

**SHAPE-SHIFTING**

**MARGUERITE MOON**



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**SHAPE-SHIFTING:**

Reimagining mothering and mother-being

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Fine Arts degree  
2017

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Tuesday, 2 Aug 2016

Went to bed at 3:30am. Was up again at 6:30am to take the girls to school. Worked on my text re feminist mothering – new to the discourse, if not the practice. So many things that I relate to! Gala did not sleep well. Again. She hasn't slept through the night this whole week. She's been home, ill, the whole week so far. The dreaded red bucket, her constant companion. Hoped this morning she'd be well enough to go to school. Woke up nauseous again with a dodgy stomach. (Me). Also very red eyes again. Pink eye? Please, no. Gala and I are recycling our germs. The horrid viral cycle. Noa's still dodging our germs valiantly. Dragged myself out of bed after fantasising for a moment to stay put. First words I heard this morning: "Mommy, my tummy is really very sore." Gave Gala some medicine and wished her stomach ache would go away. In the car on the way to school Noa told me confidently she thinks she could be a plumber. (Liking her diverse skill set – the last time we discussed her future she asked my opinion on whether to be a ballerina first and then the president, or vice versa. She can easily manage both.) She explained that the loo was very full of poo and other stuff this morning. "What do you mean, 'other stuff'?" I asked, horrified. "You know, loo paper and so on." *And so on.* I cringed. My nausea was still strong. Sparing no details, Noa described how she effectively moved things around in the loo using the toilet brush (an exciting first for her) and also flushing many times. Happy that she figured things out and was proactive. And that she saved me from having to unblock their loo again. (I could also be a plumber.) Just hoping she cleaned the toilet brush properly. "Did you wash your hands afterwards?" I asked momly, because we don't need another stomach ache in the house. "Yes." Good. Arriving at school after our hour-long school run, I asked Gala how she felt. She didn't want to eat her breakfast in the car. (My kids eat breakfast in the car. This system buys us extra sleeping time.) She said her tummy was very sore. I mostly believed her. My tired brain tried to figure out whether she was tricking me to go back home with me and skip school or whether she was truly in pain. Felt really guilty for my treacherous thoughts, but I've been duped before. Gently warned her that sudden perkiness back home will cause problems for her in future if she says her tummy is sore at school-time again and it proves to be untrue. Noa chimed in with the boy who cried wolf. Good example, Noa, but also let's not make someone feel worse if they're genuinely feeling poorly. I decided to take Gala back home with me. My own unwell stomach convinced me. I also recalled that there was a case of a kid with lice at school this week...was not keen on more issues to manage. Could hardly get away from school fast enough, my stomach crying out for my home environment. Stole regular glances at Gala on the back seat to see if she looked pale/in pain – needed validation for my decision of no school *again* today. She looked genuinely uncomfortable. Not far from home she started moaning a bit and lay down on the back seat (with her safety belt on). At home I got her out of the car quickly. She managed to get to her bedroom while groaning all the while and collapsed onto the floor. Felt so sorry for her. Desperately needed the bathroom myself. Managed to shove the red bucket in front of her just in time. Tied her hair back out of her face. Comforted her a bit. Left the poor girl on the floor with the bucket, ran to the bathroom to manage my own nausea. When we both felt more stable we moved her into my room. Made her comfortable. I started working on my text again. I don't have a deadline set in stone for today. But if I postpone it for another day, there'll just be different reasons to postpone on the next day. Deadline remains.



MI M, N & G 2015



Fig 1

1 I am aware of many diverse mothering circumstances. My opinions are based on my own lived experience. This experience includes: being the natural birth mother of two daughters, aged eleven and seven years old. Although cognisant of and embracing various other ways of becoming a mother (e.g. adoptive mother, two-mother households, single-father parenting, foster mother, stepmother, gender-neutral parents, etc.), I will not constantly refer to other circumstances in the text. I view mothering in a particular way that is inclusive of all kinds of mothers, but do not speak for all mothers. I acknowledge the important role that fathers play in a child's life, and that fathers also take part in mothering. However, my work focuses on reconciling mothering with mother-being and the representation thereof from my own particular female point of view.

### INTRODUCTION

Based on my lived experience, this body of work reimagines the representation of mothering, mother-being and the space in between through a visual exploration within photography. The overlooked space between mothering and mother-being renders it invisible as the two positions are frequently conflated. My work reassesses and redresses the representation of the mother and the concept of mothering within the context of art. Finally, the practical work and accompanying research challenge the modest, marginalised and repressed place that mothering (and mother-artists) has occupied within fine art.

The role of the mother and the concept of motherhood are burdened with expectations, presumption, convention, tradition, judgement and discrimination. Within the context of art, the Madonna and Child trope remains the most instantly summoned and enduring visual standard to address mothering. My project attempts to widen the narrow aperture through which the contemporary mother and mothering is viewed. It would be presumptuous to assume that my voice is representative of the experience of all mothers everywhere. For the purposes of this body of work my own lived experience—being the mother in a middle-class, single-parent household while studying, classified as divorced, South African, white, born at the cusp of Generation X and Y (millennial)—serves as the context from which I approach mothering.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to emphasise the distinction between *mothering* and *mother-being* and acknowledge the fluxive space between—wherein independence and being depended on, meet, clash, reconcile and co-exist. I consider mothering to be the active, ongoing process of caring for and raising one's child(ren): caring for their physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social needs. Mothering also includes leading by example (actions, words, beliefs). Mother-being revolves around the mother reconciling her pre- and post-child identity with her mothering identity; the personal experience of being a mother in relation to other identities within oneself (e.g. being an artist and/or a student—as in my case—in relation to one's existence as a mother).



Google Images screenshot  
"Madonna and Child" search  
21 March 2017

Fig 2

My personal mothering experience informs my resistance to expectations embedded within the institution of motherhood. A photographic navigation of these elusive yet ever-present spaces offers a visual reflection of things unnamed and unsaid; a look at spaces/states that cannot be clearly defined. These spaces hold an abundance of myths countered with the absence of clarity and not-knowing (what to do, what happens behind closed doors, the challenges of single mothering, the reality of raising two daughters in a patriarchal society, hindsight, the future). Spaces that reflect the oscillation between mother-being and mothering; spotlighting the endless cycle of questioning regarding the adequacy of one's mothering, mentoring and inspiration of two young girls—one's most beloveds, no less—dependent on one

for multidimensional guidance and safety, while simultaneously attempting to live life as one's best self, pursuing work that is fulfilling and meaningful. Visually, I consider the intersubjectivity between my daughters and myself. Photographically, I translate and interpret the continuous cycle of projection and reflection between us; our interdependence and overlapping realities. This work actively endorses and encourages the notion that mothers should narrate and represent their own lived mothering experiences instead of preserving and operating within the confines of the antiquated institution of motherhood.<sup>2</sup>



Google Images screenshot  
"Mother" search  
21 March 2017

Fig 3

This MFA project is a continuation of my ongoing photographic practice of exploring the idea that life consists of a series of moments that are layered and textured. My work continues to resist fixed moments, acknowledges change as the only constant and vigorously investigates methods of translating these concepts visually. The layered convergence of my family's intersubjectivities creates and reflects new combined narratives within our relational space. The elements of projection, reflection, time, space, repetition and vibrant colour mirror my mothering experience and play a significant role in complicating clearly defined expectations and depictions relating to mothering and mother-being.

<sup>2</sup> The institution of motherhood refers to the confinement of "motherhood" by dated patriarchal ideals, definitions, presumptions and suppression: a system that prevents women from making their own decisions about their bodies and reproduction; the expectation that women should have children; derisive treatment of women who choose not to have children and shaming those who are unable to. The institution of motherhood propagates societal expectations and standards for the "acceptable" mother to abide by: possessing "maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (Rich, 1986:42). An insistence on keeping lived mothering and mother-being experience—such as physical changes during pregnancy and post-birth, breastfeeding, postnatal depression, ambivalence, sexuality, etc.—private and separate from the public realm (Rich, 1986:42). It stifles the mother's self-actualisation by promoting and accepting motherhood as all-consuming and fulfilling. Rich (1986:36–37) aptly states that being a mother "is *one part* of the female process; it is not an identity for all time."

## BACKGROUND

Adrienne Rich (1976:11), writer, poet, feminist, mother and mother-discourse groundbreaker, wrote in her revolutionary book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, “All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body.” All humans have a mother, biologically at least, even if not physically, emotionally or mentally present or known to us. Everybody who is *compos mentis* has a conscious notion of or a subconscious disposition towards her/his/their expectations of a mother. There is very little distance between representations of the mother and motherhood in art and mainstream perceptions and representations of it. It is especially difficult to separate conventional attitudes towards the mother figure from representations within an art historical context when the two notions remain inextricably visually linked. Age-old Madonna and Child images, steeped in religion as the Madonna symbolises the Virgin Mary, are still, problematically, the foremost example conjured up when addressing mothering within an art context. Even more troubling are the results of a Google search for “mother”– photograph upon photograph reminiscent of the Madonna and child trope. Art historian Simon Watney (2013:58) points out:

It is striking, however, that in spite of evolving patterns of parenting, deep continuities obtain between the ancient iconography of the Madonna and Child and contemporary images of motherhood. Putting it another way, the visual rhetoric of modern mothering in photography and other media continues to draw deeply on the conventions of Christian and, indeed, pre-Christian art.

The profoundly imbedded and enduring Madonna trope on top of the surplus of mother-related media images (blogs, Facebook, celebrity-mother images, Instagram, etc.) dulls our digestion and questioning of the imaging. Bright (2013:8–9) observes that the abundance of easily accessible mother-related images and debates surrounding women’s bodies and childcare on the internet and in social media mean that “the mother has an unprecedented visibility and influence in both the cultural and



Mary Kelly  
*Primipara, Bathing series*  
1974  
Gelatin silver print, 26,67 cm x 20,32 cm

Fig 4

political spheres” and that “the photograph is at the centre of our visual culture as never before”.

There is an opening here starved of rigorous exploration: using different photographic languages and methods to energise a fresh expanse of maternal images based on lived experiences and thought processes. It is a space that requires mindful traversing, as an abundance of sentiment or, alternately, overwrought theory<sup>3</sup> would be counterproductive, as would disregard of the

<sup>3</sup> Whilst familiar with Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage (1936) and his subsequent elaboration of it (1949), and Freud’s perspective on mothers and daughters, I do not feel that these theories add value to my work or the understanding of it, nor does it have to be included in order to legitimise my experience of lived mothering. Author Simon Watney (2013:58–59) laments that “Much late-twentieth-century photography concerned with mothers and mothering was buttressed by vast amounts of arcane theoretical explanation, as if the subject somehow needed justification. In the twenty-first century, the issue of motherhood has moved unapologetically centre stage within photographic practice once again. That it has done so is perhaps because of ongoing changes in the nature of marriage and the associated debates around the needs of working mothers and single-parent families, not to mention animated discussions of the role of surrogate mothers or the question of same-sex partnerships and parenting.”



Anonymous late 19<sup>th</sup>-century  
*Hidden Mother Photograph*  
from Laura Larson-curated exhibition

Fig 5



Anonymous late 19<sup>th</sup>-century  
*Hidden Mother Photograph*  
from Laura Larson-curated exhibition

Fig 6

existence (and origin) of conventional images. An understanding of why this discourse has not been duly acknowledged, and why it needs to be, is crucial. Andrea Liss (2004:34) describes the complexity of the space I’m addressing as follows,

At stake then is strategically negotiating between engrained codes of maternity and embracing the lived complexities of chosen motherhood. This, as you can imagine, is hazardous double labor. There is no other body so cruelly and poignantly posed at the edges dividing the public and private realms. The issue may still be so silent, too, because of the uncertainties surrounding the issue of sacrifice related to women in a supposedly “post-feminist” culture. The dilemma becomes, indeed, how to speak of the difficulties and incomparable beauties of making space for another unknown person without having those variously inflected and complex experiences turned into clichés of what enduring motherhood is supposed to be.

Artist-mothers and women artists specifically have made diverse and provocative work over decades (centuries, even), but it has not always benefited from mass exposure, instead it has been marginalised by omission. However, the pervasive

Madonna and Child trope still appears dominant—so much so that often in rebelling against the motif, the antithesis of it becomes its own genre, still dependent on the original for recognition. Curator Clare Grafik succinctly pinpoints this neglect in contemporary representation, writing that “representations of mothers remain surprisingly stereotypical, fluctuating between saint and sinner, astutely avoiding more complex and nuanced debates” (in Bright 2013:6). My work aims to move beyond traditional representations of the mother and mothering, seeking a more “complex and nuanced debate”, as well as conscious consideration by, and deliberate engagement with, the art establishment. I have come upon other work/exhibitions similarly invested in subtler and more extensive representations of mothers and mothering that pay particular attention to work made with and within photography. Due to the marginalised representation of matters maternal in art, and the seeming lack of visual diversity in maternal imaging, Susan Bright curated the exhibition—and subsequent book—*Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* in 2013. She in turn was inspired by Mary Kelly’s photographic work, *Primipara (Bathing series)* (1974) and an image by an anonymous photographer, *Hidden Mother*, (c. 1856–80). Bright approached twelve contemporary artists working within photography, each addressing various issues relating to motherhood, to contribute to *Home Truths*. Bright (2013:16) states that “the work in this book is as much about current photography as it is about contemporary attitudes towards the mother figure.” On the artists and their work, Bright (2013:10) comments, “Fully aware of photography’s expectations but also aware of its limitations, these artists revel in contradiction and ambiguity, embrace the performative aspect of their practice, and, crucially, foreground the role of subjectivity and self-referentiality.” With regards to the field of photography, she writes that “They work not only with the medium, but *within* it, with an acute understanding of its changing place, identity, definitions, attitudes and approaches” (Bright, 2013:10). My own work relates to this collection as I work within photography as much as with the medium itself, challenging the representation of the mother, accentuating subjectivity and self-referentiality, all of which form the essential tenets of my approach to and execution of my work.

*The Hidden Mother* (2006–2013) by Linda Fregni Nagler, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013, is another recent photographic artwork-turned-book that merits scrutiny. Fregni Nagler's collected photographs feed into an area that I explore within my work, which is an examination of the visible and invisible (or ignored) when mothers/women/girls are "naturally" and stereotypically associated with the domestic environment. Her monumental Biennale installation, curated by Cindy Sherman, consisted of 997 photographs arranged into groups in a 9m x 1,5m display cabinet. The photographs dated from the 1840s to the 1920s, were collected from all over the world and included a variety of photographic and printing methods (such as daguerrotypes, albumen prints and Polaroids) (Nicolao, 2013: online). The photographs (1002<sup>4</sup> of them) were also published in book form as *The Hidden Mother* (2013). All of these odd-looking photographs display—while unsuccessfully attempting to hide—typically, the entirely cloth-covered/wrapped figure of a parent (sometimes only the heads are covered and occasionally a bodiless supporting arm is visible) holding a child or children. It is impossible to categorically insist that it is always the mother, but fair to assume that in most cases (if not all) it is. As the exposure times of the cameras used during that period ranged from seconds to minutes, children had to be held still and in place by a parent. It is notable that the mother is concealed under domestic-looking fabric/upholstery in these photographs in order to produce photographs that foreground the child(ren). The book is described as follows:

Creating and defining a sub-genre of photography, Fregni Nagler has accumulated images that repeat a particular gesture—the negation of the parent in the interest of the legibility of the child. The many themes bubbling under the surface of her collection are unified by the singular principle of effacement—as if this gesture speaks of the nature of parenthood itself, or of a woman's place in a patriarchal society, where she is figured without an identity of her own.

