement of these bottles reinforces their role not merely as objects, but as material traces of labor and touch. In some groupings—five in one, two in another—they remain connected by the raw aluminum channels through which molten metal once flowed. These pathways, typically removed in post-production, are preserved here as umbilical conduits between forms. Rather than erasing the process, the work foregrounds it, allowing the bottles to function as what Schneider calls *live remains*—gestures that carry affect across time, marked by repetition, rupture, and care.⁷¹ Other bottles stand apart, isolated yet still bearing the scars of their making. In one installation, they form a chest-like structure, evoking the human body not as metaphor but as vessel: one that nourishes, labors, and depletes. The composition resists closure, offering not a finished product, but a material record of care that lingers, leaks, and endures.

The burnt sand that clung to some of the bottles became an especially potent metaphor. It spoke of transformation, of destruction and preservation occurring simultaneously. In casting, the mold is destroyed in order to reveal the form within—just as the act of

⁶⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 37–39.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

caregiving reshapes the self, leaving behind traces that may be invisible but never fully lost. The sand, blackened and fused to the metal, became a residue of labor, of heat, of change. It was grief made material, a quiet reminder that care is not always soft—that it is also weight, permanence, and sacrifice.



Figure 28. *Mādar: Rest, Nest, Shadows (Sand Casting Process)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Burnt sand mold negative imprints of baby bottles after aluminum pour. Process view.⁷²

Ultimately, these cast bottles became more than objects. They became memorials—monuments to the unseen, unspoken work of mothering, to the ways in which caregiving leaves its imprints long after the act itself has passed. Their heaviness was intentional, demanding presence, refusing to be dismissed. They carried not only the memory of their making but also the histories of care, of exhaustion, of love that lingers long after the warmth has faded.

⁷² Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest, Nest, Shadows (Sand Casting Process)*, 2024, burnt sand mold with negative imprints of baby bottles after aluminum pour, process view.

Sound: *Transition* – A Sonic Maternal Landscape

Sound possesses a unique capacity to capture what words and images often fail to convey—the imperceptible shifts of presence, the weight of memory, the fluidity of time. In collaboration with Ukrainian artist and composer Nalobi Zrobe, based in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal), the voice was layered over his original track *Liquid*, part of his larger composition, *Transition*. This cloud-based collaboration allowed whispered recitation to merge with *Liquid*'s sonic landscape, creating an immersive experience that embodies the duality of the real and surreal aspects of motherhood.

Whispering became an essential vocal technique, reflecting the secretive, almost fragile nature of caregiving—the hushed lullabies, the soft reassurances in the dark, the quiet weight of exhaustion. The poem, beginning with “Your breath flows into mine, / My body bends, my hands tighten...”, dissolves into the soundscape like an echo of maternal presence. The voice does not dominate but rather lingers—fading in and out, just as the self fades and reforms in the act of mothering. *Liquid* unfolds with swelling synths and fluid textures, evoking weightlessness, drift, and suspension.

Time in early motherhood ceases to move forward in a structured way—it loops, stretches, and collapses, much like the transitions in sound. There are no sharp beginnings or endings in the composition, only shifts that mirror the continuous evolution of care, exhaustion, and transformation. The voice, recorded in layers, reflects these shifts, creating a call and response within itself—a dialogue between past and present selves, between presence and absence.

In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider argues that performance and its remains—whether gestures, sounds, or objects—do not disappear but persist through repetition and circulation. Echoing through time, these remains refuse the closure of the archive, instead performing a kind of embodied memory. Sound, in particular, is treated not as a vanishing act but as a return: a vibration that recurs and resonates, even when the source is no longer present.⁷³ This understanding of sound as a temporal and affective trace

⁷³ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 105.

informs the collaboration with Nalobi Zrobe. Her voice becomes more than documentation—it acts as a resonant gesture, a transmission of care that exceeds the moment of its recording. Rather than fix caregiving into a closed archive of words, the audio lingers as what Schneider might describe as “live” or re-enacted presence: a spectral remainder, still sounding, still affecting.



Figure 29. *Echoes of Care*, 2025, by Setayesh Babaei in collaboration with Nalobi Zrobe. Sound installation, part of *Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*. Exhibition view. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.⁷⁴

Within the thesis exhibition *Nest, Rest, Shadows*, the installation of *Liquid Over Transition* becomes a space for immersion, where the audience moves through the sound rather than merely hearing it. Sound envelops the viewer, just as caregiving envelops the body, the mind, and the senses. As the poem speaks of mother and child dissolving into each other, the sound dissolves the listener into a landscape of shifting presence—where time, memory, and identity blur in the act of becoming.

⁷⁴ Setayesh Babaei in collaboration with Nalobi Zrobe, *Echoes of Care*, 2025, sound installation, part of *Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*. Exhibition view. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

Living Within Care

Breath as Research: The Graduate Symposium (2022)

In April 2022, I participated in the Graduate Symposium *Breath: Concerning Air & Atmosphere*, co-taught by Ala Roushan and Charles Stankieveh. During this event, I presented my poem *We Are Revealed in the Hidden*, a meditation on breath as both survival and resistance.⁷⁵ At the time, I was consumed by exhaustion and ambivalence. I questioned the value of my own voice, uncertain of whether my words carried weight outside of my personal experience.



Figure 30. *We Are Revealed in the Hidden* (Presentation Still), 2022, by Setayesh Babaei. Shown as part of *Breath as Research: The Graduate Symposium*, co-taught by Ala Roushan and Charles Stankieveh. Photograph by Mihyun Maria Kim.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *Breath: Concerning Air & Atmosphere Graduate Symposium*, co-taught by Ala Roushan and Charles Stankieveh, April 2022, Daniels Faculty, University of Toronto, program available at https://www.daniels.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/breath_symposium_april22.pdf.

⁷⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *We Are Revealed in the Hidden* (Presentation Still), 2022, shown as part of *Breath as Research: The Graduate Symposium*, co-taught by Ala Roushan and Charles Stankieveh, OCAD University. Photograph by Mihyun Maria Kim

But as I began to read my poem aloud, I became acutely aware of how each word resonated back to me. The sound waves of my voice moved through the space, layering over my breath and forming an archive of presence. The repetition of breath, the rhythm of spoken word, became an embodied act of healing:

*We, like trees,
have rooted ourselves deep into the earth,
seeking depth to rise higher into the air.*

This experience reaffirmed the importance of voice, presence, and repetition in my research—both in written and material-based inquiries.

MOTHRA Residency and the Collective Space (2024)



Figure 31. *Aila Resting*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Photograph taken at Gibraltar Point during the MOTHRA artist-parent residency.

In the fall of 2024, I participated in the MOTHRA residency at Gibraltar Point, a space where artist-parents lived and worked together for a week.⁷⁷ The experience of being in a communal space with other caregivers was transformative. For the first time since becoming a mother, I was surrounded by a collective who understood the demands, the exhaustion, and the creative tension between parenting and artmaking. Unlike

⁷⁷ MOTHRA Residency, Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts, Toronto Islands, September 2024.

institutional spaces where caregiving is structured by rules and expectations, here, care was shaped by mutual understanding, shared experiences, and the fluid exchange of support. The physical space itself—the long hallways, the former schoolhouse structure, the proximity to the beach—evoked memories of my own childhood, of the ways care was once removed from intimacy and replaced by routine. As a child, school was a place where I was not cared for by the warmth of familiar hands but by the rigidity of structure. At MOTHRA, this structure softened. The simple acts of seeing another mother hold my child, of sharing meals prepared by someone else, of watching another parent soothe their child to sleep, created an expanded sense of familial connection.

In witnessing others extend their care to me and my daughter, I experienced a form of mothering I had not known before—one rooted in community rather than isolation. Clay became an extension of this experience. The slow, deliberate movements of shaping, molding, and pressing into the material mirrored the rhythms of caregiving. At a time when the demands of daily life often felt unrelenting, working with clay provided a rare and necessary pause—a moment of rest in form. The pliability of the material, its responsiveness to pressure, and its capacity to retain traces of touch resonated deeply with my experience of mothering. The surface of the clay did not resist; it absorbed. It carried the weight of the hand that shaped it, much like caregiving itself—bearing the marks of labor, presence, and persistence.

This residency reinforced the importance of rest, of collective care, and of creating spaces where artists who mother are not forced to choose between making and mothering. It was a reminder that care does not need to be an isolating act, that it can be shared, extended, and received. The experience of MOTHRA left an imprint not just on my work but on my understanding of what it means to be a mother within a creative community.

Play as a Trace: The DIALOG Residency (2025)

In February 2025, I was selected for the DIALOG Residency, where play was explored as a method of engagement with public space.⁷⁸ My interpretation of play was not as mere movement or amusement but as an act of mark-making—of leaving traces that persist

⁷⁸ “Design Residency in Honour of Tom Sutherland,” DIALOG, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://dialogdesign.ca/students/design-residency-in-honour-of-tom-sutherland/>.

beyond the moment of play itself. Play became a way to explore the body's interaction with space, to understand how movement inscribes memory, and to examine the politics of visibility and presence.

Throughout the residency, I considered how play functions in urban environments—how it transforms public space into a site of interaction, resistance, and agency. Drawing from Carsten Höller's participatory installations, I explored the ways in which play disrupts structured social spaces, challenging passive participation and encouraging collective engagement.⁷⁹ Höller's work, particularly his monumental slides, invites the body into an altered state of movement, where space is not just navigated but experienced through physical sensation. His projects turn public space into a site of communal action, where each participant leaves behind an ephemeral imprint of their passage.



Figure 32. *he Florence Experiment*, 2018, by Carsten Höller. Stainless steel slide installation at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. Photograph by Martino Margheri. Image courtesy of Dezeen.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Carsten Höller, *Experience*, exhibition catalog (New York: New Museum, 2011).

⁸⁰ Carsten Höller, *The Florence Experiment*, 2018, stainless steel slide installation at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. Photograph by Martino Margheri. Image courtesy of Dezeen.

The experience of being in a space where food, accommodations, and time were provided felt like stepping into an alternate system—one where care was thoughtfully embedded into the very structure of the residency. It offered a rare moment of clarity, allowing me to reflect on what it means to have a space designed to support the act of making. Around this time, I came across William Kirby Lockard’s *Design Drawing* in the DIALOG library, and a particular diagram stood out: a map of verbs—“play,” “give,” “care,” “participate,” “remember”—radiating from a central form like ripples of influence.⁸¹ Lockard describes how manmade environments communicate through what he calls EM (environmental message) displays—structures designed to prompt action, memory, or emotion. His suggestion that designed spaces carry “pieces of someone else’s long-term memory” helped me articulate what I had been feeling: that caregiving, too, structures space, time, and body in ways both visible and invisible.

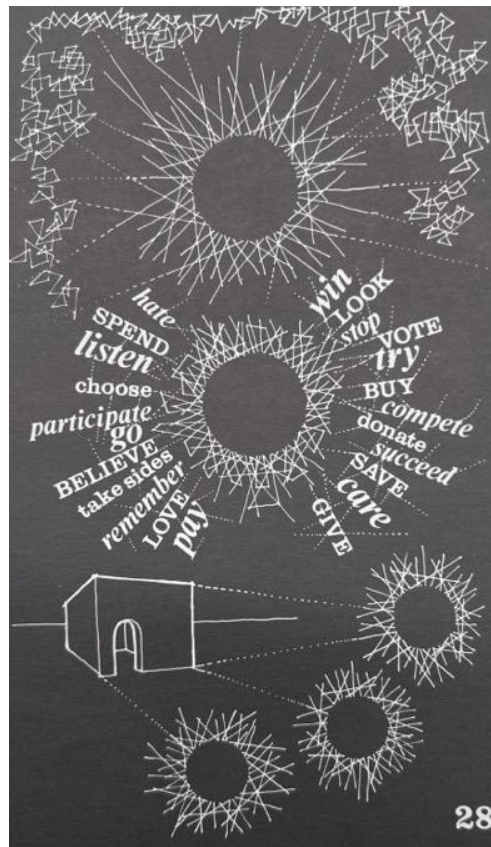


Figure 33. Diagram on Environmental Messages (EM), from *Design Drawing* by William Kirby Lockard. Page 28.⁸²

⁸¹ William Kirby Lockard, *Design Drawing* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977)

⁸² William Kirby Lockard, *Design Drawing* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977), 28.

It was in this thoughtfully supported environment, paradoxically marked by my child's absence, that I began to understand how caregiving leaves behind its own environmental messages. Unlike the MOTHRA residency, where my child was physically present, here she was not—but her absence shaped my relationship to space just as much as her presence once had. My understanding of play expanded: it was no longer just something we shared, but something that lingered—a trace, a memory, an imprint left behind. Lockard's framing of design as embedded intention affirmed the ways in which my own gestures, as both artist and mother, could be understood not only as personal acts but as part of larger systems of meaning-making and spatial memory.

The concept of play as a form of mark-making—whether through physical movement, imprinting in material, or shaping space—became a central theme in my work. This residency solidified my understanding that play is not only an act of presence but also an act of remembering, a way of inscribing experience onto the world. It is both ephemeral and permanent, like the imprints left in clay, like the marks of caregiving on the body, like the echoes of absence and presence that define maternal experience.

Intergenerational Reunion: Finding Ghamar Sultan in Motherhood

Before she was my grandmother, before she was mother to my mother, she was Ghamar Sultan—the Sultan of the Moon. A name that carried both radiance and power, a name that existed before the weight of motherhood reshaped her identity. I did not know her well in life, but in becoming a mother, I found her again. Not in stories, not in photographs, but in the quiet, unspoken ways that motherhood folds one generation into the next. I never had the chance to ask her about her struggles, her joys, or what it meant to her to carry the name Ghamar Sultan before she became someone's mother. But I have wondered—who was she before she became the woman I only knew in fragments? Did she love her name? Did she ever long to be more than what motherhood allowed? Or was she, too, erased by the labor of care? Perhaps she answers me now, not in words, but in presence.

Since dedicating my thesis to motherhood, she has returned to me in dreams. I feel her watching, listening. Maybe she is pleased that I am searching for her voice, that I am

trying to speak what went unsaid in her time. In these dreams, she is neither young nor old—she simply is, lingering in the space between past and present, between memory and inheritance.



Figure 34. *Portrait of Ghamar Sultan*, 1957. Family archive. At age 20, before becoming a mother.
Caption and photograph courtesy of Setayesh Babaei.⁸³

⁸³ *Portrait of Ghamar Sultan*, 1957, family archive. Caption and photograph courtesy of Setayesh Babaei.

Over time, these dreams became more than subconscious visitations; they evolved into a form of research—a methodology rooted in feeling, intuition, and embodiment. In academic spaces that often prioritize the quantifiable and the visible, dreams offered me an alternative way of knowing—one that honored emotional truth and ancestral presence. Each dream functioned as a quiet interview, a portal into knowledge passed down not through text, but through sensation, presence, and deep listening. They allowed me to hold space for what cannot be fully articulated—what lives in the body, in silence, and in the thresholds of sleep. In this way, dreaming became a vital tool in my practice, connecting me to my maternal lineage not through documentation, but through resonance.



Figure 35. AI-generated image of Ghamar Sultan (approximate), 2025. Selected by the my mother as the closest resemblance to her own mother.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ *AI-Generated Image of Ghamar Sultan (Approximate)*, 2025. Selected by the artist's mother as the closest resemblance to her own mother.

