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Colour Tribulations: A Mothering-ArtAdemic in a Pandemic

Using personal narrative as a feminist approach to producing knowledge, I describe how living in a pandemic creates the ultimate experience to conduct arts-based research on gender inequality for artists, educators, and professionals as well as the effects the process of artmaking can have on grief, depression, and anxiety. From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced the death of two family members. With the stay-safer-at-home order, I was thrust into finding a way to balance the roles of caring for multiple generations of my family, quickly moving to teaching online, attempting to teach and care for my daughters, and dealing with the deaths of two loved ones. The order of social distancing caused my personal grief to remain in a fog. As a Mothering-ArtAdemic (Nelson and Combe), I needed to find a way to successfully mother, create, and teach in order to remain strong and heal for myself, my family, and my students. After tending to my stay-safer-at-home duties as a Mothering-ArtAdemic, I empowered myself to paint every day. This series of abstract paintings is called Colour Tribulations, as I played with colour to fight off the anxiety, troubles, difficulties, and constant uncertainty of living in a pandemic. Each painting represents an attempt to find peace as well as a sense of safety and calm in the midst of COVID-19 chaos. The paintings conceptually work through the multitude of stresses and anxieties that accompany mothering and teaching in the midst of a pandemic and transform them into meditation, colour, and forms of art therapy.

Mothering-ArtAdemic

In 2017, I claimed that the intersectionality of my complex identity roles of mother, artist, and academic reinforce one another, and when performed together, they make me stronger in each area (Nelson and Combe). These interdependent roles create stability by keeping me better informed,

emotionally grounded, and financially secure. Embodying these identities simultaneously as a Mothering-ArtAdemic results in a fluency that I would not have found if I had compartmentalized them; it is an empowering action towards dismantling the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood. As Andrea O'Reilly claims, "The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women" (Rocking 11). Rachel Hile Bassett argues that first-person narratives "play an important role in changing others' perceptions of parenting in academia and serve as well to broaden academic parents' own understandings of their situations" (12). Maria Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro are also "convinced that personal narratives have the potential to serve as critical intervention in the social, political, and cultural life of academia" (9). The following personal narrative is a feminist approach to producing knowledge on how living in a pandemic creates the ultimate experience to conduct arts-based research on the effects that artmaking can have on grief, depression, and anxiety.

Famiglia

My maternal grandmother, Anne Palmera Serratto, my Nonnie, was the youngest of four children and the second to be born in America. Her parents and two older siblings were all born in Northern Italy. As a family, they immigrated to San Francisco and settled in North Beach, where my Nonnie was born August 9, 1923. North Beach, San Francisco was Nonnie's home for ninety-five years until July, 2019 when she moved in with my mother and father, seven minutes away from my home in Franklin, Tennessee. Over the next six months, Nonnie and my two young daughters, ages six and three, would spend their afternoons together. This happened organically, as the same week I was interviewing for an afterschool nanny, I was also interviewing for a caregiver for Nonnie. One candidate was qualified for both; therefore, I hired her, and although it was a bit chaotic to arrive home to, fall 2019 provided many cherished memories of four generations spending their days together.

Winter 2020 was an extremely hard time for my family. In late December 2019, Nonnie fell ill, and on Christmas Eve, we brought her home to hospice at my parents' house. To hospice a love one at home is a privilege that is emotionally and physically draining. Both my mother and I became very sick with the flu shortly after Nonnie came home to hospice. It took over a week to recover. On January 8, my body had not completely regained full energy when I drove to my university to teach the first day of spring semester classes, which was when I got the dreaded call from my mother. I could hear in her voice that

