A photograph of a mother and son sitting in a lake at sunset. The mother is on the left, and the son is on the right. They are both seen from behind, with their reflections clearly visible in the calm water. The background consists of a dense forest of evergreen trees under a soft, orange and yellow sky.

KASPER DALKARL

MOTHER *and* SON

MASTER'S THESIS
Kasper Dalkarl
Master of Culture and Arts
Entrepreneurship in the Arts, Photography
Novia University of Applied Sciences
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To my mother

MASTER'S THESIS

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ABSTRACT

"Mother and Son" portrays the relationship between the photographer Kasper Dalkarl and his mother.

It's a collaboration between the two, consisting of staged and semi-staged photographs pictured in places personally meaningful to the photographer, or to them both.

In 2015 my father died, an event that in many ways changed the dynamic in the relationship with my mother. The shared experience of losing a close family member brought us closer together, and, over time, an equal and mutually supporting bond was formed in contrast to the traditional relationship between the parent and the child. Herein lies what the series aims to explore – the portrayal of the relationship between mother and son.

With the aid of photography, this Master's Thesis aims to not only explore and show a relationship between a mother and a son, but also to relate it to how mothers and their adult children have been portrayed throughout art history as well as by other contemporary artists.

With this project I wanted to focus on what I have, rather than on what I have lost. In short, this body of work was made by me, for me and for my mother, in what became a personal series of images.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	2
Motherhood in European Art History	4
The story of Lemminkäinen's Mother and the Painting	9
Mothers and their Adult Sons in Art	12
Aging Women in Art and Media	17
The Relationship Between Mother and Son	19
Photographing Aging Parents	20
Self-Portraits	26
Environmental Portraits	28
Photographing My Mother and Me	29
The Technicalities	29
The Absent Father and Sorrow	31
Shared Experiences	32
Staged Portraits and the Recreation of Lemminkäinen's Mother	33
The Collaboration	34
Photographing in the Element of Water	35
Feedback & Developments of the Project	36
The Portrayal of an Aging Mother and an Adult Son	38
The Artist and the Commercial Photographer	41
Future Development	43
Finishing Words	44
References	45
Mother and Son	52

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015 I lost my father, an event that took me and my mother completely by surprise. I later came to realise that this traumatic event, and the weeks that followed his passing, in many ways changed the relationship between me and my mother.

Rather than the expected stereotype of the son stepping into his father's shoes, I would rather say that my mother and I formed an equal bond. The event brought us closer as adults and, over time, also as friends. While she always would be my loving and supporting mother, and I her child, she was no longer my caretaker. We supported each other throughout the event of my father's death, and this bond is something that has developed further as the years have passed.

This subtle shift in the dynamics of our relationship took me many years to notice, and during this MA-project, I have taken the time to explore and illustrate our relationship with the help of pictures. Since I mostly work with people in front of my lens in my day-to-day work, this experience of using myself and my mother as the main subjects of the series has challenged me in new ways.

Fairy tales, documentary work, and storytelling have been the themes of previous projects and exhibitions. In these carefully staged pictures in the stylistic borderlands between art photography and commercial photography, the models, in front of the camera, become or represent characters, take on a role dressed in costumes and covered in make-up. In my research for this project, however, I have mainly chosen to look for artwork and pictures depicting mothers, motherhood, and their sons.

With this MA-project, I wanted to do something more personal than previous works, and it finally became the obvious choice to place me and my mother in front of my camera. I would define some of the pictures as staged pictures, well planned and thought out already before the moment of capturing the image. Others, on the other hand, are semi-staged, in the sense that the stage was set, but I left certain elements to chance, allowing the spontaneous to happen in the moment.

The natural process of aging is something we should see more in pictures. At the time these pictures were taken,

I was 31 years old and my mother 57. I have chosen not to beautify us with make-up or exceedingly glamorous setups, but have rather attempted to show our faces as we are at the moment.

I wish to add a note on delimitation in the studies related to this project and to point out that the research on historical art focuses primarily on Western and European art history. The adult mother and son relationship is narrowed down here to correlate with my Finnish point of view, rather than extensively research how the adult mother and son relationship looks and varies in different cultures.

I am hoping that the portraits featured in this body of work will, in some part, help to normalize the way we, as a society, view and expect women in the "in-between state" of young and old to be presented and seen in pictures. This age group should not be invisible or feel the need to appear as anything else than how they are naturally. I wanted to show a woman, and a mother, in her 50's without focusing on trying to make her look younger in post-production – indeed, to portray her as I see her.

In short, this body of work was made by me, for me and my mother in what became a very personal series of images.

MOTHERHOOD IN EUROPEAN ART HISTORY

Many images of women in the art world are connected to motherhood, and in the Western World, the influence of the Madonna is embedded in the history of art (Belán, 2018). She is, and has been, a symbol of unconditional love and motherhood and much more. The portrayal of a mother and a son together has been done in many ways in the history of art (Mott, 1993), such as a mother holding an infant in her embrace, showing the mother as a caretaker, the grieving mother, the mother being left by their adult sons, or the mother as an advisor to her son, trying to protect him from danger.