This absence, this longing to reach across time, led me to search for her physically. I began generating AI images of her at my age, using photographs of myself, my mother, and Aila—trying to see how we bond through time, through image. I searched for familiarity, for a connection beyond memory. Did she have my hands? Did Aila have hers? Could I find echoes of her body in my own, just as I found echoes of my own presence in my daughter? The process was not just about appearance but about inheritance—the silent traces of endurance, of repetition, of maternal lineage that had shaped us all.

"No generation has demanded as much from its mother as mine has.

My mother existed only through us—

A woman erased by the act of mothering."

(Excerpt from *Stay Alive So That I May Stay Alive*).

Motherhood is cyclical, repetitive, relentless. Feeding, waking, sleeping, holding. I vanish into it, yet I have never been more present. Each motion, repeated endlessly, folds into the next until time itself loses shape. I find myself in the same rhythms my mother once performed, and her mother before her. The lineage of care is not only inherited but embodied. I feel it most in my body—the way it carries traces of labor, of loss, of love. The way it aches in places I did not know could hold pain. My body, once only my own, is now an archive of caregiving. I do not merely exist; I endure. And in this endurance, I glimpse my grandmother's hands, my mother's tired eyes, my own presence slipping in and out of itself.

"Somewhere within my mind,

A darkness opens, nameless.

Grief swells like breath itself,

Unbidden, unstoppable.

I was me,

Before I was mother."

(Excerpt from *Stay Alive So That I May Stay Alive*).

Science confirms what I have long felt in my body—that mothers are literal carriers of their children, even long after birth. Research in fetal microchimerism has shown that cells from a baby remain within the mother’s body for decades, integrating into her heart, brain, and other organs.⁸⁵ These fetal cells contribute to healing, lingering as physical traces of a child’s presence within their mother. My body, then, is not only an archive of caregiving but a biological record of my daughter’s existence, just as my mother’s body still carries remnants of me. Through my daughter, my grandmother returns. In dreams, in gestures, in the way my hands press into Aila’s small back as she sleeps. I wonder if my grandmother, long before I was born, placed her hands on my mother in the same way. I wonder if, in those quiet moments, she too felt the presence of someone she had lost, someone she had never met.

The past is not gone. It lingers, whispered through the touch of hands, carried in the weight of repetition. What was once hidden beneath time rises again in the act of mothering. I have found her here—not in history books, not in photographs, but in my own body, in my own exhaustion, in the love that persists beyond words.

⁸⁵ J. M. Kinder, I. A. Stelzer, P. C. Arck, and S. S. Way, “Fetal Microchimerism: Understanding Its Role in Health and Disease,” *Trends in Immunology* 38, no. 10 (2017).

Nesting Forms—Poetry, Objects, & Exhibitions as Maternal Archive

Poems

1.

Stay Alive So That I May Stay Alive

Stay alive, so that I may stay alive.
A new nightmare—your absence in my life.
Never before have I feared nothingness so deeply,
Feared the absence of presence.
With every stir inside me,
I tremble within myself,
Restless in past, present, and future.

Your existence now binds itself to mine.
I am from her
You shift from me to you,
And I, from you, to mother.
A strange, unspoken transformation—
A tether we both carry.

Your father understands me.
Understanding is greater than kindness,
Though his kindness is born of understanding.
And so, we are whole with him.

Fate has never been black or white,
Only shadows shifting in light and dark.
When the dark came, I feared your being.
When the light returned, I imagined you.
You were always born in our longing,
An echo of a wish now bound to flesh.

I love my womanhood in this way—
You sweep through me,
And I root myself in you.
I am steady with you,
By the law of nature: Mother.

And yet, the path of mothering is long,
Never made easier by time.

Each day, I pass through time—
Or perhaps, time passes through me.
And you, with joy,
Pass through us,
Life rising within you like a tide.

Pain surges in every limb,
Wave after wave after wave...
And I hold you in my blood,
Cradled in the ache of my body.
This is the strength of my being,
The power of a mother,
Meeting you for the first time.
In the gaze of a man becoming father.
In the shudder of your breath after birth.
In my ever-wakeful eyes.
In exhaustion.
In tears that arrive unbidden,
In the worship of you.
In love without reason—
Mother.

I have forgotten who I was before.
I exist now only in your presence.
I think not of hunger, but of yours.
Not of sleep, but yours.
Not of laughter, but yours.
Not of tears, but yours.
I drift closer to you,
And further from myself.

My body is no longer mine.
My breasts, heavy in your mouth,
Your small hands pressed against my thigh,
Weightless.

Time no longer moves through days and nights,
It only moves through you.
You are my dawn,
You are my night.
My mother gave up everything,
And perhaps, I will too.

Our connection has never been more beautiful,
For we do not understand each other—
We live each other.

I am weary, but I cannot look away.
I lie beside you, watching.
You are the most beautiful image in the world,
And a mother—its most sleepless eyes.
Your survival is my survival.
And so, I must sleep.

I pour every feeling into the space you fill,
Into the joy of your sleeping smile,
Into the scent of my mother,
Wrapping around us.

No generation has demanded as much from its mother as mine has.
My mother existed only through us—
A woman erased by the act of mothering,
A woman who might have been,
Who would have been,
Who should have been
Was lost, after us.

She broke after I left.
She drifted through time,
Until she found herself again—
In a love that had never abandoned her.
Now, I write for her voice,
And walk in the steps she never took.

Her generation burned by ours, in politics.
Our generation burned by hers, in culture.
Two generations set aflame,
Bound by grief and understanding.

I press my hand to your chest,
To feel your breath,
To feel your being.
You, the most defenseless of beings,
Who knows me only by my warmth,
By my scent,
By my voice,
By my footsteps.
I listen to your cries as though they are words.

My body has changed since your birth.
The mirror fades from my sight.
My eyes shine only for you.

And when I step away,
My smile fades with me.
Somewhere within my mind,
A darkness opens, nameless.
Grief swells like breath itself,
Unbidden, unstoppable.
I was I,
Before I was mother.

I lull myself to sleep within your lullaby.
You wake, hungry.
I wake.
I sleep.
You stir.
Your father wakes.
I sleep.
You turn.
Your father wakes.
I sleep.
You cry.
I wake.
Again and again and again.

Your father leaves for work,
And I am alone, with you.
With you, I am safe from this strange sorrow.
But without you—
I fear.
I fear I have forgotten myself,
That I have no self to return to.
I choose to stay with you.
To stay where it is safe.
And this, perhaps,
Was my first mistake as a mother.

Grief rises tall.
And I grow short, in words.

2.

We Are Revealed in the Hidden

With every inhale and exhale,
that comes and goes unwilled,
filling our lungs with air woven together—
from the breath of humans,
the exhaust of machines,
and the trees that cradle life in their branches.
Somewhere, a tear forms
in the fabric of all that was,
where childhood dreams drift—
carried by the umbrella of a dandelion seed,
delivering whispers of our fate back home.

Sew it again.
The thread never ends,
yet it knots a thousand times,
tears apart—
Do not stitch it back;
this is no remedy.

We, like trees,
have rooted ourselves deep into the earth,
seeking depth to rise higher into the air.
Yet in doing so,
we have shortened our sight of time.

We are the narrow-minded, perched above,
fearful of heights,
as if trees fear the fall from our gaze.
The rift between us and the trees—
clear as the wind.

3.

My Child, My Soul

Your breath flows into mine,
My body bends, my hands tighten. Shadows shift, pain deepens.
A river flowing backward, a root rising upward—
I become the mother,
In blood,
Holding you,
My soul, my child.

Between us,
The world slips,
Like a cord to be cut.
Time no longer bends,
It breaks,
In your thread, in my weave,
Our traces fade away.

In silence,
We build a nest
Where light and dark merge—
I am the end,
Our beginning is you.

I sing, and you emerge,
You are born,
My child, My soul.

4.

Echoes in Silence

The house is silent,
yet on paper, I am loud.
The television stares,
the books turn their own pages,
the clock asks me for time.

Everything is arranged to lead me back—
to a place, a moment, a name,
to memories shifting in the present,
never fixed, always changing.

Too late, I learned I had grown too soon.
Cultureless is a culture of its own,
and devotion, a kind of faith.
I carried both,
their remedy was silence and solitude—
but also, hope.

Some nights, I think of birth,
of months carried,
of emergence—
through water, through blood,
onto white and blue hospital sheets.

Each breath, each pain,
a passage toward life.
A door slams shut,
pulling me back to now.

Motherhood entangles time,
folding past into present,
yet it is the world
that weaves its complexities around it.

There is a joy that no world can touch—
in laughter, in care, in the press of small hands.
A beginning wrapped in warmth.

Tea turns cold,
like morning's coffee,
like evening's brew.
A cup with no rising steam.

He says:
Think of a candle within you,
keep it alight,
guard its flame.
We carry many candles inside—
do not surrender them to the wind.

Eyes close in pause,
fingers still on the keys.
Grief lingers where absence grows.
A photograph framed,
a flame lit,
mourning held in the arms of night.
Some losses burn quietly—
until a name is spoken,
until a memory stirs,
and the embers rise again.

Half-awake, half-asleep,
warmth returns through the press of hands.
Blood moves once more.
Time marks itself—
fifteen months,
yet still, I long for the nine.

A presence stirs.
Arms lift,
a lullaby hums in circles,
rocking night into sleep.
A foot on the rug, warm,
the other on the floor, cold.
Small lights blink in the dark,
steady, flashing, unseen sentinels—
television, modem, speaker,
silent machines, always watching.

Morning comes.
The flowers have had their fill of light—
they only ask for water.
The windows open outward,
but the world inside holds its own sky.

A woman in this building
says the world is dull,
though she has never seen it.

5.

Within the Mother

I drown so deeply in another
that I surface beyond myself,
cast into the quiet abyss of their being.

Stillness follows the fall—
a silence too heavy for a cry,
a wound that has no voice,
only the echo of pain
unclaimed, unnamed.

She returns to me,
a woman shaped by sorrow,
a crease in her brow
that was never meant to be.

She lingers at the threshold of knowing,
where understanding falters,
where the weight of love
is too great to be seen.

6.

Window Tree

At the heart of the kitchen window,
the tree stands, the table waits.
One bathes in the morning sun,
the other rests beneath the roof.

I am pregnant, and so is she.
I carry one,
and she carries many.
I look at her,
and she looks after me.

She is a keeper of hours,
rooted deep while I move through walls.
From every window, I find her—
a shifting shape, yet steady, tall.

A raven perches at her crown,
calling to the wind.
Bees weave circles around her,
drawn to the sweetness she gives.

She is shelter, she is feast,
a quiet witness to the world.
Her arms hold nests, her hands bear fruit,
her roots embrace the earth.

To watch her is to watch the birds,
dancing light upon her limbs.
To watch her is to watch the beetles,
climbing slow in secret hymns.

To watch her is to watch the squirrels,
plucking fruit to hide away.
She holds, she gives, she stands, she sways—
the mother tree, the mother's way.

7.

My Hands

The first to touch you,
to hold you,
to feed you from mine,
to cradle you close,
to lull you to sleep,

My hands.

The first to protect you from falling,
to lift you up,
to guide your steps,
to comfort you in your cries.

Where is the rest of me?
Where is my body?
Hidden beneath my skin,
stitching itself back together.

Will I ever be the same again?

You cry,
I cry.
I'm here my child.
All yours, not mine

Together, we grow.

Objects

Cast in Care

I began with the smallest things—Aila’s bottles, pacifiers, toys. Everyday items, but each held the residue of presence, of need, of closeness. These were not simply objects; they were extensions of her world, of mine. I made plaster molds of them, each one a cavity holding the memory of touch. For her diaper and soft teddy bear, molding wasn’t possible. Their softness demanded something else. I submerged them directly into cement—preserved not through duplication but through entombment.



Figure 36. *Cement Casts of Aila’s Objects (Process View)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Cement casts of Lego pieces made using plaster molds.⁸⁶

Cement had always spoken to me. I chose it for its weight, its permanence, for the way it resists—and yet yields—to time. But the process was far from predictable. The plaster molds absorbed the cement’s moisture, softening and sometimes fusing with the cast. Even with releasing agents as barrier, the forms emerged imperfect. Sometimes, chunks of plaster clung to the surface; other times, the molds damaged altogether. What remained were fractured, scarred replicas—part object, part ruin. And yet, these imperfections felt honest. They revealed the process, the fragility of making, the invisible labor within the material. My training in ceramics returned to me in those moments—how to read the weight of water, how to wait, how to respond gently. Taking the

⁸⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *Cement Casts of Aila’s Objects (Process View)*, 2024, cement casts of Lego pieces made using plaster molds.

hardened cement from its fragile mold was its own kind of caregiving. The process demanded slowness. Attentiveness. Patience. And in many cases, letting go.

These rough cement forms carried more than the shape of a toy or bottle. They held the memory of pressure, the tension of care. They were born different from their original forms—heavier, less refined, more vulnerable. Their sharp edges and embedded plaster fragments told stories of transformation and rupture, of being shaped by care but never fully returned to what was before.



Figure 37. *Concrete Boots*, 2005, by Sarah Lucas. Cast concrete army boots. Image courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

I think of Sarah Lucas's *Concrete Boots*—heavy, unrefined casts that carry the body's burden without concealing the rawness of their making.⁸⁷ Like hers, my work resists perfection and sentimentality. I want the seams to show. I want the pressure, the fractures, the slowness of care to remain visible. These are not idealized relics of childhood but material testaments to endurance—to the quiet acts of holding, waiting, and witnessing. They are care, cast in concrete.

⁸⁷ Sarah Lucas, *Concrete Boots*, 2005, cast concrete army boots. Image courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Amplified Absence

In this exploration, I focused on Aila’s baby bottle, aiming to magnify its presence by enlarging it fivefold through 3D scanning and printing. The decision to scale up the bottle was both technical and conceptual. Scaling became a method of transformation—an attempt to elevate a small, overlooked object of caregiving into something monumental, visible, and impossible to ignore. In daily life, these objects often disappear into routine, their importance overshadowed by their familiarity. By altering their size, I sought to shift perception, to insist on their significance, and to honor the quiet labor they represent. This magnification was not about monumentality for its own sake, but about calling attention to what is typically hidden—enlarging the trace of care until it could no longer be dismissed.

The process, however, presented unexpected challenges. The bottle’s transparency and soft edges made it difficult for the scanner’s light to detect its surface accurately. To address this, I spray-painted the bottle gray, providing an opaque, matte finish that allowed the scanner to capture its contours more effectively.



Figure 38. *3D Scan of Baby Bottle (Process View)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Laser scan of bottle during digital modeling session.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *3D Scan of Baby Bottle (Process View)*, 2024, laser scan of bottle during digital modeling session.

Despite the technical precision of the laser scanner, the resulting image was fragmented—hovering, weightless, and incomplete. The bottle, once a familiar object of care and nourishment, appeared digitally dismembered, its pieces suspended in space, detached from gravity and context. This raw, ghostly rendering mirrored the experience of caregiving itself—something deeply physical, yet often invisible or dispersed across time. Each pass of the scanner recorded more than just form; it captured the interruptions of movement, the shifts of the hand, the ghost traces of presence. The result was not a perfect replica, but a poetic echo—a digital artifact suspended between presence and absence. Reaching out to a mentor for help in stabilizing the model became a return to the relational roots of making—an acknowledgment that caregiving, like art-making, is rarely solitary. It is shaped by shared knowledge, gentle guidance, and the quiet persistence of repair.

