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The Image as a Felt Thing: Ambivalent Gestures in Motherhood and Painting

by Laura Rosengren



About the Artist

Laura Rosengren is a Canadian artist currently living and working in Stó:lō territory in Chilliwack, BC. Her practice involves a mixed material approach to painting and considers questions about motherhood and labour. Laura holds a BFA from the Alberta University of the Arts and an MFA from Emily Carr University (2025). She has received project grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council, and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation and was a finalist for the Salt Spring National Art Prize in 2021 and 2023. Recent exhibitions include Micheal O'Brien Exhibition Commons (Vancouver, 2025), Reach Museum (Abbotsford, 2024), Seymour Art Gallery (North Vancouver, 2023), and THIS Gallery (Vancouver, 2023).

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Care requires a multiplicity of quiet paradoxes to flow beneath the surface as our bodies hold complex, overlapping, and contradictory ways of being in the world. I feel this. The shifting and multiple experiences of motherhood have led me to a wider understanding of care, a care marked by ambivalence. As I consider my own complex social and gendered histories, I wonder: What does it mean to be a person who cares about the families we hold, the work we engage in, the various communities we exist within, or the land we inhabit? I relate to Leslie Jamison's description of motherhood in her autobiographical novel, *Splinters*: "Sometimes motherhood tricked me into feeling virtuous because I was always taking care of someone. But it didn't make me any more virtuous. It made me feral and ruthless. It steeled me to do what needed to be done" (2024, 120). There is something visceral about the daily ambivalence in this quote. It is about motherhood, but it also captures the conflicting feelings—the ambivalence—that show up in the ways I navigate the larger social and political arenas of my life.

Ambivalence is a misunderstood word, frequently assumed to imply a lack of care. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa alternatively shows how it is not a posture of indifference and anchors her book on Joan Tronto's definition, stating how care is "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world'" (2017, 3). She further explains that care is not merely support or something warm and fuzzy but should contain challenge, dissonance, and disruption. Care holds conflicting feelings while continuing to be engaged and involved, as Puig de la Bellacasa writes, "Thinking in the world involves acknowledging our own involvements in perpetuating dominant values rather than retreating to the sheltered position of an enlightened outsider who knows better" (2017, 11). For me, this means my art practice is entangled with the domestic realities of being a mother, and where feminist concerns intersect with race, land, spirituality, language, and more. It also means negotiating image making in a world already over saturated with images.



Figure 1. Rosengren, Laura. *Folding Laundry*, 2025.

My paintings contain open-ended stories (see Fig. 1). They are suspended from shelf-like brackets and hang loosely away from the wall, resembling the pages of a script or book. In painting, the brush stroke is a record of the artist's hand, a convention that carries many associations. Accounts of art history often mythologize the solitary genius, while capitalist notions of innovation prioritize the fast, the next, and the new. As a counterpoint to this, I work in a home studio, often with children around and integrate the slow and repetitive gestures of care labor into my paintings. My mixed material

painting practice integrates traditional methods, such as oil painting on canvas, with other methods, including needle felting and repurposing of domestic detritus, widening the visual vocabulary of painting by creating gestural alternatives to the brushstroke. Each of the materials hold a diverse history and by collaging traditional painting materials and processes with those drawn from craft or care work, I create new relationships within and across various types of making.



Figure 2. Rosengren, Laura. *Image of needle felting*, 2024.

Homelife with children involves many rituals, repetitions, and repairs. The movements can be both hurried and painfully slow, but I believe it is in these spaces that the mundane and mysterious intersect. I often work alongside my children or in their wake after they are off to school or bed. Their drawings and assemblages are visual cues that are always in my periphery. Their materials, cast-offs, and curious hands often drift into my projects, creating an exchange of influence that artist Lenka Clayton calls “the reframing of parenthood as a valuable site for creative practice, rather than an obstruction to be overcome.” Integrating this reframing into my painting practice has involved working in small spaces, in short bursts, with materials on hand and, in doing so, assigning value to the small, the peripheral, and the mundane.

In *Folding Laundry* (2024), I incorporate materials and processes drawn from my everyday experiences into the language of my paintings. I’m interested in the small, often

invisible repetitions and interruptions that accumulate and shape our lives. For example, in the two detail images below (see Fig. 3), needle felted wool, crafting scraps from my childrens' projects, and dried paint skins from my studio are collaged onto the canvas. In the right hand detail, there is a cut-up sweater and safety vest used to build out the painting. Using these materials draws attention to the painting's materiality, tactility, and surface, and also reveals its domestic context and the fragmentary, repetitive processes of creation.



Figure 3. Rosengren, Laura. *Detail of Folding Laundry*, 2024.

