



lucy o'donnell

SITTING WITH UNCERTAINTY

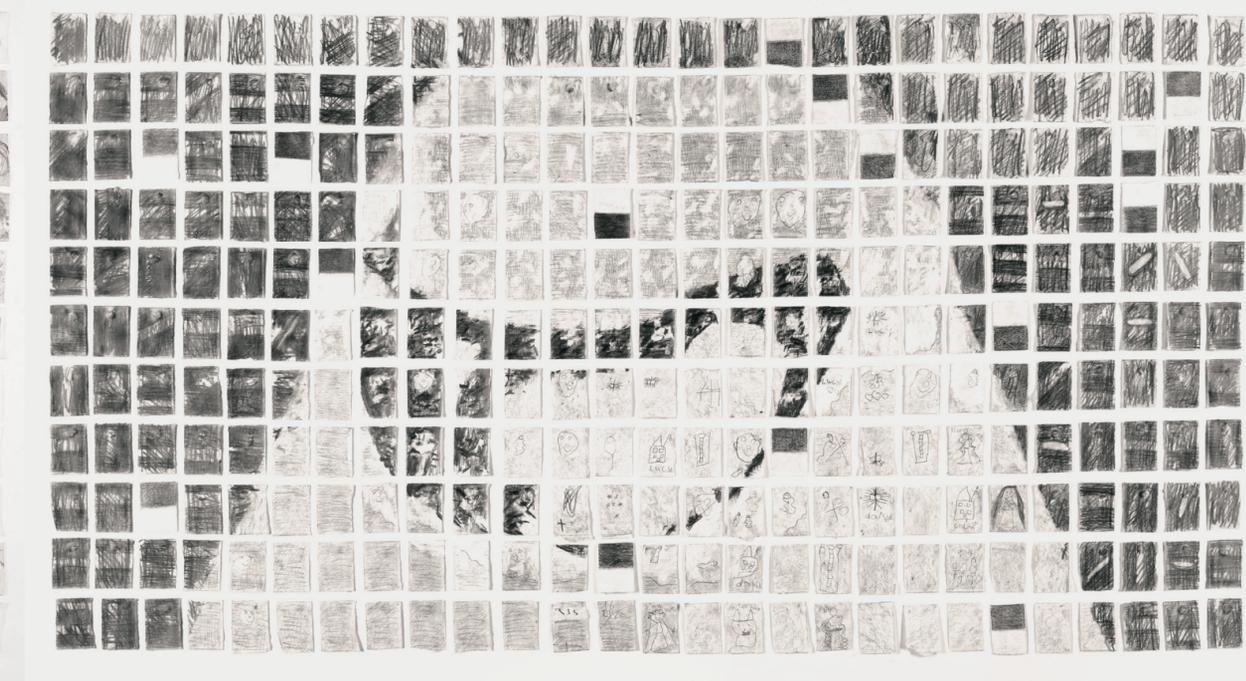
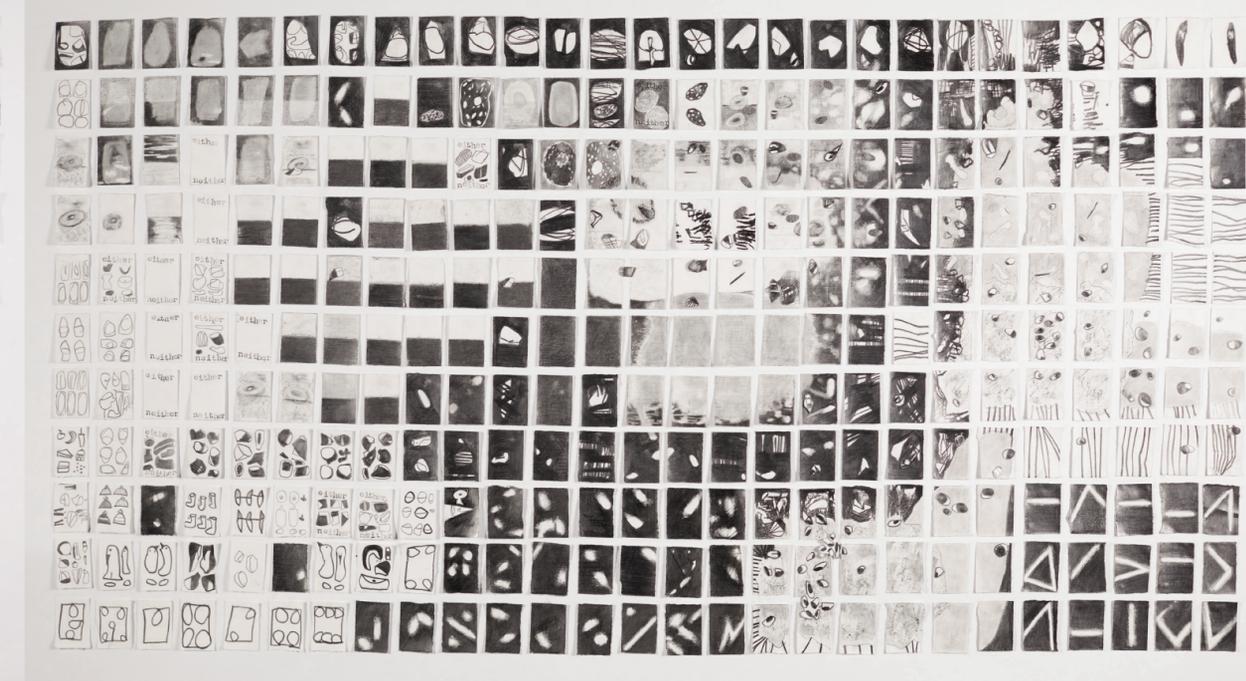


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The drawings and writings in this catalogue aim to create a platform that enables conversations around miscarriage and pregnancy loss. Here, four large drawings are documented bequeathing the four pregnancies I lost. This text gives an overview of the work followed by a collection of short written contributions by makers, thinkers, curators, researchers, and health professionals, and I would like to thank everyone who graciously contributed.

Last year I met Ruth Bender-Atik, the Director of the Miscarriage Association, and we talked through how miscarriage has been shared and documented.

