



Title

Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching

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Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching

by Martha Barratt • 04.01.2023

The mood of the exhibition devoted to Rosemary Mayer (1943–2014) at Spike Island, Bristol, radiates from the heart of the artist's snapdragons ¹ Seven works on paper capture the flowers in close-up, their petals billowing in shades of yellow, orange and lilac, lush with the pigmentation particular to oil pastel. But there is a sense of danger, a certain overripeness; black backgrounds abstract the snaps into a dark and endless space, enhancing the feeling that one is being folded into the blooms. The exhibition presents these hurried pictures – they were all completed in a day – alongside examples of Mayer's drawings, artist's books and sculptural fabric work. It is a heady maceration of pleasures and decay, of time experienced in efflorescent bursts and considered at a distance, cycling the eddies of history.

Mayer was born to a staunchly Catholic family in Ridgewood, New York, and moved to the city in her twenties, where she lived and worked until her death in 2014. Her unique visual language was shaped by these experiences, bringing together an attachment to European Christian tradition – she studied Classics at university and translated Pontormo's diary in her twenties – and an immersion in the avant-garde and conceptual-leaning New York art scene of the 1960s and 1970s.² Mayer's work engages closely with art history not through the critical lens of such peers as Adrian Piper (b.1948), but through a creative and affective attention to works of art. The show's title, *Ways of Attaching*, encourages this reading, calling to mind recent 'postcritical' approaches to art and literary theory.³ It provokes questions: why are we drawn to certain aesthetics, to particular movements and periods of art? And what can we gain by allowing ourselves to be led by such attachments, to be enfolded in the petals?

The exhibition brings together works dating from 1968 to 1983, a uniquely productive period for the artist. During that time Mayer was given solo exhibitions, published artist's books, co-founded the women-only A.I.R. Gallery in New York in 1972, secured commercial representation and gained widespread critical recognition.⁴ And yet, from 1985 there is a lacuna: she showed almost nothing and there is little material evidence of a continuing output. The snapdragons are an anomaly, created in 1995, by which point, the wall text tells us, her teaching commitments meant she had little studio time. The 'rediscovery' of Mayer after her death is due in large part to the efforts of her family and in particular her niece Marie Warsh, who has edited and contributed to several books and

exhibitions of her work (including this one) in the years since.⁵

The short timeframe of this exhibition, and indeed of Mayer's known career, seems poignant in relation to the work on view at Spike Island. Firstly, because she made a number of works named for 'lost women' of history, whose achievements were obscured and names largely forgotten. Secondly, because during those years we see Mayer untangle herself from the gallery-contingent form of sculpture towards ephemeral works of art in public or natural space: lumpy figures made of snow and balloons released in parks. It seems a natural progression towards her apparent disappearance, a prolonged investigation of what is lost and what is remembered. Outside the institution, what counts?

Mayer's large fabric piece *Galla Placidia* [FIG.2](#) takes the name of the Roman empress (d.450) most famous not for her influence or achievements but for the mosaics in her mausoleum in Ravenna. Made from layered fabric draped from a wire hoop-like structure, the form is at once organic and ethereal. Any connection between the work and its namesake is made through loose visual association: a bright gold piece of silk runs through the centre, reflecting and inflecting the surrounding colours with warmth, like gold leaf on a ceiling fresco. Although the form might plausibly be described as vulvic, even labial, Mayer is adamant that her sculptures are connected to an abstract or philosophical female experience rather than to a particular body, and not, as she is quoted in the wall text, 'to sex, as silly folks have chosen to read these works'. The silk is layered with cheaper fabrics with equally affecting qualities: a minty voile seems to stir the colours beneath into a shifting tie-dye spectrum and a purple muslin with an open weave appears more precious than it is. Both these materials sit on the topmost layer and give the impression of increased contrasts of light and shade in the folds of fabric beneath. They act as a screen, perhaps, flattening the draperies into an image.