How women have been represented and portrayed in European art history, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, is directly connected what the status women had in society during the time the artworks were made (Santa Cruz, 2020). Women have had specific social roles, where the most significant ones, historically, typically were to be a mother and a wife (Saylor Academy, 2012). Between the 15th and 17th centuries, art featuring women mainly focused on



Mother of the Artist, 1904, Magnus Enckell



Christ in the House of His Parents ('The Carpenter's Shop'), 1849–50, Sir John Everett Millais

The Piano Lesson, ca 1785, Marguerite Gérard



the women's fertility, rather than motherhood itself, and family also portraits had an upswing during the Enlightenment (Sullivan 2002). A point to be noted is that paintings featuring mothers together with young children were much more common (Sullivan, 2002) than works of art with mothers and adult children.

On the subject of paintings featuring mothers with their children, such as "The Piano Lesson" by Marguerite Gerard (1780) and "The Caress" by Mary Casatt (1891), the viewer can observe that while the two artworks, painted a century apart, reflect the art style and fashion of their times, the subjects are similar. The paintings feature a mother and motherhood in a glorified form, i.e., being the loving caretaker of their children. An interesting example of artwork that deviates from the glorified and beautiful mother is "The Survivors" by Kathe Kollwitz (1923). This is a darker work with stern motherly figures protecting their children, which most likely is a reaction to the times the artist lived in.

Moving away from the larger European scene and instead focusing on Finland, and specifically the art movement national romanticism, we can again see both mothers and women of different age groups being represented and portrayed in various styles. Many painters in Finland also painted portraits of their mothers (Finnish



The Fratricide, 1897, Akseli Gallen-Kallela

National Gallery, 2022). Some examples of these are the following: Ellen Thesleff (Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 1896), Erkki Kulovesi (Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 1925), Magnus Enckell (Mother of the Artist, 1904), Albert Edelfelt (Portrait of the Artist's Mother Alexandra Edelfelt, 1883), to name a few.

In Finnish art history, as seen above, many examples of motherhood can be found, but finding paintings of a mother and her son presents challenges. Most of them, such as "Hearing the Homework" (Yrjö Ollila, 1923), depict mothers with their children in daily situations or as caretakers of their infants, such as "Mother and Child" (Martti Ranttila 1930-1931). Somewhat differently, Victorine Nordenswan (1868) painted the grieving Mary, together with Mary Magdalene, sitting by the grave of her son, depicting the aged mother in a realistic fashion.

Finding paintings from Finland featuring mothers and their adult sons seem to be difficult. Two examples would be of the famous artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela's art works "Lemminkäinen's Mother", or "The Fratricide", which both have a darker story and tone.



Women Mourning at Christ's Grave, 1868, Victorine Nordenswan

THE STORY OF LEMMINKÄINEN'S MOTHER

The Finnish painting "Lemminkäinen's Mother" made in 1897 depicts an interpretation of a famous story about Lemminkäinen and his mother, inspired by the epic Kalevala (Talvitie, 2020). To contextualize Finland's art history and the period the painting "Lemminkäinen's Mother" was made, Henriksson (2016) writes about the art movement known as national romanticism, which took place after the 1870s and the beginning of the 1900s.

After the Grand Duchy of Finland was lost by Sweden to Russia in 1809 and became a Grand Duchy under Russian rule, the Finnish artists wanted to define what Finland was – something that was neither Swedish nor Russian. Rather, they wanted to find, create, and identify a unique culture. The artists and folklore experts in Finland at that time played a key role in creating this identity, where idealisation of both Finnish men and women was in focus (Henriksson, 2016) usually in romantic, realistic, and dramatic paintings.

Folklorist Elias Lönnrot's Kalevala (released 1835) played a significant and important role in this work, where scholars in 19th century Finland tried to explain the difference between Finland and other cultures (Kailo, 1991). Many artists were inspired by the collection of folkloristic tales, especially the Kalevala, in which Lemminkäinen's Mother is a good example. Here follows a summary of the story and the painting.

Lemminkäinen, a handsome and adventuring warrior who is a key character in the Kalevala, wanted to marry one of Louhi's daughter, the ruler of the land of Pohjola. Presented with many tasks to prove his worth, he was finally - with ill-intent - tasked to kill the Swan of the Tuonela river, bordering the lands of the dead, a task that ultimately leads to his death and his body tossed into the river (Finnish National Gallery, 2018).

Having a magical comb that would bleed in case her son would face mortal danger, his mother (unnamed in the Kalevala) learns of the grim fate

of her son. Lemminkäinen's mother rushes to the river of Tuonela, and through much toil gathers the pieces of his body and puts them together. Even though she strives to revive him, he remains lifeless.

In the painting by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, we can see the symbols of her attempts to bring him back from the dead, with potions and herbs she has used lying around Lemminkäinen's body. As a last resort, she asks a bee to travel to the heavens to fetch nectar from the gardens of the gods that could heal her son. The bee returns, the mother's gaze raised up towards the sky. The bee framed in a beam of light bringing hope to the land of darkness. With the help of the holy nectar, Lemminkäinen is miraculously brought back to life.

To help with his painting, Akseli Gallen-Kallela constructed a black room in his studio, where light only entered from a hole in the roof above his models: his mother to model for the mother, and himself to model Lemminkäinen. The painting was an image and symbol of maternal love (Finnish National Gallery, 2018), which was supposed to be a tale of the greatest love of all. (Kaukonen, 2017).



