

Jennifer Trouton
One of Many

Reassuringly Familiar: Jennifer Trouton's *In Plain Sight*

One of Many is an exhibition of an intimate and nuanced body of work by Jennifer Trouton, an artist known for her technical proficiency and exquisitely-executed paintings rich in histories and meanings. This work represents a painstakingly thorough research process which led to the production of a substantial number of oil paintings of varying sizes entitled *In Plain Sight*. The exhibition also includes circular hand-painted shelves with sculptural items, and hand-stitched embroideries and textiles. The project began in 2014 as an exploration of motherhood and the materiality of women's lives, inspired by Trouton's own experiences of becoming a mother. The work evolved, however, through a collaboration with a researcher at Queen's University Belfast who was investigating the historical provision of abortion in Northern Ireland. Trouton became drawn to the women's stories contained within the research; their hidden abortions, the idea that abortion occurred primarily in the domestic space, and the seemingly innocuous household items that women relied on.

A brown hen rests in a woven basket waiting for her eggs to hatch while, nestled amongst her feathers, a small chick clings close to its mother. A graceful swan rests its head forlornly on its wings, standing out from a cheerful orange floral wallpaper. A palm tree rises from an island surrounded by curling waves, a memento of a sun-drenched holiday abroad. These are Trouton's personal heirlooms. Faithfully rendered, each vessel is a prized possession once proudly displayed in the home and polished carefully by gentle hands. Yet such objects also allude to the metaphor of women's expected familial responsibilities as passive childbearing vessels. According to feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, 'the home displays the things among which a person lives, that support [their] life activities and reflect in matter the events and values of [their] life.'¹ As such, material belongings can 'bear witness to the sedimentation of the lives lived there.'² A tea-towel pinned to a washing line with wooden clothes pins, washing powder and a loaf of bread, an old bottle of Lysol, a cup of tea, an apron draped over a wire hanger. These are everyday items one would expect to find in the home, yet they also played a role in women's abortions. Though these household items are visible and familiar, they bear witness to the hidden lives of women and the management of their bodies in the home.

An ornate gilded oval mirror casts a reflection of sun-drenched light from a nearby window on intricately patterned green wallpaper. This elaborate wallpaper was inspired by the work of William Morris, the famed British textile designer and artist who was also a socialist activist. Interestingly, many of Trouton's carefully researched and designed wallpapers, like this one, contain plants that are natural abortifacients. The reflective mirror functions as a window into the private lives of women, yet it is one in which the physical body is absent. This painting also gives the impression of sunlight streaming through net curtains, recalling 'curtain

¹ Iris Marion Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme', *On Female Body Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005, p.139

² Young, p.140

twitchers', those who exchanged whispered stories of women's unexpected circumstances, or concerned neighbours and friends who provided support and knowledge to women in these situations. The subtle lines painted directly onto the gallery walls in the installation of the work implies the covert networks that women connected with when they needed to terminate unwanted pregnancies. This included the people whose knowledge assisted with home-based abortions like the pharmacist, the midwife, or the handywoman. It is notable that some paintings sit outside of the grid, communicating that there were people unable to connect with existing networks or to avail of the embodied knowledge in their local communities.

A closer look at the wallpaper paintings reveals further veiled meanings, as religious iconography subtly emerges from the background. A delicate pietà embedded into a wallpaper evokes a mother's sorrow. This classic Christian iconography depicts the seated Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus Christ in an intimate moment of mourning. In the context of *One of Many*, this imagery reminds the viewer of the emotional complexities that can surround unwanted pregnancy and abortion. Elsewhere, the figure of St. Brigid appears, significant because feminist theologians have pointed to an early account when the patron saint of fertility laid her healing hands upon a young women's swelling pregnant belly, causing the unwanted foetus to disappear. A painting of a mass card for Mary Margaret Savage, dated 9 September 1967, reads 'mother of four'. It bears the image of St. Anne, the patron saint of unmarried mothers, housewives, and women in labour, in a tender moment with the young Virgin Mary kneeling at her side, resting upon her beloved mother, her hands folded in prayer. Such imagery recalls the loss and heartbreak when a woman died attempting to rid herself of an unwanted pregnancy. The incorporation of Christian imagery into these paintings offers a means for contemplating the complicated relationship between religion and women's fertility in Ireland.

