

## Kasie Campbell

### *At Risk, 2017*

Performance/ sculpture

Yarn, crochet, cotton batting

Performed on August 1, 2019, for 1 hour.

Part of *Matrilineal Threads*, hosted at the Art Gallery of St. Albert from August 1 to 31, 2019

Sitting on an old wooden chair, hands folded in its lap, *At Risk* faces into the gallery. As both a sculpture and performance piece, this work is central to Kasie Campbell's exhibition *Matrilineal Threads*. A fully crocheted body suit, *At Risk* depicts a naked female figure; peach, pink, light brown and tan coloured yarns stand-in for human flesh. The finger and toenails are hot pink, matching the lips and hair ties, as well as the nipples on the lumpy, sagging breasts. The body is marred by rows of bulbous growths at the neck, shoulders, wrists, waist, thighs, knees, and ankles. The growths on both wrists glitter, like a grotesque pair of matching pink, purple and blue bracelets.

As viewers we are intensely aware of the absence of the artist's body when examining this piece as a sculpture. It lies flatly against the chair, the face and shoulders are tacked to the gallery wall, keeping it awkwardly upright. The weight of the yarn at the neck and chest cause everything to seep forward, pulling the face into an unnaturally elongated shape. The holes for the eyes and mouth gape open. It is an empty skin.

It is evident that *At Risk* has been worn repeatedly. Campbell's multiple performances have left physical remnants: the yarn on the feet is smooth, flattened and dusty, and there are dark stains under the eyes left by running mascara or eyeliner.

*At Risk* holds a palpable tension for viewers, oscillating between feelings of attraction and repulsion. The familiarity of the materials is inviting, allowing you to imagine the soft texture of the yarns against your own skin. However, the figure is intentionally unsettling and grotesque. The colour of the yarn changes across the body, an atypical patchwork of skin tones, textures and growths. The more time that a viewer spends with the piece, the more the repeated traces of hot pink shift from a playful girly touch, to feeling disturbingly out-of-place.

Through sculpture and performance, Campbell's artistic practice centers on exploring, interrogating and sharing the lived experiences of women, through a very personal lens. Since completing her BFA in 2015, Campbell's works have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Alberta and the United States, and she has several solo exhibitions scheduled across Canada in 2020 and 2021.

*Matrilineal Threads* focuses on how women relate to themselves relative to their own maternal relationships. Campbell created the exhibit in collaboration with her mother, Ginette Lund. Campbell wanted to explore links between gender, craft, domesticity and tradition, as well as the complex lived experiences of women. The pieces embody Campbell and Lund's experiences as mothers and women: hopes, anxieties, joys, secrets, desires, memories, and pains. Several



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pieces in the exhibition deal with illness, exhaustion and loss, which are all too often borne silently by women.

Together, Campbell and Lund utilized skills and materials traditionally viewed as “women’s crafts,” such as sewing and crochet. These skills have been passed from mother to daughter in Campbell’s family. Crochet, while a vital social and artistic outlet for many women, has often been limited to the creation of practical, functional and comforting objects: sweaters, blankets, hats, mittens, scarves, etc. Campbell and Lund worked to push their pieces away from comfort and functionality. Uprooting the viewer’s preconceptions of crochet as simple craft, Campbell firmly plants it in the world of contemporary, conceptual art.

Campbell states that: *“The body is central to this work, as crochet emerged from our bodies, rendering the work flesh-like in their own right. Growing up, body image was a major struggle for me, and I think that may present itself in the work that I do by creating a sort of empathy with the body.”*

While the grotesqueness of *At Risk* reflects Campbell’s bodily anxiety and feelings of objectification, the gestures used in the performances are based on Campbell’s life-long observations of her mother. Lund battled lupus for 35 years and was suffering from cancer throughout the creation of *Matrilineal Threads*. Her long illnesses caused specific and recognisable hand gestures, repetitive motions bred from discomfort, pain and numbness. Campbell incorporates these gestures into her performance of *At Risk*. She also includes familiar motherly gestures of comfort, love and care, channeling a complex, emotional portrayal of Lund.