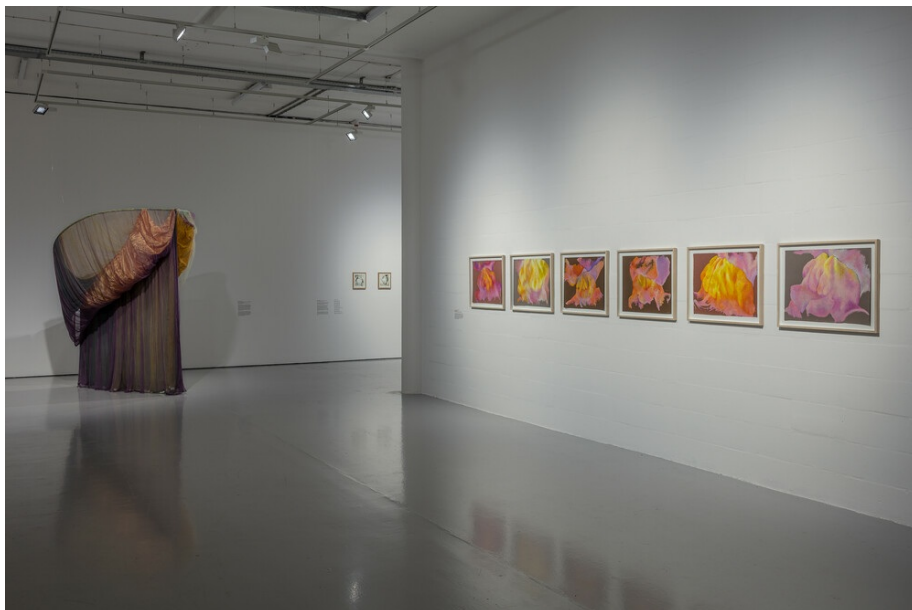


Fig. 1 Installation view of *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2022. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer; photograph Dan Weill).

Playing nearby, an audio recording of a lecture Mayer gave in around 1978 illuminates the material experiments at the heart of the fabric sculptures. She uses language that falls between the rule-based instructions of conceptual art and a more sensual or romantic abstraction. She describes *Balancing* **FIG.3**, for example, as a search for ‘the opposite ends of pink’. The sculpture hangs on the wall opposite, beautifully reassembled but likely somewhat faded. Her hand-dyed fabrics are prone to lose or change their colours, so it is difficult to know if the slow fade from gold to blue across the central piece of fabric reflects her initial experiments with dyes. The hollow vinyl tubes, however, remain ‘limber enough’ for the hang she had in mind, and several pieces are built upon the unique material quality of nylon netting, as it ‘pops up and floats’.

During the lecture, Mayer describes how her interest in women from history was piqued in the early 1970s by her participation in feminist consciousness-raising groups. In addition to *Galla Placidia*, this exhibition includes *Hypsipyle* **FIG.4**, which is named after the legendary Queen of Lemnos, *The Catherines* (possibly de’ Medici, of Aragon, of Siena and the Great) and *Lucretia in Ferrara 1509* **FIG.5**, all made in 1973 and so before the only known portrait of Lucrezia Borgia came to light.⁶ Mayer hoped that by naming her works after women underrepresented or missing from history, people would have to ‘go and find out what this name was all about’. Like many of her contemporaries, she was a believer in the political power of knowledge and representation, but also expressed a distinctly personal imperative to seek such precedents: ‘I need more women’, she wrote to her sister in 1979.⁷



Fig. 2 *Galla Placidia*, by Rosemary Mayer. 1973. Satin, rayon, nylon, cheesecloth, nylon netting, ribbon, dyes, wood and acrylic paint, 274.3 by 304.8 by 152.4 cm. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer and ChertLüdde, Berlin; exh. Spike Island, Bristol; photograph Dan Weill).

Mayer's artist's books are her clearest expression of how connecting with historical others is as much to do with sustaining herself as rescuing the dead. *Passages* (1976), a handwritten book bound in a deep red velvet cover, is shown here for the first time. Displayed unbound in a long vitrine, the inside pages are highly worked with drawings, handwritten cursive script and reproductions of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art **FIG. 6**. The text intersperses descriptions of the paintings and churches Mayer saw on a trip to Europe the previous year with

autobiographical stories and historic anecdotes. On one page, photographs of Jean Fouquet's stiff-breasted Madonna from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, the high altar at Braunau in Rohr Abbey and the Church of Sts Peter and Paul in Steinhausen are combined in a composition that recalls the neat arrangements of a nineteenth-century scrapbook. Mayer's accompanying text narrates the death and subsequent funeral of her uncle 'Charly, the black sheep':



Fig. 3 *Balancing*, by Rosemary Mayer. 1972. Rayons, cheesecloth, cord and acrylic rods, 320 by 275 by 10 cm. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer and ChertLüdde, Berlin; exh. Spike Island, Bristol; photograph Dan Weill).