we had lost a family member, but I was shocked to hear it was not Nonnie. We had lost my uncle, Daniel J Ward, suddenly to a heart attack in the middle of the night. Daniel was my godfather and my mother's younger brother by ten years. A renowned DJ in Hawaii, he was full of life, love, and happiness. He was one of my mother's closest friends and a loving ray of light in my life as well. To suddenly lose him as we were slowly losing his mother was devastating on my family, especially my mother. I continued to teach a full load of four courses at my university while mothering my two young girls and spending every evening helping my grieving mother to care for her mother, who was slowing growing sicker. When Nonnie peacefully passed on January 28, I felt a loss I had never felt before. My Italian grandmother was an extremely smart and sassy woman, who taught me more about life than I'll ever learn from another person. She taught me how to be strong yet kind. She taught me how to be honest, direct, and empathetic. She taught me how to do one thing a day and how to look at life with happiness and humour. Nonnie was there for every big moment in my life, and it was she I would go to when I needed advice. She was the matriarch of our family and embodied the definition of a feminist in every way. Lynn Comerford, Heather Jackson, and Kandee Kosior state that "Feminism has encouraged women to make their own choices rather than having their choices made for them by individual and powerful social forces" (2). It was my Nonnie who taught me how to make my own choices in life and not fall prey to social forces. In O'Reilly's 2008 volume, *Feminist Mothering*, she reviews authors that write in the self-help genre that "call for a new style of mothering, one that advocates balance and admonishes guilt" (O'Reilly qtd. in Comerford, Jackson, and Kosior 41). My Nonnie lived each day with balance and showed no guilt for conducting her life as she pleased. She drove until she was ninety-five. She danced, she went bowling, she worked for the military by choice, and she mothered without guilt for doing the things in life that brought her pleasure. My Nonnie never needed to overcome the guilt of motherhood, as she never fell prey to it. I see these feminist qualities have been instilled in my mother, my sister and me, as we each raise our own young daughters.

In late February 2020 we celebrated the lives of Anne Palmera Serratto Ward and Daniel J. Ward in San Francisco, California, with a beautiful family event at the Italian Club in North Beach. The last time our whole extended family had gathered in one spot was over seventeen years ago at my wedding. Gathering together to share stories of their lives was an event of love for two amazing people. We laid their ashes together in the water of the San Francisco Bay, as a source of strength and healing for the family still standing on shore.

Tribulations: Mothering and Grieving in a Pandemic

In early March 2020, I returned home to Franklin, Tennessee, with my husband and our two daughters. That week I was supposed to lead a group of Belmont University students to Guatemala on an arts-based therapy trip in order to work with local children who had experienced trauma. By this time, the reach of COVID-19 was growing, and my university canceled all international trips. The same week, the public schools in our community shut down due to COVID-19. My daughters stayed home, and at the time, we did not know whether they would not go back to school for that academic year. When my mother and father returned from San Francisco a week later, COVID-19 had reached our community, and we felt it was best not to see them for their own protection. Both have preexisting conditions: my mother has asthma and high blood pressure, and my father has a rare form of leukemia. In the mist of the COVID-19 stay-safer-at-home order (Moreno and Conradis), I continued to grieve the loss of my Nonnie and uncle while continuing to mother my two young daughters and constantly worrying about my own mother. She was grieving only seven minutes, away and I could not console her, I could not hug her; we could not grieve together due to the pandemic.

When my university moved to teaching online and the public-school system shut down, my daily routine quickly became a continuous cycle of feeding my children, walking them and the dog, teaching four courses online, teaching first-grade and preschool curriculum, feeding them again, and cleaning all while adhering to the stay-safer-at-home order. My husband's job as a sales director was thrown into overdrive, as he worked tirelessly to save people from being furloughed. This caused him to work long hours, many spent on the phone in meetings with others, who did not appreciate young children's interruptions. Therefore, along with many other female academics around the world, I struggled to find a balance between working from home and mothering (Minello). As the days of the stay-safer-at-home order went on and on, the orders of social distancing (Lipton and Steinhauer) caused my personal grief to deepen, and I grew depressed (see Figure 1).

