

Common Devotion

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Danielle Wayne Dravenstadt  
Master of Arts  
The Maryland Institute College of Art, 2015  
Bachelor of Arts  
Furman University, 2009

Director: Hasan Elahi  
School of Art and Design  
George Mason University

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George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to Sylvia, Miles, and Wes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **COMMON DEVOTION**

Danielle Wayne Dravenstadt, MFA

George Mason University, 2022

Thesis Director: J Carrier

My work investigates the role of care in society. I define care as a serious and tender attention to someone or something. Fastening the button on the back of my daughter's dress without tangling it with her delicate strands of hair is an example of my own maternal caring. I want to make care visible, mentionable, and call into question the impact of the presence or absence of care. My work oscillates between tenderness and its opposite, documenting an unpredictable time.

This survey of artwork created between 2019 – 2022 embodies my inquiry on care: swaddling gestures that reminded me of my now five-year-old daughter's infancy, solitary contemplations of life and fear, paintings that capture fleeting moments, and a photobook created with my eight-month-old son by my side. These works culminate to tell a story of my own experience of motherhood while remaining permeable to interpretation, inviting you to consider the role of care in your life.

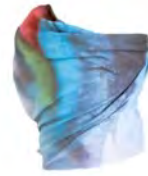
## TEND

I work to transform simple gestures of care into radical expressions of acceptance through photography, painting, printmaking, assemblage, and installation. I manifest inner realities into outward expressions, articulating nuanced perceptions of my daily life. I recreated swaddling gestures reminiscent of the tight and comforting wrapping of a newborn and directed the gesture toward the viewer as a radical symbol of care. Milton Mayoroff wrote, “Through caring for certain others, by serving them through caring, a man lives the meaning of his own life. In the sense in which a man can ever be said to be at home in the world, he is at home not through dominating, or explaining, or appreciating, but through caring and being cared for” (*On Caring*, p. 2). I see care as an antidote to violence. Making care visible, I emphasize its value in society.

I shoot wide open so that the lens functions as a dilated pupil, gaping and vulnerable. My photographs are soft, with sharp points of focus disrupting the dreamy, atmospheric vignettes. I expose the disorientation and longing that come from isolation, and, in contrast, the tenderness and embrace of connection. I want to spark a communal ambition that has a social impact by influencing how people think about care in their daily lives.



In 2019, I created a body of work I titled *Tend*. The Exhibition media included: Archival pigment prints on 100% cotton rag paper, sculptural works with manipulated muslin, poetry, and a photobook.









**Figures 1-7 Tend**

This project grew out of these questions:

1. What are the consequences of the absence of care in society?
2. How do you practice tender attention in your daily life?
3. What can be learned through a touch?
4. What is your affective response to the notion of swaddling/ being swaddled?
5. What new territories could be interrupted by this notion of care?

I was inspired by the movement of radical hospitality in contemporary art and by artists investigating the idea of generosity and care. In an interview on hospitality, Theaster Gates posed the question, “What does it mean for us to be generous to one another? And what does it mean for us to share the abundance of generosity that we have

with other people?” (*Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art | Smart Museum of Art*). I wanted to capture that spirit of generosity and acceptance.

As I began this project, I worked to capture the simple, humble gestures of care I performed as a mother using produce bags that were generated from the caring of my daughter. Sarah Ruddick writes that caretakers are immersed in the materials of the physical world, giving them a unique sensitivity to people’s needs and pleasures (*Maternal Thinking*, p.130). I wrapped the materials from left to right, bottom up, and right to left, pulling tightly in the same way I wrapped my daughter with a muslin blanket to comfort her. I loved how this play danced along the boundary of life and art, celebrating the impact of the simple gesture of swaddling. In that regard, no element was too simple or ordinary to be explored, from a lemon bag to a tomato stem. I worked to manifest the tender, attentive engagement caretakers have with the material world and create an aesthetic around that sensibility. I engaged in play around the presence and absence of care, creating subtle narratives with these humble materials. I created images of this gesture of swaddling by making photographic castings of the swaddling of my daughter. I removed her figure to disrupt traditional notions of caretaking, provoking a renewed consideration of what it means to care and be cared for.





#### **Figures 8-9 Produce Bags**

I began mining my singular experience of motherhood to capture tender moments of care and attention in daily life. Yellow became a signifier for care in this work because of my personal history with the color and the warmth and radiance it conveys. I studied and photographed advertisements from 1970s glamour magazines, investigating this notion of glamour and allure that is often employed to sell products. I use this allure to subversively influence how others think about care and generate the valuing of care in society. I printed the images on muslin, the material I used to swaddle my daughter. This brought about intense memories of caring for a newborn, and I worked to incorporate that raw emotion into my manipulation of the fabric. I embraced the fragility of the material. A tug too intense makes the muslin start to pucker. I learned to make a quilter's knot which is created by wrapping two loops of thread around the needle, holding these loops tightly, and pulling down. What starts as nothing forms into a knot beneath your fingertips and ending just where you need it to be on the line of thread. This engagement with the physicality of the material revealed new understandings of expectation and trust. I quilted four squares together into a swaddling blanket designed for standing adults to create an interactive piece. I displayed images and text to give a framework for engaging with the work.



