



On Matrimony

Matrimony provides an opportunity to think through notions of love, matrimony and ritual, eighteen months on from my wedding. The work in this exhibition seeks to invite others to reflect on what matrimony means to them, acknowledging that there are many avenues towards love and committed partnerships. These avenues may or may not involve marriage.

Matrimony presents paintings of my bridal bouquet, installed as “spectators” on pews, arranged in the gallery space. The exhibition presents a space to consider what matrimony means, from my perspective, through notions of still-life painting, sound and installation-based practice. Through the installation and associated public programs, audiences are invited to consider what matrimony means for them, opening space for dialogue around differing cultural perspectives. The work is underpinned by queer experience, coupled with the joy of marrying into my wife’s Filipino family.

The accompanying digital sound score, created by BJ Morriszonkle and Nero Friktschn Feuerherdt, references the sounds an orchestra makes when warming up—a seemingly disparate and impromptu cacophony and a digression from the order and form that is typical for the cohesion of an orchestra. Experiences of these sounds elicit a sense of anticipation and are often accompanied with the experience of settling into a theatre for a performance. Likewise, they can signify the act of arriving and preparing for a wedding ceremony, and by extension of preparing for a marriage. The digital sound score will be replaced with a live performance during the opening event. The sound work acts as a reminder that when it comes to love, we are forever in stages of anticipation, learning, beginning and return.

The paintings depict different compositions of my bridal bouquet, painted on black backgrounds. Still life paintings historically have represented the liminal boundaries between life and death. Originating in Ancient Egypt, still-life as an art form highly codified mortuary rituals, with the belief that objects represented on the walls of tombs and sarcophagus would accompany the dead into the afterlife. The later Dutch and Flemish still-life paintings, created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (a style which the florist drew inspiration from when creating my bouquet) expressed the transience of life and futility of materialism. This sense that all is passing echoes the need for prioritising emotional support and lived experience in the place of material possession within a healthy marriage. Traditionally words spoken during wedding ceremonies often reference death. Qualities of transience and resonance, that accompany notions of mortality, are synonymous with still-life painting. This echoes the ways in which we leave emotional traces on one another, as lovers. We retain life “milestones” in material and non-material traces—photographs, memories and keep-sakes. Wedding invitations are often squirreled away in drawers. Flowers from wedding bouquets can be dried or they are left to wilt, becoming an allegory for the stages of decomposition, re-consumption and regeneration that become part of fashioning a life with another person.

Behind the installation is a lone sculpture titled *Bridal Veil*— this veil has been hand-crafted from thousands of brass wedding rings—joined together, one by one. Historically, veils were used to represent modesty and purity. I did not wear a veil on my wedding day. Nor did my wife. Fashioned in gold brass, the veil becomes an art object and is reminiscent of chain mail. Chain mail is a protective material, used for suits of armour. The veil can be seen as a symbol for the protection that two people can provide to one another through marriage, or it may be viewed as a symbol for the self-protection one must harness to deal with the challenges of marriage. Chain mail is defined as a flexible mesh material—basically a metal fabric. In a relationship, one may adjust harsh material into that which is malleable, in an effort to protect

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one another and find meeting points of understanding. Through a feminist framework, I am reclaiming the veil as at-once a symbol of a coming together, and a symbol of retaining independence. During our wedding ceremony, the Filipino cord and veil ritual was performed. Two couples, whose relationships we admired, placed a veil over us, signifying protection and togetherness. Through the use of brass wedding rings, the work references the vows we made. As we placed rings on one another's fingers, we repeated the lines, as this ring has no end, my love is also forever. *Bridal Veil* transforms the act of conversational commitment into solid form.

The title for the show, *Matrimony* draws its root from the Latin matrimonium, based on *mater*, *matr-* meaning “mother”—a word deeply related to *care*. In a committed relationship a sense of mothering can come to the fore, regardless of the existence of children. We need to care for our partners. Acts of care historically have implicit connections to notions of the maternal. There are also many relations to be drawn between mothering and sustaining an artistic and/or curatorial practice. And so, as artist, I return to acts of making to consider my relationship to matrimony. The word *curate* derives from the word *care*. I have experienced great care from curator Dr. Miriam La Rosa whilst realising this exhibition. We often talk about conceiving artworks—a word that references birth. *Mothering* is defined as *relating to or characteristic of a mother, especially in being caring, protective, and kind*. Sometimes we must parent a lover when they are in need of support. Both the wedding ceremony and the state of being married can be described with the term matrimony. It has a double function, suggesting both beginning and ongoing acts of care.

