

Kay Lawrence

Ellie Wood's finely detailed drawings of women explore the getting of female adulthood from a child's point of view at the moment of her learning sexual difference... In her long dress and protected by her parasol, the female figure is as familiar as the little cat, its paws neatly in front, its long tail on the loose. Undressed, the figures trace out her understanding of the female body, 'complete' with male and female parts. The graphic gestural marks convey a confidence and decisiveness with the process even if the learning itself is unfinished. Ellie Wood was just eight years old.

Kay Lawrence is Ellie Wood's mother, and it is likely that these figures represent a child's perception of her mother's body. The child's spontaneous gestures are re-defined by the considered, repetitive movement of the weaving. At the same time the degree of self-reflexivity implies an adult response. In tapestry, the graphic quality exists only in its meticulous representation through labour-intensive translation into weave. This collaborative process is itself an outcome of the relationship of mother and daughter, and mothering as a practice is inscribed in the drawing and in *Gender Tapestry*. By her working and re-working of Ellie's drawings, she identifies herself with Ellie as daughter. She imagines herself as the daughter who draws her mother.

For the child, the drawings were the transitory records of a process of learning. In the translation, they have been invested with metaphorical meaning. These images visualise the Freudian notion of the phallic mother. Freud argued that children of both sexes believe in the phallic mother, the mother who exists prior to the child's knowledge of castration and sexual difference. The boy imagines the mother is like himself; the girl believes her penis will eventually grow to be like her mother's. The phallic mother represents a comforting phantasy of sexual sameness (not to be confused with the castrating woman who represents a terrifying phantasy of sexual difference). The notion of the phallic woman is crucial to Freud's theory of castration; if the child did not initially believe the mother was phallic, it could not later construct her as castrated. In Lacanian terms, woman could not be seen as representing 'lack' or 'absence'. According to Freud, the importance of the penis for both sexes is a corollary of the fact that the child is unaware of the existence of the vagina and its proper function until the tenth or eleventh year. The phallus is a symbol of plenitude and completeness, and represents the desire for completeness once again, and for the time when mother and child not separated.

In *Gender Tapestry*, the small figures in dark outline are the daughter's drawings of her mother, reworked as the mother imagining herself as daughter. The sequencing suggests not only maturation but also loss. Of the figures arranged according to height, the first two retain the phallus but the third is anatomically more accurate but is no longer 'complete'. But what is the significance of the pale outlined, shadowy figure, whose head and feet are beyond the pictorial space? She too is the phallic mother, representing the daughter's separation from the mother and her desire for reunification with her.

The *Gender Tapestry* and the *Untitled* drawing explore the mother-daughter relationship from a number of perspectives. The daughter's journey to maturity, interpreted within a Freudian-Lacanian framework of lack and separation from the mother, is one of these perspectives. The tapestry represents Ellie's as-yet-

incompleted process of separation from her mother. Implicit also within the tapestry is Kay Lawrence's relationship with her own mother who died when Kay was a young woman. This perspective is made explicit by the artist's repeated citation of this passage from Janet Frame's autobiographical novel *Owls Do Cry* to account for a body of work undertaken over a period of some seven years:

Oh my mother was as big as the arm of land will hold sea and not spill. I cannot imagine her death...

I would have held my arms, like land around a lake, tight about her, and not let her spill over for anyone save myself, for I was the youngest; and yet it is not my mother I grieve for, it is herself as grandmother for my children; only, yes, it is my mother too, who should have died long ago she was so tired with sweeping out her house and the world.³⁸

The spilling is an image of maternal plenitude, but it is also an image of the mother's death. Grieving for the mother who spills, the daughter believes that she should have—that she could have—sheltered the mother from death. Her mother's early death is figured here in the superimposition of bodies as an obstacle to the daughter's negotiation of her own maturation through separation. But Kay Lawrence's representation goes beyond personal experience. Psychoanalytic insight into the formation of female subjects as 'separate but like' mothers suggests that the separation of girls from mothers is less radical and less definitive than that which boys undergo during the Oedipal transition. If this is the case, then perhaps women experience the death of their mothers as a loss of some part of themselves.

Yet another perspective on the mother-daughter relationship represented is that of the mother who experiences the maturation of the daughter through as loss of self and a loss of her own maternal plenitude. Here, the daughter's body is seen to be incorporated into the phallic maternal body "like land around a lake, tight around her". 'Letting go' is the otherside of the daughter's attainment of a separate identity, and perhaps the mother associates that transition with her own death.

In these troubling images, then, Kay Lawrence draws on personal relationships and experiences to give insight into the mother-daughter relationship. Identification, separation, maturation and death are represented as inextricably connected in the formation of female subjectivity. It is enlightening, then, to place these works in the context of her public commission work as a designer, tapestry weaver and community artist of national stature.

Kay Lawrence designed the monumental *Parliament House Embroidery* for the new Australian Parliament House, and worked with Anne Richards from 1984-88 to co-ordinate the making of this work by guild embroiderers from across Australia. More recently, she designed two major tapestries to commemorate the centenary of women's suffrage in South Australia in 1994. The *Women's Suffrage Centenary Tapestries*, now hanging in the House of Assembly chamber of the South Australian Parliament, were woven collaboratively by South Australian weavers working in a public location and encouraging passers-by to contribute by weaving a pass. As Kay Lawrence writes, the tapestry, "both in its imagery and in the process of its making... speaks of participation and collaboration". "Because of the close links between women and textiles," she writes, "I decided to use images of textiles in the



Ellie Wood (above)
untitled drawing 1987
felt pen on A4 paper
28 x 37 cm (11.0 x 14.6 in)
Photograph: Lesley Goldacre

Kay Lawrence (top left)
Gender Tapestry 1993
woven tapestry, cotton warp; linen weft with some wool
139 x 157 cm (54.7 x 61.8 in)
Photograph: Lesley Goldacre

design as much as possible, to make reference to women's public and private lives."⁵⁹ These images include an Aboriginal coiled rush mat, a nineteenth century child's embroidered sampler and a bride's wedding veil, the yellow ribbon of the South Australian suffragists, and the 'wagga' quilts of the Depression years made from sacking. Through these textiles, used in conjunction with fragments of other 'documents', Kay Lawrence traces back the history of South Australian women, constructing a lineage down the female line.

This sense of connectedness and community between women that Kay Lawrence develops and conveys in her collaborative and 'public' practice is the

counterpoint to the images of unresolved separation that are explored in the 'personal' imagery of her solo work. The sense of loss conveyed in the artist's tapestries is counterpoint to an imagined and actual restitution formed in her community work as artists and designer.