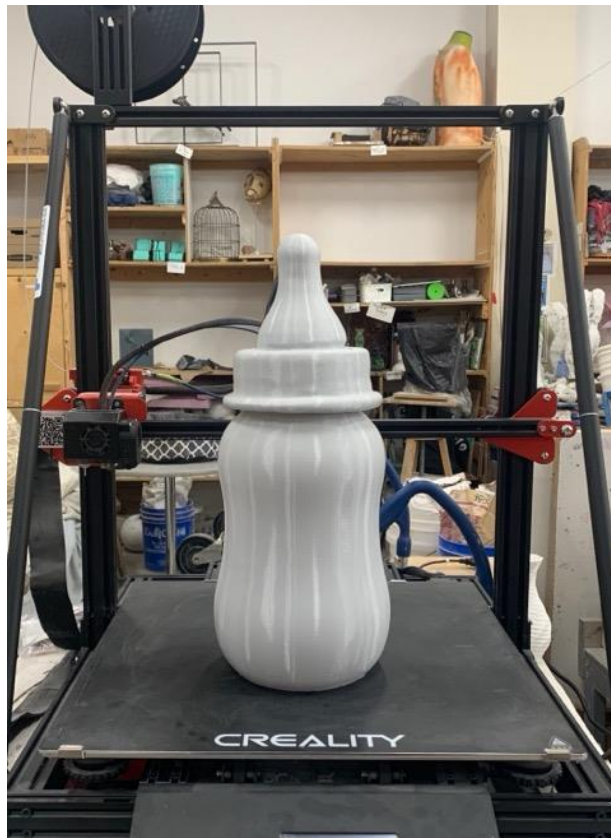


Figure 39. *3D-Printed Bottle with Embedded Audio*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Large-scale PLA print with internal speaker emitting recordings of the Aila. Photograph by Thoreau Bakker⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Setayesh Babaei, *3D-Printed Bottle with Embedded Audio*, 2024, large-scale PLA print with internal speaker emitting recordings of Aila. Photograph by Thoreau Bakker.

The final 3D-printed bottle, rendered in pale gray plastic, possessed a ghostly quality—large yet fragile, hollow yet resonant. To imbue it with a sense of presence, I embedded a small speaker inside, playing recordings of Aila’s infant cries. This transformed the bottle into a vessel of memory, emitting sounds that evoked both absence and intimacy. The disembodied cries created an uncanny experience, prompting reflections on the intersections of technology, memory, and motherhood.



Figure 40. *Untitled (Pots & Pans)*, by Robert Therrien. Installation view from *Artist Rooms: Robert Therrien* at The Exchange, Penzance. Image courtesy of Artist Rooms and the Robert Therrien Estate.⁹⁰

This exploration of scale finds resonance in Robert Therrien’s oversized domestic sculptures, particularly his towering stacked plates and monumental table-and-chair installations. Therrien’s work reconfigures everyday objects into immersive, surreal environments, evoking both childlike wonder and uncanny displacement. His enlarged plates—objects of the domestic sphere—take on an almost mythic significance when removed from their functional scale. Similarly, in scaling up Aila’s baby bottle, I sought to estrange the object from its original use, drawing attention to its emotional and material weight. Therrien’s manipulation of scale becomes a way to reflect on memory, familiarity, and estrangement—strategies that parallel my own attempt to render the invisible labor of caregiving newly visible and materially present.

⁹⁰ Robert Therrien, *Untitled (Pots & Pans)*, installation view from *Artist Rooms: Robert Therrien* at The Exchange, Penzance. Image courtesy of Artist Rooms and the Robert Therrien Estate.

While the piece achieved its intended scale and incorporated innovative elements, I felt a disconnect due to the mediated nature of the process. The reliance on digital tools introduced a distance between myself and the material, contrasting with the tactile engagement that characterizes my practice. This experience reinforced the importance of direct interaction with materials, where the physical act of making allows for a deeper connection and the emergence of meaning through embodied labor. Still, this project opened a new line of thinking—what would it mean to scale care for public space? I now envision this work as a potential public art installation—an amplified vessel of caregiving, memory, and sound, situated in communal space. If supported, this piece could one day take shape beyond the studio: standing as a marker of maternal labor, presence, and the echoes of touch that continue long after the moment has passed.

Molten Memory

At the same time I was exploring scale through digital fabrication, I became increasingly drawn to repetition—to the quiet ritual of casting the same form over and over again. I returned to Aila's baby bottle, this time using silicone molds to cast it in plaster, repeating the process across three molds. There was something meditative in the repetition, in allowing myself to be present in the studio, in the rhythm of mixing, pouring, waiting. It was during this period of experimentation that a conversation with a sculpture and installation professor led me toward a new material and method: aluminum sand casting.



Figure 41. *Plaster Cast Baby Bottles*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Series of plaster bottles cast from silicone molds.⁹¹

⁹¹ Setayesh Babaei, *Plaster Cast Baby Bottles*, 2024, series of plaster bottles cast from silicone molds.

Once I began researching the technique and viewing other artists' works, I felt an immediate sense of recognition. Sand casting with aluminum—this ancient method of shaping metal through heat, pressure, and time—suddenly seemed to hold everything I had been trying to say. The strength and weight of the material mirrored the burdens of motherhood; the rough, unrefined surfaces reflected the exhaustion, beauty, and vulnerability I had come to know so intimately.



Figure 42. *Aluminum Cast Baby Bottles*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Sand-cast aluminum baby bottles with visible seams and sprues, photographed post-pour during demolding process.⁹²

The process was demanding. Each mold box had to be packed with sand and pressed tightly onto the object. My arms ached from repetition. The labor was not only physical but communal—I relied on studio technicians to help move the heavy mold boxes filled with sand. Because of safety regulations, I couldn't witness the pour itself. Instead, I

⁹² Setayesh Babaei, *Aluminum Cast Baby Bottles*, 2024, sand-cast aluminum baby bottles with visible seams and sprues, photographed post-pour during demolding process.

waited—another familiar gesture of motherhood—and returned only to see what had emerged.

My decision to leave them unrefined was a recognition of their power. These objects became not only representations of care, but bearers of its labor—monuments to the acts we are told to clean up, smooth over, or erase. In this way, they resonate with Nene Humphrey's *Spoons Series*, in which she cast spoons in collaboration with her mother, using the repeated domestic object to speak to the intergenerational nature of caregiving.⁹³ Like Humphrey's spoons, my bottles are both functional forms and deeply symbolic—they hold nourishment, but they also hold grief, exhaustion, and memory.

These cast aluminum bottles, still bound by the paths that shaped them, exist as quiet witnesses to labor. They remind us that in caregiving, as in casting, it is not always the refined outcome that holds meaning—it is the process, the weight, the repetition, and the decision to let something be as it is, scars and all.

Scripted

While immersed in the physical intensity of sand casting, I was also preparing for an exhibition in OCAD University's Great Hall. For this exhibition, I turned to my journal—a container of thoughts, emotions, and memories written during the early years of motherhood. I picked up large rolls of unused printing paper from the university print shop and began transcribing entries by hand, in Farsi, using bold, flowing strokes. The idea was to let one long scroll unravel from the fourth floor down to the second, letting the paper fall through the open architecture of the building, turning memory into scale, language into structure.

When the paper dropped, it created a sound—soft, yet haunting—as the scroll layered upon itself, folding story into space. However, shortly after installation, I was told it posed a fire hazard and had to be removed. I adapted the work into four smaller scrolls that extended from the wall to the floor, losing the spectacle of scale but retaining the intimacy of script.

⁹³ Nene Humphrey, *Spoons Series*, 1990s, cast spoon sculptures made in collaboration with the artist's mother.

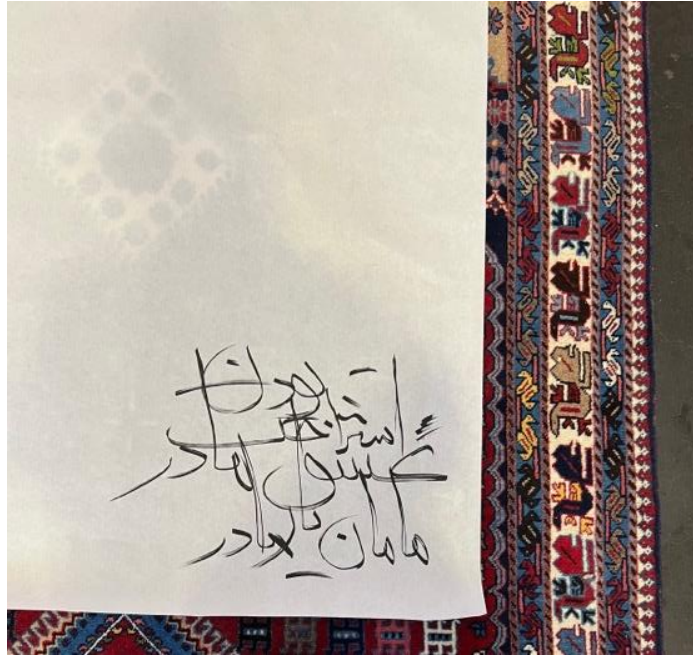


Figure 43. *Mādar: Rest in Progress (Writing Performance, Preparation)*, 2024, by Setayesh Babaei. Marker test on scroll paper beside Persian rug. The handwritten Persian words translate to “Mother,” “Beloved,” “Rest,” and “Motherhood.”⁹⁴

As I wrote, I remembered something I had forgotten: my handwriting had once been a form of connection. In my youth, friends would ask me to write letters for them—to lovers, to parents, to friends—trusting my script to carry emotions they struggled to express. That history returned as I wrote my own words again, this time in a public space. Each stroke became an act of re-entry into memories once folded away. Rewriting became a form of re-seeing, of re-marking a story already lived.

There is power in writing something again—not to repeat, but to reveal. This work became a meditation on memory, language, and presence. Even stripped of its original scale, it stood as a quiet monument to what has been carried, silenced, rewritten, and finally, remembered.

Fold Impressions

The folding performance I presented during the exhibition in OCAD University’s Great Hall marked the beginning of a deeper, more intimate inquiry. As I folded layers of fabric on the floor—one after another—I became increasingly aware of the order in which I

⁹⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest in Progress (Writing Performance, Preparation)*, 2024, marker test on scroll paper beside Persian rug. The handwritten Persian words translate to “Mother,” “Beloved,” “Rest,” and “Motherhood.”

chose to conceal them. There was meaning in those choices: the layers that disappeared first seemed to hold the most emotional weight. I began to reflect on how mothers—across generations—have learned to fold away parts of themselves to fit social ideals, to become palatable, to appear as “good” mothers.

This personal realization opened up an artistic path I hadn’t previously explored. A conversation with a mentor, a printmaker, led to the idea of capturing the folds not just through performance but in print. We pressed a folded baby onesie through the printing press, and the outcome surprised us both—clear, stark, and raw. Every crease was visible. Every fold became a line, a map of compression and care. These were not prints of garments; they were imprints of memory, of repetition, of weight that could no longer be concealed.



Figure 44. *Folded Baby Clothes*, 2024. Print press transfer by Setayesh Babaei.⁹⁵

We spent a day folding and printing, and with each impression, I witnessed something profound: the garments became relics of presence, not through what they were, but

⁹⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Folded Baby Clothes*, 2024, print press transfer.

through what they had endured. These were frozen gestures, suspended in stillness, articulating stories not through imagery but through texture, rhythm, and residue.

The process echoed Beatriz Colomina's insights in *X-Ray Architecture*, where she describes how modern architecture was recalibrated through the sensitivities of the ill—designing for patients “in the weakest position” meant tuning space to what is often invisible: breath, rest, light, exhaustion.⁹⁶ Colomina writes that a tuberculosis sanatorium, unlike conventional hospital rooms, had to function as “a house with open windows,”⁹⁷ offering care not only through medical treatment but through space itself. This attention to the unseen—to air, rhythm, and exposure—informs how I understand the work of folding and printing fabric. My prints do not capture garments, but what they have endured: compression, softness, repetition. Like the sanatorium's architecture, which made illness spatially visible, these impressions record the labor of caregiving not through representation, but through trace. Creases become lines of memory; folds become marks of containment and release. In this sense, the cloth pressed through the print bed becomes a kind of diagnostic surface, revealing what caregiving inscribes on the body and mind: a residue of touch, pressure, and disappearance made visible.

These impressions are quiet declarations. They hold their own time. They make visible what is so often tucked away.

The works in this section reflect an evolving, process-based inquiry into material, memory, and care. Through trial, failure, repetition, and unexpected discoveries, each object became a record of labor—sometimes painstaking, sometimes playful, always intimate. The decisions were often shaped not by mastery but by dialogue: with materials, with mentors, with past knowledge and new challenges. From casting to printing, folding to rewriting, the process itself became the content—revealing the emotional texture of caregiving and the invisible weight of maternal labor. These explorations were not about perfect outcomes, but about making visible the gestures that often go unnoticed.

⁹⁶ Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 67.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

Exhibitions

Final Thesis Exhibition

Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood

Thesis Exhibition Presented at the Graduate Gallery, OCAD University, March 2025

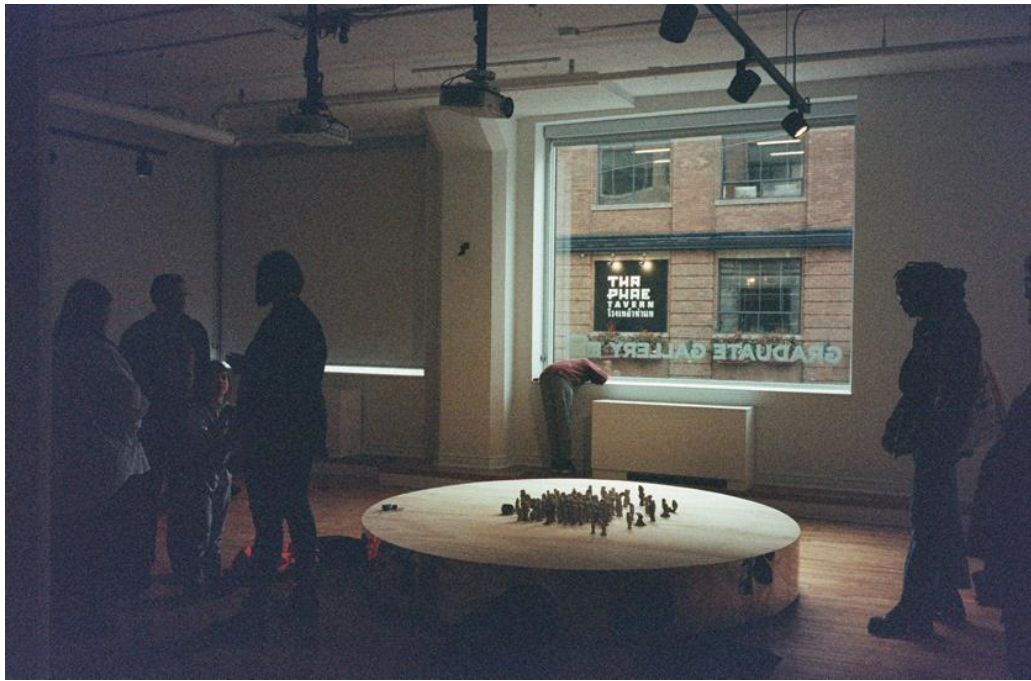


Figure 45. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah⁹⁸

This exhibition brings together the many threads of my artistic exploration—a journey shaped by the emotional and physical dimensions of caregiving. *Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood* is not a final statement, but a moment of gathering—where past works, material discoveries, and conceptual questions merge to form a space of reflection, collaboration, and shared presence.

