

; it was in the air, as they say.

Erika DeFreitas

July 8 – August 27, 2016

A Conversation between Erika DeFreitas and Ellyn Walker. For a digital copy of this text, please visit our website at www.gallery44.org/exhibitions

Artwork in vitrines left to right:

at the very point where words fail us; (the old word foi, "faith") No. 1, digital inkjet print, 2016

Her body is full of light (often, very often, and in floods)., (4:19), dual channel video, 2016

at the very point where words fail us; (the old word foi, "faith") No. 2, digital inkjet print, 2016

- EW** June 10, 2016 I see your work as being about relationships. There is something very tactile in the way your work makes visible the processes of negotiation or ways of 'working through' that are integral to being in relationship with others. You continue to use yourself and your mother as relational subjects, which allows you the opportunity to return to the representation of women, family and the self – complex sites of representation on their own as well as collectively.
- For relationships to succeed, they require immense work, they demand ongoing care that is unyielding while also adaptable. Uniquely, the relationships that you explore in your work are manifold, such as between you and your mother, the self and community, and between public and private ways of being. Using representation as a vehicle for considering such diverse entanglements, your work offers a glimpse into the complex ways in which identities are formed – through inheritance, construction and more importantly, through negotiation. The corresponding photographs, *at the very point where words fail us; (the old word 'foi,' "faith"), No. 1 & No. 2* (2016) remind us of this, portraying two related yet independent women who have much to say and, at times, little room to say it. What do you think about the notion of inheritance or construction in relation to the work?
- ED** June 24, 2016 [When looking back at the photographs and videos of my mother and I, I am always taken aback by how our bodies are so similar and the ways that we share gestures and movements. I am always thinking about construction and I'm never quite sure. What I mean by this is that there are times when I really can't see a clear line between what is inherited and what is constructed.](#)
- EW** June 10, 2016 The images of you and your mother portray the weight of particular histories, which through the use of culturally-loaded signifiers like beads and stones demonstrate longstanding practices and complicated identities. The literal mass of 300 rosaries that almost cover your mother's face reference familial rituals of Catholicism and collaborative making, as you and your mother carefully and laboriously made each rosary. While her hands are shown still and crossed at her waist, it is, the image of your mother "running rosary beads between her fingers," as you describe her fervently doing each day that is alluded to in this stoic portrait.
- Your own self-portrait depicts a scene where multiple stones bound with hair hang from your teeth, referencing the abject body, feelings of loss, and cilices or hairshirts (uncomfortable garments worn as a form of religious penance in early Christianity). The represented heaviness (of the rosaries, and of the stones) in both of the photographs evidence the complex relationships of the subjects to each other and to the objects they are carrying.
- ED** June 14, 2016 [There is something about holding a stone in the palm of my hand or rubbing one between my thumb and index finger that I find to be very grounding. Stones have become a tool for meditation – not too far from that of the beads on a rosary. I am also very interested in the use of stones in funerary practices across a number of cultures and faiths.](#)
- EW** June 21, 2016 [Hands are an interesting symbol in thinking about historical representations of women, where, in maternal contexts, hands evoke care and gentleness. Or from a religious standpoint, they can be suggestive of penance, prayer and healing.](#)
- ED** June 27, 2016 [Hands also remind me of labour. I often think of Jacob Lawrence's paintings and how I've always been attracted to the hands in them, writing with chalk, holding a sledgehammer, or ironing clothes. I also consciously think about making my hand \(labour/process\) evident in my textile works by leaving the needle visible or pencil markings still on the cotton. Lately I've been having my hands visible in my photographs – interacting with or just placed near or on an object. I've been trying to understand why I'm drawn to this and, at the moment, I think it is my way of being present, almost creating proof to myself that I exist.](#)
- EW** June 21, 2016 [Can you expand more on the continued nature of collaboration in your work? Particular to this work, but also, more broadly.](#)
- ED** June 27, 2016 [Collaboration has always been present in my practice. I love to think about it in a really broad sense. For example, there is the collaborative work that I do with my mother, but I've also collaborated with artists through a psychic medium. Even with works that I create on my own, I feel like there has been some element of collaboration because I've talked to people about the work, asked for advice, etc. To me, that is all collaborative. I guess we can tie it all back to relationships, really. These relationships that I've built and continue to build are so important to me on a personal level as well as to my practice.](#)
- EW** June 10, 2016 You often use the body – your own and your mother's – to communicate relational affects such as loss, guilt, heaviness, sadness, hysteria, speechlessness, anxiety and uneasiness. In doing so, you also highlight the body as an important site of vulnerability, but, also, of resilience. The corresponding videos *Her body is full of light (often, very often, and in floods)* (2016) offer evidence of this relational spectrum, portraying almost identical scenes of yourself and your mother going through the (e)motions. You two proceed from what appears to be lighthearted to joyful to hysteric to confused to frantic to inconsolable to desolate to melancholic to calm – quite the range of feelings. By making these affects visible – in particular, ones that have long been attributed to the 'irrationality' of 'women's emotions' – you give legitimacy to their feeling and likewise lend complication to their individual experience. You also re-present the phenomena of the weeping Virgin Mary statues (thought to be supernaturally crying), as each of you are pictured sobbing without any explanation. Can we read the use of your own body – rather than the hiring of an actor – as evidence of the personal or biographical nature of your work?
