



Pretty pinks and dirty yellows: Changing domestic ecologies in the painterly collages of Jahnne Pasco-White

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“Contempt for domesticity is in part an effect of bias against spaces and practices strongly associated with women. By recuperating domestic life and those of all genders who create and sustain it, I hope to strike back against that bias.”

Susan Fraiman, *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*, 2017: 3.

Housework is a banal, grubby and non-spectacular aspect of life and economy. But, it is also part of a powerful hierarchical economy that endures relentlessly despite so much opposition and resistance. When housework is considered in relation to persistent and, indeed, accelerating inequity and injustice, it is more interesting and latently spectacular (but no less grubby). In other words, the way we work creates the world, but housework underpins and enables both that work and that world. Such criticism is traditionally called “social reproduction theory” (Bhattacharya, 2017), which looks at how the world keeps on turning and how it is supported by essential undervalued work. Recently however, the idea of “social reproduction” has been challenged by key scholars who seek to look closely at domestic structures but also seek to break out of their hegemonic formations (Haraway, 2016; Lewis, 2020; Cooper, 2017). Rather than just critically

describing reproduction, such projects seek to critically recreate the domestic in a different image. In concert with this line of thinking, this chapter examines at subtle remaking of domestic ecologies enacted in Jahnne Pasco-White’s painterly collages.

In Australia the link between one’s place of work and a home place of shelter is perversely simple: the two are distinct in theory but related both financially and materially in practice. The enduring colonial focus on private land possession and mortgage debt (Keenan, 2015; Crabtree, 2013) means that many people are effectively working to meet monthly mortgage payments or rental dues to keep the roof over their head (even more so since the start of the pandemic). Crabtree describes this as the “Great Australian Dream of mortgagee homeownership, steeped in ideologies of individualism and success through ownership” (2013, 106). Housework is that which makes that same colonial home shelter a nice place to be and, at least in theory, nurtures and rejuvenates the worker so they can be productive members of society. Thus, thinking critically about housework and the forms of work that both break and (re)make home shelters is vital at this moment of coronavirus and accelerating climate change; if housework supports the world as it is, we have to change how we

understand and practice housework in order to change the world.

Jahnne Pasco-White's studio process and visual works explore the terrain between house and work. In email discussions with the artist and after reviewing the other contributors to this volume, I have learned that her housework and painting work occupy the same space: there is substantial traffic between the home and studio and the life and work of this artist-mother. So much traffic it seems it is almost impossible to tell them apart: my daughter "has seen me drawing on the walls in the studio, in galleries—we lived in a tiny studio apartment in Paris for a couple of months when she was one, and I was doing a residency—and so often at home she asks if we can draw on the walls" (Pasco-White, 2020). Not only that, Pasco-White's artist statement for the exhibition *inter-giftedness* that in the artist's work the outside world leaks in, both accidentally (water leaking through cracks unwanted in the studio, making the space damp and dank) and purposefully (water that is necessary to liquify colour to enable its transfer as paint onto the surface). The line between home and work is slippery. On the one hand, it is right that feminist criticism in the time of coronavirus outlines how employers have commandeered homes and to simply *push back* to create a clear distinction and a proper work-life balance (Lewis, 2020). But on the other hand, perhaps we can also pause and try to construct a critical *and* creative kind of housework that can resist mere reproduction of the status quo and tend toward at least a minor revolution in life and work. Can Pasco-White's pink and yellow collages (that cover the entire wall surface like wild versions of the family-friendly Dulux 'wash-n-wear') and paintings (hung laundry-like from the gallery ceiling) help us think through the process of critically remaking housework?

While this chapter approaches Pasco-White's painterly collages as a way to rethink the meaning of housework, this necessitates academics and cultural critics to revise their research and writing methods. The question of how to do rigorous analysis of visual works at a distance is related to this argument too and not only because of the questionable authority of the "armchair expert". Rather, critically rethinking methods is about remaking our processes and products during COVID-19 and, indeed, in respect of the climate change mitigation mantra "#flyingless". There are more reasons than just the possibility of fatal infection and the consequences of carbon emissions to collaborate differently today. If we need to slow down, take a breath, change how

