'Daughters Mothers' (Future Feminist Archive)
SCA Galleries, The University of Sydney
5 – 28 March 2015

The creativity that runs in families is rarely the subject of artistic exploration in Australia, and is often restricted to a handful of well-known examples (the Boyd dynasty, more recently painters Michael Johnson and Matthew Johnson). Perhaps due to a small population and fragmented settler histories, there has been a stronger drive for innovation over tradition. Yet for most artists, a learnt way of being, an approach or mindset, even as a reaction *against* a family model, may be at the heart of art-making. In recent months, confronted with the failing health of my own mother, I recalled attending art classes with her as a child. That quiet and focussed time allowed me to be part of a creative journey that directly stimulated the beginnings of my own.

The creative connection in families, specifically between daughters and mothers, was at the heart of 'Daughters Mothers', a gentle yet revelatory exploration within the context of the Sydney College of the Arts initiative, 'Future Feminist Archive: Contemporary Art and Feminism' (on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of International Women's Year). In the catalogue, curator Jacqueline Millner contextualised 'Daughters Mothers' within other Australian intergenerational exchanges, including Vivienne Binns's *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories*, Brenda Croft's *The Big Deal is Black* (1993), and Ponch Hawkes's photographic series *Our Mums and Us* (1977).

The daughters and mothers were Judy Watson (b.1959) and Joyce Watson (b.1935), Alison Clouston (b.1957) and Joan Clouston (b.1926), Toni Warburton (b.1951) and Enid 'Soot' Warburton (1917-2014), Sue Pedley (b.1954) and Peggy Pedley (b.1924). The juxtaposition of the work of each pair was intriguing for the creativity 'back story' of each of the known artists, within what Millner referred to as the 'rich exploration of the intersection between personal and public histories'.[1]

The changing generational mindset was also a reminder of the cyclic nature of behaviour. An abhorrence of waste, in the previous (mothers') generation, was due to limited financial resources and post-war shortages, which developed habitual frugality. In the current (daughters') generation the interest in re-use and sustainability is similar, yet driven by the increased awareness of limitations in the earth's natural resources. Another intrinsic element within this exchange was its rebuttal of the 'patriarchal myth' that motherhood may be an inherent threat to a creative practice.[2] The evidence, certainly in this exhibition, suggested that the reverse was true.

Judy Watson's family (in this context) was extended. Joyce Watson was taught print-making by her daughter Judy, an interesting aspect of their creative connection. Judy's sister Margy Watson died in October 2013, and was represented by a series of prints that explored shopping behaviour with humour and a peculiarly female psyche. There were also small watercolours by Judy's daughter Rani (aged 13). Judy Watson, whose work was recently recognised with an Australia Council Visual Arts Award (2015), acknowledged that, 'The best part of being an artist is sharing the journey'.[3] Her artist's book *Under the Act* (2007), was informed by familial inspiration from her Indigenous heritage and the bond with her grandmother, Joyce's mother Grace. Judy and Joyce's collaboration was an evocative wall-hanging, printed with fish and ghost net motifs.

from top: 'Daughters Mothers', installation views, SCA Galleries, 2015. Showing left to right, **Alison Clouston and Joan Clouston**, ***Never-ending*, 2015**, **Sue Pedley and Peggy Pedley**, ***Patches of Light*, 2015**; **Alison Clouston and Joan Clouston**, ***Never-ending*, 2015**. Installation detail. Courtesy the artists.

Watson describes working on this together as a 'therapeutic, healing process' after her sister's death, and wrote, 'Our blood sings and carries memories of our mothers and their mothers who are laughing in the shadows with us now'.[4]

Alison Clouston has had a diverse career, with significant collaborations at the core of her practice. Her media and the forms she makes are awkward, embedded in environmental ethics, often dark. A long held desire to collaborate with her mother Joan Clouston was noted in her early modelling of strong personal ethics, together with a remarkable making and mending practice. Their collaboration *Never-Ending* (2015) was suitably unruly. An installation, with fabric as its conduit, had long swathes of twisted fabric flow down the wall, through the fulcrum of three 1960s Singer sewing machines, and into family textiles, wool bundles, and the remnants of an injured tree from Clouston's garden. It combined their interests in conservation of resources and the environment.

Toni Warburton described her mother as her first teacher of both art and the observation of nature. Sadly Enid 'Soot' Warburton died while the exhibition was being planned. Toni selected for inclusion Soot's puppet theatres and detailed pencil drawings of landscapes, evocative patches of bush, and rocks. Juxtaposed with Warburton's naturally weathered iron containers, salvaged from a family holiday shack that burnt down, together with ceramics incised with leaf motifs and other Australian bush elements, the works extended each other. Warburton's rusty and burnt containers, patinated by time and experience, were a stunning counterpoint to the SCA's large, raw gallery spaces, in sandstone buildings from the 1880s.

Sue Pedley and Peggy Pedley contributed an installation made in Peggy's studio and garden in Tasmania, which drew on the family's long heritage in the island state. *Patches of light* was two hangings, like twin towers. Sparsely sewn patches on sackcloth dominated the first; the second was made from seaweed and fleece, wire and cord. All of these materials had history—wool from Sue's brother's Tasmanian farm, seaweed gathered at a family holiday spot on the Tasmanian coast, and silk reused from Sue Pedley's performance work at the Setouchi Triennale (Japan, 2010). The juxtaposition of the two hangings saw the dark mass of ageing natural forms contrast with the sewn structures, and explored the displacement inherent in the settlement of Tasmania.

This exhibition described previously untold family stories, and the importance of shared heritage. In their discursive journey through these historic spaces, the installations tied the daughter / mother relationship together, highlighting their respective skills. Yet, in these collaborations, what we saw was so much more than the sum of their parts.

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Notes

1. Jacqueline Millner (ed), *Future Feminist Archive: Contemporary Art and Feminism, 40th Anniversary of International Women's Year 2015,* Sydney College of the Arts, 2015, p.10.
2. Jacqueline Millner (ed), ibid., p.11.
3. Judy Watson, email to the author, March 2015.
4. Judy Watson, in 'Joyce Watson & Judy Watson', Millner (ed), op. cit. p.40.