My paintings grow out of collages made from personal photos. The process involves coloring photocopied photographs with children's markers (like a coloring book); an activity I will sometimes do with my children. I re-copy these quick, almost disposable exercises, color them again, building layers of new shapes and values. This process continues through several iterations with cutting and collaging. In each cycle, different elements are emphasized while others are obscured. Making, unmaking and remaking the same image repeatedly mimics some of the domestic realities of caregiving or maintenance work. It is also somewhat akin to the experience of remembering a particular moment over time, where elements of a story shift and change. Drawing, tracing, and transcribing images in this way also allows for an ambivalent knowing of images. The repeated process of painting in and washing out, such as in *Blue House* (2024)

leaves traces of the struggle to both reveal and conceal (see Fig. 4). These materials and processes accumulate, making the narrative images underneath them ambiguous. It slows recognition or the ability to understand the image quickly. Flat images also begin to possess a different presence through materials such as felt and fiber. I am interested in how recognition is embedded, interrupted, or distilled by the sensory world of repetition and slowly made objects. I am particularly drawn to this repeated engagement with the same image in contrast to the flood of daily images that my body cannot store or process. At one time, family images were containers for stories and shared memory, today the sheer volume of my own personal images means I can barely access them.

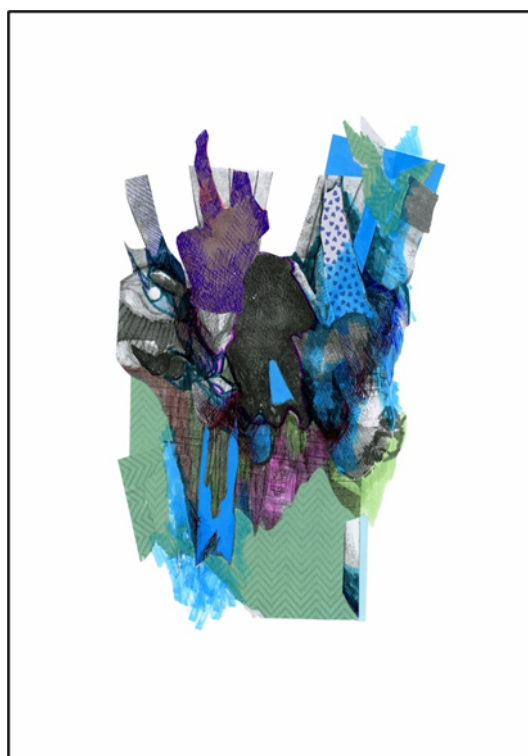
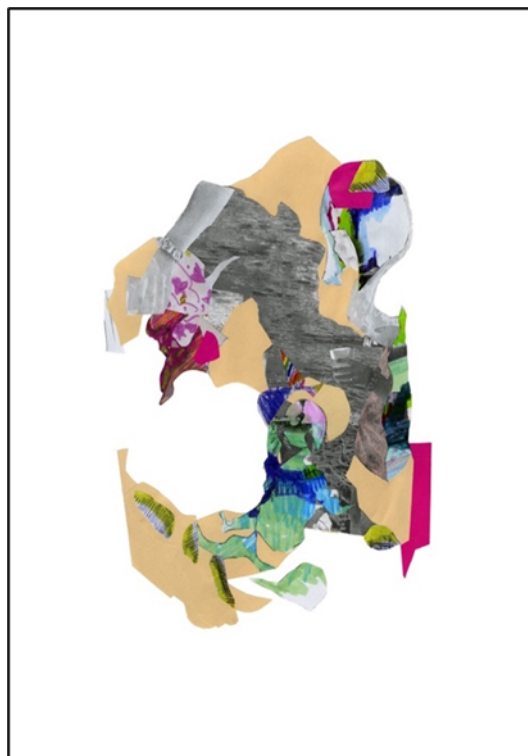


Figure 4. Rosengren, Laura. *Blue House*, 2024. Fabric dye, gesso, acrylic paint, needle felted wool on canvas, 72" x 41.5" x 5".

In *The Eyes of the Skin* (2024), Juhani Pallasmaa talks about how our increasing devotion to the eye and images has weakened our collective responsibility and care for each other. He writes about how this increasing reliance on, and promotion of visual materials has become cancerous, using words like nihilist or narcissistic to make the point that vision has a distancing and alienating effect. Here, the power of the eye to take in and absorb large quantities of information means that it also becomes less connected to the body or emotions. As Pallasmaa further articulates, “The hegemonic eye seeks domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world” (22). Conversely, touch counters these tendencies in powerful and important ways. Even if only evoked, touch closes a distance and requires proximity. Closeness invites an affective or care response—it is harder to be indifferent when you are near.

The desire to have my paintings engage both the visual and tactile is one reason that wool felt has found its way into my work. Felting is a textile process where fibers are knotted into one another rather than applied on top. In my work, I generally needle-felt wool into the fabric of the canvas. The use of felt and paint together involves laborious and sometimes futile experimentation to make these disparate materials work together. How do I needle-felt a resistant painted surface (and why would I want to)? There is a material and procedural incompatibility, but one that feels akin to the struggle of ambivalence. The desire to have these materials coexist is a way to expand my painting practice to include my experiences of motherhood and the long tactile histories of women working with their hands.