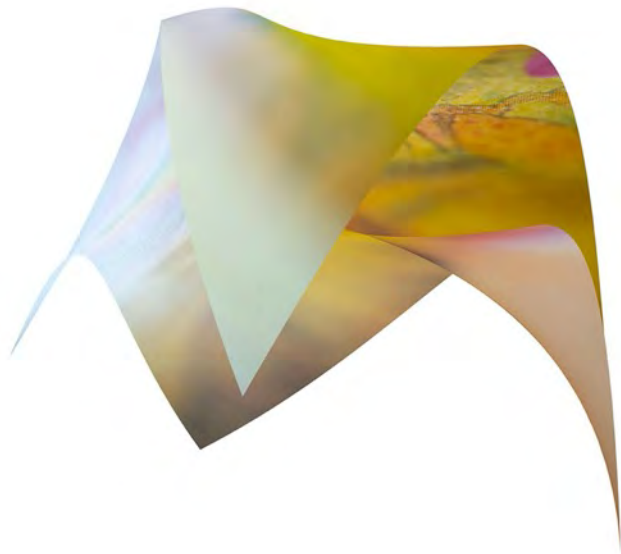




**Figures 10-11 Swaddle**

I manipulated the images digitally, enacting this practice of creating a triangular wrap, which is the first step of preparing a swaddle for a baby. Enacting this gesture of care in the digital format made me wonder in what new territories this notion of care could interrupt or influence.



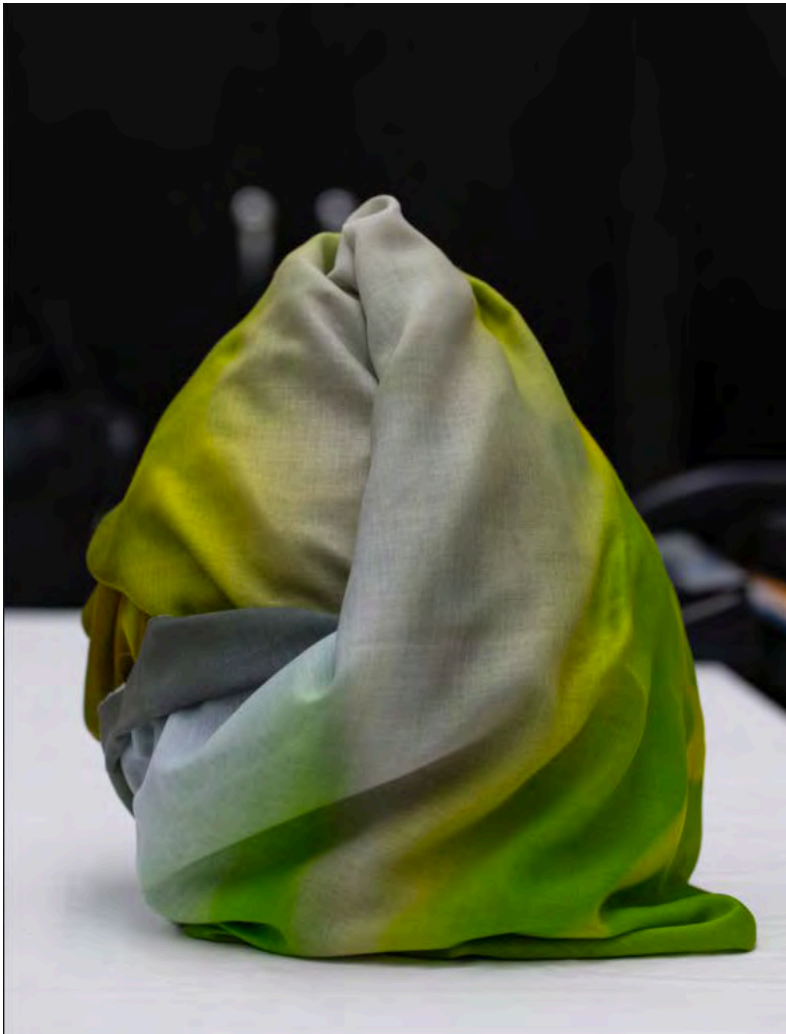




**Figures 12-14 Digital**

I began working with the muslin sculpturally and on the wall, allowing myself to explore the gesture freely, letting go of the interactive function of the work to create territories of feeling with these forms. I explored the various ways to swaddle, wrap, and

comfort. I used inflatables so that only my breath gave volume to the forms.



**Figure 15 Breath**

The material became a vessel to contain my caring gestures, and I exercised a special tenderness in wrapping from left to right, right to left, tugging and tucking, tending. As these forms took shape, the visual language persistently related back to a poem I wrote when I embarked on this project:

## Tend

The cracking fizz bobs to the brim  
of the white tub  
to white tiles  
collecting in the spot where I kneel to you

