Mother and daughter Caroline and Maisie Broadhead have worked intensively together to create their first major artistic collaboration, Taking the Chair, a strikingly personal, subtly humorous exploration into the endurance and importance of the family.

**The Chair**

Their starting point was Caroline’s ongoing fascination with the empty chair as a symbol of human absence. She explains “the chair functions as an object in itself, but it almost expects a body, it is used as a social tool that controls the way you sit with each other, and on its own implies human action”. Maisie’s creative process begins with reference points from the past, to which she adds a personal twist. The pair have brought these interests together and selected seven paintings by Hogarth, Magritte, Velasquez and Vermeer, all but one of which feature an empty chair. Taking inspiration from these paintings, Caroline has reworked the chairs in three-dimensions, using second hand pieces and various materials to follow her captivation with traces of memory, the self and the passing of time. Maisie has taken her mother’s chairs and used them as vital elements in her visually stunning digital photographic prints, re-staging the original paintings.

They describe the chair as “the point at which our work meets”; and through their collaboration this everyday piece of furniture becomes more than an inanimate object. It is the vortex around which an examination of the family and themselves spins, and every detail, no matter how mundane, has a deep personal significance. In using these individual references, the Broadheads’ provide an incisive insight into existential themes of being; time passing and rotating, the trace of history in the present, and the intertwined notions of absence and memory. As Maisie observes, “sometimes it is as though the past, present and future jump back and forth leaving elements behind, there is a continuum”.

All of the photographs in Taking the Chair depict domestic scenes and ‘everyday’ activities, although this everyday is staged and re-staged, firstly in the paintings and then again in Maisie’s reconstructions. Much like the masterful artworks on which they are based, these photographs are far from snapshots; they bring together a thoughtfully crafted development of ideas, from the creation of Caroline’s chairs, to the building and dressing of the sets, to the digital manipulation of the image. Maisie explains how she maintains the atmosphere of the original paintings, saying “I add and subtract from the painting in subtle ways, but the placement of subjects will stay the same.” These ‘subjects’ become the Broadhead’s playing themselves, another re-staging, this time of their own everyday lives, placed within the settings of their selected paintings.

**Vermeer, time, absence and the self**

Three Vermeer paintings were chosen; like the Broadheads the Dutch Master used the same set in the same room, with the same models playing various roles, but making various alterations in each of his works. Firstly, Vermeer’s Young Woman Standing at a Virginal and what is widely accepted to be its pendant painting Young Woman Seated at a Virginal (both 1670-72), are recreated, each with their own parallel. Of these four photographs two show the space occupied by a figure, as in the original paintings, and two show the same scene empty but for Caroline’s chair, as Caroline and Maisie realised the dramatic effect the chair could have if it was alone in the scene allowing them to intensify their investigation into memory and absence.

1 From interview conducted by Tessa Peters and Janice West for Memoranda, edited by Tessa Peters and Janice West, London: Luminous Books 2011
Sitting at a Machine reinterprets Vermeer’s Young Woman Seated at a Virginal. Depicting an ordinary, everyday scene, the lighting and thick fabric that drapes down the left-hand side creates a stage-like, theatrical vignette. Maisie’s youngest sister Bella replaces the young woman, and a laptop, mug and telephone substitute the 17th century musical instruments of the original. In place of the large viola in the foreground is Caroline’s Edwardian mannequin, a reference to Bella’s chosen career in fashion that mimics the shape of the musical instrument.

Chairperson, which is Sitting at a Machine’s parallel, makes the connection between Caroline and her youngest daughter profoundly clear. Caroline explains that by using blue tape to precisely follow Bella’s outline she wanted to “fix the body to the chair, but show that the person is free to move around.” Bella’s decision to study fashion is not entirely removed from her mother’s past work with garments and clothing, and in Chairperson Bella is symbolically tied to her mother, “like a future trace”, in Caroline’s words.

Sitting Room and Standing at a Machine are inspired by Vermeer’s Young Woman Seated at a Virginal. In Sitting Room Maisie eliminates almost every human trace that can be seen in Sitting at a Machine, its pendant photograph. Caroline’s re-working of Vermeer’s upholstered chair is a ghostly suggestion - there is no padding or filling, just fine, sheer cotton organdy through which light from the window shines. The wooden frame, with its elaborately carved legs, is covered in dark brown flocking, which adds weight but also turns the frame into a silhouette in Maisie’s photograph. Whereas Chairperson explicitly delineates the trace of Bella’s previous (or future) being, the absence of any human presence in Sitting Room is far more haunting. Bella is fixed to her family in its parallel, standing at a sewing machine directly in front of an enlarged photograph of Maisie playing with Caroline’s nylon jewellery as a child, which replaces the cherub in the original painting. All that is remains in the absent image is a memory of the family, entirely concentrated in the unsettling, singular presence of Caroline’s barely-there chair.

