

Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context (BA)

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Question 1: Explore how artists have approached the concepts around 'gender' in art practice; providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

How artists have used their work to challenge societal expectations based on pregnancy and motherhood.

Throughout the years, women have had to face the heavy expectations of society, they are silenced and controlled on how they should behave due to their gender. Women are dictated to follow rules around their bodies and their identities, in relation to pregnancy and motherhood. During pregnancy, women are socially expected to want to carry, birth a child, experience motherhood. If they do not take on this role, then they are weighed down with the judgement of other people for wanting or having an abortion. Alongside this, during motherhood, women are looked at as the main caregiver, with the social expectations of being a good mother, leaving mothers with an immense pressure of trying to keep the high standards of how society decides a good mother should be, making motherhood a difficult experience for women as they try to fit into this perfect image. In this essay I'm going to explore the works of Paula Rego, Mary Kelly and Louise Bourgeois. These artists are pivotal because each of them has challenged these maternal expectations and forced viewers to face the reality of women's true experiences through their different styles of artwork.

A prime example of artwork is Paula Rego's *Abortion Series* (1998), this series depicts the challenges that women face due to the loss of their reproductive rights and shame that is placed upon them for wanting an abortion. The series consists of eight raw etchings of women alone. The basic props of furniture serve to highlight the sense of isolation and abandonment. (Coldwell, p.25, 2005) The etchings are made up of harsh and dark lines, the scratchiness of each piece is echoing the pain of each woman in the pieces. The way that Rego has positioned the women in the etchings are important towards depicting physical discomfort, each woman is in a different position, either painfully curled up on a bed, or sprawled out and clinging onto themselves. Rego shows how these are dangerous abortions as the women are in their own spaces, using their own household items to carry out their own procedure, rather than using or having the option of medical care. The etchings show how at home abortions are unsafe but are carried out due to abortion being illegal and the judgement from society for wanting an abortion. It describes the desperation of women as they must carry out these different procedures themselves. In an article about the dangers of at home abortion, it reads,

This kind of abortion is usually performed outside the legal system by a person who does not have enough knowledge and skill and in places with the lowest medical standards. Based on the conditions in which abortion is conducted and the methods used, the occurrence of severe complications is a possibility. This makes illegal abortion one of the main reasons for deaths in pregnant women. (Shahbazi, 2011)

These prints were in response to a referendum to legalise abortion in Portugal failed in 1998. Rego responded with the *Abortion Series* out of anger, as she had previously

experienced abortion and heard about the experiences of other women. (Cristea Roberts Gallery, 2019) An article written about Rego's series of work features Rego describing what influenced her to create this piece of work in an interview, Rego states, "The (abortion) series was born from my indignation... It is unbelievable that women who have an abortion should be considered criminals." (Strøm, 2004, p.195-196) Rego is describing how she feels about women not being able to do what they want with their bodies. Women throughout the years have had to face the feeling of unworthiness based on them wanting or having an abortion. In an article about abortion stigma and a study about a woman's social acceptability after having an abortion, the author writes, "Women with an abortion history were significantly less desired as marital or dating partners than were women with no history of abortion." (Hanschmidt et al, p.173, 2016) Due to the judgement from society, women feel guilt, shame, self-blame or selfishness after having an abortion. (Hanschmidt et al, p.173, 2016) Rego puts these feelings into her etchings by displaying the look of shame and guilt through the women's faces in their painful positions. Rego is forcing society to face the reality of what women go through when there is abortion laws put in place and how their bodies are controlled through being shamed.