I sharpen my knife  
to cut a tomato  
every seed is for you

Will you take them?  
the mint planted  
the milk  
the lime

the hissing kettle sings a song that's only yours

And how tightly I wrap your silky shoulders  
in muslin

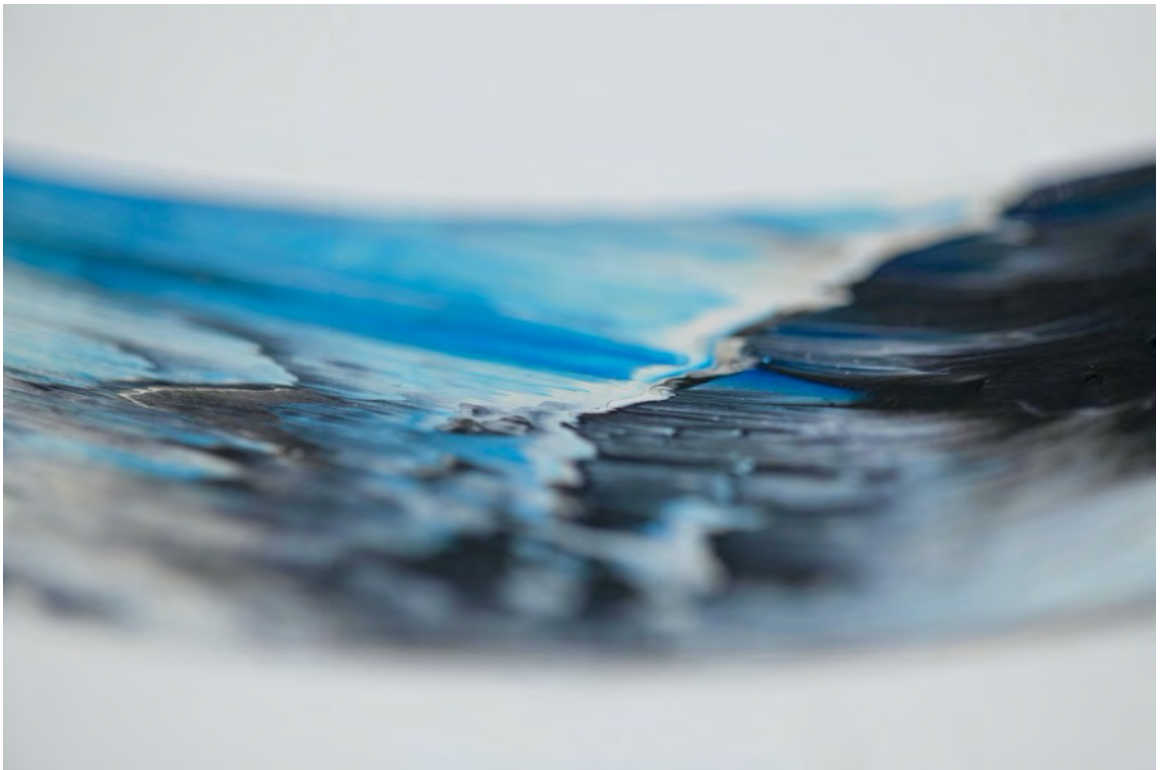
take the balcony  
the floor  
the rook  
the stair  
the yellowed papers  
the sugar  
the sheets

the butter  
the balm  
the string of spinel  
the pillow  
the knob  
my breath  
the door

this silver-handled brush  
is yours

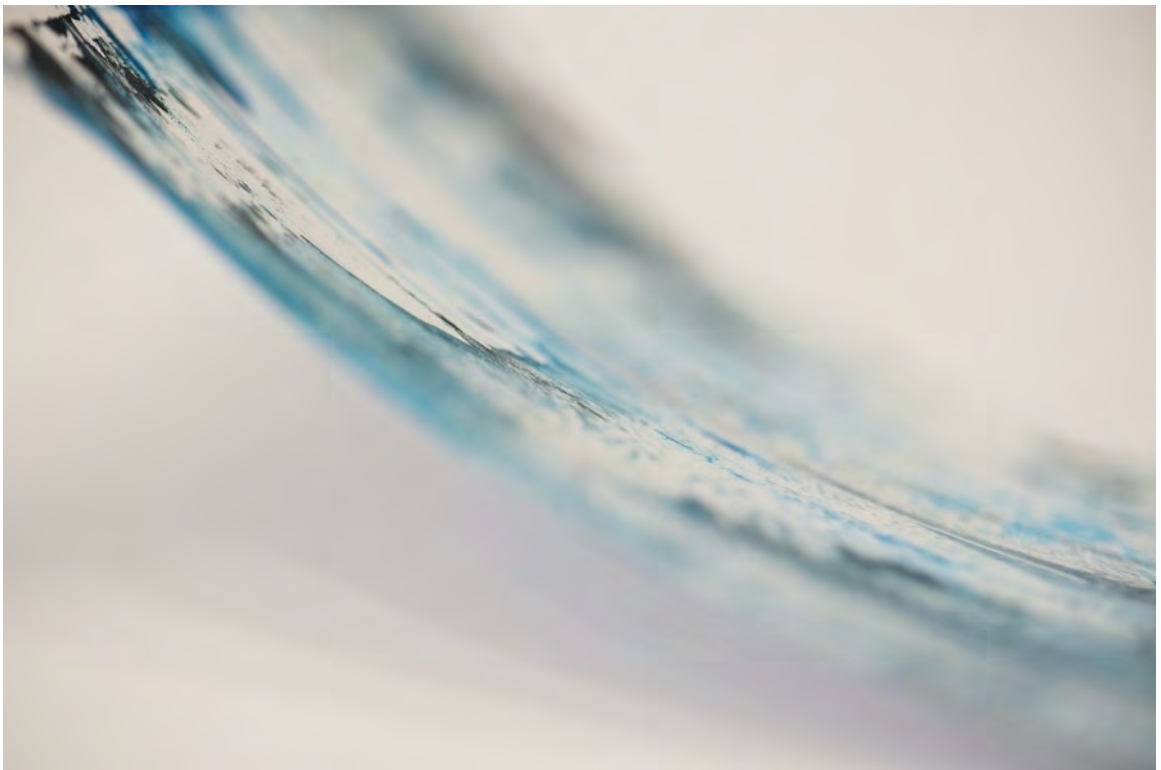
## QUIET

I created a series of paintings to process the relationship between violence and tenderness. These paintings are deconstructed and reconstructed through the scope of the lens, exploring the vastness of the mind's perceptions. I experienced new depths within my own mind. These states of mind influenced my artistic process and work. The series *Quiet* explores my solitary reflection on these experiences.