At its center lies a participatory sculpture project *Holding Past, Molding Presence* that invites others to press their hands into clay, leaving behind gestures of care that live on beyond the moment of contact. This act—simple, tactile, and intimate—mirrors the

⁹⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

everyday labor of caregiving: unnoticed, repetitive, and deeply embodied. Over the course of a year, this project grew from my sustained exploration of caregiving not as a theme, but as a way of being in the world. It was shaped through sculpture, performance, and installation practices that asked how care is transferred, remembered, and preserved.



Figure 46. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.⁹⁹



Figure 47. *Holding Past, Molding Presence* (participatory process view). Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

The conceptual foundation was influenced by Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, in which she disentangles motherhood as an institution from the lived experience of mothering. Her framing of this duality—between societal expectation and personal truth—resonates throughout the work. Each handprint in clay captures that tension: the imprint of someone reaching out, giving form to what is often held privately. Rich critiques, “The mother’s battle for her child... needs to become a common human battle, waged in love and in the passion for survival,” emphasizing how deeply personal acts of care are too often shouldered in isolation.¹⁰¹ Involving others in the making process—inviting them to leave behind their own traces—expanded the project from a personal exploration into a collective act of witnessing. These sculpted gestures do not merely symbolize care; they embody it. Each indentation speaks to the layered contradictions of caregiving. Its beauty and exhaustion. Its visibility and erasure. Its repetition and resilience. In the intimate act of touch, these forms archive not just the shape of hands, but the emotional labor often unseen yet deeply felt.



Figure 48. *Holding Past, Molding Presence* (detail). Clay, plywood, mirror sheets. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah

¹⁰⁰ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence (Participatory Process View)*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

¹⁰¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 280.

Diana Taylor’s theory of embodied memory—especially her distinction between the archive and the repertoire—offers a crucial lens through which to understand the conceptual core of *Nest, Rest, Shadows*. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor writes that while archives consist of enduring materials like documents, texts, and objects, repertoires are composed of ephemeral practices: “acts of transfer” such as storytelling, movement, or ritual that are passed from body to body.¹⁰² This concept aligns profoundly with the ethos of my project, which centers on caregiving as an embodied, relational practice—one that is often invisible, yet deeply remembered in the body.

By inviting participants to press their hands into soft clay, the project enacts this very idea of the repertoire. These impressions are not just physical marks; they are gestures of care, expressions of memory, and transfers of lived experience. The act of pressing into clay becomes a ritual in itself—a tactile, unspoken form of communication that carries forward the emotional weight of caregiving. It resists erasure, offering a counterpoint to caregiving’s usual disappearance from institutional archives and public recognition.



Figure 49. *Holding Past, Molding Presence* (participatory process view). Clay, plywood, mirror sheets. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹⁰³

¹⁰² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁰³ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence* (Participatory Process View), clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

What Taylor's theory allows me to do is frame these imprints not only as personal traces but as collective memory in motion. Each gesture becomes part of a repertoire of care—a shared language spoken through material engagement. Rather than telling a story of caregiving, the work performs it: participants enact their own forms of giving, holding, shaping, and releasing. In this way, the installation functions not just as an exhibition but as an active site of memory transmission. The clay, though static once dried, becomes a living document of these ephemeral acts—tangible proof of presence, collaboration, and acknowledgment. Her work affirms the idea that what we pass between one another through embodied interaction—through the repetition of care—is no less meaningful than what we record in text. In *Nest, Rest, Shadows*, this becomes an act of resistance: preserving caregiving not in silence or secrecy, but in form, gesture, and collective presence.

Upon entering the gallery, viewers encountered a low circular platform wrapped in mirrored sheets. Only a sliver was visible at first, encouraging movement, curiosity, and a gentle unfolding of space. Clustered atop the platform were dozens of hand-formed sculptures—each created by a participant who had imprinted their hand into fresh clay. The mirrors reflected and distorted nearby bodies, echoing how care is glimpsed—rarely central, but always near.



Figure 50. *Holding Past, Molding Presence (installation view)*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence (Installation View)*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

Behind the installation hung *Traces of Touch*: a grid of vacuum-sealed pouches, each holding a small portion of natural clay. These bags, suspended like wombs, invited visitors to unpin one, warm it in their hands, and form their imprint before placing it on the platform. This gesture—slow and intentional—established a rhythm of participation, presence, and letting go. As pouches were used, the artist quietly replaced them—an unseen act of tending that mirrored the quiet, continuous labour at the heart of care.



Figure 51. *Traces of Touch* (installation view). Natural clay, vacuum-sealed pouches, pins.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Luke Ge Lu¹⁰⁵



Figure 52. *Traces of Touch* (installation view). Natural clay, vacuum-sealed pouches, pins.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Traces of Touch* (Installation View), natural clay, vacuum-sealed pouches, pins, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Luke Ge Lu.



Figure 53. *Stains of Care* (installation view). Bamboo cloth, water, clay. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹⁰⁷.

Nearby, the act of cleaning became its own form of care. Titled *Stains of Care*, this component included two plinths with white bamboo cloths—wet and stained. Used cloths were then each hung by the artist on the wall, transformed into markers of shared effort. These acts—touch, wipe, mark—repeated the rhythms of daily caregiving: soft, cyclical, essential.



Figure 54. *Stains of Care*. Bamboo cloth, water, clay. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *Traces of Touch (Installation View)*, natural clay, vacuum-sealed pouches, pins, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

¹⁰⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Stains of Care (Installation View)*, bamboo cloth, water, clay, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.



Figure 55. *Stains of Care* (detail). Bamboo cloth, water, clay. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.¹⁰⁹

A sound piece titled *Echoes of Care*, composed in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe, resonated quietly across the space. Two speakers—one low to the floor, the other slightly raised—played a whispered poem, *My Child, My Soul*. Some words were clear, others dissolved into rhythm. Listeners filled in the blanks with their own meanings. This sonic exchange mirrored care itself: imperfect, intimate, and profoundly felt.

¹⁰⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *Stains of Care*, bamboo cloth, water, clay, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

¹⁰⁹ Setayesh Babaei, *Stains of Care (Detail)*, bamboo cloth, water, clay, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.



Figure 56. *Echoes of Care*. Sound installation in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹¹⁰



Figure 57. *Echoes of Care*. Sound installation in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Luke Ge Lu¹¹¹

The entire gallery invited pause. Pillows were scattered throughout, inviting viewers to sit, rest, or converse. This subversion of typical gallery posture became a gesture of

¹¹⁰ Setayesh Babaei in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe, *Echoes of Care*, sound installation, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

¹¹¹ Setayesh Babaei in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe, *Echoes of Care*, sound installation, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Luke Ge Lu.

generosity—viewers no longer observers, but participants. Care was not only the subject, but the space.



Figure 58. *Stains of Care* (installation view). Bamboo cloth, water, clay.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹¹²

This final exhibition brought together ideas and forms developed throughout earlier works like *Nest Me Chest* and *Judge Me Not*. Raw, repetitive materials—aluminum, clay, cloth—held space for imperfection, for story, for community. Artists like Robert Gober and Carolee Schneemann inspired my approach—Gober through haunting domesticity, Schneemann through embodied gesture and relational presence.

¹¹² Setayesh Babaei, *Stains of Care* (Installation View), bamboo cloth, water, clay, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.



Figure 59. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Farihah Aliyah Shah¹¹³



Figure 60. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Farihah Aliyah Shah.

¹¹⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

In *Nest, Rest, Shadows*, caregiving was made visible through sculpture, cloth, and sound. The gallery became not just an exhibition but a living space for collective rest, connection, and reflection. This was not an ending, but a space of return. An archive of imprints—traces of touch, moments of care, and voices gently exchanged. A soft place where caregiving could be shared, and where being seen was itself an act of care.

Reflection

The most profound and unexpected response to my thesis exhibition came not only from the number of hands that pressed into clay, but from the stories that emerged around each gesture. Visitors approached the work with curiosity, but quickly shifted into something quieter—something close to reverence. The invitation to leave behind a sculptural imprint became more than an act of making; it became a moment of being cared for. Participants expressed feeling held by the space. They slowed down. They stayed. They made not just one sculpture, but two, sometimes three. They asked if they could take them home, but often, after touching the final form, decided to leave them behind—feeling, somehow, that their story belonged in the circle, among the rest.



Figure 61. *Traces of Touch* (installation view). Natural clay, vacuum-sealed pouches, pins.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Traces of Touch* (Installation View), natural clay, vacuum-sealed pouches, pins, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

The whispering voice in the space—the poem *My Child, My Soul*—lingered like breath between words, subtle yet immersive. One visitor said it reminded them of their mother’s voice, though they hadn’t heard her speak in years. Another described it as a dream: a presence both haunting and tender. The mirrored surface beneath the sculptures fractured bodies into fragments—viewers saw themselves multiply, distort, and dissolve. This distortion was not disorienting, but intimate. Some said it recalled moments from childhood—something once forgotten now suddenly remembered. In that space, reflection became connection. Conversations emerged, not only about the work but about caregiving, about absence, about how love leaves marks we carry long after the moment has passed. The murmured voice, the mirrored floor, the imprints of hands—together they invited visitors into a quiet world where grief and grace could coexist.



Figure 62. *Echoes of Care*. Sound installation in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Luke Ge Lu¹¹⁶

What moved me most was the way visitors engaged—not passively, but with presence and care. They asked questions. They pressed clay into shapes. They lingered in silence,

¹¹⁶ Setayesh Babaei in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe, *Echoes of Care*, sound installation, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Luke Ge Lu.

then began to speak: about their own mothers, their children, their fears, and their memories. The work did not exclude—it invited. It welcomed stories both spoken and unspoken. Some found closure. Others found beginnings. And all, I believe, found themselves reflected somewhere in the material, the sound, or the quiet weight of the space.



Figure 63. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹¹⁷



Figure 64. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.



Figure 65. *Holding Past, Molding Presence*. Clay, plywood, mirror sheets.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photo by Fariyah Aliyah Shah¹¹⁹

The accumulation of these responses revealed something essential: that caregiving, in all its forms, is both deeply personal and universally resonant. Each of the exhibitions that preceded this one—*Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, *Monsther*, and

¹¹⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

¹¹⁹ Setayesh Babaei, *Holding Past, Molding Presence*, clay, plywood, mirror sheets, 2025. Presented in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows: Tracing the Echoes of Motherhood*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Fariyah Aliyah Shah.

Mādar —offered fragments of this larger conversation. But it was in Nest, Rest, Shadows that everything came together. Here, people didn't just look—they stayed. They sat. They folded in. And in doing so, they gave the work its final form. Not just the clay, or the cloth, or the voice—but the echo. The reflection. The shared breath between gesture and witness.

Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows

Solo Exhibition Presented at the Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond Street West, Toronto, May–June 2024



Figure 66. *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition view from hallway, 2024. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition view from hallway, 2024. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

As my first solo exhibition, *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows* was both a culmination and an opening—less a destination than a surface in formation. Influenced by artists like Takesada Matsutani, whose practice foregrounds repetition, material honesty, and time as medium, I approached this exhibition not as a showcase of resolved works, but as a test site—an unfolding gesture of reflection, rhythm, and rest.

The curatorial approach was deeply inspired by Takesada Matsutani’s unique philosophy and method, particularly his embrace of adaptability and material responsiveness. As the Document Journal article observes, Matsutani’s work resists rigid structure, favoring a process-oriented approach where materials such as glue and graphite guide the form through slow, repetitive gestures. His practice of revisiting the same techniques—layering, sanding, and building over time—encapsulates a kind of meditative labor that resonates with my own approach to curating. Like Matsutani, who allows the act of making to unfold organically, I approached this exhibition through an accumulation of decisions that foster dialogue between the works, the space, and the viewer’s body. This ethos of patience and presence echoes my experience with both motherhood and artmaking, where repetition and responsiveness are not just methods, but modes of being.¹²¹

Three core characteristics defined the installations at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows* are length, repetition, and rawness. These elements manifested not only in the materials—plaster, clay, fabric, graphite, aluminum—but also in the spatial and sensory experience of the gallery. Many works were installed below eye level or connected to the floor, honoring the realization that motherhood happens on the floor. Viewers were invited to sit on pillows positioned throughout the space, breaking the norms of upright gallery-viewing and encouraging a slower, embodied engagement. This gesture of rest was intentional: to create a place where both viewer and artwork could settle, pause, and breathe.

¹²¹ Document Journal, “For Takesada Matsutani, Resistance Comes in the Form of Adaptability,” *Document Journal*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2022/02/for-takesada-matsutani-resistance-comes-in-the-form-of-adaptability/>.

The rawness of the works—unrefined textures, visible seams, stains, and fractures—spoke to the honesty and vulnerability embedded in maternal labor. The repetition of forms and actions, from folding baby clothes to casting bottles, echoed the daily rituals of caregiving and the cyclical nature of exhaustion, comfort, and return.

By allowing the works to rest in proximity to one another, to the floor, and to the viewer's body, *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows* offered a contemplative and intimate environment. It became a site for feedback, for noticing what was still becoming, and for gathering strength to move forward. Like Matsutani's process, it trusted that repetition and presence—not perfection—would give form to meaning. This exhibition was not an end, but a surface still forming.

1.

Nest Me Chest

Aluminum, Sand Cast, Stretch Cord

61 x 22 x 5 inches

2024

In *Nest Me Chest*, a symmetrical arrangement of aluminum baby bottles—raw, unrefined, and cast through sand-casting—mirror one another to form the shape of a torso or ribcage. Their alignment evokes the structure of a chest, a central site of both breath and burden, suggesting the emotional and physical weight of maternal care. The bottles, once vessels of nourishment, now transformed through heat and labor, become relics of presence—unapologetically imperfect and vulnerable.

From the center of the chest-like form, a black cord pours down to the floor, pooling in loose, tangled loops. This gesture introduces a visceral language of connection and unraveling. The cord, both umbilical and metaphoric, extends from the chest as if echoing the unseen ties of care—those that nourish, bind, and sometimes overwhelm. Installed at a height below eye level, the piece encourages viewers to sit on a nearby cushion, lowering their bodies to meet it. This shift in posture creates a space for rest, pause, and quiet confrontation—aligned with the commitment to presenting motherhood as something both grounded and embodied.



Figure 67. *Nest Me Chest*, 2024. Aluminum, sand cast, stretch cord, 61 × 22 × 5 inches.
Installed as part of *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows* solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²²

¹²² Setayesh Babaei, *Nest Me Chest*, aluminum, sand cast, stretch cord, 61 × 22 × 5 in., 2024. Installed in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.



Figure 68. Doreen Balabanoff viewing *Nest Me Chest*, *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows* solo exhibition.¹²³

The title *Nest Me Chest* plays with tenderness and tension, underscoring themes of protection, confinement, and the intimacy of maternal touch. The mirrored casting process evokes repetition and endurance, while the uncut feed lines that connect the bottles remain visible—interrupting the refinement and speaking to the rawness of caregiving. The work, like the body it suggests, does not close or contain; it opens.

¹²³ Setayesh Babaei, *Nest Me Chest*, aluminum, sand cast, stretch cord, 61 × 22 × 5 in., 2024. Installed in *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

2.

Not ForNever
Cement
2023



Figure 69. Installation view of *Nest Me Chest* (right) and *Not ForNever* (left), from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²⁴

Originally created for the first group exhibition *Mādar* in 2023, *Not ForNever* gathers a collection of infant-related objects—bottles, pacifiers, a teddy bear, a diaper—cast in cement. Once soft and in daily use, these intimate objects are recast as weighty, immovable relics. The porous, imperfect textures speak to both the fragility and resilience

¹²⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Installation View of Nest Me Chest (right) and Not ForNever (left)*, 2024. From *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

embedded in maternal care, while the use of cement evokes a sense of permanence and labor.