Mack Books, 2013: online

An important point to emphasise here is the denial of the mother's identity as an individual. Viewing *The Hidden Mother* photographs in their totality would facilitate equating one mother with all mothers due to the sheer volume of photographs, as well as the mothers' indistinguishability, hidden as they are behind fabric or curtains or other signifiers of domesticity. Similarly, when viewing all mothers in relation to the Madonna and Child motif (whether in art, history books or the internet) they all take on one identical identity, that of "mother". One mother = all mothers = no individual selfhood.

The curator of the 2013 Venice Biennale, Massimiliano Gioni, provoked congratulatory approval and fierce criticism alike when he curated the substantial exhibition *The Great Mother* (*Le*

4 *The Hidden Mother* (2006–2013) Venice Biennale exhibition displayed 997 photographs while there are 1002 photographs in *The Hidden Mother* book.

5 In my opinion, in order to promote dialogue on the subject matter it is more beneficial than not to have an extensive exhibition and comprehensive accompanying catalogue that looks at motherhood—despite having a curator who lacks lived experience and the benefit of absolute understanding. Christy Lange, associate editor of *Frieze*, wrote in her review of *The Great Mother*, "Why would a Western European white male curator attempt to curate the definitive show on 'the iconography of motherhood'? The task itself seems quixotic and, indeed, the problems of 'La Grande Madre' (The Great Mother) start with the chosen premise. As feminism and the female gender seemed subsumed as subcategories, I was nagged by the feeling that Massimiliano Gioni (curating the show in his capacity as the Artistic Director of the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi) may have confused 'motherhood' with 'womanhood'. [...] To be fair, he seems to have taken to heart the problems of a man defining a lineage of either motherhood and feminism, but these contradictions are far better addressed in the range of (male and female) voices in the scholarly catalogue than in the show itself" (Lange, 2015: online).

*Grande Madre*) in Milan in 2015. The works of 127 artists dealing with the iconography of the mother and motherhood from 1900 to 2015 were presented in the grand Palazzo Reale. The criticism interrogated whether his maleness was capable of appropriately and sufficiently understanding the mother and doing the subject justice. The criticism was valid<sup>5</sup> and warrants discussion, but the fact that a star curator realised an extensive show surveying the iconography of the mother, zooming in on a 115-year period, deserves recognition and commendation. It finally foregrounded the representation of the mother within art discourse. In his essay *Madonnas and Mothers*, Watney (2013:52–59) reminds us that the inceptive representations of motherhood—the Madonna and Child trope—were conceived and propagated

for centuries by male artists heavily influenced by religious dogma. Their images had nothing to do with the actual experience of mothering from the mother's point of view. It would be fair to state that maternal imagery has not evolved proportionally to social change.

In *Home Truths*, Bright (2013:10) points out that "The artists featured here do not abandon the Madonna figure completely—often they appropriate, update and subvert it instead. Thousands of years of iconography are hard to shake off." Before moving past the Madonna and Child imagery, it is worth looking at work by two contemporary photographers included in *The Great Mother* that "subverts and updates" the stereotypical motif. Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) shows Opie securely holding/supporting her son, Oliver, while he is breastfeeding. The mother holding her child while they share an intimate moment and gaze, in front of a deep-red backdrop, clearly evokes the Madonna and Child. Yet Opie's completely bare upper body, her toddler-sized son, the actions of the mother breastfeeding and Oliver drinking from his mother, Opie's tattoos, her short hair, the visible healed white scars of the word "pervert" cut into her chest, her secure support of his body with sturdy, tanned hands and the body of an older mother with the hint of underarm hair distinctly unsettles the youthful delicateness and chastity expected of a traditional Madonna. With this portrait Opie claims her right as a lesbian mother and does not serve purely as a feminine backdrop for her child. Erin Barnett (2012:85), assistant curator and photo historian at the International Center of Photography in New York, calls this portrait "a radical and heroic image of motherhood." Her bare upper body provides revealing insight into her pre-mother and separate identity as it co-exists with her mother identity. Presenting the word "pervert"—in scarification—on her exposed chest, above the body of her smooth-skinned young child, is a bold declaration of the co-existence of her numerous worlds. Barnett (2012:85) observes that "These large-scale photographs interrogate and integrate Opie's multiple identities (lesbian, pervert, mother)" in "non-traditional and non-apologetic representations."

Before Opie became a mother she used self-portraiture to represent and articulate her concept of a happy family, a lesbian family. In *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993), Opie has her scarified back to the viewer, displaying a still-bloody picture recently cut into her skin. It depicts a universally familiar, childlike drawing of a happy family (two women, inferred by the stick figures wearing skirts) smiling and holding hands in front of their chimneyed house, with the sun, a cloud and birds in the sky. Opie skillfully combines non-conformist concepts with traditional imagery in order to address her selfhood. It is compelling to witness her pre-mother life coinciding years later with her mothering life. The act of breastfeeding in public is still seen as controversial—because of social conventions surrounding bared breasts, a topic deserving of its own in-depth debate—but in this portrait it is a decisive and defiant action by the mother. With one foot tucked between his mother's arm and her breast/body, a hand nestled under the other breast, the boy is safe and sound, cared for, oblivious to any controversy or subversion attached to his safe and regular ritual. This everyday act is regarded as improper in public only. The punctum<sup>6</sup> for me lies in the vulnerable-looking paleness where the two bodies meet in each other's personal space; the juxtaposing of new supple skin and older lived skin. Opie's skin tone graduates into darker and redder hues towards all of her extremities, suggestive of a life lived outside of the home, too (tanned skin)—her selfhood. Most evocative are her weathered hands supporting her son's body, it is where her different identities meet her child. This portrait effectively displays Opie as a mother: it affords her subjectivity through her identity separate from mothering but not exclusive of it, and it is an active example of the intersubjectivity between mother and son. Artist-writer Margaret Morgan (2011:216) comments that

Opie's maternal self-portrait offers a universal sign—motherhood—inflected by a set of powerfully resistant counter-signs, a kind of “regional specificity”, if you like, that makes the image extraordinarily affirming of the maternal bond, fulsome in all its complexity, yet extremely resistant to easy instrumentalization.

Her work speaks to mothering, but deals equally with her own context and subjectivity, which means that she presents the mother comprehensively as opposed to one-dimensionally. Lived experience narrated by an actual mother is key in presenting more complete representations of mothers and mothering.



Catherine Opie  
*Self-Portrait/Cutting*  
1993

Fig 7



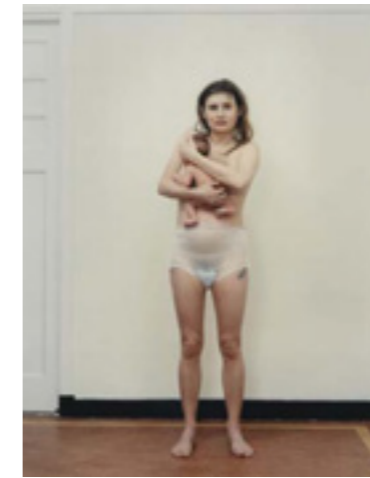
Catherine Opie  
*Self-Portrait/Nursing*  
2004

Fig 8

Rineke Dijkstra is another contemporary photographer who has reimagined the mother. In her series *New Mothers* (1994) Dijkstra photographed new mothers and their newborn babies in their respective homes soon after giving birth. *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994*, was photographed immediately after Julie gave birth, *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16 1994* a day after giving birth and *Saskia, Hardewijk, Netherlands, March 16 1994* a week after giving birth via Caesarean section. Dijkstra (in Van Adrichem, 2012:48–49) recalls that she had the idea for making the series years before she actually did so, shortly before a friend had her first baby:

I was there when it happened and saw her gradually experience more and more pain until finally she was out of reach, no longer present. I missed the actual birth, but when it was finally over, she showed me the baby, very proud but

<sup>6</sup> In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes describes one of the elements in a photograph as “the punctum”. The punctum is not the same for every viewer, nor is it an intentional detail included by the photographer. It is a part of the photograph that touches one for some reason and is therefore specific to each viewer. Barthes says “Nothing surprising, then, if sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*” (Barthes, 2010:53). “The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*” (Barthes, 2010:59).



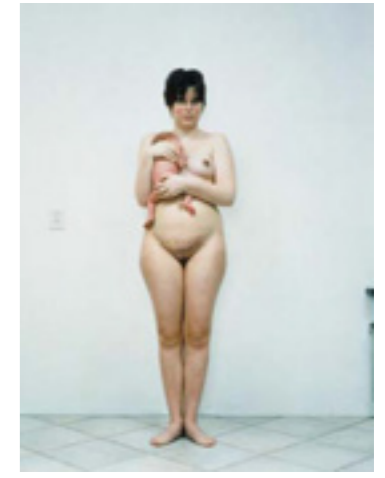
Rineke Dijkstra  
*Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands,*  
*February 29 1994*

Fig 9



Rineke Dijkstra  
*Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands*  
*May 16 1994*

Fig 10



Rineke Dijkstra  
*Saskia, Hardewijk, Netherlands*  
*March 16 1994*

Fig 11

very emotional too—happy, confused, and tired. It was all so different from what I had expected! You always see photographs of mothers with their babies where everything seems veiled in a cloud of pink.

She continues, “There's a rawness about childbirth. And what gets blocked out right away—I mean the tension and the pain—remains in the photograph.”

Even though Dijkstra was an outsider to the event of giving birth it was evident to her that the experience of giving birth was layered with contrasting and fluctuating emotions. Breaking through the “cloud of pink” by photographing the new mothers in a vulnerable physical and emotional state, exposing their “rawness” and physical post-birth traces in no way blemishes the extraordinary experience of giving birth and holding an entirely new person in this world that one is responsible for. Devoid of superficial details, the bare backgrounds in the photographs and central placing of the mothers concentrate our focus on the women. Most striking at first glance is the gaze of all three women. Julie's gaze, especially, is almost wild, and it requires little effort to imagine that she has just undergone a major, life-altering event. The viewer can focus purely on the women's bodies and faces, with the eye eventually directed to the tiny babies they cradle. Women's bodies are such scrutinised sites—the more “flaws” the harsher the gaze—yet in spite of being entirely physically exposed, it is the women's eyes and facial expressions that tell the most

captivating stories. Their bodies have undergone pain and change, as is evidenced by Julie's maternity underpants and pad, the trickle of blood running down Tecla's leg and Saskia's Caesarean scar. The visible traces of their physical ordeals are external markers of the changes in identity that have transpired and will continue to unfold as their new identities incorporate mothering and mother-being.

These mothers underwent another recurring theme consistently present within mothering, that of loss and gain: they lost their pregnant bellies, but gained a child. They also lost a certain amount of personal freedom, but gained a deep and inexplicable love. Every stage of being a mother involves loss and gain: confusion, emotional flux, intensity, deep satisfaction, sadness, immense joy, overwhelming love, relief, anger and ambiguity are often at play within a mother, sometimes simultaneously. Writer, mother and feminist Jane Lazarre (2001:67) writes, “I began to cry, overwhelmed for the thousandth time that day. I wondered if you could have a heart attack from the emotional intensity of being a mother.” Complex feelings—including negative, ambivalent or hopeless feelings—do not devalue the mothering experience, but function as proof of the depth of feeling and unpredictability that accompanies mothering and mother-being. It also points to the fact that there are many factors within mothering that are uncontrollable. As a mother one discovers that shape-shifting and adapting are required to manage the continual flux (physical, emotional and mental) within oneself and the new life now in one's care.

## MOTHER / MOTHERING / MOTHERHOOD

It is beneficial to look at certain terms used within the discourse of the mother and the notion of mothering. Stephanie Chapman (2013:137), social history and eighteenth-century art specialist and Curator of Exhibitions and Displays at The Foundling Museum in London, reminds us that in 1753 “Samuel Johnson defined ‘motherhood’ in his *Dictionary of the English Language* as ‘the office or character of a mother.’” In the Google dictionary (at least) we have moved on from motherhood being equated with moral mediocrity or excellence to motherhood being described as “the state of being a mother”. “Mothering” is defined as: “[to] bring up a child as its mother” and “[to] look after someone kindly and protectively” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Soanes, 2006:489). Not only are these definitions of motherhood and mothering limiting and superficial, they are inaccurate. The definitions are, however, an accurate reflection of the narrow crevice through which all things mother-related continue to be viewed. My lived experience as a mother challenges the dictionary’s definition of mothering, prying open the aperture to extend its meaning. Mother/mothering does not offer kindness and protection as a given. Many mothers across the centuries have been prone to cruelty, abandoned their children (sometimes as protection, sometimes not) and some have even killed their offspring. Mothering is not an automatic (or natural) extension of being a mother. In *Feminist Art and the Maternal* Andrea Liss (2009:xviii) states:

The taboos brought to bear on the matter of the mother continue because notions of motherhood and femininity are still laden with assumptions of naturalness and passivity. The issues are also repressed because of the uncertainties surrounding supposedly maternal qualities of care and sacrifice in a so-called postfeminist culture.

What exactly is the state of being a mother? It is not a singular, static state. It is active, ongoing, complex, combinative, variable and fluid positions between mothering and mother-being. Working in photography I have attempted to find visual translations for the communication between mothering and mother-being.

It is impossible to extricate myself from my relationship with my daughters and them from me,

so I look at how our combined subjectivities enrich, complicate and even at times reduce our individual identities. It is a story about finding our own selves within each other and without each other. As a mother of two daughters, feminist mothering forms the basis of our lifestyle and much of the teaching I provide to my daughters. My work offers a visual insight into the intersubjectivity between my daughters and myself. I believe the responsibilities of mothering include teaching principles in aid of social and cultural reform. Andrea O’Reilly (2008:200), a prolific writer and theorist on Motherhood and Women’s Studies explains the motivation behind this idea clearly:

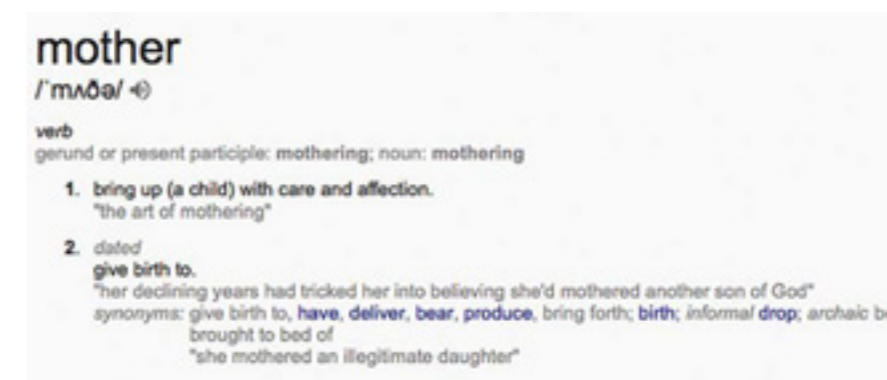
Feminist mothering of girls is not about choosing blue over pink, or trucks over dolls but about *living*, to use the title of Marilyn Waring’s work, *as if women counted*. And, more specifically, in the context of motherhood, feminist mothering demonstrates to our daughters that women have a selfhood outside of motherhood and possess power within motherhood.

Feminist mothering is a lived experience, a practice rooted within respectful and equal relationships with other humans, valuing diversity. It resists the notion of motherhood as an institution shrouded/smothered in presumptions, assumptions and expectations of “proper” maternal conduct.

It is important to note that there is a distinction between the terms “motherhood” and “mothering” within feminism. The difference was first theorised and contextualised by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976) and has become the point of departure for all discussions surrounding the mother within the broader context of feminism since then.

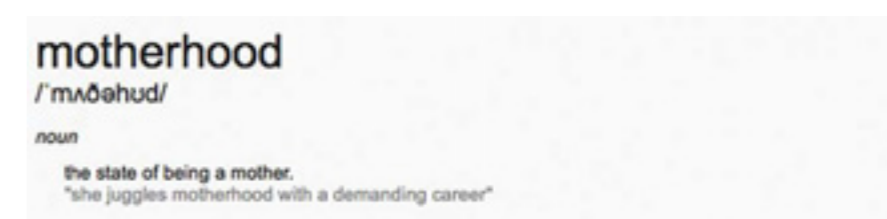
The term motherhood thus refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and potentially empowering to women. This distinction enabled feminists to view motherhood as not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive: on the contrary mothering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment and as a location of social change.

