

# I FELT THAT

CURATED BY JOSEPHINE BAILEY

30 JUNE – 3 JULY 2022

An interview with Polina Pak



**Q: Your previous bodies of work focused a lot on bodily trauma and experience, is that what drew you to this project?**

A: Yes, absolutely. My practice has been a space for me where I reflect on past trauma, on my identity and my relationships, and in the process of exploring these themes, of tapping into my past I am often faced with a sense of solitude. This project has been such a special experience, a sensitive and mindful space which revealed so much to me about the ways in which we relate to, support and feel each other.

**Q: How much about the gender pain gap did you know about in advance of the discussions and workshops?**

A: I believe that nearly every woman has experienced this form of bias, and so naturally it comes up in our conversations often, however I was not aware of the history and origins of the gender pain gap. When we had a lecture with Luisa from the London Drawing Group, I could not contain my shock and frustration over the very blatant examples of misogyny that we have accepted as the norm and adapted to, for, what it feels like, the lack of any other choice. But since then, my faith in change has been restored, through watching all the artists in this project be so honest, incredibly strong and confrontational to the systems of oppression.

**Q: Your work focuses heavily on a sense of nostalgia and familiarity, which for me makes the depictions feel even more personal. Do you find your practice is always drawn from these feelings?**

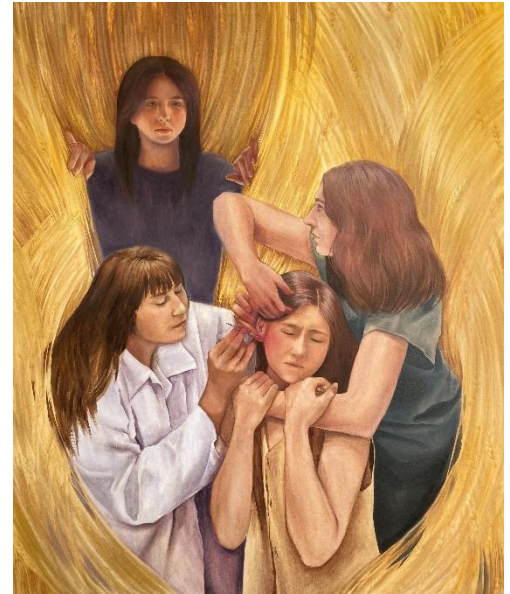
A: It is often drawn from these feelings indeed. I find a lot of comfort in it, in being able to revisit certain moments from the past, in retelling stories, in looking into relationships or feelings that had been lost or glanced over.

**Q: What has been the most impactful moment of this project for you?**

A: Seeing people's works emerge from their personal experiences and the conversations we'd had as part of the project.

**Q: Your painting that you've created for this exhibition is incredibly moving & universal in its intimate portrayal of girlhood and womanhood. We spoke about it during our workshops, but would you be able to speak about the inspiration behind this?**

A: Of course. In a way, this painting is a portrayal of the relationship I have with womanhood, depicted through my grandmother's childhood story. She was someone who heavily influenced me, who I shaped myself after. After she passed, I began revisiting the stories she would tell me, the hardships she would so stoically disguise from us, shrugging her shoulders, saying 'oh well, that's life'. I remember when I was little, I spotted that she only had one pierced ear, so old, the skin had grown back over it. She told me that back when she was 5, living in Kazakhstan, she really envied the girls with beautiful jewellery and wanted to get her ears pierced. Which didn't end up fully happening, as the shock from that moment of pain was so overwhelming, she ran away crying. Over the years she learned to hurt and cry in private, but that little scar is a small reminder of one of her first encounters with pain. There is an old saying in Russian – 'beauty requires sacrifice', which is drilled into girls' heads through generations. It feels as though you are supposed to accept pain, hurt discreetly and quietly. And it's something I see happen over and over again with the women around me, and I really hope that we can avoid this harmful narrative and break away from the pressure that has been put on us for generations.



*Polina Pak, A Piercing Embrace, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 125x105cm*

**Q: Which artists do you look to for inspiration on similar topics?**

A: Paula Rego, Kiki Smith and Marc Chagall really move me in that way.

**Q: How do you want the viewer to experience your work, in relationship to this topic of gendered pain?**

A: I hope it evokes their want to comfort. Comfort themselves, comfort their friend, mother, sister... and recognise how much this comfort and reassurance is needed these days.