we work, the processes of critical collaboration need to change too. So, in both aiming to avoid the trap of armchair expertise that treats one's own knowledge with god-like authority that enables their criticism to fall from above and model a different critical intimacy with the art of another, the methodology of coming to know Pasco-White's work for the purposes of writing this essay was to ask the artist some specific questions about her process via email and consider them in relation to the aesthetics of the works. This is not exactly revolutionary, but it certainly helped make sense of them while only being able to visit them online. I then sought to connect what I discovered about the artist's paintings and processes to my own research obsessions because, as my guru once said, "obsessions are the most durable form of intellectual capital" (Sedgwick, 1992, ix). I'm an expert *of a kind*, but not an expert of all kinds: I'm obsessed with making the boring things (weather and chores) interesting. In this case my expertise gives me licence to think critically about housework and it is my expert opinion that Pasco-White paints it for us.

In the chapter that follows I consider Pasco-White's work in relation to housework. In the first part I examine the relationship between her process (how) and the overall aesthetics (what) in terms of her artworks. I then turn—in the second part—to thinking the artist's own phrase "the labouring of delicate supports" in relation to her approach to painterly collage and then I conclude with some provisional thoughts about the tensions between labour and love in the context of home reflecting on the provocations of these painterly collages.

Part 1: How something is made in relation to what is made.

In the 1970s second-wave socialist feminists identified housework as a labour that fuelled capitalism and sought to revolutionise the world by rethinking how domestic work was understood and valued (Federici, 1975). Paradoxically, another powerful trajectory of feminism sought liberation from this obligatory drudgery (Wollstonecraft 1796; Woolf [1929] 2001; Beauvoir [1949] 2010). The latter charge to be liberated from housework is a vital feminist ambit. But it also represents the most substantial and possibly the most dubious form of feminist success in the present unjust world, even if that success is entirely partial and inadequate. To be clear, I'm not saying to be a feminist today you have to *want* to do chores. Rather I'm saying this: if feminism is to be viable in the future it has to be popularly recognised and pursued as something much more than just having the

equal pay and skirts in the boardroom. The liberation-from-housework feminist success story is real, but it is occupied by mostly white cis-gendered women who in many instances loudly disavow any connection to feminisms and often work in oppressive and maintain oppressive regimes.¹ Meanwhile, housework has remained, as Ursula Huws (2019) notes, 'the epicentre of capitalism', undesirable and, for the most part, un- or under-waged but still utterly necessary to the ongoingness of this unjust global system.

Thinking about housework as a fuel for capitalism, a kind of complement to coal and gas, it sits in tense relation to the centrality of the *visual* sense for painting's audience. To rephrase this non-sequitur assertion as a question: what has housework's status as capitalism's fuel got to do with visual art? Painting privileges the visual. It is a traditional visual art: one can look but usually cannot touch. In seemingly unrelated contrast, housework, the cruddiest of all Marxist feminist subjects, is both tactile and hidden. Talking about housework in relation to the wider political economy is at its root a critique of the commodity (or a critique of the glistening object for sale that is utterly detached from the raw materials, supply chains and labour that produced it). Such critique goes beyond the worker himself and all the way to the labour of the mother who carefully washes the workers bottles and nappies before he has even learned to walk. The painting is the ultimate artistic commodity: it sits on a wall and accrues value for a range of abstract and immaterial reasons quite removed from the artist and in ways that are utterly impossible for other artforms like poetry and performance. Critiquing a painting in terms of its status as commodity is a cruddy game too. This is not only because artists like Andy Warhol and Alexander Brenner have already made painting more valuable via various kinds of stunts to draw attention to painting as commodity. More interestingly, fixating on the labour of the process is a problem for visual arts criticism because it actually disavows and devalues the pleasures of looking at a visual artwork in the first place. Critiquing a painting in terms of its status as a commodity does not allow us to just sit and look at Pasco-White's work and enjoy looking without immediately asking: how was it made and what does that mean? at the same time.

