

**The Thin Blue Line,
the Deep Red Sea**
*Explorations of Miscarriage
and Pregnancy Loss*

Marjolaine Ryley

“What I’d experienced had not been a full life, nor was it a full death, but it was a real loss”

“Grief is a normal process that will inevitably touch each of us and yet most of us find ourselves ill prepared and uneducated in this realm. It is within this already stifled environment that we experience pregnancy loss, almost like a secret within a secret. When we stumble into this hidden region we enter what traditionally have been considered private female affairs: menstruation, fertility, birth, menopause and the like. Women in many cultures are taught early not to speak publicly of such things and so pregnancy loss becomes one more female experience to be hidden and demurely downplayed.”

Seftel, L. *Grief Unseen – Healing Pregnancy Loss Through the Arts*, 2006

Although an estimated 1 in 4 pregnancies ends in miscarriage it is still very much a taboo subject. This work explores pregnancy loss, revealing the joy, pain and heartache that come hand in hand with trying for a family. This project is in collaboration with UK charity the The Miscarriage Association and was undertaken during my time as their Artist in Residence.

Marjolaine Ryley



Our Thoughts are Forming the World



Love Letters

THEY SAY FACT IS STRANGER THAN FICTION. *I found out I was pregnant just before our wedding. I miscarried again twelve days before.* It was Easter day 2008. Bleeding, uncertainty, spiritual awakening, holy water, more bleeding. A trip to A&E on Easter Monday. Christ risen indeed. My baby leaving me slowly. A lovely doctor told me the truth. Another hoped for the best. And then it was over. My best friend understood, she grew up on a farm she had seen it all before. **The scan confirmed; the pregnancy was no more.** No consolation in any of it but I defended myself like the soul guard of the castle. OFFICIAL LINE IT HAPPENS, IT'S NORMAL. *Unofficial line, I'm cracking under the strain, heartbroken.* **What if?** What if I can't have children? What if it's me, it's my fault, all my fault. The nightmarish week before the wedding we suffered. But then it was amazing, a day of light and happiness and it was not an act. Today we saw a herd of wild deer, the highlands healing us, *our happiness as real as the suffering we feel over the loss of our second baby,* our hopes gushing out of us like the beautiful icy streams we have waded through. **And so we re-group,** we spend our first few weeks together, married ecstatically happy with bouts of melancholy hiding from the outside world. Here everything is pure, out there, dark, majestic, fearful. *We dread the return to real life but accept its inevitability.* And we make love again deciding to ignore the sensible advice, the cycle begins, new possibility enough to light the darkness. We watch Grizzly Man. I hear Hertzog's narrative in my head. Nature is a force of savagery, and destruction, *this is not a Disney film.* Out in the beautiful wilderness I wonder are those terrifying bears or just rustling bushes.

Fact and Fiction

A NIGHT SO DARK THE BONES ACHED, searing thoughts piercing sleep, awake now, **dark room, dark thoughts**. I am all wrong, *I am broken, this body is cut down*, mind overflowing, spilling outwards unable to contain its woes. *All around me in different dreams they sleep*, him besides me uneasy. I get up, piss into a cup printed with exotic leaves, my urine is dark, pungent. **I await the test results no longer caring**, all I can think of is the mirrored cabinet and the promise of relief from this head full of hell. *Not pregnant. I take the pills and sink back into bed shivering*. I reach for his warmth, a momentary relief. I lie on my back rigid and await the **sweet relief**. It's a long time coming. And in other rooms in other houses *women lie awake, bleeding, in pain, loosing, hope fading again*. I reach into the screen to tell my story and hear about their sorrow. I cannot listen anymore *but I cannot stop hearing them*.

A Night so Dark



The Black Rabbit

FLOATING ABOVE them all, looking but not seeing, existing but not talking, they do not see me or hear me, so of course **I am not really there**. My pain an *uncomfortable inconvenience; present in the room*. They want me to be different. I don't want to pretend anymore, lost in my grief I feel closest to them, *they are here, very near, within me*, just outside, under the apple tree, on my finger, in my heart.

Under the Apple Tree



Gust of Wind



The Thin Blue Line

SO NOW THE TEST SHOWS THE *faintest line*.
The promise of a future combined with the fear of past horrors. Tiredness, dizziness, **feelings of anxiety**. Trying to breath, EXCITEMENT, a night of tossing, turning and waiting. The smell of urine released into the morning, dark gold, but does it have the power to perform a miracle *The little magic stick*, changing colour, the wait, **slowly, slowly, looking, eyes blurry** – *find a brighter light* – **is there something there?** The faintest blue line, forming a cross. Of all the times for it to happen it's the best and the worst. *Be strong, be patient. Pray.* Let this be the one that turns from an abstract blue line into the amazing journey of life, **new life**, let us 9 months from now be *holding our very own happy, healthy baby*. Me and him. *There are no answers here today* just cells dividing and life deciding.

