Virgins on the Cross

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Introduction

The photography series "Virgins on the Cross" is a body of work that aims to document the raw and unfiltered reality of motherhood. This visual narrative challenges the stereotypes and societal expectations placed on mothers and analyse the ambivalent aspects of motherhood.

In this series prevails the moments of exhaustion, the struggle to maintain a sense of self, and the weight of societal judgement, with the purpose of serving as a reminder of the relentless demands placed on mothers, while also dismantling the romanticised notions of motherhood in visual language. It recognizes the visceral mother-child bond, but also acknowledges the complexities, through explosion of vulnerabilities' moments, that can often be overshadowed, providing a more realistic understanding of the journey, through a conversation that challenges the traditional narratives and invites consideration of other aspects and representations of motherhood. The figure of mother in the artistic representations, has minimally evolved, offering often romanticised and frozen depictions that are oriented to celebrate the persistent "symbolic" scenes linked to breastfeeding, childbirth, affectionate and protective behaviours.

For instance, historically, the prevailing belief was that motherhood embodied a woman's highest calling. The ability to bring new life into the world was considered a miracle, and the act of nurturing and nourishing a child was seen as a sacred duty. This perception of maternity as a point of sweetness created a cultural ideal that elevated mothers to almost saintly status.

"In the Christian tradition, 'ideal' notions of motherhood were disseminated through the figure of the Virgin Mary. A paradoxical symbol, she represented the miraculous – being both a 'Virgin' and a mother." (L. Figes, 2020)

The intersection of motherhood and art has long been a significant theme, particularly in historical representations closely tied to religious imagery. Throughout art history, depictions of motherhood, particularly in the context of religious iconography, have often exalted the figure of Mary as the quintessential mother.

Through masterpieces such as the "Pieta" (Michelangelo, 1497-1499), several Virgin Mary with baby Jesus and the massive replications of these works the art scene has provided a powerful platform for the exaltation and commemoration of the

divine aspects of motherhood, symbolised by Mary, the mother of Jesus. The resonance of these religious icons' depictions speak of the cultural adulation reinforcing the bond between sacred and maternal. Consequently mostly of the representations far from a similar prototypes have been slightly demonised.

“Julia Margaret Cameron’s portraits of Mary Hillier constitute a conflicted picture of motherhood. In these Madonnas, Hillier looks out of frame in three-quarters profile, or confrontationally at the camera, but rarely at the child she holds. In some ways, this Renaissance-styled neutral expression, coupled with averted gaze but intimate soft focus, aligns with the virgin Mary as representing both the epitome and antithesis of motherhood; sexually pure, but “androgynous” (Mavor 52). We can read in her expression a glowing love or a cold disinterest – is this the angel in the house, or do we read motherhood not inherently, but through photographic juxtaposition with the children she holds?”

(G.Oddity, 2020)

Figure 1: Madonna and Children, 1864 by Mary Hillier

Artists perspectives on motherhood

"BIRTH SCENE," by Hermione Wiltshire and Claire Bottomley reimagines the nativity scene through a contemporary lens inviting audiences to critically engage with a new visual of body and maternity and reshape a consolidated information in a new light.

“The Birth of the Image revisits and disrupts familiar biblical tableaux, exploring the legacy

of Renaissance paintings in our view of maternity and the female body.” (H. Judah, 2023)

“Birth Scene re-visualises the Nativity by rotating the birthing body so that the vaginal canal points directly towards the viewer which is often the midwife’s point of view. This new orientation challenges the traditional versions of the Virgin Mary’s birthing body, which, with the help of geometric perspective, give the impression of receiving the gaze. Our ‘Birth Scene’ resists that direction of the gaze - the baby is about to be pushed out of Lucy’s body into Midwife Becky’s hands towards the viewer. Reversing the traditional direction of the gaze.” (C. Bottomley, 2023)

Figure 2: BIRTH SCENE – POV: Midwife, The Birth of the Image, 2020 by Hermione Wiltshire and Claire Bottomley

However, from my deep-rooted Catholic formation was extremely hard to detach completely from the notions received by a Christian education. In fact, for the formulation of the title project, I felt inspired by the religious figure of Jesus's mother, as an entity that culturally encapsulates the pain and sacrifice endured by mothers everywhere. The plurality of “Virgins”, not in the puritan sense of the term but as incarnation of leniency, symbolises the shared struggles that all mothers can experience, unifying them under a common cross, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, cultures or circumstances.

The antecedent phase, the pregnancy, since antiquity has been shaped by conflicting forces. On one side, there is a physicality deeply intertwined with the concept of sinuosity, reflecting the embodiment of the maternal archetype. On the other hand, there is the expectation that the pregnant body should contain and restrain its sexuality, guided by ethical considerations.

“ Pregnancy was also a taboo subject due to its affiliations with sex. Pregnancy provided evidence that a woman was fertile, but also sexually active. It undermined a woman's purity and chastity, thus it remained problematic.” (L. Figes, 2020)

Contemporary art has undoubtedly freed itself from the chains of social criteria, limiting itself to replicate the conventional archetype of Venus shape, idealised for motherhood. However, depictions of mothers breastfeeding or portraying postpartum scenes persist, but despite that there also exists a vibrant range of artists who have evolved their

visions to manifest motherhood in all its complexity, exploring the dynamics of relationships progression, the resilience demanded by challenging circumstances, and even the poignant perspectives of children.

There are even projects where motherhood is less involved, and remains a perceptible and influential force. Maybe one of the most iconic images of a mother is Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" (D. Lange, 1936).

Blending the intent of documenting the consequences of the Great Depression with the evocative representation of motherhood, Lange 'inadvertently' magnified the power of maternal strength in circumstances of struggles.

"The look on the mother's face embodied so many emotions; deep concern and worry, apprehension about the future, a wistful longing. Despair. Yet there was something more, a glimmer of hope and determination, a quiet dignity and stoic resilience, a heroic fortitude of the human spirit." (J. Trotter, 2019)

In somehow describing how the power of a mother's portrait is penetrating, becoming a symbol of resilience in the mass culture. However this specific image in my personal opinion not only symbolises a crisis, a sort of resignation to a circumstance, the tiredness of a population, but also, based on my knowledge of this story, a lack of empathy from mother to another mother, from the photographer to the subject.

