

I FELT THAT
CURATED BY JOSEPHINE BAILEY
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An interview with Jennifer Nieuwland



Q: What drew you to this project?

A: I instinctively gravitated towards the project because my overall practice explores bodily memory and seeks to find a visual language for painful experiences rooted in trauma, on a sliding scale of intensity. These occurrences are intangible and hard to verbalise and are imprinted and mapped in our body and psyche. My work endeavours to evoke these affects and sensations, giving them a voice through the medium of paint.

The incommunicability of pain fascinates me, Elaine Scarry in *The Body in pain: the making and unmaking of the world*, argues that pain 'shatters' language, destroying the ability of the subject to communicate and in turn de-stabilising the 'self'.

Consequently, the propagation and/or neglect of pain, have been used as a means of oppression and control. I was interested in finding out more about the gender pain gap and deepening my understanding around the perceptions and attitudes surrounding female pain.

Q: You have said that your work is focused on the female experience, but that you never fully explored the gender pain gap in your work - why do you think that is?

A: My practice went through a dramatic shift during my MA at City and Guilds of London Art School, from which I graduated last October. It is therefore still fairly new to me. It focuses on my own recollected experiences, which are of course female in nature. However, its central focus has been to explore the discourse around the body/mind relationship and how felt affects and sensations could be evoked through material and formal play, how paint could channel the nervous system. I didn't really question the gendered aspect of my work until I started interrogating the theme of birth and motherhood.

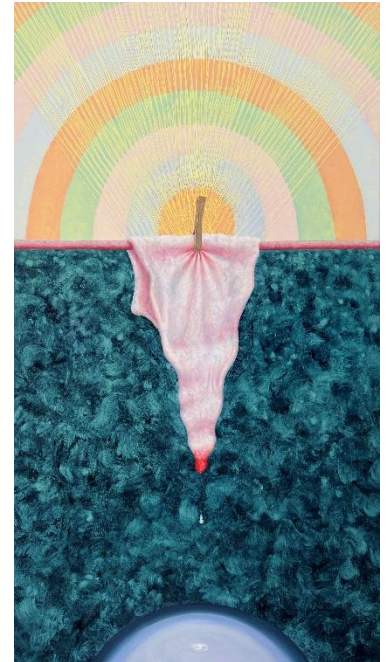
Subsequently, I had the privilege of joining this project. This prompted me to reflect on my own past experiences dealing with pain and chronic illness and the gender bias I myself was exposed to but hadn't recognised.

Perhaps this lack of awareness was due to some of these experiences involving other women as well as men – be that with medical professionals or in my own corporate environment. Ultimately, we have all been brought up in a patriarchal system and can be oblivious to our own or other's unconscious bias. This is why it is so important to build awareness. I can't credit enough this initiative led by Josephine Bailey.

Q: Your visual language is obviously very inspired by surrealism (at least to me!), especially in the way you are able to reduce forms to pure simplicity - have you found it difficult to convey complex ideas and feelings around this notion of "pain" whilst still continuing to be true to your imagery?

A: I think surrealism is a great conduit for expressing complex ideas and feelings. Tal R, Dana Schutz and Philip Guston have been great influences on me in this respect. They create visual analogues for the intangible and use the logic of the cartoon to go beyond the confines of realism. The simplicity of their forms and imagery belies subtle complexities.

The surrealist strategy of playing with the 'elasticity' of form and visual puns, allows me to convey physical and psychic states that would otherwise be difficult to represent. For example, a deflated breast can evoke exhaustion, soreness, dryness, abjection while simultaneously being a metaphor for motherhood and nurture. The ghostly breasts in *Baby Blues* express a vulnerability, they are fragile and tearful, yet also like two eyeballs staring out at the viewer in confrontation. The isolated, host-less state of my body parts is sinister; it can indicate a trauma, a sense of loss and incompleteness but these 'figures' are also manifesting sensations and actions, they are speaking out... Playing with the slipperiness of meaning opens up layers of interpretation.



Jennifer Nieuwland, Sacrifice, 2022, oil on canvas, 90 x 50cm

My work is equally inspired by expressionism and abstract expressionism. I use formal and material play to disrupt and open up meaning. Experiences are materially held in the body and hence they resonate intuitively with the material of paint. Paint takes me to a place where I can access the 'felt', suggesting new and unexpected ways of expression. The marks, textures, sheens and colours in my work act like different sensory and emotional notes, they hold and encode secrets.

In *Sacrifice*, the pastel colours of the rainbow evoke a child-like innocence and fragility while the rays of light scratched into the paint, denote a quiet violence. The thicket of dark and agitated marks below speaks of a darkness, of a scary, almost claustrophobic space. These conflicting signifiers reflect the complex and ambivalent tensions within the experience of birth and mothering.

Q: Can you explain the original feelings that pushed you to make these paintings you're displaying?

