

Spring

Emptied

open

still,

after the storm.

Letting the light trickle in.

Telling monsters to wait

by the door

as you sleep to dream.

Of the next

strong legged woman

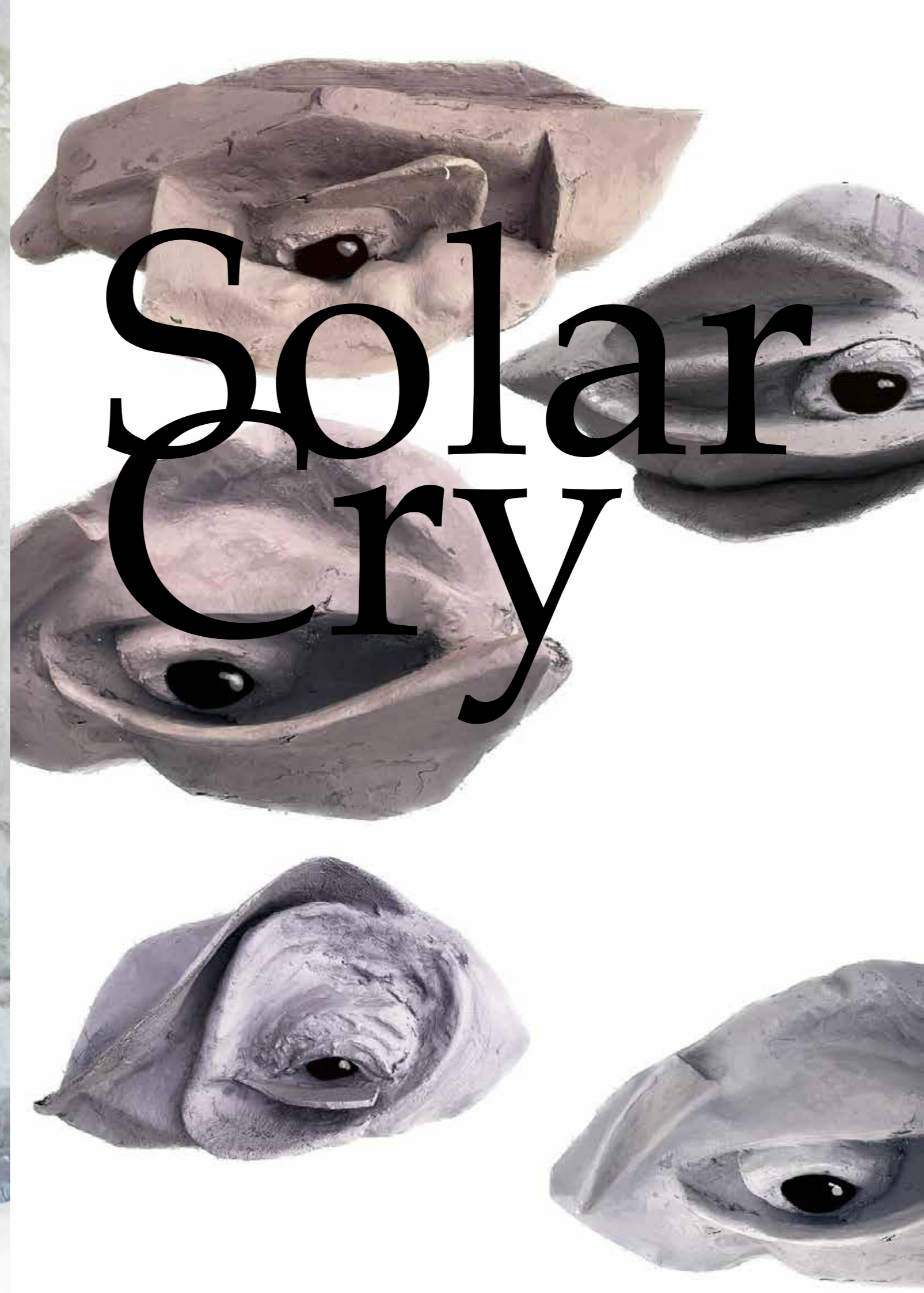
who touches the sky.