Lemminkäinen's Mother, 1897, Akseli Gallen-Kallela

MOTHERS AND THEIR ADULT SONS IN ART

When looking for art featuring mothers together with their adult sons in European art, we easily find a theme quite like the struggles of Lemminkäinen's mother, presenting the sorrow and struggles of the grieving mother. The "Pietà" (meaning pity or compassion) or "The Lamentation of Christ", is a theme much explored by artists that was developed during the high Middle Ages (Niguliste Museum, 2020). Michelangelo's sculpture, the Pietà, one of his most famous works (Müntz, 2010), is a prime example, and is probably the most well-known work with this theme. Symbolically it is the inverse of Mary holding her new-born son, where we instead see her in a picture of sorrow, pain, and grief holding her dead son.

Other examples of Mary and her adult son would be the Byzantine mosaics of the mother Mary sitting by the side of her adult son, enthroned in the fashion of imperial



Pietà, 1498–99, Michelangelo

The Death of Balder, 1817, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg



Apse calotte mosaic (detail), 1140-43, Mosaic, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome

rulers (Belán, 2018), and similar works that emerged during the twelfth century when Mary became more prolific in the Christian doctrine.

Looking at other mythological mothers, we have multiple examples featuring mothers and their sons. One of those is the story of Achilles and his divine mother, Thetis. She dips her son in the river Styx to make him invulnerable to prevent the foretold fate of his death, even though his death in the Trojan War cannot be prevented (Burgess, 2009).

Achilles and Thetis is one example of a myth featuring a mother with her adult son. In other art featuring the adult Achilles together with his mother, she gifts him with a divine shield. Thetis prophesies Achille's death, and so, intervening with her foresight and maternal love to protect her son persuades him not to take part in battle (Slatkin, 1991). Nevertheless, he decides to re-join the battle, and, in the Iliad, she is aware of his impending death in the coming battle. On his behalf, Thetis procures magical armour and a shield for him in an attempt to keep him safe. Even though he is divinely armed, his death cannot be prevented, but his mother attempts to do so even if she knows it is futile.



Thetis Delivering New Armor to Achilles, ca 575-550 BCE

Of mortal mothers, rather than the goddess mothers, we have examples such as Antikleia, the mother of the hero Odysseus. After spending many years on his adventures, he consults the seer Teiresias in the Underworld, where he also – to his surprise - finds the soul of his dead mother (Cohen, 1995). He learns that she died because of her longing for her son, who had been away for many years, and missing his counsel and sweet nature, she, in the end, passed away (Van Nortwick, 2008). Compared with other more famous mothers, we can't find many artworks of her, but in the painting "Teiresias Foretells the Future to Odysseus" by Henry Fuseli (ca 1800), we can see the spirit of his mother in the background.



Achilles Receiving New Armor From Thetis, ca. 1838-1856, Carl Adolf Henning

Teiresias Foretells the Future to Odysseus, ca. 1800, Henry Fuseli



In Norse mythology, we find a similar tale of Frigg, the foremost among goddesses (Lindow, 2002), trying to protect her son Baldr from his foretold death. Frigg is described and portrayed as a mother (Davidson, 1998). Having mainly relied on oral traditions in the Northern countries and a lack of reference materials, we have very little art portraying Frigg and her son Baldr except in popular culture (Pentz, 2018). In Snorri Sturluson's Edda, Baldr dreams about being killed, and his mother Frigg makes everyone and everything in the world swear that they will not harm her son, except for the mistletoe she deems harmless. Through trickery and malice, the trickster god Loki manipulates events in a way that ultimately leads to Baldr's death (Lindow, 2002) and is a prelude to Ragnarok – the end of the world (Davidson 1993). There have also been studies comparing the legend of Baldr and Lemminkäinen, suggesting that the story of Lemminkäinen was influenced by the story of Baldr and his mother (Frog, 2010).

AGING WOMEN IN ART AND MEDIA

Here follows a brief examination of the subject of ageing women in art and media. In a study done in Sweden, women in the age group of 50 and above are underrepresented in media and advertisement pictures (Mediekompaniet, 2020), with only 33 % in that age group represented. A similar study conducted in Finland shows women in the age group of 50-67 represent only 31 % in Finnish media (GMMP, 2020). These results point to a paradox of movements in today's society. While the empowerment of women and aging is reinforced, this concept seems to be in conflict with the anti-aging industry. Women through media, advertisements, and cinema are led to defy natural biological decline and are pushed to consume products that will hinder signs of aging, where youth is a lost object (Gravagne, 2007).

Whereas aging women are underrepresented, elderly women are represented in all forms of art, with generic and recognizable signs of old age (Hofrichter & Yoshimoto, 2021). At the other end of the spectrum, we have the young, beautiful, and idealized female, while women showing physical signs of aging are mostly invisible in the literature of art history. Kampmann (2015)

categorizes art depicting age in the following categories: the state of being old, the process of becoming older, and the social group of older persons. Further, Kampmann (2015) notes that the theme of old age has only received sporadic attention in art history, concluding that it is a field of study still under development, with some studies focusing on the 16th and 17th century.

As an example of the place of women in historic art, Pettersson (2021) writes about the perception of women and aging in Ancient Egypt, showing that signs of aging in art was not always obvious when it came to depicting women. Another aspect of this perception would be to understand the art and why it was made, and why people were shown to begin with. One example that Pettersson (2021) raises is that of women, otherwise young-looking, with white or gray strands of hair – or the obvious elderly women with obvious signs of aging.

In the world of theatre and musicals, Kinney (2016) notes that the stage is usually made by and for younger artists, and while aging women are not absent, they are a rarity. Continuing, Kinney (2016) concludes that plays could

help shed light on the theme of aging, which in turn could help change people's thinking about aging.