A: Generally, the subject of pain is not one that many people are drawn to. It is the most human thing to turn away from illness. My work seeks to highlight what is often hidden or neglected. Birth is a uniquely female experience which can be overwhelming and intense. I personally wasn't prepared for the challenges and complications surrounding it. I was expected to just 'get on with it' and felt that any form of weakness would be frowned upon. I went through difficult births and felt quite isolated in the aftermath. At the time, the 'breastfeeding is best' philosophy was dominant, which increased pressure on mothers and made them feel

inadequate if they couldn't breastfeed. Consequently, my second child had a lactose intolerance that wasn't diagnosed until he was 6 months old.

As women we struggle through these experiences because that is the way it has been for hundreds of years. There are 'expectations' we have to meet and there is shame and fear surrounding female health topics, be it periods, birth, hormones etc which make it hard to speak up and express our concerns. Carmen Winant in *The art of Birth*, argues that "Women's issues are deemed less worthy of making serious visual and critical interventions into". Through these paintings I wanted to give a voice to this personal, significant and uniquely female experience.

My paintings always depart from a simple idea of a recalled feeling or event. These initial thoughts and feelings then start to build into more complex layers, through formal and material play they grow into something bigger, opening up meaning.



Jennifer Nieuwland, 2022, Split(II)
, Oil on canvas, 60 x 50cm

For example, in *Split (II)* I started off by thinking: 'how do I go about conveying the violence of birth and that feeling of being suddenly separated from the precious, fragile being inside you?'. I started painting an isolated pregnant bump at the centre of the canvas, holding a luminous energy within it and then I 'cut' through it with a thick, fleshy line of paint, splitting the figure and canvas in half with this raw, violent gesture. This 'line' evokes a wounding; a c-section perhaps or a tear but also a separation between mother and child, between self and other, it literally splits the 'space' of the canvas in half. The two adjacent spaces act as an internal landscape, denoting different affective states. One half is light and ethereal and the other is oppressive and ominous, a reflection of the dualities within this experience.

In *Sacrifice* my first thought was 'how do I evoke a sense of emotional and physical exhaustion and flatness? Of soreness and isolation?'. It was through making various initial sketches that the idea of hanging the breast/form on a line and pinching it with a peg (to reference female labour and inequality) came to life. These horizontal and vertical formal elements were reminiscent of the Crucifixion, which I then built into the idea. I wanted there to be light radiating from the breast to suggest something of the miraculous, an energy emanating from this drained female form. The figure is rendered in a visceral way, revealing the veiny 'matter' that lies beneath the surface, the 'life' it holds within.

Q: How does religion intervene into your practice? Especially in the works you are planning to show - pain and religion have an obvious overlap after all, no matter what your experience!

A: I am not religious and neither is my family but I lived the most part of my youth in Italy, where I was exposed to a lot of religious imagery and iconography. Those that dealt with pain and suffering, always had the greatest impact on me. Blood and wounds give rise to a fascination, you want to look but also to look away. Simultaneously, one can connect to the emotional pain in these images, they provide comfort in some way.

Referencing religious imagery is a shorthand to the discourse of pain, acting as a metaphor for trauma. The crucifixion is a universal image which has been used throughout art history. However, I have only ever seen male artist interpretations of this. I wanted to use it as a reference for female pain, subverting the status quo in the painting *Sacrifice*.

This led me to think about how many of the qualities ascribed to Jesus are actually very feminine ones; nurture, empathy, self-sacrifice, the endurance of pain. This project has deepened my awareness of the

injustices suffered by women for centuries and I wanted the painting *Sacrifice* to reflect this, to carry a personal yet universal message.

Ultimately, giving birth *is* a miracle, through this often painful and traumatic experience a woman creates a life. Yet birth has been glorified in art through imagery of the Virgin Mary which has shaped society's idea of motherhood as something purely joyous and one-dimensional. I wanted to highlight the darker, hidden aspects and ambivalent tensions within it.

Q: What has been your process throughout this project in terms of research materials leading up to the final works?

A: This project has exposed me to a wealth of source material, from articles and books to a lecture on the gender pain gap and to many personal viewpoints and stories. All of these have fed into my work and process, leading me to re-evaluate my use of imagery and materials.

My paintings have a 'cartoony' flatness which I have started to question. I think a certain playfulness is important in the work in order to allow the viewer in and provide an antidote to the abject, darker side of it. However, I also want to do justice to the seriousness of the subject matter. I started thinking about using thicker paint to add a more 'visceral' quality to the work. Hence the thick raw line in *Splitting*, and the meatier texture of the flesh in *Sacrifice*.

I also looked at Loie Hollowell, an artist who deals with the subject of birth. Her delicate, layered textural qualities evoke the sensory, something I wanted to heighten in the work.

Q: How have you found the process of collaborative research and understanding on such a sensitive and often triggering topic? Do you feel it's impacted your way of working at all?

A: I have really enjoyed the collaborative nature of this project. Pain is often something we go through alone and the candid sharing of experiences has been really cathartic and inspiring. Building a sense of community and synergy is really important in raising awareness of such significant topics. This is the first time I work so collaboratively on a project and the experience has been invaluable, adding depth and new ways of thinking and seeing to my own practice. There are so many connections between all our works but they are all so uniquely different, each one reflecting the universality of female pain but also the very personal and intimate voices of the artists. There is a real sense of purpose to this project which has started a really important conversation and I hope this will continue in some form. It will certainly continue within my own practice.