Indeed, vision is a complex sense. In certain threads of feminist science and technology studies it has been put under the critical microscope (so to speak) because it is so privileged in western epistemology. Haraway seeks to privilege the "haptic" over the "optic" and so do many

who follow her lead. But vision is not a disembodied or superficial sense; for those who have it, vision can trigger feelings and understandings that are powerful; those who do not require physical supports or have enlivened other senses. In this vein, it must be said that Pasco-White's works are pleasurable to look at even if, as abstract works, they do not immediately convey any straightforward meanings. They are the abstract painterly relative of "sexy ugly": "pretty dirty". "Pretty dirty" is a descriptive term in which crucially, "*pretty*" operates as an adjective not an adverb. Here "pretty" refers to the predominance of pastel pink, purple and peach colours in the *messmates* and *becoming-with* series. "Pretty" is not intended in a pejorative sense of the way that any feminine descriptor is immediately supposed to disempower and belittle. Rather "pretty" is the pinkness of skin, lips and nipples. Like contempt for domesticity itself, contempt for prettiness is, to follow Susan Fraiman (2001, 3), "an effect of bias against spaces and practices strongly associated with women". Moreover, in *Queering Femininity* Hannah McCann (2018, 1 and 6) provokes us to think deeper about the implications of gender "presentation" and gendered surface aesthetics. She does so both in terms of the money and labour involved in creating prettiness, beauty or other traditionally feminine aesthetics and also in terms of the "the political positions" of "specific surface enactments". The juxtaposition of the purples, pinks, peaches, browns and yellows invokes the visual surface tensions of maternal aesthetics: pretty (soft, nurturing, comforting bodies) and dirty (bodies that make breast milk, vomit and poo). As abstract paintings though, the colours signify only ideas rather than positively represent them, but it is here that their messiness together (together as "messmates"; "becoming with" one another) acts as an invitation to indulge in the pleasures of the surface before exploring potentially meaning across other dimensions.

The pursuit of meaning in dimensions beyond the surface of visual works takes us backwards and into the process of making the works and outwards into their spatial arrangements when exhibited in a gallery. In her artist statement for *inter-giftedness*, Pasco-White states that her work incorporates:

[...] a range of vegetable hand-dyed cottons and linens in which water draws out the pigments from organic matter gathered from my surroundings and domestic setting, such as olives, crab-apples, copper beech leaves, pine barks, pine needles, eucalyptus leaves, clovers, beetroots, carrots, avocado skins, black beans, turmeric, wattle, blackberries,

hawthorn berries, indigo, dandelion, mushrooms, and lichen. Also incorporated into the works are earth pigments, violets, clovers, bicarb soda, dried mandarin skins, recycled painting rags, clothes, bamboo baby wipes, previous paintings and various drawing papers from both our daughter's bedroom and the studio, as well as acrylic, oil stick, crayon, pastel and pencil.

And that her process is hidden in the paintings, which are for sale and commodified, in ways that naturally mask the labours of making, nonetheless contain traces of these processes which will be present in galleries of those who retain the works in a couple of ways. These traces manifest in terms of the non-toxicity of the materials and their possible limited shelf-life (less toxic, but less enduring than oil paint, for example), but also in terms of the pretty pinks and dirty yellows and the way the colour itself invokes and refuses to simplify certain stereotypes of domesticity by association. Moreover, the spatial arrangement that the works in *messmates* and *becoming-with* invokes cover the whole surface area of the wall like a new coat of paint, or to hang from the ceiling like laundry drying. The theatrics of the exhibition invokes and aestheticises domestic space, but not in any way that entirely disavows or disappears the messy undesirability of housework itself. By divulging elements of how the artworks were made, as well as the thinking behind their framing and installation, Pasco-White points to a dynamic relation between what is made, how it is made and how it is exhibited. The movement between the “what is made” and the “how it was made” invokes established architectures and tired housework practices at the same time as gesturing towards new domestic ecologies where bodies, labour and materials are reconfigured.

Part 2: The Labouring of Delicate Supports

If maintaining diversity of life of earth is a collective effort, then Jahnne Pasco-White's question “*how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk [...] and how will it respond?*” is an urgent one. If returning to housework and remaking housework is an important part of any new ecological order, then Jahnne Pasco-White's question “*how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk [...] and how will it respond?*” is an urgent one. The artist's question is literally about paint and silk, but at a grander scale it is also about how we distribute labour and its flipside: “rest, strength and enjoyment” (Berlant, 2016). The material—whether silk, or flesh and blood, or an ocean—will always be holding something for another: if the environmental crisis teaches us anything,

there is no escaping co-dependence. In the quest to be liberated from domestic drudgery the idea of independence was taken too far: liberalism is a lie, there is no such thing as total individuality. The question is not who am I? But who am I in relation to others? I can still feel like an individual when in relation to others, and I can still feel alone in the world, but I will never be entirely alone. Coronavirus has made intrahuman innate connectivity obvious, but coronavirus doesn't answer the question of how much can one hold for another and for how long. Coronavirus alone does not answer what will they look like once they're released from their burden. The details of the answer matter because there is a massive industry glossing over such details and there is a massive industry that treats diverse material differences with contempt.