In modern society, there is considerable discussion regarding age and representation. Jermyn (2021) writes that the celebrity world, in an attempt to find authenticity, has led to celebrities sharing pictures of themselves without make-up in an attempt to show their "real selves". The 2017

Pirelli calendar, where actresses were invited to be portrayed naturally, is used as an example. Jermyn (2021) notes that ageing women in media are likely to be highlighted for using too little or too much make-up. Furthermore, he argues that while the 2017 Pirelli calendar tried to popularize and normalize aging, it might have been counterproductive by rarefying the women in their natural state in the pictures.



Helen Mirren in the 2017 Pirelli Calendar, 2016, Peter Lindberg

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MOTHER AND SON

From the examples from art history presented previously in the thesis featuring mothers and their sons, we can conclude that the relationship between the two has been important to document. The frequency in which this theme has been introduced in art also makes it an extensive field of study.

In all relationships people have during their lives, the mother is usually the closest during infancy, but also remains among the five closest relationships during the course of her child's life (Antonucci, Akiyama & Takahashi, 2010).

Akeinar & Shaw (2017) discuss attachment theory which emphasize the importance of parental contingent responsivity during the child's infancy, which establishes trust and security. While the theory focuses on a secure and positive base for the child's infant period, the authors note that parenting becomes more complicated as the child grows older. The study emphasizes the sensitivity of the mother-son relationship, especially if the relationship lacks early positive coercive interactions, to give the child a base for positive social-behavioural development in later childhood (Akeinar & Shaw, 2017). A warm and sensitive parenting teaches the children how to regulate emotions and behaviour, and also teaches the necessary social skills needed to interact with others.

Schwartzman (2004) writes that mothers can be more assertive with their sons, which can lead to the son experiencing higher levels of autonomy. On the other hand, this can also lead to a distance between the two. Limited research has been done regarding the perspective of the relationship between men and their mothers (Bershtling & Strier, 2022). Masculinity as a social context is often identified through separation from the mother and denial of femininity (Bershtling & Strier, 2022). The authors (Bershtling & Strier 2022) point to a shift in recent years in norms associated with the traditional masculinity, defined by traits such as toughness, invulnerability, or independence – and that they in recent years have found to a "softer" form of masculinity emerging, where the mother and son relationship is close, and the mother is a role model for her son.

According to Fingerman, Huo & Birditt (2020), women are more involved than men in the family ties, but notes that this might be changing as gender roles are shifting. In their studies, they found that mothers had more frequent contact and support exchanges with their adult children. The authors conclude that mothers are more involved in the lives of their children, and that daughters are more involved than sons.

PHOTOGRAPHING AGING PARENTS

Hirsch (1999), comments that photography has become the main medium for creating family portraits and notes that early photographers sustained formal aesthetics from painted family portraits. This started to change when cameras became more accessible and cheaper. Hirsch writes about how the medium of photography is used to document family memory and the family's story.

Photographing parents has become an art genre (Gray, 2017). Having worked mainly with a style of staged pictures, Colin Gray (b. 1956) first started with a documentary style of pictures and then quickly changed to a more staged style. He wanted to make his pictures more personal – restaging scenes from childhood with his parents. Finding the fun in his work, the photographer explains how he and his parents started to invent new scenes together rather than restaging memories as they had done previously. Aging, the photographer explains in an interview, was an important part of the project, something he wanted to document.

Pictures from Home by Larry Sultan (1946) is a blend of documentary and staged photography, where



Mom in Doorway, 1992, Larry Sultan



Hull Under Water, 1991, Colin Gray

the photographer takes the ordinary and makes something beautiful of it. Sultan started with a portrait of his father that then developed into a larger project (Muraben, 2017). The photographer wanted to portray the everyday with the interiors giving a glimpse to the era of the American Dream (Beck, n.d.).

The American photographer and artist Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971) has worked with her mother Sandra Bush, a former model, in many of her projects that celebrate black beauty. Describing her process as collaborative, she works to find poses in the pictures that are comfortable. Here we see the artist working with colours, framing and poses to emphasise the beauty of her mother.

Finnish photographer Sonya Mantere (b. 1987) also worked with her mother in her project "(She wanted to be named) Rebecca". She describes her project as a re-construction of her mother in a society where mothers have a very limited field of gender expression. In an intimate collaboration, she works together with her mother where her mother dresses in different outfits and applies make-up to create different versions or "alter egos" of her mother. Using costume play in a play between the masculine and feminine, Mantere explains how the



(She wanted to be named) Rebecca, 2022, Sonya Mantere



Madame Mama Bush, 2006, Mickalene Thomas

pictures are characters that her mother is not in her daily life.

Photographing family members and parents in various ways is of course something we see a lot in the field of photography. One such example could be Phillip Toledano (b. 1968), who worked with his father in the aftermath of the death of his mother. The artist explains how he, after his mother's death, became aware of his father's lack of short-term memory, not being able to remember the death of his wife. He calls the project, a series of documentary portraits combined with short journal-like texts, a record of his relationship with his father, a journal of the days they have left together.

Sanna Sjöswärd (b. 1973) is a Swedish photographer, who after being adopted contacted her biological mother in Iran in 1999. With many of her series and books she has explored her identity, and in her series "Roots", wherein she seeks to discover more about her background.