#### **Figures 16-20 Quiet**

As someone who embraces life, fear is also undeniably present. Fear can be useful, as it guides choices aimed at survival. Fear can also take on its own life and play a detrimental role. Raising small children in the midst of a global pandemic is a source of fear. There is a push-and-pull between caretaking and fear that I became interested in.

I explored this through poetry:

#### **Untitled**

I showed him my collection and his face dropped.

He doesn't see that this is everything. The whole world explained in string and pins and crumpled papers.

They remain carefully arranged by the fireplace.

Don't move them.

I was influenced by Natalie Diaz's *It Was the Animals* (*Postcolonial Love Poem*, pp. 58-60).

#### **It Was the Animals**

Today my brother brought over a piece of the ark  
wrapped in a white plastic grocery bag.

He set the bag on my dining table, unknotted it,  
peeled it away, revealing a foot-long fracture of wood.  
He took a step back and gestured toward it  
with his arms and open palms—

*It's the ark, he said.  
You mean Noah's ark? I asked.  
What other ark is there? he answered.*

*Read the inscription, he told me.  
It tells what's going to happen at the end.  
What end? I wanted to know.  
He laughed, What do you mean, 'What end?'  
The end end.*

Then he lifted it out. The plastic bag rattled.  
His fingers were silkened by pipe blisters.  
He held the jagged piece of wood so gently.  
I had forgotten my brother could be gentle.

He set it on the table the way people on television  
set things when they're afraid those things might blow up  
or go off—he set it right next to my empty coffee cup.

It was no ark—  
it was the broken end of a picture frame  
with a floral design carved into its surface.

He put his head in his hands—

*I shouldn't show you this—  
God, why did I show her this?  
It's ancient—O, God,  
this is so old.*

*Fine, I gave in. Where did you get it?  
The girl, he said. O, the girl.  
What girl? I asked.  
You'll wish you never knew, he told me.*

I watched him drag his wrecked fingers  
over the chipped flower-work of the wood—

*You should read it. But, O, you can't take it—  
no matter how many books you've read.*

He was wrong. I could take the ark.  
I could even take his marvelously fucked fingers.  
The way they almost glittered.

It was the animals—the animals I could not take—

they came up the walkway into my house,  
cracked the doorframe with their hooves and hips,  
marched past me, into my kitchen, into my brother,

tails snaking across my feet before disappearing  
like retracting vacuum cords into the hollows  
of my brother's clavicles, tusks scraping the walls,

reaching out for him—wildebeests, pigs,  
the oryxes with their black matching horns,  
javelinas, jaguars, pumas, raptors. The ocelots  
with their mathematical faces. So many kinds of goat.  
So many kinds of creature.

I wanted to follow them, to get to the bottom of it,  
but my brother stopped me—

*This is serious, he said.  
You have to understand.  
It can save you.*

So I sat down, with my brother ruined open like that,  
and two by two the fantastical beasts  
parading him. I sat, as the water fell against my ankles,  
built itself up around me, filled my coffee cup  
before floating it away from the table.

My brother—teeming with shadows—  
a hull of bones, lit by tooth and tusk,  
lifting his ark high in the air.

## HOLD ON

In 2020, I experienced challenges mothering a young child during the COVID-19 crisis. In response to this experience, I created *Hold On*, a book of photography that offers a nuanced perspective on care during the pandemic. By photographing elements of my daily life, I captured the mundanity of quarantine life with a young child, while pushing toward new territories of feeling. Shooting how it felt allowed me to take what is particular about my life and open it up to a broader audience and a more universal understanding.

The theme of motherhood runs through my work. Camille Dungy's book of poetry, *Trophic Cascade*, influenced my thinking around nurturing, care, and motherhood (*Trophic Cascade*, p. 16).

### **Trophic Cascade**

After the reintroduction of gray wolves  
to Yellowstone and, as anticipated, their culling  
of deer, trees grew beyond the deer stunt  
of the mid century. In their up reach  
songbirds nested, who scattered  
seed for underbrush, and in that cover  
warrenred snowshoe hare. Weasel and water shrew  
returned, also vole, and came soon hawk  
and falcon, bald eagle, kestrel, and with them

hawk shadow, falcon shadow. Eagle shade  
and kestrel shade haunted newly-berried  
runnels where deer no longer rummaged, cautious  
as they were, now, of being surprised by wolves. Berries  
brought bear, while undergrowth and willows, growing  
now right down to the river, brought beavers,  
who dam. Muskrats came to the dams, and tadpoles.  
Came, too, the night song of the fathers  
of tadpoles. With water striders, the dark  
gray American dipper bobbed in fresh pools  
of the river, and fish stayed, and the bear, who  
fished, also culled deer fawns and to their kill scraps  
came vulture and coyote, long gone in the region  
until now, and their scat scattered seed, and more  
trees, brush, and berries grew up along the river  
that had run straight and so flooded but thus dammed,  
compelled to meander, is less prone to overrun. Don't  
you tell me this is not the same as my story. All this  
life born from one hungry animal, this whole,  
new landscape, the course of the river changed,  
I know this. I reintroduced myself to myself, this time  
a mother. After which, nothing was ever the same.

