O’Reilly, 2011: online



Screenshots of Google Dictionary

Fig 12



Screenshots of Google Dictionary

Fig 13

**mother** n. **1** a female parent  
**2 (Mother)** (especially as a title or form of address) the head of a convent.  
**3** informal an extreme or very large example of something: *the mother of all traffic jams*.  
 v. (**mothers, mothering, mothered**)  
**1** bring up a child as its mother.  
**2** look after someone kindly and protectively.  
 - DERIVATIVES **motherhood** n.  
 - ORIGIN Old English.

Oxford English Dictionary  
 (Soanes, 2006:489).

I regard (feminist) mothering as an active, ever-evolving site/process of providing options, diversity, equality, action and change. It is also a safe and necessary space wherein the ambivalence experienced within mothering can be acknowledged and considered. In *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss (2009:66) refers to philosopher Sara Ruddick’s “complete rethinking of the maternal” and reminds us that

...one of Ruddick’s central insights is to think of mothering as a form of work or practice rather than as an identity taken on only by mothers. ‘To mother’ is a verb, an activity and not a noun, a naming, a fixed identity.

Regarding mothering as active, ongoing and adjustable informs my photographic practice, which in turn reflects those characteristics within mothering, and also the space between mothering and mother-being.

## THE HIDDEN MOTHER

My work examines and agitates the idea of being hidden, as well as the notion of one's environment shaping and eventually/possibly usurping one's identity. In my images I attempt to make an impression on our environment by photographing and then visually projecting the photographs of my daughters and myself onto significant domestic items that serve as "spectres of a tradition of female oppression", which I then rephotograph (Gioni, 2015:15). Some of these items include a crocheted baby blanket that my mother made ("women do crafts"), a lace curtain ("so feminine"), a carpet ("to wipe your feet on"), a blind in front of a window ("being watched") and bedding ("house work is women's work"). These images are a visual invocation to ward off the possibility of our environment overwhelming and engulfing us.

I project images of myself and my daughters onto our domestic environment in order to direct the narrative, rather than become caught up in a narrative not of our (my) choosing. This visually affirms that we can shape our environment, not vice versa; my daughters and I will not become part of the furniture. Even while manifesting our own narrative, the viewer never sees our faces in totality. The projections onto various surfaces never reflect back a complete, solid or distinct facial image. There are always parts missing or obstructed. We're partly hidden and partly seen, a reflection of progress in the representation of mothering and mothers. The frustration remains that domesticity is still the chosen (forced) arena of this battle. Due to ingrained hierarchies and traditions it is hard for people to separate a mother and her children from the domestic space. Similarly, because of the various backgrounds inveigling upon our projected faces it is hard to divorce the sitter from the background.

Commenting on her installation work *Maternal Exposures* (1997), a grid of monochrome photographs depicting mothers and babies in various stages pre- and post-birth in maternity wards (accompanied by sound), South African artist, writer and curator Terry Kurgan's (1998:23) view supports my observation:

Social myths permeate and complicate the lived experience of mothering. The whole area



*Blank Spaces /*  
*March 2015–April 2016*

Fig 14

is fraught with mythologies, homogenisation, idealisation and sentimentality. At times for some mothers, the actual lived experience might approximate aspects of this idealisation, but for many, the experience is far more complex, varied and ambivalent. It is overlaid and influenced not only by individual personality, but by class, material circumstances, age, religion, family and community, to mention but a few of the range of variables.

Preconceived ideas have forced mothers into an imagined/expected area/position regardless of their personal context. My images oppose that notion, insisting that wherever you look you will find us, not only where you expect to see/find us. It also alludes to the fact that mothering and mother-being exist in everything mothers do. Every experience accumulated out in the world filters through one's mother-being and is eventually released into one's mothering. Similarly, mothering affects mother-being.

While one side of the coin deals with saturation, the other deals with absence, emptiness. My photograph *Blank Spaces / March 2015–April 2016* can be juxtaposed with *The Hidden Mother* photographs, where what we do not see is as



*Anonymous Hidden*  
*Mother photograph*  
circa 19th Century

Fig 15



*MM Invocation - Lace*  
2016

Fig 16



*Gala Invocation - Window*  
2016

Fig 17

compelling as what we do see. *The Hidden Mother* functions as a visual metaphor that highlights the mother's indispensable work behind the scenes. Ironically, even as the mothers are shrouded/hidden (suppressed) in all manner of domestic fabric—the aim being to merge her into her surroundings and render her invisible—the issues of home, domesticity, public versus personal, working without recognition, sacrifice and the mentality of doing what needs to be done regardless of personal cost clamour prominently to the fore. *The Hidden Mother* series serves as the embodiment of the patriarchal institution of motherhood, and my work counters it in its "desire to escape from the suffocation of tradition" by reimagining it through mothering (Gioni, 2015:15). My series of projections constantly consider what mother-being means to me, to my children and my work, finding approaches to synergise these divergent effusions into a collaborative network within which to operate. Mothering almost never operates independently from mother-being. My identity (mother-being) informs my mothering choices and my mothering decisions affect my mother-being. Sometimes they are at odds – when mothering interferes with mother-being, or vice versa. Attempting to reconcile and align them is a constant personal process.

*Blank Spaces / March 2015–April 2016* is a collection of photographs taken on—or occasionally after, depending on the circumstances—the days that it wasn't possible to photograph my daughters and/or myself during the year-long photograph-a-day project. The discipline required to take photographs on most days of a year, when possible, reflects the enormity and omnipresence of mothering. Even though it was not possible to photograph every day for a multitude of reasons, *Blank Spaces* is a testament that those days took place, regardless of my family's availability to be recorded. The variegated tonality of the daily backdrops indicates the span of time these photographs covered. It hints at different seasons and times of day and raises questions about absence and presence. There is a constant awareness/sensitivity within our relationship around my absence and presence in their daily lives. As a single parent I am my daughters' foundation/stability and the primary intermediary between them and their initial experience of the world. Their absence is similarly keenly felt. *Blank Spaces* is also a reminder to clear the mind from expectations regarding mothering or a particular mother and to be receptive to multiple mothering narratives. Every mother deserves the opportunity to fill in her own blank spaces and narrate the individual experience particular to her own context, instead of being coerced into an unrealistic mothering paradigm.

## THE GREAT MOTHER

*Shape-shifting* came to life when I started photographing my children (and myself too, eventually) daily at a similar time, as often as possible. The series of three large *Everyday Portraits* (March 2015–April 2016) represents each of us over a period of 360 days. The aim was to develop a daily practice, to record us individually every day for a year, but it is visually evident that it was not always practical or possible to do so. The non-fulfilment of this aim evokes a similarity to mothering (and life) in that, regardless of intentions and plans, reality serves up its own unforeseen difficulties and brings about a different configuration of events than the one imagined. It is also a consideration (meditation) of the everydayness and omnipresence of mothering and mother-being. My photographic practice is driven by the dissatisfaction of a fixed moment in time. Change (physical, time, seasons, light, feelings, opinions, etc.) is ever present and any given moment is never the same as the one just passed. Part of photography's allure is its ability to capture/record/freeze an impression of a moment in time, pausing the transience of time for an instant. In essence *Everyday Portraits* recorded the passing of time by capturing a mass of little moments. These everyday photographs are an extension of my frustration at not being able to express the intensity of being a mother. When my eldest daughter, Noa Rose, was a few months old, my sister's husband told me that I probably had the most photographed child in the world. Soon after giving birth to her and becoming a mother I realised that she had become a physical incarnation of time's relentless passing. She became my ever-growing, fast-learning parcel of time and I was the witness to her growth and being. The intensity of certain pockets of time was undeniable. The desire never to forget moments of overwhelming love, exciting new milestones or even exhaustion was strong, and I recorded as much of it as I could. Painter Joan Snyder (2001:206) relates that

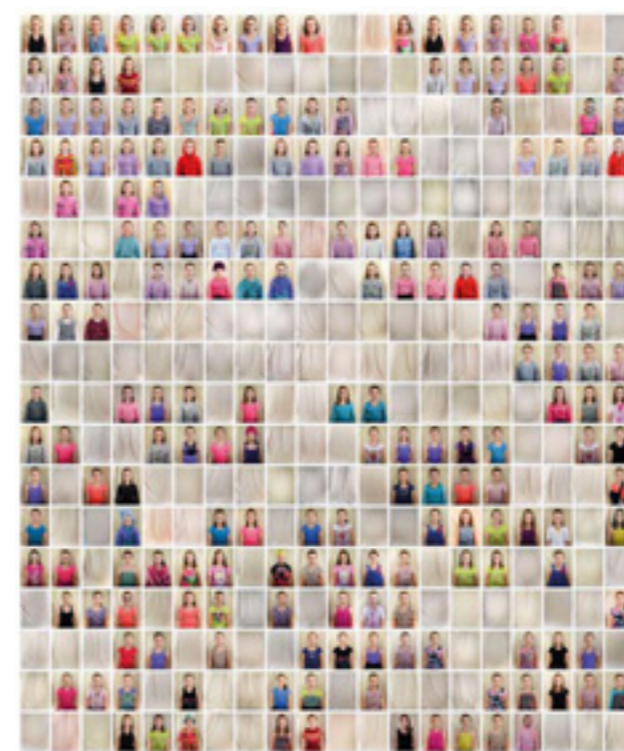
...being a mother affects your work because it affects your whole being—your body your mind your heart and soul—and of course your work. But what it's really like is that you have two lives, yours and your kid's. Every day. Maybe the hardest part is the "maintenance" because children keep eating and growing.



Gala Everyday Portrait  
March 2015–April 2016

Fig 18

The three everyday behemoths are a testament to the daily grind, the magnitude of mothering co-existing with mother-being and being present every day. It is a visible declaration of wanting/attempting to do what is needed every day, but not being able to. It reflects growth, repetition and the passage of time, absence, presence, multiplicity and abundance. My children and I lived through many versions of ourselves in the space of a year; I was many mothers to many children within that one year, my children endured many mothers, each of us survived numerous moods, all of us coped with a variety of situations. As much as the viewer might be overwhelmed by the evidence of 360 days of living, the actual lived experience of it was even more acute. Sophie Howarth (2016:7) discusses the nature and inherent agenda of family portraits as, "Look at us! So loving, so happy, so normal." That has been the basic message of family photography for decades." To support her assertion she recounts photographer Martin Parr's observation that "most family albums are a form of propaganda, where the family looks perfect and everyone is smiling" (in Howarth & McLaren, 2016:7). The

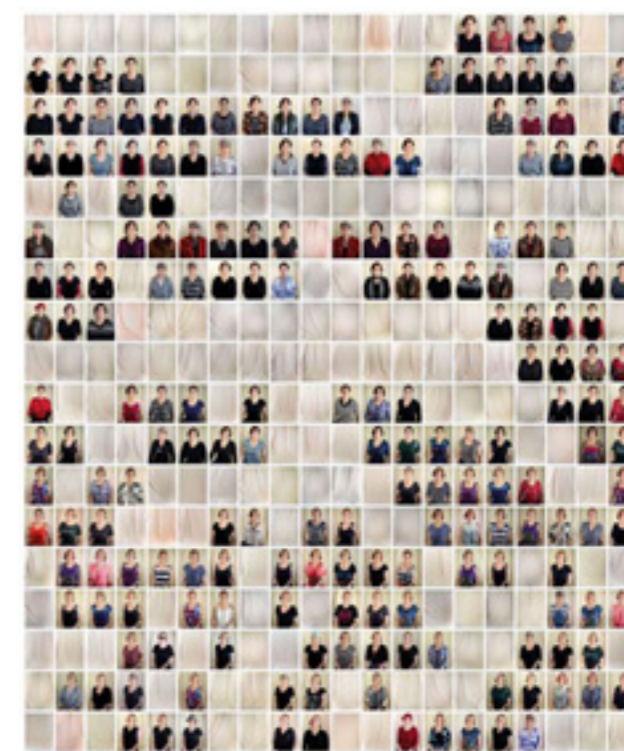


Noa Everyday Portrait  
March 2015–April 2016

Fig 19

*Everyday Portraits* tirelessly dispel the falsity behind the propagation of the mythical perfect family.

On another level this work pushes back against people who have known me for years and still don't know my children's names. The *Everyday Portraits* aim to add depth—instead of carefully curated highlights—in resistance to superficial contact between people in a digital age. Visually the photographs evoke the appearance of pixels on a computer screen. "Pixel" is the shortened version of "picture element"—in other words it represents only a minute element of a whole picture. A pixel only represents one colour at a time. Pixelated photographs appear uneven and jarring, but can still present the viewer with enough information to surmise the recorded image. The *Everyday Portraits* read like enlarged pixelated photographs, but the overall image cannot be inferred as the provided information covers but one year in three entire lifetimes. Each *Everyday Portrait* displays a similar pattern—similar but not quite the same. As much as we share a trajectory as a family, our internal lives follow our individual subjective paths, which converge again



Marguerite Everyday Portrait  
March 2015–April 2016

Fig 20

when we interact. Our independent experiences are projected into our interrelational dynamics. Life in our single-parent household is infused with texture. As much as I attempt to shape it into the smoothest experience possible, external factors complicate my intentions in addition to our own intersubjective friction. In comparison to pixelated photographs the *Everyday Portraits* reflect only fractional aspects (emotions, experiences, etc.) within a lived year, but hint at the complexity of each individual. The series not only displays the portraits that were taken over 360 days, but also bears witness to the days on which nobody could be photographed. Absence and presence each have their own story to tell, and combined the narrative gains more depth.

My work's attempt to defy the one-dimensional representation of mothers and mothering, which includes a limited focus concentrated on the practical aspects of mothering—caring, feeding, doctoring, providing protection, etc.—resonates with the expanse of Massimiliano Gioni's *The Great Mother* exhibition. It is an arduous project,

open to scrutiny, criticism and understanding alike. Reimagining mothering is a formidable task, redolent with the impossibility of conveying every subtlety and divergent entanglement of its subject, but it justifies an attempt and a platform. While cognisant of casting too wide a net, I would be remiss not to touch upon the discourse that questions whether mothers can be (good) artists, especially when the work involves the artist's children. As Bright (2013:19) rightly observes,

The roles of good mother and successful artists (or writer for that matter) are often seen as polar opposites. Motherhood is considered to be a precious, almost sacrosanct state, and as a result the mother-artist figure generates anxiety—especially when she involves her own children in her work—because she is assumed to have abrogated her parental responsibility.

This archaic urge to separate the mother (and her child/ren) from public spaces and meaningful discourse deserves to be challenged and opposed. In her essay *The Body in Question: Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity and Desire*, Liss (2004:35) unpicks this issue further:

The uneven distribution of interest between woman and artist-thinker becomes all the more cruelly amortized in the case of mother as artist-thinker. 'Mother' hovers as the uneasy subset to 'woman' as well as silently operating as its unacknowledged frame. The devaluation of mother is always at once the devaluation of women.

It is interesting and unsettling to note the opinions of two very prominent—if on occasion sensationalist—artists about having an art career as a mother. The shock value of their statements ensured wide reporting of them, propelling their opinions into the public domain and so rendering it relevant to the artist-as-mother discussion that straddles the art world and social convention. Tracey Emin (in Alexander, 2014: online) said:

I don't think I'd be making work [if I were a mother]. I would have been either 100 per cent mother or 100 per cent artist. I'm not flaky and I don't compromise. Having children and being a mother...It would be a compromise to be an artist at the same time. I know some women

can. But that's not the kind of artist I aspire to be. There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men. It's hard for women. It's really difficult, they're emotionally torn.