Melanie Manchot (b. 1966) is a photographer who, with her series "Look At You Loving Me (2000), worked with her mother over a period of four years, making around 40 works during



Days With My Father, 2018, Phillip Toledano

that time. This series of work is also a display of a relationship, not only as mother and daughter but also as photographer and model. In an interview, Manchot describes the start of her project, asking her mother to pose naked, with the initial idea of making images with a woman in the process of getting older. The photographer notes that her mother, as many others in her mother's age, was quite invisible and that she hoped her series would represent these aging women.



Roots, 2006, Sanna Sjöswärd



Double Portrait, Mum and I, 1977, Melanie Manchot

SELF-PORTRAITS

Photographic art has a history as fine art (Juamev, 2021) where a portrait photography depicts an image of a person. Self-portraits are a genre in and of itself, not only in the world of photography, but has been present in art history with early examples such as Dürer's self-portraits in 1500 (Carbon, 2017). Self-portraiture had an upswing in the 19th and 20th centuries, with artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Pablo Picasso creating famous self-portraits (Gorichanaz, 2019). Gorichanaz writes that self-portraits could even be said to be a defining artistic genre of our age, something most artists produce. From there, it comes down to the purpose and meaning of the self-portrait. The myth of Narcissus, who loves his own mirror image, can be seen as something linked to the self-portrait culture, but ultimately it comes down to the artist's experience and intention (Gorichanaz, 2019). Carbon (2017) comments that self-portraits and selfies do not have much in common and, as such, points to the purpose of self-depiction. While the two have some resemblance to each other, selfies are usually intuitive, and self-portraits are usually something private and vulnerable that are generally produced in a longer lapse of time where the artist is both subject and spectator (Carbon, 2017). Gorichanaz, 2019, concludes that selfies

relate to positivism, whereas self-portraits relate to truth and the use of vulnerability.

Elina Brotherus (b. 1972) is among the most well-known Finnish photographers who work with self-portraits. The image of herself is a signature feature of her work, and, moreover, 20 years of photographing herself has now become an evolution of this familiar figure present in her work (Toth, no date). In the beginning of her photography, while still studying, she made autobiographical self-portraits (Brotherus, 2017), and that her work alternates between autobiography and an art-historical approach. Using herself as a model, she focused early on the relationship between landscape with an added human element (Brotherus, 2022). Talking about how her photography has evolved over the years, she discusses how she started using her own personal experiences as a starting point for her work, then later became interested in iconography and paintings. It was from this interest that she drew inspiration, calling herself an image-maker rather than an autobiographer, then later returning to autobiography when she approached her forties. She uses playfulness, freedom and unconventional ways of representing what being a woman is in her work (Brotherus, 2022).

Baigneuse de Saturnia 1, 2003, Elina Brotherus



ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAITS

The term "environmental portrait" is being used increasingly for portraits taken outside the studio. These portraits take place in an environment where the subject is captured with similar sets of skills as in a studio, be it posing or lighting (MasterClass, 2021). The portrait is usually taken in the subject's natural environment rather than in an artificial setup that is disconnected from the person.

With the help of background or surroundings, the story of the subject is told. Norton (2012) discusses how environmental portraits are used to lend credibility to images. He describes the style as portraits illuminated with an external light source directed onto the subject, overpowering yet balancing together with the ambient light. The photograph contains the subject(s) in a scene that tells a story, giving the picture a sense of place and character (Norton, 2012).



Christer Finne, 2017, Kasper Dalkar!

PHOTOGRAPHING MY MOTHER AND ME

My MA project consists of a series of portraits featuring my mother and I. Some of them are self-portraits, some of them are portraits of my mother, and some portraits of us together.

The pictures feature us in environments that communicates something about us or create a story surrounding us – the locations having a personal connection to me or my family. Some pictures were planned as picture pairs with similar compositions in different environments to illustrate a visual connection between the mother and the son.

As described previously, the style of the pictures is a combination of self-portraits and semi-staged environmental portraits, where we interact with each other and the environments in which we are featured.

The project started with my exploring ways to develop myself as a photographer. I wanted to find a way to

express myself, to work with something personal instead of doing commissioned pictures for clients.

Using the technical skills regarding light, composition and editing, I had gained as a commercial photographer, I was able to bridge my artistic and commercial side, thus combining them to to create something new and personal.

THE TECHNICALITIES

The pictures were taken on a digital medium format camera. Most pictures have flash light in them, usually directed indirectly through a large umbrella to soften the light, combined with natural light or artificial light in the typical fashion of environmental portraits. By using flashes in the environment, I direct the light onto the subjects' faces to add inspiration from the paintings that I enjoy, such as those by the famous painter Rembrandt.

Adding sharpness and contrast with the help of combining flash and natural light is something I have



always enjoyed. It allows me to get a very finished feel to the pictures directly on camera, rather than having to focus so much on postproduction.

Many of the pictures have a bit of smoke from a battery-driven smoke machine added to them. Usually, I do not want the smoke to be too strong, but, nevertheless, I use it to add atmosphere or enhance a sense of mystery.

Many of the pictures have me present in the shot. In those, I have set the focus before manually and then, with interval shooting, set the camera to take a picture every few seconds without a time limit. This gives me and my mother time to try different variations of our poses. It also gives me time to chat with her in order to guide her into the feeling I am looking for in the picture, but also allowing the spontaneous to take place in the moment.

THE ABSENT FATHER AND SORROW

In the early development of the project, I was angling the project towards doing a new project about my father and his absence in our family after his death. I had previously worked with the theme back in 2015 and 2016, just after his unexpected passing, but rather than doing self-portraits I took pictures of others.

