

A Colossal Interview

Zoë Buckman On Tenderness, Her Evolution as a Woman and Mother, and Embroidering Her Largest Works To Date

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What responsibility does an artist have to care for her viewers? This is a question that Zoë Buckman (previously) thinks about deeply.

Portraying elements of her own experiences with abuse and sexual violence, Buckman is vulnerable, generous, and outspoken, sharing her stories in a manner that tethers her to countless others who have endured similar trauma. Her subject matter is difficult, but her works are warm and inviting as she stitches her grief and strength into handkerchiefs, tablecloths, and dish towels.

Much of her output during the past few years has championed the fight: that of resilient survivors, of rebelling against the patriarchy, and of Buckman's own sparring with the art world as she sought to use mediums historically associated with "women's work" to put issues of rape, assault, and bodily autonomy front and center. Her new series, though, titled *Tended* and on view at Lyes & King, takes a softer approach, which Buckman discusses in this conversation. In September 2023, we spoke via Zoom about making such large-scale portraits, her early indoctrination in feminism, and what it's like to raise a child around such difficult, and undoubtedly necessary, work.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity. Shown above is "songs leak from my bedroom walls" (2023). Photo by Charles Benton. All images © Zoë Buckman, courtesy of Lyes & King, shared with permission.

Grace Ebert: Can you tell me about *Tended*?

Zoë Buckman: Yeah, absolutely. It's a first for me in that I've never done a solo show that just has one medium and one modality of expression. For the last several years, I've been working with textiles primarily, but I'll usually have some sculptures, a sculpture hanging from the ceiling, and then some embroidered flat works. There might be a neon. At my last show in New York, I was actually incorporating handbuilt ceramics. So this, for me, is quite stripped back, and I gave myself firmer parameters. Within those boundaries, I've been able to really expand and explore and push my limits of what I can do with embroidery.

It's also a first because I've never made works of this scale. I recognize that for a lot of artists, these are not large-scale works. But for me, who does this all by hand, myself, without assistance, this is a larger scale. From working on hankies and hand towels and tea towels to suddenly a tablecloth, that's quite a big step up for me. It's been challenging, but it's also been fun and exciting.

Grace: That is a huge step. And the works are figurative, which is probably a different process than your other works?

Zoë: Totally. I've been edging towards figurative, more portraiture-style embroideries, and that's been about me becoming more comfortable. Audiences have been seeing in real-time my growth and evolution. I started to actually put figures and forms in my work—which was something that I'd really strayed away from—and the first time I dipped my pinky in was during the pandemic. That was with a show called *Nomi* that had to go online at Pippy Houldsworth. At the time, like all of us, I was isolated, alone, and really just missing bodies and people, my family, my friends, my loved ones. Looking back now, I can see that a lot of that, that solitude and that fear of when am I going to get to see my people again, that's why I started to depict forms. But they were really small, and these little figures dancing around a tea towel, coming undone and exalting and raving and whatnot.

Then my next series was called *Bloodwork*, and that was my first in-person solo show in London. In that series, I was like, these are portraits. It was more detailed and taking up more room within the textile. And now with *Tended*, I feel like I've been able to really expand that.



An installation view of 'Bloodwork'

Grace: And these new works are based on photos, correct?

Zoë: They are. Ninety percent of them are abstractions from photos that are taken by me. Some of them are photos of me taken by other people. But they're all my own personal moments that

I've been reflecting back on from the early 2000s until now and ranging from moments captured with my mum, my daughter, niece, sister-in-law, best friends, a lover, etc. In some of the works, I also use text from writing I've done the last few years.

In the work "lies dressed honestly," a friend and fellow survivor is lying on the floor of a boxing ring, exhausted and raw. I remember standing above them and taking that pic, and I've returned to it many times over the years because of their gaze that is both direct and non-confrontational. I painted flowers growing from those that were already printed onto the border of the tablecloth and then added text from writing I'd done about violence in gendered relationships.

Grace: Why did you choose to use photos from such a broad period of time?

Zoë: It's about these significant relationships where there has been this tenderness and this closeness, this love and support, or a bearing witness to one of life's big transitions. My mum passed away four years ago, so if I want to depict her, that's already going to be a photo from the past.

My sister-in-law, Dionne, is such a rock and a force. There's an embroidery of her daughter, my niece Sadie, and you can see my sister-in-law's legs. Sadie is sat in between Dionne's legs, having her hair done by her mum. I took that photo two summers ago before the Notting Hill Carnival in London. I love that there's that moment in which the focus is really on the child. But I also wanted to depict something of me and her mother so I did that with the work, "songs leak from my bedroom walls," which is the largest embroidery I've made to date and depicts a moment in my bedroom when I was 17. The figures, accompanied by their wilderness, take up most of the textile. There's an explosion of growth coming from my pen in the piece. That, to me, really signifies my and Dionne's evolution that was yet to come as we became women and mothers.

