

Alexis Soul-Gray

Artist Statement

Her touch was tender.

Her skin was tender.

She lost her mother at the tender age of 25.

What makes and unmakes us? How do we love and grieve? Who do we long for? What do we repeat and seek to repair? In essence, how were we mothered, and how might we mother ourselves? These are the questions around which artist Alexis Soul-Gray's tender images on canvas, paper and linen revolve.

To be tender is to be loving, gentle and attentive; it is to be young, innocent, soft too (like a tender morsel of meat which melts, delicious, in the mouth). But tenderness also describes a state of pain, of delicacy and frailty; tender skin is burnt skin, broken skin, bruised skin, skin so thin it tears, it weeps, it flakes. Soul-Gray activates these multiple meanings not only through her selection of subjects and adoption of materials, but also through her modes of creation by destruction.

Working across painting, drawing and printmaking, collage, embroidery and assemblage, Soul-Gray begins with a figure – mother, child – from a source which may comprise the sheet on which the image is realised. Compelled to collect the cheap imagery of idealised family life in the twentieth century, she consumes and appropriates family manuals and photograph albums, knitwear catalogues filled with studio-shots of posing mothers and children unlikely to be related, biscuit-tins and sugar-sweet adverts for the well-run home ripped from magazines. These reference materials – where family is often faked but also individually and unpredictably felt – are torn by Soul-Gray, tarnished and defaced, before being transformed into paintings, prints and drawings. Cut-out girls, removed from their first contexts of smiling family parties and mother's arms, are held instead by the colour-soaked, tear-streaked work of art. There is violence in this gesture but also, ultimately, infinitely tender loving care.

Soul-Gray will graduate from the prestigious MA Painting programme at the world-leading Royal College of Art, London, in 2022. She was the overall winner of the Delphian Open in 2021 and recipient of The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant in 2021 and 2022. Her work is in collections across the world.