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Rebecca Hastings

ARTISTS WHO USE themselves as the subject of their work often say it's convenient. But what do we say when it's our children we paint? For me, it's less about creating sentimental mementos, and more about expressing what I call 'maternal ambivalence'.

My recent work explores the relationship between mother and child; the complex and contradictory experiences that swing wildly from affection to aggression, encompassing frustration, rage, tenderness, love and fear. This theme was borne out of an interest in subverting the traditional romantic idealisation of motherhood and children, not just in art but also in contemporary advertising and social norms. It was very much a reflection of my own frustrations in the day-to-day reality of raising children and the pressure I feel from society in this role.

As the work has evolved I find myself repeatedly painting images of my children. It seems only natural that they should feature, given the themes I am probing. The paintings depict my son or daughter wearing homemade masks or concealed within items of clothing – sometimes theirs, often mine. I have introduced nostalgic props (echoing my own childhood) and hand-made objects into the compositions, which serve to separate or hide the child from the viewer.

Whilst I use portraiture as a format, I don't consider the works to be portraits of the

sitters. In fact, I think of the children as props too. Fundamentally, the works speak of concealment and this can be interpreted in many ways. For me, it's about the 'hidden' reality of parenthood, or the guilt you have to hide if you ever suggest your kids are anything but 'little angels', and even my need to run and hide when it all gets too much.

Because I work from photographs there's a lot of work before I can start painting. I'll begin with an idea, expressed as a thumbnail in my journal. Props must be sourced or made and consideration given to the outfits the child will wear. Then it's time for the photo shoot, and that's when things get harder.

One of them will be in charge of holding the light while the sitter will be expected to sit up straight, put their arms down, put their tongue back in, etc. Not surprisingly, I usually end up with something unexpected, whether it's the tilt of a head, the intensity of a confrontational gaze or simply the arrangement of the shadows.

Whilst I paint in a highly realised manner, these are works that play on our imagination. What intrigues me now is that the work is continuing to evolve and each new painting feeds upon the last so that I am less conscious about my initial concerns. Now, disquieting and almost creepy imagery is beginning to emerge, which makes the work harder for me to explain, but ultimately more beguiling and less 'gettable'.

At first glance they appear to be playful images of children, but a second look reveals a certain uncertainty that goes beyond the use of strange props and masks. The stillness of the child, the unnatural light source, the almost-perfect symmetry; these things operate to create a psychological uneasiness that belies cute and cuddly, and treads a precariously fine line between real and unreal. ■

Rebecca Hastings is represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne.
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EXHIBITION
 Disquiet
 28 May to 18 Jun, 2013
 Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne
 Supported by ArtSA

01 Disquiet (The Beanie), 2012, oil on board, 100 x 100cm
 02 Tethered I, 2012, oil on board, 58 x 52cm; photo: James Field
 Courtesy the artist