I named the series "Sorrow", which consists of portraits where the models were dressed in casual business clothes, symbolising their daily lives and repeating routines that most people have in our society. The models were all surrounded by running or splashing water, which was my way of showing how the society always keep flowing, and how loss can make one feel overwhelmed and symbolically drown.

I was 24 when he passed, and as a young adult faced with the loss of a parent, I felt lonely in many ways, partly by how uncomfortable it made people around me. Death, I observed, was something that young people did not talk much about and did not know how to handle, which, in turn, led them to prefer avoiding the subject entirely. Now with a few years separating me from the

overwhelming loss, I felt more interested in looking at the theme again from another angle. One idea I had was to recreate old pictures from our family album, with pictures featuring me and my father. I decided early on that I wanted instead to focus on what I have, rather than on what I have lost, and therefore started planning a new project featuring me and my mother.



Sorrow, 2015, Kasper Dalkar

SHARED EXPERIENCES

When my father died, something I cannot explain occurred. On the day of his death I felt an unease the entire day, and both I and my mother felt that something was wrong. My father was in our summer house on the West Coast, whilst my mother was working in Southern Finland, and I was in my student flat in Jakobstad. But still, somehow, the whole day we could feel that something was wrong. Finally, my mother asked my aunts to check on him, and when my mother later called me, I knew he was dead before I answered the phone.

I cannot explain this connection, other than that it was something I felt, and still feel today– a feeling that my mother and I share a connection that is present even if we are separated by distance. This shared connection is something that I have tried to illustrate in this project, with portraits of me and my mother in similar compositions and elements in different locations. These portraits are in a way connected to the landscape around us, to the world, but also to each other.

STAGED PORTRAITS AND THE RECREATION OF LEMMINKÄINEN'S MOTHER

At first, I wanted to try to make well-planned and staged portraits of us, in a similar way that I have usually done for my commercial work. The first picture I took for the project was inspired by an Akseli Gallen-Kallela's painting "Lemminkäinen's Mother", presented early on in this MA. It was from this important piece of Finnish art history that I had decided to draw inspiration from.

After doing research and discovering how the artist made use of his own mother as a model for the mother in the painting, I decided wanted to pay homage to that. It inspired me to create my own version of his work, of my own mother and me in a picture.

I knew where I wanted to take the picture – close to a small river near the home that we had for many years in Bemböle, in southern Finland, where I had taken the first picture for the series "Sorrow", in 2015. I had always felt a strange sense of connection and calm to that place.

I set up my camera and lights as planned, matched the light to that of the painting as best I could in that situation, set the camera to take one picture every 5th

second, and with the help of my wife, who was assisting me with placing us properly in the frame and who was also running around with the smoke machine on my behalf.

Being in front of the camera was a new experience in that setting, especially with me and my mother together. Running back and forth between the scene and the camera, I managed to get the shots that I wanted, but it was also a challenge to be both the photographer and the subject.

As noted previously, the painting of Lemminkäinen's Mother is full of symbols connected to the story. I instead wanted to strip it down and focus on the maternal love for her son.



THE COLLABORATION

Having completed my first picture, I wanted to continue with the same setup. I carefully planned a picture in the sauna in our summer house, without the inspiration of a painting, where my mother and I would sit together as we have done my whole life – especially when I was a child. I also planned a picture in front of the sauna and did the same thing as before. I set up my light, camera on tripod, and set it to take one picture every fifth second.

Now, not having a painting as a reference, made me realise we were trying to pose too much without a reference. I did not see "the real us" in the pictures that I first took. So, I just let the

camera keep taking pictures, while talking to my mother, spending moments of silence together, trying to make us forget about the camera as much as possible by talking.

This sauna session made me realise that staging things too carefully was not the way to proceed if I wanted to capture what I felt was the relationship between us and how we are together. It had to be spontaneous, not strictly documentary, but maybe something between the staged and documentary picture, just setting the stage and leaving it to chance to see what happens in the picture. Thus, a set of semi-staged portraits.



PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE ELEMENT OF WATER

In my pictures, I find myself often drawn to the element of water. In this project, it was a conscious choice for many reasons. Water is such a vital element for life, a symbol of birth, a symbol of life, something that connects us all over the world. In one picture I am in the cold waters of Iceland, while my mother is in the waters close to our small summer house in Vörå, Finland, continuing to visually show connection over distance with the aid of the elements.

Looking at water in the art world, it has always been present in art history due to its importance to human life (Clarke, 2010), while also drawing parallels to birth and new beginnings. What is also interesting is how Clarke (2010) makes the connection between water as a subject and also a material for making art, be it watercolours or even the influence it has on sculpting in computer generated art. In the case of Lemminkäinen's Mother (1897), we look at the black water of the River Tuonela with the symbols of death and the theme of resurrection (Pihlainen, 2000).



FEEDBACK & DEVELOPMENTS OF THE PROJECT

Portfolio reviews in February with Elina Heikka, Museum Director at the Finnish Museum of Photography, and Laura White, Exhibition Director at VB Photography Centre, and Terhi Tuomi, Curator at Amos Rex in Finland presented new viewpoints on my project. They all gave encouraging words, stating that the theme of mother and son is something interesting. We all have a parent, which is a theme many are interested in exploring. The consensus seemed to be that while the theme of "father and son" is something that has often been presented before, the focus on the mother and son has not, at least not as I saw it where the mother and the son stand on equal ground. I was advised to focus on the core of my idea and my project and put my commercial work to the side.