Marina Abramovic (in Puglise, 2016: online) stated that

I had three abortions because I was certain that it would be a disaster for my work. One only has limited energy in the body, and I would have had to divide it. In my opinion that's the reason why women aren't as successful as men in the art world. There's plenty of talented women. Why do men take over the important positions? It's simple. Love, family, children – a woman doesn't want to sacrifice all of that.

It is not problematic that a woman should choose not to have children, regardless of the reasoning behind it. But it is troublesome that Emin implies that a mother being an artist must be flaky, that having children would compromise a woman's art career and that only artists without children can be good artists—unless they are men. Abramovic likewise thinks that women would have to sacrifice too much to be able to be fully committed to making art. These comments are chilling because they are rooted firmly in a paradigm that the patriarchal system has created, and their utterance make them complicit by reinforcing outdated ideas instead of challenging the status quo. Perhaps their critical success has led them to internalise the structures of patriarchy.

As I theoretically absorb and *live* the discourse that women and mother-artists face, it affects my mother-being and my mothering of my two daughters. Rich (1986:247) states that what daughters need is

...mothers who want their own freedom and ours.[...] The quality of a mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.

By making this work I am essentially creating possibilities and opportunities for my daughters.

## HOME TRUTHS

Susan Bright (2013:8) credits a *Hidden Mother* photograph and Mary Kelly's *Primapara (Bathing series)* as the impetus for creating the *Home Truths* show. She recognises Kelly's work as

...a moment when the representation of the mother figure in art started to shift. Until this point, fine-art photographs of mothers generally took their lead from the long-established conventions of depicting the Madonna and Child in painting, sculpture and mosaic. *Primapara* showed, however, through a series of gridded close-ups of a child, that the mother figure could be present in ways that went beyond traditional (male) depictions, and also that it could exist in the space of critical and conceptual practice. Put simply, it changed the way the mother-and-child motif was employed and understood.

She describes the artists' work featured in *Home Truths* as situated "within the ever-expanding and increasingly nebulous genre of documentary" (Bright, 2013:17). Although my work documents—thoughts, time, a mind space—I think of it more as recording intangible sites of discomfort. The images I make are portraits of in-betweenity, of overlapping sites (e.g. domesticity and feminist mothering) as they converge. Bright (2013:17) continues her commentary on the photographs in the book, unknowingly describing my own work too: "Their work tends to be autobiographical in mode and presents an interpretation of the self that highlights its complexity and contradictions, as well as emphasizing the difficulty of confronting emotive subjects with photography."

In her memoir a disgruntled Sally Mann (2015:151) declares, "How can a sentient person of the modern age mistake photography for reality? All perception is selection, and all photographs—no matter how objectively journalistic the photographer's intent—exclude aspects of the moment's complexity." It is exactly such excluded complexities, within mothering and mother-being, and also within fixed-moment photography, that I attempt to redress in my *Mirror* (2016) photographs and *Imprint* (2016) series. By redirecting the most obvious and predominant representation of the mother—her body—towards creating alternative portraits that deal with her intangible feelings and thoughts, my methodology

adopted strategies to circumvent the immediate and conspicuous. I worked within photography and photography's language—using projection, reflection and mirroring—to imitate and visually manifest the thoughts I wanted to capture.

One day, while alone in my studio, motivated and filled with experimental ideas, I needed my kids for an exploratory shoot but they were in school. Timewise there was only a limited window of opportunity in which to work that day and I was determined to make use of it. I decided to project my children's images onto a mirror, to conjure them up and produce them in the studio where I needed them. Making things work when seemingly impossible constitutes a substantial part of mothering, I find, as well as of my photographic practice—a symbiosis that originated the mimetic pattern within my work process. The minute their projected images appeared on the mirror I knew that the process I was engaged in—and the resultant images—was a fitting analogy for our intersubjectivities. The projected images of my daughters were intended to be of them only, but I could see myself and my studio reflected in the mirror intermingled with their images too. I could see myself taking photographs of projections of my daughters in my studio; no matter what angle I moved to while photographing, my reflection remained visible in the mirror. In the course of exploring this new methodology and the intriguing images that emerged, the old projector I was using started flickering uncontrollably and the projected colours became extreme and distorted. I was overcome with feelings familiar to my mother-self, disbelief at the rapid deterioration of an experience that had begun so well. My camera battery was also waning because I had shot video before the promising mirror experimentation. It struck me that the strange images emerging from a string of what initially seemed like setbacks were quite alluring. I also remember thinking that that photographic moment exquisitely mirrored how quickly the unexpected, uncontrollable opposite of what you intend/expect can erupt when you have children.<sup>7</sup> There was a brief, frantic period in which I captured these serendipitous images before all my technology simultaneously died. Fortunately my thoughts on mothering and my photography

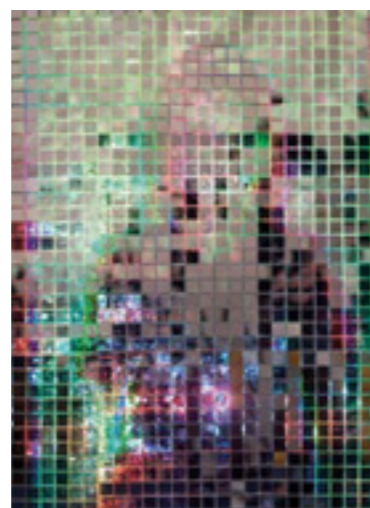
<sup>7</sup> An experience not reserved for mothers only, as any caretaker of children will recognise the feeling. As the primary caregiver I have weathered this experience countless times.

practice had had a short marriage that produced a crisp, abstract visual summary as a result. Due to our intersubjective relationships, my children and I each have an enormous effect on the other, while maintaining our separate selves/paths, the effects tangible even and often in the absence of the other person. Andrea Liss (2009:24) describes it well:

Our relationship is, indeed, interdependent. Yet naming it as such seems too fixed, too determined, too duly enmeshed. It is more undefined, open, part of the unconscious, like overlapping of the self with the intimate other where the mother's and the child's senses of being are constantly in flux. This more fluid and differently inflected sense of interdependence, this intersubjectivity, recognizes the possibilities for mutual acknowledgements and continuous unfolding of selves between the mother and the child. Thus, thinking the mother-child relationship as intersubjective, whether during a child's infancy or at any other "developmental" stage, gives this relationship a deeper meaning than the more traditional connotations of "mother-child".

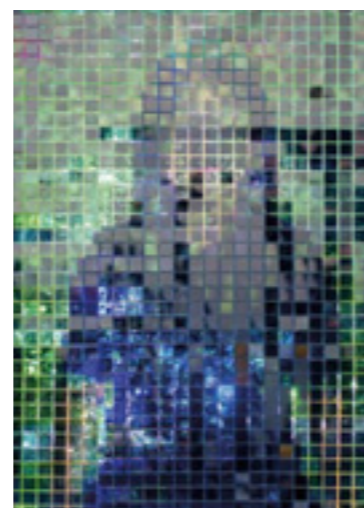
The *Mirror* series presents a visual offering of our overlapping realities, our intersubjectivity and interdependence, but also acknowledges our separate subjective selves. It hints at mothering and mother-being as active, challenging and ever-changing processes. As with *Everyday Portraits*, the pixelated aesthetic suggests a likeness of the person photographed, but gives no clear specifics. We rely on the colours and the image as a whole to provide the clues as to what/who we are looking at. The images are comprised of multiple coloured squares, reminiscent of the *Blank Spaces* photograph. But now colour has been added to the blank spaces, indicating the unfolding complexity of the photographed person, intimating that we are layered and textured beings and deserve to be presented and viewed as such.

Sandra Matthews' *Timelines* project began in 1989, when she photographed women close to her (from family members to neighbours) using newspaper fragments as backdrops. Unsatisfying results (according to Matthews) prompted the end of the process. Twenty years later she "rephotographed the original subjects" and found that the "play of time on faces and bodies suggested narratives of growth, loss, and survival." With the *Timelines* images she was specifically concerned with "temporal and psychic



*Pink Mirror*  
2016

Fig 21



*Blue Mirror*  
2016

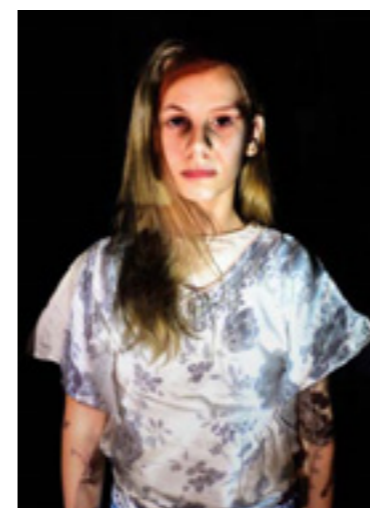
Fig 22

spaces", hoping that "the images speak, among other things, of the complexity of what is transmitted between generations." Cognisant of the reverence of time that becoming a mother triggers, Matthews (2012:166–167) writes,

When I became a mother, my sense of time slowed and thickened, becoming more inclusive of simultaneous events, more viscerally connected to past and future. With an enhanced personal stake in the well-being of the next generation, I felt more actively part of the flow of human time. This flow did not move inexorably in one direction, but swirled richly around me, bathing me in the influences of several overlapping generations.

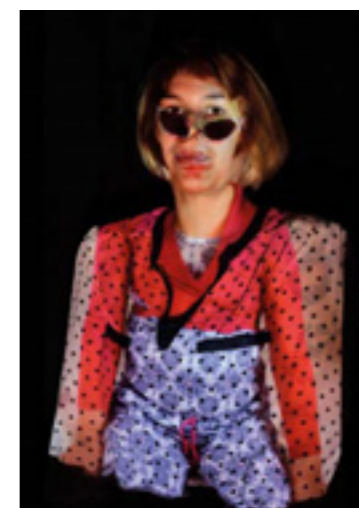
Again the substantial experience of being a mother underlines the idea of "overlapping" as a recurring theme that is present within processing one's mother-being. I agree that as a mother one is continually aware of past influences, present developments and potential future impacts.

Despite our best (or worst) efforts, no mother can accurately predict how their child will cope with life, how they will be in this world, whether one has prepared them adequately for the vicissitudes of the years ahead. I not only bestow love and physical, emotional and intellectual care upon my daughters, but also a world view, social attitudes, political perspectives, bad habits and examples and my own experiences as a daughter, which extensively influence the mother I am. Inevitably I project these



*Imprint on Noa*  
2017

Fig 23



*Imprint on MM no. 2*  
2017

Fig 24

things onto them, sometimes knowingly, often inadvertently.

The child gains her first sense of her own existence from the mother's responsive gestures and expressions. It's as if, in the mother's eyes, her smile, her stroking touch, the child first reads the message: *You are there!* And the mother, too, is discovering her own existence newly. She is connected with this other being, by the most mundane and the most invisible strands, in a way she can be connected with no one else except in the deep past of her infant connection with her own mother. And she, too, needs to struggle from that one-to-one intensity into new realization, or reaffirmation, of her being-onto-herself.

Rich, 1986:36

In the process of gifting experiences to another person self-reflexivity steps in, prompting a review of one's own position regarding all of the above matters. This action nourishes the cycle of our interdependence and intersubjectivity and adds to the value or inadequacies we bring to our relational space. Within that space, finding and claiming a space of one's own is imperative to our individual well-being and growth and in turn adds richness to our group dynamic. It is in this intersubjective space that the *Imprint* (2016) series—our faces projected onto each other's—came about. We imprint upon each other consciously and subconsciously. The images are a visual imagining of our future and past chimeras. Their faces on mine, my face on theirs—the confluence of our subjectivities, experiences, feelings, thoughts—we shape each other. We depend on each

other to become more of ourselves. We each collect experiences in the world that become part of our context. In turn we project experiences onto each other and have them reflected back at us.

Once again time comes into play. There is a fast-forwarding of time as my face is projected onto my children's faces. My face on theirs casts a conjecture over them, a visual musing of what they might be and/or look like at some point in the future after my guidance as a mother and the effect of my genes have converged with their own particularities. The lines and shadows my face imprints upon theirs magnify the years (and experiences) separating us, a portent of life to come. Similarly, there is a rewinding of time and a reversal of roles when their faces are projected onto mine. Their faces on mine are mnemonic of a time when I was a child and daughter, before I had adult responsibilities and becoming/being the person guiding a family. It is also a display of how much of my children are in me. It is a reminder to me of the importance of seeing things through their eyes too. As much as I affect them with my genes and my ways, they deeply impact me too. Our relationship is a mutual transaction, a transaction even at cellular level, as my children left cells<sup>8</sup> in my body even when they vacated it. This biological and physiological exchange between us secures our interconnectedness on every conceivable level.

<sup>8</sup> Based on information provided by Amy Boddy, geneticist at Arizona State University, Callier (2015: online) writes "during pregnancy, cells from the fetus cross the placenta and enter the mother's body, where they can become part of her tissues.

This cellular invasion means that mothers carry unique genetic material from their children's bodies, creating what biologists call a microchimera, named after the legendary beasts made of different animals.

[...] Over evolutionary time, the fetus has evolved to manipulate the mother's physiology and increase the transfer of resources like nutrition and heat to the developing child. The mother's body in turn has evolved countermeasures to prevent excessive resource flow. Things get even more intriguing when fetal cells cross the placenta and enter the mother's bloodstream. Like stem cells, fetal cells are pluripotent, which means they can grow into many kinds of tissue. Once in the mother's blood, these cells circulate in the body and lodge themselves in tissue. They then use chemical cues from neighboring cells to grow into the same stuff as the surrounding tissue.

Although the mother's immune system typically removes unchanged fetal cells from the blood after pregnancy, the ones that have already integrated with maternal tissues escape detection and can remain in mom's body. Microchimerism can get especially complex when a mother has multiple pregnancies. The mother's body accumulates cells from each baby—and potentially functions as a reservoir, transferring cells from the older sibling into the younger one and forming more elaborate microchimeras.

## THE REAL MOTHER

Finally, the focus is on the real mother as opposed to the traditional, idealised mother. The real mother is accessible through lived mothering and mother-being, instead of the expectations rooted within the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Sara Ruddick (2001:189) observes that “an idealized figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow on many actual mothers’ lives. Our days include few if any perfect moments, perfect children perfectly cared for. Self-doubts are compounded by others’ promptings.” I venture that I frequently feel that my daughters and I experience “perfect” moments—of course, it depends on one’s personal definition of perfect. To me, these are moments of fulfilment when everything feels as it should (even a minute will suffice)—usually simple moments, funny moments, or moments when our thoughts or actions are in sync. Sometimes it is simply appreciating the luxury of spending time together during our busy lives.

I presume Ruddick refers to an imagined perfection in which one has no problems, where nobody is dirty, ill, hungry, bad-tempered, etc. *Breakfast* (2016) is a moving portrait that depicts my children’s weekday breakfast ritual during school terms. The video portrait juxtaposes an imagined “perfect” breakfast setting with the real circumstances surrounding their breakfasts. Despite the setting appearing to be less than ideal, it is our reality. Nobody (that I know of) enjoys spending an hour in tedious traffic every morning. My daughters and I don’t mind it that much because it gives us time together: we have discussions, tell stories and listen to music. Our lived reality surpasses the supposedly perfect breakfast. *Breakfast* serves as a metaphor for the creation of our particular lived experience: we make it work. Adequate sleep—for the children, as adequate sleep is still out of my reach on most days—outweighs breakfast at a table; the children being happy at school and looking forward to going to school overrides a closer school and less traffic. Our perfection lies in creating our own version of perfection, in defiance of superficial breakfast norms. *Breakfast* is a nuanced example of lived mothering informed by mother-being as opposed to motherhood. The moving portrait reflects the constant changes in life, the passing of time, and reminds us that one moment is never the same as the next and that no day can be repeated. Our life is not static, nor relegated exclusively to the actual domestic site/home.



