“Contempt for domesticity is in part an effect of bias against spaces and practices strongly associated with women. By recuperating domestic life and those of all genders who create and sustain it, I hope to strike back against that bias.”


Housework is a banal, grubby and non-spectacular aspect of life and economy. But, it is also part of a powerful hierarchical economy that endures relentlessly despite so much opposition and resistance. When housework is considered in relation to persistent and, indeed, accelerating inequity and injustice, it is more interesting and latently spectacular (but no less grubby). In other words, the way we work creates the world, but housework underpins and enables both that work and that world. Such criticism is traditionally called “social reproduction theory” (Bhattacharya, 2017), which looks at how the world keeps on turning and how it is supported by essential undervalued work. Recently however, the idea of “social reproduction” has been challenged by key scholars who seek to look closely at domestic structures but also seek to break out of their hegemonic formations (Haraway, 2016; Lewis, 2020; Cooper, 2017). Rather than just critically describing reproduction, such projects seek to critically recreate the domestic in a different image. In concert with this line of thinking, this chapter examines at subtle remaking of domestic ecologies enacted in Jahnne Pasco-White’s painterly collages.

In Australia the link between one’s place of work and a home place of shelter is perversely simple: the two are distinct in theory but related both financially and materially in practice. The enduring colonial focus on private land possession and mortgage debt (Keenan, 2015; Crabtree, 2013) means that many people are effectively working to meet monthly mortgage payments or rental dues to keep the roof over their head (even more so since the start of the pandemic). Crabtree describes this as the “Great Australian Dream of mortgagee homeownership, steeped in ideologies of individualism and success through ownership” (2013, 106). Housework is that which makes that same colonial home shelter a nice place to be and, at least in theory, nurtures and rejuvenates the worker so they can be productive members of society. Thus, thinking critically about housework and the forms of work that both break and (re)make home shelters is vital at this moment of coronavirus and accelerating climate change; if housework supports the world as it is, we have to change how we
understand and practice housework in order to change the world.

Jahme Pasco-White’s studio process and visual works explore the dynamic between house and work. In email discussions with the artist and after reviewing the other contributors to this volume, I have learned that her housework and painting work occupy the same space: there is substantial traffic between the home and studio and the life and work of this artist-mother. So much traffic it seems is almost impossible to tell them apart: my daughter “has seen me drawing on the walls in the studio, in galleries—we lived in a tiny studio apartment in Paris for a couple of months when she was one, and I was doing a residency—and so often at home she asks if we can draw on the walls” (Pasco-White, 2020). Not only that, Pasco-White’s artist statement for the exhibition inter-giftedness that in the artist’s work the outside world leaks in, both accidentally (water leaking through cracks unwanted in the studio, making the space dank and damp) and purposefully (water that is necessary to liquify colours used in the studio). The line between home and work is slippery. On the one hand, it is right that feminist criticism in the time of coronavirus outlines how employers have commandeered homes and to simply push back to create a clear distinction and a proper work-life balance (Lewis, 2020). But on the other hand, perhaps we can also pause and try to construct a critical and creative kind of housework that can resist more reproduction of the status quo and tend toward at least a minor revolution in life and work. Can Pasco-White’s pink and yellow collages (that cover the entire wall surface like vivid versions of the family-friendly Dulux wash-n-wear) and paintings (hung laundry-like from the gallery ceiling) help us think through the process of critically remaking housework?

While this chapter approaches Pasco-White’s painterly collages as a way to rethink the meaning of housework, this necessitates academics and cultural critics to revisit their research and writing methods. The question of how to do rigorous analysis of visual works at a distance is related to this argument too and not only because of the questionable authority of the “armchair expert”. Rather, critically rethinking methods is about remaking our processes and products during COVID-19 and, indeed, in respect of the climate change mitigation mantra “#flyless”. There are more reasons than just the possibility of fatal infection and the consequences of carbon emissions to collaborate differently today. If we need to slow down, take a breath, change how we work, the processes of critical collaboration need to change too. So, in both aiming to avoid the trap of armchair expertise that treats one’s own knowledge with god-like omniscience that enables their criticise others, and model a different critical intimacy with the art of another, the methodology of coming to know Pasco-White’s work for the purposes of writing this essay was to ask the artist some specific questions about her process via email and consider them in relation to the aesthetics of the works. This is not exactly revolutionary, but it certainly helped make sense of them while only being able to visit them online. I then sought to connect what I discovered about the artist’s paintings and processes to my own research obsessions because, as my guru once said, “obsessions are the most durable form of intellectual capital” (Sedgwick, 1992, ix). I’m an expert of a kind, but not an expert of all kinds: I’m obsessed with making the boring things (weather and chores) interesting. In this case my expertise gives me licence to think critically about housework and it is my expert opinion that Pasco-White paints it for us.