Apart from this, I also had valuable discussions and reviews about my project during Photo London (2021), Paris Photo (2021), the workshop and exhibition at Flak in Patreksfjörður, Iceland (2022), and Les Recontres d'Arles (2022).

Of interesting note was how the portfolio reviewers based in Finland reacted on the idea of using Lemminkäinen's Mother as inspiration, feeling quite reserved about it, in the sense that they thought "it had been done". They encouraged me not to go for a documentary style but to use the technical skills I have in creating my project. On the other hand, showing the Kalevala-inspired image to reviewers abroad received a very different and positive reaction.

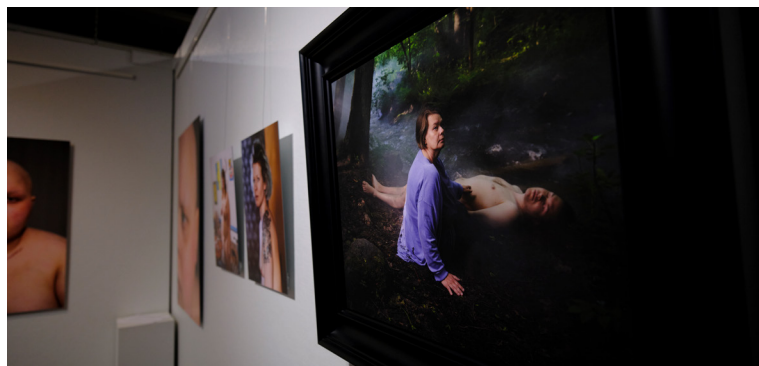
In the category of creating self-portraits, I did experiments during our workshop in Patreksfjörður in Iceland, where I produced a few pictures that I decided could work for the idea I had about connection over distance. It was a breakthrough for me, and I finally started to create pictures for my project and even exhibited one of the pictures that is used in the final project.

In Arles, the portfolio reviews I received by R 2.0, led by Artistic Director Ying Ang, gave an interesting point of view, mainly in the discussion about typical ways of

showing the masculine and the feminine. We discussed about how my long hair could be used in my pictures to challenge the traditional norm on how we see masculinity in pictures.

Of extra importance for the project was a series of mentor-talks with photographer Julia Fullerton-Batten. Together, we discussed the pictures from various angles, looked at symbolism and meanings in them, and Julia, with her critical eye, encouraged me and gave me ideas that led to many improvements in the project.

The first iteration of an exhibition version of the Kalevala-picture was made for an exhibition held at the Ostrobothnian Photography Centre, POVA in Lapua. Creating the first version of the printed image gave me ideas on how to develop the final image before the concluding exhibition.



THE PORTRAYAL OF AN AGING MOTHER AND AN ADULT SON

While doing my research in art history, literature, media, and the public debate, I observed one surprising thing: that the relationship between the aging mother and the adult son seems to be conspicuous by its absence. This correlates with discussions I have had with curators and portfolio reviewers during the MA process, and most of the people I have met could not think of an art project specifically showing that type of mother and son relationship. In its very mundane and common nature, it still seems that it is more common to discuss mother-daughter or father-son relationships. Moreover, material featuring the mother-son relationship is more often focused on the child's relation to the mother rather than the adult relationship.

My goal with the project was to explore and develop myself as a photographer working with a personal theme and to create portraits of a mother and her adult son who are close to each



Portrait of the Artist's Mother Alexandra Edelfelt, 1883, Albert Edelfelt

other. I obviously had an agenda and thoughts about what my pictures mean and symbolise, but they have been created with experiments and interventions, with one set of photos reacting to previous ones, creating new thoughts and ideas during the process. What will be interesting is to see how other people will interpret them and relate to the theme of mother and son.

I did not want to portray my mother in an idealized mother-role, or a caretaker in the fashion of the Madonna, or a woman defined by her role as a mother as discussed by Santa Cruz (2020). On the other hand, I did not want to portray my mother in the fashion Finnish painters, such as Albert Edelfelt (1883), had documented their aging mothers in traditional portraits, with the mother posing in front of the camera in the conventional and established painterly style.

Defining my series in styles, I was aiming for something other than the traditional and established portrait. I was looking for a blend between the obviously staged picture, such as in Colin Gray's series "The Parents", where he uses his imagination and humour to capture his aging mother and father. I wanted to blend this staged style of photography with the autobiographical self-portrait, such as in the works by Elina Brotherus. I therefore chose to lend those two elements (the semi-

staged and autobiographical) with a mix of creating my own myth and story, inspired by works such as Lemminkäinen's Mother (Akseli Gallen-Kallela, 1897).

In art history, we can see that one of the most frequent mother-images is the Madonna (Belán, 2018), a symbol that has shifted in styles and ideals, changing greatly throughout history, and developing accordingly. What remains clear is that the mother as a symbol of protecting and loving her children has been important to portray in art. Having often been portrayed for her motherly love, idealized, glorified, and beautified, usually portrayed in scenes where she is embracing or caring for her small children (Nakamura, 2014), I feel there is room for more authentic and varied representation of the mother figure, especially the aging one.

Myths and legends featuring mothers and their adult sons have usually spotlighted the heroic son's exploits rather than the mother. The woman is often defined by archetypes, such as her role as a mother, wife, or guide (Relke, 2007). In many, she is helping her son (Lemminkäinen's Mother, Frigg helping Baldr, Thetis and Achilles, etc), by using her divine powers or insights, while in others she is simply the grieving the folly and absence of her heroic son. Perhaps modern interpretations of the legends could be turned around to put the mothers in the spotlight?

