Much of life with small children revolves around loss of control and disintegration of physical boundaries. – Moyra Davey (as quoted in Szymczyk 2010, 88)

Late in 2019, in the halcyon days before the Australian bushfires and the coronavirus pandemic, I visited Jahnne Pasco-White’s exhibition becoming-with at Gertrude Glasshouse in Melbourne. Canvases hung loose and unstretched from clamps in the ceiling, interrupting the space and the path of the visitor, who moved through them like a theatre scrim or laundry hung to dry. Perhaps dirty laundry rather than clean—the canvases were dyed and scrawled on with pigment and taped with bits and pieces of rags. Indeed, the list of materials on the room sheet conjured images of the domesticated home, but also the bush, and included ingredients both imported—such as olives, beetroot, turmeric, paprika, avocado skins—and native—as in wattle, lilly-pilly berries, lichen, and leaves. Scrawl really does get to the mode of mark-making, which could be painterly (liquid, luscious) or drawn (scratchy, jutted, dry). The palette was determined by those ingredients, and leaned heavily toward mustard yellow; the deep, dull purple of storm clouds; or pale rusts and pinks. I’m tempted to flirt with a more vivid, leaky domesticity than laundry and kitchen, and describe that mustard yellow as the unique colour of the faeces of an infant subsisting on breastmilk or formula, or one smear of concentrated red as wound or menses. But I won’t. A more intrepid interlocutor than me might identify which ingredient produced which colour, but I’m hesitant to perform this kind of decoding, just as I suspect that there’s no real point in differentiating individual paintings, either. Instead, what I felt in the gallery that day was a porosity, a cross-contamination of these paintings, as if they were all really the same painting. This porosity was surely the result of the materials used across the paintings’ surfaces, but also how they were installed—canvases of different shapes and sizes overlapped one another, having shed both the frame and the autonomy of the spaced white wall. (This was not the first time I’d experienced unstretched paintings hung from the ceiling lately—Helen Johnson, Sam Falls, Emma Fitts and Vivian Suter all come to mind as examples of the same strategy, so clearly something is in the air about canvas-as-textile and its relation to body and environment).

Later, when I visited Pasco-White’s studio as she begun to make works for the show she now presents at STATION, inter-giftedness, I learned that she places canvases on the floor, walks on them and allows the ‘outside’ to track onto them too, including in the form
of her young daughter. I began to understand this mode of porosity as an ethics of relationality. I thought, too, of Moyra Davey writing so perceptively (as she always does) about ‘much of life with small children revives ails and superstitions around loss of control and disintegration of physical boundaries’. The porosity I’m describing dovetails with a seemingly contrary impulse, which is the painting as archive, or perhaps better (and more Donna Haraway-ian), compost.

By this I mean how all manner of material collected on the adventures the artist takes with her daughter eventually finds its way into her paintings, such that they become repositories of a much larger landscape, as well as time capsules of a particular season, mood or day.

Pasco-White’s show was at once highly accomplished and undone. There is a quality in her painting practice of gracelessness and skill or, to dust off an art historical term, ‘facture’, by which I mean the manner in which something is made. She holds in suspension form and informe, the made and the unmade. The show was titled becoming-with, after a line by Donna Haraway. In her illuminating essay written for the show and reproduced in this volume, curator Amelia Wallin quotes Haraway (1989, 39):

That’s why, of course, women have had so much trouble counting as individuals in modern Western discourses. Their personal, bounded individuality is compromised by their bodies’ troubling talent for making other bodies, which individuality can take precedence over their own, even while the little bodies are fully contained.

This porosity of self and body—the unbound, uncontainable self of motherhood—produces a promiscuous painting practice, I would argue, in which porosity and contamination are the operative mode in life and in the studio (the two are themselves porous). It’s a practice redolent of dirty nappies and wadded up tissues. It traffics in relationality rather than atomised. As the writers of “Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a Relational Understanding of Place/Space” point to exchange and responsibility, I thought, too, of the porosity as an ethics of relationality. I’m trying to describe, and which Pasco-White terms inter-giftedness, pointing to exchange and responsibility, to one another and to all other more than human bodies. Points of contact, seepage, and influence are multifaceted and multidirectional. She’ll place large canvases directly on the studio floor, spinning canvases around as she paints. This lack of orientation is of a piece with the porosity, or relationality, I see around me, in Pasco-White’s body of work and in the essays in this book, a bone-deep desire for an expanded sense of mothering: a collective mothering in solidarity with other care workers, with the ‘polymedianism’ of Black feminist thought, with queer mothering and Indigenous matriarchies, with non-biological mothering and surrogate, and with reproductive and domestic labour. Last year I read an essay by Saidiya Hartman, ‘The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Racist Manner’, a critical reflection of the lives of young black women, who had been surveilled and incarcerated but essentially remained “unthought” and thus, their history untold. To appreciate the beautiful experiments of Esther Brown and her friends, Hartman (2018, 471) writes, ‘one needs first to conceive something as unimaginable and unknown as being as always unthought and whores producing “thought of the outside,” that is, thought directed towards the outer bound of what is possible’. The outer bound of what is possible—isn’t that most where we need to be?

But we’re already there. When my old home, California, isn’t burning, my new one, Australia, is. A sixth extinction is underway, Australia is stricken with drought and floods, refugees are detained in offshore prisons, and authoritarian rule is on the rise. We are clearly at the end of something—an entire way of being in the world that has manifested as the heads of the hydra of patriarchy, empire, capitalism, and religion (what the queer poet Robert Duncan referred to as the monstrous ‘Daddy Sunday’).

Thought of the outside would be the thought of all those who have been left outside: Indigenous people, refugees and migrants, slaves, “essential” workers of colour, non- and non-binary-humans, fast girls, surplus women, whores, mothers, and all those who fall outside the traditional systems of classification erected by Daddy Sunday.

When I read this line by Hartman—thought of the outside—it reminded me of something that the poet Bernadette Meyer (1994, 19) wrote from inside the fever dream of new motherhood. ‘Women’, she wrote, ‘can still wind up writing some unheard of things don’t you think, I mean things that have never been written yet’. Well, yes. Let’s write some unheard of things, let’s direct some thought toward the outer bound of what is possible—this is what is urgently needed, as though all of our lives depended upon it.

References


Jahnne Pasco-White: Kin

Published by Art Ink and Unlikely Publishing, in Melbourne, Australia
artink.com.au
unlikely.net.au

Unlikely Publishing is supported by The Centre of Visual Art (CoVA) at The University of Melbourne

All images © 2020 Jahnne Pasco-White
Text © 2020 N.A.J. Taylor and the authors where stated
This edition © 2020 Art Ink

Editor: N.A.J. Taylor
Design: Hayman Design
Copyeditor: J.M.L. Taylor

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, Martin Bequest for Painting, Gertrude Contemporary, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Moira 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 hardcover. Jahnne is especially grateful to her partner Nico 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 Art Ink, as well as Norie Neumark and Jan Hendrik Brüggemeier 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.

Distribution: Art Ink, Australia
First Edition of 750
ISBN: 978-0-6450166-0-4
Printed by Gunn & Taylor, Australia
Paper: Ecostar+ 100% Recycled Uncoated, 120gsm, 250gsm
Stephen Clay, 120gsm, 250 gsm