We openly offered reflections around the early phases of miscarriage, a time when assurances cannot be given and when doubt and uncertainty become all consuming. This led our dialogue to use the phrase, sitting with uncertainty, and this expression became the title for the exploration of my drawings and motivated this initial poetic work that reiterates the pace and sensation of uncertainties:

The it of the clock
As the what of the tock
The what of the it
The me and the this
The wanting the waiting
The void and the aching
The peeing and looking
The calls and the booking
The blaming and longing
The feelings of wronging
The wronging and righting
The writing the fighting
The tit and the tat
The this and the that
The in and the out
The tap and the spout
The entrance the exit
The exit the next bit
The what's and the whys
The naps and the cries
The silence and aching
The sleep and the waking
The patterns keep going
Speeding and slowing
All in the clock of its ticks and its tocks

I had my first miscarriage the day after my PhD viva. I passed the process yet, despite this successful result, I felt a great sense of failure. I spent days in hospital with various complications from miscarrying this pregnancy. Things were never going to be the same again; I had persistent encounters with uncertainty throughout the four pregnancies I 'lost'. The drawings in this catalogue are the first significant body of work since my PhD. They connect to and process my miscarried pregnancies. They speak to the taboos of negotiating miscarriage in silence, thereby interrupting the repetition of repressed voices and aspiring to open up conversations around this difficult and complex experience. Each drawing in this catalogue is made up from multiple smaller drawings organised within a grid format. The intention for the drawings is for them to use their individual parts and appear to propagate within the grid structure by making an image that references a range of things, thereby creating a bigger picture of colliding forms and shapes. These drawings refer to each miscarriage I had: four works depicting one body that endured four failed pregnancies. It was my intention that these drawings appear to grow and break, with unexpected forms, activities, and narratives.

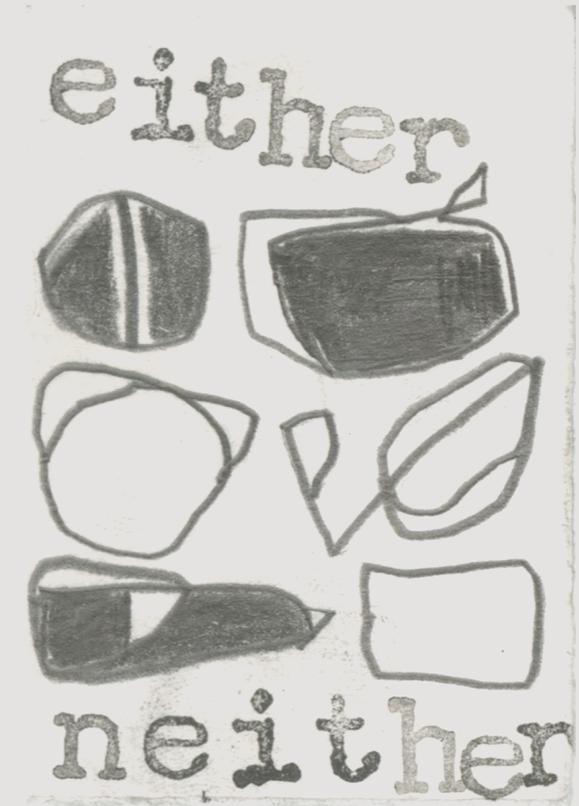
Miscarriage is scary, sad, uncertain; physically and mentally painful; filled with loss, grief, and distress. It is hard. I wanted to make these drawings to work through/with/in this place of uncertainty and failure. Drawings are often perceived

as places where potential arises by thinking through something and allowing the unknown to be untangled: they inherently possibilise. These drawings worked through failure by narrating the in-between of pregnancy without birth. I was interested in shifting my previous application of drawing as a site of potential to perform failings. The repetitive rhythms inherent within a grid set a systematic structure that delineated certainty and inevitability. I liked the way the grid could offer this rigidity whilst the smaller units that made up the work could accommodate difference, alternatives of form, pattern, and nuanced associations with cells, bodies, spaces, and landscapes. It appeared that this format could offer a place for the unexpected to disentangle and enact failure. The smaller units of drawings acted like little chapters of time that make up a bigger picture, a wider narrative. A place where activities are both micro and macro. The process began with my reflections on both landscape and the sonogram, where the ultrasound waves provide a monochromatic image of an unrecognizable place and a strange relationship between image and self-perception, where the unseen and unknown collaborate. This place is like a landscape, an unearthly one, and it offered me a reference point to think about the body's terrains, activities, and cycles. The politics of the body in representational terms was negated through the monochromatic suggestions of the sonographic image.

The sonographer's image gives access to the private domain of your body, to the place your baby dwells. It is this image that can quickly resituate the language used for your pregnancy. The status your body once possessed changes within the language gleaned from this image and where, for me, my baby changed and became material of conception. In this shift expected events ceased and biological growth became a vessel that had fucked up.

My GP and midwife had been telling me about my baby, about their due date, and gleaning information from me to fill in forms and make plans. But a miscarriage deletes this and, on the same day when medical professionals talked about my 'baby', others named it the 'material of conception'. Both my infants and my own status had changed. You and your body did not do its job and your baby has been let down ... by you. Blame and shame take over and, with limited answers as to why such a catastrophic occurrence has happened, a pragmatic you is asked for: Please change your idea of baby, its care and safety, its successful development, your nurturing, and place as mother in order to sort out this 'material'; alter the importance of baby as baby does not exist its matter now and its coming out unfinished. The professionals need to make sure you know what options you have, and you are given choices for 'miscarriage management'. You do not want to take any of these choices; you don't want the material to exit; you want your baby back.

These experiences of loss filtered through into the drawings, sometimes with words, sometimes with ambiguous shapes that appear as like blobs or splats, whilst other times more recognizable forms came forward, such as nappies or bottles: the things that have also been taken away. The drawings were worked in small detail, like stars in the night sky, tiny dots inhabiting dark vast spaces. The process of making these drawings was about the physical activity of labouring marks and surfaces as a time bound suspension of mercurial forms. Pregnancy propels you into a future: medical staff plan, explain, and prepare, as do you, both physically and mentally. What do you need, what do you have, what do you need to arrange? All of this disappears and takes a tangent, where the choices are not wanted and all lead to the same outcome: the 'material' must leave you. The newness, the expectations, the potential of growth all go ... but the desire does not ... the love does not ... the connection does not These, however, get replaced with failure. The rich potential of growth is replaced with loss, and what do you do with loss? The drawings are interwoven with the narratives and experiences of miscarriage, so to talk about the drawings is to talk about the miscarriages. The drawings connect to the expelling; they ponder the tentative time between the viable and non-viable, between baby and material, between maternity and expulsion.