*Breakfast*  
2016  
Video still

Fig 25

In *Home Truths* Bright (2013:18) describes the thread that runs through the work as “an exploration of the complex and demanding experience of motherhood and of the transitions that occur to a woman’s identity when she is becoming or being a mother.” The moving portrait *becoming/being* (2017) speaks to the multiple selves (mother, artist, woman, daughter, sister) contained within me. It addresses the shift/s that take place when becoming a mother—physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, financially—remaining the same, yet forever changed. It applies to the constant motion/flux between mothering, mother-being and making work and my attempt to reconcile these different moving parts. The reality that things are out of my control is evident. It also alludes to the fact that my children are with me, always, even when they are not (physically). *becoming/being* references the well-known Madonna della Misericordia (Madonna of Mercy) figure. Watney (2013:53) describes her as, “a popular image from the Middle Ages [...] represented as a standing figure holding open her cloak protectively like a tent, providing shelter to the needy and vulnerable, including orphans and other

abandoned children.” In this instance my children are hidden from view, as they need not be paraded or foregrounded to prove my motherly virtuousness. They are taken care of, safe and even having fun. The mother/I is/am sitting instead of standing as work gets tiring and the mother/I is/am not a statue. The mother/I is/am also not a towering figure, but at times is/am almost completely overwhelmed by her/my children and the demands of mothering, work and life. Yet she/I remains/remains steady, holding on to her/my identity and stability. Here, the mother is the subject, and not exclusively in relation to her children. Janine Antoni (2013:41), one of the artists included in *Home Truths*, says that the intention behind creating her image *Inhabit* (2009) was to

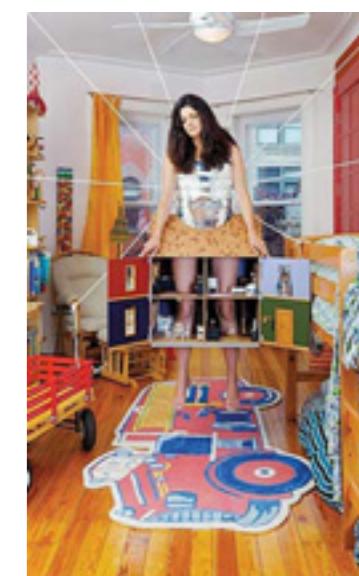
reflect the complex reality of motherhood, [...] I embraced the necessity of shape-shifting in order to fulfil this role. The elastic scale-shifting in the photograph acknowledges the mother’s required flexibility. She is a ubiquitous presence, and yet her role requires a degree of withdrawal.

Liss (2004:34) also foregrounds the idea of constant movement, changing and adapting as a mother:



Piero della Francesca  
*Polyptych of the Misericordia* (1460–2)  
Oil on tempera on panel  
(central panel)  
273 x 330 cm

Fig 26



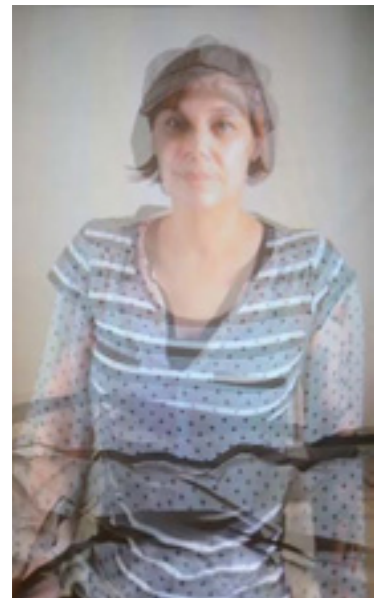
Janine Antoni  
*Inhabit*  
2009  
Digital C-print  
296 x 183 cm

Fig 27

The “truth” is that we [mothers] are constantly in motion, are never only in one place. We work against allowing “mother” to slip into a place of nostalgia for the norm. The mind and body of the mother are constantly in labor.

The constant flux between mothering, mother-being and e.g. artist-being cannot magically be managed through the fix-all term of balance. Balance implies steadiness, equilibrium, sustained command of a situation. Pegeen Reichert Powell (2008:257–258) theorises:

The discourse [of balance] keeps work and family (or alternately work and home or work and life) as two discrete entities. The goal is to achieve a state in which neither sphere interferes with the other and both are satisfied and satisfying. As I write I don’t need to look far to come up with images in my daily life that seem to challenge that discourse: the breast pump on top of the stack of articles I need to read for my research [...] Although the discourse is about striking a balance between work and family, these images suggest that in reality these realms are quite literally layered, that they almost always share both time and space.



*becoming/being*  
2017  
Moving portrait still

Fig 28



Unidentified Sculptor *Madonna della Misericordia* (circa 1345)  
Church of San Tomà, San Polo, Venice

Fig 29

The layers Powell speaks of are palpable in *becoming/being*, my portrait clearly consisting of numerous selves, each comprising two halves, albeit one image. Both halves are requisite for the image to be complete, although the top half would make sense without the lower half, but not vice versa. Neither half (or self) can control the other. Powell (2008:267) describes the relentless back and forth that keeps the discourse of balance on a loop: "In order to maintain balance, a woman needs to remain still, not disturbing the status quo; yet it is the status quo that creates the contradictions that induce a woman to seek balance in the first place." Perhaps *becoming/being* could function as the visual loop that unsettles balance while affirming selfhood within multiple selves. I will leave the brilliant and relatable account of multiple selves within a mother's identity by Amber Kinser (2008:124) as the final thoughts in this section:

Mothering practices intersect the multiple relationships of which I am part, the multiple selves I embody at home, at work, and in my community, the multiple family subsystems and

suprasystems that overlap in my life. There is a simultaneous connectedness among these relationships and selves, and yet, often enough, there is fragmentation about them. They are parts of a unified whole that seldom feel unified, both connected and fragmented, both seamless and split. There are times, plenty of times, when these multiple and often divergent selves, contradictory selves even, rub against one another. There are times when the rubbing against my mother self and my feminist self, for example, create such friction it is a wonder I don't get burned. Then again, I suppose I do. Every moment of mother-relating for me also is a moment of relating-in-multiplicity, of trying to reduce the friction of opposing demands of multiple selves and relationships. Survival in feminist mothering necessitates coming to see this rubbing against, this friction, this tension, not as purely oppositional and therefore needing to be resolved, but as inherent, and necessary, and not in need of fixing. It means embracing what dialectical theorists call 'unity of oppositions' (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

## CONCLUSION

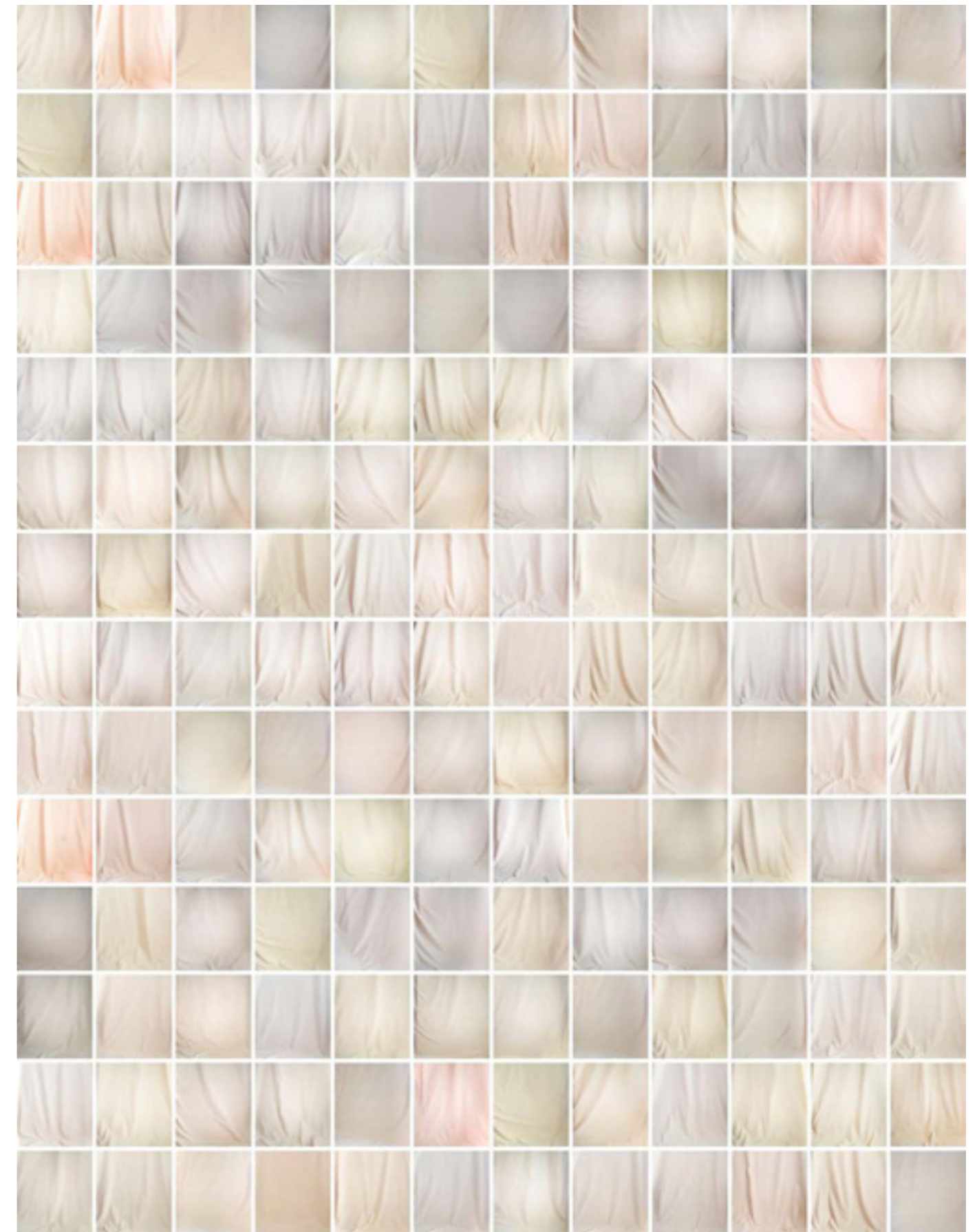
The timeliness of addressing and redressing the importance of reimagining the representation of the mother within art and within society is not only increasingly experienced by myself, but is also supported by highly regarded contemporary curators, writers and art critics such as Susan Bright (*Home Truths*) and Massimiliano Gioni (*The Great Mother*). Accomplished thinkers such as Sara Ruddick (feminist philosopher and writer), Rachel Epp Buller (feminist art historian), Andrea O'Reilly (writer) and Andrea Liss (art historian and cultural theorist) to name but a few have long advocated and contributed to the rethinking of mothering, with the lived experience of mothers establishing the basis of a new and more realistic narrative. Adrienne Rich was the initial force behind dislodging the obstruction-idealised expectations created by the patriarchal institution of motherhood—that prevented us from viewing and presenting the mother as the mother experiences it herself (mothering).

By deconstructing some of the layers that constitute the complexity of mothering we can access and represent mothering more accurately by refuting the one-dimensionality of the concept of motherhood and the Madonna and Child trope. Some of the layers that I have looked at include bringing mothering out of the shadows by projecting light onto it, acknowledging the vastness—everydayness, complexity, traditional imaging—of mothering and several of the modulations within it; recognising the intersubjective relationship between my daughters and myself by accepting that as a mother I am my children's mirror and they inevitably become mine.

Mothering children is a reflective and reflexive process. It is a relentless, ongoing, shape-shifting situation that conflates the temporality of the past, future and present. Mothering can never be separated from mother-being and the movement between the two is in perpetual flux. The mother should not be seen only in relation to her children, but as a subjective entity who is enhanced by the addition of her maternal identity. Creating awareness of the transactional space between mothering and mother-being provides essential insight into the site serving as an intermediary between the positions, each nourishing and complicating the other. It is a dynamic site of opposing currents.

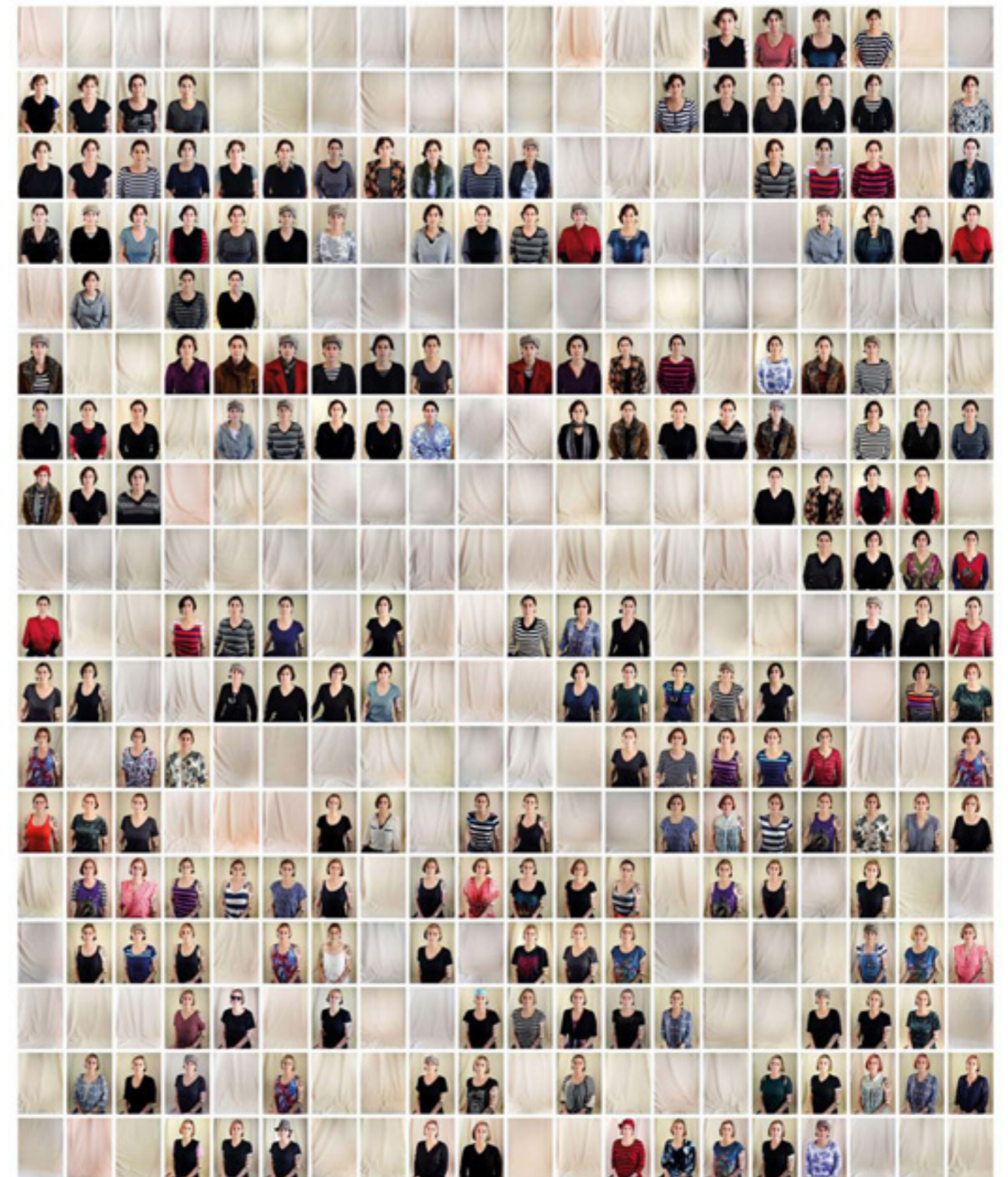
This body of work discards the cloak of the Madonna and exchanges her single male baby for two daughters. It erases her golden halo and shows interest in her opinions. Her thoughts displace absorption with the appearance of her virginal physical body. She breaks free from the idealised perfection that has ossified her evolution for centuries. She is absolved from expectations. She is real.