Your boy reaching for pink,

reaching for joy.

September 2021

Poem by Bridie Lunney  
September 2021



# Solar Cry

## Show of strength

For sculptor Sanné Mestrom, there is power in the act of creativity. Hannah-Rose Yee gets a preview of her next exhibition.



When the artist Sanné Mestrom heads to her home studio in the Blue Mountains to work on one of her sculptural meditations on the female form, she layers on five pairs of disposable gloves. The gloves serve an important and practical function: they protect her hands while she's working for hours with cement, plaster, wax and wood, casting and recasting her pieces in search of the perfect shape. But they are also a clear marker of the duality that exists within her. "I'm always having to go back into the house to do something for my son ... And every time I need to leave the studio to go into the house, I rip off a layer," Mestrom explains. "I'm always going between mother and artist, mother and artist, mother and artist."

Mestrom has a six-year-old son, and his arrival – sweet and wriggling and full of life – changed everything. She juggles her artistic practice (her works are held by the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Museum of Contemporary Art) with teaching as a senior lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts, and before becoming a parent, her art-making would see her "go until I fell apart from exhaustion". "Even though it adds a whole other dimension of responsibility and pressure, being a parent, for me, has also made me have a much more balanced and healthy life," she reflects. Still, it has come with great sacrifice. Mestrom feels most creative at twilight, a time that happens to coincide with every parenting responsibility. "The hardest bit of parenting is

not having my twilight anymore," she admits. Dusk is the "most spacious time of day", she explains. "It's like blowing air into a set of lungs, that just get bigger and bigger and bigger. That's the real creative gestation time. And as much as I obviously adore being a mother, I miss that."

Now her studio time is precious, and it occupies the same window as her son's school day (and occasionally his after-school jujitsu). For the past six months, she has been working on the pieces that will be exhibited in *Solar Cry*, her solo show at Sullivan + Strumpf's Melbourne outpost in August. Several text-based works will line the walls of the gallery, while the centre will hold two sculptural female figures. One features a woman curled over and weeping, her tears collecting into a deep basin. The other is a towering figure – "I think of her as the warrior," Mestrom smiles – muscular and strong.

She recently made the decision to switch the materials of these two pieces: the weeping woman will now be solidified in eternal, ageless bronze, while the power of the warrior will be undercut by the fragility of plaster. "She is this warrior, but she's also frail and brittle, and breakable," says Mestrom. "Whereas this introspective, weeping one is much more intimate and kind of quiet, but she's made of [bronze]; she will outlive us all." After refining both works these past few months, this decision feels final. "I'm close to the end now," Mestrom reflects, with a deep breath.



"All I can really do is say that I try and represent a version of myself"

At the heart of Mestrom's practice is repetition. She remembers spending a year as a teenager transcribing the Chinese philosophical text *Tao Te Ching*, three pages every day. ("I don't speak Chinese, just from English to English!") "There's something really meditative in committing to that process as a young person," she muses. Mestrom says she has always been a seeker. Her high school art classes in New Zealand, where she was raised, cemented that; she notes proudly that all of her peers enrolled in art school and several of them are still practising artists. "When I entered that art class it was like, *oh*, I'm home. These are my people."