Figure 70. *Not ForNever*, 2024. Cement. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²⁵

Reinstalled for *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, the sculptures are arranged on black shelves mounted close to the floor—an intentional curatorial choice that invites the viewer to lower themselves physically and emotionally. This gesture reorients the viewer’s relationship to the work, mirroring the posture of caregiving and amplifying the tactile, grounded nature of the maternal experience.

The title *Not ForNever* plays with the tension between permanence and transience. It rejects the finality of “forever” while resisting the dismissal of the temporary. These cast objects are “not forever,” but also “not never”—suspended between memory and

¹²⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Not ForNever*, cement, 2024. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

forgetting, presence and absence. They carry the residue of a moment in time that was once urgent and intimate, now transformed into something static and contemplative.



Figure 71. *Not ForNever* (detail), 2024. Cement. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²⁶

Together, the arrangement suggests a quiet archive: not just of objects, but of gestures, rituals, and attachments. Their roughness and irregularity resist perfection, instead preserving the emotional density of early motherhood—its repetitions, its losses, and its invisible strength.

¹²⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *Not ForNever* (Detail), cement, 2024. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

3.

Judge Me Not

Aluminum, Sand Cast
2024



Figure 72. *Not ForNever* (right) and *Judge Me Not* (left), 2024. Cement, cast aluminum, sand cast. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²⁷

Judge Me Not brings together a circular arrangement of aluminum baby bottles, installed on a low plinth that invites viewers to bend down and look closely. The outer bottles remain raw and connected by casting feeders, while the ones at the center have been processed—cut, cleaned, and darkened through further treatment.

This contrast reflects a journey from formation to loss. The darker bottles in the center carry the weight of refinement, representing the emotional cost of striving for perfection and the grief that follows. Their altered surfaces suggest attempts to smooth and control, only to reveal a deeper sense of rupture and vulnerability.

By positioning the piece at a lower level, the viewer's body must shift to engage—mirroring the shift in perspective required to understand care, struggle, and imperfection.

¹²⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Not ForNever* (right) and *Judge Me Not* (left), cement, cast aluminum, sand cast, 2024. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

The title *Judge Me Not* asks for compassion: to look without assumption, to recognize the traces of effort and exhaustion embedded in each form.



Figure 73. *Judge Me Not*, 2024. Aluminum, sand cast. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹²⁸



Figure 74. *Judge Me Not*, 2024. Aluminum, sand cast. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition.¹²⁹

This work challenges ideas of success and failure in caregiving and creation, honoring the labor of what is often unseen, unfinished, or quietly changed by experience.

¹²⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *Judge Me Not*, aluminum, sand cast, 2024. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

¹²⁹ Setayesh Babaei, *Judge Me Not*, aluminum, sand cast, 2024. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition.

4.

Fall Me Fly

Video Installation, 2024



Figure 75. *Fall Me Fly*, 2024. Single-channel video projection on suspended sheer fabric, Persian rug. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³⁰

A video projection gently spills down a suspended white fabric, translucent and slow. The footage, captured from below Aila’s swing, reveals her rising and descending in arcs of play—weightless yet tethered. The slowed motion of her body contrasts with the clarity of her voice, singing a fragmented birthday song: “Happy Birthday to me, Happy Birthday Agha, Happy Birthday Nini...” Names of strangers in the park become part of her spontaneous celebration, moments of social joy stitched together with emerging language. She counts—“Yek, Do, Seh”—just learning numbers, already offering them to the world.

¹³⁰ Setayesh Babaei, *Fall Me Fly*, single-channel video projection on suspended sheer fabric, Persian rug, 2024. Installation view from *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.



Figure 76. Aila resting on the rug beneath *Fall Me Fly* video projection, 2024. Part of the installation *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*¹³¹

Beneath the fabric lies Aila's Persian rug, anchoring the installation with cultural and emotional resonance. The rug becomes soil, sanctuary, and silent witness—a land passed down, a woven landscape of inheritance. It holds the projection like a body holds breath. The pairing of flight and ground, of voice and fabric, of child and mother, offers a meditation on care as both elevation and return. *Fall Me Fly* evokes the tension between fear and freedom, presence and distance, becoming and belonging. It is a lullaby of trust and transition, sung not by the mother, but by the child.

¹³¹ Setayesh Babaei, *Aila Resting on the Rug beneath Fall Me Fly Video Projection*, 2024. Part of the installation *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*. Photograph by Jinxin Guo

5.

Folding to Hold, Holding to Fold

Press Print on Paper, 15 x 15 inches each, 2024



Figure 77. *Folding to Hold, Holding to Fold*. Press print on paper. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³²

This series of nine press prints captures the quiet ritual of folding baby clothes—each impression a record of care, repetition, and memory. The soft cotton onesies, pressed while folded, reveal their creases and contours like fossils of maternal labor. No fold is identical, yet each holds the same impulse: to protect, to contain, to soothe.

The press printing process, developed in dialogue with a printmaker mentor, became a method of sculpting with paper—a way to materialize gesture without the object itself. The fabric's presence is both visible and ghostly. The prints resemble x-rays of labor: layered, transparent, and suspended between motion and stillness.

¹³² Setayesh Babaei, *Folding to Hold, Holding to Fold*, press print on paper, 15 × 15 in. each, 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

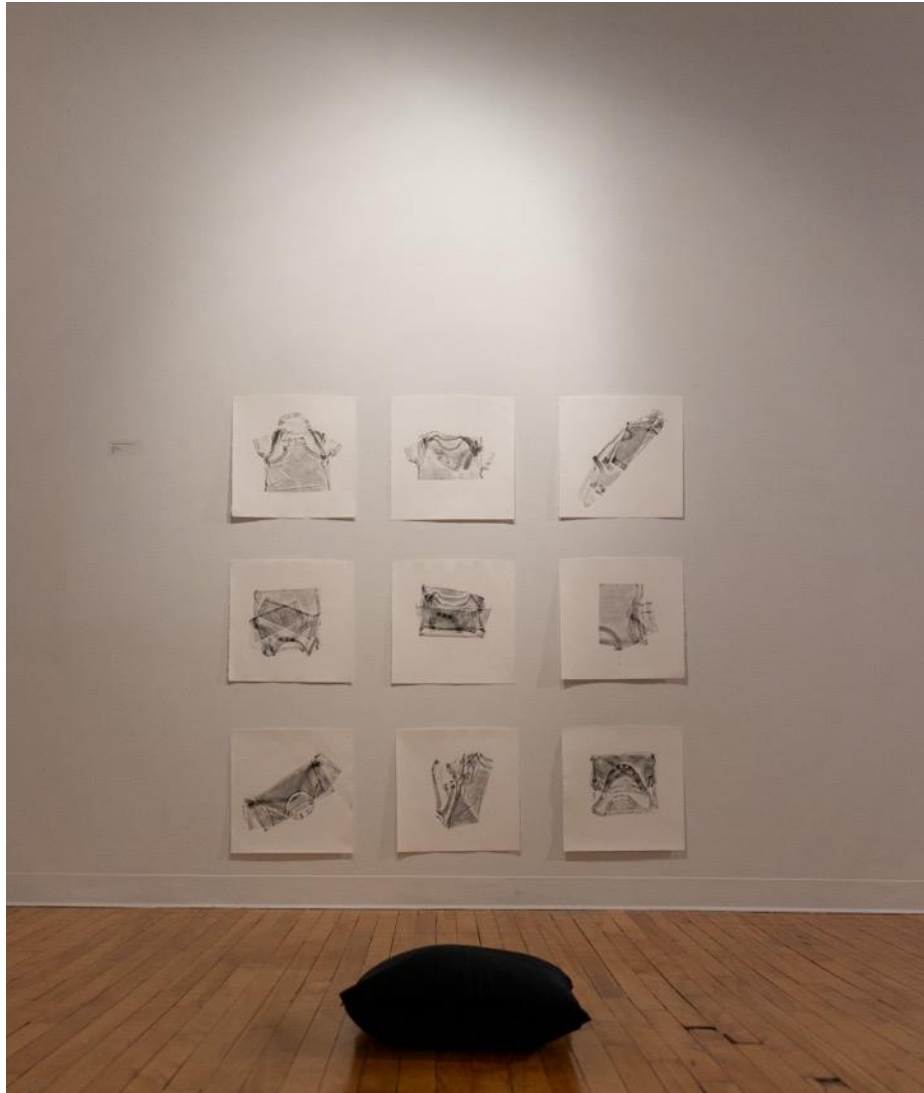


Figure 78. *Folding to Hold, Holding to Fold*. Press print on paper. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³³

In motherhood, time isn't linear but moves continuously between doing and undoing, containing and releasing, effort and rest. Installed in a three-by-three grid, the sequence reflects that oscillation. Folding becomes both preparation and preservation; holding becomes both offering and keeping. These are not portraits of garments, but of the maternal impulse to order chaos through repetition, and to create meaning through the smallest, most tender acts.

¹³³ Setayesh Babaei, *Folding to Hold, Holding to Fold*, press print on paper, 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photographs by Jinxin Guo.

6.

ThInk Me

Aila's Shirts, Ink on Cotton, 48 x 48 inches, 2024

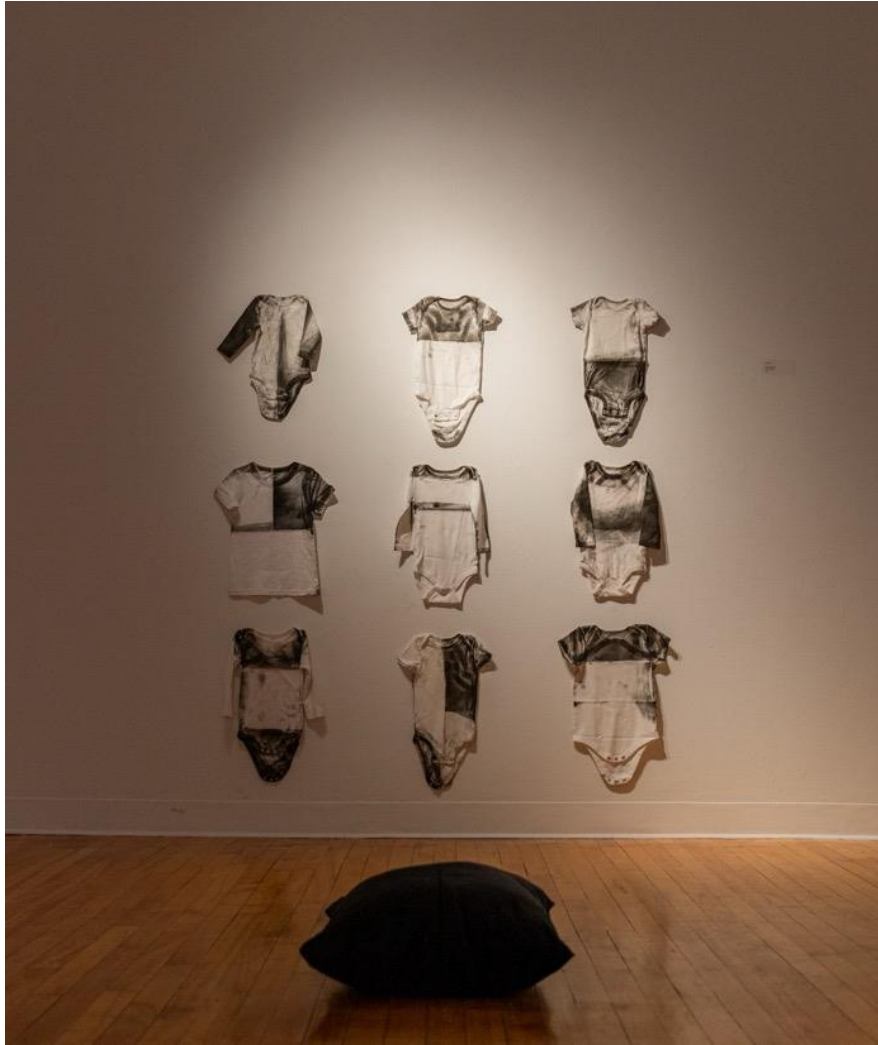


Figure 79. *ThInk Me*. Aila's shirts, ink on cotton. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³⁴

Positioned directly across from *Folding to Hold, Holding to Fold*, this installation completes a dialogue between process and trace, imprint and object. Nine of Aila's onesies, the very garments used in the press prints, are unfolded and mounted here in their stained, marked state. What was once pressed and abstracted is now exposed—creased, wrinkled, and bearing the trace of black ink.

¹³⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *ThInk Me*, Aila's shirts, ink on cotton, 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

The title, *ThInk Me*, merges thought, ink, and identity. It gestures toward how meaning is not only made through doing, but through being seen and considered. These garments carry more than marks—they carry memory, time, and touch. Every fold and ink stain becomes a record of maternal gesture, of repetition, of trying and undoing.

Unfolded, the shirts seem to breathe. Each one holds its own rhythm of care, and together they compose a collective portrait of caregiving. Positioned opposite the prints, this work places the viewer in the space between action and reflection, between presence and trace. Here, what is typically hidden or washed away—the stain, the imprint, the mess—is centered, seen, and honored.

7.

Everything's Ok

Plaster, 30 x 20 x 48 inches, 2024



Figure 80. *Everything's Ok*. Plaster. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Everything's Ok*, plaster, 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

This sculpture began with using the enlarged 3D-printed baby bottle form—scaled up, reimagined, and re-skinned in soaked plaster gauze. Wrapped like a body, like a wound, the surface hardened into a mold before being cracked open to release what was inside. The plaster broke away with effort, revealing not one form, but three disjointed segments, stacked imperfectly—each misaligned yet balanced, vulnerable yet upright.

The result is a new object, no longer a bottle, no longer a tool of feeding or comfort, but a monument to transformation. Its misalignment is not failure—it is testament. The sculpture stands tall and strange, a totem of maternal reconstruction. Behind it, the torn mold—its shell, its skin—is left crumpled on the floor, like an exhale after labor. What once held and shaped is now discarded, no longer needed but not forgotten.



Figure 81. *Everything's Ok*. Plaster. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *Everything's Ok*, plaster, 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

Titled *Everything's Ok*, the work leans into the contradictions of reassurance and rupture. It quietly echoes the maternal phrase often spoken to soothe others while concealing personal unraveling. In its broken symmetry and visible process, the piece speaks to the messiness of making—of caregiving, of healing, of identity. Wholeness, it suggests, does not require perfection. It asks us to consider how something fragmented can still stand, still hold, still mean.

8.

Just Like You

Photographs, Mirror Sheets, 60 x 48 inches, 2024



Figure 82. *Day to Day* (left) and *Just Like You* (right). Aila's onesie, fabric; photographs, mirror sheets. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³⁷

Arranged in a gridded composition, this photographic installation captures quiet gestures of a mother's hand mirroring her infant's during feeding—an act repeated, unnoticed, and deeply embodied. Each image holds a moment of synchronicity, where the maternal body

¹³⁷ Setayesh Babaei, *Day to Day* (left) and *Just Like You* (right), Aila's onesie, fabric; photographs, mirror sheets, 60 × 48 in., 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

instinctively follows, echoes, and adapts to the needs of another. These black-and-white photographs become studies in presence and bonding—of learning a child through gesture, not language.



