

'The Maternal Gaze'

Irish Museum of Modern Art

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Domnick Sorace, *The Maternal Gaze: Grandparents on their wedding day*, courtesy of IMMA.Laragh Pitmann, *The Maternal Gaze: Laragh's mother and sisters*, courtesy of IMMA.

GEORGE FLOYD'S INVOCATION of his mother in the final moments of his life brought renewed poignancy to familiar tales about the last words of dying soldiers, and of the dying in general. Whatever the reason this may be our tendency, there are few words as stirring as 'mother'. Not everyone has one in their lives, not all mothers are a positive force, but it is something most of us have in common.

As IMMA'S five-year project dedicated to loaned works by Lucian Freud concludes, two portraits of his mother Lucie are presented for our contemplation, in dialogue with paintings by Chantal Joffe. 'The Maternal Gaze' is a related online presentation, comprising 22 short videos and films that also direct our attention to this subject.

They form a diverse patchwork of reflections on how maternal figures, grandmothers included, have impacted on the lives and work of their creative progeny. Contributing artists were selected from members of IMMA's Visual Engagement Team, its long-running programme Studio 10, and the migrants' collective, Art Nomad.

Reminiscences about textile-related activities experienced in the home – crochet, knitting, embroidery, tailoring and upholstery – weave the testimonials together across cultures and time. Patchwork is celebrated in Brigid McClean's fond tribute to her grandmother, Maggie Gillespie from Donegal. Her memories mingle with those recounted by her mother, the youngest of Maggie's eleven children.

Combing her granny's silver-white hair instilled in McClean a love of threads. She hunkers down beside a quilt Maggie stitched together at the end of many hard days' work, and lined with remnants of old work clothes. McClean has completed copious ink studies to retrace decisions made in creating its floral patches and geometric structure. It is showing signs of wear, and she plans to repair it using gold thread. Speaking quietly about how she carries her grandmother in her heart, she emits a small sigh of remembrance that, like other moments encountered through the series, eloquently conveys a sense of loss.

In contrast to the informality of most, Chris Jones's short is a meticulous sound and vision montage anchored by his poem, *The Green Buddha*. From a childhood memory of dropping and breaking a statuette cherished by his mother, he conjures a portrait of a life that shared experiences with generations of young Irish emigrants: the bustle of downtown Manhattan, setting up

home in Queens, visiting Coney Island, dispatching blue airmail envelopes home. It closes with a photo of his mother, before marriage, before parenting, head thrown back in a carefree moment of joy.

Jones's "nostalgia for a place that I can't remember" resonates across many of the tales told, about meetings at social clubs, treasured garments, dancing and music. An impulse to gratitude is captured by Nigerian-born Joe Odi-boh's heartfelt thank yous to his mother, Theresa, for the suffering she bore on his behalf, for caring for him while sick, for ensuring he received the best schooling, for providing him with financial support. He confesses to a period of almost forgetting about her, until a visit brought the love flooding back. "If I die and be born again," he declares, "I still want to come back and be your son."

Roxana Manouchehri, from Iran, recalls three occasions in which she and her mother were moved by their shared experiences as women to shed tears: one when Zohreh supported her decision to apply to art college, another when, much later, she bought her mother a gift of a painting class, and a third when she was released from jail, having been accused of not adequately covering her hair.

Pakistani-born Amna Walayat's film layers sound with still and moving image to revel in the hand-crafted gold jewellery passed on by her mother for her dowry. She recounts fantastical stories, also passed down, of her great grandfather's marriage to a she-bear; of a grand aunt "so beautiful, fragile and transparent" that when she drank, people could see water pass through her throat. Having grown up in a creative household, Walayat sees her mother's unstinting perfectionism mirrored in the precision of her miniature painting.

Maggie, Theresa, Zohreh, Ellen, Margaret, Johanna, Martha, Rachele. The presence of maternal figures, named and unnamed, is movingly reconstructed through this programme. Living still, or preserved in memory, their influence remains, disseminating to the wider community through the medium of art.

Susan Campbell is an independent visual arts writer and researcher.

Antonio D'Souza, *The Maternal Gaze: Martha in her homemade dress*, courtesy of IMMA.