

## **ALICE ANDERSON'S CHILDHOOD RITUALS**

### **JOANNA S. WALKER**

**JW** At the Freud Museum London your red dolls hair dominates the interior and exterior of the museum. Can you tell me what significance this material has in your work?

**AA** It has great personal significance related to certain childhood memories. I remember the terrible fears I used to have when I was a child left alone at home for many long hours waiting for the return of my mother. At that time I invented rituals for myself to calm my anxieties. For example, these rituals consisted of undoing the thread from seams and I would wind these threads around parts of my body and other objects. Later I began to use my hair instead of thread.

**JW** I am reminded of Anna Freud's work on bodily illness in children and her discussion of the mother's ownership of the child's body. There is a power struggle implied here which ties in with the sense of confinement you present in your work when you deal with the mother / daughter relationship.

**AA** I am interested in the emotional tensions that occur as a result of the exercise of power within the basic political cell of the family. In *Housebound* – my outdoor sculpture at the Freud Museum London – I continue these references as I make a deliberate allusion to the creative process I adopt in my childhood rituals. The flowing metres of hair are wound around the exterior of the house in the same way that the thread and hair were wound around my body and my personal objects when I was a child. It is a fetishist process which indicates strong tensions.

**JW** When I approached you with the idea of you having an exhibition at the Freud Museum London, I mentioned how important and interesting it might be to draw out the presence of Anna Freud in the space. The house and its collection pay homage to the life and work of Sigmund Freud who lived at the site during the last year of his life in 1939. However, it was the home of Freud's daughter, Anna Freud (1895-1982), for over forty years. Anna was a pioneering psychoanalyst in her own right and was responsible for overseeing her father's legacy after his death.

**AA** Anna wanted the house to be set up as a museum after her death in order to celebrate her father's life and work. In many ways she is remembered only as the 'caretaker' of his legacy. Aside from the Anna Freud Room, which contains a selection of personal objects related to Anna's life and work, the interior of the house is orientated mainly around Sigmund. I felt this heavy shadow: masculine and authoritarian.

**JW** You have used the dolls hair in a number of gigantic site-specific projects, the most recent ones being Crossing at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris (2010 -2011), Mother Web at the Royal Opera House in London (2010) Birth at the Busan Biennial in South Korea (2010) and Synapses at Riflemaker in London (2010). In these works you orchestrate what appears like huge "bundles" of hair, which invade the architectural settings like menacing mother webs.

**AA** Whether I work on a small scale as in the Tower sculpture series, or on a large scale as in the site-specific sculptures, I replay my 'Childhood Rituals'. In the Cinematheque Francaise sculpture, the hair symbolizes the link between mother and child and this analogy continues in the Royal Opera House installation. Maud Jacquin talks about a seductive trap, protective and threatening, welcoming and oppressive, closing in like a spider's web. There is a sense of confinement which is prevalent in so many of my architectures which deal with the maternal bond.

**JW** Hair is such a rich symbol with many different cultural, religious, mythological and magical associations. It also has a very personal reference as an intimate body part. While it cannot sense pain and it can be grown back if removed, it is still considered to be a key component of the body. Obviously you are using a synthetic substitute in your work, but still the material refers to your own hair with its distinctive colour. For many Freudian commentators, long hair represents the id and aggression and it is considered to be a potent sexual emblem.

**AA** It is true that hair has a significant role to play in culture and religion, and it functions as an important signifier of gender and sexuality. When I produce architecture in a space, I am orchestrating an intimate gesture which I present on a large scale. I am stamping my identity across an alien space, especially as the distinct colour of the material is modelled on my own hair.

**JW** What is the significance of the Power Figure sculptures?

**AA** The Power Figures are a response to the childhood ritual performances and they employ a similar method using thread or hair. I think of them as being protective somehow as power figures can be. They resemble the cheap imitation African masks and objects we had at home when I was little. I remember feeling both terrified and fascinated by these objects.

**JW** The materials you employ in the exhibition – thread and hair - have a special significance in the discourses of psychoanalysis. The concept of weaving is adopted in Freudian theory as a metaphor for describing how trains of thought converge in the ‘dream-work’, and thread is likened also to the umbilical cord that unites mother and child. Similarly, as you have suggested already, hair is conceived to represent the mother-child bond. Children relate to their hair as they do to their mother – they touch, stroke, clutch and suck on it – and so hair pulling or cutting is symbolic acts of separation. Your intervention with Anna Freud’s loom in the museum functions, therefore, as an important linchpin of these ideas.

**AA** In the Anna Freud Room, one of my characters -a wax doll - is sat at the loom positioned in such a way as to suggest she is working to create linear bars made from the dolls hair. The hair is coming from large cocoons resting on the floor. In the Exhibition Room opposite a second wax character is positioned behind the same bars made from the dolls hair.

I have called this sculpture Confinement Room. These two rooms operate as mirrors do. However, even though the two dolls are identical, modelled on my own self-image, they are like mother and daughter. The mother is creating a prison for her daughter with the same geometric grid of red hair.

**JW** The dolls hair has been straightened and arranged geometrically to conform to the rationality of the grid in a manner which is entirely new in your practice. Are you presenting a subversive play on the idea that the hair is transformed by the grid – with its associations to high modernist practice - into art?

**AA** There is certainly an interesting conjunction of the masculine associations of the grid, with its claims to disembodied abstraction, with the corporeal, feminine associations of the dolls hair. In the same way that the hair subverts this patriarchal 'seat' of psychoanalysis as it is inserted into the context of the museum, so too does it problematise the formalist ideal of self-referentiality. Even though the hair is not literally my own, it still makes an intimate reference to my body:

**JW** The grid is emblematic also of the machine and industry but your dialogue with Anna's loom and the feminine labour of weaving shows you embracing the domestic. I recall that Freud stated once that the activity of weaving is a cover for 'genital deficiency'!

**AA** Yes, and so by pretending to embrace this so-called "feminine" activity of weaving, I celebrate and subvert these Freudian associations of genital deficiency! Indeed, I destabilize the binaries of Feminine-Masculine and Industrial-Domestic in the exhibition. Also, as I knew that Anna was a keen weaver herself, I wanted to engage with this aspect of her personal life. When she was eighty-five years old and living in the house, she and a friend, Manna Friedman, produced hand-woven goods. They marketed them under the name 'Mandanna'.

**JW** I think the concept of weaving functions also as a metaphor for how you bring together different temporal moments in the exhibition. On the one hand one senses your preoccupation with Anna Freud – her life and work – and with the environment that was her home for over forty years. On the other, one is taken back to your family house and to the memory of one of your earliest childhood ritual experiences. Different temporal dimensions overlap in much the same way as the weft and warp interweave in the loom.

**AA** My experience in my family house somehow intersects with the present of the museum, and with the past of Anna Freud which continues to haunt the space. This is why these different planes of temporality and experience become inter-linked.

**JW** You present a subjective and cyclical conception of time in your practice when you deal with your fictional childhood memories. As you have stated elsewhere, memory functions as the 'master of fiction' as you replay your childhood over and over again as a fragmented narrative. Can you elaborate on how you conceive time as operating in your art?

**AA** Time operates as my working material, my 'canvas', as I reinvent my memories. The act of remembering generates an imaginative and fictive account of the past. Bergson, once said that to talk about the past is to dream. I play with the dislocation of time in the same way that children construct parallel worlds. As children, we do not think logically and our conception of time certainly does not operate along a linear trajectory. I recapture this temporal confusion – this co-existence of having the past rub against the present - as I give shape to my childhood in my Art.