As a Mothering-ArtAdemic (Nelson and Combe), I needed to find a way to be an empowered mother in order to gain strength and start to heal for myself, my family, and my students. As O'Reilly has argued, "mothers' content with and fulfilled by their lives make better mothers—children raised by depressed mothers are at risk—empowered mothers are more effective mothers" (*Rocking* 48). After tending to my stay-safer-at-home duties as a Mothering-ArtAdemic, I knew I needed to create space for situations that would empower myself to embody my identity as an artist. I needed to start painting.



Figure 1. *Social Distancing*, March 2020, 36 x 36, Acrylic on Canvas Gallery Wrap

Colour Tribulations: Creative Making as a Form of Art Therapy

My four-year-old daughter paints every day at her Montessori school. Staying safer at home, I wanted to continue this practice of artmaking for both my daughters. Using flowers sent as a thoughtful condolence, I set up a still life painting lesson (see Figure 2). Showing my daughters how to capture what they see on paper using oil pastels and watercolour paints, I watched their creative energy flow and was encouraged to step into the artmaking process. Playing with their artmaking materials inspired me to play further on a canvas in my home studio. The work completed from this process of instruction and play is called *Love* (see Figure 3). This painting was my first of 2020. It was through the process of teaching my daughters how to use artmaking to memorialize something beautiful shared with our family in remembrance of loved ones that I started to create again. As O'Reilly claims "We attended to often to what women need from 'mothers' and mentors'; attend too little perhaps to what we who are old need from 'daughters' who create and preserve what we care for and care about, whose energy and sheer determination carry us on" (*Rocking* 5-6). It was my daughter's creative energy that gave me a glimpse to the other side of grief.



Figure 2. *Still Life Lesson*, March 2020



Figure 3. *Love*, March 2020, 40 x 30, Mixed Media on Canvas Gallery Wrap

After teaching my college level courses online and attempting to teach my daughters' their curriculum, we continued to play with artmaking in our shared making space (see Figure 4). When I would paint, they would paint (See Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 4. *Shared Making Space*, March 2020

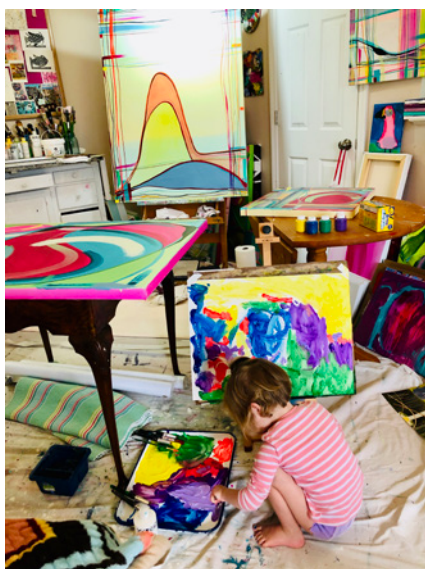


Figure 5. *Maribelle [3] Painting in Shared Studio Space*, March 2020



Figure 6. Hazel Anne [6] *Painting in Shared Studio Space*, March 2020

We also collaboratively painted. It was these shared moments that became spaces where we helped one another to work through the tantrums and stress that come with living, learning, and working from home fulltime together. We call these works *Meditative Tantrums*, as there were many over this time period (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Meditative Tantrums*, Collaboratively Painted, March 2020

I continued to use the kitchen table to instruct my daughters in unique ways of making art, such as playing with printmaking (see Figure 8). Together, we enjoyed making art, but each day, this would only last an hour or so, and then they wanted to play outside. Since the table was already set up, I started to paint there so I could keep an eye on them through the kitchen window (see Figure 9).



Figure 8. *Playing with Printmaking*, March 2020



Figure 9. *Kitchen Table Studio*, March 2020

As the weather in our area continued to grow into a beautiful spring I started to paint on our back-deck. This way I could keep painting while also keeping an eye on the kids (see Figure 10). I absolutely loved the process of painting outside, but not the process of having to clean up for every meal (see Figure 11).