There is a large underrepresentation of women in my mother's age group in media overall (GMMP, 2020), and, at the same time, the industry at large who tries to make women feel the need to hide signs of aging (Gravagne, 2007). Aging women, as noted by Jermyn (2021), often face scrutiny for looking too old or trying to look too young while they are aging.

While my pictures are bordering on the romantic and mythical side, I left our bodies and faces untouched by postproduction. This, I hope will contribute to the general efforts of normalizing how we see women and mothers in the process of aging. Other important topics are the relationship between the mother and the son and the traditional norm of stereotypical masculinity of the adult man. Here, I hope to show a softer side of the masculine norm, as briefly described in the studies by Breshtling & Strier (2022). Photographer Colin Gray (2022) claims that the art of photographing one's parents has become a genre in itself to the point that it has become a cliché. Research also concludes that self-portraits in art and

photography has been a genre for a long time (Carbon, 2017), something that most artists engage with during their lifetime (Gorichanaz, 2019). This project features my first serious attempts at self-portraits and the portrayal of my mother in the conscious and planned manner of staged photography rather than daily family snapshots.

How the process of aging is shown, problematized, hidden, glorified, manipulated, or made invisible is of great interest to me. In the manner Kinney (2006) discusses and encourages representation and normalization of aging women in the world of theatre, I also feel that photographers worldwide might have the power to impact on the discussion and help normalize how we view aging generally. One example of such an attempt of empowerment was made in Peter Lindbergh's pictures for Pirelli (2017), featuring make-up free celebrities, but this and similar efforts can be counterproductive if performed in a way people cannot relate to, for example, if the subjects are rarefied or glorified in their natural state (Jermyn, 2021).

THE ARTIST AND THE COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER

From my own point of view, it was hard to find the bridge from commercial photography to the art world. I have noticed in discussions with various photographers that many, including myself, separate the two worlds – or view them as something separate. Commercial on the one hand, the artistic on the other. From a self-reflective point of view, it was difficult to be my own critic, my own commissioner. It seems to me that many photographers I have talked to who started their career in the commercial world, at some point, wish to move on to creating more personal and artistic work. Doing so can provide a mutual benefit to the photographer's career by combining personal artistry to make commercial work more unique and interesting to clients. While making personal and artistic work benefit from the technical skills of the commercial photographer. In other words, the commercial and artistic do not need to be separate, but can live in symbiosis in the photographer's arsenal.



Revenue, 1999, Elina Brotherus



Revenue, 2011, 12 ans après

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Pictures being a document of passing time is one of the most interesting characteristics of the photographic medium. To me personally, this is a project I am certain will become more valuable as time passes. I will most likely revisit scenes featured in the pictures to motivate me to do more photography featuring me and my mother over the coming years. In the future, the pictures will be a document on how appearance changes and differs whilst we age, and a development on how we interact and play around in the frame while testing and trying new photographic ideas. In addition, one might be able to witness shifts in our relationships, how society around us changes the same with our life-situations.

One interesting example would be the series "12 Ans Après (1999 / 2011-2013)" by Elina Brotherus, where the photographer has revisited places featured in her earlier work. With the pictures, Brotherus shows signs of passing time with the human element of aging evidently present in the pictures, while some of the environments remain the same. Being still new to the autobiographical style of photography, this development of depth and meaningfulness is something I feel can only be reached

through continuous photographing over the course of the coming years. Indeed, I am grateful the MA project gave me a start to something I might not otherwise have begun.

Another inspirational series is Sonya Mantere's series "She wanted to be named) Rebecca", where the trust between daughter and mother, as well as photographer and subject leads to fantastic and playful pictures. My mother, being a professional flutist, could also add an additional collaborative element to the work, where pictures and music could create a combination of our creativity and express our relationship further.

As noted by Bershtling & Strier (2022), limited academic research has been done regarding the perspective of the relationship between men and their mothers, and this could also be a subject for further studies and a theme that could be emphasised with the photographic medium.

Having now worked with a combination of staged and semi-staged pictures featuring me and my mother in

quite a serious tone, I am interested also in trying the more playful approach of Colin Gray's "The Parents", where the playfully staged memories and scenarios is a joy to watch.

Another personal future goal is to use techniques that we in the MA course learned from Paula Roush in a photographic book workshop. My initial attempts to present and organize my early pictures in a book dummy during her guidance was an eye-opener. As the series grows, it would be a fitting medium to present the work, perhaps inspired by the beautifully made photo book "Big Fence / Pitcairn Island" by Rhiannon Adam (2021), which shows incredible craftsmanship and artistry.

FINISHING WORDS

I set out to create a personal body of work, something that could be defined as artistic or fine art photography. This project and studies surrounding it has broadened my view of photography, my skills as a photographer, and given me fresh input into the way I work. I've become more aware about the theme of the mother-figure in photography and art and have been given a place to do my own personal reflections with my set of skills. This project represents a new beginning, and the result is this visual story about the mother and the son.

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KASPER DALKARL

MOTHER
and SON

“Mother and Son” portrays the relationship between my mother and me.

In 2015 my father died, an event that in many ways changed the dynamic in the relationship with my mother.

The shared experience of losing a close family member brought us closer together, in a mutual supporting bond.

Over time, we became close friends.

























KASPER DALKARL

MOTHER
and SON