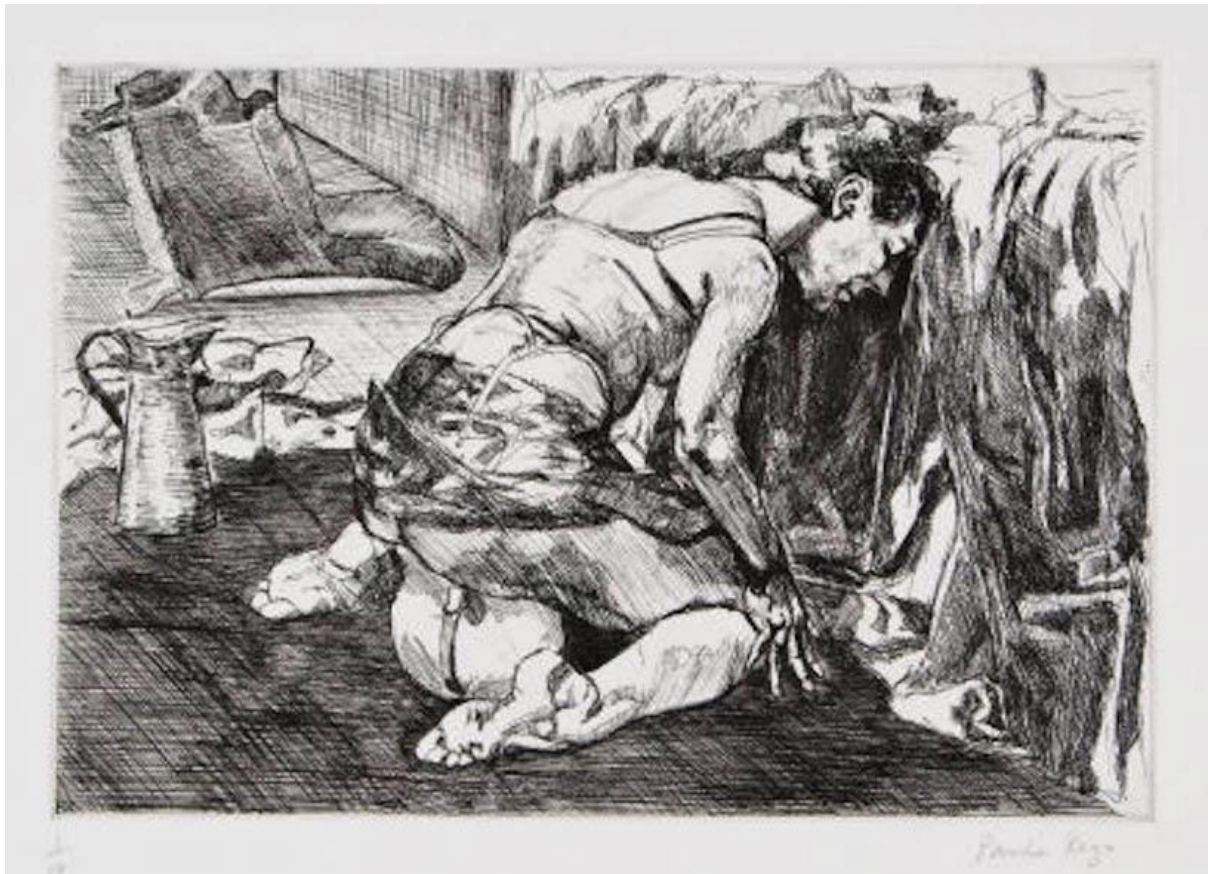


Figure 1: Paula Rego, *Abortion Series*, (1998)

Motherhood has been socially constructed as an unrealistic idea that women should become instantly a natural at, as if it's a calling to them. Women are set with the high standards of being a caregiver, an educator and a home manager, whilst being able to keep themselves together and gain personal fulfilment. (Inna Circle, 2024) "If mothers do not adhere to these standards, they are met with judgement, negative evaluation, exclusion, and mum-shaming." (Danielle, L et al, p.102, 2023) A work that hit back at these societal expectations is the *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) by Mary Kelly. The six-year long *Post-Partum Document* is made up of one hundred and thirty-five pieces, documenting the experiences of navigating early motherhood and the realities. The documents follow the development of her son and the relationship between them up

until the age of five years old. The work features a range of different things that a mother would use, have or experience during motherhood such as used cloth nappies, baby clothes, texts about her relationship and changing roles as a mother, his drawings, details about his diet and items that he collects. (Warriner, R) In a conversation about the *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly says, “In the Post-Partum Document I’m concerned to see how femininity, within the discourse of the mother–child relationship, is produced as natural and maternal.” Through this work, Kelly explores how being a woman and being maternal are considered to be connected with each other, meaning that being a woman means you should naturally become a mother, this expectation puts pressure on mothers. The *Post-Partum Document* shows how this is not the case; Kelly depicts how you learn to become a mother. A famous quote from the French philosopher, Simone De Beauvoir, reads “One is not born but rather becomes a woman.” (McCall K, p.211,1979) Beauvoir’s powerful quote backs up Kelly’s work. Beauvoir is stating that the gender roles that society have made are not something comes naturally to women. Beauvoir further backs up this argument by stating,

No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (McCall K, p.211,1979)

This further backs up the argument that becoming a mother is something that is taught and learnt as women navigate motherhood, Beauvoir is stating that society has created this unrealistic idea of what femininity means and that even though women have the ability to give birth and feed children, unlike men, it doesn’t mean that motherhood is

something that comes natural to them. This relates to the *Post-Partum Document*, as Kelly is displaying how she has navigated through motherhood by learning as she goes, rather than it being built into her, which society claims. Furthermore, an article reads,

“Myth of mothering joy” assumes that the typical woman desires to be a mother in order to be happy, and this aspiration is the pivotal element of biological femininity, from which both mothering skills and fulfilment in personal scarifying for children naturally emerge. (Iacona, E et al, p.2, 2025)

This explains the ideas behind the ‘myth’ created by society and links to the *Post-Partum Document* as it says that the skills that a woman requires to be a good mother should come naturally to them, which is what Kelly argues against.