The term “resilience” is a contemporary buzzword. It is used across so many discourses: economics and psychology to contemporary climate change and sustainability policy, especially as it intersects with strategies that seek to address (psychological, social and ecological) damage at the same time as maintaining a capitalist model of economic growth. In this context, resilience means enduring or, stated more positively, bouncing back from a stressful or disastrous event. The term has been the subject of widespread critique across almost all disciplines. Scholars have noted that the concept best serves a certain model of corporate capitalism because: (1) it seeks growth, and recycles stress, trauma and even disaster into an opportunity for economic growth (James, 2015); (2) it is so widely used it comes to signify something very vague at best, and mean nothing at worst (Cooper and Walker, 2011); and (3) it focuses on economic growth at the expense of social and environmental care, justice and healing (Bracke, 2016). In other words, resilience policies and strategies are holistic in terms of the capitalist economy or a corporation dedicated to profit, but their plausibility relies on invisible and unaccountable physical and emotional labours of others.

What these critiques do not attend to is the inadequacy, or (frankly) the outright lie, of the universal applicability of the metaphor of resilience in terms of materials. In short: while resilience as a policy buzzword is used as a general principle for bouncing back *successfully*, not all materials are resilient in the same way. In fact, the material definition of resilience is far more nuanced. Different materials (including bones and oceans) have different capacity for being resilient: resilience is defined (OED, 2020) as a material's elasticity (“the power of resuming an original shape or position after compression,

bending, etc.”) and the differentiated and measurable qualities of a material (“The energy per unit volume absorbed by a material when it is subjected to strain; the value of this at the elastic limit”). Those writing of resilience policy today, do not ask the most important question of materials: “*how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk [...] and how will it respond?*” They assume and demand total strength and elasticity. Not all materials bounce back from stress, trauma or disaster in the same way; not all materials can take the same load. Silk is different from bones; is different from oceans. And, to complicate further, different materials bounce back (or not) from different stressors differently.² Some don't bounce back at all. A material critique of resilience thus cuts to the cavernous heart of the concept of resilience as it is used in policy and planning when the question—how much can it take and how will it respond—is not asked.

Knowledge of Pasco-White's processes, provides detailed reflection on these questions. Her attention to household processes, mothering and domesticity also enable us to link it up to the question of housework as an invisible load. Clearly when the move to break out of housework was part of a feminist mantra, there was a sense of desperation: an outright refusal of the strain, it's drudgery and boredom. But perhaps the housework is not the problem as such, but the obligation. The inability to negotiate one's terms of one's contract. The artist's collages carefully renegotiate these terms:

I [use] the term labouring as a pushing the limits of what a material can take, hold, withstand, endure and, how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk, for example, and how will it respond? Or how may this canvas hold up with many layers of limestone, soil, many other fabrics, paints pigments? I am interested in pushing the limits of how we consider painting, disrupting its traditional methods and misusing material. Often I am working with delicate supports, by this I am referring to the surface I am working onto/into which are often lighter ... fabrics, such as cottons, (often old sheets, tablecloths, curtains, sometimes towels), linens, canvas and silks. I was drawn to the terms “supports” and “loading” as I felt they get at a more spatial approach to painting. Underpinning that I am also interested in labour and in its many disguised forms that often go unrecognised. In many ways, this is echoed in the “loading” of the many different fabrics that are incorporated and layered into the works often comes from a domestic and everyday—and gendered—space, incorporating these elements of my immediate surroundings and experience, the load becomes a type of archive (Pasco-White, 2019).