Although wool and paint speak different languages, and require different often conflicting methods, I bring them together like a grammatical slash. Paint/felt. Lauren Elkin, in her book *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art* (2023), talks about the usefulness of the slash used as punctuation for expressing multiple conflicting or separating ideas. It is a division yet a relation that bridges and creates both distance and dialogue. Working the canvas in two ways creates a dialogue between materiality and image; it allows the work to be experienced visually but the tactile residue also facilitates an embodied and sensory encounter. I am interested in activating a tactile association and a related affective experience for the viewer. For example, the felted textures in *Container* (2024), reflect the domestic softness of worn fabrics or bedding, an association of animal hide or coat, and reads in areas like mold or decay where it is caught with paint (see Fig. 5). In addition, felting and collaging domestic scraps become a way to monster the painting by puncturing the integrity of the painted image and creating disruptions, irregularities and spills. There is division, yet relation.



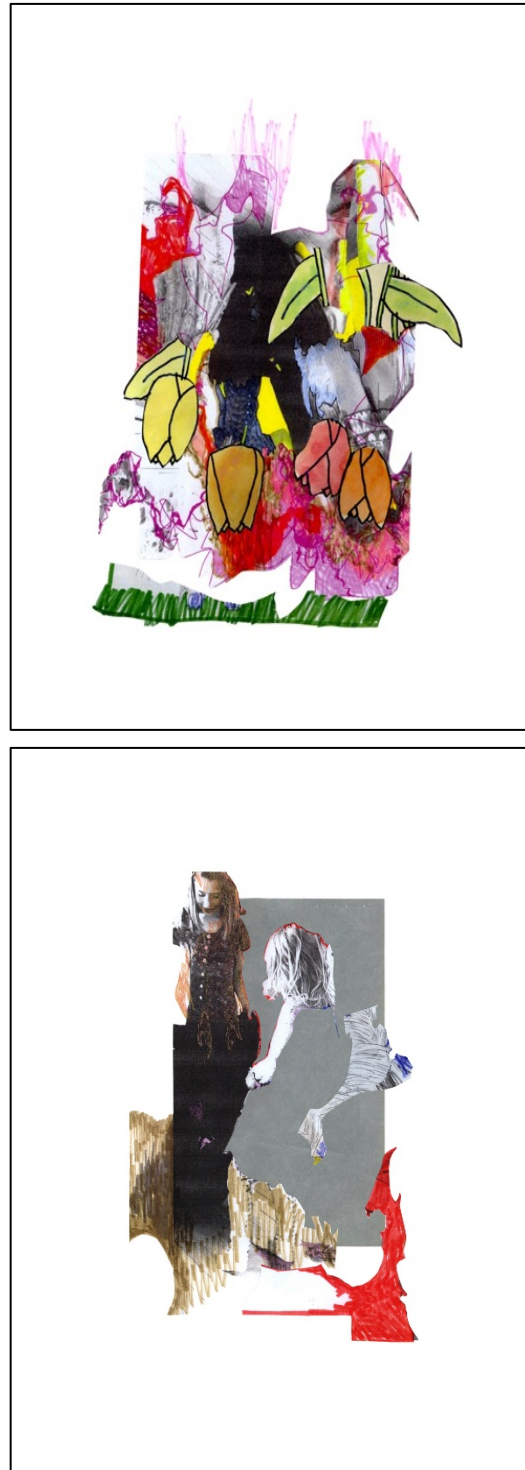


Figure 5. Collages from the series *Colouring Pages*, 2024. Top left: *drinking water*, top right: *crowded house*, bottom left: *ghost hands*, bottom right: *tulips*. Mixed media collage and digital print, each 22" x 15".

My experiences of motherhood and painting, as well as living in an increasingly polarized socio-political landscape, have led me to consider how ambivalence might be a type of active care that is both generative and reparative. I focus on the home because,

especially after having children, it can feel like a separate world. It has edges and contains life and a myriad of interrelations, operations and hierarchies related to our survival and flourishing, but ones that often seem hidden or apart from the bigger events of the outside world. It is a microcosm; a small world nested inside the larger one. Yet, as Nadiah Riviera Fellah writes, “the domestic sphere of traditional motherhood cannot comfortably exist with larger existential threats outside their doors, whether global pandemic, ecological destruction or the toxic legacies of colonization” (2021, 26). The home is a container, but it is also a thin, permeable architecture that patterns and plans bleed through.

In my work, I am not primarily interested in telling a singular story, but in evoking an affective and tactile response through the multiple small recognitions, repulsions and sensory engagements found in the interplay between images and materials. By using felt, fabric, and other domestic accumulations alongside paint, I rupture and repair the skin of motherhood narratives. Needle felting, in particular, mimics a certain experience of motherhood for me. It is slow, soft, and imprecise as well as sharp and disruptive. It gets under the skin and pierces the surface of the image over and over. The image becomes a felt thing.



Figure 6–7. Rosengren, Laura. *Detail images of container*, 2024.



Figure 8. Rosengren, Laura. *Blue House*, 2024. Fabric dye, acrylic and oil paint, chalk, and needle-felted wool on canvas. 76" x 54".

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