Figure 2: Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document, Documentation I: Analysed fecal stains and feeding chart*, (1973-79)

One of the biggest impacts that a woman faces during motherhood is the gender roles of how women are silenced and expected to get on with being a good mother. A piece that shows the emotion complexity from this idea is *The Good Mother* (2003) by Louise Bourgeois. *The Good Mother* depicts an armless mother-like figure, the figure is distressed and looks as though it's weak. The face of the figure is low and looks tired. Below the figure is five bobbins of thread, each bobbin is representing the heads of children, their thread is attached to the chest of the figure, as if they are feeding from it constantly. (Ellen Mueller, 2017) The work is displaying the selfless act and self-sacrifice of being a mother, the body of the figure is trapped in this role. The thread attached from the bobbin represents that the figure is producing for others rather than itself, showing how the role of being a mother becomes a never-ending feeling. Bourgeois has managed to show the pressure of being that ideal mother that society enforces onto women, she is representing how that heavy expectation silences women, and they are expected to take on that role. The sculpture also represents how motherhood isn't always a happy feeling, instead it can become a tiring role for women and makes them lose themselves in the process. Women have been told to assume this role for many years, Beard tells the story from the beginning of Western literature between mother Penelope and son Telemachus,

'Mother,' he says, 'go back up into your own quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff... speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household.' And off she goes, back upstairs. (Beard, p.4, 2018)

The story shows us how women have always been silenced and are expected to be passive and powerless. It explains that gender roles have always existed as far back into Western literature and further backs up the point that women have always been put into their place, specifically by men, in this case it's between the mother and her son. Beard states, "an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species." (Beard, p.4, 2018) Beard is stating that for many years, men create this idea that they are the powerful figures, rather than a woman. They take on the powerful roles whilst the women are expected to be quiet and get on with the housework. In *The Good Mothers* case, Bourgeois shows how mothers are being silenced and 'getting on with it', they are expected to assume the role of motherhood, rather than speaking up, women take on society's role and they try to fit into it, their life becomes revolved around nurturing and being the main care-giver for their children, and they are left with no individuality. The story about Penelope and her son and *The Good Mother* are linked to each other due to how both women are being controlled in both situations, they behave the way that they do as they lose their voice and instead, follow a set of rules. Referring to the article *Sex Roles*, a participant in response to how they feel about judgement during motherhood said,

I felt like I couldn't get it right and that I was going to keep stuffing up and people were going to keep finding every single thing that I couldn't do perfectly and tell me about it and exploit and shove it in my face and say you didn't do enough, you haven't done enough here. (Danielle, L, p.106, 2023)

This statement links with Bourgeois, *The Good Mother*, as Bourgeois is depicting this feeling of tiredness and keeping up with trying to be a good mother. In this statement the

participant is describing this feeling of not being able to do enough and experiencing the judgement of others because they weren't able to live up to the high standards that people have set. This feeling of not being able to get everything right weighs mothers down.



Figure 3: Louise Bourgeois, The Good Mother (2003)

To conclude, Paula Rego, Mary Kelly and Louise Bourgeois each depict through their different types of work how gender is constructed and how women are controlled through their bodies and their behaviour is changed due to society telling them how they should act. Each artwork represents a different rule that women are expected to follow. Rego's work is representative of the female body and how they are shamed, women aren't given the choice of doing what they want with their bodies, and she depicts the anger felt by women. Kelly's work challenges people to face the realities of being a mother, the difficulties of motherhood, and that the perfect image that society creates of

motherhood is a false narrative. Bourgeois displays the powerless and silence of women, and how they are attached to this never-ending role of being a good mother. Through their expressions in their work and use of objects, these three pieces of work tie into each other to reveal the emotional intensity, judgement, and societal expectations that women face during pregnancy and motherhood in different ways. Rego's work makes women feel supported through their decisions with their bodies. Kelly and Bourgeois show women that they don't need to live up to the standards of society, and that navigating motherhood is a learning experience, which gives mothers a sense of comfort.

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