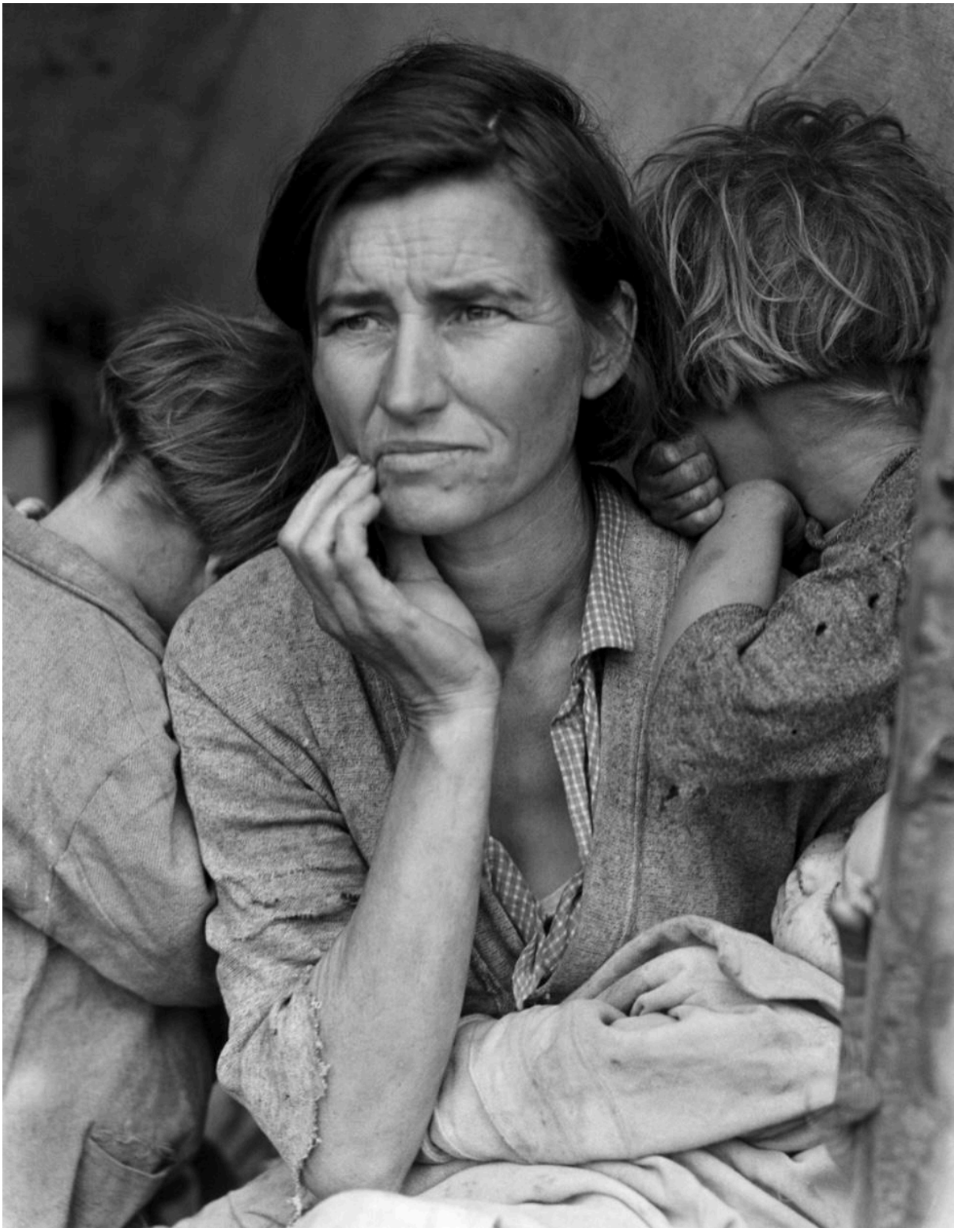

Figure 3: Migrant Mother, 1936 Dorothea Lange

But sometimes the ‘hostility’ is a female thing, Julia Fullerton Batten in the series, Mothers and Daughters *(J. Fullerton Batten,2012)* composed by several images enriched by a sharp tension, describes the turbulent relationships between mothers and daughters as testament of also her memories. The images are singularly titled indicating the various scenarios and facing more dynamics under a cinematic drama light.

“love and ultimately acceptance that is only arrived at after a lifetime of struggle and conflict.” (J. Fullerton Batten, 2012)

“Many of Julia’s projects address the progression from teenager to womanhood in this unique and visually impactful way such as “Teenage Stories” (R. Fulleylove, 2012)

“ From burning the past” (J. Fullerton Batten, 2012) to “Forgiveness” (J. Fullerton Batten, 2012) is perceptible an aura of regret and delusional expectations consumed in familial contexts. “The bond between a mother and daughter changes over time, facing new challenges at every life stage. Whether your mother-daughter relationship is loving, fractured, fraught or all of the above, it’s always going to be complex.” (V. Hannigan, 2015)

Figure 4: Burning The Past, 2012 by Julia Fullerton Batten

Figure5: Forgiveness, 2012 by Julia Fullerton Batten

The idealisation of idyllic places and behaviours only serves to perpetuate a skewed perception of what truly transpires within these bonds, intensifying the concealment of the more realistic idea that often the hyper romanticised images are closer to a semi-fiction narration.

“Motherhood is often over romanticised and I find that image damaging” (N.Woods, 2021)

“From Greek civilization to the dogma of Mary: the construction of a model

in modern times….within a destructive spiral of prejudice” (M. Ballerini, 2021)

sinking its roots in capitalist and patriarchal functions. “Capitalism in fact, states Eleanor,

alienates women from their reproductive function by forcing them to be controlled by a patriarchal society.” (M. Ballerini, 2021) But is the purpose of the art world to mainly represent the ideal of a "concrete" motherhood that never vacillates? In a world that habitually directs its gaze towards the nurturing nature of mothers, it is important to acknowledge that care is a dynamic exchange between child and parent.