Black cars carried the brothers and sisters, gladiolas,

lilies and cousins, past their church and houses to the layers of new grass, unearthed flowers and carved stones.

Charly was lowered into that safe ground, near the stone with this name, and they each threw in white roses, flowers and dirt.



Fig. 4 *Hypsipyle*, by Rosemary Mayer. 1973. Silk, cheesecloth, dyes and wood, 274.3 by 121.9 by 15.2 cm. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer; exh. Spike Island, Bristol; photograph Dan Weill).

The text, which is difficult to read in places, continues further down the same page:

Wreaths and garlands mark occasions when a group gather on sacred ground in ceremonies of celebration or loss. Weltenburg's stucco garlands, gilded plaster tendrils, wreath of star flowers for the Madonna, hold celebration long past the crowns of May or the strung flowers offered to the god of the feast and then to all the gods, at dawn breaking after two days of collecting flowers, long past the flowers for Charly.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2022, showing, on the left, *Lucretia in Ferrara 1509. 1973*. Coloured pencil on paper, 101.6 by 76.2 cm. and, on the right, *The Catherines. 1973*. Fabric, wood and dye, 304.8 by 182.9 by 121.9 cm. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer; photograph Dan Weill).

Here, Mayer links her experiences of her uncle's death, ceremony and remembrance to the pictorial history she has gathered in her scrapbook. The conjured images are tragic and sensational, seeped in the Catholic traditions that bound the artist with the older art she loved. Between the gladiola and the stucco garlands, there lies a pained fascination with the passage of time, something she described as her overriding sense of 'the transience of every thing, person and circumstance'.⁸



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2022. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer; photograph Dan Weill).

The death of Mayer's parents when she was a teenager led her to seek refuge in books, especially art history, as a source of escapism and sensual pleasure, something that would never disappear. However, she took the opposite approach in *Snow People* (1979), figures that she built from handfuls of snow on the lawn at Lenox Library, Massachusetts, and named each with a plural: Annas, Fannys, Marys. A few small photographs in a vitrine record their lumpy, huddled forms. Built to melt, they evoke the strange slow panic of remembering the dead, their faces shifting and impossible to hold.

Throughout her life, Mayer maintained a strong personal and creative relationship with her sister. Bernadette Mayer (1945–2022) worked predominantly in poetry, but the sisters drifted into the one another's wheelhouse from time to time. Bernadette produced an autobiographical photocollage, *Memory* (1975), which was republished in 2020, and Rosemary was a skilled writer in many forms.⁹ A collection of their letters, written between 1976 and 1980, when Bernadette moved away from New York to take up residencies and teaching posts elsewhere, was published on the occasion of the exhibition under review. Many of the works on show were produced during these years, and there are occasional mentions of them in Rosemary's letters to her sister. They also contain glimpses into her diverse reading lists: Rainer Maria Rilke, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judy Chicago's autobiography ('I dare you to endure it').¹⁰ Otherwise, they document everyday concerns over money and minor illnesses ('another abscessing tooth and sinus madness'),¹¹ campaigns for sisterly affirmation and art-world disaffection ('I hate the art people but I begin to think that I have to deal with them').¹²

The three essays in the catalogue, by Jenny Nachtigall, Laura Mclean-Ferris and Jenni Sorkin respectively, are illuminating; they are highly informative and encourage generous new readings of her work.¹³ Nachtigall explores the artist's interest in the quotidian, how her work combined existential themes and dramatic, almost Baroque images with the everyday habits of eating, sleeping and making a living. Pontormo's diary, which Mayer translated, was written between 1554 to 1556, when the artist was in the final phases of his work on the Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence. Like Mayer, he did not write much about painting and focused mainly on subjects that tend to be of little interest to others: his digestion, anxiety over schedules, gripes with a neighbour.

Nachtigall discusses Mayer's interest in the diary as 'a way of bringing Pontormo's floating, floral bodies back to ground, back to the pleasures and pains of Mayer's own life, and away from art's institutional existences' (p.35). This insight encourages us to look at her letters with Bernadette not as clues to an artist's intentions or processes but constituent nevertheless to her particular aesthetic.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2022, showing on the left, *Snow Figures*. 1980. Pencil and charcoal on paper, 101 by 136.5 cm. (Courtesy Estate of Rosemary Mayer; photograph Dan Weill).

