

REBECCA HASTINGS

Disquiet

'It's like fighting with myself sometimes, the kids reflect myself back at me, the things they say and do, the personality traits that are embedded in their DNA.'¹

A study in parenthood is held within a single gaze... The child looks out at the mother; defiance mixed with adoration. An intimate, domestic moment is suspended, gently rendered, faithful to the subtle gestures of childhood. But something altogether uneasy is also present. Large knitting needles held in small clenched fists draw attention to a kind of stand-off that seems to be taking place.

Or, sweetly dressed in soft creamy folds, a candy ribbon, oversized beanie and cupid bow lips. But those lips possess no smile and that hat seems permanently drawn down over the eyes. Is this some serious game of hide and seek? Or perhaps, a form of self-imposed time out? The mother gazes back at the child's hidden face. Artist and sitter caught at a shared impasse.

These seemingly playful images – at first glance they spring forth with the vivid reality of childhood – function rather as an inventory of one mother's difficulties, anxieties and personal doubts. Frustration mingles with guilt mingles with love. Parenthood rarely lives up to those media driven inferences of it being all hugs and kisses, and here, despite an atmosphere of calm, there is a faint hint of something deeply unsettled. Within the delicate brushwork of these portraits lies a yearning to divulge a vast range of negative emotions, obligations and hurdles that come with caring for another. The closest relationships often set the greatest challenges.

Hastings makes paintings that intentionally subvert conventional representations of the mother/child bond. Here, the highly personal infiltrates the traditional. The psychological manifests within the everyday. Instead of recalling iconic images of love – child wrapped in mother's all-encompassing embrace, laced with subtle suggestions of saintly adoration – Hastings uses distance and the uncanny to suggest both the intense attachment and inevitable separation that exists between the two. Seen through the anxious eyes of the mother, the child's own self-hood becomes the object of parental stress, a site of potential hazard and worry.

Keenly aware of the perils of childhood and of the physical dangers that abound in daily life, the artist uses the various objects with which the child engages to convey this sense of foreboding. With a luminosity and accuracy similar to 18th century portraiture, the child is depicted by the mother – radiant skin, bright eyes and a dutiful sense of composure, props in hand. But unlike the idyllic children from art history, who stood patiently holding objects of play – a pet, spinning top or some piece of nature plucked from the garden – here we see sharp needles, restraining ribbons, blinding caps, suffocating clothes and pressing hands.

Each item possesses a menacing overtone and it is here that the dark, possibly taboo, core of Hastings' work lies. Sometimes Mothers harbour negative feelings of fear, anger or anxiety toward their role. Sometimes Mothers want to get away from their children, to not be slave to their child's every need. 'By default', states Hastings, 'these object also reflect my own anxieties for myself in the role as mother; I too feel constrained, restrained, blind, suffocated by these beautiful children.'² A portrait of a beautiful child, infused with a mother's concerns; a register of the anguishing battles that can occur between a parent and their offspring, of the worries, tenderness and intensity of that lived experience.

¹ From a series of email interview questions between writer and artist, April 2013

² Ibid

Catalogue essay written by Phe Luxford