In a society where our cultural norms dictate that mothers are the primary givers of care, ingraining in us the notion that a mother's role is inherently giving, while the concept of receiving care can create an unsettling dissonance. Leonie Hampton's lens, through the work “In the shadow of things” (L. Hampton, 2011) challenges us to shift our perspective and recognize the equally poignant moments of a child expressing love and support for their mother, breaking the shackles of conventional thinking. The series is a poignant testament of Hampton’s mother's obsessive compulsive disorder that influences and leads us also to reflect on the level of tolerability felt by a child rather than by a parent.

It's like comparing what is in the emotional possibilities of who and what a mother is capable of facing compared to what a child is able to give, proposed in a way that is consumed in a less traditional way far from ordinary expectations.

“I offered to help my mother win the battle against this enormous mountain of objects with the tacit agreement that I would photograph the entire process. The work is therefore the result of this pact with her. It is the personal recording of an intense emotional journey, of which the camera was the key and the shield to move forward, trying to enter a paradoxical world, both terrifying and full of love". (L. Hampton, 2011)

“Hampton has created a richly personal photographic language to tell the happysad story of her family, which, though it focuses most acutely on Bron” (M. Houghton, 2011) and how a disorder associated with a mother transports the entire family into an abyss of discomfort.

"Tradition dictates that it is the maternal figure who represents the heart around which the members of a family revolve; it happens in this case too, albeit in a different way.”

(L. Hampton, 2011)

Figure6: In the shadow of things, 2011 by Leonie Hampton

Figure 7 : In the shadow of things, 2011 by Leonie Hampton

Sometimes even unfamiliar places can create disorientation and maybe a sense of judgement because culturally it is more plausible to engage with the traditional representations. ‘‘Representations, identity and resistance in communication” (Howarth C., 2011) So what about the boundaries and restrictions of a physical space? Naomi Woods embraced this contradiction, cultivating, with a justified fear, an intimate desire, having a child birth and documenting her experience of motherhood in a caravan, realising how the confinement of this space was paradoxically liberating. ‘It was never my intention to have a child here, in fact, it was something that internally, I fought against fiercely. I had heard looking after a baby was hard and feared the restrictions the space could bring. But everything else felt right and after 13 years living in boats and caravans as two, what was one more tiny body in this space?”

(N. Woods, 2021)

Figure 8: I Wake To Listen, 2018 by Naomi Woods

"I thought motherhood would feel magical, but it didn't….my camera became a therapeutic tool with which to pull myself back out of the fog of early motherhood. I poured myself out in front of it; seeing, accepting and occasionally even celebrating my new being." (N. Woods 2021)

Sometimes even the absence of motherhood evokes the depths of maternal instinct.

In the exhibition "Mother" at Serchia Gallery, in which I was involved with Virgins on the Cross, most of the featured works were created by mothers, each offering a profound exploration and perspective of maternal experience through their art. However, amidst this diverse collection, one piece stood out - Jess Fair Brother's introspective work titled "The Things I Thought I'd Pass On." (J. Fair Brother, 2020) Her work served as a sequel to her previous piece, "Conversation with My Mother," (J. Fair Brother,2015) and Role play (woman with cushion) (J. Fair Brother, 2013-2016) delving further into the complexities and emotions surrounding her inability to become a mother herself, inviting viewers to contemplate the profound impact of motherhood, not just for those who experience it, but also for those who yearn for it without success.

“I always thought I’d use my high chair with a child of my own….After my mother died, which coincided with my fertility unravelling, I just left it there in the shed, gathering dust.” (J. Fair Brother, 2020)

Figure 9: The Things I Thought I'd Pass On, 2020 by Jess Fair Brother

Figure 10: Role play (woman with cushion), 2013-2016 by Jess Fair Brother

Sources of inspiration, Development, Research, Methodology

In the context of a failed maternity, my project stands out as a thought-provoking composition, for instance through the portrayal of a swollen belly and the surreal figure of an undeveloped or mutilated swan.

This piece evokes imagery that could be associated with abortion.

However, behind these controversial visuals lies a deeper truth a portrayal of undeniable evidence that cannot be concealed, and that leaves its traces despite attempts to do so. Through provoking uncomfortable conversations my aim is to marginalise the ordinary narrative in visual language, the meaning that penetrates in existentialism failure and the act of childbirth, as a medium to manifestate it. Sense of loss, disappointment, fragility and vulnerability are negative feelings, however are necessary for human progress, and when those start to lose their power tend to create an indifferent and empty human beings. Depth and superficiality have initially been introduced in one of the pioneer images of this series and exhibited previously at Serchia Gallery.

Image 11: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

Figure 12: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

Figure 13: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino.

In reference to the life essence enquiries Bill Viola' s installations provoked contemplation and introspection, to ponder the flow of existence and the transitions that mark the human experience also through mother's elements. From the scene of childbirth to his mother dying in the bed, from the recall to the Pieta' of Michelangelo to the martyrdom, all traced back to the procreation phase and the finite cycle of life. "Some of the profound mysteries of human existence. One is concerned with birth and the other death; one with comfort and creation, the other with suffering and sacrifice" (N. Azzarello, 2014)

Figure 14: Nantes Triptych, 1992 by Bill Viola

However also the beautiful act of birth is anticipated by suffering and sacrifice.

So what about the “violence” of childbirth, more specifically the act of expulsion iconography? This ‘potential unorthodox’ representation often acknowledges the messiness and vulnerability of the process and finds itself censored or overlooked due to its explicit nature, which raises important questions about society's comfort and limitations with the power and rawness of birth. “Women’s sexuality and reproductive abilities have been causing anxiety throughout many cultures” (N. Ashby, 2022)

“«Woman is endowed with constitutive inferiority» for which «(her) destiny is to be in sight of man» and to be his “complement”. «The virile [is opposed] to the feminine like the genius of the spirit to the true genius of life, to the guardian angel of biological existence»[v], that is to say that «form without force» needs «strength without form".