Set against black backgrounds, flowers like Yellow Tail Iris, Penny Royal, Dong Quai, Common Centaury, and Tansy bloom to life in Trouton's skilled hands. While these paintings reference nature and fecundity, they also allude to traditional folk remedies used to induce menstruation and abortion. The knowledge of these flowers and herbs was passed down through generations of women. Reflecting on the historical gendering of floral and botanical painting – subject matter often historically ascribed to women artists – Trouton remarks: 'They painted the things that men thought it was appropriate for them to paint.'³ Reflecting on her own subversion of this genre, a visual language in which she is well versed, Trouton says: 'I have something to say, and I won't be an apologist for saying it in paint, and I won't be an apologist for saying it in a language that would be read as feminine ... because there is value in that.'⁴

Two flexible, tubular arms rest folded around a black, rubber, elliptical-shaped body. The Higginson syringe, traditionally manufactured as an enema, was a syringe with a bulb in the centre of the tubing that, when compressed, forced liquid into the body cavity. Filled with soap or a disinfectant, these were used as an emmenagogue to separate the placenta from the uterus, resulting in miscarriage. A large white basin with a blue rim sits next to a round bar of soap. Both rest on top of old newspapers that were used to line the bed to avoid the

³ Jennifer Trouton in conversation with the author, 28 June 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

staining of the bed linens by the aborting body. These paintings convey the care and preparations put in place and the provisions that were to hand when a woman underwent the task of ending her pregnancy. If, as Young states, 'The home is an extension of and mirror for the living body in its everyday activity'⁵, then these material objects in domestic settings convey the lived realities for women who sought to manage their own fertility, further suggesting that the home and women's bodies in the space of the home 'can have a political meaning as a site of dignity and resistance.'⁷

Several paintings draw attention to the journeys some made, and continue to make, across the Irish Sea for abortion care. A circular shelf displays a child's wooden boat solemnly set against a painted wallpaper background that depicts travel routes used by women. The inclusion of children's toys – like the toy boat or a child's well-loved teddy bear, with its worn fur, held close to provide comfort – are a reminder that nearly half of women who seek abortion are already mothers, prioritising the lives of the children they already have. A series of images of Ireland, doubled and flipped upside-down, with various objects placed in the centre (including a white suitcase, a red pair of shoes, and a toy train pulling a carriage of wooden blocks), appear like moths or butterflies. In several cultures, such insects signify rebirth, transformation, and change, and their appearance here might comment on cultural and political changes in recent years. The flipped shape of the double Ireland also takes on a pelvic-like appearance, hinting at the absent body that is present throughout this work.

Since the artist initiated this work in 2014, the landscape for abortion has changed dramatically on the island of Ireland. Abortion was previously illegal in both jurisdictions under section 58 and 59 of the *Offences Against the Person Act* (1861). In the Republic, the repeal of the 8th Amendment to the Irish Constitution in 2018 saw the implementation of an abortion care service commence on 1 January 2019. Although the issue of abortion was devolved to Northern Ireland, an amendment to the *Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019* enacted by Westminster decriminalised abortion on 22 October 2019. In March 2020, the British government published a new legal framework for abortion in Northern Ireland, although at present the Department of Health has declined to implement this framework. Accordingly, in July 2021, Secretary of State Brandon Lewis instructed the Northern Ireland Executive to make abortion services available by 31 March 2022, or Westminster will administer its own directive. As the island of Ireland looks to the future of reproductive healthcare, it is important to consider what is at stake with the larger cultural shift in recent times. Bound up in this is the need to examine and understand the histories of abortion in Ireland, including the silences of women's stories and their agency in asserting autonomy over their bodies. *One of Many* employs a subtle and intimate visual language to trouble that which may seem reassuringly familiar, and in doing so invites a scrutiny of that which is hidden in plain sight.

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⁵ Young, p.140.

⁷ Young, p.146.