Figure 83. *Just Like You*. Photographs, mirror sheets. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³⁸

Interspersed throughout the composition, mirror sheets interrupt the visual flow. Their placement is neither regular nor decorative; they act as thresholds—openings that fragment and reflect. Positioned directly across from a shelf of concrete-cast infant

¹³⁸ Setayesh Babaei, *Just Like You*, photographs, mirror sheets, 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

objects, the mirrors catch not only glimpses of those sculptural forms, but also the bodies of viewers passing by. As such, the installation becomes a layered field of memory and projection—where the viewer’s presence collapses with the mother’s, the child’s, the object’s.

The mirrors evoke portals or spells, drawing on the symbolic history of women and mirrors—tools of self-reflection, suspicion, and power. Here, they invite confrontation: with one’s image, with the maternal, with inherited gestures. In this work, the self is not fixed. It shifts between roles, between past and present, between the seen and the seer.

9.

Day to Day

Aila’s Onesie, Fabric, 15 x 140 inches, 2024



Figure 84. *Day to Day* (detail). Aila’s onesie, fabric. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photo by Jinxin Guo.¹³⁹

This sculptural garment begins as a baby’s onesie but has been elongated into an exaggerated timeline—an impossible stretch of fabric cascading to the ground and curling back upward. Hung on an adult-sized hanger, the piece evokes the dissonance

¹³⁹ Setayesh Babaei, *Day to Day* (detail), Aila’s onesie, fabric, 15 × 140 in., 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

between infancy and adulthood, tenderness and expectation. The disproportionate scale unsettles: it is no longer simply a child's garment, but a vessel for time, projection, and inherited roles.

Its drape recalls ceremonial textiles—a veil, a gown, perhaps even a bridal train—inviting readings of femininity, transition, and societal expectation. The symbolism is layered: the onesie, once an intimate object of care, becomes a marker of a path already mapped out for the child. The white fabric carries echoes of purity and tradition, yet its weight and length speak of accumulation, burden, and repetition.

The piece functions as a soft monument to the invisible work of caregiving—quiet, stretched, and often taken for granted. Placed with a pillow before it, the installation encourages rest and reflection, asking viewers to sit with the contradictions: care as both offering and demand, growth as both wonder and weight, garments as both comfort and constraint.



Figure 85. *Day to Day* (detail). Aila's onesie, fabric. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Setayesh Babaei, *Day to Day* (detail), Aila's onesie, fabric, 15 × 140 in., 2024. Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, solo exhibition. Photograph by Jinxin Guo.

The curatorial decisions behind *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows* were rooted in a desire to create a space of embodied reflection—one that allowed the viewer to encounter the work not from above, but alongside it. The placement of each piece in relation to one another fostered an immersive, horizontal encounter: sculptures grounded on low shelves and plinths, photographs positioned close to the floor, and pillows inviting rest and pause. Works that emerged from labor-intensive processes—casting, printing, folding—were placed in conversation with one another, allowing material and gesture to echo across the space. These spatial relationships made visible the cyclical rhythms of care, the repetition inherent in maternal labor, and the acts of breaking and remaking that define both art-making and mothering. The exhibition, as a whole, reflected a quiet refusal of hierarchy—in its form, its materials, and its invitation to witness.

Monsther (Mother +Monster)

Presented at the Art, Design, and Graduate Studies Group Exhibition, Gallery 1313, May 2024

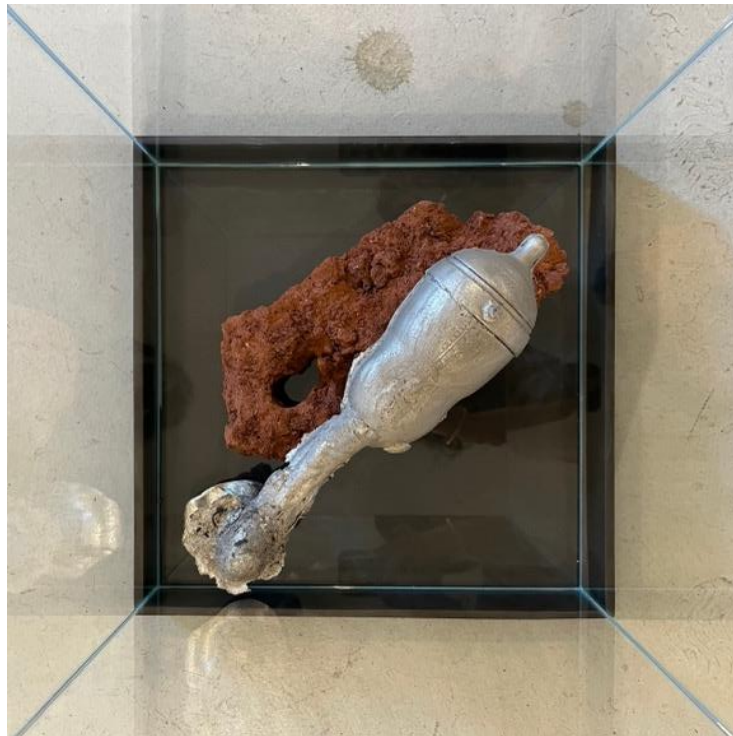


Figure 86. *Monsther*, 2024. Aluminum, lava rock, glass.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Setayesh Babaei, *Monsther*, aluminum, lava rock, 2024. Presented at the *Art, Design, and Graduate Studies Group Exhibition*, Gallery 1313, May 2024.

At the center of the gallery stood *Monsther*, a singular aluminum baby bottle from the larger sand-casted series—deliberately chosen for its imperfections. It was the first form cast, raw and unrefined, bearing the visible marks of process and labor. Perched atop a jagged lava rock, the bottle's aluminum feet appeared fused with the stone, as if it had emerged from within the earth itself. The combination of lava and aluminum invoked a dual metaphor: lava as a geologic symbol of rupture and rebirth, and aluminum as a domestic material transformed through heat and pressure—each element echoing the intensities of maternal experience.

Encased within a glass vitrine, *Monsther* hovered between artifact and anomaly. The display both protected and isolated the object, inviting scrutiny, contemplation, and judgment. It asked to be seen—but remained unknowable. In its materiality and staging, it presented the maternal not as soft or sentimental but as something ambiguous, uncanny, and strange. The baby bottle, once an object of care, becomes monstrous when dislocated from its nurturing context and rendered in harsh, industrial material. Here, it stood not to soothe but to confront. Like the abject, it exists at the threshold: expelled, yet never fully separable from the self. The object's monstrousness was not in its form but in its refusal to be sanitized, sentimentalized, or smoothed over.

In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the concept of abjection is explored as a process by which individuals and societies expel what is perceived as impure or threatening to identity.¹⁴² The maternal body occupies a central position in this framework, symbolizing both the origin of life and a threat to individual autonomy due to its inherent ambiguity. The maternal, then, becomes the site of both attraction and repulsion, of necessity and excess.

Monsther embodies these themes through its deliberate transformation of a familiar object of care. The baby bottle—intimately linked to nourishment and dependency—is rendered in hard, industrial aluminum and displayed like a relic or a specimen. Mounted on a lava rock and encased in glass, the piece confronts the viewer with the maternal

¹⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

object stripped of its original function and imbued with new, unsettling meaning. The lava rock anchors the object in a primal symbolism of creation through rupture, while the aluminum recalls both resilience and violence—echoing the intense pressures of maternal labor and identity.



Figure 87. *Monsther* installation view, 2024.¹⁴³

By confronting the viewer with this transformed object, *Monsther* prompts a re-evaluation of the boundaries between the nurturing and the monstrous, the domestic and the alien. It resists easy categorization, aligning with Kristeva’s theory of the abject: that which is expelled, yet remains hauntingly present. The work offers no resolution—only a quiet provocation to reconsider how motherhood is seen, mythologized, and policed.

¹⁴³ Setayesh Babaei, *Monsther* (installation view), 2024. Aluminum and lava rock. Exhibited at the *Art, Design, and Graduate Studies Group Exhibition*, Gallery 1313.

Mādar: Rest in Progress Exhibition

Presented at the IAMD Work in Progress Exhibition, Great Hall, OCAD University, February 2024



Figure 88. *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024. Performance still, photo by Jinxin Guo.¹⁴⁴

Mādar: Rest in Progress explored the layered complexities of motherhood, where rest becomes both a physical necessity and a quiet act of defiance against societal expectations. The installation wove together personal narrative, cultural inheritance, and performative gestures, offering a multidimensional encounter with the maternal experience.

At the center of the installation was my daughter Aila's Persian rug—an artifact of care, culture, and domestic history. Began from wall to resting the floor, the rug grounded the work, symbolizing both the intimate domain of caregiving and the first terrain a child encounters. Besides it, rolls of wide-format paper inscribed with handwritten Farsi drawn from my journal, chronicling reflections on motherhood across generations. Initially envisioned to fall freely from the fourth floor to the second, fire safety restrictions

¹⁴⁴ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024, performance still. Photo by Jinxin Guo. Exhibited at *IAMD Work in Progress Exhibition*, Great Hall, OCAD University, February 2024.

required me to modify the design. Instead, the scrolls were shortened, re-rolled, and displayed similar to the rug, reframing the work's spatial scale but not its emotional scope.

A participatory element invited visitors to sit on the rug, lift its corners, and contribute their own inscriptions in the blank space underneath. This space—concealed yet present—became a repository for collective memory, underscoring the shared silences and untold stories of caregiving. The gesture of writing beneath the rug echoed the often-hidden labor of mothers, suggesting that the most foundational stories are those rarely seen.



Figure 89. *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024. Photo and mirror tile installation¹⁴⁵

A series of twenty black-and-white photographs lined the walls, each capturing a distinct moment of my hand mirroring Aila's during feeding. Unlike the singular image presented

¹⁴⁵ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024. Photo and mirror tile installation. Exhibited at *IAMD Work in Progress Exhibition*, Great Hall, OCAD University, February 2024.

in my first exhibition, I selected these twenty from hundreds taken over time—each frame marking subtle variations in touch, presence, and connection. Together, they trace the tender, instinctive language of caregiving, emphasizing the role of hands in the quiet rituals of mothering.

Interspersed between the photographs were fragments of mirror, reflecting the rug and scripts inviting viewers back into the work. These mirrors acted as symbolic portals—gateways into self-reflection, memory, and imagination. They recalled the historical association between mirrors, witchcraft, and the female body—inviting a reclamation of the figure of the mother not as mystified or passive, but as active, visionary, and resilient. Through these mirrors, the viewer’s body became part of the installation, collapsing the space between art and witness, memory and presence.

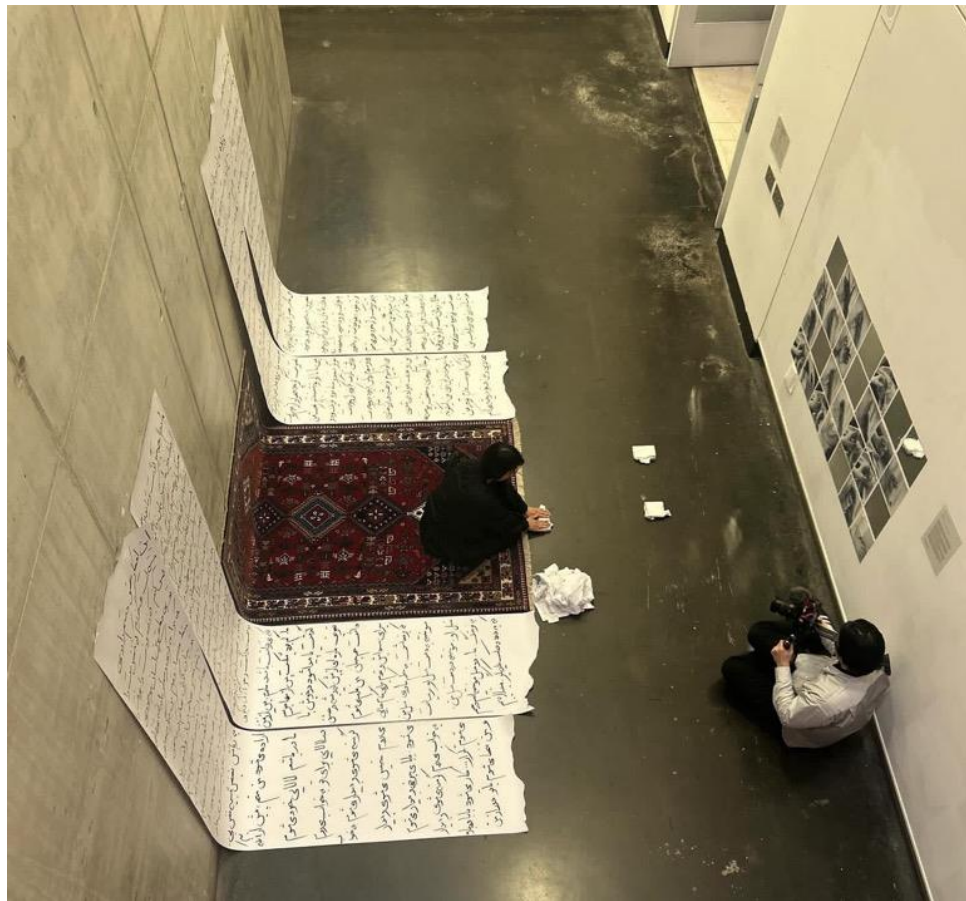


Figure 90. *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024. Performance view from third-floor balcony.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Setayesh Babaei, *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024. Performance view from third-floor balcony. Exhibited at *IAMD Work in Progress Exhibition*, Great Hall, OCAD University, February 2024.

The performance element began as I entered the space and walked toward the rug with the cautious, unbalanced gait of a child attempting a straight line. At the rug's edge—a liminal threshold between the private and the public—I paused. A pile of white baby clothes lay before me. I gathered them in my lap, moved them to one side, then picked and re-folded each garment with deliberate care. I placed them in three rows of three, each folded uniquely. The remaining clothes were held close, then arranged as a makeshift pillow. I lay down, eyes closed and began humming a lullaby that echoed across the gallery's high ceilings. The song, wordless and wavering, became a form of grief and release—an acknowledgment of what is carried and what is let go.

One of the most profound outcomes of this exhibition was the way the Persian rug transformed into a shared space of rest and reflection. It became a place where I could sit down with friends, colleagues, and mentors, speaking at the heart of the work. These conversations frequently turned to stories of caregiving—both personal and inherited. For some visitors, the rug evoked childhood memories: crawling along its borders, tracing its animals and flowers, watching family stories unfold on its surface. The Farsi script, unlike the clear imagery of mother and child hands, posed a mystery for non-Farsi speakers. The frequent question, “What does the writing say?” initiated a ritual of translation that grew deeper and more nuanced with each retelling. This act of translating became part of the work's rhythm—bringing others into the piece through language, memory, and curiosity.

For visitors estranged from their mothers, the installation stirred deep emotion—some wept, inspired to reconnect with empathy. Others saw the calligraphy as architectural, subtly reshaping the space. Revisions prompted by fire safety rules, though initially frustrating, ultimately deepened the work's meaning. The need to adapt recalled a mindset from my girlhood in Iran, where being female meant every “no” demanded a new way forward. This form of creative resilience—a trait familiar to many artists and mothers in places where freedom is never guaranteed—continues to shape how I navigate both art and motherhood.



Figure 91. *Mādar: Rest in Progress Exhibition*, 2024. Installation view with Aylan Couchie. Photo by Luke Ge Lu.¹⁴⁷

The performance and installation could be viewed not only up close but also from the balconies of the upper floors. From above, the lullaby drifted softly, echoing across the open space—some thought it was part of the building’s ambient sound. Passersby slowed down, peered over the railings, and stayed to watch. The sound was distorted by distance, creating an atmospheric presence that differed from the intimacy felt by those sitting nearby. Viewers above described the performance as haunting, ethereal—while those on the rug experienced something more immediate, grounded. This multiplicity of perspectives reflected the many angles from which motherhood is viewed: distant or close, mythic or tactile. Regardless of vantage point, each visitor could find meaning. The installation opened itself from every direction, inviting reflection, presence, and connection.

