



← **No Dimensions, 2022**
With a vacuum cleaner nozzle for a mouth, the clay this mother bird seems to feed on is part of its own body. "I wanted to celebrate the sense of returning to zero," Cuddon says.

→ **Night Portraits, 2023**
While many of Cuddon's sculptures begin as an image that's then intuitively adapted as the clay is worked on, these Night Portraits are intentionally formless and bear bite marks that suggest the way young children explore the world with their mouths. "Biting or eating is about trying to understand something but to destroy it as well," she says.



All you knead is love

Fired up by the experience of raising a child in the pandemic, in her new show sculptor Katie Cuddon explores the 'incredibly physical' relationship between mother and baby

Words: Skye Sherwin

The "mother" has retreated with her child to an old kitchen chair. Her body has become a vessel, pink as new skin, comforting as a hot-water bottle. Yet something is a little off. She doesn't exactly nestle the rolled-up blanket that is her "baby". Although tied by a harness strap, this infant sits atop the mother like an awkward offering. As the mother's head tips back in what might be ecstasy, exhaustion or simply for a glimpse of the world beyond, it turns

out she has no face – her neck ends in a dark opening, a void. For the sculptor Katie Cuddon, that emptiness is an "element of horror" within Night Portraits, her new exhibition of clay works exploring early motherhood in its bodily and psychological contradictions and complexity. "My work comes from feelings that inhabit the body and take it over," says the artist, who became a mother in 2018. "The relationship you have with a small child is incredibly physical. I felt extreme emotions and confusion: was I one

or two people? It's a really interesting place to think about sculpture from" – how the experience of motherhood can turn "coordinates of space and time on their heads." In Behind Mother's Eyes, a huge, bright blue sculpture that resembles a scaled-up version of the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf statuette, the figure's "eyes" are two cartoon-like holes cut into stout protruding legs. You can literally look into them, into darkness, and the darkness seems to stare back. This relationship between internal and external worlds has long

occupied the artist. "My work often has openings and holes," she says. "I want it to share the same space we inhabit, to breathe the same air. I don't want the clay to seem solid but to appear as a skin defining this form, this body." Hooked on using clay since childhood, Cuddon originally studied ceramics before switching to fine art, studying at the Glasgow School of Art and then the Royal College of Art in London. In 2011, she was awarded the first of Camden Art Centre's renowned ceramics fellowships. She is

careful to distinguish her interests from the current boom of ceramic artists, though, seen in shows such as the Hayward Gallery's 2022 survey Strange Clay. She doesn't have the ceramicist's typical fascination with the alchemy of the firing process and its glazes. Rather, her reference points take in the history of sculpture, from ancient Etruscan hand-worked terracotta figures to Rodin's clay models. Cuddon creates her forms' thin skins with her hands, working from the outside in, leaving a surface

that's marked and lively with her fingers' indentations. "It's my searching process," she says. These forms are then fired to make the clay strong so it won't collapse. Rather than cloak them with a ceramicist's glaze, they're finally painted in thin, chalky washes of colour. Raising a child during the pandemic when "I was thinking about death a lot, swinging between the start and end of life" has led Cuddon into fresh territory. The show's titular sculptures, Night Portraits, evolved from her reading "relentless terrible

news: climate change, the threat of world war and stories of women being abducted and killed". It made her question her own reality, something she addressed by creating work with a strikingly physical, sensory process: small amorphous hunks of shaped, bare clay that cling to table edges and have been dripped with wax and bitten into. "It's about feeling one's way in the dark and grabbing something to hold." Katie Cuddon: Night Portraits is at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 10 June to 3 September.



← **Mother and Baby, 2020**
Months of thinking and rearranging went into this selection of found objects; the kitchen chair that supports the clay sculpture recalls traditional pedestals, while the blanket and strap link the sculpture with the domestic world.

↑ **Behind Mother's Eyes, 2020**
This sculpture's blue ocean of rumpled skin recalls bellies after giving birth. The infant occupies the pole position where the mother's head should be.

'I don't want the clay to seem solid but to appear as a skin defining this form, this body'

sculpture

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Katie Cuddon, installation view of "A is for Alma," 2024. Photo: Colin Davison

Katie Cuddon

April 16, 2024 by Beth Williamson

Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.

