

Beyond the Personal  
A New Chapter in the work of Marjolaine Ryley

Camilla Brown

Ryley's work grows from personal experience and is a form of mediated autobiography. Yet although her work connects to the diaristic impulse of many contemporary artists, one might think of Nan Goldin or Tracey Emin here, it moves into a different realm with a different audience. It is never just a download of personal experience as she seeks with each project she has worked on over the years to transcend beyond the personal. This new work is by far the most emotive and in some sense raw subject that Ryley has sought to tackle. It speaks of an experience shared by so many women that is rarely verbalised or shared with others. It is estimated that a quarter of pregnancies end in miscarriage in the UK. It can happen for many different reasons and at different stages of pregnancy and can sometimes leave emotional scars for the women and their partners who experience it. Ryley has been through this five times in her journey to have children. For me it was once.

In this book, Ryley reflects with images and her own writing on her experiences of miscarriage. The first entry on her blog on the subject is a video she has made of herself suspecting the start of a miscarriage. She uses the camera as an active participant in her work taking on strands and ideas developed by Jo Spence and Rosy Martin from the 1980s Phototherapy movement. They were to enact and role-play through their experience of illness and loss using the photograph as a therapeutic tool. These women were using photography in a new way to create a language for an area of women's experience that had not at that stage been given a visual voice.

What precedents do we have to the depiction of miscarriage within the canons of art history? Not many and the most relevant would seem to be in the work of Louise Bourgeois and Frida Kahlo. In her painting Henry Ford Hospital (1932), for instance, Kahlo depicts a small version of herself in bed, attached on what appears to be umbilical cords to symbolic items such as her womb, her dead baby, a snail, which shout of her pain and experience of miscarriage. Many women in painting and photography have dealt with self-portraiture as a genre. In Body Art and Performance, female experiences of menstruation, rape and illness have been tackled. But surprisingly few, given its frequency of occurrence, have taken on the subject of miscarriage.

Interestingly in her research Ryley has found a plethora of online platforms that women have used to commemorate and discuss their own experiences of loss and pregnancy. It would seem the web has become the contemporary repository for commemoration and the arena used to speak of the unspeakable. Similarly there are platforms online to discuss death and illness as well as the impact of menopause in a more direct way. It seems the place to turn when language fails, the place to find comfort in the solace of strangers, as forums and discussion groups cluster around issues and experiences. On YouTube it is possible to find a raft of confessions to camera, often poetic and tuneful, as well as heart breaking and harrowing.

There is a sense of a need to speak out against a silencing of women's lived experience. It may be uncomfortable terrain but it seems ground that is worth covering. Medical imagery has had a long tradition of representing foetuses and embryos often in the name of medical science. The need to see in order to understand and control the female body medically often seems the root of this imagery. The grainy black and white images of scans have become so prevalent that not only are they now sent to friends and family to announce pending births, they are also anticipated parts of the experience of pregnancy. Many speak of a pregnancy seeming unreal until that photo image is seen and it all becomes so tangible. But of course for others it is only during the scan that the worst news is discovered. That a pregnancy has not worked out, despite the morning sickness. That a baby is dead or no longer there. The void. The loss. The end.

That it is photography that both commemorates and reveals death seems appropriate given the medium's long historical connection to mediating our experience of death. Of course Ryley's work operates outside the realm of therapy. But when considering photographing loss it inevitably taps

into the role that the photograph can and has had in the therapeutic process. It brings to mind the work of Todd Hochberg who works in hospitals to take images of still born babies. This mediation of loss and the role the photograph of a cherished baby can play in the bereavement process is key. It also harks back to a much earlier use of photography in its very early days to record dead children. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth infant mortality was extremely high with one in three children not making it beyond the age of five. Grieving parents embraced photography as a way of recording and fixing an image of a child taken away so young. These images today can seem almost macabre as the children are shown in their best clothes often during the onset of rigor mortis. Yet we of course are seeing these images now, separated from their role in an intimate family setting, as we become voyeurs to family tragedies long past.

Of course in the case of miscarriage the issue is often not having a body to mourn, with pregnancies lost without any semblance of recognizable human form. This does not lessen the woman's sense of loss, what might have been, but it does of course take away the visual evidence of it. What are we left with as the remains to mourn? Ryley takes on that challenge in her work, using a range of different visual metaphors for her experiences. The syringe with the drug that will enable her to carry a pregnancy full term shown alongside a toy soldier, tea bags and blood coloured tea, everyday objects which take on new significance and meaning in the context of the work. In one work Ryley holds out in her hand a mashed blackberry. A simple piece of fruit in this context takes on an allegorical role to represent destroyed flesh. The ring on her hand has twisted around so a heart shape inset is seen. The symbolic intent to suggest love and commemoration is here. The hand held out so we see the artist's palm suggests we are being asked to bear witness to something private and personal. It seems so much more potent and powerful than a more literal image of blood or flesh.

In *Things are strange*, we see a white liquid poured carefully from a miniature teapot into a tiny cup. Ryley has noted that in other cultures vessels pouring out liquid have been used as a metaphor for miscarriage. The size of the pot suggests this is a child's toy perhaps taken from a toy house used by children to play and fantasize about domestic life, the home and the family. The play with scale is interesting, suggesting an Alice in Wonderland type world we may be attempting to enter if we drink from the cup. Yet these objects seem to carry a symbolic sadness to them as the toy that the missing child will never play with. The physical distance of the couple also suggests the wider impact loss has on couples which can often cause huge rifts and gulfs between partners unable to cope with each other's responses to grief. Ryley is bravely taking on new visual territory in this work, which is of course as much about words as image. We need to go on that journey with her to ensure that in the future there will be a contemporary visual language that speaks of this experience for all the women who are yet to go through such loss. At least they will know they are not alone.

The Thin Blue Line, The Deep Red Sea: Explorations of Miscarriage and Pregnancy Loss  
Marjolaine Ryley

First published by NEPN 2015

ISBN 978-0-9933418-0-9