

There are many ways to be a mother and an artist, but few of them are easy. There are never enough hours in the day and often it feels as though you're working on borrowed time, navigating between the studio and caring responsibilities. Similar to many artists I know, Sally Anderson counters this by taking a compartmentalised approach to her practice and her mothering. Anderson speaks of being able to visualise her studio when she is home, knowing exactly the next step she will take on a painting that lies dormant waiting for her return.

Encountering the paintings of Anderson recalls the feeling of looking out of the window of a moving train, somewhere along the coast. Distant landscapes, vibrant blue sea, brown rooftops and scenes from other people's lives flash past. A layering of images contributes to this sense of movement. Upon each canvas is a painting within a painting, functioning like a window or a portal that opens onto another world. These paintings also sustain a sense of distance, watching from afar a life that is not your own. If I look long enough, I feel as though I might catch a glimpse of my own reflection looking back at me.

Sometimes these paintings-within-paintings appear like a postcard, bordered in white and tacked onto a window, a contained landscape collaged directly on top of an existing vista. Other works contain reproductions of exhibiting paintings, such as a landscape by Bob Thompson and a figurative sketch by Paula Modersohn-Becker. Anderson gleans her imagery from social media and reproductions glimpsed in books, which is to say she paints from life.

Often positioned in the foreground, a vase of cut flowers offers a moment of stillness amidst fragments of cliffs, water, rocks, trees, and roofs. Banksias, tarragons, kangaroo paw and red hot poker, are the flowers native to suburban Australia that I imagine Anderson encountering on her walk to her studio, picking and then arranging in an act of care. Carefully selected shells, too, dominate the painted canvases, the same kind that my children place against their ears to be instantly transported by the sound of the sea. Another kind of portal. This is the stuff of everyday magic, or windows into what Anderson calls 'secondhand motherhood' – the versions of motherhood that we witness through others' experiences.

Well versed in the expressions of other worlds and the portals with which to reach them is science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin. A mother of three who shared the responsibilities of childcare with her academic partner, Le Guin's short text *The Carrier Bag of Fiction* likens the form of the novel to "a sack, a bag...a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us." Sally's paintings are carrier bags in this same vein. They contain the outcomes of a careful process of selection and composition, of sacred keepsakes and landscapes. A vase, a vessel, a frame, a womb, a house, a painting, are each a kind of container. At times they may be watertight, but more often these containers overflow, and experiences leak out.

In her meditation on the colour blue, writer and theorist Maggie Nelson compares life to a train of moods or a string of beads, each one a different hue. To be caught in one colour or mood is to miss all the variations that make up a life. Anderson is concerned with accounting for all these complexities, and it is through the windows and portals in her work that she attends to multiple truths at once. Mothering in particular is an expression of contradictory experiences and feelings; I love my child and I need time and space, both things can be true.

Like poetry, Sally's paintings are comprised of lyrical arrangements, contrasts of form and subjects that unfold across the canvases. In her paintings, borders are porous. A lined brown shape becomes a trunk, a quilt, a rock. A square of blue is an ocean view, a flooded town, and a waterfall. In the manner of Rubin's Vase, what you are looking at shifts before your eyes, depending on your perspective.

Like poetry, also, are her titles, which I read to myself several times in order to unravel them. 'Sea', 'me', 'hold', these words echo across the titles of multiple paintings like an incarnation. In each title, the adjectives are stripped away until just the nouns and verbs are left, and I am reminded of the children's books I read nightly to my boys, the simple phrases from everyday life that I have half-memorised.

Mothering young children requires physical presence, yet while reading, bathing, preparing food, settling for sleep, pushing strollers or swings, the mind is free to wander through landscapes and ideas. Collecting images and inspiration that can be transferred back into the work as soon as time allows. Anderson's paintings offer this possibility of being in multiple places at once, they capture slithers of time in which all the complexities of motherhood and life are contained.

Amelia Wallin, 2023