**Professor Lisa Baraitser:
Professor of Psychosocial Theory**

MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities, and Ethics) is dedicated to promoting critical debates about the maternal in contemporary culture. We use the term 'the maternal' to unpack 'motherhood' as a lived experience, a social location, political and scientific practice, an economic and ethical challenge, a theoretical question, and a structural dimension in human relations, politics, and ethics. From this perspective, pregnancy without birth is central to both the maternal and to the politics of birth. In a 2014 special issue of MaMSIE's Journal Studies in the Maternal dedicated to 'Non-Reproduction', guest editors Sophie Jones, Harriet Cooper, and Fran Bigman asked two key political questions: firstly whether discussions of the politics of reproduction (such as about abortion, reproductive rights, and rights to work alongside raising children) have obscured social investments in non-reproductivity and, secondly, if it is possible to navigate the tensions between coercion and prohibition in relation to reproduction, in order to open up non-reproduction as a strategy of feminist and queer resistance. In other words, can non-reproduction operate as a category of experience that helps us to rethink the polarisations of positions that saturate the politics of reproduction? Dissolving the conceptual opposition between reproduction and non-reproduction allows us to understand pregnancy as a state of contingency and indeterminacy, and this in turn

allows the emergence of a pregnant subject's position that undermines the logic of attempts to impose social order through the control of the female reproductive body. Whilst pregnancy without birth is an affective experience, one that can be filled with sadness, pain, and grief, it is also carries multiple meanings that are easily obscured if pregnancy is mis-conceptualised as a singular or determinate state of being. The state of being 'betwixt and between' is not just that of miscarriage, which is described in the philosophical literature as ontologically ambiguous because it falls between a series of binaries such as 'parent' and 'non-parent', but the state of pregnancy itself. Pregnancy without birth allows us to glimpse this ontological ambiguity that figures in the feminine in culture and politics and to build coalitions of solidarity that support the maintenance of its meaning making potentials. We can see this in Lucy O'Donnell's work as she moves through the grief of pregnancy without birth, thereby joining so many people who are pondering their various states of contingency. Her drawings consider the state of pregnancy as 'betwixt and between' as she builds and breaks compositional possibilities by mirroring her thoughts and experiences, thereby using this catalogue to extend conversations and interrogate pregnancy through the collective written contributions.

**Ruth Bender-Atik:
Director of the Miscarriage Association**

Art provides us with a way of processing our thoughts and emotions. Abstract art, such as Lucy's, allows us to interpret what we see in different ways, since one piece of work can mean something different to each person who views it. This can be extremely valuable when interacting with works that explore difficult subjects, such as pregnancy loss, because they can encourage clarity and provide comfort in unexpected ways. Everyone experiences miscarriage differently; everyone's experience is unique. Lucy's artwork explores her personal experience and sends the message to others that they too will have their own unique feelings and thoughts about their own loss. The Miscarriage Association is a UK-wide charity that offers support and information to anyone affected by miscarriage, ectopic, or molar pregnancy. Our staffed helpline and online resources help thousands of people every year to get through their experience of pregnancy loss and, in many cases, to manage the anxiety of pregnancy after loss. We work with health professionals to promote good practice in medical care, support clinical research, and strive to raise public awareness of the facts and feelings of pregnancy loss. We are moved by Lucy's work and her wish to share her own personal experience of pregnancy loss through art, in the hope that it can provide some support and comfort to those in a similar position.

**Dr Vanessa Corby:
Associate Professor,
School Research Lead: Fine Art,
School of Art, Design &
Computer Science**

*Turning the Material: Miscarriage,
Not Knowing and Matter*

Sitting with Uncertainty, produced by Lucy O'Donnell between 2018 and 2019, draws the unseen trauma and grief of miscarriage into the realm of the visible. The process of making this lived experience of sexual difference tangible for others is vital in a culture in the UK that still struggles to grasp the significance of this predominantly private medicalised event. Gesture and graphite on paper transform the private rhythms, sensations, flows, and matter of the body in the closed space of the studio. The act of doing so should not be mistaken for therapy, which only ever places art in the service of forgetting. Rather, it is a means to sustain and share the absent presence which has come into being for an (m) other.

The freedom to share this experience from a position of safety, through processes of material-led exploration or other forms, is a profound privilege. The transition of this work from the private space of the studio to the public realms of exhibition and publication walks a political tight-rope because to articulate one woman's bereavement for the benefit of others could quite easily be mobilised by those who would deny women choice over their reproductive rights. The proximity

given to abortion and miscarriage in Law in conservative US States, such as Alabama, and countries, such as Egypt, El Salvador, and the Philippines, imprisons women unless they can prove that the inability to carry their pregnancy to term was spontaneous.¹ In many respects this legislation is the most extreme manifestation of the responsibility assigned to pregnant women, which presupposes that they are somehow in conscious control of their physical bodies while denying them a right to autonomy over them. The cultural, medical, and political forces that structure the experience of miscarriage for women turn on this presumption of de facto control over the body, which is part and parcel of a wider ideological framework that discriminates against disability, obesity, and represses the natural process of aging in order to deny death. A new, hysterical era of normativity ushered in by wearable technological devices such as smart watches and fitness trackers polices the body according to the data it produces. Sensory awareness of the body, regardless of gender, is giving way to the mapping, monitoring, and assessment of O2 sats, heart rates, and sleep patterns. Moreover, for many women in the West, the body's flows and rhythms have been mitigated by oestrogen and progesterone based contraception. The decision to 'plan' a pregnancy and even a birth is often, therefore, a confrontation with the body's hitherto unfelt physicality and recalcitrance. The grief felt when a pregnancy does not carry to term is then

compounded by this context, which takes hold of mourning and transforms it into guilt by attributing blame to a body that refused to be subjugated to conscious will. As O'Donnell says, 'You and your body did not do its job and your baby has been let down [...] by you.'²

The four drawings clustered within *Sitting with Uncertainty* are a corporealization of this experience; its grid formations work through this expectation of control while the individual, intensely worked drawings deny any sense of containment. Some can be read from left to right, imbuing them with a temporal logic, and yet each work augments the restlessness of the grid that Rosalind Krauss famously described via the paintings of Agnes Martin.³ The viewer's gaze lurches in fits and starts between gestures, images, and surfaces that resolutely insist upon the bodily matter of mother and child. The gestalt of the work is not a coherent whole but a fractured narrative that again and again displaces hope to perform the irrevocable rupture of the one from the other.

The scale, monochrome, and formlessness of some drawings invoke the sonographic image which, as O'Donnell explains, 'gives you access to the private domain of your body, to the place your baby dwells'. The cellular forms emerge through the negative space surrounded by hard angular graphite lines that score the paper with palpable aggression. Here, the darkness of the mother's body is not a soft, fluid space of nurture but a site of violent reproach: 'you have fucked up'.⁴ Elsewhere, repeated ovoid forms are

conjoined, sit side by side or overlay one another, as if circling something that the artist is desperately trying to conjure from the page.