*Blank Spaces / March 2015–April 2016*  
Giclée print  
60 x 46,3 cm



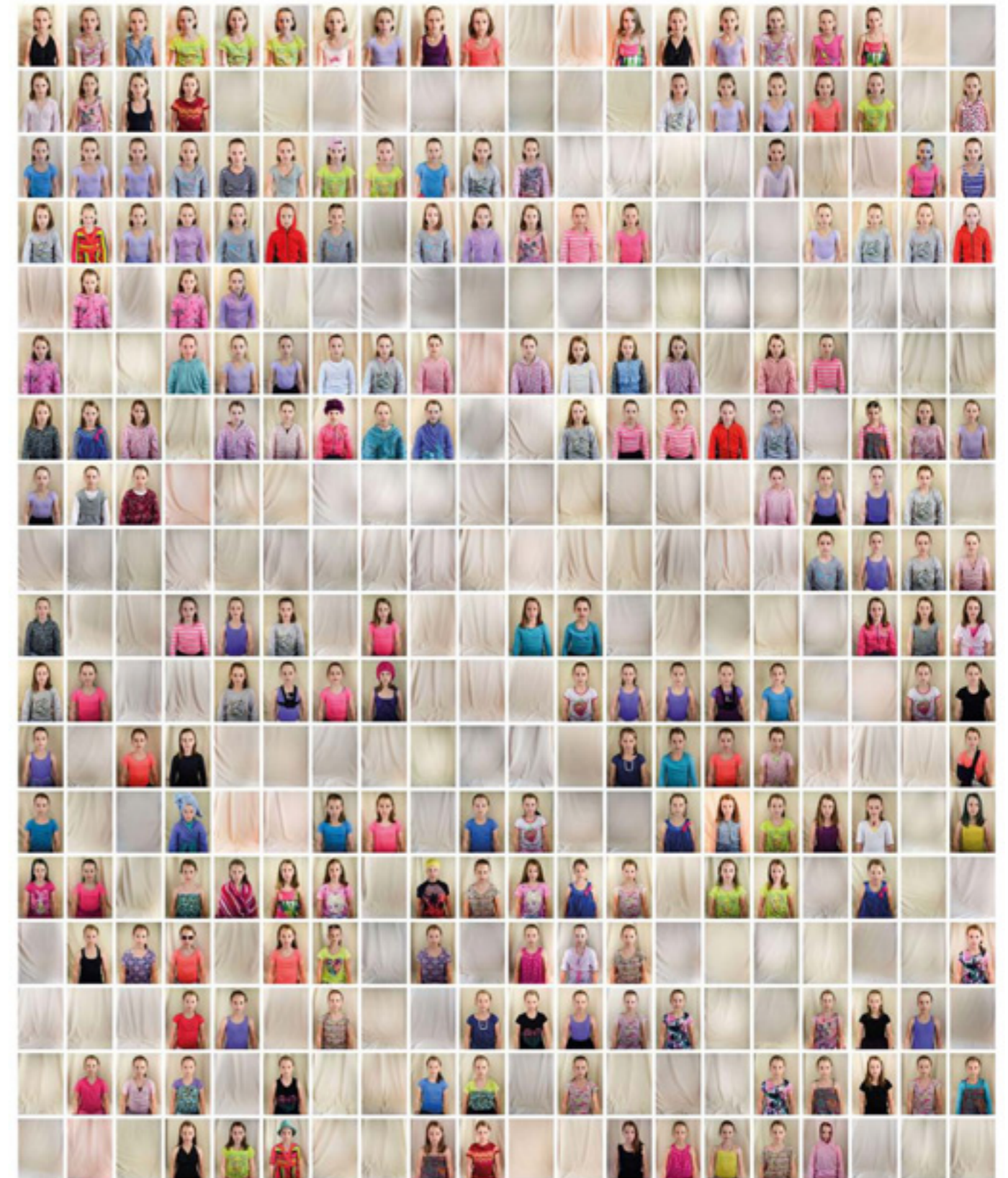


*Marguerite Everyday Portrait* March 2015–April 2016  
Giclée print  
145 x 120 cm





Noa Everyday Portrait March 2015–April 2016  
Giclée print  
145 x 120 cm





*Gala Everyday Portrait March 2015–April 2016*  
Giclée print  
145 x 120 cm





*Imprint on Noa*  
Imprint Series  
2017  
Digital C-print  
35 x 27,49 cm





*Imprint on Gala*  
Imprint Series  
2017  
Digital C-print  
35 x 27,49 cm





*Imprint on MM no. 1*  
Imprint Series  
2017  
Digital C-print  
35 x 27,49 cm





*Imprint on MM no. 2*  
Imprint Series  
2017  
Digital C-print  
35 x 27,49 cm





*MM Invocation - Lace*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Giclée print  
70 x 46,89 cm





*Gala Invocation – Silver Dress-Up Material*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Digital C-print  
70 x 47,66 cm

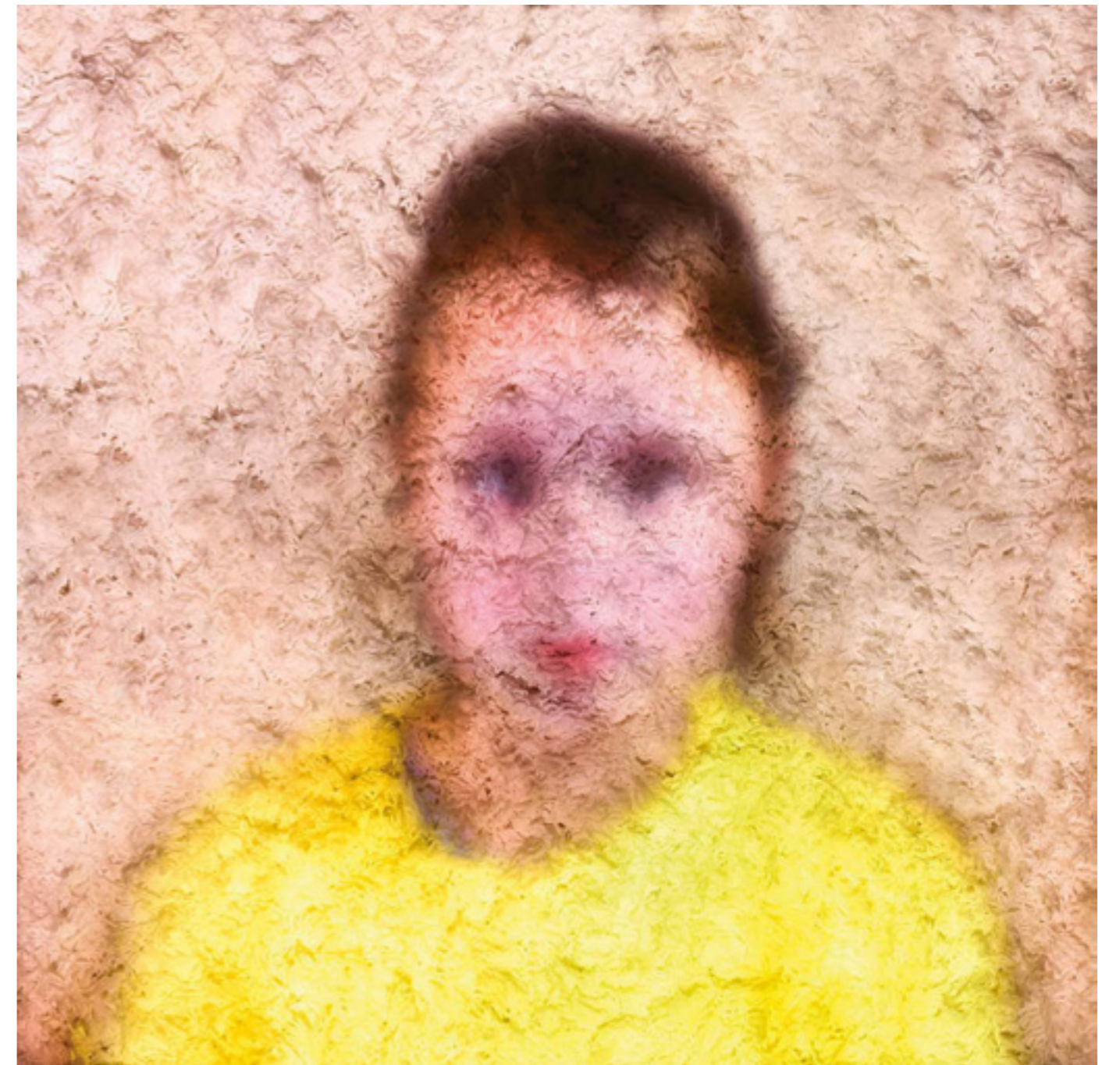


*Noas and Galas*  
2016  
Digital photograph in lightbox  
65 x 69 cm





*Gala Invocation – Carpet*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Giclée print  
40 x 40,6 cm





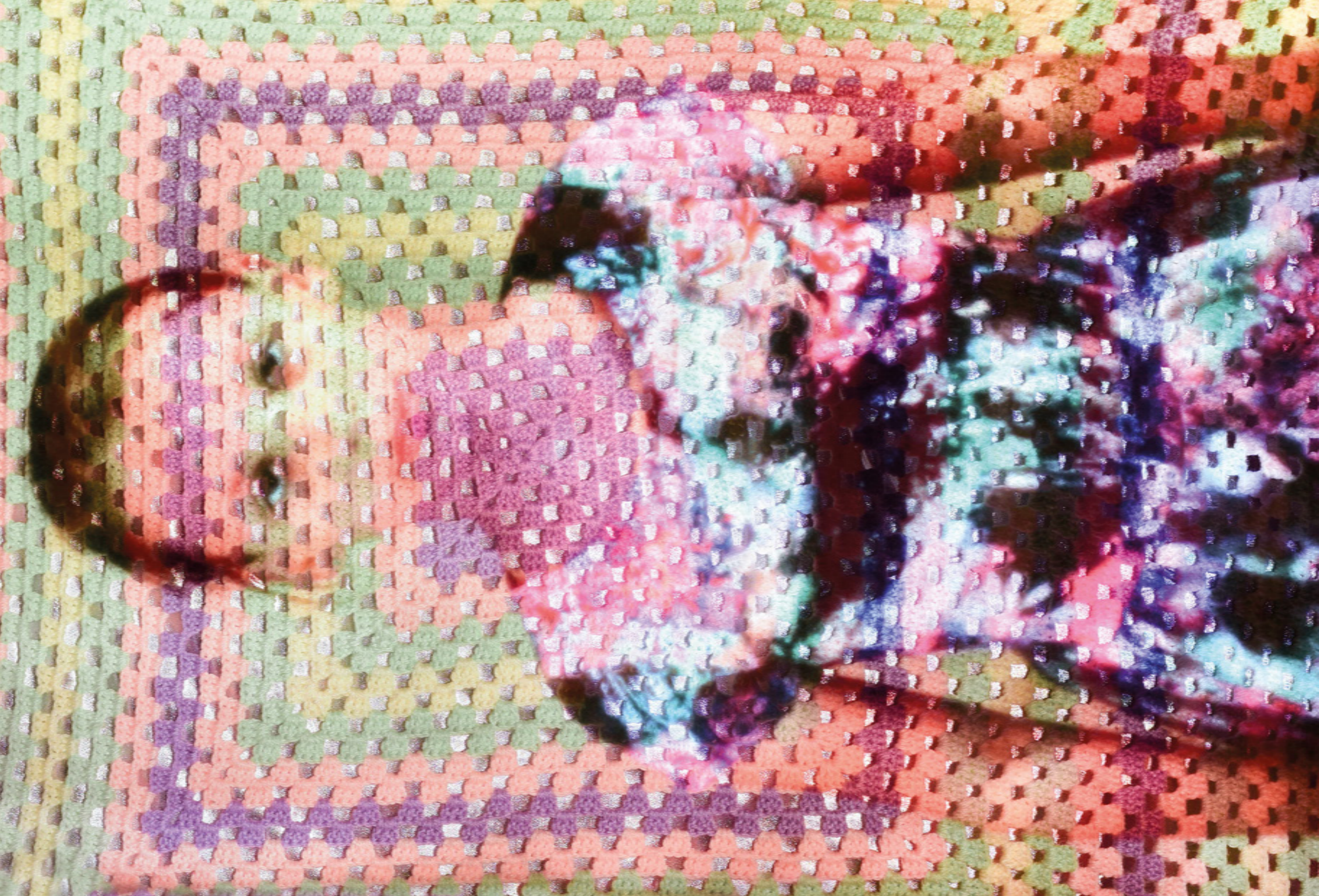
*Noa Invocation – Linen*  
Invocation Series  
Giclée print  
2016  
40 x 37,42 cm





*Gala Invocation – Curtain*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Digital C-print  
34,99 x 34,3 cm



