



Tether



Theola Ross, *émicétôsét – Many Bloodlines*, 2020. Video still

Tether

April 6 - June 4, 2023

Artists: April Hickox, Natasha Lan, Jennifer Long, Kelly O'Brien, Theola Ross, Arpita Shah, Jessica Wohl

Curator: Phil Vanderwall

Assistant Curator: Michaela Lucio

Program Coordinator: Irene MacCreadie

Writer: Asmaa Malik

Publication Design: Donna Nolan

ISBN 978-1-928127-34-5

© 2023 Thames Art Gallery

List of Works

April Hickox, *Untitled*, from the *Dialogue* series, 2012- ongoing. Photograph, 40" x 50" per print

April Hickox, *Untitled*, from the *When the Mind Hears* series, 1995. Photograph, diptych 3' x 4' per print

April Hickox, *Untitled*, from the *Dissonance* series, 1995. Gelatin silver prints, 16" x 20" per print

Natasha Lan, *Untitled*, from the *Observations Out the Window* series, 2023. Inkjet prints, translucent 'invisible thread', 24" x 35"

Jennifer Long, *Untitled*, from the *Caesura* series, 2018 – ongoing. Site specific installation of photographs.

Kelly O'Brien, *My Brother Teddy*, 2014. 16 mm film, 5 minutes.

Kelly O'Brien, *How Does Life Live*, 2017. 16 mm film, 3 minutes.

Kelly O'Brien, *All The Beauty In The World*, 2022. 16 mm film, 3 minutes.

Kelly O'Brien, *The Future Is All We Think About*, 2023. video, 5 minutes

Kelly O'Brien, *Kitchen Party*, 2023. video, 3 minutes

Arpita Shah, *Untitled, (10 weeks)*, 2020. Archival digital prints, 28.5" x 23.5"

Arpita Shah, *Harris and Lewis at Six Months*, 2021. Archival digital print, 8" x 10", matted 16" x 20"

Arpita Shah, *Untitled*, 2020. Archival digital print, 18.75" x 23"

Arpita Shah, *Untitled, (2 days before)*, 2020. Archival digital prints, 37" x 30"

Jessica Wohl, *Missing My Son*, 2019. Found fabric, bed sheet, pants, spandex and acrylic, machine piecing, needle-turn appliqué, hand quilting, 62" x 40"

Jessica Wohl, *Family Portrait*, 2019. Found fabric, shirts, bed sheets, pillowcases, spandex, machine piecing, needle-turn appliqué, raw-edge appliqué, machine quilting, hand quilting and embroidery, 79" x 72"

Jessica Wohl, *In the Care of Others*, 2019. Found fabric, pants, shirts, day care sheets and gouache, 27" x 297"

Theola Ross, *émicétôsét – Many Bloodlines*, 2020. Short documentary, 11 minutes Alex Fisher-Baily (Producer), Lucius Dechausay (Editor), Alexandre Nour Desjardins (Cinematography)

Cover Image: **Arpita Shah**, *Untitled, (2 days before)*, 2020. Archival digital prints



75 William Street North
Chatham, Ontario N7M 4L4
519.360.1998 | ckartgallery@chatham-kent.ca
www.chatham-kent.ca/TAG | www.tagartspace.com

Thames Art Gallery exhibitions and programs are generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Municipality of Chatham-Kent.





Kelly O'Brien, *My Brother Teddy*, 2014

Tether

Asmaa Malik

The images from *Tether* fill my mind in the in-between moments. In my car, idling on an unplowed street as my son finishes his drum lesson. In my basement, endlessly righting inside-out hoodies and sweatpants before tossing them into the wash. In my darkening study, closing my laptop—and briefly, my eyes—as twilight hastens to pull me back into my leading role: mother.

Motherhood hinges on the illusion of slackness and the tension of a permanent connection that will be snapped back into action at any second. Though the intimate moments of parenting feel fleeting at times, the transformative works of *Tether* are a reminder that they forever shape the contours of our bodies, our lives, and our work.

Tether draws together artists who push and pull at parental connections with equal force: Arpita Shah, Theola Ross, Natasha Lan, Jessica Wohl, April Hickox, Jennifer Long, and Kelly O'Brien. Through their lenses and with their hands, these artists frame their subjects with great care.