As a woman and mother this work is difficult to bear; it compels me to reflect with sadness and regret on my own reproductive history. One in four women experience miscarriage, one in a hundred has three in a row; some suffer four in the later stages of pregnancy, which is nothing short of brutal. More than once, while writing this essay, I have been compelled to reach out and physically draw my own child close to me to be assured of his continued life force. This visceral yearning for my son speaks of the inextricable bond between mother and child, and this is what is at stake in these drawings. This is no more apparent that in the integral section of work formed by O'Donnell's daughter Daisy's drawings. Their presence articulates the promise that each of O'Donnell's pregnancies held: the potential for a further bond between a mother and a vibrant, intelligent, loving, funny little human being.⁵ The inclusion of Daisy's drawings stands as a testimony to what might have come into being but also lends additional weight to O'Donnell's lament for these babies, as these losses are not hers alone but are shared within her family. The artist therefore not only has to reconcile her own grief and that of her partner, but also her daughter's mourning for a much longed for sibling who she now crosses out or, as Derrida would have it, places under erasure, thereby sustaining them and her relationship

to them as neither there nor not there.⁶ The vitality of the drawings clustered within *Sitting with Uncertainty*, as well as their animate materials and gestures, simultaneously seek to disavow the death blow that transformed O'Donnell's babies into 'material of conception'. The failure of these drawings catches them in a tension between animate and inanimate matter.

To speak as a colleague, who has worked alongside O'Donnell during the production of this body of work, prompts reflection on the continued need to recognise our collegiate and pedagogical responsibilities to one another as feminists. The drive to find a voice through which to articulate the hitherto occluded experiences of sexual difference in the academy brings a new critical lens to discourse practice-based research. The Fine Art Masters programme that O'Donnell and I devised champions the agency of materials and the body, as well as the need to let go of the desire to control of predetermined ideas and to give oneself up to uncertainty as a positive means to unlock, interrogate, and develop an art practice. It is a curriculum that draws on artists, such as Emma Cocker, Elizabeth Fisher, and Rebecca Fortnum, and thinkers, such as Jane Bennet, Elizabeth Grosz, Tim Ingold, James Elkins, and Merleau-Ponty. *Sitting with Uncertainty* is a searing example of the unfolding of embodied knowledge through making in which the artist and their work journey through the not yet known. In this instance, however, the relevance of Merleau-Ponty stems not only

from his famous intertwining of vision, movement, and uncertainty but from the means by which he configures painting as an 'ongoing birth'.⁷ His revolutionary ontology constitutes the body as a generative site of knowledge and assigns a positive value intended to supplement, if not supplant, the distance and dissection of Western Rationalism. Forty years later, this notion of painter as genetrix has been taken up by James Elkins, who intertwines matter, space, and the artist in the womb of the studio, via his famous recourse to alchemy in *What Painting Is* (1999).⁸ *Sitting with Uncertainty*, however, puts a question mark beside the efficacy of the body conceived by Merleau-Ponty and Elkins. It is a body of work that problematizes the notion of artist/work/studio as a genetrix for women, revealing the normative expectations that can belie even the most radical of philosophical gestures.

¹ A comprehensive picture of the regulation of women's reproductive rights across the globe can be accessed via <https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws> Last Accessed 09/09/2019.

² Lucy O'Donnell, (2019).

³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Harvard, Mass: MIT Press, 1986).

⁴ Lucy O'Donnell, (2019) my emphasis.

⁵ I wish to stress that this 'promise' should be distinguished from any claim of 'ensoulment' as advocated by the Pro-Life movement. For further reading see Chapter 6 'Stem Cells and the Culture of Life' in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 82–93.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, (1998) *Of Grammatology*, pp 19.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1961) 1993. 'Eye and Mind', in Galen A. Johnson ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 129.

⁸ Elkins, James. 1999. *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting. Using the Language of Alchemy*. London: Routledge.

Hannah Darwin: PhD Student in Art History from Queen's University in Canada and Assistant Digital Archivist at the Birth Rites Collection

The Birth Rites Collection, hosted by the Department of Midwifery within the Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery, and Palliative Care at King's College London, is the sole contemporary collection in the world that focuses directly on childbirth. The collection is displayed across five medical buildings at Guy's Campus and is composed of works of photography, sculpture, painting, film, and other mixed media. Its goal is to encourage a wider debate about the politics and practice of childbirth through art. From the moment of its installation at King's, the collection has received much opposition regarding the unabashed depiction of the female body and the process of childbirth from medical students and staff, who have branded the works as "inappropriate" and "offensive".

As an Art History PhD student, my work deals with the visual and material culture of death and medicine in Victorian Britain. My research looks at how attitudes towards death changed with developments in modern medicine and how these new attitudes were represented and signalled in the visual and material culture of the nineteenth century. Recently, I was fortunate enough to intern as an Archivist for the Birth Rites Collection. One work from the collection that was particularly striking and brought together the themes of birth and death

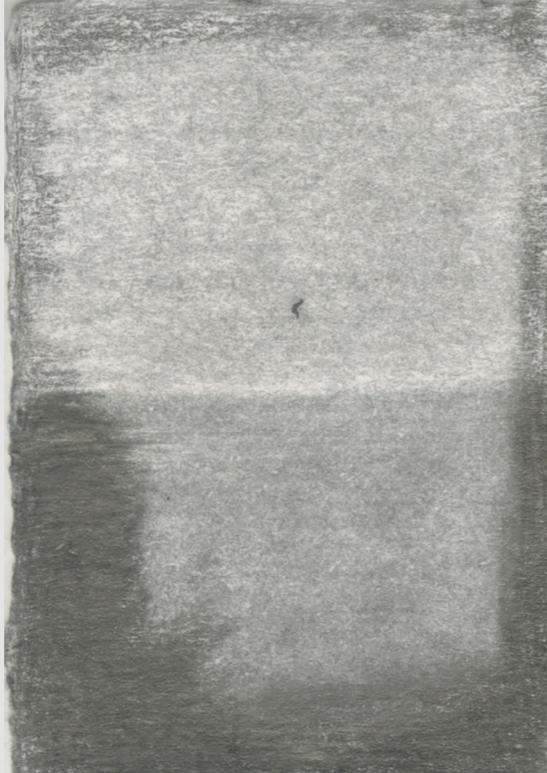
was Tabitha Moses's *The Islands of Blood and Longing*. In this piece, Moses documents a miscarriage by staining paper with her products of conception as they emerge from her body, creating a series of crimson islands.