In the chapter that follows I consider Pasco-White’s work in relation to housework. In the first part I examine the relationship between her process (how) and the overall aesthetics (what) in terms of her artworks. I then turn—in the second part—to thinking about the artist’s own phrase “the ‘journey’ and ‘the labour’ of the mother” (Pasco-White 2020) in relation to her approach to painterly collage and then I conclude with some provisional thoughts about the tensions between labour and love in the context of home reflecting on the provocations of these painterly collages.

Part 1: How something is made in relation to what is made.

In the 1970s second-wave socialist feminists identified housework as a labour that fuelled capitalism and sought to revalue the work by rethinking how domestic work was understood and valued (Friedan, 1963). Paradoxically, another powerful trajectory of feminism sought liberation from this obligatory drudgery (Wollstonecraft 1796; Woolf [1929] 2001; Beauvoir [1949] 2010). The latter charge to be liberated from housework is a vital feminist ambit. But it also represents the most substantial and possibly the most dubious form of feminist success in the present unjust world, even if that success is entirely partial and inadequate. To be clear, I’m not saying to be a feminist today you have to do housework. Rather I’m saying this: if feminism is to be viable in the future it has to be popularly recognised and pursued as something much more than just having the equal pay and skirts in the boardroom. The liberation-from-housework feminist success story is real, but it is occupied by mostly white cis-gendered women who in many ways have never considered their connection to feminisms and often work in oppressive and maintain oppressive regimes. Meanwhile, housework has remained, as Ursula Huws (2019) notes, ‘the epicentre of capitalism’, undesirable and, for the most part, un-or under-paid but still utterly necessary to the ongoingness of this unjust global system.

Thinking about housework as a fuel for capitalism, a kind of complement to coal and gas, it sits in tense relation to the centrality of the visual sense for painting’s audience. To rephrase this non-sequitur assertion as a question: what has housework’s status as capitalism’s fuel got to do with visual art? Painting privileges the visual. It is a traditional visual art: one can look but usually cannot touch. In seemingly unrelated contrast, housework, the cruddiest of all Marxist feminist subjects, is both tactile and hidden. Talking about housework in relation to the wider political economy is at its root a critique of the commodity (or a critique of the glistening object for sale that is utterly detached from the raw materials, supply chains and labour that produced it). Such critique goes beyond the worker himself and all the way to the labour of the mother who carefully washes the bottles and clothes for her children. Critiquing a painting in terms of its status as a commodity does not allow us to walk. The painting is the ultimate artistic commodity: it sits on a wall and accrues value for a range of abstract and immaterial reasons quite removed from the artist and in ways that are utterly impossible for other artforms like poetry and performance. Critiquing a painting in terms of its status as commodity is a cruddy game too. This is not only because artists like Andy Warhol and Alexander Brenner have already made painting more valuable via the marketplace, but also because the commodification of the artist’s work seems inexorable. For those who have it, vision can trigger superficial sense; for those who lack it, vision can trigger feelings and understandings that are powerful; those who do not have vision can explore the other senses. In this vein, it must be said that Pasco-White’s works are pleasurable to look at even if, as abstract works, they do not immediately convey any straightforward meanings. They are the abstract painterly relative of “sexy ugly” or “pretty dirty”. “Pretty dirty” is a descriptive term in which crucially, “pretty” operates as an adjective not an adverb. Here “pretty” refers to the predominance of pastel pink, purple and peach colours in the messmates and becoming-with series. “Pretty” is not intended in a pejorative sense of the way that any feminine descriptor is immediately supposed to disempower and belittle. Rather “pretty” is the pinkness of skin, lips and nipples. Like contempt for domesticity itself, contempt for prettiness is, to follow Susan Fraiman (2001, 3), “an effect of bias against spaces and practices strongly associated with women”. Moreover, in Queering Femininity Hannah McCann (2018, 1 & 6) provokes us to think deeply about the implications of gender “presentation” and gendered surface aesthetics. She does so both in terms of the money and labour involved in creating prettiness, beauty or other traditionally feminine aesthetics and also in terms of the “-life-harboring, life-giving” enactments.” The juxtaposition of the purples, pinks, peaches, browns and yellows invokes the visual surface tensions of maternal aesthetics: pretty (soft, nurturing, comforting bodies) and dirty (bodies that make breast milk, vomit and poo). As abstract paintings though, the colours signify only ideas rather than positively represent them, but it is here that their messiness together (as “messmates”; “becoming with” one another) acts as an invitation to indulge in the pleasures of the surface before exploring potentially meaning across other dimensions. The pursuit of meaning in dimensions beyond the surface of visual works takes us backwards and into the process of making the works and outwards into their spatial arrangements when exhibited in a gallery. In her artist statement for inter-giftedness, Pasco-White states that her work incorporates:

