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Artlink

The Mother Issue

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Tania Lou Smith
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Courtesy of the artist

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(M)Other is an Opera!

Josephine Mead

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Josephine Mead pictured during *(M)Other is an Opera!* development funded by Chamber Made, 2025
Photo: Sarah Walker

As an artist, I need to make. This sounds simple, but it's complex. It is a need wider than me, bigger than me, deeper than me. It connects to the hunger of artists scattered throughout history before me. It is stitched to past women who have found dedication through vocation. It is insatiable. I am the mother of my practice. My recent work has focused on motherhood, as I navigate IVF. I've read, breathed, watched, injected and manifested *mother*—whatever that may mean—hoping all this creative energy will lead to a baby.

There are synergies to be found between motherhood, artmaking and arts-work — with and without the existence of children. I see many forms of mothering in the arts that extend far beyond heteronormative roles, gender confines and nuclear families. Motherhood is truly creative. I've always wanted a child. As an artist, before finishing one project, I'm planning the next. I like working this way. Across my two-year fertility journey, I've reckoned with my body not meeting the creative timelines I've set. I always choose collaborators wisely and at times my body has felt like the wrong choice. I haven't been a reliable collaborator. I've sat beside close friends who unequivocally do not want children. They've held me through the setbacks of IVF. I've held them as they defend their choice to not have children. We've held each other, with trajectories different, knowing our respective choices are of equal value.

Last year I curated a day of radio programming for B-Side Radio with Rosa Spring Voss called *HOUSE-HOLD*. We considered expanded notions of care from artist-parents, health practitioners and caregivers. The program acknowledged how parenting comes in many forms, with or without biological children. We talked of alternative methods of world-building and family building, embracing queer, non-normative perspectives. When planning the show, Rosa—an artist and post-

partum support-worker—noted she can give more of herself to others because she doesn't have children. Sometimes the best mothers are those who have chosen not to procreate, or who haven't procreated yet.

The main thing I've been gestating over the last two years is a book called *(M)Other is an Opera!* It's a memoir, charting my experience of IVF as a queer-woman, artist and wife. Through the book I return to the main question artists entering motherhood ask: can I sustain my creative practice alongside motherhood?

The book has charted intrauterine inseminations, counselling appointments, endless paperwork and failed IVF cycles. It's charted friends and family-members falling pregnant and giving birth. It's charted unfamiliar feelings of jealousy. It's charted poor care at one clinic, with incorrect notes on hospital records. It's charted an expensive and long transfer period to find better care. It's charted IVF cycles being suspended in mid-air, to make way for invasive surgeries. It's charted a medical system that doesn't always understand queerness. It's charted the cathartic power of artmaking. It's charted every needle that has punctured my skin and every tear shed. It's been written as a letter to my wife. It's charted us falling, in hard moments, and re-finding our footing, in good ones. Mostly, it's charted waiting — the universal feeling of IVF.

In late 2024 I participated in Hi-Viz Satellites—a creative lab funded by Chamber Made, Punctum Inc. and SAtheCollective, bringing together artists from so called Australia, Singapore and Taiwan. We stayed on the plains of Gunaikurnai and Taungurung Country (Mount Hotham). I was writing my book and waiting for my body to recover after a hysteroscopy, before starting another cycle. I began thinking the writing could translate into theatre. I was imagining my words visually, held in the bodies of others. With encouragement from Chamber Made Artistic Director/

Below and right:
Dana Miltins and Jillian Murray performing during
(M)Other is an Opera!
development funded by Chamber Made, 2025
Photo: Sarah Walker

Sunny Kim performing during *(M)Other is an Opera!*
development funded by Chamber Made, 2025
Photo: Sarah Walker



CEO Tamara Saulwick, a two-week theatre development for *(M)Other is an Opera!* was scheduled for August 2025. As I was trying to make myself—as mother—using science and deep intention, I was also preparing for the theatre development. This planning allowed a sense of productivity within an IVF journey that was not feeling productive.

This productivity was invigorating and terrifying. Writing to the blank page with no one around is a very different experience to allowing your words to sit in the mouths and bodies of others. Would I cope with baring myself in this way? I followed my intuition and invited a group of artists I admired: soprano opera singer Sophie Bisset, vocalist Sunny Kim, composer Kueiju Lin, actors Dana Miltins and Jillian Murray, and dramaturgs Kate Sulan and Mary Helen Sassman. I couldn't have assembled a more supportive group of women. When the theatre development was initially planned, I was sure I would be well and truly pregnant by the time it took place. I would be joyful—full belly—reflecting on the difficulties of the past and noting how far I'd come. As time passed and obstacles stacked up, it became clear that I would not be pregnant.

My period was late, and the IVF cycle I thought would end just before the fortnight of development, was now scheduled to end halfway through. We toyed with skipping the IVF cycle, but couldn't endure more waiting, so we forged ahead. It was a raw two weeks. I spoke about my fertility journey with open honesty, and my collaborators shared their experiences, generously. But I didn't tell anyone I was in the middle of a cycle. I couldn't have been with a more supportive group, but I knew I couldn't speak of it and continue to move through each day. I put my writing in the hands of the women around me and my words were held with deep care. We found they could be sung, performed and read. We found they were flexible. We found what worked and what didn't. We found many things, and I'm still digesting the experience.

The cycle failed.

The day after, we had a session with Sunny Kim.



Sophie Bisset performing during *(M)Other is an Opera!*
development funded by Chamber Made, 2025
Photo: Sarah Walker



She responded to a past passage I had written about entering the ocean and finding no division between the sea and my tears. It was written while standing amid IVF and the open water, feeling as if the sea and sky were crying for me. During the session, Sunny vocalised the pain of the failed cycle. I was able to hold in my tears that day, because she released them for me.

I was digesting and grieving my loss, while hearing my words of waiting, fear, hope and pain, being read, sung and performed back to me. An echoing of myself while I was in deep disappointment. I drew comfort through every creative act from the women surrounding me. Sunny voiced my tears. Sophie reached the heights of my hopes and fears through operatic score. Dana wove humour into my writing, allowing me to breathe. Through Jillian's years she brought wisdom and hope to my words. Kueiju musically stitched things together. Mary Helen and Kate held space, while holding me. A few days after my cycle failed, midway through the development, my brother's partner gave birth. The highs and lows and hopes and lacks of motherhood were all around me. Every

direction was a mirror to the motherhood I was reaching for and not meeting. Over the past two years I've been able to think of little else than becoming a mother.

While I'd never experienced a theatre development, I've done a series of art residencies that have echoed this intensity. With these focused capsules of creativity, the pennies often don't drop until long after the period of making. The dust has begun to slowly settle, post development, and I'm digesting all that was brought to the fore, examining what needs to be kept for the next stage and what can be left on the cutting room floor.

In art school I was introduced to Faith Wilding's iconic work *Waiting* (1972) — a performance where Wilding sat and recited experiences of waiting that women endure. I think of this work often and have regularly likened it to my experiences of waiting — waiting for love, for understanding and most recently, for a baby.

As I sit at my desk at the Wheeler Centre, undertaking the Hot Desk Fellowship to finish my book — with a hard-won baby seed growing inside me — I still find myself waiting. Waiting for the twelve weeks scan; waiting for funding to continue the theatre work; waiting for my energy to return when the tiredness of early pregnancy abates, so I can plunge into the myriad projects I'm working on. I return to the question: can I sustain my creative practice alongside motherhood? And I realise, through my identity as an artist, I already am.

Josephine Mead is a visual artist, writer and curator, based on Wurundjeri Country. Her multidisciplinary practice explores personal notions of support.