*Solar Cry* is Mestrom's first major exhibition in three years, and refers to something she has discovered during that time: the power of letting out a guttural roar from deep within her. The sound is paradoxical, both exhilarating and full of anguish, both pain and pleasure. "I just stand there and it comes up, right from the depths of me," she explains. "It completely vibrates my being and gives an extremely powerful sensation of release." The two main sculptures are an evocation of the emotionality of this roar, and to perfect them Mestrom has been "walking constantly around the work". How are the proportions? Are they too neat? Can something be pared back, or added on? Is there enough tension between the pieces, or does it need to be dialed up? "I'm just in and out and around, I never sit down, I don't take lunchbreaks, I'm nonstop." (This way of creating is, Mestrom adds, "exhausting".) Part of this process involves making and remaking the works many times. She was doing that just the other day, she admits, shaving through the wood and fibreglass frame of the warrior with her reciprocating saw because "she was *too* muscly, actually", and her shape needed to be just right. Mestrom isn't afraid of scrapping everything and starting again from scratch. "I need to be very patient, because I can spend three days moving in one direction and then realise it's not right."

As a sculptor, she feels a degree of responsibility in terms of how she showcases the female body. "All I can really do is say that I try and represent a version of myself," she concludes. Something Mestrom takes seriously is how to talk about strength with her young son. When he falls over and scrapes his knee, Mestrom, a single parent, tells him: "Come on buddy, you're strong, like mamma. Get up like I do." This is intentional. "He sees me cry, I don't hide my emotions from him," she says. "I want him to model his life and his resilience on me. You know, I fall down, but I get back up. I'm modelling that resilience for him." *Solar Cry* is on from August 1 to 22 at Sullivan + Strumpf Melbourne.

AARON ANDERSON, BRONTE CORMICAN-JONES  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN+STRUMPF



Opposite page: Sanné Mestrom in her studio with a work in progress for her upcoming exhibition *Solar Cry*. This page, top right: The mood board for *Solar Cry*. Other images: Works in progress for the show.





These are hundreds  
of ways to  
kneel and  
kiss the ground.  
Rumi

SOLAR CRY Sanné Mestrom 2024



All of a sudden, the moon  
and I were best of friends.  
The nights were long and we were  
awake, walking in circles around  
the house, rocking the baby  
back to sleep.  
Emma Straub



# To fetch blood from stones is apparently impossible.

Words by Dr. Emily Cormack



In 1435 J. Lydgate wrote that, “*Harde to likke hony out of a marbil stoon, For there is nouthir licour nor moisture.*” Neither honey nor liquor nor moisture can be brought forth from a stone. Stones and moisture, moisture and stones, neither the two shall meet.

But what about the tragic tale of Niobe from Homer’s *Illiad*? Upon witnessing all 14 of her children being murdered by the twin-gods Apollo and Artemis, her grief was so deep that Zeus took pity on her and turned her to stone. Zeus was trying to still her grief, to remove the moisture from her. But still she cried, the rock emitting moisture ceaselessly, and she became The Weeping Rock which is still visible today in Mount Sipylus, Manisa, Turkey.

Mestrom’s large, bronze ‘*The Weeping Rock*’ elicits moisture from her solid bronze mass also. Like Niobe’s Weeping Rock, this sculpture performs the impossible with her endlessly productive grief. She crouches, curling her enormous limbs asunder and curves about her vessel. In this sculpture her eyes are poised over the bowl, head gently bowed as she weeps, catching her tears. With large sturdy useful-looking hands she holds her bowl, allowing the tears to be caught and replenish her, cycling endlessly. These tears are not wasted, instead they appear essential, elixir tears. Rendered in plaster and cast in bronze she brings moisture from her mass. Tears from bronze, and bronze from tears.

But who caught Niobe’s tears? Perhaps the tears of Niobe have trickled into streams and rivers, giving forth many more life forms in her moist ecosystems? Perhaps hers were also flourishing tears? Greek traditions frequently suggest tears as having qualities of flourishing and fertility. Whether they are shed by gods, men, or trees, tears give birth to a variety of substances and plants. The Heliades were seven nymph daughters of the sun-god Helios. When their brother Phaethon was struck from the chariot of the sun by Zeus, they gathered around his smoky grave on the banks of the River Eridanos and in their unrelenting grief were transformed into poplar-trees and their tears into golden amber.