When a woman conceives, she not only conceives a child but also a future, a possibility. She becomes immediately connected to the potential life inside her and she begins to imagine the endless possibilities that this little being could bring to her life. When a miscarriage occurs, more than one conception is lost. With each cramp and passage of clot, that fragile future ebbs further out of reach. Sadly, this is not a rare occurrence for a woman. Miscarriage, in fact, is the most common complication that occurs during pregnancy. In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that one in eight women experience miscarriage.¹

Euro-American culture has tended to treat death with a forced formality, a rigid — and most importantly — pervasive silence. What makes *The Islands of Blood and Longing* both powerful and poignant is how the simple act of documentation deals with the passage of time, grief, and death. Similarly, Lucy O'Donnell's project, *Sitting with Uncertainty*, uses drawing to work through the disquiet that accompanies a miscarriage. As a woman who has experienced miscarriages, O'Donnell uses drawings as a metaphor for possibility and potential. Her drawings are blended not only with her own stories of miscarriage but also the lability of the moments linking maternity and expulsion.

The importance of the Birth Rites Collection and projects like O'Donnell's that plainly and openly discuss the complex feelings around miscarriage cannot be understated. O'Donnell's project is particularly significant as her work creates a space for women to break the silence that surrounds the essential but uncomfortable moments of birth and death.

¹ Miscarriage, National Health Services. Last reviewed 1 June 2018. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/miscarriage/>.



Griselda Goldsbrough:
Visual Artist and Writer,
Co-Curator for Aesthetica Art
Prize, and Art and Design
Development Manager at
York Teaching Hospital NHS
Foundation Trust

We have a culture that often says stay strong, hide loss, and keep going. With Lucy's artwork we have an opportunity to be open, share, and discuss the many impacts that miscarriages have on both women and men. The artworks beautifully confront the numerous complex layers and individual emotions that are often ignored but sit with us as viewers, as well as those who experience miscarriage. Here, Lucy explores both the fleeting moments and the deep-seated devastation that many suffer through drawing and contemporary processes. Artists have addressed miscarriage through their work from Frida Kahlo, 'The Miscarriage', as early as 1932 to photographer Dianne Yudelson, who experienced this loss eleven times and created the photo series, 'Lost'. Andrew Foster, an award-winning illustrator, created the artwork 'Pain Will Not Have the Last Word' to express his loss from a male perspective. These losses inspired them to express their pain through art and to give others the chance to learn, engage, and share. Lucy's work also raises awareness about the grief, loss, and isolation that is felt but often not shared. Here we have chance to connect, talk, and support.

Dr Deborah Harty:
Programme Director Fine Art,
Creative Arts, Loughborough
University; Co-Editor of TRACEY
Drawing and Visualisation
Research

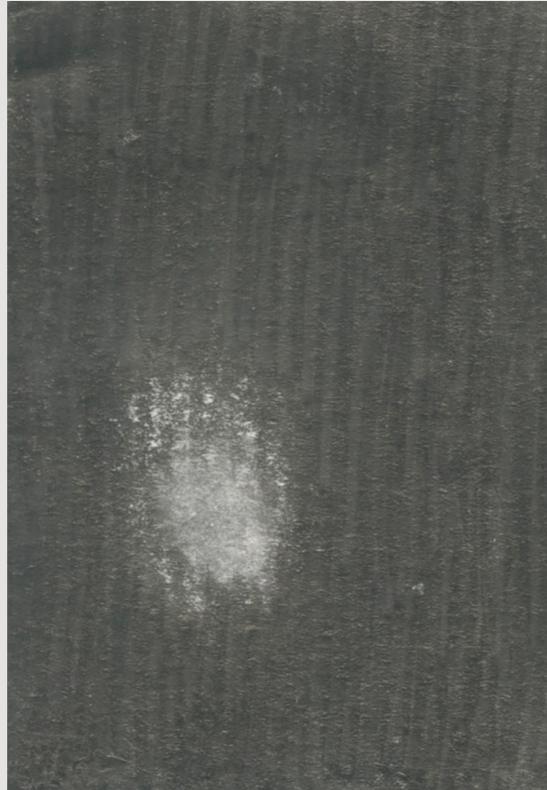
blackness falls

... the death of an unborn child is a hard experience to reconcile. The nature of pregnancy is expectation; of a future; of renewing life; of nurturing. An anticipation of a life ahead, smiles, the first steps, starting school. Clichés ... maybe? Nevertheless through the irritation and discomfort of the physical awkwardness of pregnancy, they create a mind-set of joy. What happens when that is taken away, in an instant, no time to adjust, gone, black and white, no room for compromise, just over. Left with the physical signs of what could have been, milk with no reason to flow, a cot, a teddy bear and tiny shoes with no purpose other than to increase the sense of loss. There is a sense of failure, guilt, your role; to nurture; to protect; to keep them from harm - you didn't. A harrowing time, a sense of loss, blackness, isolation; a fear of most around to communicate with you - an unwanted reminder that life is fragile and temporary. Dark and dismal times, what followed was a series of questioning, about life - about death. An awakening to the reality of life, a time to acknowledge fear, death ... very disorientating, an isolating experience, constant reminders of what you have lost and a lack of understanding as to why you should feel such grief for a life never lived. It continued, things returned to normal,

but the weight was carried, the feeling of disconnection ever present. Tasks continued to be tackled, dinner continued to be cooked; the emptiness grew long after the physical self had returned to its near pre-event state. There seemed no end, try to understand, to reflect, what rationale could there be for such an event? It presented a challenge of beliefs, that we exist, have a journey, learn from our mistakes, that everything happens for a reason. Lost, the underpinning philosophy I had judged and used to learn to cope with anything grim ... gone ... in an instant.¹

This passage appears within my PhD thesis: the starting point of my practice-led research through drawing. Like Lucy O'Donnell, drawing was my means of working through and communicating the experiences of loss and the grief that followed. Many years on, with a young woman for a daughter, the memory of that loss is still ever present. Miscarriage is not an easy subject to be confronted with. It often remains the domain of those who experience it or care for those going through it: a world held in secret. Lucy's experiences and the subsequent project, *Sitting with Uncertainty*, speak to those who have felt this loss, whilst also opening the dialogue with a wider audience. This offers an opportunity for understanding and a place of acceptance for the grief of a life never lived.