**Figures 21-34 Hold On**



## SNAPSHOT PAINTINGS

In 2021, I gave birth to my son. I created a series called *Snapshot Paintings* to document my life as a mother to a newborn. I used the immediacy of painting to draw the viewer in to a personally felt experience. I used colors inspired by everyday life and painted in brief, speedy sessions while my son was napping in the next room. The tenderness and fragility of new life inspired the marks and forms in these paintings. The paintings are the same 4" x 6" scale as a common photographic snapshot to emphasize the fleeting nature of the subject. The painting process was a way to slow down the time during this newborn phase. The rapid movements of the paintbrush or palette knife mimic the abrupt passage of time, while the meditation on the individual moments and care and attention to the colors aim to draw out and articulate these ephemeral moments.

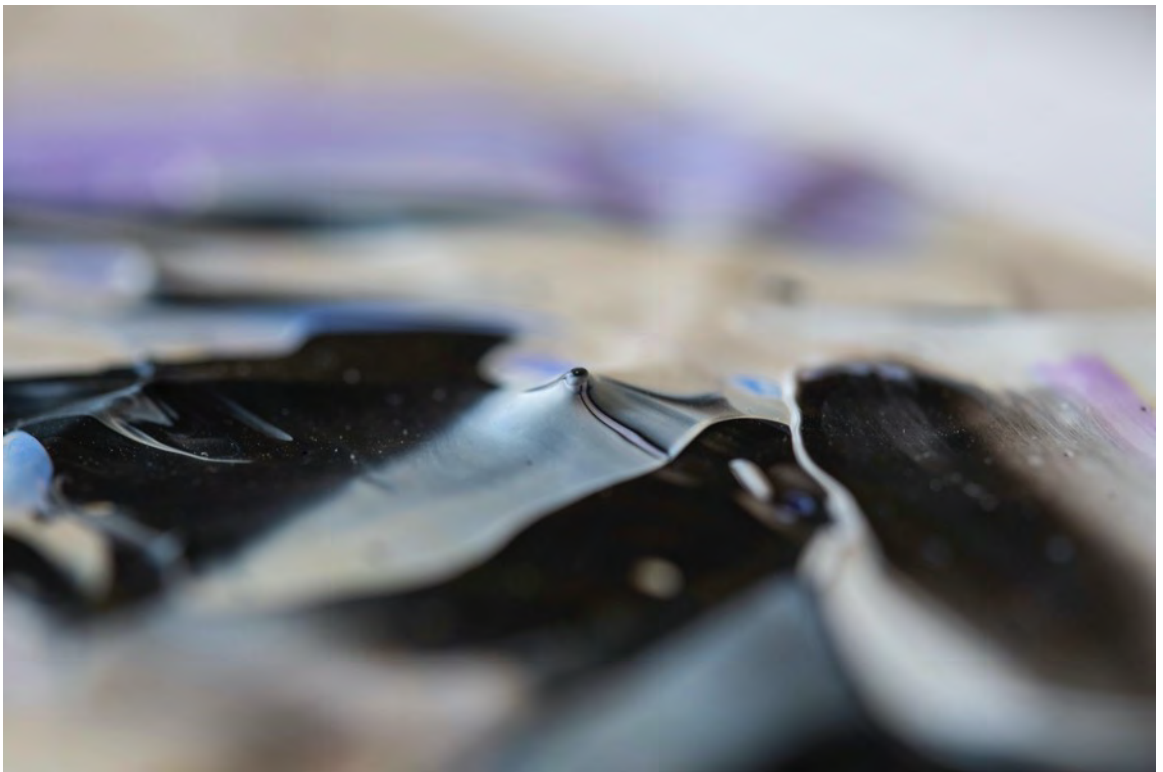










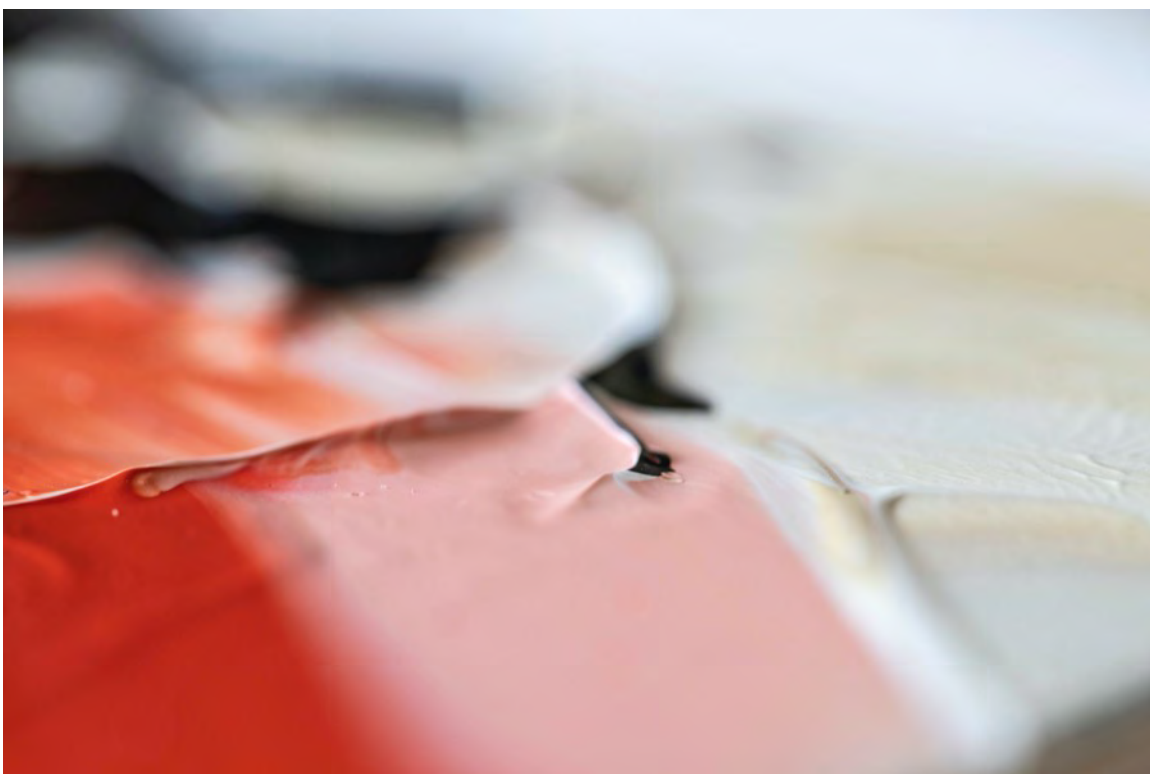
























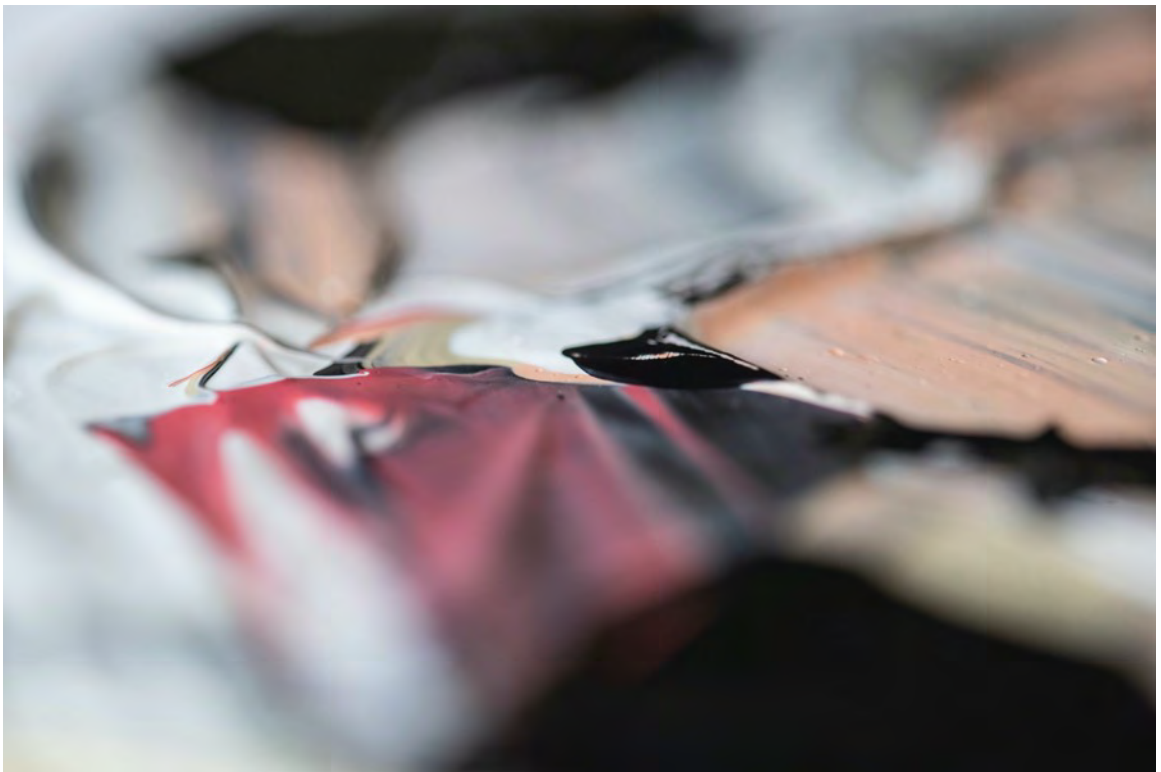


























#### **Figures 35-74 Snapshot Paintings**

To be devoted to a person, activity, or cause requires a trained attention. For me, this commitment can feel like a holy obsession. Acts of devotion can be driven by a special affection.

To embrace a child comes naturally to me. My son wakes up with rosy cheeks and glassy eyes, and I pick him up and hold him against my chest. This affection can be felt in other areas as well, whether it is a poem you hold dear, a cherished artistic subject, or a sensational ray of sunshine.

I wondered what might happen if I embraced something displeasing or disagreeable. By embracing a rejection, I experience the tension between affection and disgust until the feeling is transformed into something completely new. I hated the beige color that covered my apartment walls and the hospital curtains. I decided to bring this detested color together with carefully mixed delightful colors drawn from everyday life, like the aqua blue of a baby bottle cap or the light green of the neighbor's vinyl siding. This combination of the beloved and rejected brought an intensity of feeling to my painting process.