The third pair of this series is inspired by Vermeer’s The Glass of Wine (1658-61). In one of the pair, Wine Tasting, Maisie’s sisters Lucy and Zoe are depicted sharing a bottle of wine. As in the painting, the chair is vital to the narrative of this scene. Zoe, playing what was Vermeer’s male character, has just left her seat to show her sister the bottle of wine. Caroline’s re-worked chair for this and its companion image, Light Interrupted has been painted blue everywhere except where its fretwork has left a shadow; the unpainted parts remain the dark brown colour of the wood. The chair is positioned to match the light-source coming in from the window in Light Interrupted, but not in Wine Tasting. This displaced shadow disrupts the narrative, speaking of an ‘other’ time or place that could be either past or future, or both.

**Head to Head**

The complexities of Taking the Chair are encapsulated in Head to Head, based on William Hogarth’s second painting in his Marriage a la Mode cycle, called The Tete á Tete (1743-45). Here Caroline and Maisie play themselves twice; worn out and taking a moment of rest after a hive of activity, and then again, with Caroline deep in thought in the background ‘workshop’ area of the scene and Maisie in the foreground, looking concerned with bills in her hand. Caroline explains, “this refers to the process of the project – Tete a Tete, head to head, Broadhead to Broadhead...us talking and doing and exhausting ourselves”. The duality here is explicit; not just “exhausting themselves”, but exhausting their selves’, as explored and examined and played over and over again. A red and brown fine mesh ‘body’ covers the chair in the foreground, acting as a reminder of the luxurious chair in Hogarth’s original painting. In Caroline’s version, called Throne Down, a very plain and simple wooden chair is visible through the material, and like these versions of themselves, the chair seems stretched, deflated, upturned and exhausted.

References to the art world that the Broadheads are very much a part of can be seen here, in the inclusion of jeweller Maria Militsi’s re-purposed toy wrestlers on the mantelpiece, product designer Tord Boontje’s garland light hanging from the ceiling in the background, and above the mantelpiece, a photograph of Caroline’s great uncle, John Bulloch Souter’s painting The Breakdown. All of this indicates another layer of ‘belonging’, to their extended artistic network. An empty baby’s bottle sits next to a beer can, which along with the tools scattered on the floor is a fairly disconcerting juxtaposition. This is Maisie’s contemporary allusion to the “gritty” and unsettling atmosphere of Hogarth’s paintings, although her intention is to hint at Maisie’s son’s presence and integration into their artistic world. Caroline explains he is part of “a way of life that involves activity and equipment not usually found in a nursery”, and Maisie adds “ones children become part of one’s work even when they are not there, I wanted to hint that he was near.”
The Boys

In Prince Caspar, Maisie’s take on Velasquez’ 1659 painting Prince Felipe Prospero, she replaces the prince with her own son, revealing the presence hinted at in Head to Head. Here Caspar is dressed up in Caroline’s mother’s wedding dress and a feather headband, wearing face paint and surrounded by his toys. The small children’s chair he leans on is clothed in a garment-like cover, intricately woven by Caroline using thousands of tiny class beads, the colours of which refer to the upholstery of the chair in the original Velasquez painting. Like Caspar’s dressing up costume, the chair’s clothing is slightly loose, and Caroline’s primary means of investigating the absent body, through empty clothing and the empty chair, quietly resonate.

Bringing the historical model forward, Caroline and Maisie have re-created surrealist René Magritte’s 1928 painting Man with a Newspaper. Here Maisie’s partner Jack sits at a table, reading a newspaper that headlines the Royal Wedding, placing it within a precise socio-historical moment. One of the more still images in the Broadhead’s series, Jack appears to leave this scene, as the man does in Magritte’s painting, and the image of the scene is repeated three times in his absence. Nothing at all changes in the detail - Caroline’s mother’s painting on the back wall, and her niece Charlotte’s hat, stay where they are. This stillness creates an unnerving atmosphere, enhanced when the gradual creeping of a white, polymer clay outline around the empty chair in the foreground is noticed. Time seems to be passing, yet everything stays the same, and as Caroline once noted “it is both terrifying and reassuring to know that the world will keep turning, time will keep moving on.”

The death of a project

The final scene in this series is Death of a Project, which is based on Hogarth’s last painting in his Marriage a la Móde series, entitled The Lady’s Death. It is the grand finale of this staged parody of the Broadhead family, featuring all but one of the members that have taken part in this project, including Maisie’s dog, licking his lips at the sight of the pig’s head on the table. Even the painting that appeared on the desk in Sitting at a Machine makes a return in this relatively sparse image. Here Caroline plays Hogarth’s original dying Lady; whilst her articulated Collapsed Chair lies upturned, fallen and debilitated, to symbolise what the Broadheads explain as “the exhaustion of the idea.”

Caroline and Maisie Broadhead’s work exists as separate entities, but when brought together it acts as a metaphor for the family itself - made up of individuals that, although following their own directions, are inextricably linked. By Taking the Chair in both a contemporary and historical context, they show that these profound familial narratives, that have endured for centuries, continuously revolve through the past, present and future, interwoven as they are with presence, absence, and memory, in infinite layers that make up the notion of the individual self. With their insightful vision, the chair becomes so much more than just a piece of furniture.

Written by Rachael Crabtree
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