¹ Harty, D. (2010), *drawing // experience a process of translation*, PhD thesis: Loughborough University



**Sarah Irvin:
founder of the Artist Parent Index**

The experience of miscarriage arguably lacks adequate platforms for expression and the subject has been notably marginalized within the canon of art history. To address this inadequacy, the Artist Parent Index collects information related to the visual art discourse around reproduction and parenting, and organizes these details in an online searchable database. As a repository for knowledge about the variety of art practices pursuing these topics, the Index provides support for the development of these visual art discourses and increases public understandings of reproduction. Artistic practices critically engaging with the experience of miscarriage are a crucial component of this project, as miscarriage is ubiquitous yet remains unfamiliar to those who have not experienced it. Lucy O'Donnell's project, 'Sitting with Uncertainty', creates a space for challenging conversations with those who have experienced miscarriage as well as their families, thereby facilitating support for this community. The Artist Parent Index seeks to increase awareness of O'Donnell's work within the general public, specifically those who have not had a first-hand experience with miscarriage, as the project is a model for care through personal expression and interpersonal understanding. The concept of care is a touchstone for the Artist Parent Index through their prioritization of care for the artists involved, as well as their ideas. Care, our

common need, is generative. Caretaking has the capacity to create connection through the engenderment of shared knowledge. Both the connection-through-knowledge and the knowledge-because-of-connection produce new possibilities for the structures of our daily lives. This knowledge-connection that surrounds reproductive experiences — especially those related to miscarriage — is essential for the creation of respectful public policies related to reproduction, making provisions for trauma-informed medical care, structuring decent workplace policies, and for the overall health of our communities and the individuals who create them.

**Dr Rebekka Kill:
Head of School Art, Design
and Computer Science at
York St John University**

*Just the Dream Hanging Around her Still:
Invisible children and Imaginary lives.*

Unlike other deaths, when a pregnancy or a neonate is lost there are no grieving rituals: often no gravestone, no condolences, no flowers and cards, no gathering of friends and family!

Without clear and customary mourning rituals, parents are left not knowing how to mourn, deprived of their right to mourn, and feeling as if their grief is not recognised by society²

Alice is feeling really sad today; there's a dull ache deep inside her rib cage, a lump in her throat. She says goodbye to her two boys, squeezing them a little bit too hard, trying not to cry. She's thinking

about the little sister they never had; the one they never got to meet. She would be three today, little invisible Cherry. She's a shadow child, but one that has a mother, a father, and two big brothers. Alice sees this blond-haired, blue-eyed toddler often: imagines her soft curls, her smell, her voice, the way they might hug and hold each other. But today, on Cherry's birthday, Alice is going to her grave to sob and grieve and let all her secret, desperate grief out.

Terry and I are sitting in a bar drinking gin. I tell her Alice's story, and talk about writing this text. Her face crumples, and a tear rolls down her cheek. "My daughter would be 34 now", she says. "I can't talk to anyone about it, but I imagine her all the time. What she would look like. What she might be doing. I could even be a grandparent by now." She pauses, "No-one has ever, ever, spoken to me about this. Ever." We're silent for a moment.

And so when Mrs Darling went back into the night-nursery to see if her husband was asleep, all the beds were occupied. The children waited for her cry of joy, but it did not come. She saw them, but she did not believe they were there. You see, she saw them in their beds so often in her dreams that she thought this was just the dream hanging around her still.

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*³

How many of us have lost children? These invisible children are in the shadows where a daughter, a son, a brother, a sister, or a grandchild should be. These ones that never were, or were just a

moment that's gone, only exist in our imagination. But in our imagination they grow, change, have relationships, and a life that's synchronous with our own. They are there and not there simultaneously. And how complex are these fictions that we carry with us? The hair, the face, the developmental landmarks: starting school, doing exams, getting married, having their own children. All the birthdays that never happened and the relationships that only exist in our imaginary narratives.

Imagine for a moment that all of these ghosts, these shadows, were made visible. Thousands and thousands of people who have been loved and grieved for, and whose invisible lives play out alongside ours. These people have imagined pasts, and imagined futures woven with ours. But these are futures that will never exist.

Italy Calvino describes this perfectly in *Invisible Cities*⁴

From that real of hypothetical past of his, he is excluded; he cannot stop; he must go on to another city, where another past awaits him, or something perhaps that had been a possible future of his and is now someone else's present. Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: dead branches

These dead branches, these imaginary lives, are our internalised grieving rituals. They're private, but also shared by many.

¹ Frost M., Condon JT (1996) The psychological sequelae of miscarriage: a critical review of the literature. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry;30:54-62

² Lang, A, et al. (2011) Perinatal Loss and Parental Grief: The Challenge of Ambiguity and Disenfranchised Grief OMEGA, Vol. 63(2) 183-196

³ Barrie, J. M. (2015) Peter Pan (Collins Classics) William Collins; UK ed. edition

⁴ Calvino, I., (1997) Invisible Cities, trans. Weaver, W., Vintage Classics

Dr Alison Longridge: Acupuncturist, PhD, MScAc, MBAcC, ACT

What I love about traditional acupuncture is that this medicine recognises what it is to be an emotional being; it declares and celebrates that we are first and foremost emotional beings, who thrive on loving connections and our ability to create.

The creation of new life is an extraordinary event. It demands huge physical resources to create, from scratch, a perfect miniature baby with its own endocrine gland – its very own life support system – and all within the first weeks of pregnancy. It is no wonder then that a miscarriage can be so much more than a heavy period, that it can require an emergency hospital admission, and leave you feeling physically and emotionally shattered.

My job is to help gently bring about the physical and emotional letting go of a miscarriage. It is to allow women to recognise the magnitude of their heartbreak, to help them recover from blood loss, and to guide them to sleep, rest, and eat deeply nutritious food. It is to re-establish normal blood flow to the uterus after surgery and treat palpitations, anxiety, and insomnia. It is to help re-establish the ebb and flow of hormones throughout the fertile cycle and draw them out in BBT charts: a clear visual that restores trust and confidence in their

bodies and helps women see just how ready they are to conceive again, to create again.

Traditional acupuncture is a brilliantly practical medicine with a tender heart, but not everyone knows just how beneficial it can be for women to see an experienced fertility acupuncturist for pregnancy loss. And that is why I was delighted when Lucy asked me to contribute a few words to this wonderful art project.

