

# MOTHER LOAD



This practice-led research explores how artist-mothers engage with their lived experiences of art-making and motherhood and examines the potential of a Photo Study Workshop as a participatory method for fostering reflection, dialogue and shifts in perception. Using secondary research, Practice as Research and primary methods including workshops, art-making, discussions and a survey, the study is situated within a defined group of artist-mothers.

Photo-elicitation was used as both method and practice, enabling participants to articulate experiences through image-making and discussion. Analysis revealed key themes of time, identity & creativity, domestic labour and value, with notable differences between visual and verbal expression. Findings suggest that motherhood and artistic practice are deeply interconnected, with maternal experience shaping creative processes. The workshop supported critical reflection and collective meaning-making, highlighting the persistent undervaluation of maternal labour within cultural contexts, as discussed in feminist frameworks concerned with care and reproduction.

Overall, the research demonstrates that the *Photo Study Workshop* functions not only as a research method, but also as a reflective and potentially transformative space.

## Exploring the Lived Experience of Artist-Mothers

Hanna Isseyegh



Hanna Isseyegh  
Double Vision, 2026  
Risograph print  
260cm x380cm

### Illuminating Lived Maternal Experience

**Mother Load:** *The Photo Study Workshop* is a participatory visual research project that investigates how motherhood shapes, challenges and enriches artistic practice, grounding its methodology and aims in current feminist scholarship on maternal experience and creative labour. Emerging from a growing body of literature that critiques the historical exclusion of artist-mothers from the art canon, the project recognises motherhood not as an impediment to creative life but as a site of complex transformation, structural tension and potential artistic renewal.

The project ultimately seeks to visualise and validate the complex realities of motherhood within creative practice, offering collective insight into lived maternal experience while examining whether participation in a *Photo Study Workshop* can contribute to a shift in perspective.

### Making, Doing and Thinking

Throughout the project, artistic practice and research have operated in a reciprocal but non-linear relationship. At times they unfold in parallel and at other points one informs the other retrospectively. Positioned as a mother-artist, my lived experience functions as an embedded site of knowledge production, challenging separations between researcher and subject. This foregrounds situated knowledge and acknowledges embodied experience in shaping process and outcome. The project combines participatory research (*Photo Study*) with material-led studio practice, allowing insights to circulate between collective and individual modes in uneven and evolving ways.

Image-making operates as a process of translating research data into visual form. Material is drawn from three sources: participant contributions from the *Photo Study*, the Maternal Mapping exercise and my own interpretive responses to emerging thematic data. These function as a hybrid dataset-qualitative, embodied and affective. As the research developed, recurring patterns within this dataset generated further works, establishing a feedback loop between analysis, interpretation and making.

The *Photo Study* produced clustered data around **time, identity (& creativity)** and the **labour of care**. These patterns emerged inductively, revealing structural conditions rather than individual narratives. Time consistently appeared as a structural constraint on artistic production for mothers. This finding operates visually within the work, shaping fragmentation, repetition and interruption as material and compositional strategies.

### Reconsidering Creative and Maternal Identities

This study explored how participation in a *Photo Study Workshop* influenced artist-mothers' perceptions of their lived experiences of art-making and motherhood. Enabling participants to reconsider the relationship between their creative and maternal identities.

Participants' responses indicate that art-making and motherhood are deeply interconnected rather than separate domains. Many described how maternal experience shapes their creative processes, informing subject matter, constraining and structuring time and prompting adaptive strategies for making work within conditions of care. In this sense, motherhood was not experienced solely as a limitation, but also as a generative force within artistic practice.

Notably, the theme of value emerged as central, though not always visually explicit. Participants reflected on how their artistic labour and maternal work are perceived and valued, both personally and socially. This aligns with feminist analyses such as those of Silvia Federici, who highlights the systemic devaluation of reproductive labour, and Andrea O'Reilly, who advocates for the recognition of motherhood as a site of intellectual and creative production. Within this framework, the study suggests that the experiences of artist-mothers are undervalued but also underrepresented within dominant cultural narratives.

Overall, participation in the *Photo Study Workshop* supported **shifts in perception**, enabling artist-mothers to more fully recognise the scope, significance and interconnectedness of their creative and maternal labour. The research demonstrates that such participatory, visual methodologies can generate collective insight while also contributing to the ongoing revaluation of maternal experience within contemporary artistic practice.

Kathleen Walsh  
Round the Clock, 2025  
Digital Art  
Participant Image

I would like to thank my artist-mother community for their time, support, interest and for the honest, raw and authentic conversations we have shared. You have inspired and supported me in so many ways.

Thank you to all the artists that have participated in the *Photo Studies* and the workshops. Thank you for sharing your stories, for trusting me with your images and your time and thank you for indulging me in endless conversation.

Thank you to my supervisor Dr. Maeve Connolly for your guidance along this journey. Thank you to the IADT Lecturing staff, in particular Cora Gummies, Clyde Doyle, Shirley Casey, Dr Hilary Kenna, Steven Nestor and Chris Pandolfi.

Finally, a special thank you to my friends and family for their ongoing help and support along the way.