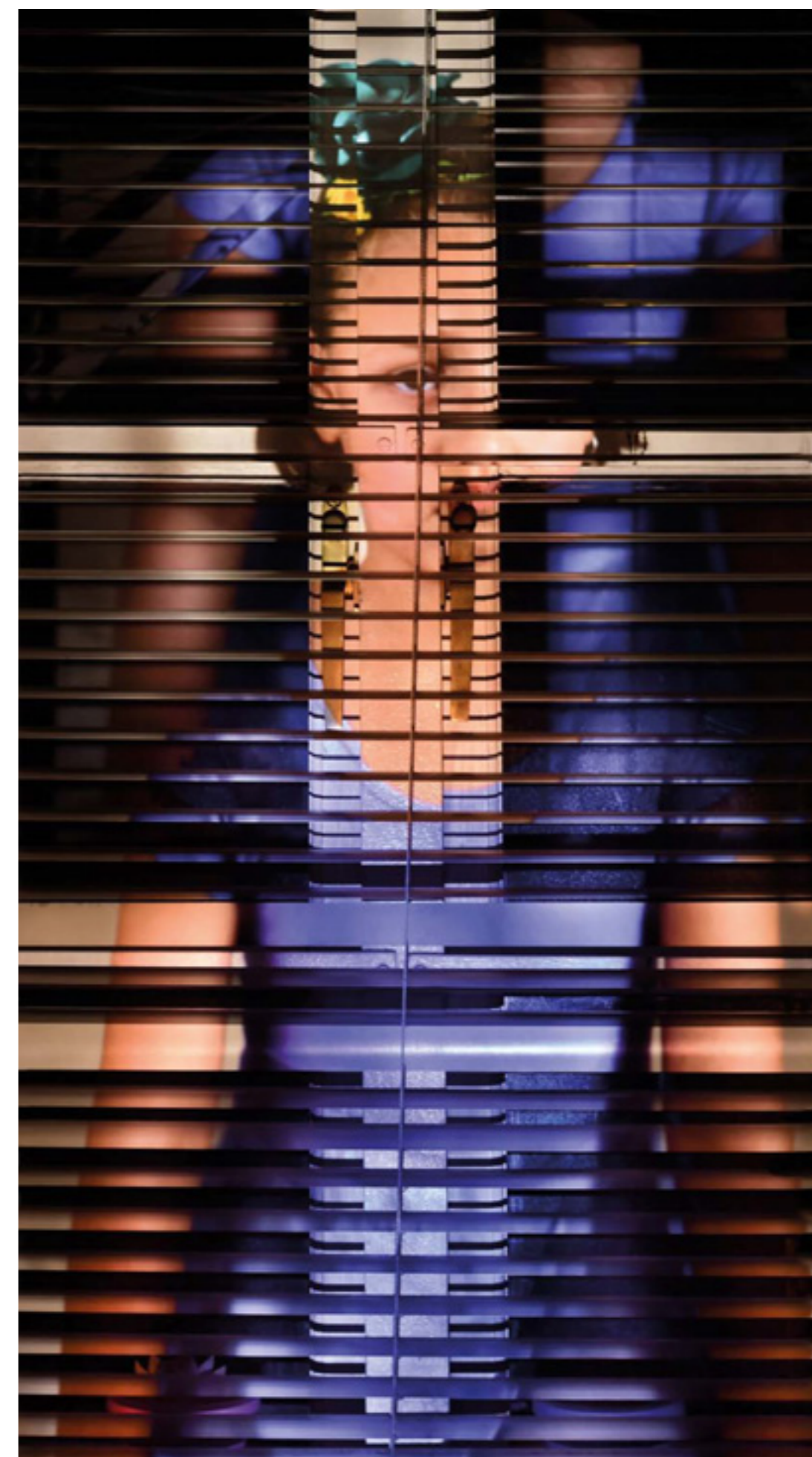


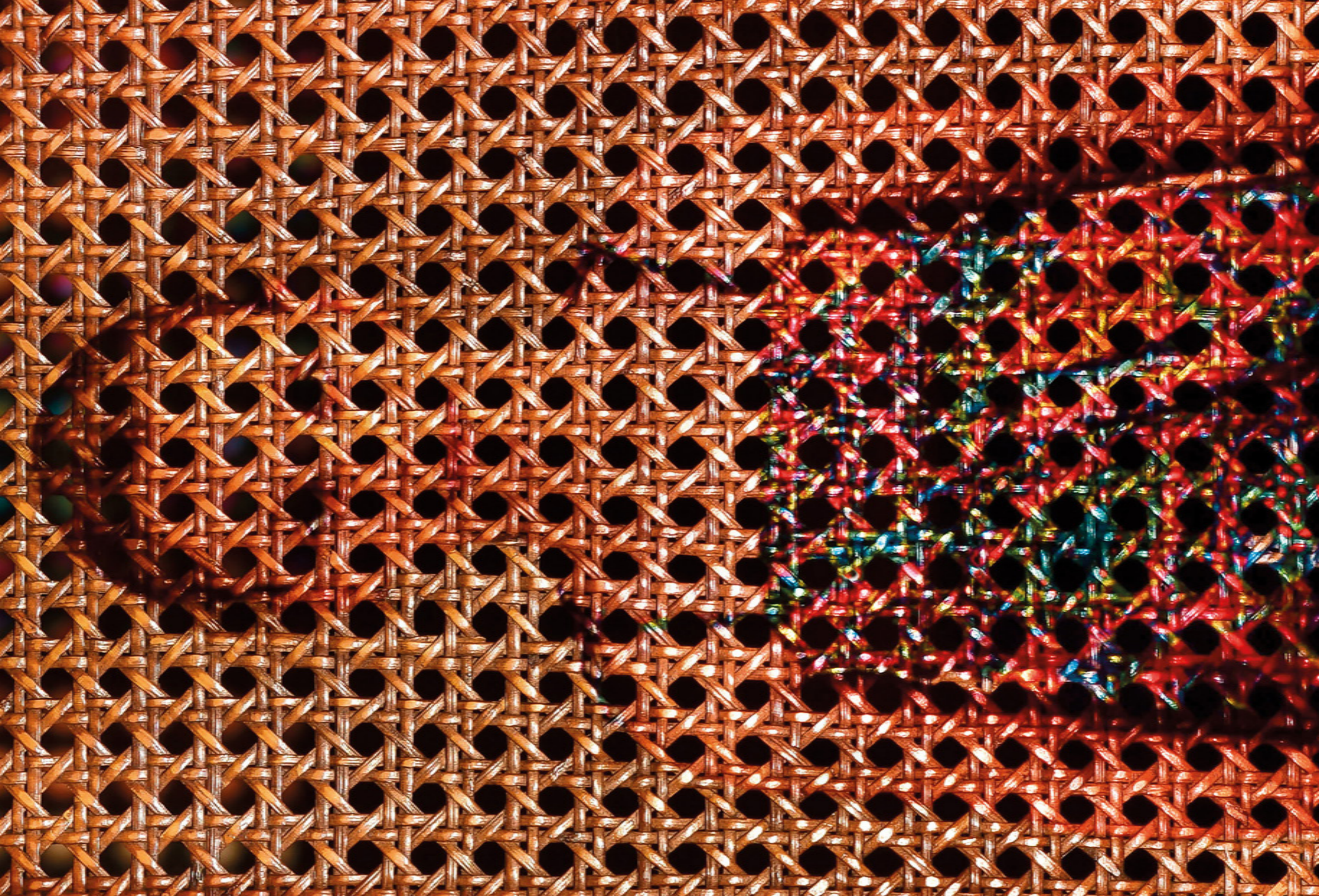
*Noa Invocation – Blanket*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Giclée print  
50 x 33,1 cm



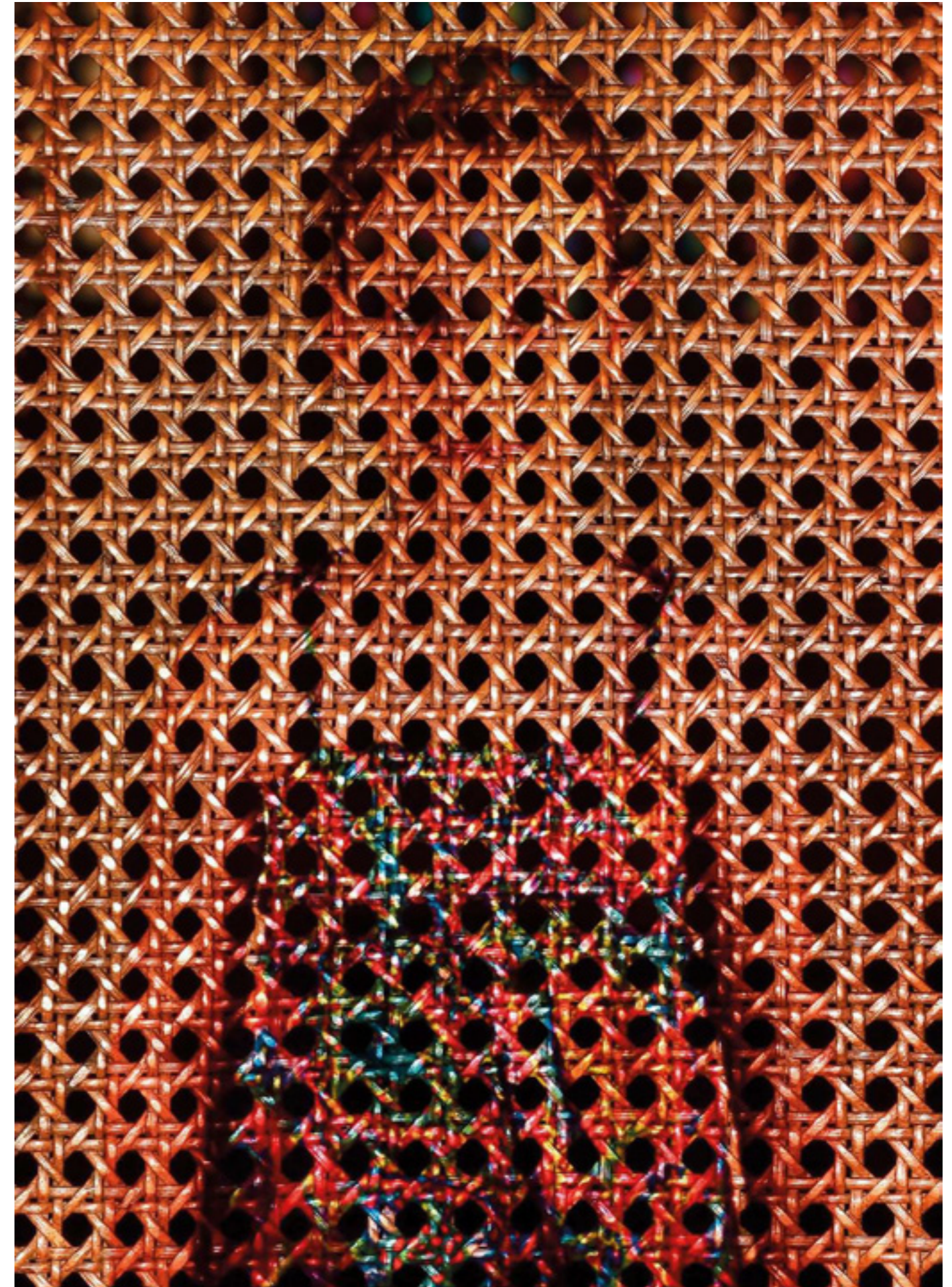


*Gala Invocation – Window*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Digital C-print  
43 x 23,9 cm



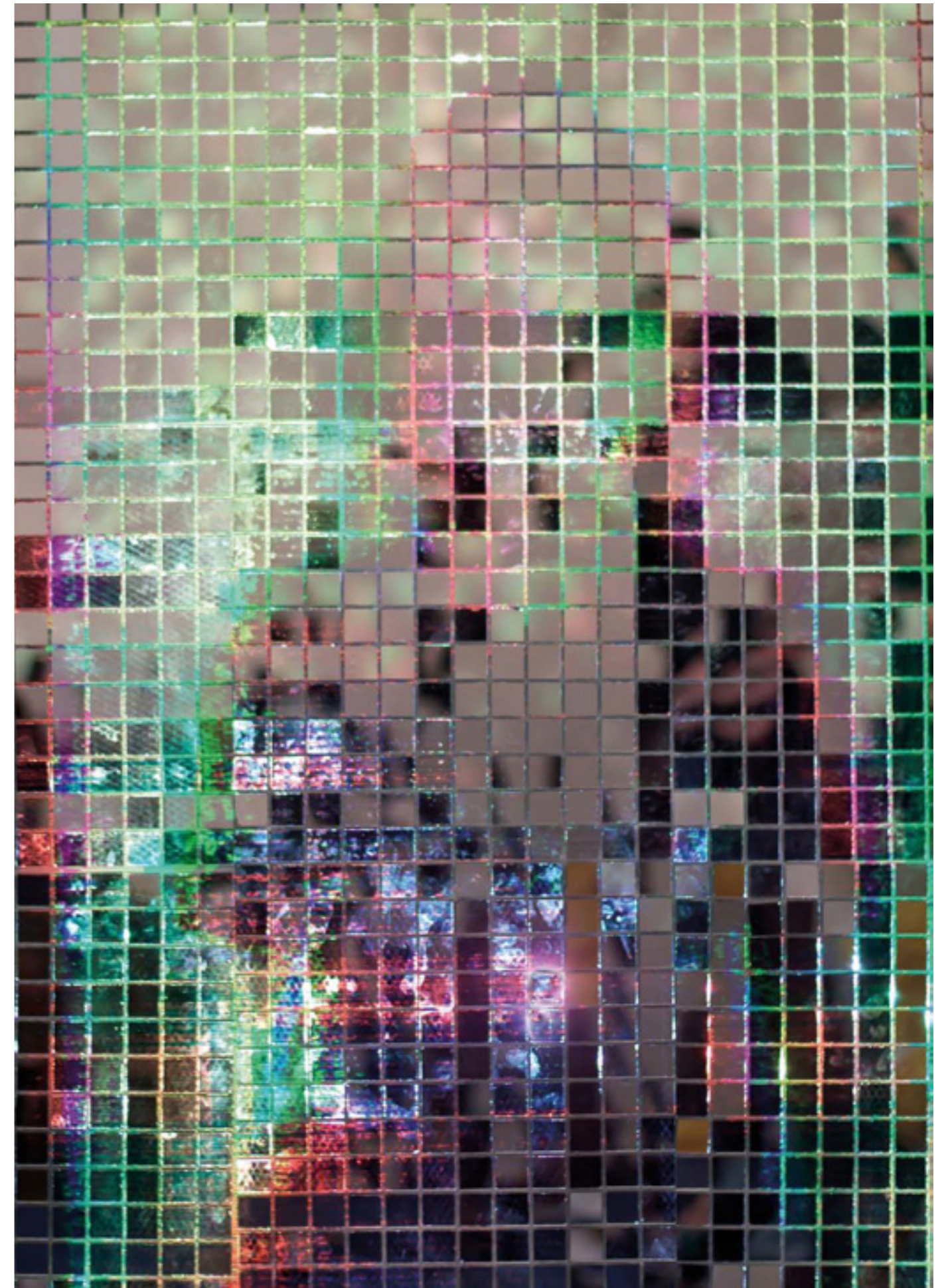


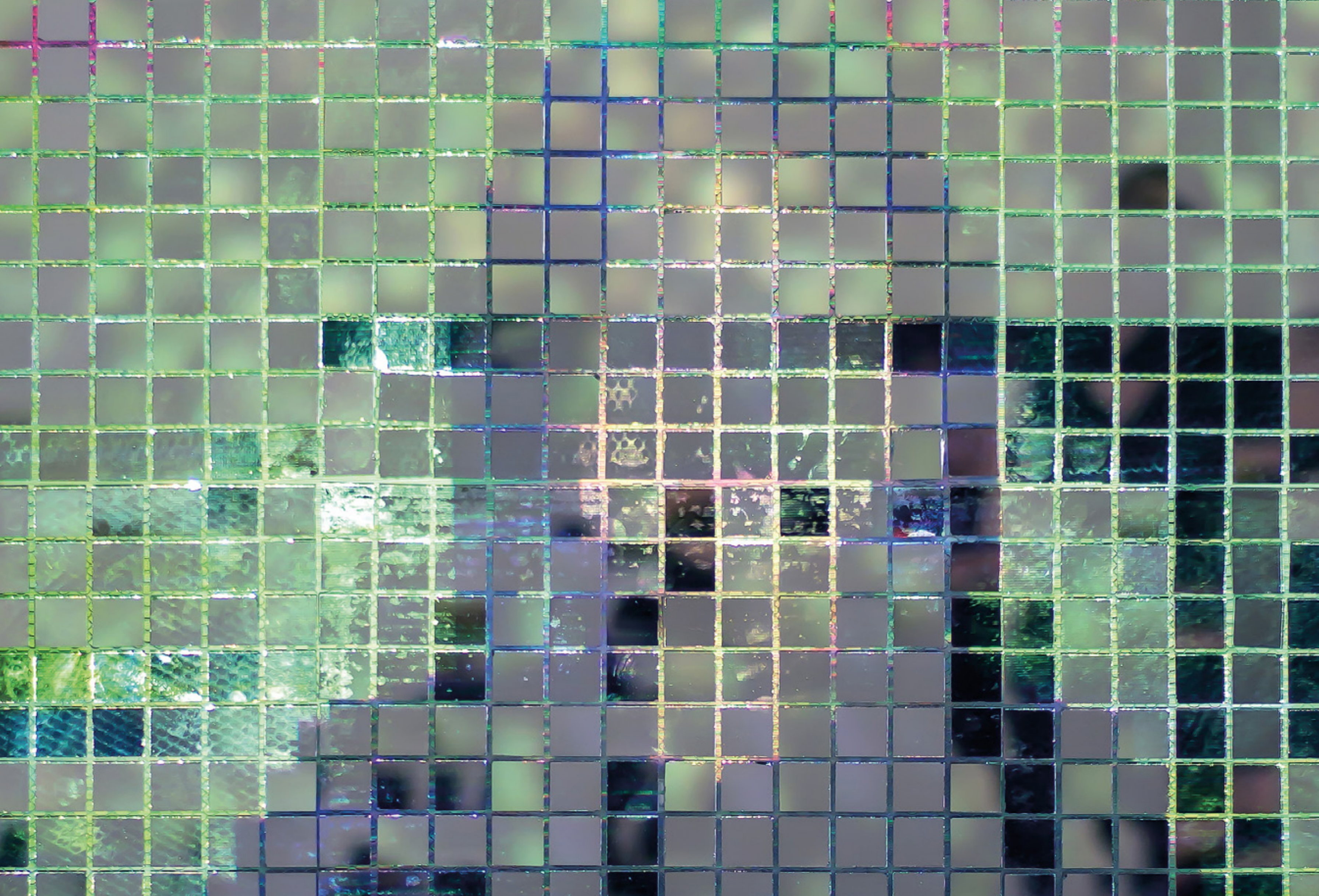
*Noa Invocation – Chair*  
Invocation Series  
2016  
Digital C-print  
38 x 27,39 cm