Liz Long: Development Manager, Reflect

Miscarriage can be a topic that is often unspoken; therefore, we are delighted to be included in this catalogue so that we can support Lucy in opening conversations to share experiences of miscarriage. Reflect provides care and support to anyone who has experience of miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, or stillbirth in North Yorkshire. A pregnancy loss, at any stage of pregnancy or soon after, can leave a woman or man feeling overwhelmed with unanswerable questions and grief. A sense of isolation and loss are common and may leave you feeling 'out of step' with events. Reflect can help work through the emotions that surround the loss in a safe and compassionate environment. We allow time to express pain and disappointment, and offer support for as long as it is needed. We offer a structured support programme called 'Reflections' that enables someone to come to terms with their loss. The Reflections course is a series

of approximately 10 sessions that explore the emotional, physical, and spiritual effects of pregnancy loss and it has proved to be life changing for those who have completed the programme at Reflect. We look at the different stages of the grieving process and help to work through all the different emotions that may come up, such as anger, sadness, guilt, and grief. We offer the Reflections programme both on a one-to-one basis and for couples. Losing a baby under any circumstance and at any stage of pregnancy can cause a great deal of suffering for the mother or father, and Reflect is able to provide the time and space to work through that suffering. We want to give the hope of coming to a place of acceptance and being able to move forward.

One client said "*I found it very helpful to have a safe space to talk ... [Reflect] has really helped me through the most difficult period of my life in a way that has made me stronger and happier than before.*" A loss may have been recent or many years ago. Someone may have experienced one loss or several. All Reflect volunteers are trained in our specific pregnancy loss support and all receive regular, on-going supervision and training. Emma, one of our volunteers, described her experience of helping a client: "*It's wonderful to see the person change in front of you ... no longer overwhelmed by sadness but accepting the miscarriage as part of her life journey*". Grief is normal: it is a process of emotional suffering usually caused by the loss (or perceived loss) of someone or something that is

important to us. Following pregnancy loss, grief is the release of sadness at the loss of the baby, all that might have been and, potentially, a bit of themselves. Grief often involves initial shock, then sadness and anger or fear, before moving forward into acceptance. However, months or even years after the loss someone can, on occasions, still be overcome with grief. Many of our clients wish that friends and family could talk to them about their loss, ask them about their experience, and ask how they are. If a baby has been named, please do use it. Often people also wish that their friends would behave normally around them and invite them to events, even if they say no. Also, practical support can be helpful, especially if they have other children. Ask them "What can I do to help?" and ask them again in a few days and weeks' time.

All of Reflect's services are free and confidential. If you would like any further information or if you would like to make an appointment then you can contact us via our website at www.reflectsupport.co.uk or you can give us a call: Harrogate: 01423 206710 York: 01904 676710 Selby: 01757 547710

Dr Annemarie Murland: Practicing Artist and Curator, Coordinator of Visual Art at the Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies, University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

Lucy O'Donnell: Sitting with Uncertainty as a Means to Re-imagine the Canon

As part of her on-going artistic research, Dr Lucy O'Donnell presents a series of drawings and creative writing entitled *Sitting with Uncertainty*, which has been made in conjunction with a forthcoming exhibition to provide insight into the subjectivity of losing a child through miscarriage. A personal lens registers the artist's felt experience through visual and textual narratives that cast full light on the misconception of "the fertility of nature." ¹ The subsequent works present everyday culture and Western art history with a dilemma of reception and expression, as there is no real representation or documentation on the role of miscarriage and its impact on the female body and psyche within art history. These works of art, alongside a strong, embodied, feminine narrative, support O'Donnell's vital contribution to the gender-specific international art exhibition and festival, *Reimagining the Canon*, which will take place at Newcastle Art Space Gallery, Newcastle, NSW, Australia, from 25th October-17th November 2019. Women artists and performers along with female poets and writers from across border states and continents will converge in Newcastle over a three week period to celebrate creativity and "connectivity"

from a purely “womanist” perspective.² The exhibition as a means of ‘cracking open the canon’, provides a platform for women artists to respond to a history of exclusion and limitation that has underpinned female representation in commercial and institutional art spaces universally. To that end, the historical narratives that render art made by women as “a visible invisibility” are rejected and ignored in favour of a revisionist approach to practice and reception.³ As such, a variety of interdisciplinary works of art that question ‘what art made by women is and what it can be’ provides the contextual touchstone for both the artist and viewer. O’Donnell’s creative practice acts as a conduit between empiricism, the female body, and its representation in art history. By retelling her personal story of miscarriage and its associated vernacular of loss, the artist imparts a real sense of authorship into the works’ formal identity. O’Donnell’s methodology is firmly located within the visual as a form of felt experience. As an archive, this body of monochromatic, abstract drawings is imbued with a sensory, gender-specific aesthetic to deliver a self-reflexive and intimate account of her lived experience of continued miscarriage to the viewer. The individual compositions are a repository of marks, lines, shapes, and tone that sustain the certainty of the works’ “formal coda”.⁴ As part of the process of making, the works are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed in an effort to breakdown any notion of formal representation. At

the same time, the process of making also illustrates how the artist thinks through the building-up of both surface and form.

As a metaphor of resistance, the use of the ‘grid’ as an installation device disrupts the natural order within the composition and highlights the disparate relationship between form and content, memory and the body, presence and absence.⁵ To that end, a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty is created within the composition as a whole, reflecting the evolving and dissolving nature of miscarriage itself. As a powerful communication tool, the art of women’s stories is central to and shapes Dr Lucy O’Donnell’s artistic research. The exhibition focuses on the power of art to connect women, regardless of their race, age, sexual identity, or location, through their creative practice, whatever that may be.

Instagram: Reimagining the Canon

Facebook: Reimagining the canon

¹ Emma Goldman, *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism*, 3rd. ed. (New York, USA: Times Change Press, 1970), 23.

² The use of the terms ‘connectivity’ and ‘womanist’ illustrate the symbiotic relationship that exists between women when they share a lived, felt experience.

³ Pamela M. Lee, “Open Secret: The Work of Art Between Disclosure and Redaction” *ARTFORUM*, 49:1, (2011), accessed July 7, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201105/open-secret-the-work-of-art-between-disclosure-and-redaction-28060>.

⁴ See Una Rey, Virginia Cuppaidge: “The Nature of Abstraction” *ARTFORUM*, 39:2, (2019), accessed July 7, 2019, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4770/virginia-cuppaidge-the-nature-of-abstraction/>.

⁵ See UbuWeb, Rosalind Krauss, “Grids” *UbuWeb Papers*, October, Vol. 9, (Summer, 1979), pp. 50–64, accessed July 8, 2019, http://www.ubu.com/papers/krauss_grids.html.