Sadly, Ginette Lund passed away in May 2018, a month before *At Risk* was performed for the first time.

*“Now that I’ve lost my mum, wearing the suit makes me very emotional. I am wearing an article of clothing that my mum stitched together. I think about her braced hands weaving it all together and think about how she made it to fit me perfectly and with such care.”*

On August 1, 2019, during the opening reception of *Matrilineal Threads*, Campbell transfixed patrons to the Art Gallery of St. Albert her performance piece for a full hour. Emerging from the building’s basement, she subtly navigated the main floor, working her way silently through the crowds of visitors. Campbell intentionally avoided all physical contact. Her hands flexed and clenched, often touching her face. She walked slowly, taking an extended, hesitant pause before climbing the stairs. The room hushed when Campbell entered the main exhibition space. Visitors watched intently, alone or in small clusters, as the artist began to interact with the other sculptures.

*“While wearing the suit for performance, my every thought is about my mum and I allow myself to feel what I need to feel in the moment. When performing at the Art Gallery of St. Albert, I was overcome with sadness. I laid down and sobbed into the giant hands. As I performed her gestures that were bred out of pain and discomfort, I was brought back to the day that I lost her. Having my dad there to witness the performance for the first time was also new... I knew immediately that he recognized these repetitive gestures.”*

The responses to the performance were vast and varied. Empathy, aversion, sadness, confusion, warmth, shock, awe, amazement, concern, disgust, nostalgia. A couple of viewers wept as they watched the performance, captured by the raw emotion and sense of loss. Others quietly considered what they were seeing, reflecting on their own experiences, or their relationships with their own mothers or daughters. There was an unequivocal sense that Campbell had captured a powerful, and universal narrative in her performance.

Many visitors had adverse reactions, taken aback by the unfamiliarity of crochet and yarn as fine art materials, and the exhibitions overwhelming femininity, both in colour and subject. In more extreme cases, visitors would physically shrink into themselves, or retreat from the gallery entirely. These cases are telling of the vital social importance of *At Risk*. It highlights the lingering resistance that some patrons (both men and women) still have towards seeing female-centric narratives and subjects in galleries, despite decades of work by feminists. Historically, women's labours, relationships and lived experiences have been ignored, trivialized, and underrepresented in art galleries, and the world at large. *At Risk* boldly claims space, pushing these subjects into the foreground. In the discomfort, or repulsion felt by some visitors, *At Risk* is still working as intended. Campbell wants the piece to be uncomfortable. It forces viewers to question their preconceptions, challenging why they feel repulsed by a naked female form, or by stereotypically feminine colours and traditional crafts.

Today, movements around the world are demanding space for women: to be heard, to be recognised, and to have their experiences acknowledged. *At Risk* is beautifully positioned to be a site of conversation, to create dialogue that builds understanding of the physical and emotional struggles of women. The strength of *At Risk* lies in the frank, and honest collaboration between Campbell and Lund, and in Campbell's deep sense of empathy and loss. Creating a work of art that allows anyone to experience a strong sense of empathy with women's experiences helps to generate healing and understanding.

For these reasons, the Art Gallery of St. Albert has chosen to nominate *At Risk* for the Eldon and Anne Foote Visual Arts Prize, above all other works shown in *Matrilineal Threads*. While challenging, unfamiliar, and at times, uncomfortable, *At Risk* holds an emotional truth and profound resonance for all viewers. Through materials, subject and collaboration, Campbell is challenging preconceptions, and demanding space for women's experiences to be seen and shared. Although Campbell is in the early stages of her artistic career, her work and practice is relevant, vibrant and vital, and we wholeheartedly support her as extraordinarily deserving of this prestigious visual arts prize.

Sincerely,

Jenny Willson, Director/ Curator

Emily Baker, Exhibitions Assistant

Art Gallery of St. Albert



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