

# *My body was their first home*

Text by Roxanna Watson. Published by hardcopy\* on the occasion of the exhibition *GESTURES* by Rosie Morris, Church of St. John, Healey, 4-6 October, 2024.

Touching another person can be a way of grounding yourself – a reminder of your own sentience and ability to connect with the world around. Touch is a mechanism for communication. It is part of how we share how we are feeling. Touch can be healing in a very literal way.

In her 2024 exhibition *GESTURES*, Newcastle-based artist Rosie Morris explores experiences of care in relation to the body as a site of touch and shelter, through the lens of ‘daughtering’. This concept investigates the circular relationship between parent and child and how the threads of intergenerational care become entangled with one another. Taking the form of soft sculptures and prints onto aluminium, Morris’s works have a tenderness and familiarity that convey a sense of gentle nostalgia, and speak to the yearning, grasping feeling of fading memories; a fragile thing you want to hold onto. *Halo* shows a single strip of aluminium formed into a circle. The shape has connotations relating to pregnancy and birth, as well as the cyclical and intergenerational nature of care. The foil is loosely fixed in a manner that alludes to the discrete, delicate points of contact that bind us to one another.

Skin-to-skin and physical touch are foundational to the bond formed between parent and child. These primal interactions form a dialogue that becomes the basis for our earliest memories, before our understanding of the world is codified by language and visual memory. Our children relate to us through the familiarity of our skin - its smell, its warmth, the rhythm of the heart that beats beneath it. When we are apart, the feeling of missing our children can be felt like an ache in the body. Their lack is palpable in the arms that held them, the hips that carried them, and the breasts that fed them.

My children express care and need in a manner that is unencumbered by self-awareness or expectation. The way their affection flows out of them is so unrestrained; it is pure and raw and beautiful. They tug and claw at my flesh like

animals picking at a carcass. Sometimes it feels as if they are trying to consume me, or perhaps they might be desperately searching for a way back into my womb. To them, my body was their first home; a site of safety and shelter. The way I communicate my love for them is slightly tempered by my hardened adulthood. When we grow up, we lose our physical softness, our faces become sharper, our skulls fuse and we grow kneecaps. When I express my emotions it is filtered through this rigidity. I am more measured, more in control, but the urgency is still there. I take long, deep inhalations from the crowns of my kids' heads, filling my lungs in an attempt to soak up as much of them as I possibly can. When I hold my breath it is an attempt to stop time for a moment.

Becoming a mother feels like a deeper exploration of your own childhood. Reliving a version of the past, only things have shifted slightly. The room and its contents are roughly the same, but the sun has moved on and the shadows fall differently now. It can take a while to come to terms with this new arrangement. To accept that you are the parent now can feel akin to accepting that you no longer need to be parented. *Gently by the wrist*, the title of one of Morris's prints, implies the act of guiding someone. Hand-holding is a familiar gesture, but it is a strange sensation to find yourself becoming a leader along a path where you were once so dependent on another to light the way.

Our approach to parenting is informed by our own experiences of being parented. I do not seek to emulate my mum and dad, but I have found their smeared fingerprints on the lens through which I judge my decisions. I catch glimpses of the different members of my family in the mirror and when I speak to my children, sometimes I hear the timbre of my mother's voice spill out. I am sure some people might find welcome comfort in these interjections, but to me they are simply unsettling. The fear of becoming my mum is itchy and persistent and finds me frequently wrestling with my own identity. A resistance to ageing and mortality are admittedly factors in this, but there is a cloying sense of adolescent defiance which I am not sure I will ever outgrow. Having a complicated relationship with my parents has bled into having a complicated relationship with parenthood. I learned how to care for others through how I was first cared for myself, and everything I do as I navigate being a mother is a step taken in relation to this kind of felt knowledge.

Caregiving, especially in the sense of parenting, is typically imagined as a stream that flows downwards from parent to child. However, this notion overlooks the complexity of family dynamics and the role of children as active participants in providing care. This can manifest in the 'parentification' of siblings, who sometimes assume a parental role over their brothers and sisters. In other cases, the parent-child

caregiving relationship might become reciprocal, with parents themselves becoming reliant on their children to provide support and stability with their emotional wellbeing. As life progresses, the lines blur even more and the demands of caring for ageing parents frequently intersect with the births of our children.