(G. Giudici, 2017)

The photographer Julia Albrech also has been affected by the weight of societal norms “....depression procured by structures and norms our society believes in, like hot water that heats up until you burn your skin. Some call it hysteria or manifest it as craziness. “It is weird to grow older and realise what your mother has been through after a specific time, the façade of the perfect life begins to crack, and the crumbling plaster reveals the broken foundation. They say: don‘t look too deeply into things, or you will look backwards. It feels like I am looking at myself apart from my body and judging whether I am behaving correctly.” (Fresheyes, 2022) Her representations related to pregnancy and childbirth are singular and impactful.

Albrech’s piece “After Fertilisation” (2021) simulate an act of expulsion which is as disturbing as it is capable of garnering a reaction from the public through the reproduction of the mechanism of birth using an alternative body zone. An open mouth that substitute the vagina and a closed fist to indicate a child's head. It is clear that Albrech's photography is intentionally designed to provoke powerful reactions and aims to have an interactive audience.

Figure 15: After Fertilisation, 2021 by Julia Albrecht

As a mother myself, I often find myself pondering the question of who determines the correct and incorrect methods of raising children. Should our values and attitudes always conform to societal standards?

Sally Mann's intimate and often controversial photographs of the project “Immediate Family” (S. Mann, 1992) have sparked critique and analysis, prompting discussions around her role as a mother and her decision to expose her children through her art. While some may question Mann's choices as a mother to expose her kids in such a public manner, there is undoubtedly a sense of boldness and fearlessness in her approach. By inviting viewers into her family's private space, Mann challenged traditional notions of motherhood and parental protection, inviting a deeper exploration of the complexities of familial relationships and the realities of growing up.

In the article “The disturbing imagery of Sally Mann” (R.B. Woodward, 1992) is stated “The shield of motherhood can quickly become a sword when turned against her. If it is her solemn responsibility, as she says, "to protect my children from all harm," has she knowingly put them at risk by releasing these pictures into a world where pedophilia exists? Can young children freely give their consent for controversial portraits, even if -- especially if -- the artist is their parent?” (R.B. Woodward, 1992)

Figure 16: Immediate Family, 1990 by Sally Mann

Figure 17: Immediate Family, 1990 by Sally Mann

But it is certain that in contemporary times, being almost ‘hostage’ of mass media, the social habits tend to normalise what we could instead define hysterical and distort behaviours. Nowadays in visual language culture, especially for the images promoted on social platforms, there is a kind of celebration of motherhood, where often mothers’ expectations are revealed and which gives life to a mechanism of exposure/ response; The act of mothers sharing the contents of their children online is a complex interplay of emotions and intentions. According to what is declared in the article “Motherhood & Photography” (G. Oddity, 2020) there are “two sectors of modern

photography of motherhood” (G. Oddity, 2020) and creation of dynamics. In the digital era by choosing to share these personal moments, mothers are taking control of the narrative surrounding their children ”gaining the illusion of control over the inevitable absence of her children just as the infant does” (G. Oddity, 2020) But beyond the realms of serene domesticity or carefully orchestrated familial scenes there is another dialectic around the figure of mothers which is “also publicised” (G. Oddity, 2020) and that captures the interest of the audience:“portraits of refugee mothers with their children. “The mothers stand in their tents with their children in their arms, centred in the frame and often making direct eye contact with the camera. The focus is on their faces rather than those of their children. Each photograph is lonely, fitting most of the body in frame such that the background of their tents dominate the frame.” (G. Oddity, 2020)

My research phase was divided into 2 parts which however were completed simultaneously: on the one hand I discarded classic images that prevail in the maternal narrative of poetic pregnancy wombs, postpartum and licking breast milk, on the other I focused on finding the elements to be able to construct my body of work. Focusing on my flexibility on what is understood as immoral and what does not fall within the canons in the conventional representation of motherhood, beyond my intent to explore the aspects of ambivalence, I also felt the necessity to analyse which are the boundaries that define what is ethical in terms of self expression as mother and artist.

“I am a vulgar, perverse photographer with no morals. Why? because there is nothing vulgar, perverse and devoid of morality in wanting to deal with human nature. If anything the opposite, denying human nature, wanting to embellish everything at all costs is vulgar,

perverse and devoid of morality. because precisely it means denying and denying means lying means being false liars and puppets at the mercy of morality and the will of others. I love dirt because in that dirt I find authenticity, I find the truth and I find my freedom and freedom of others." (D. Vannini, 2023)

I tried to embrace an intuition to manifest my concept of photography without filters, also looking at a kind of artists that are closer to my school of thoughts like Torbjorn Rodland. "It's all about this represents me — this is my spirit animal, this is my mood — and so it's not about critical distance, it's about seeing this is the only language I have."

(T. Rogers, 2018)

For the first time for an exhibition I thought to merge black and white imagery with coloured pictures, I was strongly guided by elements rather than entire artists works, the colour red blood predominantly was what I was inspired by as an index of visceral and fleshy connotations served as a canal, infusing the installation with a raw, primal energy that demand attention; I used it in various combinations- faded, burgundy- darker, warmer, pinky, splatted. The piece "Svayambhu" (A. Kapoor, 2007) Anish Kapoor "blood, Illusion and l'origine du monde (origin of the world) (J. Benhamou-Huet, 2023) evokes "self-engendered, shaped by one's own energy" (V. Triger, 2007)

and even its means is extended "metaphor for all emigrations and cultural cross fertilisations" (S. Hubbard, 2022) the power, structure and flow of this artwork reminded me of the 9 linear months, the semi-conscious state of a mother, and a portal to another realm. Kapoor's assertion that the waxy material used in the piece is deeply connected to the human body resonates with me, providing the foundation for my unique interpretation of his work. "The body is central to my project. But another part of my work is about the subject of our perception of reality.

Is it full? Is it empty?" (J. Benhamou-Huet, 2023) The "evocation" of the 9 linear months

brings to mind the passage of time, growth, and transformation, akin to the gestation period of a human life.

The half-sleep of a mother symbolises a state of anticipation, where one is poised between wakefulness and dreams, mirroring the liminal nature of Kapoor's creation.