Matrimony will be accompanied by a suite of public-programs, including poetry readings, writing workshops on love for adults and teenagers and a “conversation circle”. Through community engagement, differing cultural perspectives on love, marriage and ritual will be welcomed. This work seeks to celebrate and acknowledge the multiple ways one can enter into committed forms of love, regardless of sexual preference and cultural background, and both in and outside the bounds of marriage.

— Josephine Mead, 2024



On Love

Our love is multifaceted, ever-shifting, sometimes brackish and sometimes clear—just like you. Our love lives in the depth of eros and the plains of friendship. After meeting with love in different guises, the love I found in you was peculiar and complicated and warm and constant. It's safe and stressful and broken and whole and consuming. Eros can be defined in many ways. It is an ancient Greek concept for a passionate love—the meeting of pleasure and pain.

Eros is an issue of boundaries. [1]

Eros here means reaching for but never reaching; it is not the love of consummated desire, but the love that is fuelled by its own impossibility. [...] This love is necessary because it's impossible; it's the best thing in life and it's the worst. [2]

As you know, I've spent the last few years writing a book of poetry on love called *I Sea See / I Her Hear*. Taking metaphor from the ocean and the ancient poetess Sappho, I've reflected on our love story, leading up to our marriage in June 2023. Sappho lived in Greece around c. 610 BCE — 570 BCE. She wrote of eros and love and was known for her *epithalamium*, wedding songs. She had female lovers and wrote from the position of "I"—a radical new direction at the time. I naturally write from "I" and I usually write to "you". In September 2023 I travelled to Greece, to walk in Sappho's footsteps, stand in the places she stood and consider what love is.

Along the shoreline of Eresos, where Sappho was born, grow Sea Daffodils—a relic of her time, now endangered. Called lily of the sea, they once abounded on the Greek coasts. Now they are rare—a result of being uprooted. The Latin name, borrowed from the Greek "pankrátion", means the all-powerful and testifies to the numerous medicinal virtues the plant carries. The white flowers are funnel-shaped with a delicate fragrance which is best enjoyed on still warm evenings—an appropriate precursor to the sweet honeyed breeze Sappho would later sing of through her poetry, on the other side of the island. Sea Daffodils grow from bulbs. All that is needed is contained in the womb from preconception: a metaphor for some women. The Sea Daffodils have been pulled up by their roots; upturned to make way for construction; and desecrated as a result of dredging and dune erosion. Their numbers are slipping. Sappho's poems, sung and spoken to the wind, were not recorded until years later. They were marked with mistranslation, burnt in the ancient fires of Alexandria, were lost in sand, and changed through new tongue when found. The funnel like flowers are short-lived, with crescent stamens. Flowering comes to an end in the middle of September. The burst is very brief. The majority of Greek weddings happen in January—the month of Hera. But sometimes, for a variety of reasons, a wedding will fall between August and September. I walked along the shore, with three rings on my wedding ring finger, three months earlier, in June, we had been marked by Hera. They say that Sappho and ancient poetry exists in modes of triangulation and return. We are redefining marriage on our own terms. [3]

Love and the voice go hand in hand. We are constantly re-learning how to communicate with one another. All our words have edges and sometimes we speak different languages. Often people talk about what their "love language" is. Sappho's songs were passed down orally, never written. She sung them to the wind and they were carried along recitation lines. We

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have found them later recorded in fragments—scrawled on scraps of papyrus, lining ancient coffins and rubbish heaps. We read between her gaps, searching for words we can't find. I am still learning the vocabulary of you, working out how you articulate and pluralize.