“... in grief for Phaethon, [they] drop the amber radiance of their tears” (Euripides *Hippolytus* 740–741, trans. Kovacs)

I have held in my hand the golden gum from Kauri Tree’s in Aotearoa,

and the Poplar’s must be a shared genus. The unseemly, gloopy, syrupy emittance seems an unlikely end for tears. But perhaps a mighty grief might bring forth such a thick and sticky translucence, such generative matter.

Mestrom’s sculptural eyes merge creation with secretion. The large bronze eye-fountains are isolated from their bodies. Not quite dismembered, but certainly highlighted. They rain tears from the iris, not from the tear duct. Perhaps in our seeing we pour ourselves - empty ourselves out. Like Odysseus who weeps “fertile tears and lets his aion flow out of him.” In Homer, aion refers to lifespan, elixir, vital force, and source of vitality. Perhaps Mestrom’s eyes cry their life force – not as an emptying of the self, but as a filling of the world. The more we look and the more we see, the more vitality we bestow about the place. Vision being synonymous with knowledge, and the artist in particular uses their vision to generate new ways of seeing. Mestrom’s are endless flourishing tears with their humid, life-giving ecosystems.

Similarly, the Heliades’ Poplar gum is not the end of the story of their tears, it too is flourishing, life-giving. Bees harvest the resin to make propolis (colloquially referred to as ‘bee glue’). In Greek, ‘propolis’ means ‘city wall’. Bees use this to strengthen their hives and their honeycomb structures. Human’s harvest this propolis and use it as a supplement to strengthen their immune system.

“*You trickle, they swirl, we gather*” reads another of Mestrom’s sculptures. Even in grief the woman produces, restores and replenishes makes space to gather. As if in the extreme relief of grief, the shuddering, aorta-rattling wail that signifies change, there is some life-giving substance. Tears are the sluicing water wall, the hose through our psyche, that strips our insides of monsters and gods. Tears are the deep clean that ‘lets the light in’. The tears in Mestrom’s works are life giving, immunity building. They are “Emptied, open, still.”



1. Dave Henderson, *The Medieval English Begging Poem: A Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-Columbia In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy*, 2008
2. “Tears of the dawn = dew (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 13.621–622); tears of Helen = helenium (see p. 104 above); tears of the lotus = gum (Herodotus 2.96); tears of trees = propolis (Aristotle *History of Animals* 533b28, etc); see Deonna 1965: 148–153.” From *Centre for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University*, III.4. *The Language of Tears*, <https://archive.chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6812.iii-4-the-language-of-tears#n.32> accessed 29 June, 2024
3. *Centre for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University*, III.4. *The Language of Tears*, <https://archive.chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6812.iii-4-the-language-of-tears#n.32> accessed 29 June, 2024
4. Words from a poem written by artist Bridie Lunney to Sanné Mestrom and her son Dante. September 2021.
5. Words from the same poem written by artist Bridie Lunney to Sanné Mestrom and her son Dante. September 2021.



The Weeping Rock in Mount Sipylus, Manisa, Turkey, known as Niobe’s Rock, a rock in the shape of a weeping woman, which the ancient Greeks believed to be Niobe

The “weeping stones” phenomenon is typically attributed to natural processes. These are usually porous rocks, like certain limestones or sandstones, that readily absorb water. When saturated, these stones release moisture through a process sometimes called “bleeding,” where water is pushed out through tiny pores or fissures in the rock.

This water release creates the effect that the stone is “weeping” or producing tears. The expelled water may be clear or tinted by mineral content, enhancing the intriguing occurrence, sparking a sense of mystical wonder.