Figure 10. *Making and Mothering*, March 2020



Figure 11. *Studio and Meal Table*, March 2020

In a matter of a week, I had moved my studio from upstairs in the playroom to the kitchen table, and then the back-deck table, allowing me to paint each afternoon. I wanted to sustain this practice but in a way that would not require

me to break it down each time the family gathered for a meal. Therefore, I moved my studio into the driveway (see Figure 12). I thought this would be a great space, and it worked for a while, until the girls started to think of the space as their personal playground, perfect for hide and seek and playing soccer (see Figure 13).

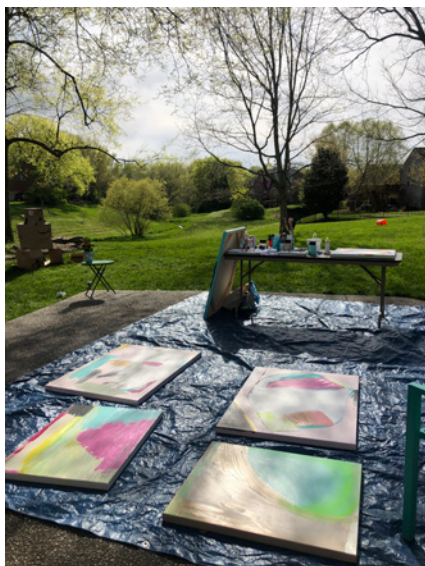


Figure 12. *Driveway Studio*, April 2020



Figure 13. *Studio and Playground*, April 2020

Working in the driveway worked for a few days, but I tired of having to take everything in each night, and the tree branches above kept dropping on my work. Therefore, I moved my car into the driveway and created a sanctuary to paint in (see Figure 14) while continuing to watch my children run around, catch insects, and escape the snakes (see Figure 15).



Figure 14. *Garage Studio Sanctuary*, April 2020



Figure 15. *A Mother's Studio View*, April 2020

I started painting (see Figure 16) and painting (see Figure 17) and painting every single day (see Figure 18). This series of abstract paintings is called *Colour Tribulations*, as playing with colour (see Figure 19) helped me fight off the anxiety, troubles, difficulties, and constant uncertainty of living in a pandemic. Each painting represents my attempt to find peace as well as a sense of safety and a calm in the middle of COVID-19 chaos (see Figure 20).