Grace: That makes me wonder if *Tended* is also having tenderness for yourself through these periods?

Zoë: Yeah, totally, 100 percent. Another thing that's been going on with my art practice is that I've been making work exploring what I'm experiencing that year transposed onto the art. It's obviously very cathartic. I hope I'm also finding ways to make it universal, and you're not sitting here through my art therapy.

I am aware that *Tended* is also about my journey with healing and arriving at a place where I can talk now about grief, abandonment, violence, and abortion. But I can look at it now from a place where I'm really exploring our care and the tenderness towards ourselves and others as an antidote to these femme-bodied experiences. Whereas in the past, I was looking more at rage and strength, resilience and resistance. That was *Bloodwork* and that was *Nomi*. The mode of that work was more, look at these awful things that we experience, and look how fucking badass and strong we are. Now, I'm at a place where I'm able to be softer.

Grace: It feels that way. I think one of the reasons your work is so powerful is that it is universal, unfortunately, and many people have experienced similar things. I've heard you talk about your responsibility as an artist in making work about trauma, and I'm wondering how your thinking about that has evolved in the last couple of years. And also, how do you care for yourself as you bring up these moments from your past and are exposed to those of others sharing their stories in response to your work?

Zoë: Thank you. One thing that's important to me has to do with beauty and softness. Those are definitely tools that I embrace and harness. I know that I'm exploring something that is very difficult and triggering. It's always been important to me that I make work that draws people in and creates an environment for conversations about violence, rape, abortion, miscarriage, and all of these things. In the work itself, I am trying to care for viewers.

It's an interesting question. I really appreciate you asking it. And I just realized something, which is that when I walked into the gallery to install, the first thing I did was make them turn the lights off. This is the standard and no shade to the gallery whatsoever, but they had those bright strip lights that honestly, remind me of the times when I'm being wheeled into surgery. It's cold, and it's sterile, and people are standing over you, and the lights are so bright. You're

about to get an injection that's gonna put you out, but the last thing you see is this blinding white light. And you think, is this it? Is this the last thing I'm gonna see? Right? So when I walked in to install, and I saw all my pieces framed and finished, leaning up against the wall in this light, I was like, "We have to turn the lights off." There was enough natural light to hang the work and get conversations right, and then we spot-lit each piece.

I personally have a bit of a stress response when I go into a packed gallery in Chelsea or the Lower East Side or wherever it is, and it's blinding. You can see everything. I don't like it. It makes me feel like I'm under a microscope as a viewer. I just want people to be looking at the work so the lighting was deliberate in that way.

Grace: It's about creating a comfortable space for people to be in.

Zoë: Yeah, exactly, where it's warm, and you can breathe. The works will then start to speak to you.



Left: "holy ash" (2023). Right: "thoughts run out my hands like a gecko" (2023).

Photos by Charles Benton

Grace: I'm curious if you are willing to talk a little bit about your child and them being around your work. You recently moved your studio, right? Is your studio at home now still?

Zoë: Yes, it is at home. It's on the ground floor of my home, and we live above it, which has been revolutionary because I can shut the door.

Grace: What is it like to raise a child in the context of your work? I imagine they ask a lot of questions.

Zoë: Absolutely. In my previous home-studio, I was really, for the first time, exploring this violent relationship, which of course, they had been a small kid during that time. And then suddenly, the truth of that relationship was being explored in art in our home. It definitely opened the door for some really beautiful and honest conversations between me and my kid. And also, I can recognize that the need for healthy boundaries became very apparent during that time. I'm about honesty, and I've always spoken to them like we are equals. That's been really beautiful and beneficial for our relationship. And at the same time, this is a kid who needs to be

a kid. So I've been learning on the job how to navigate that, and I've probably made some mistakes.

I can tell you that when they walked into the gallery—I took them this weekend to see the show—they were so proud. They were blown away. They loved that the first thing, the first piece, is the one of me and them. It takes a little while to see them in it and most people don't notice them straight away. They see a woman with a black eye, but out of a bunch of appliquéd flowers, you see there's this other form. It's a kid on the toilet with blood in their knickers. Cleo was super proud of that moment being captured—I obviously had their consent—and also it being depicted in thread.

Grace: That's so special. So often, women are saddled with the idea that either you can be an artist or a good mother or if you're child-free, then the only thing that can fill that innate motherhood-shaped hole is art. I'm wondering how you understand the connection between motherhood and your practice, especially as your child seems to feed some of your work.