Moreover, the idea of a gateway encapsulates the sense of transition and metamorphosis, suggesting that Kapoor's artwork serves as a threshold to an alternate reality or a new understanding of the self.

By embracing Kapoor's insight into the bodily essence of his creation, I find the freedom to idealise and imbue his work with my personal perspective. This flexibility allows me to weave my own narrative, drawing from my experiences and emotions to enrich the meaning of “Svayambhu” beyond what may be conventionally recognized.

In my individual interpretation it signified a manifestation of victory, of transport from one dimension to another, of strong and enthralling, of linear borders, but with the risk of something falling, of anxious and reassuring, of a colour that is true in nature, of majestic but that smells of home, domestic, of matter that becomes liquid and liquid that becomes flesh, that reaches our feet, that heads towards life and that life was already inside, of a war and peace. “Anish Kapoor challenges us to seek the truth beyond appearances, inviting us to explore the territory of the untrue and the unreal.”

(Palazzo Strozzi, 2023)

Figure 18: Svayambhu, 2007 by Anish Kapoor

Another source of inspiration was Twin Peaks scene by David Lynch.

Lynch's works delves into the realm of subconscious desires, exposing the unsettling and often taboo aspects of human nature. Through dreamlike sequences and symbolic imagery, he delves into the dark depths of the human psyche, unearthing primal urges and hidden motivations. "Sometimes I get ideas, and I don't know exactly what they mean. So I think about it, and try to figure it out, so I have an answer for myself." (R. Carrol, 2018)

This exploration of the subconscious adds layers of complexity to his work, prompting viewers to confront their own innermost desires and fears. In the creation of my body of work I felt that I had slightly abolish limits because it is an expanded project that attempts to go beyond the simple representation of motherhood and attempt to ignite discussion on identities, sexuality, confrontation, resilience amid the enigma of our mortality, the prospect of the unknown, integration of an iconography that is reluctant to be accepted.

Even the contradiction to introduces Lynch as source and associates to motherhood, it prompts a reevaluation of the entrenched clichés surrounding Lynch's portrayal of women and alleged misogyny, my attempt to deconstruct the concept of one way representation and interpretation which restrict the depth of understanding, perpetuates biases, and excludes diverse perspectives.

Figure 19: Twin Peaks - Laura Palmer still image, 1990 series by David Lynch

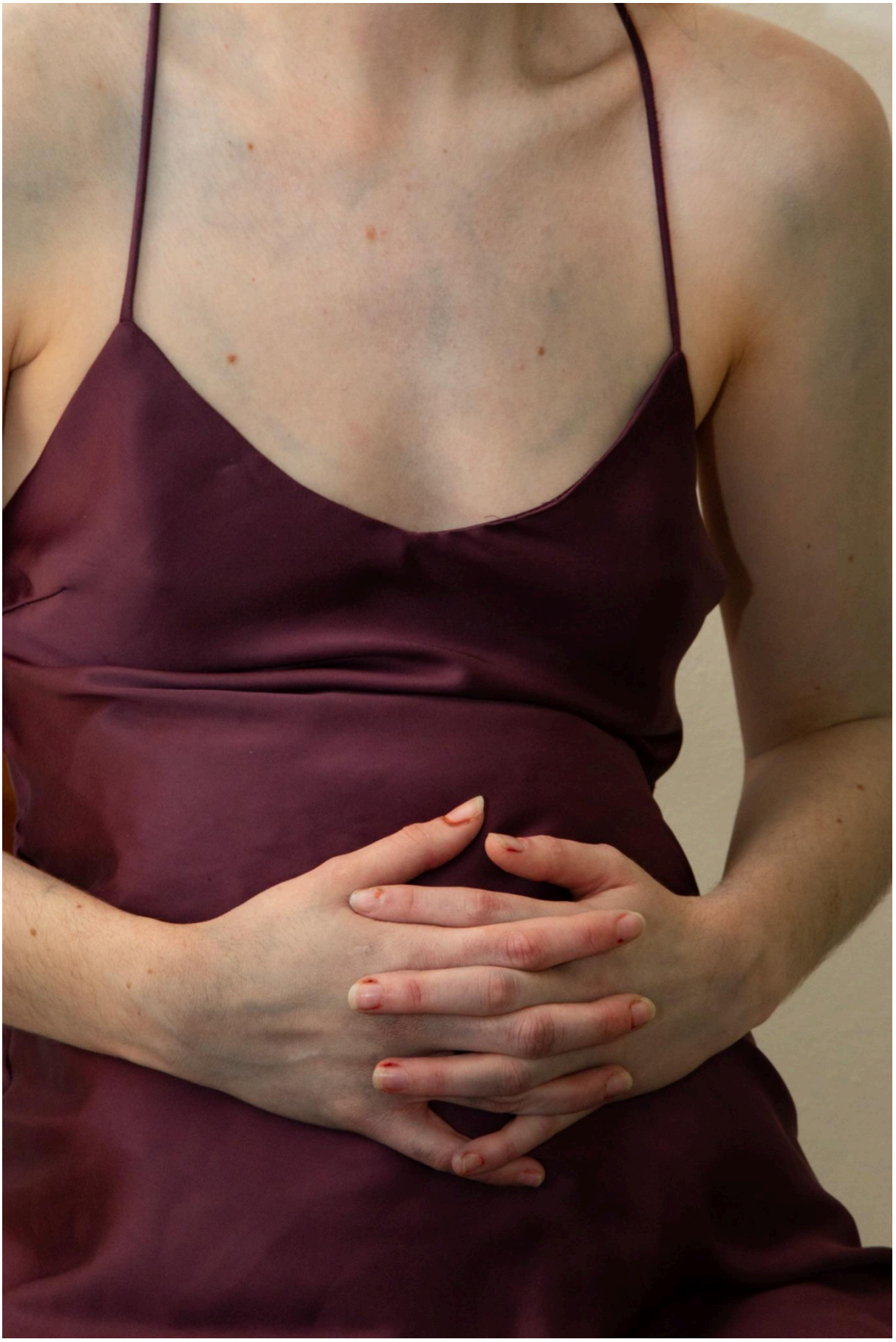

Figure 20: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

Figure 21: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

Figure 22: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

Figure 23: The Mother Project, 2006 by Tierney Gearon Trailer.