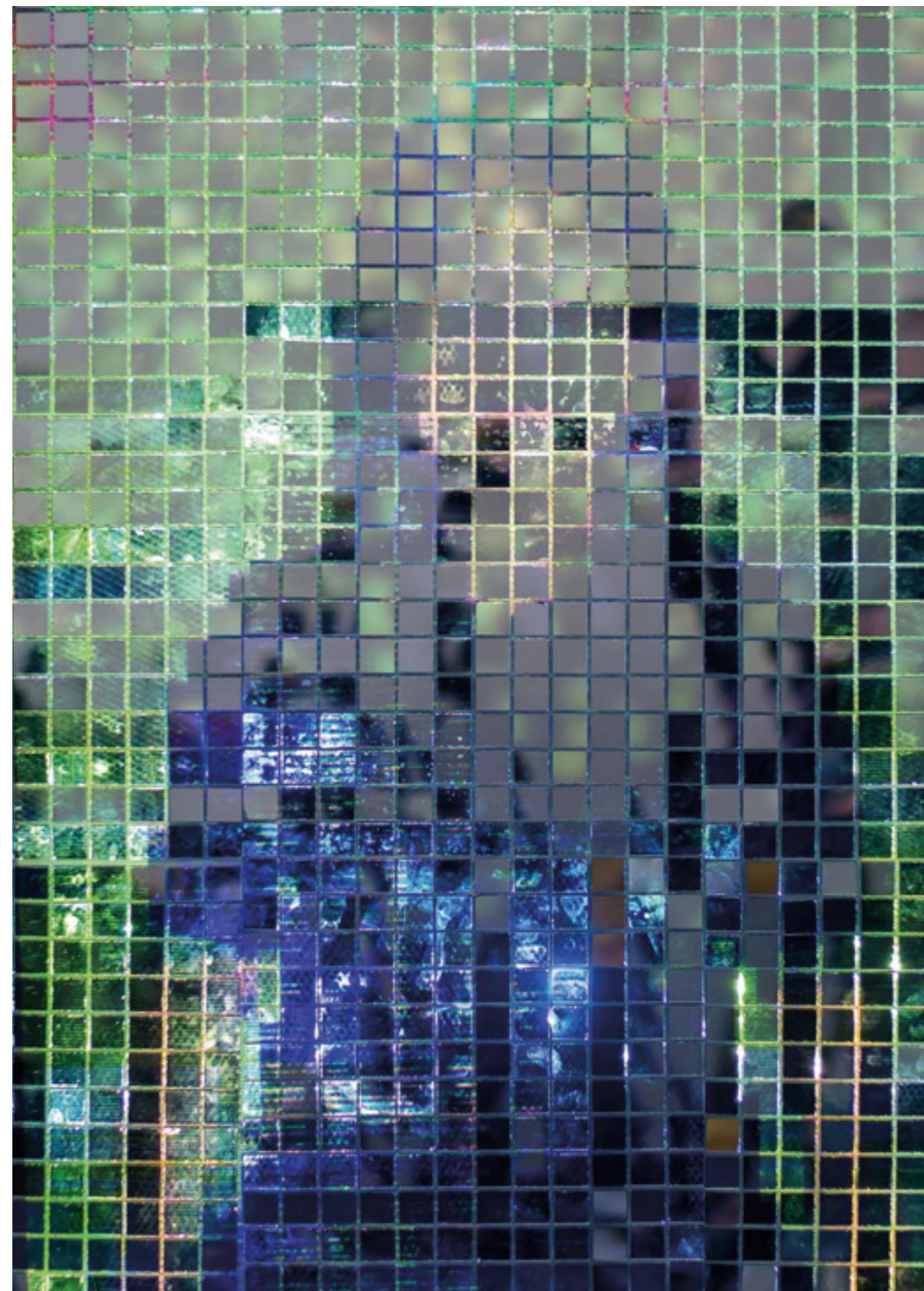
*Pink Mirror*  
2016  
Digital C-print, diasec  
85,5 x 61 cm





*Blue Mirror*  
2016  
Digital C-print, diasec  
85,5 x 61 cm

Next page  
*M / M, N & G 2015*  
30,48 x 20,32 cm  
Digital C-print

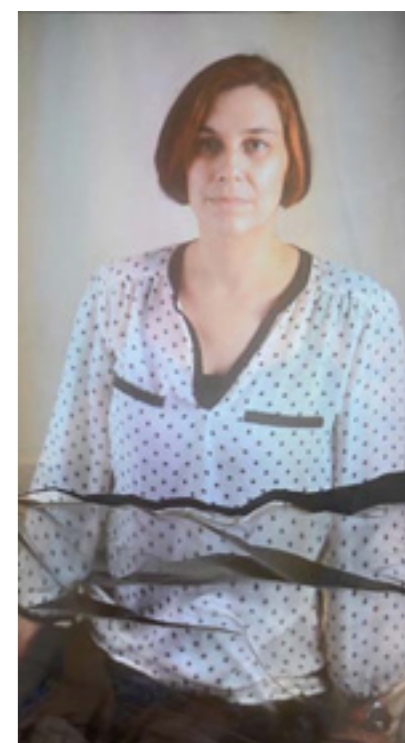
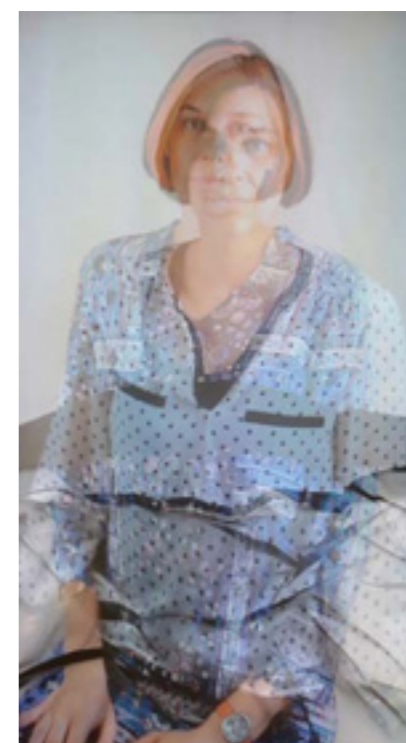
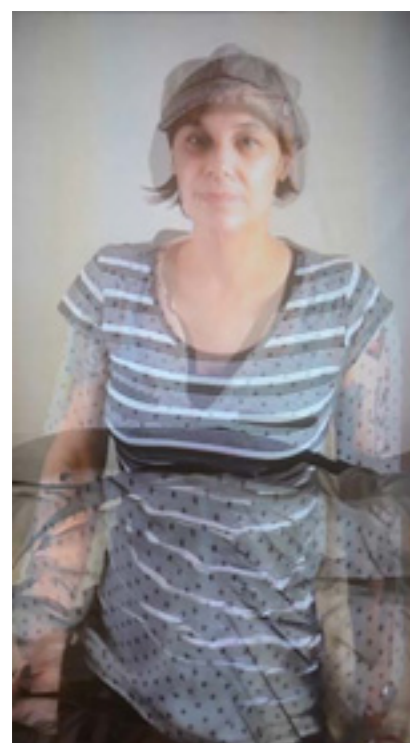
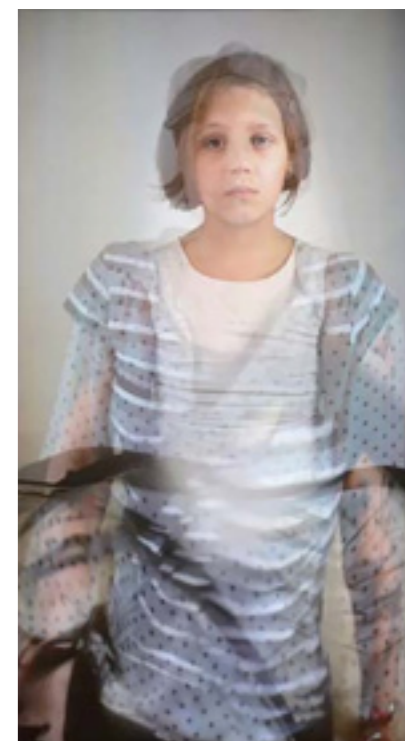
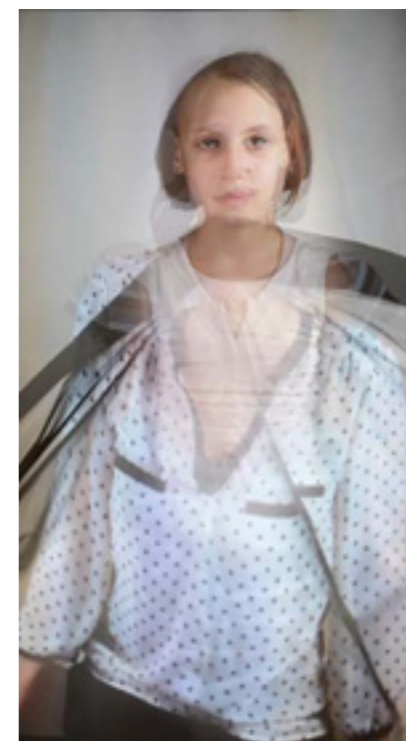
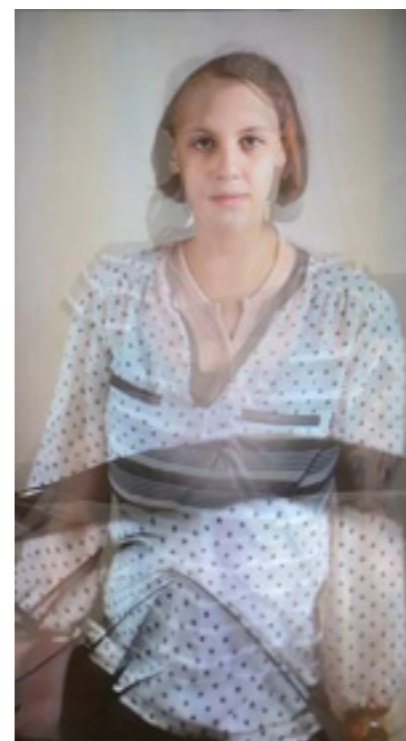
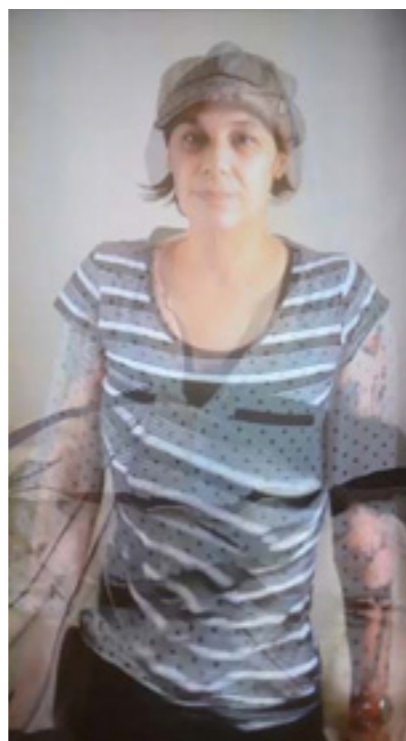
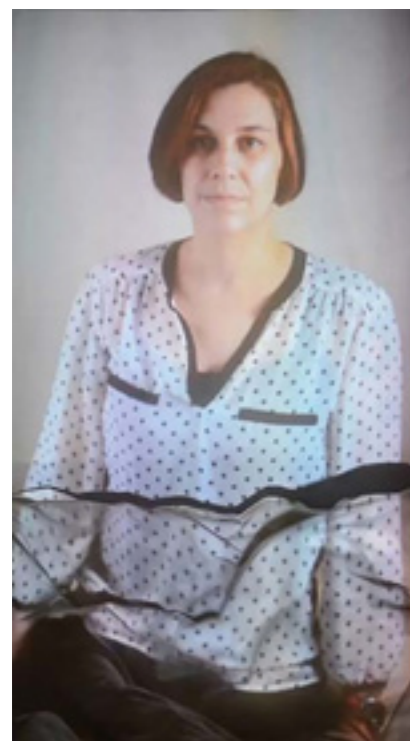




Breakfast, 2016  
Video still



becoming/being  
2017  
Moving portrait still



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**IMAGE REFERENCES:****Fig 2**

"Madonna and Child" Google Images Search, (2017). Google Images screenshot. [Online]. [https://www.google.co.za/search?q=madonna+and+child&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwivyl\\_74ZjUAhWLCsAKHT4JANwQ\\_AUIBigB&biw=1613&bih=779](https://www.google.co.za/search?q=madonna+and+child&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwivyl_74ZjUAhWLCsAKHT4JANwQ_AUIBigB&biw=1613&bih=779) (Accessed 15 March 2017).

**Fig 3**

"Mother" Google Images Search, (2017). Google Images screenshot. [Online]. [https://www.google.co.za/search?q=madonna+and+child&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwivyl\\_74ZjUAhWLCsAKHT4JANwQ\\_AUIBigB&biw=1613&bih=779#tbm=isch&q=mother](https://www.google.co.za/search?q=madonna+and+child&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwivyl_74ZjUAhWLCsAKHT4JANwQ_AUIBigB&biw=1613&bih=779#tbm=isch&q=mother) (Accessed 15 March 2017).

**Fig 4**

Mary Kelly, (1974), *Primapara*. Bathing Series. Gelatin silver print, 26,67 cm x 20,32 cm. [ONLINE]. Available at: <http://www.myrelchernick.com/maternalmetaphors/images/Mary%20Kelly%20Page/Mary2.jpg> (Accessed 21 March 2017).

**Fig 5**

Collected by Laura Larson. *Anonymous Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hidden Mother Photograph*. In Larson, L. 2017. *Hidden Mother*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.laural Larson.net/curatorial1.html> (Accessed 22 May 2017).

**Fig 6**

Collected by Laura Larson. *Anonymous Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hidden Mother Photograph*. In Larson, L. 2017. *Hidden Mother*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.laural Larson.net/curatorial1.html> (Accessed 22 May 2017).

**Fig 7**

Catherine Opie, (1993). *Self-Portrait / Cutting*. Chromogenic Print. 101,6 cm x 74, 8 cm. [Online]. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/30354> (Accessed 25 March 2017).

**Fig 8**

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**Fig 9**

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A special thank you to Noa Rose and Gala Olanna. I am deeply grateful for your love, patience, support, co-operation, collaboration, time and sacrifice. This project exists because of you. It is an honour to know you and to be your mother.

Mom and OJ, you have made everything possible. Thank you for your unwavering trust, love and support. Camilla, thank you for always being there. Your contribution is invaluable.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to Jean Brundrit, my supervisor, for sharing your extensive photographic knowledge, your experience and guiding me to narrow things down and letting go.

Thank you to Stephen Inngs, my supervisor, for your insights, broad knowledge (photographic and otherwise) and the freedom to explore and experiment.

Camilla, Noa and Gala, thank you for your help with and endurance of the *Everyday Portraits*.

Thank you to Melvin Pather and Moeneeb Dalwai for your valuable technical assistance and considerable knowledge.

Thank you to Kashiefa Shade, Solvej Vorster and Peter Vries for being excellent librarians and kind people. Thank you to Fazlin van der Schyff at the CCA for your printing expertise.

Thank you to Carlos Marzia for the design of this book. Thank you to Sitaara Stodel for assisting behind the camera that time I had to be in front of it.

Post Graduate Funding Office, UCT  
National Research Foundation  
Michaelis School of Fine Art

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