Figure 16. *Playing with Paint*, April 2020



Figure 17. *Painting Every Day*, April 2020

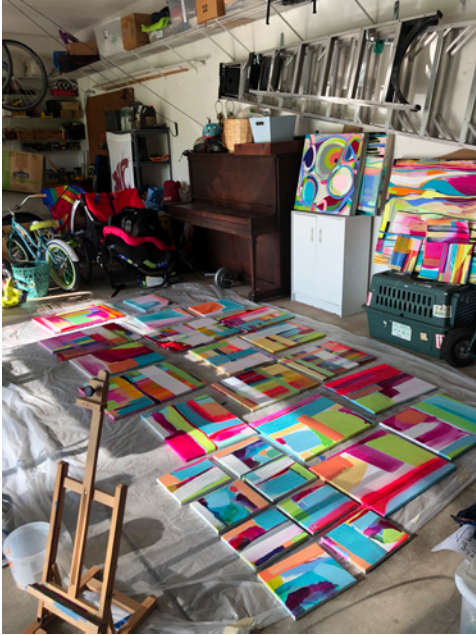


Figure 18. *Painting Each and Every Day*, April 2020

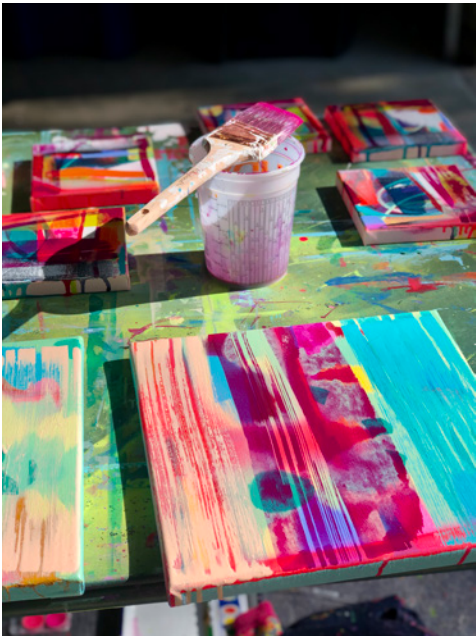


Figure 19. *Playing with Colour*, April 2020



Figure 20. *A Mothers Making Space*, April 2020

The paintings, around one hundred by the end of April (see Figure 21), conceptually work through the multitude of stresses and anxieties that accompany mothering and teaching in the midst of a pandemic and transform them into meditation, colour, and forms of art therapy. It was through the process of painting and playing with colours every day that my fog of ever consuming grief, depression, and anxiety started to lift.

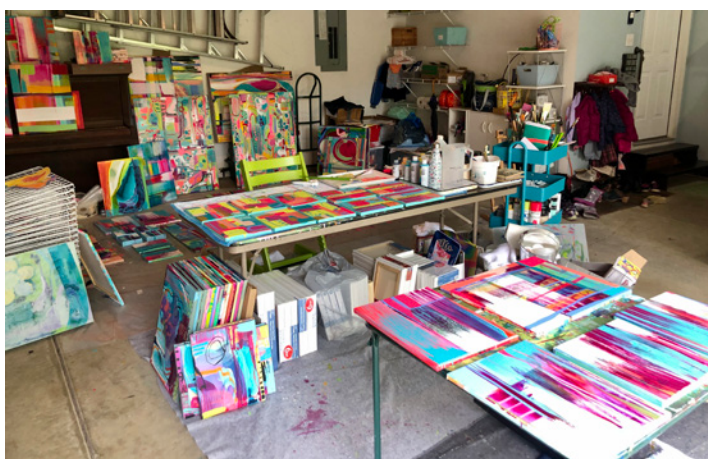


Figure 21. *One Hundred and Counting*, April 2020

Colour Therapy

The COVID19 pandemic has caused tribulations across the world, but the one thing it has provided me, which I had not had since becoming a Mothering-ArtAdemic, is extended time to play with artmaking. With my new garage studio, I was not concerned with damaging the floors or making a mess of our family table. This new artmaking space provided me the freedom to experiment with colour therapy.



Figure 22. *Experimenting with Colour Therapy*, April 2020

Merriam-Webster defines “colour therapy” as “the use of color and colored lights to improve or enhance physical or emotional well-being.” Using different media and containers, I mixed colours as if they were elixirs of happiness (see Figure 22). It has been said that the purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love colour the most (Birch). Many artists are taught and continue to create with a limited palate. They create boundaries in their paintings, selecting only the colours that coordinate or complement one another. In contrast, I agree with the artist David Hockney in his defense of olive green, in that I don’t believe that there are “off-putting” colours (St. Clair 11). I do not want my works to be defined with a limited palette using only warm, cool, or neutral colours. As I was experiencing a range of emotions, I chose to use the whole spectrum of a rainbow to express what words could not in my works (see Figure 23). I looked to colour as a source of healing. As grief and the fear of the unknown are hard to define, “It is the best possible sign of a colour when nobody who sees it knows what to call it” (Ruskin qtd. in St. Clair, 32).