TIERNEY GEARONS - THE MOTHER PROJECT TRAILER
https://vimeo.com/900420738?share=copy

“Tierney Gearon's photographs have been called manipulative, disturbingly ambiguous, even perverse; the London police demanded that the Saatchi Gallery which first showed the offending photos of her young children take the pictures down. Tierney has always maintained she loves her subjects deeply and understands them better than anyone else. How could she not? They are her family.” (C. Cotton, 2007)

Figure 24: The Mother Project, 2006 by Tierney Gearon

Figure 25: Untitled, by Chris Crawford 2023

“I am fascinated by this vibrant, gelatinous, mysterious-looking thing known as “the mother,” but the truth always disappoints people. It’s just a cellulose structure that is the byproduct of

bacteria and the symbiotic fermentation from alcohol to vinegar—basically the juicy bits you find in veggies and fruits. In some ways a healthy, strong, thick mother indicates a great vinegar, but a perfect vinegar can also happen with a weak-looking mother or none at all."

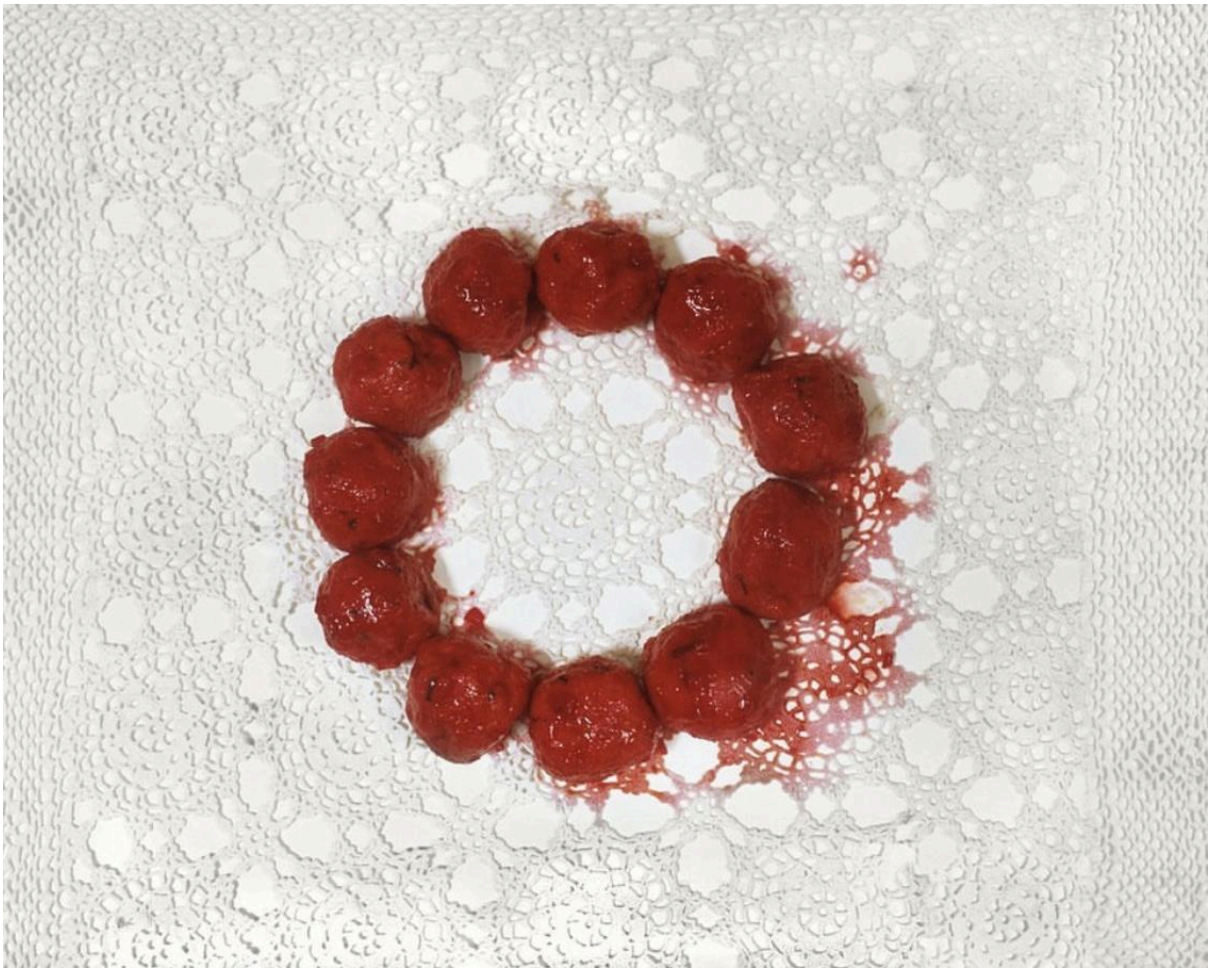

Figure 26: Chinko, 2008 by Sagit Zluf Namir

Figure 27: Untitled - Unknown producer

Figure 28: Halat Shabbat, 2020 by Sagit Zluf Namir

The representation of the pregnant body is a rare theme in visual arts, especially if it doesn't represent a happy ending. (N. Ashby, 2022)

Figure 29: Henry Ford Hospital, 1932 by Frida Kahlo

Frida Khalo "exhibits a complex dialectic between the social dimension of these art forms, their intimate relationship to religion, the creation of art, the struggle to create life, and the inevitability of death" (N. Ashby, 2022)