## COMMON DEVOTION

In my photobook *Common Devotion* (2022), the perspective shifts to me, a mother, caring for a young child while observing the physical world. There is a tension between devotion to the place and devotion to the person. Devotion seeps into every aspect of my life and work as I care for my children and train my attention on experience.

The medium of photography has the potential to pin down fleeting experiences and to capture the artist's act of looking. Attention has been an important element of my practice, and my photographs bear witness to my own act of looking and my curiosity about the world.

What does it mean to look closely? Sometimes this is a literal, physical act of crouching down, positioning a macro lens directly against a subject. Other times, looking closely has to do with an attitude or behavioral shift, slowing down, listening, and feeling.

During an interview with Krista Tippett, Mary Oliver said, "Attention is the beginning of devotion" (*On Being*). I believe that training attention on experiences can lead to a deeper level of care.

The world teeming with life in the midst of environmental degradation and disease inspired me to consider my everyday environment. I explored themes of life, death, survival, nature, and nurture. I was inspired by Jorie Graham's poem *Thaw* (*Runaway*, pp. 30-32).

## Thaw

There is a plot in the back of my building.  
Not the size of the asteroid.  
Not what four  
hyper-crenellations of a reef would have held when there were  
reefs. It's still here. I must not  
get the time  
confused. The times. There is a coolness in it which would have been new  
Spring. I can't tell if it's  
smell, as of blossoms which would have been just then  
beginning, or of loam. Through this  
green sensation is  
a thing which threads & pushes  
up. What is it pushes it. Whatever pushes it we  
must not get the feelings confused, the feelings of this – in this –  
now. One of us looks in  
the field guide. One of us looks up to where the sky had been.  
Our prior lives press on us.  
Something with heavy re-  
collection in it  
presses. Not

history anymore of course but  
like it. Is it five minutes or 500 years. Can we pencil that  
in. Next to the ashheap. The windowless classroom or what we still call class-  
rooms. Out of habit. Which feel, as the monitors speak, like  
they're filling with snow. Each creature sits  
alone. Is that what it is, a  
creature. It feels like a resurrected thing, this sensation I have of a  
creature. I carry certain stains with me. I can imagine  
loneliness which is an error I know. I think of causes &  
effects which is a form of regret. I imagine this veil  
shall be lifted again and something like a face in a mirror  
appear. And it will be me. Will be a room as rooms used to be to us.  
And us in them.  
As a family or as lovers. We shall be lifted and we shall touch  
in the old way. Just a hand on another. Not meaning that  
much but still a small weight. With  
meaning. A feeling of a harbouring inside which reminds one of having a  
mind. A feeling that one could  
die for instance.  
So there was  
mystery, hope, fear, loneliness.  
A sudden alarm from not-knowing and being startled by an in-



comprehensible terror or some other reaction  
to change. There was  
change. A person could be-  
come. You could look into a face &  
not know. There was rain & you would hardly notice.  
It could rain for hours. The face would be there inside  
its otherness, the way its body, which you could not imagine the in-  
wardness of, moved, each one  
moved,  
differently, completely  
differently. Why is it now you summon  
streets. How they ran everywhere away. You could be in a strange  
place and not know. You could be  
lost. You could be as if  
thrown away from the real. A trembling thing. A  
journey. Lost yes – but not wrong in being. And from there you  
could see a face which was a stranger. And it  
would have a look which you had to wait for.  
Because it was its look.  
Because you could not program it or request it.  
Because it was not yours.  
Not yours.

And when it came your way like a strange turning  
it brought a gaze with it. An ex-  
pression. A thing given to you you had not made or owned or seen  
before.  
That's all. You do not know how to go on from here.  
You do not know how to imagine further  
into the past.  
You want to remember what it was to see a look.  
There is one look among all the unprogrammable looks you want to recall.  
You raise your hands to your face to feel for it, can you force it.  
It was like this:  
someone turned your way.  
It was a free turn. It was made by them freely.  
And what they did then was this.  
You had done something. You  
seemed to become un-  
masked. You  
had done something you should not have done. You felt in you that u  
wished you had not.  
And they did something with their free face,  
they tossed it out at you,  
a thing not yours to dial-up or own – a thing free – a free thing –

they forgave you.

You are not sure you know what this means. But you are sure this happened once. You

were a thing

that required it.

And it was a thing which was not exact, not on time, not wired-in,

which was able to arrive in

time – just in time – & could be

given.

I considered Graham's uncanny descriptions of "touching in the old way" and becoming "unmasked" in the context of the evolving pandemic. I explored patches of undeveloped land where invasive plants were surviving to create images that reflected the chaotic nature of living things. I discovered the quietness that can be found in the most ordinary settings.

I observed living things as a way to better understand my own existence and experience as a living person in the world. Macro photography allowed me to explore life on the smallest level. I created this book at the cusp of spring, documenting the slow warming of the earth and tenuous teasing of fresh life.

My work is a stubborn embrace of the ordinary. There is nothing too small to be considered. This devotion to quotidian life sustains my creative practice. I am dedicated to this ritual curiosity. I am influenced by artists who show a reverence for everyday life and experience including Roni Horn, Rinko Kawauchi, and Rachel Whiteread.

My photographs became artifacts of a particular time and place. This documentation culminated into a survey of a personal place and history. Arranging these images into a book helped me identify threads of meaning that at times weaved into a new narrative.