[...] a range of vegetable hand-dyed cottons and linens in which water draws out the pigments from organic matter gathered from my surroundings and domestic setting, such as avocado skins, black beans, turmeric, wattle, blackberries, pine needles, eucalyptus leaves, clove, beetroots, carrots, avocado skins, black beans, turmeric, wattle, blackberries,
hawthorn berries, indigo, dandelion, mushrooms, and lichen. Also incorporated into the works are earth pigments, violets, clovers, bicarb soda, dried mandarin skins, recycled plastics, bamboo wipes, previous paintings and various drawing papers from both our daughter’s bedroom and the studio, as well as acrylic, oil stick, crayon, pastel and pencil.

And that her process is hidden in the paintings, which are for sale and commodified, in ways that naturally mask the labour of making, nonetheless contain traces of these processes which will be present in galleries of those who retain the works in a couple of ways. These traces manifest in terms of the non-toxicity of the materials and their possible limited shelf-life (less toxic, but less enduring than oil paint, for example), but also in terms of the pretty pink and dirty yellows and the way the colour itself invokes and refuses to simplify certain stereotypes of domesticity by association. Moreover, the spatial arrangement that the works in *messmates* and *becoming-with* invoke cover the whole surface area of the wall like a new coat of paint, or to hang from the ceiling like laundry drying. The theatrics of the exhibition invokes and aestheticises domestic space, but not in any way that entirely disavows or disappears the messiness that is the inevitability of itself. The evoking elements of how the artworks were made, as well as the thinking behind their framing and installation, Pasco-White points to a dynamic relation between what is made, how it is made and how it is exhibited. The movement between the “what is made” and the “how it was made” involves established architectures and tired household practices at the same time as gesturing towards new domestic ecologies where bodies, labour and materials are reconfigured.

**Part 2: The Labouring of Domestic Supports**

If maintaining diversity of life on earth is a collective effort, then Jahnne Pasco-White’s question “how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk [...] and how will it respond?” is an urgent one. If returning to housework and remaking housework is an important part of any new ecological order, then Jahnne Pasco-White’s question “how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk [...] and how will it respond?” is an urgent one. The artist’s question is literally about paint and silk, but who am I in relation to others? I can still feel like an individual when in relation to others, and I can still feel alone in the world, but I will never be entirely alone. Coronavirus has made intrahuman innate connectivity obvious, but coronavirus doesn’t answer the question of how much can one hold for another and for how long. Coronavirus alone does not answer what will they look like once they’re released from their burden. The details of the answer matter because there is a massive industry glossing over such details and there is a massive industry that treats diverse material differences with contempt.

The term “resilience” is a contemporary buzzword. It is used across so many discourses: economics and psychology to contemporary climate change and sustainability policy, especially as it intersects with strategies that seek to address (psychological, social and ecological) damage at the same time as maintaining a capitalist model of economic growth. In this context, resilience means enduring or, stated more positively, bouncing back from a stressful or disastrous event. The term has been the subject of widespread critique across different disciplines. Schroeder (2014) argues that the term best serves a certain model of corporate capitalism because: (1) it seeks growth, and recycles stress, trauma and even disaster into an opportunity for economic growth (James, 2015); (2) it is so widely used it comes to signify something very vague at best, and mean nothing at worst (Cooper and Walker, 2011); and (3) it focuses on economic growth at the expense of social and environmental care, justice and healing (Bracke, 2016). In other words, resilience policies and strategies are holistic in terms of the capitalist economy or a corporation dedicated to profit, but their plausibility relies on invisible and unaccountable physical and emotional labours of others.