Taken together, Pasco-White's *messmates* and *becoming-with* series of works are studies in the variety of different material load capacities present and visible on a single canvas. The paintings ask detailed and visual-material questions about the load bearing capacity of different materials. Knowing this about the process of making the painterly collages, and the labours of the different layers, provides space to carefully think about what materials can take what pressures and for how long? Such material questions challenge immaterial resilience thinking, where the difference between who (i.e. whose bodies) or what (i.e. bodies of land and water) are asked to carry burdens for particular social and environmental interactions are overlooked. We don't know all the details yet, but what we do know is that, like wealth, the rest is unevenly distributed. We do know that the Greenland ice sheet has passed a tipping point. We do know that Australia burned like never before in the summer of 2019-2020. We do know that some keystone species in the environment are dying out. In Pasco-White's case the question of material support is being asked for aesthetic purposes, but it can act as an invitation to ask the same question of the social and ecological worlds we are seeking to build too.

Conclusion: Rethinking Labour

Artists, like mothers, are perversely and psychically trained to devalue their work because they are supposed to love it. This is a problem because it creates potential for exploitation. This problem occupies the air space between the two dominant common meanings to the word labour in English. As Astrid Lorange (2020: 50) puts it in her poem “Labour”:

the word labour [is] especially potent, since it must account not only for the activity of work, but also the potential of a body to work and therefore that body's value in a given market; it also must account for the collaborative process of birthing and being bored, the very process of becoming a body at all.

So, first is giving birth: the labouring involved in bringing a new child into the world. The second is labour as alienated waged work. The relationship between the two significances of the same word is obvious: in both senses labouring is embodied, sweaty, work, a movement and activity. But, it is ironic that the two are so materially distinct in terms of their place within current economy. While gestation, birth

and the aesthetics of a newborn baby are often described as “alien”, there is nothing alienated, in the sense inherited from Marx, about the process of labouring to give birth, one literally gestates the baby for months and then is (in most cases) handed the product of these labours (the child) to care for the next eighteen years (at least). While in the other, the product of these labours is already sold off, via the wage—one is alienated from one’s work. Historically the way that Marxist feminists have dealt with this double standard is through seeking a wage for housework (Federici, 1975), and more recently arguing for thinking about gestation itself as labour (Sophie Lewis, 2018). But this approach does not fully cut to the heart of the problem with the way that we existentially view and value work in general.

In her memoir *The Undying Anne Boyer* (2019: 178) describes the existential devaluation of housework like this: “Doing the dishes is not like freedom”. Rather, for Boyer “freedom is whatever we notice because it isn’t like doing the dishes For any author of doing the dishes, the best part of the story would be the story of missing out on everything else while the dishes are being done”. In a digest of the problem of “doing what you love” Miya Tokumitsu (2014), citing Thoreau, claims that work should be properly paid and given certain scientific or moral weight, but added the qualification in brackets: “it’s hard to imagine someone washing diapers for “scientific, even moral ends,” no matter how well-paid”.

Housework is seasonally figured as the worst kind of load to bear: as a load so thick and heavy it’s like the painter created a special mixture of lead paint just to make it heavier against the silk. Or if not the heaviest, the ugliest and least desirable. Those lumped with housework are literally seen as the least ambitious. And even when housework is waged, there are a disproportionately high number of documented or otherwise non-white workers in cleaning roles, or poorer white people. I wonder though, if doing the dishes is not like freedom (which is evidently not like freedom), how is getting in a suit and sitting behind a computer all day freedom? While earlier feminists sought to revalue housework, today Kathi Weeks (2011) and other “postwork” feminists are seeking to end labour markets altogether and move toward a postwork horizon, something more communal, caring and collective. Meantime, while we are caught in this stand-off between waged and unwaged work, Pasco-White’s artworks ask the important question: “*how much can I layer and load on this piece of fine silk and how will it respond?*”. In asking this question and remixing home

and work, the artist’s collages propose a revised domestic ecosystem in which we can do the careful, slow and messy thinking necessary to arrive at an answer.

Endnotes

¹ In some contexts this disavowal of feminism is known as “postfeminism” see Jess Butler “For white girls only?” for an excellent survey of postfeminist politics and feminist disavowals.

² Part of this argument is also in my short definition with Astrida Neimanis, “weathering” and is unpacked in full in a chapter in my forthcoming book *Weathering the City: The Changing Climates of Feminist Theory*.

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