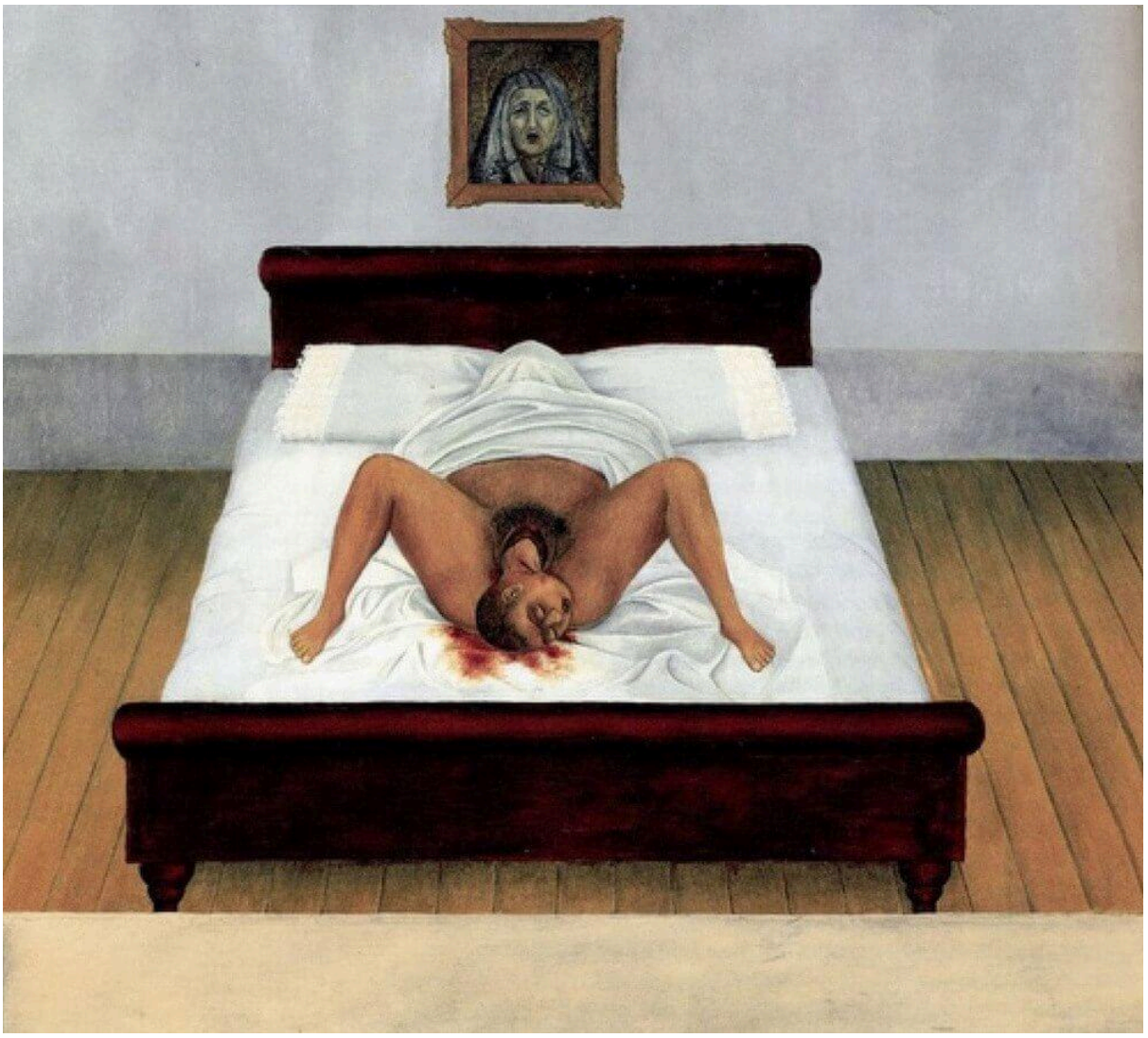

Figure 30: My Birth, 1932 by Frida Kahlo

Frida Khalo “allows the genitalia to take centre stage in the painting and reclaims the act of childbirth from the realm of taboo” (N. Ashby, 2022)

Trying to give continuity and consistency to my practice, I have integrated in Virgins on the Cross, animal representations, hidden identities and external elements as often practised in my previous exhibitions.

Figure 31: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

The use of symbolism as reflection of my cultural identity and expression of beliefs and traditions that encapsulate layers of meaning of historical, social, and spiritual contexts of my land of origin. The Photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard once said. “ ‘Rose Taylor’ is a specific person, whether you know her or not. ‘Rose’ is more generalised and could be

one of many Roses—many people. No title, it could be anybody.” And in the same way, a mask “serves as non-personalizing a person.”(D. Zax, 2011), following this discourse the absence of facial expressions would potentially allow more space to the body language of some of my subjects and aim to put the ‘Virgins’ on the same level, the ‘cross’, without categorizations. In the series are included few images produced with the AI

It was my first approach to Artificial Intelligence and despite the many controversies surrounding the use of text generator AI I am convinced that it’s nice to know that we can directly transport our thoughts facilitating our practice as I strongly consider AI a valid alternative form of representation.

Figure 32: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

The repetition of some photographs presented both in black and white and colour intensifies the concept of not succumbing to the first engagement, stumbling twice in the same image and reconsidering the interpretation.

The knotted bed sheets hang like a tangible umbilical cord, twisted and bound, symbolising the bond between mother and child, life and the inevitable tangled nature of existence. Within this entanglement, the bed sheet takes on profound significance, evoking the very bed where life is often conceived, nurtured, and ultimately, where it meets its end in the embrace of death. This simple yet profound symbol embodies

the complex cycle of life, from inception to conclusion, all within the folds of a humble bed sheet. Placed in isolation on a wall alongside an image that mirrors this element, the braid takes on a stark and evocative presence.

The act of braiding, traditionally associated with femininity and adorned with various cultural and historical connotations, holds a complex duality. On one hand, it can signify strength, unity, and resilience through its intertwining strands, as represented in another image.