### The Giving Tree

By Shel Silverstein

Once there was a tree.... and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come, and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree.... very much. And the tree was happy. But time went by. And the boy grew older. And the tree was often alone. Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, "Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy." "I am too big to climb and play," said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money?" "I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy." And so, the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy. But the boy stayed away for a long time.... and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back, and the tree shook with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy." "I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?" "I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy." And so, the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy. But the boy stayed away for a long time. And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come, Boy," she whispered, "come and play." "I am too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?" "Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree. "Then you can sail away... and be happy." And so, the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy ... but not really. And after a long time, the boy came back again. "I am sorry, Boy," said the tree, "but I have nothing left to give you - My apples are gone." "My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy. "My branches are gone," said the tree. "You cannot swing on them -" "I am too old to swing on branches," said the boy. "My trunk is gone," said the tree. "You cannot climb -" "I am too tired to climb," said the boy. "I am sorry," sighed the tree. "I wish that I could give you something... but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry...." "I don't need very much now," said the boy. "Just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired." "Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, "well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." And the boy did. And the tree was happy.

Silverstein, S. (1964). *The Giving Tree*. Harper & Row.

Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree" is a deceptively simple tale that has been intensely debated since its publication in 1964. On the surface, it portrays a tree's unwavering love for a child, sacrificing everything for his happiness. Some view this as a beautiful metaphor for unconditional love and generosity. However, critics argue that it normalises martyrdom and an unhealthy asymmetrical relationship.

We know that strong relationships are built on a foundation of collaborative and mutually-sustaining respect, support and contribution. Generosity and self-sacrifice are not the same thing, and too much self-sacrifice can create a parasitic relationship that is detrimental to both. This paradox makes "The Giving Tree" a powerful catalyst for thoughts on relationship dynamics, gender roles, and the balance between self-sacrifice and self-preservation. Its ability to evoke such contradictory responses underscores the complexity of human relationships, challenging us to reflect on our own understanding of love and generosity. It's a strange, haunting story that lives in the back of my mind as an uncomfortable touchstone for the paradoxes of love.

S. Mestrom, 2024



# SOLAR CRY

## Sanné Mestrom

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The exhibition 'Solar Cry' is cathartic, exploring sexuality, the human form, the maternal experience and traumatic events from my adult life. The sculptures in the exhibition are a meditation on love and intimacy in contemporary society through sociological, cultural, and gender theory lenses, examining how these experiences vary across gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.

To me, the works embody some of the theoretical perspectives from scholars including Giddens, Bauman, Beck, and Illouz, and consider feminist critiques of romantic love as potentially oppressive to women alongside more positive feminist views of love as transformative. The authors and the artworks speak of all the paradoxes, often pain - and certainly confusion - that come with maternal love, romantic love, self-love.

Ultimately, the works in this exhibition are a song of anguish and relief, because after six long years, I am finally emerging from what I now understand to have been the period of matrescence. Matrescence, a term yet to be widely recognised, describes the profound transition into motherhood. This complex process parallels adolescence in its transformative impact in a woman's life, involving significant changes in brain structure, endocrine system, microbiome, psyche, and self-identity. Recent neuroscience research on matrescence now shows us lasting brain changes linked to empathy and caregiving, while endocrinology tells us that this period as potentially the most dramatic hormonal event in human life.

From the impact of all these changes, Lucy Jones, author of the seminal book 'Matrescence' describes her personal experience as blindsiding and increasingly isolating, "I fell down a rabbit hole. I had gone, but I didn't know where, or if I would return. I found I was confronted with my selves anew: my childhood self, the bare, naked roots of early psychic disturbances. This, I did not expect. I thought early motherhood would be gentle, beatific, pacific, tranquil: bathed in a soft light. But actually it was hardcore, edgy, gnarly. It wasn't pale pink; it was brown of shit and red of blood. And it was the most political experience of my life, rife with conflict, domination, drama, struggle and power."<sup>[1]</sup>

When my son was born I had to quickly learn to love this strange little creature for the same reasons I had had to learn to love my changed leaky-body: this floppy bag of bones and I are now stuck together for life, so we'd better learn to listen, understand each other, tune in, pay attention, elbows on the table.