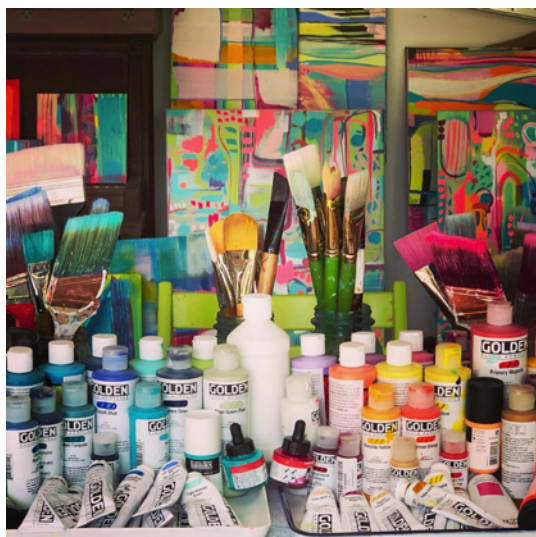


Figure 23. *Using the Spectrum of a Rainbow*, April 2020

I used Payne's grey—a bluish blur of fading black, the colour of a pigeon's feathers, or the cool cozy feeling of a dark, overcast rainy day. Payne's grey is my colour of grief and deep sorrow for the loss of loved ones. Artists look to Payne's Grey to create an atmospheric perspective in their compositions. In my recent paintings, this colour represents the memories of my loved ones, almost like a fading dream; the further away they are, the paler and bluer they appear. I used a spectrum of pinks: quinacridone magenta, quinacridone violet, quinacridone crimson, and florescent pink. A lighter shade of red, pink holds power in its hue. Looking at a shade of pink brings me happiness, and wearing it makes me feel powerful. Originally used to define a baby's sex as male, as it was the Virgin Mary that wore baby blue, pink in its contemporary form is associated with femininity (St. Clair). I find power in strong vibrant pinks, as I do not ascribe to the feminist backlash against the colour (see Figure 24).

I played with pyrrole orange for its shock, yellow ochre and nickel azo yellow for its warmth, and many hues, shades, and tints of blue and green for their connections to water and earth, including teal, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, cobalt turquoise, turquoise phthalo, chromium oxide green, green gold, phthalo green (blue shade), and phthalo green (yellow shade) (see Figure 25). Large strokes of cleansing white, with its link to light, have "laid deep roots in the human psyche and, like anything divine, can simultaneously inspire awe and instill terror in the human heart" (St. Clair 39).

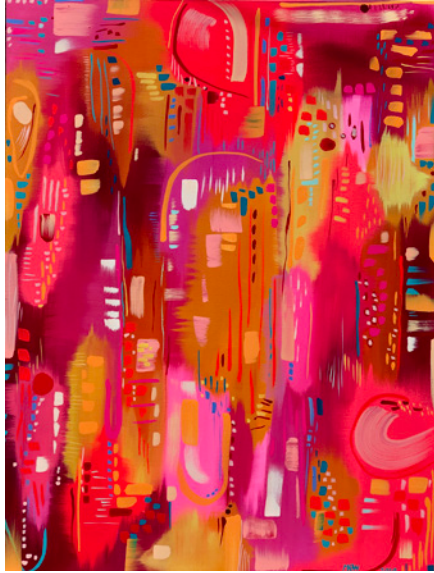


Figure 24. *One of A Kind*, April 2020, 60 x 40, Mixed Media on Gallery Wrap Canvas



Figure 25. *Colour Tribulations 1-6*, April 2020, Mixed Media, each 10 x 8 on Canvas Wrap

Days turned into a week, and weeks into months, and I continue to paint almost every day while still living through a pandemic. As I mix my colour concoctions, I find healing qualities in my colour potions and strength and peace as I lay colours on the canvas one at a time (see Figure 26).



Figure 26. *Side by Side: A Dance for Daniel & A Dance for Nonnie*, April 2020, each 30 x 30, Mixed Media on Gallery Wrap Canvas

Working through this creative process of building colours upon colours as well as the sheer multitude of paintings (see Figure 27) has provided a space for healing and a place where I can truly embody my Mothering-ArtAdemic identity. I continue to collaboratively paint with each of my daughters (see Figures 28 and 29). This process of making together has provided them space to creatively engage with colour therapy, and together, we have produced works we are proud of (see Figures 28, 30, and 31).