No Answers Here Today

WAITING, WAITING FOR THE EXAMINATION,
the words of god, or the medical practitioner.
Hoping, faded dreams hanging by a thread.
Knowing in that place where hope dies, it is
over, again. *Except, that one time, that miracle,*
the words 'There's a little one' a tick in the
viable box. **Stunned.** She is my daughter.

Waiting



Madonna and Child



There are no Words

WORLD TURNING, sun shining,
heart bursting with love for her, little
precious child, *love her more I could not,*
cherish her more I could not. But when
I am alone their faces appear, *deep rivers*
of grief, cutting my eyes with salty tears,
images of women, bleeding, losing their
children, missing them. **My only truth is**
pain, heart broken, my lost babies.

World Turning, Sun Shining



Blackberry

THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND. If they did they would not say such things to me, a bereaved mother grieving two deaths in less than a year. *If they could see into my heart they would know this love and loss is pure, sacred, not one ounce of self-pity* resides here. I have seen the blood, I have watched them die, *held them within as they faded*. They did not see me. Their eyes were shut. **Do not say anything** to me. *I am not listening.*

I Choose Not To Hear You



The Infusion



Goodbye Baby

A MIGRAINE PIERCED MY SLEEP, I dreamed of a city; dirty, crowded, strange faces, an American among them. **I'm somewhere and nowhere**, straining to catch a glimpse of the city, *dusty and uninviting*. I don't know where I am, searching all around, *desperate for a way out* yet I am caught, well and truly tangled, this net restricting me at every turn. **I am unhappy** and I don't know how to be well again. *I fear I am lost forever*. I need to find my way out of this maze to a place where I can *accept what is* and not *what might have been*.

Dark City – Day 17



Baby Slug

DEAR LOST ONES, *I miss you every day*, I imagine you, *how you would have looked, playing with her*. I know just how special it would have been. Ghost baby you are hovering at my shoulder **watching me, bringing me comfort**. Are you a *little devil* or a *beautiful angel* or *both*? Are you the same soul or are your brothers and sisters there with you? Little one who should be inside me, due at Christmas I miss you. Your sister senses you. *I long for her to be called 'sister' like I never was*. She is your beautiful amazing sister and would have loved you and hated you a tiny bit. We are waiting for you little tree soul. **Please come back, one, both, all?** All I am I offer you. I will be your mummy, love you and protect you, **we offer you this family**. JOIN US. I will look at it all again. I promise. Leave no stone unturned. Come and see our garden, the slide, the seeds will grow next year and she will be three. *We have a place for you here. Please try again. We love you. Welcome to my womb and all our hearts.*





The Other Side

I WAS HOLDING a beautiful blonde haired baby (boy) I could feel the **intense warmth**, *soft skin and radiated babyness*. She played nearby. I invited her to interact with us *and hug the baby*. It was MINE, HERS, OURS all at once. I awoke longing, but soothed.

Dream of Him



Things are Strange

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 common to 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 images. 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.



Heparin Plated Armour



All that remains

For Eden & Conrad

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Join us

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Marjolaine Ryley

Marjolaine Ryley has exhibited and published her work both nationally and internationally including exhibitions at Impressions Gallery, Bradford, Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, The Palacio des Artes, Porto and Wolverhampton Art Gallery, West Midlands. Publications include *Villa Mona - A Proper Kind of House* (Trace Editions) and *Growing up in the New Age* (Daylight). Funded through Arts Council England and in collaboration with The Miscarriage Association the work in this book was made during her time as their Artist in Residence. Her project blog can viewed at www.thethinbluelinethedeepredsea.wordpress.com. Ryley is currently a Senior Lecturer in Photography at the University of Sunderland.
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The Miscarriage Association

Around one in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage. It can be a very unhappy, frightening and lonely experience. The Miscarriage Association is a registered charity that provides support and information to anyone affected by miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy or molar pregnancy. The charity also supports clinical research, promotes good NHS care, and raises public awareness about pregnancy loss.
www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

Camilla Brown

Camilla Brown trained as an art historian. Completing her BA at Leeds University, she then studied for her MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She is a curator, writer and lecturer on contemporary art, specialising in photography. For ten years she was Senior Curator at The Photographers' Gallery, London previous to which she was Exhibitions Curator at Tate Liverpool.

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NEPN

NEPN is the development agency for photographic practice in NE England. Established in 2009, NEPN works with photographers, artists, curators and a wide range of cultural partners to create a lively and informed context for photographic activity and to encourage new audiences for photography. NEPN manages a programme of commissions, conferences and talks, peer and portfolio review events. www.northeastphoto.net