That words have edges is an insight most vivid, then, for the reader or writer of them. Heard words may have no edges, or varying edges; oral traditions may have no concept of "word" as a fixed and bounded vocable, or may employ a flexible concept. [...] All are breathable. The edges are irrelevant. [4]

The Greek alphabet is a phonetic system uniquely concerned to represent a certain aspect of the act of speech, namely the starting and stopping of each sound. Consonants are the crucial factor. Consonants mark the edges of sound. The erotic relevance of this is clear, for we have seen that eros is vitally alert to the edges of things and makes them felt by lovers. As eros insists upon the edges of human beings and of the spaces between them, the written consonant imposes edges on the sounds of human speech and insists on the reality of that edge, although it has its origin in the reading and writing imagination. [5]

It is nothing new to say that all utterance is erotic in some sense, that all language shows the structure of desire at some level. [6]

Together, we are sounding out new words. Prior to our wedding, to enter into queer marriage was a position forbidden. For many, it is still far out of reach. There comes great weight with this. We carried this weight down the aisle on our wedding day. Queer history is steeped in stories both bitter and sweet. Does this enable those who are queer to get even closer to love? When you come from a history that is sweet-bitter, you have the possibility to reach further into eros, further into love.

*Eros once again limb-loosener
whirls me sweetbitter, impossible to fight off (Sappho) [7]*

You are salt. You are sea. I am your shore. You are the other. You are me. There are many parts to fit together through contradiction and console. It is a privilege to watch you find yourself. You are songs sung to the wind and stories re-told with great confusion. You are fragmented lines on papyrus, missing beat and new tongues seeking translation. Some of our songs are already lost on the wind. With ever-changing faces, you are private and public. We join linguistic gaps for each other, and yet there are many disjunctures in our conversations. We have a historical desire to piece things together. To make a "whole". To produce a "mirror image". To understand. But there is no certainty in any form of story. We are fighting back against history. Boiling our own water, making our own salt:

*come girls beat your fists
down upon your breasts
and shred your dresses
(Sappho) [8]*

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On the 3rd of June when we married, I looked through Filipino lace veil and watched you looking back at me. Your eyes, tender buttons. I was making a brass veil sculpture for many months and felt as if I was getting nowhere. Joining thousands of brass wedding rings by hand. Creating chainmail, to eventually be placed without body, mounted as absentee. What does it all mean? I started making the work before our wedding. Each join, made by hand, a small consideration on our joining. A small consideration of the protection and discomfort that can come from this. When sliding ring onto finger we remarked, *As this ring has no end, my love is also forever*. As the year of our wedding drew to a close, the veil sculpture was still not complete. Life had got in the way. Is this an allegory for the busyness of a happy marriage?

Each join was a small consideration on the joining of marriage, on the joining of selves. A rumination on opening and closing the circle. Thinking to the work I started, which will be returned to upon arriving home. There will always be more joining to go. Thinking to our wedding ceremony two weeks ago. Thinking of you through lace veil, thinking of you under Filipino lore; law; love.

Thinking of you with tear-stained cheeks and your steeliness. With moments of overwhelm between—I know how much it was for you. It was so much for me too. Thinking of you crying through your vows, your steady unsteadiness.

Thinking of you right now, upstairs in our hotel room, awaiting hospital news.

Thinking of you. [9]

The first day we spent together, you spoke of your *Nanay*—your grandmother. Our future was immediately cast as one that would be rooted in love for family.

Your Nanay dove for pearls. Pearls are the only stone in your ears that you'll wear. We both wore pearl earrings on our wedding day. We swam over huge iridescent pearls at the Great Barrier Reef in 2021, holding hands as we were swimming. It was the moment I knew we needed to stay together. I stamped our wedding invites with shell wax seals and hand-painted a shell on the sign that we put outside the venue. It said Maligayang Pagdating—a message to welcome. I got a shell tattooed on my arm right before the wedding to represent you. Should we name our future child Pearl in reference to your Nanay? I'm thinking through the meaning of a pearl as an allegory of a child. I'm thinking through the meaning of our child's future as an allegory for a pearl. I'm thinking about names constantly and add Pearl to the list.

[10]

*I came here for her
but it is the her at home
that I am aching for
S / K*

[11]