¹⁴⁷ Figure 50. *Mādar: Rest in Progress Exhibition*, 2024. Installation view with Aylan Couchie. Photo by Luke Ge Lu. Presented at the *IAMD Work in Progress Exhibition*, Great Hall, OCAD University.

This work was deeply informed by Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), which documents the intimate rituals of caregiving through a conceptual and material lens.¹⁴⁸ Like Kelly, I used objects, language, and routine acts to render the maternal visible—not as sentimentality, but as a site of intellectual and emotional inquiry. Her emphasis on documentation as an artistic form resonated with my own impulse to preserve the ephemeral and frame the labor of care as both personal and political.



Figure 92. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79. Mixed media installation. Image source: *The Lonely Palette*, “Episode 51: Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1976).”

Rest in Progress became a living archive—of gestures, memories, absences, and presences. It was an attempt to hold space for what is often overlooked: the floor as stage, the rug as sanctuary, the act of folding as testimony, and rest as resistance.

Mādar: A Return to the Community

*Presented at the IAMD First Year Exhibition, 49 McCaul Street, OCAD University,
December 2023*

Titled *Mādar*—the Farsi word for “mother”—this marked my first return to public artistic practice since becoming a mother. It was more than a re-emergence; it was a moment of integration between lived experience and artistic labor. I was also part of the curatorial

¹⁴⁸ Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79, mixed media installation, image source: Tamar Avishai, “Episode 51: Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1976),” *The Lonely Palette* (podcast), February 7, 2021, <https://www.thelonelypalette.com/episodes/2021/2/7/episode-51-mary-kellys-post-partum-document-1976>.

team, contributing both to the thematic direction of the show and to the physical arrangement of works in dialogue with one another.



Figure 93. *Mādar*, 2023. Installation by Setayesh Babaei. Cement objects on stained baby blanket, photographic print.¹⁴⁹

The installation featured infant items once used by Aila—baby bottles, pacifiers, toys—cast in cement and placed atop white cotton blankets stained with breast milk. The medium of cement was chosen for its unyielding weight and permanence, symbolizing the monumental and enduring aspects of motherhood. Through this material transformation, objects of early care were reimagined as commemorative sculptures: the soft turned hard, the fleeting made permanent.

Behind the installation, a photograph showed my hand gently mirroring Aila's during a breastfeeding session—an image of presence, repetition, and inherited gestures. Positioned on the floor behind the sculptures, the photograph emphasized the embodied, grounded nature of maternal labor. The floor itself became an intentional site of

¹⁴⁹ *Mādar*, 2023. Installation by Setayesh Babaei. Cement objects on stained baby blanket, photographic print. Presented at *Mādar: A Return to the Community*, IAMD First Year Exhibition, 49 McCaul Street, OCAD University, December 2023.

reflection, recalling how infants first encounter the world and where much of caregiving unfolds. This was also reflected in the artist statement accompanying the work:

In my artistic exploration of motherhood, "Mādar," I delve into the profound and transformative essence of motherhood, exploring its monumental and commemorative dimensions. Through the meticulous casting of infant items in cement, I seek to infuse these objects with weight, permanence, and significance. This choice of medium serves as a metaphor for the enduring impact of motherhood, portraying its challenges and blessings.

By placing these cement-cast infant items on white blankets stained with breastmilk, I accentuate the intimate bond between mother and child. This deliberate arrangement acknowledges the maternal journey often unfolding on the floor, where infants perceive the world. The stains on the blankets symbolize the unique experiences of each mother, adding a layer of personal narrative to the work.

A poignant photograph captures a mother mirroring her child's hand position, emphasizing the profound role of hands in caregiving and motherhood. This tactile connection illustrates the tender and caring nature inherent in the maternal role, with hands becoming powerful symbols of love, support, and a mother's enduring devotion. "Mādar" invites contemplation on these layered meanings, encouraging viewers to reflect on the significance of the stains, the narratives they encapsulate, and the emotions they evoke. In celebrating the complexities of motherhood, the work aims to foster empathy while honoring the resilience and enduring legacy of mothers, all within a concise yet impactful narrative.

Returning to the community through *Mādar* was a grounding moment in my artistic journey—an embodiment of the personal becoming public, and the intimate becoming visible.

What surprised me most about *Mādar* was not just how the work was received, but how instinctively people knew how to approach it. There were no formal instructions to sit, to touch, or to share—but one by one, viewers lowered themselves to the floor, settling in beside the sculptures as though stepping into an unspoken ritual. Many picked up the

cement objects gently, curious about their weight. Some cradled them. Others turned them over in their hands, tracing their rough edges with quiet attention. Some commented on the tension they felt between the softness of the photographic image and the unrelenting texture of the casts. That contrast opened conversations—about the beauty and brutality of caregiving, about tenderness embedded in exhaustion. Visitors, particularly mothers, began to speak. They shared stories of their children, their routines, their silences. Some confessed fears they had never voiced aloud: the fear of not being enough, of failing silently, of being judged for their anger or fatigue. Others nodded, relating wordlessly. What unfolded in that space was something larger than the work itself—it was a moment of collective witnessing. In those exchanges, I saw how art could become a site for both vulnerability and solidarity, where the act of looking became the act of listening. *Mādar* was not simply an installation—it became a resting ground for stories too often held in isolation.



Figure 94. *Mādar*, 2023. Installation by Setayesh Babaei. Cement objects on stained baby blanket, photographic print.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ *Mādar*, 2023. Installation by Setayesh Babaei. Cement objects on stained baby blanket, photographic print. Presented at *Mādar: A Return to the Community*, IAMD First Year Exhibition, 49 McCaul Street, OCAD University, December 2023.

Conclusion

The body of work presented here is not an arrival, but a return—a looping path through memory, material, and maternal time. What began in the quiet repetition of daily caregiving unfolded into a language shaped by hands, clay, fabric, and breath. It did not seek to define motherhood, nor resolve its contradictions. Instead, it lingered in the folds—of clothes, of time, of stories passed between generations, sometimes in silence.

Throughout this journey, I came to understand caregiving not simply as a theme, but as a methodology. Not as a static role, but as a rhythm that shaped the way I made, thought, and engaged. It guided how I worked with others, how I shared space, how I returned to materials not as tools of mastery but as collaborators in meaning-making. Every performance, every imprint, every thread of cloth and fold of paper was a continuation of this rhythm—acts of presence that carry their own quiet authority.

Care is not a concept here, but a texture. It moves through the soft weight of cement, the unfinished edge of a cast bottle, the whisper of a lullaby dissolving into space. It is found in the stains that remain, in the silences between gestures, in the generosity of viewers who came not just to witness, but to contribute—to press, to fold, to remember.

This research does not seek resolution or permanence. Instead, it builds a different kind of archive—one that resists closure, that favors gesture over conclusion. It asks not how to preserve caregiving, but how to remain with it: to let it shape us, to let it speak.

In the imprint of hands, in the repetition of forms, in the stories exchanged in whispers or tears, this work became not only a record but a holding space. A space where caregiving is felt, seen, and shared. Where absence becomes a presence. Where the maternal is not framed in sentiment, but in endurance, vulnerability, and grace.

This was never about solving. It was about staying—with the mess, the beauty, the exhaustion, and the tenderness. Staying long enough to hear what care has to say—when we slow down, when we make space, when we begin to listen.

Final Reflection

This work began in the folds—of time, and of memory—and it remains there still: unfinished, open, enduring. After my thesis defence, I became more aware of how the textures of control and tenderness intertwine—not only in caregiving, but also in making.

The instinct to organize, to arrange, to tend carefully to the traces of care—this was not a denial of caregiving’s messiness. It was, I now understand, an inheritance. It is a mark left by the women who came before me: my mother, my grandmother. Their stories, like their lives, were often glossed over—shaped and managed to survive within the pressures of their worlds. To control was not to erase; it was to endure. This tendency lives within me too: not as a way to sanitize, but as a method of holding complexity with care.

In arranging the clay pieces into a grid, in sequencing the cloths, in layering the mirrors, I see now another unconscious thread: a reflection of my worlds and how society itself organizes and industrializes the maternal experience. Motherhood is often produced as a singular product—a one-size-fits-all narrative meant to smooth over the contradictions of care. This standardization attempts to erase the reality: that caregiving is as fractured and as singular as each body and each breath. The grid, then, was not an erasure of difference, but a survival strategy inside a system that demands coherence.

Care became rest for me in motherhood. Caring for the exhibition was not a task apart from resting—it was resting itself. In the careful placement of clay, in the wiping of cloth, in the tuning of sound, I was performing the same gestures that shaped my daily life: quiet, repetitive, necessary acts of endurance. Caring is restless, but resting is never careless.

Motherhood—and the restless care it demands, with all its horrors and contradictions—is unsurpassable. It cannot be solved or sanitized; it remains suspended between beauty and exhaustion, survival and surrender. In this work, care was never romanticized. It was traced as a tension: something both fierce and fractured, both vital and wounding.

The invisible labor behind this work was constant: the unseen preparation of clay, the emotional tending to participants, the silent upkeep that made the visible possible. This labor did not fade into absence; it saturated the space, forming an atmosphere of holding.

Even the idea of "rest" carried its own contradictions. While the exhibition offered places of pause and softness, I remained in motion—hosting, arranging, responding. Rest was something offered outward, but rarely reclaimed inward. Here again, the reality of caregiving revealed itself: care and exhaustion endlessly intertwined, each feeding the other.

Throughout this process, I came to see that my performance of arranging, folding, organizing were not efforts to clean away the mess—but different ways of staying with it. The grid of clay imprints, the sequence of stained cloths, the mirrored surfaces—these were not attempts to resolve contradiction, but ways to witness it: to hold its restlessness, its fractures, its tenderness.

The stains were not cleaned away. The echoes were not silenced. The hands pressed into clay did not form perfect shapes—they formed what was necessary: imprints of presence, of fatigue, of hope.

This is the texture of caregiving: not an orderly narrative, but a restless, living archive. Care, here, is not only tenderness. It is endurance, sacrifice, grief, ambivalence, and grace—held together in the imperfect folds of time and body.

The exhibition did not smooth over the surreal aspects of caregiving; rather, it leaned into the strangeness, the fragility, and the endurance that coexist there. This work was never about solving or celebrating caregiving. It was about staying with its contradictions long enough to understand: contradiction is its deepest form of devotion.

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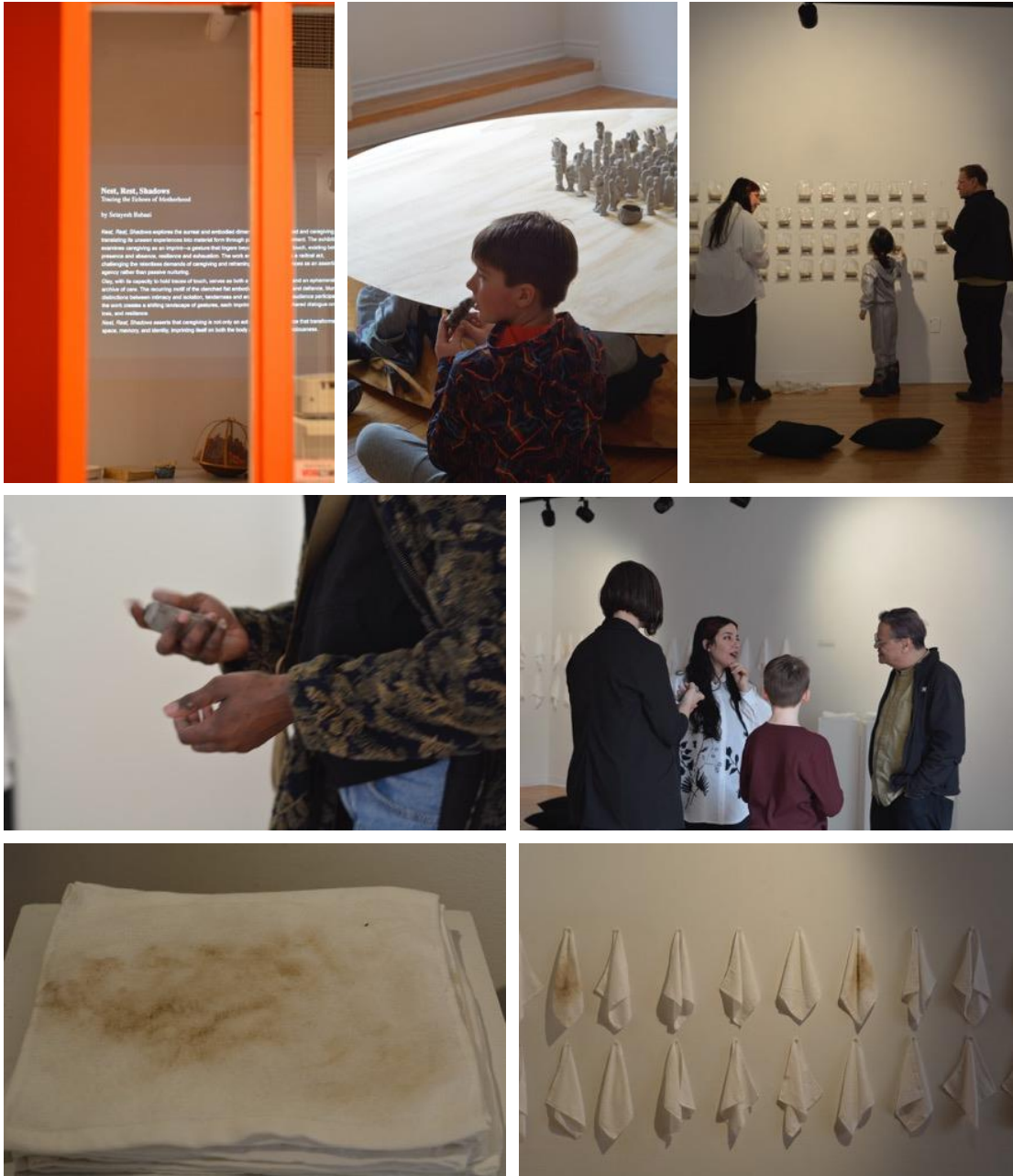
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Appendices

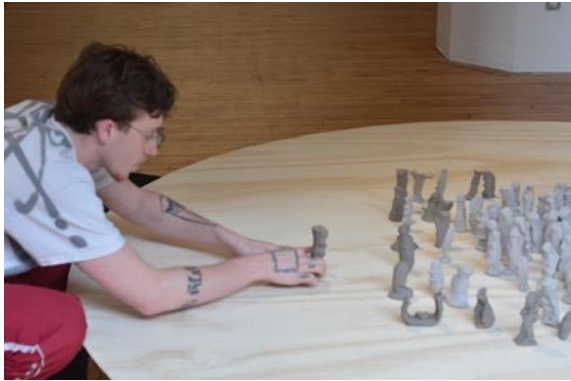
Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation, installation views, and performance stills.