Morris's sculptures are small and somewhat fragile. The components resemble soft furnishings that are stacked and draped to create miniature structures reminiscent of worlds built by children. Dens and fortresses and mountains and castles; stony walls and unforgiving terrains are neutered by the reality of their plushness. The soft domesticity of it all is very feminine and womb-like, but not always overtly so. Maybe only in the sense that practically all comfort is inherently womb-esque; soft and cradling and protective.

The fabrics Morris uses are found or repurposed, and coloured with natural dyes that use kitchen and domestic waste. The creation of these materials is laborious and requires patience and care. The waste is also a reminder of how the unpalatable thing can still form part of something beautiful. Caring for another person is visceral. It is bodily and often thankless. Care work demands patience and a strong stomach, as caregivers frequently confront the messiness of the human body. The gore and reality of it all can be oppressive, evoking intense disgust which becomes blended with love and affection. Meanwhile, the responsibility and sacrifice can feel heavy and unrelenting. Every second is precious and slipping, and yet achingly protracted. When you are in a caregiving role, your time is split. Part of the job is simply to watch; to bear witness to someone else's existence. It's not your hands on the wheel, but you must not take your eyes off the road. It can be hard to feel present when long periods are spent in stasis, with idle hands and willing the clock to move faster.

The aluminium-on-aluminium prints featured in Morris's *GESTURES* depict kitchen foil that has been moulded or cast into forms that allude to physical touch. The actual shapes are obscure, mere suggestions from which we can divine our own interpretations. We might glimpse the reassurance of a palm pressed into a shoulder, or fingers combing through hair. Through these tactile gestures we convey empathy, vulnerability, and love. The ease with which foil takes an impression speaks to the way we mould those around us. We leave traces of ourselves everywhere, but it can be hard to predict how our actions might leave a mark. Sometimes we miscalculate, and things don't land quite right. We can change people's minds and affect their moods without ever meaning to or even knowing. The reverse is also true. It can be difficult to make ourselves heard or felt; to give weight to something so small in a vanishing moment. The voids found in the creation of the cast are illustrative of those lost and nearly-forgotten gestures. The malleability of the material also alludes to the fragility

of memory itself. Foil is flexible and will hold a shape, but it degrades over time. Memories retain a fluidity and continue to change as we age and the perspective from which we view them shifts, and eventually they become lost to us entirely.

There is a distinct contrast between the warm softness of Morris's sculptures and the harsh, metallic monochrome of her prints. The textural differences in the materials are extreme. The sculptures appear smooth and disarmingly cosy, while their counterparts show images of sharp foil casts printed in black onto an aluminium surface. These differences relate to the conflicting emotions and other points of contrast that attend care work. Moments can shift rapidly from restful and calm to loud and blaring. The wrapping and scraping that is associated with metal is analogous to the chaos. Despite such contrasts, the works exist harmoniously alongside one another. Of course, they are thematically linked, but they are equally united by the visible presence of their maker's hands and her process. Each piece is a physical record, the product of the many dimensions of labour that went into its creation.

While Morris keeps the viewer at arm's length thanks to the abstract nature of her work, there are still hints of the personal woven throughout *GESTURES*. The push and pull between private and professional is almost universally understood. There is a compulsion, and expectation, to make our inner worlds consumable to the public in pursuit of approval, solidarity, community, or, increasingly, financial gain. This conflicts with the desire for privacy and the need to protect ourselves and our families, as well as a need to compartmentalise and create breathing space. The voids and spaces in Morris's works are a reminder of this. The struggle between restraint and familiarity is evident in their range of titles. *Tucking you up in bed* and *how small you looked looking up at me* is surprisingly intimate in comparison to *Kitchen table den* and *Shell*, which err more towards descriptive. When I first became a parent, after leaving the safety of the hospital, the world felt suddenly more threatening. This, compounded by my greedy obsession with my own children, has left me resistant to sharing even small fragments of our lives in the public sphere, and yet they creep into my writing. We keep our loved ones close out of a fear of letting them go. Our babies grow up and become different versions of themselves again and again. This carries on into adulthood, where it might plateau for a while, but we continue to shed parts of ourselves, exchanging them for new qualities. Or perhaps we reveal things that were there all along, previously tucked up inside ourselves, away from prying eyes.