That caregiving is not readily defined speaks volumes. Caregiving is relegated to a domestic duty—unrecognized, undervalued, yet constant. From sewing to filmmaking and photography, visual narratives pose universal questions about care work and the need to find meaning in those in-between moments.

It is difficult to tell if Shah's first two untitled photographs were taken during her pregnancy or after giving birth. It almost does not matter. Her twins have reshaped her. In a departure from her exquisite, composed portraiture work, Shah captures the beautiful chaos of her body in pregnancy, her unexpected folds, her uncoloured hair, and the soft wildness of it all. Her roundness and her fullness are matched by the image of her babies' gloriously rippled thighs. Her words written to them during her pregnancy speak to an intimacy that is impossible to recapture: *I wonder what you will be like.*

Ross' *émicêtôcét: Many Bloodlines* begins with intention. The Cree filmmaker and their white partner, Stefani, search for an Indigenous sperm donor for their child. They plan to centre Ross' heritage, passing on traditional knowledge while fostering love within their queer, multicultural family. Ross' desire to decolonize their own bloodline is an affirmation of their identity, as well as recognition of the weight of the past and



Jessica Wohl, *Missing My Son*, 2019



hope of the future. The cries of their newborn resonate as Ross' voice breaks with the first Cree words the child will hear: *Kisémântô kinânâskômitin. Mitôni kisâkîtin (I thank the Creator. I truly love you).*

The child is noticeably absent in Lan's stark, lonely photos of cinder block rooms used for so many institutional purposes that they are rendered anonymous. The unrelenting glare of the fluorescent lights, the unfilled nail holes in the bathroom tiles. These are the rooms she looks out from when pumping milk; the liminal tensions of work and motherhood: *Where am I when I am away from them?*

The daily daycare reports in Wohl's *In the Care of Others* reveal what is missed when the parent is not there. The quantification of care into neat little categories: Daily Activities, Diapering, Lunch. The pull of the domestic—the bedsheets and the clothes—is palpable in Wohl's work. The hide-and-seek of *Missing My Son* tugs at the elusive desire to be present with your child, while simultaneously needing (and wanting) to be elsewhere: *What did I miss?*

It is striking to see smartphones and tablets in the wild in Hickox's *Dialogue* series consisting of photos of her daughter in the car and on the shore, yet they feel almost organic. So much of our world has become mediated through these devices. Seeing the bright sky through her daughter's tablet and her own camera frame forms an infinite loop of sense-making. This view connects them in shared, though divergent, perspectives, both with the ripples of water spilling over the frame. Similarly, Hickox's sketch-like *Dissonance* series, which features children's hearing aids for her daughter who was born Deaf, reads like a picture book: a spoon, a toy plane, a cluster of crayons. Hickox used images to teach her to communicate through sign language and with her voice: *How do I help them see the world?*

Long's *Caesura* punctuates a quotidian timeline with a flurry of small moments that uncover divine in the mundane—the ocean in a froth of shampoo atop a child's head, the eternal entanglement of sisters connected through their hair and through their mother's body. Many of these images were captured during the endlessness of the pandemic lockdowns. They tell a story of the desire to be together, yet the need to grow apart. Fingers intertwined, legs disappearing into the sand: *How do you stay connected?*



Theola Ross, *émicêtôcét - Many Bloodlines*, 2020. Video still.

In her intimate films, O'Brien captures her young children, holding them still in fading moments, connecting their inward thoughts and their outward miens in her careful gaze. Her middle child, Teddy (who has severe physical and developmental disabilities) appears at the centre, even when he is not there. He needs care, but so do O'Brien's growing daughters. And so does she. Her cinematic family albums capture the poetic, crystalline heartache of constant care: *How do I let them go?*

My son is almost 10. From the sidelines, I watch him play basketball and marvel at his gangly silhouette, the shape of his distinct personhood. He has always been a whole other someone outside of me. When he was born, I worried that I did not know how to be a parent. Yet, every question I have ever had about taking care of him has really been about myself: *Who am I?*

Motherhood is a lifelong condition. Its permanence extends beyond its biological and societal definitions. The artists featured in *Tether* remap and redefine motherhood in ways that cannot easily be separated from themselves. A beloved friend who lost her first child soon after he was born became pregnant once again. A stranger asked her, "Are you excited about becoming a mother?" She replied, "I'm already a mother."



April Hickox, *Untitled*, from *When the Mind Hears* series, 1995. Photograph, diptych