Photographs by Farihah Aliyah Shah

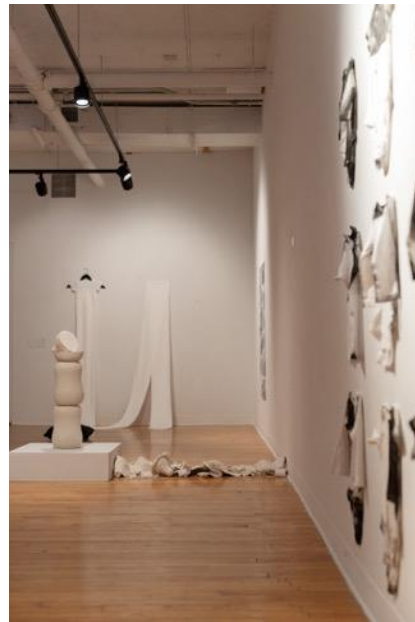








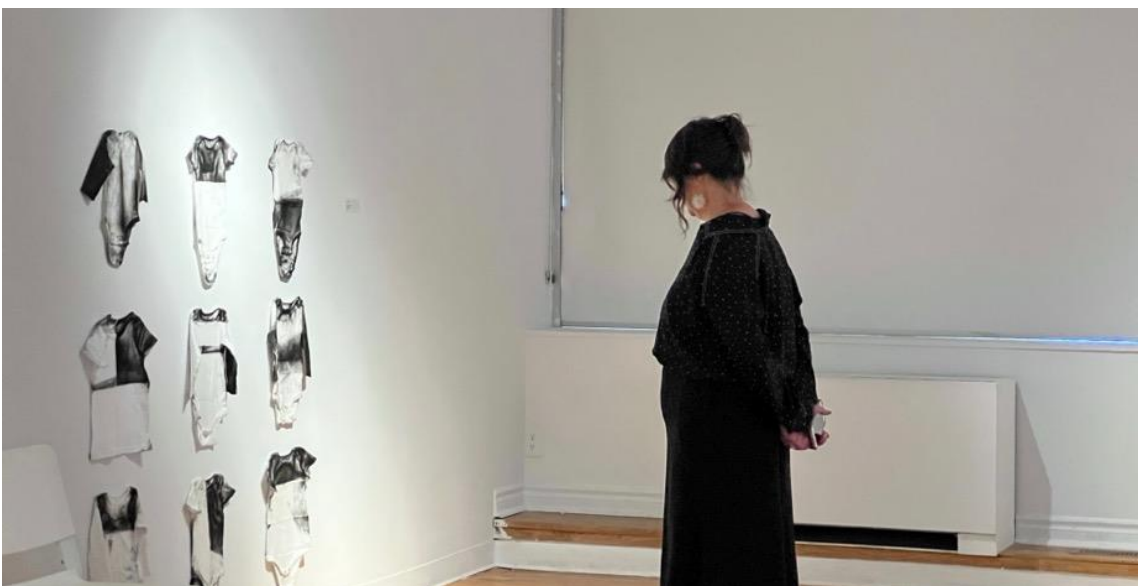
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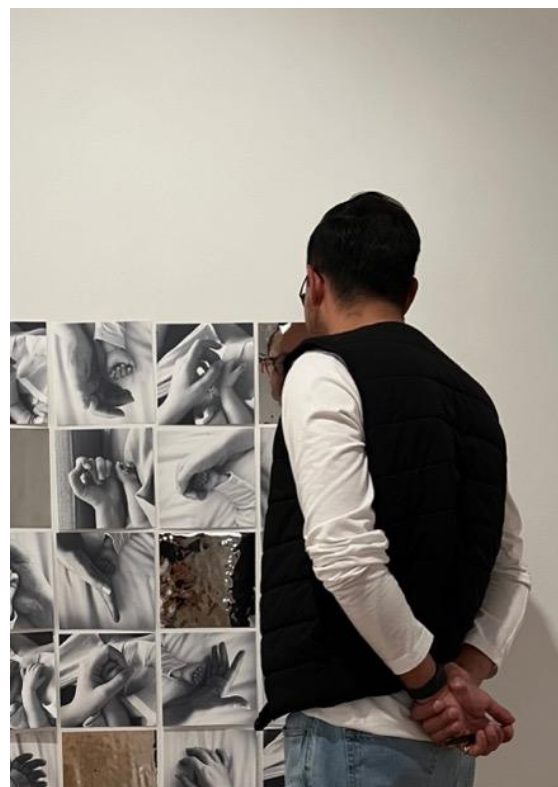






Photograph by Setayesh Babaei





Still from video documentation. Videography by Luke Ge Lu.



Photographs by Jinxin Guo



Photographs by Audiences

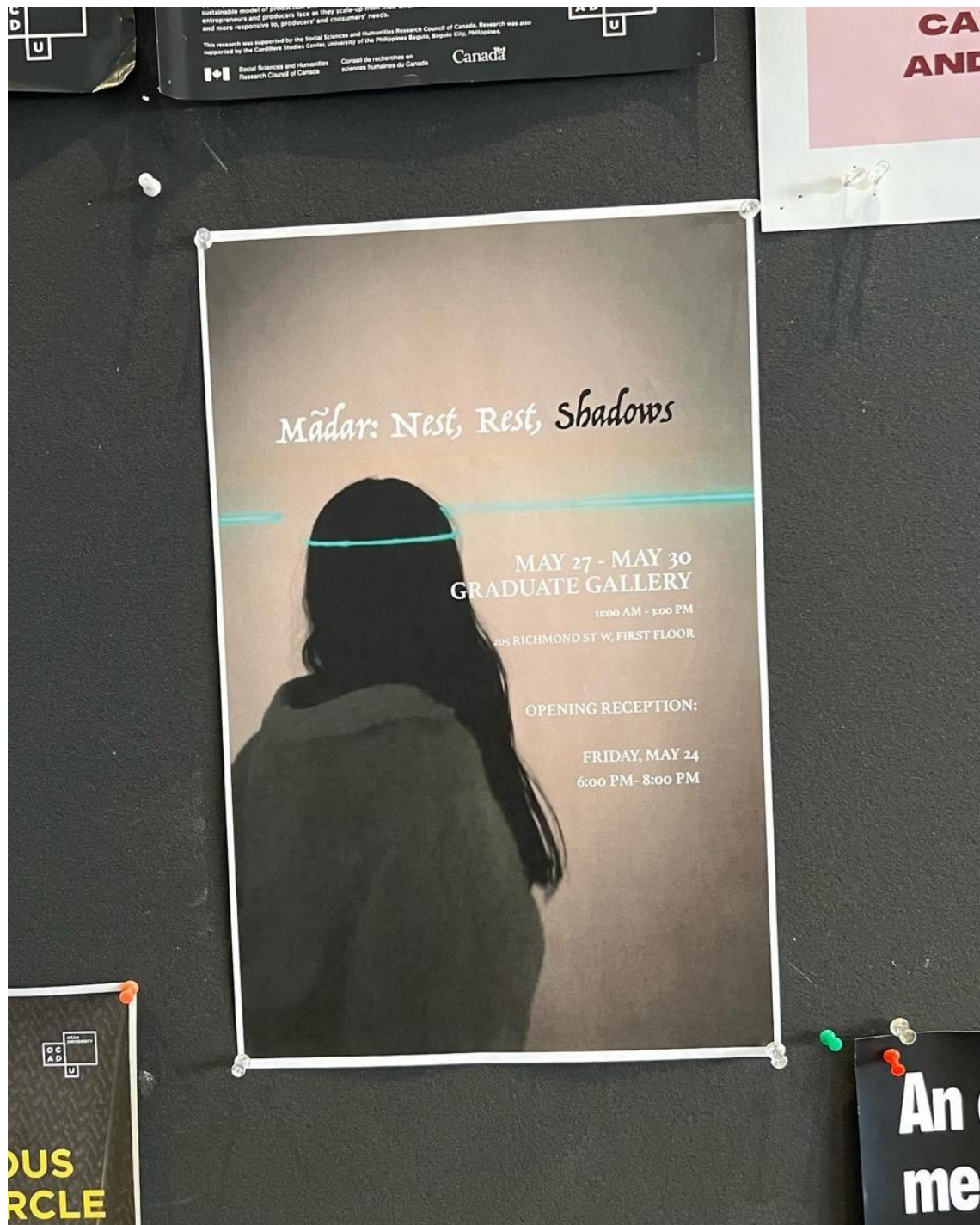


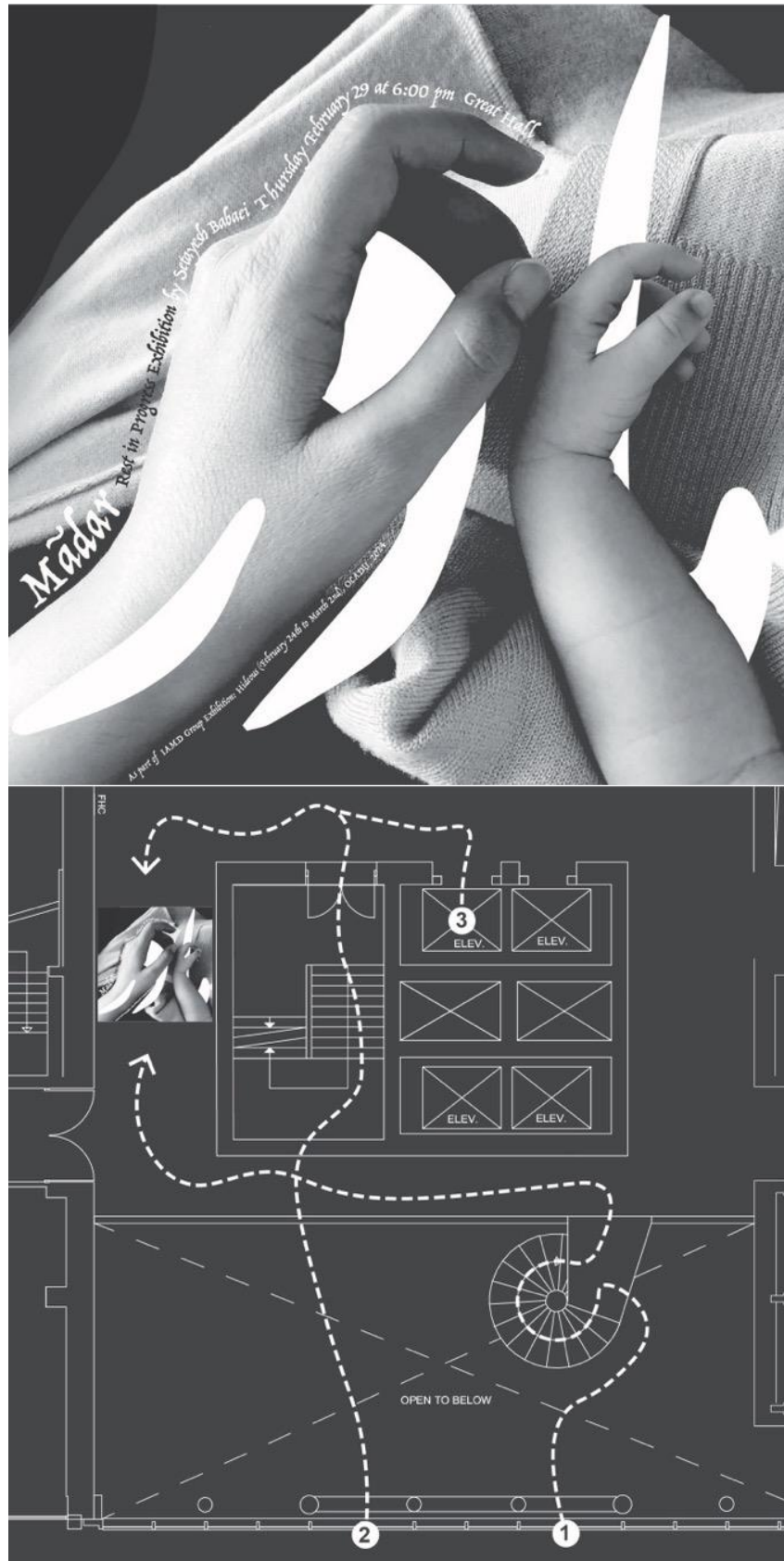


Appendix B: Exhibition Posters



In place of a traditional exhibition poster. [Watch the video](#) on Instagram.





Appendix C: Sound and Video Installations

Sound Installation:

Echoes of Care. Sound installation in collaboration with Naboli Zrobe.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, Final Thesis Exhibition, 2025.
Access the track via this private [link](#).

Video Installation:

Fall Me Fly. Video installation.
Presented at *Mādar: Nest, Rest, Shadows*, Solo Exhibition, 2024.
Access the track via this private [link](#).

Appendix D: Translations

Scripts Presented at *Mādar: Rest in Progress*, 2024

There was a time when you were just a dream—a quiet wish carried in the spaces between my thoughts. Before you arrived, I imagined you in glimpses: your laughter before I had ever heard it, the weight of your body in my arms before I had ever held you. I did not know your face, but I knew your presence. And when you came into my life, you became more than I had ever dreamed. You became the center of everything.

From the moment you moved inside me, I felt my own existence shift. I was no longer just myself; I was also yours. Every beat of my heart carried you, every breath I took was for both of us. I was your home before you even knew the world, and you were the life that transformed mine. There was fear in this change—fear of the unknown, fear of whether I could be enough for you. I had never been afraid of absence before, but the thought of a world without you was unbearable. You were not even born yet, and already, I could not imagine my life without you in it. The weight of responsibility felt enormous, but so did the love. Love that was unlike anything I had ever known—love that asked for nothing in return, love that reshaped my very being.

Your father understood this love in his own way. His kindness, his strength, his steady presence made this journey easier. Together, we waited for you, dreamed of you, built a space in our hearts and our lives for you. And then you arrived. No one told me how time

would change after you. Days and nights blurred. There was no longer a before and after—only you, only us. I watched as you breathed, as you cried, as you slept. Every moment with you became both infinite and fleeting. I traced your tiny fingers, felt the weight of you against my chest, memorized the shape of you before you could even recognize me. I will never forget the first time I held you. The pain, the exhaustion, the overwhelming weight of bringing you into this world disappeared the moment I pulled you into my arms. You were covered in my blood, your cries filled the room, and yet, in that instant, the world became quiet. Nothing else mattered. There was only you.

Being your mother has been the greatest transformation of my life. It has been a surrender—of time, of self, of everything I once thought I knew. But it has also been a discovery. Through you, I have learned who I truly am. I have felt strength I never knew I had, endured exhaustion I never imagined, and found joy in the smallest, simplest moments. But there were struggles too. In becoming your mother, I sometimes lost sight of myself. I forgot my own name in the rhythm of caring for you. I no longer thought of my own needs, only yours. And yet, despite the exhaustion, despite the weight of this new life, I never wanted to be anywhere but here—with you.

I watched my own mother fade into the role of motherhood, sacrificing so much of herself for her children. It is only now that I truly understand her, that I see the love and the loss intertwined in that devotion. She gave up parts of herself so that I could become who I am today. And now, I find myself walking that same path with you. But my love for you is not a sacrifice—it is a choice, one I would make again and again without hesitation.

One day, you will grow beyond my arms. You will become your own person, with dreams and fears and a life that extends far beyond mine. And when that day comes, I hope you know this: you were never just my child. You were my greatest teacher, my greatest love, my greatest adventure. You made me a mother, and in doing so, you made me whole.

I do not know when you will read this. Perhaps when you are grown, when you have found your own path, when you are searching for understanding. Maybe one day, you

will hold a child of your own, and in that moment, you will feel what I have felt for you. If that day comes, know that I am with you in every step, just as you have always been with me. No matter where life takes you, no matter how far you go, you will always carry a piece of me within you—just as I have always carried you.

Appendix E: Participations and Contributions

Clay handprints at MOTHRA, Photographs by Setayesh Babaei





[illegible]

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