Professor Lesley Regan: Head of Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust at St Mary’s Hospital, and Deputy Head of the Division of Surgery, Oncology, Reproductive Biology and Anaesthetics at Imperial College London

Professor Lesley Regan is the 30th President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, only the second woman to ever hold this role, and the first in sixty-four years. Professor Regan has kindly shown support for the work of Dr Lucy O’Donnell from York St John University, which aims to open discussions and broaden understanding of miscarriage. Head of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at St Mary’s Hospital campus, Imperial College London, Professor Regan is also director of Women’s Health Research Centre and co-director of the UK Pregnancy Baby Bio Bank. Professor Regan combines her clinical and research work on recurrent miscarriage and uterine fibroids with a passion for communicating to the wider public, writing two successful books on miscarriage and pregnancy for the general reader and presenting a series of eight BBC ‘Horizon’ documentaries. In 2015 she received an Honorary Fellowship of the American College and a Doctorate of Science from University College London for her contributions to women’s health.



Marjolaine Ryley:
Senior Lecturer in Photography and Video Art University of Sunderland, and Artist in Residence at The Miscarriage Association (2014/15)

Permission to Heal

Pregnancy loss is still very much a taboo subject despite the fact it is incredibly common, with an estimated one in four pregnancies ending in miscarriage. When a known member of our community dies, the funeral rites and commemoration which ensue enable us to work through the loss as part of a social ritual; however, more often than not with pregnancy loss there is no socially acknowledged way to 'mourn' and this can leave those in this situation in a sort of limbo.

The lack of funeral rites can be extremely distressing. Grieving deeply yet with no outward way to have their loss acknowledged can leave couples 'stranded on their island of grief'. In *Grief Unseen*, Laura Seftel writes the following under the heading 'Permission to Heal'

Approximately quarter of a million pregnancies end in miscarriage each year in the UK. Pregnancy loss is real loss: it deserves to be acknowledged and witnessed. The amount of time a woman is pregnant is not a valid measure of the depth of her grief. Losses occurring early in pregnancy—even failed fertility treatments—can be emotionally devastating.

Laura Seftel, *Grief Unseen: Healing Pregnancy Loss Through the Arts*

My own journey to motherhood was an emotional rollercoaster and I experienced five early miscarriages during this time. As an artist, the ability to express my grief through creative outputs became a lifeline. In 2013, I created a series of photographic images and autobiographical texts entitled 'The Thin Blue Line, The Deep Red Sea' while working as artist in residence at The Miscarriage Association. Making this artwork finally allowed me to begin the healing process. And, 'process' is very much what this is: an ongoing exploration of how the body and soul deal with deep, life altering loss.

Lucy's drawings are captivating, haunting, deeply emotional, and beautifully cathartic. They visualize so many of the invisible emotions, mountainous highs, and ravines of despair so many go through. They claim the space that society is unable to afford 'failure'. They also celebrate life, no matter how short, and the myriad of ways the inner space of pregnancy and loss interact with the outer world. My personal experience of recurrent miscarriage has shaped me, yet I would not change any of this. I have come to treasure each life I carried no matter how brief. I have no wish to erase the experiences or my pregnancies, however unsuccessful. I no longer view them as 'losses' but as part of the fabric of my being and experience with each having created a new space within me both physically and emotionally. Lucy's poetic drawings visualize the beauty and sorrow of 'life before life' allowing us to celebrate

the lives of the intangible beings we call 'miscarriages', as well as re-defining societal expectations and liberating us in the process.

Martha Joy Rose:
Curator and Director,
The Museum Of Motherhood (M.O.M.)

Lucy O'Donnell's contribution to the body of work on miscarriage, loss, and motherhood offers significant progress towards making this critical subject more visible. Frequently identified as a woman's failure, or the failure of her body to do its job, miscarriage can be a topic that elicits sorrow and shame. This can be especially true when navigating medical, as well as social, environments unequipped to deal with the highly emotional terrain of bereavement. When the incomplete work of the pregnant body leaves women devastated, there are few outlets to share this sense of sorrow. Yet, we all recognize the benefits of aggregating stories for community-based healing. To that end, the Museum of Motherhood acknowledges O'Donnell's recent work as an important cultural contribution within the category of mother-made art. We hope that more dialogue on this topic will be forthcoming, and follow the recent increase in scholarship and creative endeavours regarding the psychological, spiritual, and physical ramifications of maternal grief.

Laura Seftel:
ATR-BC, Founder of The Secret Club Project, Women Artists on Pregnancy Loss, and Author of Grief Unseen: Healing Pregnancy Loss Through the Arts, Northampton, Massachusetts

Sudden losses play tricks with time. Grief interrupts our daily rhythm — halting and stretching it — dividing life into before and after, leaving only repetitive fragments that no longer make sense. In this series of large-scale drawings, Lucy O'Donnell offers a glimpse into windows of fragmented time following the devastation of four miscarriages. Her accompanying poem, complex in its simplicity, alerts us to 'the wanting the waiting/the void and the aching'. Through images and words, she shows us that not only is time interrupted, but so is a woman's very sense of self and her connection to her own body.

In openly tackling the often taboo topic of pregnancy loss, O'Donnell displays immeasurable courage. Although at least 1 in 5 pregnancies end in loss, miscarriage is still met primarily with silence in our society, and perhaps even more so in academia. But as any artist knows, the creative process cannot sidestep authentic experience. For O'Donnell, the path of her art and the path of her private loss have inevitably converged.

The primarily black and white palette of these intricate and, in places, intentionally shadowy drawings suggest a sonograph. The absence of colour also cues the viewer into the emotional flatness of daily

life in the wake of a loss, which is only punctuated by red (is it blood, is it pain?). Images reminiscent of cells poignantly transform into child-like drawings of everyday objects: a piece of fruit, a hat, a child's boot. These drawings reveal both the wrenching physical experience of a miscarriage and the subsequent longer lasting impact on the artist's emotional life. The art-making process itself — the paper; the graphite; the areas roughed by over-working and rubbed raw — involve the hands that expected to touch and hold a baby but which instead remained empty and longing. Yet, as a creative act, these drawings also remind us that the arts connect the hands and the heart, thereby moving us from a passive stance to one of life-affirming expression. Following pregnancy loss, it is common for a woman to feel not just sad, but to also become mired in misplaced guilt, shame, and an unrelenting sense of failure. Awkward platitudes from friends, family, and healthcare providers can deepen this sense of isolation. Sherokee Ilse, a pioneering pregnancy loss educator, has written that "the silence following each [of her own anguished losses] was deafening." When artists like O'Donnell reveal their personal narratives, they are educating all of us and paving the way for more informed and compassionate responses to childbearing losses. The universal power of art to transcend, to heal, and to inspire change is most welcome in the on-going challenge to make this invisible loss visible.

