

mother



an exhibition by  
Rachel Walls

#### ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

mother began as a script for a short animated film. The concept was to create a work that expressed some of the emotional experiences I have had as mother of a profoundly Autistic child. The scope of this theme explored in the film was limited - I wanted to share a greater range of the experiences I have had in this unusual life. As the original animation medium was oil paint on glass, it was a smooth transition of format to express this concept as a series of paintings. The resultant further explores the theme I had originally set out for film production in a way that is holistic and satisfying.

Autism is a complex cognitive impairment that can have a wide range of manifestations. At the most severe end, Autism is extreme to a point that is hard express. These works reflect on my experiences as a parent trying very hard to bring joy to the life of my child. I am certain that those who do not understand Autism and its hardships will be able to see into the world(s) I am sharing in this series of works. I feel it is important to express both the gravity of existence under duress and the beauty of relationship. I also feel that there are some important social messages I needed to convey surrounding disability as the last bastion of bigotry - the treatment of people with impairments and their caregivers is still nothing short of shameful. And nobody seems to know they are complicit to that. mother addresses these issues in a way that is beautiful, harsh, and honest. All the images in this catalogue are copyright © Rachel Walls 2012. All rights are reserved by the artist, and images may only be used with consent of the artist.



Public Relations - Oil, Ink on canvas. Image copyright Rachel Walls, 2012. Permission and print res images to be obtained from the artist



work in progress - Idyllic - 2012. Painting with bare hands to mimic the act of stimming. Image copyright Rachel Walls 2012

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Rachel concurrently practices as an animator, film editor, academic, and commercial and fine artist. Rachel's unique perspective and creative versatility have afforded her a range of international exhibitions, publications and screenings. The processes she undertakes range from traditional paint making to frame-by-frame hand-etched 35mm film animation.

#### ORIGINAL EXHIBITION INFORMATION:

September 20 - October 1, 2012  
GAFFA gallery, 281 Clarence Street, Sydney, 2000  
[www.gaffa.com.au](http://www.gaffa.com.au)

#### ENQUIRIES:

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Mother, 2012. Oil, Encaustic, Coffee on Canvas, 762 x 1016 mm

This work is the first piece I created for this series. The idea had emerged several years ago, and I created a rough draft on paper, which hung on my wall until I completed the finished version.

There are aspects of this work that to some seem religious, but to me, the intention is one of telling a common story. For first time mothers, there is an awkwardness in the transition from new mother to 'mother' - and everything about early child rearing is unexpected. I postured the mother holding her infant in a way that is ignorant of usual care - the neck is unsupported and the two seem to look at one another in an estranged manner. This work is meant to represent the universal essence of being a first time mother, simply that everything is new and requires a range of initiations.

For myself, as a mother of a child with Autism, there are a range of ways in which this notion of being uninitiated has never ended. Autism is mysterious, and the symptoms/behaviors associated with Autism are not constant or consistent. So just when I think I am getting the hang of things, everything changes. In a range of ways I will never truly understand my son's needs, and this painting reflects this aspect of our relationship.





Family, 2012. Oil, Wax, Ink, Gold on Canvas, 617 x 905 mm

I have experienced a strong isolation from normal family support. As an estranged/expatriate, I operate in a solitary way. This makes notion of family for me different to those typically presented by media. I only have my son, descended of myself, to associate with this term. Here we cling to one another, close in our co-reliance. He is my child, I am his mother. We are family.

This work is painted in simple joyful colour to express the beauty of our relationship, and the solidarity of our family unit.