Figure 27. *Multitude of Paintings*, May 2020

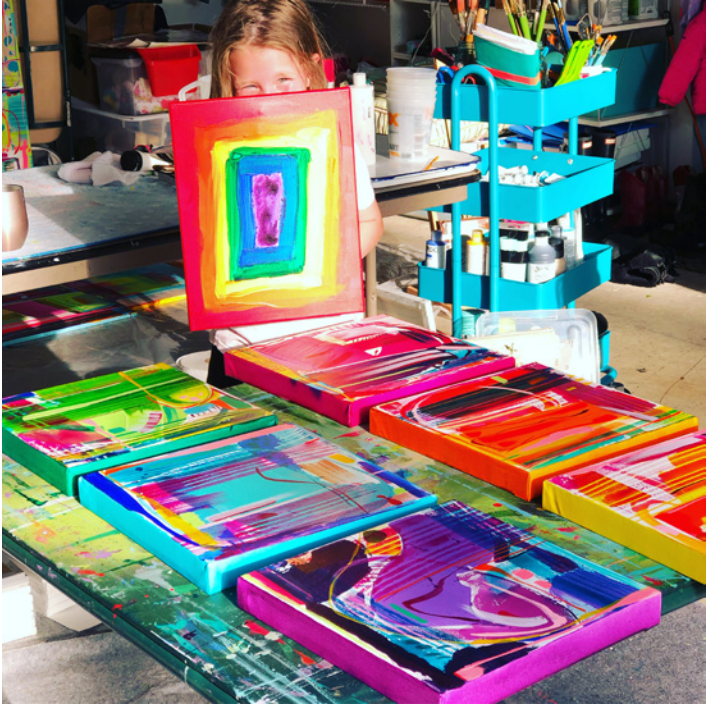


Figure 28. *Mom, I See a Rainbow*, April 2020



Figure 29. *Maribelle, Collaborative Painting*, July 2020

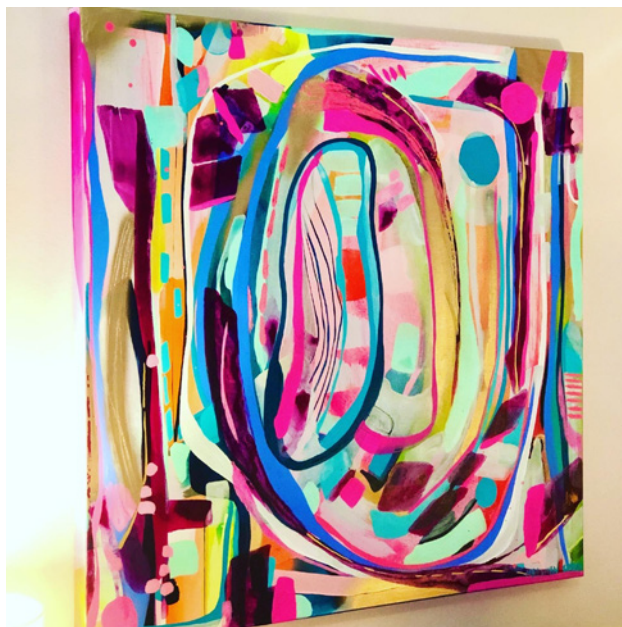


Figure 30. *MBN and MBN Collaborative Painting*, July 2020, 36 x 36, Mixed Media on Gallery Wrap Canvas

Figure 31. *Close Up of Collaborative Painting*, July 2020

Conclusion

Grief has no conclusion (Shear; Maciejewski and Prigerson), and as I write this, the conclusion to COVID-19 is nowhere in sight (ILO). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequalities of gender equality in our current society like no other time in history (Mahajan et al.). Mothers are leaving the workplace in higher numbers than ever before to prioritize childcare and homeschooling demands (Kibbe). The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated mental health conditions in America with “daily doses of death, isolation and fear generating widespread psychological trauma” (Wan 1). I continue to grieve for my Nonnie and Uncle Daniel, along with three other friends lost this year, and now the heavy weight of losing Ruth Bader Ginsburg. As an American and feminist parent (Comerford, Jackson, and Kosior), I am deeply concerned with the direction my nation is headed in. I constantly worry about what kind of future my daughters will come of age in and what I can do to protect their human rights as females.