What these critiques do not attend to is the inadequacy, or (frankly) the outright lie, of the universal applicability of the metaphor of resilience in terms of materials. In short: while resilience as a policy buzzword is used as a general principle for bouncing back from a stressful or disastrous event. The artist’s collages carefully renegotiate these terms:

I [use] the term labouring as a pushing the limits of what a material can take, hold, withstand, endure and, how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk, for example, and how will it respond? Or how may this canvas hold up with many layers of limestone, soil, many other fabrics, pigments, materials? I am interested in pushing the limits of how we consider painting, disrupting its traditional spatial approach to painting. Underpinning that I am also interested in pushing the limits of how we consider painting, disrupting its traditional capitalist model of economic growth. In this context, resilience means enduring or, stated more positively, bouncing back from a stressful or disastrous event.

The term “resilience” is a contemporary buzzword. It is used across so many discourses: economics and psychology to contemporary climate change and sustainability policy, especially as it intersects with strategies that seek to address (psychological, social and ecological) damage at the same time as maintaining a capitalist model of economic growth. In this context, resilience means enduring or, stated more positively, bouncing back from a stressful or disastrous event. The term has been the subject of widespread critique across different disciplines. Schroeder (2014) argues that the term best serves a certain model of corporate capitalism because: (1) it seeks growth, and recycles stress, trauma and even disaster into an opportunity for economic growth (James, 2015); (2) it is so widely used it comes to signify something very vague at best, and mean nothing at worst (Cooper and Walker, 2011); and (3) it focuses on economic growth at the expense of social and environmental care, justice and healing (Bracke, 2016). In other words, resilience policies and strategies are holistic in terms of the capitalist economy or a corporation dedicated to profit, but their plausibility relies on invisible and unaccountable physical and emotional labours of others.

What these critiques do not attend to is the inadequacy, or (frankly) the outright lie, of the universal applicability of the metaphor of resilience in terms of materials. In short: while resilience as a policy buzzword is used as a general principle for bouncing back successfully, not all materials are resilient in the same way. In fact, the material definition of resilience is far more nuanced. Different materials (including bones and oceans) have different capacity for being resilient: resilience is defined (OECD, 2020) as a material’s elasticity (“the power of a material to return to its original size after being deformed, bent, etc.”) and the differentiated and measurable qualities of a material (“The energy per unit volume absorbed by a material when it is subjected to strain; the value of this quantity for an elastic material.”). What these writers of resilience policy today, do not ask the most important question of materials: “how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk [...] and how will it respond?” They assume and demand total strength and elasticity. Not all materials bounce back from stress, trauma or disaster in the same way; not all materials can take the same load. Silk is different from bones; is different from oceans. And, to complicate further, different materials bounce back (or not) from different stressors differently. Some don’t bounce back at all. A material critique of resilience thus cuts to the very heart of the concept of resilience as it is used in policy and planning when the question—how much can it take and how will it respond—is not asked.

Knowledge of Pasco-White’s processes, provides detailed reflection on these questions. Her attention to household processes, mothering and domesticity also enable us to link it up to the question of housework as an invisible load. Clearly when the move to break out of housework was part of a feminist mantra, there was a sense of desperation: an outright refusal of the strain, it’s drudgery and boredom. But perhaps the housework is, in some sense, the problem. Or perhaps one has to negotiate one’s terms of one’s contract. The artist’s collages

**Conclusion: Rethinking Labour**

Artists, like mothers, are perversely and psychically trained to devalue their work because they are supposed to love it. This is a problem because it creates potential for exploitation. This problem occupies the air space between the two dominant common meanings to the word labour in English. As Astrid Lorange (2020: 50) puts it in her poem “Labour”:

the word labour [is] especially potent, since it must account not only for the activity of work, but also the potential of a body to work and therefore that body’s value in a given market; it also must account for the collaborative process of birthing and being bored, the very process of becoming a body at all.

So, first is giving birth: the labouring involved in bringing a new child into the world. The second is labour as alienated waged work. The relationship between the two significances of the same word is obvious: in both senses labouring is embodied, sweaty, work, a movement and activity. But: it is ironic that the two are so materially distinct in terms of their place within current economy. While gestation, birth,
and the aesthetics of a newborn baby are often described as ‘alien’, there is nothing alienated, in the sense inherited from Marx, about the process of labouring to give birth, one literally gestates the baby for months and then is (in most cases) handed the product of these labours (the child) to care for the next eighteen years (at least).

While in the other, the product of these labours is already sold off, via the wage—one is alienated from one’s work. Historically the way that Marxist feminists have dealt with this double standard is through seeking a wage for housework (Federici, 1975), and more recently arguing for thinking about gestation itself as labour (Sophie Lewis, 2018). But this approach does not fully cut to the heart of the problem with the way that we existentially view and value work in general.