'I want to lead you in gracefully' is scrawled across the bottom of a drawing of the same name. It is a good description of Mayer's drawings in general. They are enchanting, neatly shaded in pastel parallel lines as in *Lucretia in Ferrara 1509*, her lines effortlessly capturing light and air, making flowing shapes like sails filled momentarily with wind. The large-scale pencil and charcoal drawings are another highlight. *Snow Figures* **FIG.7** is barely there in light blues and wispy lines. It shows three women, smudged with horizontal scribbles for eyes and skirts frothy as clouds. All haughty bustles and petticoats, they recall the sad magic of Rilke or Proust, which her letters tell us Mayer read the year before. They are ghosts, ethereal and out of time.

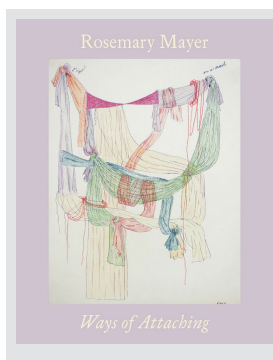
Exhibition details

Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching

Spike Island, Bristol

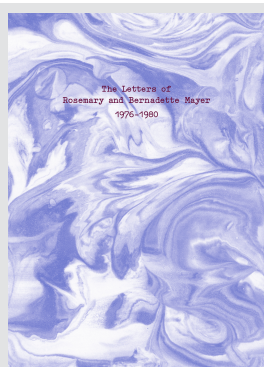
8th October 2022–15th January 2023

About these books



Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching

Edited by Eva Birkenstock, Laura McLean-Ferris Robert Leckie and Stephanie Weber
 Lenbachhaus, Munich, Ludwig Forum,
 Aachen, Spike Island, Bristol, Swiss
 Institute, New York, König, London, 2022
 ISBN 978-3-7533-0163-1



The Letters of Rosemary & Bernadette Mayer, 1976-1980

Edited by Gillian Sneed and Marie Warsh
 Lenbachhaus, Munich, Ludwig Forum,
 Aachen, Spike Island, Bristol and Swiss
 Institute, New York, 2022
 ISBN 978-0-9995059-6-0

Footnotes

- 1** A version of the exhibition opened at the Swiss Institute, New York (9th September 2021-9th January 2022).
- 2** See R. Mayer: *Pontormo's Diary*, New York 1979.
- 3** See, for example, R. Felski: *Hooked Art and Attachment*, Chicago 2020.
- 4** Her exhibitions at A.I.R. in 1973 and at Monique Knowlton Gallery in 1976 were widely reviewed at the time and she was included in several survey books and articles on women artists. See 'Selected bibliography', rosemarymayer.com, available at www.rosemarymayer.com/about-rosemary/cv-, accessed 19th November 2022.
- 5** See, for example, R. Mayer: *Excerpts from the 1971 Journal of Rosemary Mayer*, ed. M. Warsh, Chicago 2020, p.88. For a review of some earlier books and exhibitions, see A. Tobin: 'The thousand episodes the mind enjoys: Bernadette and Rosemary Mayer', *Burlington Contemporary* (20th May 2020), available at contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/the-thousand-episodes-the-mind-enjoys-bernadette-and-rosemary-mayer, accessed 19th November 2022.
- 6** Dosso Dossi's portrait of Lucrezia Borgia (1516; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) was identified in 2008.
- 7** Rosemary Mayer quoted from G. Sneed and M. Warsh, eds: *The Letters of Rosemary & Bernadette Mayer, 1976-1980*, Munich, Aachen, Bristol and New York 2022, p.275.

- 8** Unpublished artist's statement from 1983, quoted in M. Connor: 'The pleasure of necessity: the work of Rosemary Mayer', *Woman's Art Journal* 6, no.2 (1985), pp.35–40, at p.30, doi.org/10.2307/1357997.
- 9** See Tobin, *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 10** Rosemary Mayer quoted from *op. cit.* (note 7), p.280.
- 11** *Ibid.*, p.275.
- 12** *Ibid.*, p.268.
- 13** Catalogue: *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching*. Edited by Eva Birkenstock, Laura McLean-Ferris, Robert Leckie and Stephanie Weber. 290 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Lenbachhaus, Munich, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Spike Island, Bristol, Swiss Institute, New York, and König, London, 2022), £25. ISBN 978–3–7533–0163–1.

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