I come from a platform of unearned privilege as a white cisgender woman with inherited monetary and social knowledge. I am in heterosexual relationship, married to a supportive partner. Our dual incomes have provided a stable home environment in these uncertain times. Our harmonious relationship and collaborative parenting style work to create a safe space for our family to thrive together. Together, we made the choice to pull our oldest daughter out of the public-school system to send both of our children to a private Montessori school. Though financially draining, I recognize how fortunate we are to have made this privileged decision. Enrolling both our children in the same private school limits our exposure to COVID-19 and provides a consistent in-person education for our daughters while allowing us both to fully focus on our careers. I started this academic year with a promotion to program director of fine arts at my university and am currently teaching in a high-stress HyFlex model (“Returning to Learn”). According to the United States Department of Labor, 865,000 women across many industries left the workforce between August and September of 2020, in what is now being called a “female-recession” to recognize the detrimental and disproportional effect the pandemic has had on women in the workplace (Berry). This statistic is deeply concerning for society. I recognize how my privileged position in life has afforded me the opportunity to constructively take advantage of COVID-19 by using creativity to enhance my relationship with myself and my family.

Even though there is currently no vaccine for COVID-19 and positive numbers are on the rise, we no longer are required to stay at home as a family full time. I continue to mother, teach, and paint while living in a pandemic. My depression has lifted, but my grief and anxiety are ever constant in our current social climate. As I pass through my mothering-making space each

day, as I am not currently able to play with colour for hours, I continue to find short bursts of time to experience colour therapy (see Figure 32). The process of painting continues to bring me a sense of safety and calm in the middle of COVID-19 chaos.

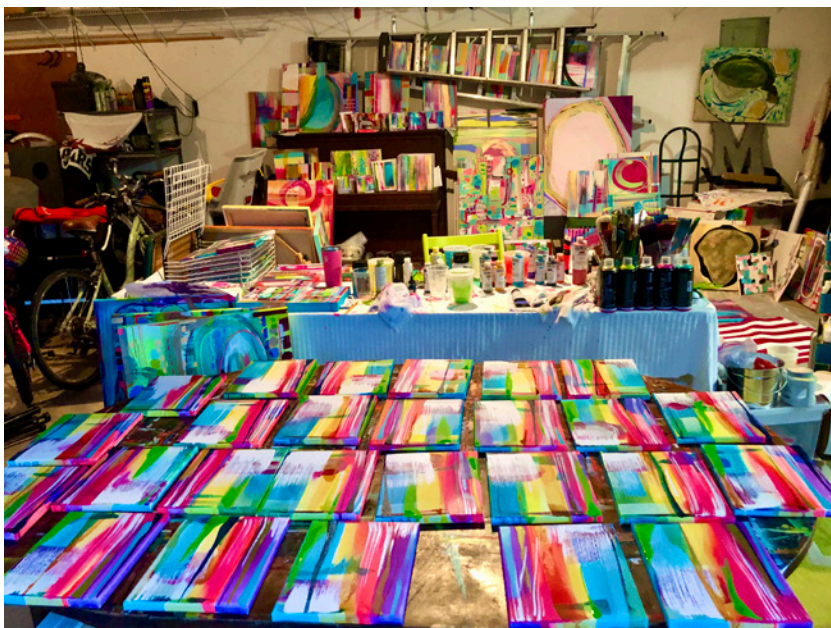


Figure 32. *Studio Accumulation, Three Hundred and Counting*, October 2020

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