During the process of digging into the mundane, there was an occasional experience with what I would call the sublime. In these moments of transformation, the ordinary setting was brushed away to reveal something novel. Monumental or miniscule, these moments revealed insights into my own humble role as an observer of the expansive, fleeting, and tender world.

I discovered a care deep within myself. My identity continues to shift as I learn what it means to be a mother and caregiver. I have learned to care in the midst of fear, and I have learned how to survive. I see my home as the bird's nest pictured in *Common Devotion*. The nest is assembled with care, while making use of what is available. A delicate strand of plastic floats from its fragile structure. Life persists.

Now, I am confronted with the reality of the persistence of carelessness in what seems to be a less and less caring world. Do small acts of care matter in the face of acts of carelessness and violence, great and small? I found myself questioning my notions of hope and acceptance as I passed the endless collections of detritus littering the landscape.

What are the consequences of the absence of care in society? I have witnessed a lack of personal consequence for carelessness. How do you practice tender attention in your daily life? I experienced the ways in which care remains invisible and undervalued. What can be learned through a touch? I find myself more disconnected than ever, as our

children learn in school to remain at a safe distance from one another. I question whether a hug is safe. What is your affective response to the notion of swaddling/ being swaddled? I miss those moments when I could offer comfort from such a simple gesture. What new territories could be interrupted by this notion of care? I have observed the tremendous need for care. But I now wonder how to overcome the barriers to care. What are the limits of care?

I considered my personal failure to care, and the ways I've neglected care in my life. The image of yellow and orange granules of fertilizer, meant to nurture, spilled and abandoned on the asphalt reminded me of how flawed our attempts at care can be. This artificial substance aimed at improving a lawn, perhaps, is now a futile mark, left behind.

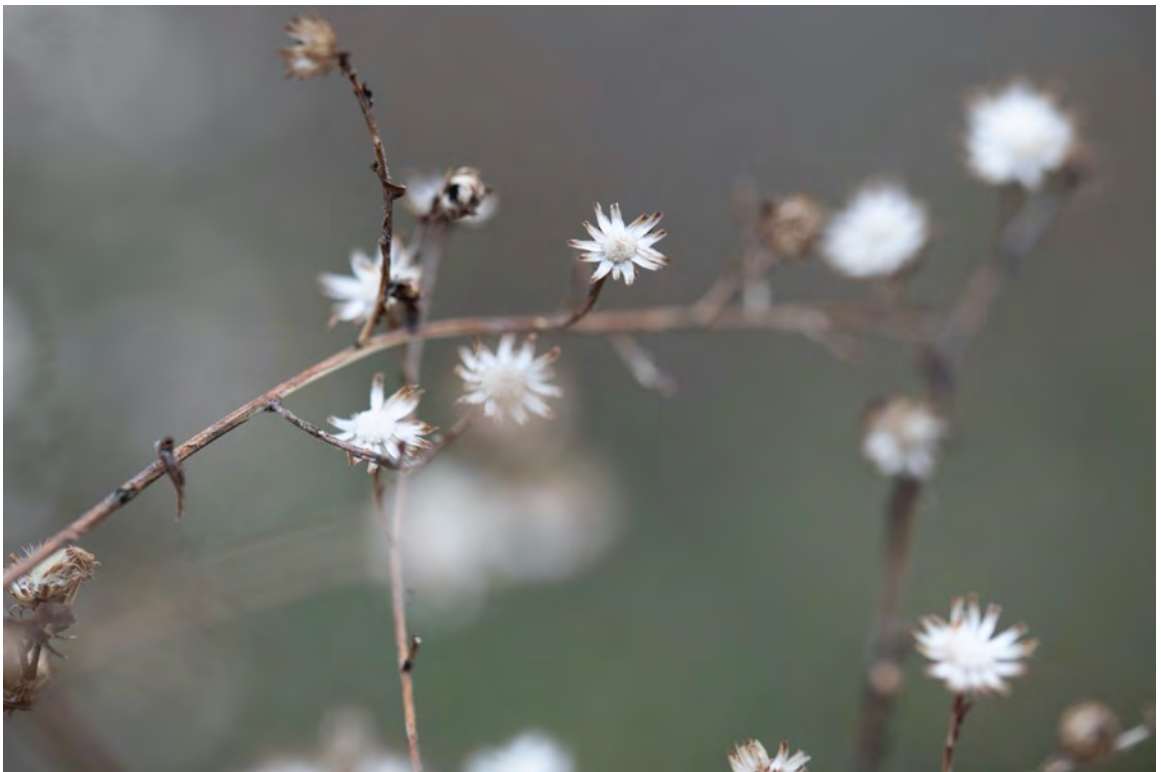
Walking through a pathway of trees, branches dangling precariously after a storm, I wanted the answers to all of my questions. Where do we go from here? My mind raced as the stroller bumped over dozens of sweetgum balls. The sun broke through the clouds as the path met a busy street. I looked down to find my son sleeping soundly as the cars buzzed by. Looking at his face, I felt the trust that is freely given from a child – the trust to be cared for.





















**Figures 75-86 Common Devotion**

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Danielle Wayne Dravenstadt is an interdisciplinary artist, specializing in photography, with an MA from the Maryland Institute College of Art and a BA from Furman University. Her artwork explores, challenges, and transforms the ordinary through photography, painting, printmaking, and installation. She transfigures mundane and transient moments into arresting and immutable artifacts, revealing nuanced perceptions of the quotidian.