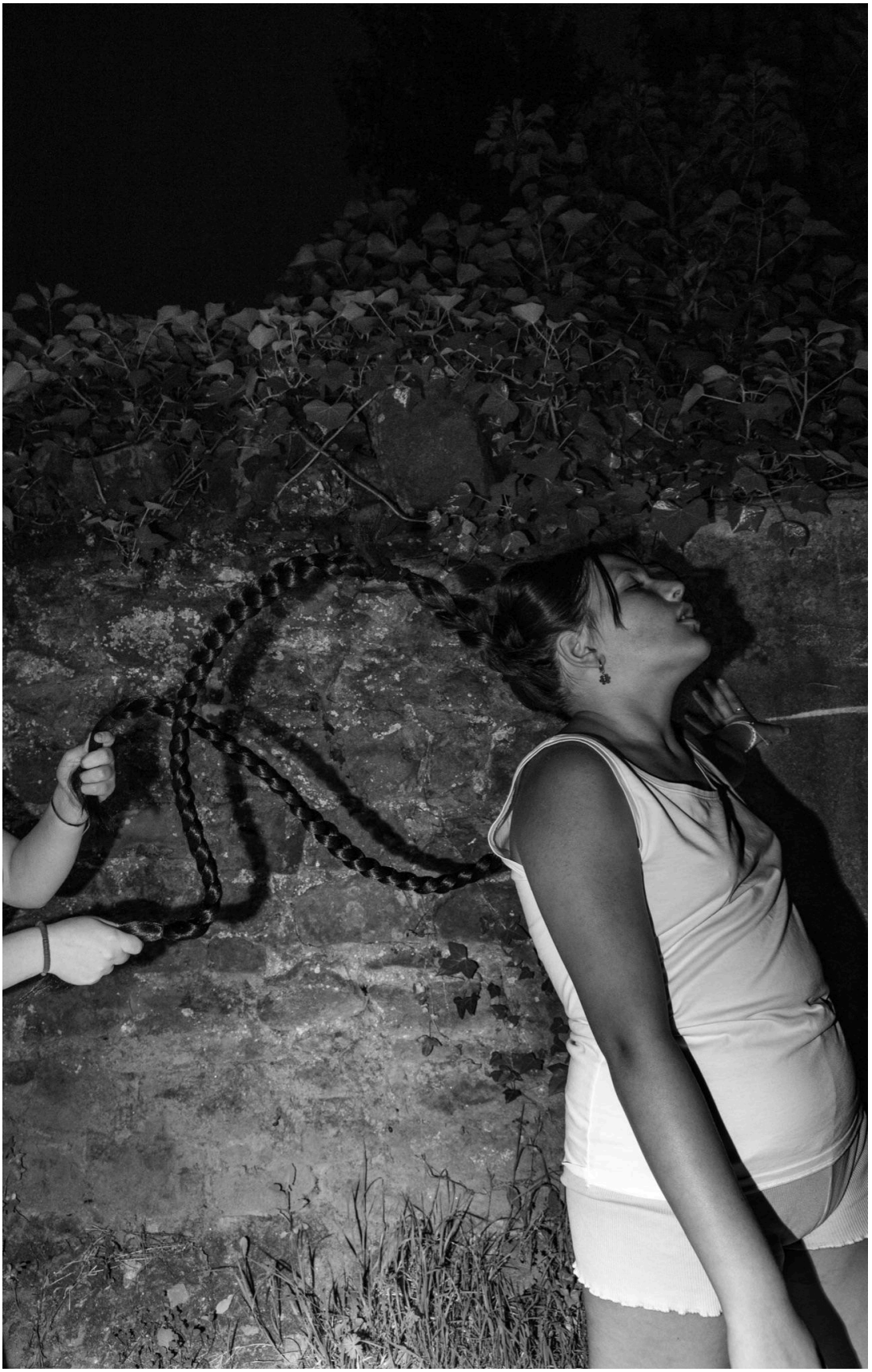

Figure 33: My own image - Virgins on the Cross, 2023 by Ada Marino

Conversely, it can also be perceived as a metaphor for restraint, captivity, imposition of societal norms and linked to the concept of castration, deprivation and secondariness.

Figure 34: Virgins on the Cross, 2023 Installation shot by Ann Dineen

The M-shaped arrangement, beyond the intent of recalling the letter M like mother, created a deliberate visual choreography, orchestrating movement and generating a wave effect and a prospect of mothers crowding within the exhibition space.

Conclusion:

Motherhood has been represented through millions of visions and multiple perspectives, even performative. The monologue "I am not a mother: we women have a sense of guilt that rumbles inside us" (C. Francini, 2023) is another font of inspiration showing a conversation of a missed mother to an inexistent child.

From this piece is evident and stands out the indescribable pressure to conform to a predefined notion of womanhood, the words are suspended between the masked pain and the narration of an insidious judgement.

"And I already know it, child, you will take away from me all the creativity, the light, only you will remain at the centre of the scene and I will be a simple extra and then I will become big and then old and I will no longer be able to pretend that time doesn't stop. passing, because you will always be there, there, reminding me at every moment that my youth is over. And I think that you will make me so happy, that then you can never really make me that happy, because that's how things in life work: they are never what you expected. And I wait for you and desire you so much that you will necessarily be a disappointment. But how do I speak...? But what kind of mother am I? I'm not a mother, meanwhile…" (I. Costabile, 2023)

"When someone tells you that they are pregnant and you have never been pregnant,

something explodes inside you.

A hole that opens up in the middle of your vital organs, a kind of fear, dizziness, and while all this is happening, you have to celebrate, because pregnant people are violent and just want to be celebrated. And there is no room for your pain, for your loneliness. You have to celebrate." (I. Costabile, 2023)

Based on all the notions acquired through my extensive research I wanted my body of work to reflect what still remains unexplored and eradicate the conventional idea of expressing, presenting and perceiving art, trying to look from different angles in the role of producer but also spectator.

The intention behind "Virgins on the Cross" is not to destabilise the audience, rather it is to unearth the layers of suppressed reality and reshape narratives. What could visually be potentially and wrongly considered 'violent', 'abusing' or disturbing is just performing the function of reclaiming truth. This reclamation, soaked in suspense and rich with pathos, serves as a metaphor for the conflicts that permeate our society aiming to amplify consciousness and perception in order to contribute to facilitate a more empathetic understanding about expectations, struggles and resistance of motherhood.

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IMAGE 7

In the shadow of things, 2011 by Leonie Hampton. Available at:
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