The tricky thing with a baby, though, is that we don't speak the same language, yet. There is no language with which to understand each other. There is not yet any meaning. Our attachment to one another is *a priori*. How can we love something we don't yet understand? Claire Arnold-Baker describes this existential crisis of motherhood as "a time when women are confronted with the basic tenets of existence: of life and death; and of the complex interaction between choice, freedom and responsibility." It's crippling. She suggests this crisis can happen when we experience something that causes us to consider our existence in its entirety. "There is a confrontation with the arbitrary and unfathomable nature of existence and a realisation that there are many elements to life that cannot be controlled".<sup>[2]</sup>

The unfamiliar space of matrescence is a strange place to live in, and it's hard to build life-long love relationships on such shaky ground. For me, love for my son was found in the absence of understanding - love became a space to which I could continually return, becoming as different as I could be from myself without being traumatically deformed; it is a scene of optimism for change, for a transformational landscape. For the first couple of years of his life, I leave myself, to go to him. He can't yet come to me, because he's barely even entered into his psychic self.

Leaving myself to enter this new space - blinded by a sort of love-fog white-out - I'm forced to look in all directions, including into the mirror of my own childhood. I can see now how my childhood was marked by a sudden and baffling immigration from the Netherlands to New Zealand in 1983, followed



by the immediate evaporation of parental presence - my mother and father vanishing into the labyrinth of a new economy, their absence as physical as the slippery ground beneath my feet. At 4 years of age I had to fend for myself; only I didn't. Instead, I tucked myself up under the play table at a foreign suburban pre-school and sat in silence. I couldn't speak English nor understand what anyone around me was saying. I didn't understand the games. I didn't like the food. I didn't appreciate the hard plastic vacuum-moulded beds we were forced to nap on at 11am, under dusty woollen postwar blankets that always seemed to smell of vomit. These early days were long, dark and lonely, and I remember them well.

For the first few years of parenting, I was continuously sandwiched between these ghostly echoes of my own childhood, my self-expectations as a new mother, and the bewildering and often ineffable needs of my son.

Alongside this teary little jangle of flesh and of bones, cradled in my arms, I'm also trying to love the lonely, isolated 4 year old version of myself. I am making promises, so many promises about how I will do things better for my boy than my parents

did for me. I may not yet know what love is, but I will be the witness to your life, you will always feel safe, you will always know where home is because your home will be in me. You will never feel lost or alone. I promise and I promise and I promise him.

For the first four years I am negotiating these intrinsic love-relationships, while the romantic love around me is falling apart. I am too tired to see the landscape slowly shifting round me, hearts reconfiguring in ways that no longer have room for the sort of love that created you. After 4 years your father and I are exhausted, frustrated and disappointed in each other. Pain is all around us and the love grows cold...

...My boy and take each others hands and walk away, in step, to start again.

My promise to you, son, is a quiet song, looping in my head. As time passes, it grows louder, changing with frustration, exhaustion, relief and renewal. Until eventually, it becomes a roar: the Solar Cry. It comes up from way down deep in the stomach - in the abdomen near the diaphragm and behind the aorta - and when I roar from this place it vibrates my entire being. It shakes awake my bag of bones, brings it back into consciousness. It activates the sympathetic nervous system, releasing everything that is held so tightly inside me. Yes, love is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying. It's an ongoing refinement of the truths we dare to share. For you, my son, I lay my truths bare. I stand as your unwavering witness, a living reflection of your true self whenever you seek clarity. Through my eyes, you'll always find a faithful reflection of the person you are and the person you're becoming, and in this shared gaze, we'll each find growth and understanding.

<sup>1</sup>. Lucy Jones, *Matrescence: On the Metamorphosis of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood* (Great Britain: Allen Lane, 2023). 10.

<sup>2</sup>. Arnold-Baker, "The Existential Crisis of Motherhood". 6.

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