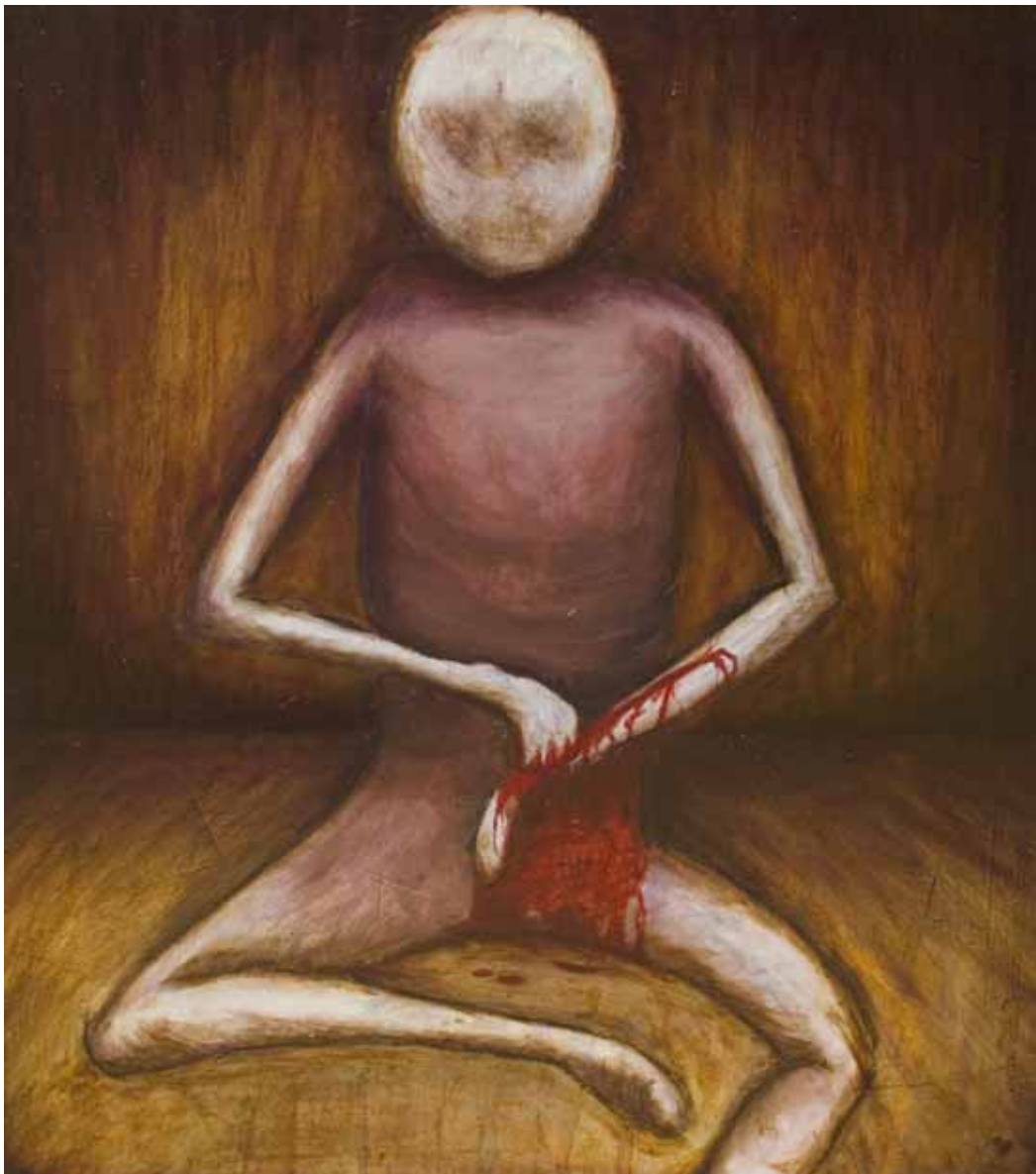


This Room, 2012. Oil on Canvas, 1524 x 1016 mm

This room is representative of a few interesting and conflicting states. Peaceful tranquility mixes with claustrophobic isolation - this is the reality of my living space.

Autism is a behavioral disorder which has a range of negative destructive outcomes. Things like faecal smearing make it hard to have furniture items such as sofas - which are hard to clean. Some of the stimulating activities related to Autism just cause precious loved things to be destroyed. Therefore I was not as an adult able to collect the types of things that people associate with a home, or with memories. I have no mementos of travels, gifts from friends, etc. As my son grew and became more able to destroy large items, my world became simpler and simpler.

In the end I became distanced from notions of what kind of things you find in a home, and I found a way to enjoy the home environment even though it had become quite ascetic. There is a beauty to be found in the absence of possessions, and while I was forced into this mind-set I have profited from being un-obsessed with the trappings of a conventional home.



Please Stop!, 2012. Oil on Canvas, 915 x 1016 mm

An unfortunate aspect of Autistic behavior is self-harm. It is very difficult emotionally to digest this behavior, and also difficult to stop a person with Autism from harming themselves. Short of sedation there is nothing that can be done. I have never been able to stop my son from this gruesome fascination, he seems to take interest in removing his skin. His hands, arms and face are covered with scar tissue. He first began this at the age of four, and I have never been able to come to terms with this, stop it, or even manage to effectively treat his wounds. He will remove every bandage, suck off ointment, and every attempt at restraint just reinforces his interest in this painful fixation. He does not seem to feel the pain, the pain I feel at his detachment from his physical self is immense. I have tried to show this activity in an honest way, as the emotional experience of watching this behavior is more powerful than depicting my emotional self in relation to the subject.





Stimming II, 2012 (diptych). Oil, Wax on Canvas, 762 x 508 mm

Stimming is a term that relates to behaviors designed to over-stimulate the senses. These behaviors can constitute one or several senses. One of my son's typical stimming activities is to scream repeatedly at a high pitch and volume.

It is my impression that my son uses these kinds of stimming activities to attempt to resolve difficulties he has in understanding the world around him, I do not think he screams for joy, but that perhaps he is trying to seek a form of peace by blocking out the world with sound. This diptych displays the chaos of the sound my son creates in his search for peace, as well as the disturbance and pain it causes to those who are subjected to it. It is hard to imagine, but this behavior is extremely painful to the ears. My doctor requested I wear earplugs around the house to avoid further damage to my hearing on account of this.

Somewhere between his desire for tranquility and the strength of force applied in that quest, there is an expression of a very average longing - to simply relax - but it is expressed in such a strange way. I have tried to capture this complex desire for calm in this set of works.