- ED** June 27, 2016 [Yes. I'm very much interested in the use of my body as material, as signifier. There tends to always be an element of autobiography in my work, but it is never solely about that. Rather, it is the autobiographical context that everything else I am attempting to explore is built upon. I control how my body is framed; yet the vulnerability comes in not being able to control how my body is read. The body is also a marker of time. With each photograph or video that documents our bodies, I can trace the changes that are happening. In my practice I'm interested in making the impermanent, permanent. Exploring loss, the body becomes a site of this impermanence.](#)
- EW** June 13, 2016 The repeated use of your mother as subject is really effective, too, in particular within this work, as the maternal figure works to reinforce your explorations of Catholicism alongside the representation of women.
- ED** June 24, 2016 [I remember when I first started to work with my mother, a common connection that people made during studio visits was to religion, and I was often asked if I was Catholic. At the time, I wasn't concerned at all with religion, despite using images of the *Pietà* or Renaissance paintings frequently as source material. I was more mindful of how the depiction of mothers \(at times, with their children\) had some roots in art history and contemporary art, such as in the work of Mary Cassatt, Janine Antoni, Sophie Calle, Hannah Wilke and many others. Around thirteen years ago I was introduced to the work that Jean-Martin Charcot did on hysteria. I was fascinated by it, especially by the photographs taken of the women at Salpêtrière. This work will definitely be entering my practice in some way in the future, if it hasn't already.](#)
- EW** June 21, 2016 [I like that you're both poetically and materially creating an ancestral record here.](#)
- ED** June 27, 2016 [An inventory. An archive.](#)
- EW** June 21, 2016 [Obviously the notion of 'women's emotions' is a patriarchal idea. Are you consciously trying to address this in your work?](#)
- ED** June 27, 2016 [I don't think it's always a conscious decision, but as a feminist it's always present and lingering somewhere informing my practice – for example, patriarchal ideas of language, the female/racialized body.](#)
- EW** June 10, 2016 The absence of explanation forces us to resist making meaning upon first viewing the work. Rather, there is work to be done in reading its nuances, and in building a context for the emotional rollercoaster we see onscreen. You describe this work as an exploration of a "quiet tension," – I am interested in where exactly the quietness lies for you? Is it in yours and your mother's solitariness, the lack of dialogue, the subject's minimal dress, or the video's banal background? Instead, I see this work as being subversively loud, conveying a range of sounds that counteract the silencing suggested in the photographs of you and your mother.
- ED** June 24, 2016 [It's loud because it's putting things that are often unsaid or practiced privately out there for others to see, hear, internalize, question. Maybe it is the vulnerability that feels loud?](#)
- ED** June 27, 2016 [I think that the quietness and tension lies in what goes unsaid. We rarely discuss religion. I can remember a few conversations we've had about it. Once was after my parents divorced and my mom stopped going for communion. When I asked her why, she said that she wasn't allowed to go up because of the divorce. It was at that time that I decided to no longer go for communion. Another time we discussed religion was when I was around fourteen years old \(maybe younger\) and I told my mom that I no longer wanted to attend mass. We discussed my reasons and she said that it was okay to no longer attend. Since then, we haven't really talked about it. This is the quietness, the silence that exists. The tension was present for years until we started to create this work and gradually started to talk about it.](#)
- EW** June 10, 2016 It is here that the works come together for me, merging autobiographical references with broader cultural ones. Combined, the artworks show us performative negotiations – as seen between the photographed subjects and their featured objects, but also between the different representations of yourself and your mother throughout the overarching body of work. While much remains unsaid, your reimagined portraits of the Mother and Child show us that while spiritual traditions and cultural beliefs may endure, their meanings and articulations shift and conflate, leaving much to still be heard –
- ED** June 27, 2016 [– and, likewise, learned.](#)

Erika DeFreitas is a Toronto-based multidisciplinary conceptual artist. She explores the influence of language, loss and culture on the formation of identity through public interventions, textile-based works, and performative actions that are photographed; placing an emphasis on process, gesture and documentation. Exhibition sites have included Project Row Houses in Houston, the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, The Art Gallery of Windsor, Platform Centre for Photographic & Digital Arts, Centre [3] for Print and Media Arts, The Art Gallery of Mississauga, the Pollock Gallery at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, the Houston Museum of African American Culture, and a residency at Mentoring Artists for Women's Art in Winnipeg. DeFreitas is a recipient of the Finalist Artist Prize from the Toronto Friends of Visual Arts. She is a graduate of the Masters of Visual Studies Program at the University of Toronto. www.erikadefreitas.com

Ellyn Walker is a writer and curator based in Toronto. Her work explores the decolonizing potential of intersectionality through an art historical and curatorial lens. She is currently a PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at Queen's University.