

sculpture

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER

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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.