In her memoir The Undying Anne Boyer (2019: 178) describes the existential devaluation of housework like this: “Doing the dishes is not like freedom”. Rather, for Boyer ‘freedom’ is whatever we notice because it isn’t like doing the dishes .... For any author of doing the dishes, the best part of the story would be the story of missing out on everything else while the dishes are being done”. In a digest of the problem of ‘doing what you love’ Miya Tokumitsu (2014), citing Thoreau, claims that work should be properly paid and given certain scientific or moral weight, but added the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone washing diapers for “scientific, even moral ends, “ no matter the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone making it heavier against the silk. Or if not the heaviest, the painter created a special mixture of lead paint just to sell off, via the wage—one is alienated from one’s work. Historically the way that Marxist feminists have dealt with this double standard is through seeking a wage for housework (Federici, 1975), and more recently arguing for thinking about gestation itself as labour (Sophie Lewis, 2018). But this approach does not fully cut to the heart of the problem with the way that we existentially view and value work in general.

In her memoir The Undying Anne Boyer (2019: 178) describes the existential devaluation of housework like this: “Doing the dishes is not like freedom”. Rather, for Boyer ‘freedom’ is whatever we notice because it isn’t like doing the dishes .... For any author of doing the dishes, the best part of the story would be the story of missing out on everything else while the dishes are being done”. In a digest of the problem of ‘doing what you love’ Miya Tokumitsu (2014), citing Thoreau, claims that work should be properly paid and given certain scientific or moral weight, but added the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone washing diapers for “scientific, even moral ends, “ no matter the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone making it heavier against the silk. Or if not the heaviest, the painter created a special mixture of lead paint just to sell off, via the wage—one is alienated from one’s work. Historically the way that Marxist feminists have dealt with this double standard is through seeking a wage for housework (Federici, 1975), and more recently arguing for thinking about gestation itself as labour (Sophie Lewis, 2018). But this approach does not fully cut to the heart of the problem with the way that we existentially view and value work in general.

In her memoir The Undying Anne Boyer (2019: 178) describes the existential devaluation of housework like this: “Doing the dishes is not like freedom”. Rather, for Boyer ‘freedom’ is whatever we notice because it isn’t like doing the dishes .... For any author of doing the dishes, the best part of the story would be the story of missing out on everything else while the dishes are being done”. In a digest of the problem of ‘doing what you love’ Miya Tokumitsu (2014), citing Thoreau, claims that work should be properly paid and given certain scientific or moral weight, but added the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone washing diapers for “scientific, even moral ends, “ no matter the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone making it heavier against the silk. Or if not the heaviest, the painter created a special mixture of lead paint just to sell off, via the wage—one is alienated from one’s work. Historically the way that Marxist feminists have dealt with this double standard is through seeking a wage for housework (Federici, 1975), and more recently arguing for thinking about gestation itself as labour (Sophie Lewis, 2018). But this approach does not fully cut to the heart of the problem with the way that we existentially view and value work in general.
Jahnne Pasco-White is represented by STATION, Australia

Jahnne Pasco-White acknowledges the following organisations for sponsoring the project at various junctures: Australian Council for the Arts, Marten Bequest for Painting, Gertrude Contemporary, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Mora Dyring Memorial Studio Fellowship, Bendigo Art Gallery’s Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize, Yarra City Council, Moreland City Council, Regional Arts Victoria, Monash University and the Australian Federal Government’s Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Several individuals, identified by the tremendously supportive staff at my gallery STATION, acquired works that enabled printing the book in hardcopy. Jahnne is especially grateful to her partner Nic for his unwavering commitment to her practice and to this book, and their daughter, Oslo, whose entry into their lives gave rise to this body of work in the first place. The project’s ultimate shape and form benefited from being intimately nurtured by family, peers and friends, as well as intellectually nourished by the dozen authors who dedicated time and energy to write such thoughtful chapters.

N.A.J. Taylor is greatly indebted to each of the contributors to this volume—and the peer reviewers—for meeting every editorial demand made of them during an extraordinarily difficult 18-month period, both individually and collectively. One of the joys of editing this book has been to document the grace and grit of his partner Jahnne as an artist, whilst observing these same qualities being developed in her mothering of Oslo. His own mother, Jan, deserves special praise for her editorial assistance. He would also like to acknowledge Simon Hayman and Samantha Lynch at Hayman Design and the team at Unlikely: Journal for Creative Arts, for agreeing to co-publish this volume.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from the publishers and copyright holders.