Idyllic, 2012. Oil on Canvas, 762 x 838 mm

This work expresses the joy my son and I receive from nature. We both find peace and calm in escaping the urban environment. My son especially enjoys walking in the nature reserves and along the beaches of Sydney's northern region. When we are not out and about, our yard is a place of calm for my son. I have created a space full of plants for my son to experience. He knows that in this open space, he can simply be himself without the pressures of the urban environment.

I think some of the relaxation we all experience when visiting parks and wildlife areas comes from the absence of linear man-made structure. Some comes from the lack of industrial sound. A less obvious component comes from not having social impositions - norms and conditions that allow us to exist in the urban landscape are not as relevant in an isolated natural space. While this is not a huge matter for those of us who are accustomed to the social conventions of modern social practice, for people with Autism, social conventions are difficult to negotiate. Nature is a relaxed and forgiving space.





Stimming, 2012. Oil, Wax on Canvas, 762 x 660 mm

Stimming is a piece that is honest and simple. During early childhood development, many infants and young children experiment with the sensory experience provided by their own leavings. In Autism, many young people engage in faecal smearing beyond the once or twice during infancy. My son used to 'decorate' his bedroom every morning for years when he was young. It was a hard thing to avoid, as he barely slept during his youth, so I was always too exhausted to get up quickly enough to prevent this morning ritual. Later in life, he would occasionally have smearing episodes around the house, and these would be difficult to manage, depending on the locations. Faecal smearing is something that nobody ever gets used to, although I did learn to cope with it in my own way. It's totally dehumanizing to have to clean up shit every day, especially when it's everywhere. But when it is your child, the situation is considerably different, and it's just part of the job.



I Didn't Know, 2012. Oil, Glass Beads on Canvas, 762 x 607 mm

This painting is based on my memories of early motherhood. My son had severe reflux and I used to let him sleep lying on my chest so that he was upright. I often would simply sleep with him out of sheer exhaustion, and wake up in this position.

Every first-time mother wishes they could turn back the clock in one way or another and do a better job of those early days, with the knowledge gained from parenting there are many things a mother wishes she knew from early on. For me, this is more than the average yearning. Autism does not manifest until later stages of childhood development, and emerges at around 18 months to 3 years. However, there are a lot of hallmark behaviors that are apparent in early infancy. I wish I could have known that these simple signs - poor sleeping, poor feeding, reflux, frequent ear infections - could have made Autism known to me. But they are so common and innocuous in and of themselves. There is no way I could have known what was going to happen. I myself didn't know anything about Autism until my son was diagnosed and I had to educate myself (the doctor responsible for diagnosis didn't do this). I wish I had known about Autism, its signs and symptoms, from early on because early intervention is so critical.

This painting is about the memory of a time when I was just a young mother struggling to be in the role of mother, with no idea of the altered path I would wind up taking with my son.





Toe Walking, 2012. Oil, Wax on Canvas, 914 x 711 mm

Toe walking is a typical behavior in Autism, where the person walks in a rather odd fashion, rocking and moving around on their toes. It is not the same as walking in the normal sense, as a person on their toes, and is hard to describe without seeing it. It is awkward and odd and sets a person apart from society in its alterity as a form of locomotion. It is a form of stimming where proprioceptive stimulation is targeted.

I notice my son doing this most when he gets excited about a movie he likes, or a food he wants to eat. He especially will do this in front of the television when there is an exciting moment in one of his favorite films. For him toe walking is full of joy, and expresses his excitement and delight in things around him that he understands and takes pleasure in.

As I am also an animator, I decided to express his joy in a 'walk cycle' - a series of poses that if animated, would mimic the appearance of a walking person. I focused on 'key frames' - major poses in the sequence that would require in-between drawings to flesh out the work. I also make reference to the UPA studio style of the early fifties, which represent a huge stylistic impact on modern animation. I have used my sense of style, love of animation, and my son's love of animated films to create the aesthetic style of the work.

I am making his joy beautiful to those who do not perhaps understand his toe walking on first glance, and at the same time acknowledging a source of joy both for my son and myself.





Public Relations, 2012. Oil, Wax, Ink on Canvas, 1524 x 1397 mm

This work is the one that took me the longest to execute. I had wanted to express my disdain for the many people that had accosted myself and my son in public. However, every time I would sketch out a concept it seemed somehow petty, as if I was the asshole and not the people who had caused us so much negative experience out in society.

So for a long time this canvas was simply primed and hanging in my living room, so I could stare at it.

I decided in the end to paint the actual words that people had said to us in public. They were painted over and over in ink on the canvas until they became a visual cacophony. I then painted the figures over the top, in the centre of this horrific noise, to show our emotional reaction to this barrage of negativity.

I have a lot of anger but also a lot of understanding for this kind of verbal assault. It is emotionally challenging to think that anybody could be born impaired, or could become impaired during their lifetime. It's frightening. And someone with Autism presents so strangely, it's difficult to process and accept. Creating distance is a way to cope for many people. However, it's harmful to my son and I, and I wanted in this piece to express what it means to be unthinkingly cruel to people who already have a tough life to start with.

I would like to think people would think twice about this kind of thing after viewing this work, which I put forward with more than a little bit of attitude.