Hatton Gallery

Only seven sculptures make up Katie Cuddon's exhibition "A is for Alma" (on view through May 4, 2024), all made since the birth of her daughter. The abundance of space and the strangeness of the light are immediately striking. Viewers enter into a dim half-light, just sensing the clay forms that sit on chairs, stools, and other supports. Further into the space, the light sensitively graduates from darkness to a golden luminescence, gesturing to the 24-hour cycle experienced by parents of a new child, darkest just before sunrise, while also alluding to a longer developmental trajectory.

Clay may be the material at the heart of creation myths across time, cultures, and geographies, but there is something more fundamental happening here. Cuddon, a Professor of Fine Art Practice at Newcastle University, leaves her mark on these intuitively formed works, which are pushed, pulled, and pinched into shape, impressed with fingerprints, sometimes bitten or torn—covered in the imprints of actions and gestures. Despite, or because of, this deep engagement with material, these are psychical forms and spaces. The art historian Anne Wagner once described Barbara Hepworth's anthropomorphic sculptures as conveying the impression of structure beneath a smooth stretch of skin. Cuddon's works are the antithesis, their irregular, loosely defined surfaces suggesting provisional and exploratory forms from the inside out, as if they might change at any moment. There is no concrete embodiment here; instead, one senses the pull of the maternal imaginary. Informed by psychoanalysis—think of the destructive element in Kleinian theory or the more nurturing approaches of D.W. Winnicott—Cuddon ultimately explores the maternal experience from the inside. The apparatus of motherhood that surrounds each infant/maternal relationship and encounter often sees the pair elided, the focus shifted to the breast and the mother disappeared as an individual.

"A is for Alma" reveals Cuddon's progressive experience of rediscovering her individuality as the infant grows into newfound independence and reliance on communication through the body gives way to the acquisition of language. In the multipart *Abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz* (2021–23), 26 clay letters half-tumble from a makeshift platform onto the floor, uncontained and making their own way. Their chalky surfaces are colored in shades of deep blue, suggesting the precious lapis lazuli so prized by artists as a source of pigment. The infant grows and leaves behind its largely oral explorations of the world, but Cuddon bites and tears at the clay letters, turning the tables on Alma's precious acquisition of language.

Mother and Baby (2020) evokes past moments of feeding or comforting an infant in the dead of night. A baby-pink flattened ceramic vessel, with a folded blanket strapped to its body, lies on a chair. The deep-seated loneliness of the experience is underlined by the outstretched neck of the vessel, which ends in a gaping orifice howling into the void, recalling Jacqueline Poncelet's anguished sculptures of the 1980s. Home may be a safe haven, but it can be an isolating one, too.

The pale yellow of *Self-portrait* (2021) and *Lemon Sunday* (2020) conjures pastel crayons and, simultaneously, the color of infant vomit. The infant and mother of *Lemon Sunday* sustain each other, while a tiny gap between the two suggests growing separation. A child's mitten stuffed roughly into an orifice disrupts the pairing and the violence of the psyche leaches through. In *Self-portrait*, the figure strains to hold her head high on an elongated neck; a bright red crayon stands in for the lipstick-coated mouth of an earlier self.

Behind Mother's Eyes (2020) transfixes, rooting the viewer to the spot with its vulnerability. This is the mother experiencing the world afresh through new eyes, living with a new body (marked by folds of fat across the belly), and supporting a helpless infant. *Shadow* (2023), the only masculine presence in the space, hovers on the wall behind. Horned and vaguely bovine, it is difficult to say whether this pale presence represents a force for good, or malevolence.

The show culminates with the wonderfully uplifting *The Wind's Hand* (2024), which takes its title from a line in Sylvia Plath's poem "Morning Song." An unglazed ceramic torso of sorts sits atop a set of ash wood steps adorned with Alma's pencil drawings. Beautifully situated close to the gallery's bay windows, the figure looks set to fly away should a gust of wind catch it. The naked, unadorned fired clay exudes a lust for life, a sense of freedom and excitement for what is to come. The growing child, much less dependent now, has found her feet. The maternal figure is absent, but the way back, down the steps, is always open. The route, mapped by the child's own drawings, will always be taken on her own terms.