

VIDEO COMMISSION

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Brief Illuminations Between Interruptions

Kate Blackmore and Diana Baker Smith

Text by Lauren Carroll Harris

How to be a mother-artist?

My own life as a mother has been transformed by an all-pervasive sense of mystery. Who is my daughter? What is her future and ours together? *Brief Illuminations* pulses with that same unknowingness. Diana Baker Smith and Kate Blackmore unpack the genre of hidden mother photography common in the Victorian era, in which mothers were visually erased from idealised childhood portraits to enable the slow, wet collodion process to do its ghostly work. Behind blurry, unsmiling babies, the mothers – holding their squirming children still for the long-exposure process – are phantoms. To the modern eye, the anachronism is obvious: why not just include the mother? Diana and Kate’s moving image work takes the form of a contemporary photo shoot, subtly riffing on and subverting hidden-mother portraiture, and is framed with a voiceover discussion of their own dreams about their collaborative film. One artist is pregnant, and the other has recently given birth for the first time. Dreaming, they work even as they sleep. They talk, troubleshoot, recall visits to palm readers and aborted pregnancies, and dissect the behind-the-scenes images unfurling before us.

It can feel hard to untangle portrayals of pregnancy and motherhood from the cluster of conservative fantasies that these roles define women, our biology and our fates. Two hundred years after the era of hidden-mother portraits, the work of mothers, and of artists, remains invisible. Kate and Diana's work together, including within the performance collective Barbara Cleveland, has always involved a strong take on social relations – on queer and feminist ways of existing, despite the way that power compels us to think of ourselves purely as individuals. Some kind of collectivity has to permeate the culture and overcome the strong, structural urge to, say, identify as an individual practicing artist or a sole trader or a primary caregiver in a standalone nuclear family unit.

Now the artists are concerned with the care work of motherhood. Brief Illuminations holds a sense of something being built. The energies of the production team – the makeup artist, the photographer, the videographer, the lighting person – are systematically exposed to the viewer. Pregnancy and motherhood are also collective experiences, but are more commonly popularly sold as lifestyles on social media and women's media. The radical notion of motherhood as a collaborative exercise – rather than a compliant atom within the family institution – is not new. But it's more relevant in a culture that encourages us to view ourselves as behind or in front of a camera lens at all times, and our pregnancies as part of the general merchandise of consumer life. The availability and dispersal of aspirational images: clothes, the bodies, the maternity wear, the performance of an enviable life, the child as

a doll-like object within that life. Who wants that, like really wants that? Even in much contemporary photography, user-generated and otherwise, the mythic figure of the mother – her existential explosions and reproductive labour – remains charged with a phantasmal quality.

Moving image is the collaborative vehicle for exploring these ideas, because it can't be realised alone; the production of video art is alchemised by collaboration. You can't make it on your own. We can't make it on our own.