Zoë: Yeah, absolutely. Becoming a mother really opened me up. In my life up until that point, I had not taken charge of anything. I'd had my power already taken away from me by male forces by the age of 26 when I gave birth. Finding myself in this position, being pregnant, completely integrated with my intuition and my power, and commanding that space when I gave birth, then commanding space to raise and care for a baby, for some reason, I fell into it in a very natural way. Was I freaked out? Yes. Was it fucking hard? Yes. Was it infuriating at times? Of course. But for some reason, I was like, shit, I can do this. That feeling of capability really opened me up as an artist.

When it comes to the industry, as a female artist, there are so many judgments. One, as you touched on, is motherhood, the heaviness, judgments, taboos, and how you do or don't fit into the right category of what is expected of you as a female artist, if you do become a mother and if you don't. But also, there's just so much crap put on female artists. Even when it comes to what we do in our spare time, what we look like, what we want to talk about, what we want to make art about, whether or not we like sex, fashion, love. It's beyond. It sucks. I've tried to shut that out.



"clean tea" (2023). Photo by Charles Benton

Grace: Is that difficult to do?

Zoë: So difficult. I mean, the art world definitely did not want me to have a place in it when I first started making work. It's been over a decade of me continuing and keeping my head down and making work and trying to shut out a lot of the highly judgy sentiments that I was subjected to, particularly when I was first coming up. Grace: I'd like to talk about your feminism, where it came from, and what it means for you, especially considering feminism as a popular ideology seems to have been de-radicalized.

Zoë: It definitely came from being the daughter of a super strong woman who was a socialist, feminist activist, voice of the people, on the front lines on the picket lines. I found this massive biscuit tin completely chock full of different badges that my mum had collected over the years, from like, Jews against apartheid to the miner's strike to like, fuck the Tories scum, we hate fascists, feminists against fascists. It's so cool. So for sure, super early, implanted in the home were conversations and ideas that questioned patriarchal constructs.

That was even something I had to explain to people when they asked about my name, Zoë Buckman. People would mistakenly refer to my dad as Mr. Buckman, and I'd be like, "Oh, that's not my dad's name." I would have to explain. My mum and dad agreed that the children should have her name because she's the extraordinary one who gave birth to us. That's for sure where these ideas had their germination.

Becoming an artist in New York during the time that I did, the friends that I made, and the community that instantly embraced me here—for whom I am so abundantly grateful. Honestly, I would not still be making art if it wasn't for a small group of artists and curators who just took me under their wing—within that community, I really learned more about the intersectional piece. I credit my friends and my community who took the time to criticize feminism to me and with me and talk about their experience of feminism. It really opened me up to understand a more intersectional experience.

Grace: Is *Tended* the first time you've talked about gender in a genderqueer way?

Zoë: In this series, it's important to me that when I speak about the work or write about the work that I'm not misgendering any of the subjects depicted. If I look at *Tended* as a whole, there are three trans people who I've depicted in thread and one non-binary person. I am not making gender a focus of the work at all because that's really not my story, and I certainly wouldn't want to be profiting off of their journeys. When you look at the work, you have no idea which of these subjects is trans or nonbinary, right? But it was important to me in the writing about the series that I express it correctly, so as to not misgender anyone that I love. I think also an important distinction is that I'm not cherry-picking the people that I depict in the work based upon like, oh, I need a trans woman. I need a trans guy. If I look at a photo, and it happens to be a drag queen who is also trans, doing makeup on my child for their ninth birthday, and what I see is this love and this tenderness and this moment of affirmation between these two people, that's what I want to capture.

Grace: It feels very clear that the people you're depicting are people you know.

Zoë: Exactly. They're very much a part of my life.

Grace: Can you talk about the loose threads?

Zoë: First of all, I am not a professional embroideress. When you look at something that's executed perfectly, like a really gorgeous piece of embroidery or lace that has been handmade, when it's completely finished and completely perfect, you actually don't cognitively think of it as being handmade. You just see what it is depicting. That's a gorgeous flower, or that's a really delicate, beautiful piece of lace. You don't think about the fact that someone actually made this, and this is a manifestation of their toil and their hard work.

Part of the decision to let the threads be loose is first of all, recognizing and owning my own limitations formally, but also, it's a way of saying, I was here. Here's my work. Here's my chaos. Here are my mistakes. There's a knot there. This one's dangling. This one's now knotted into this

one. And it's all coming down. That's important because a lot of the work is about that. It's about the labor of our forms and our hard work. And also our messiness.



Buckman with 'Tended.' Photo by Abbey Drucker

Grace: And what our physical bodies produce.

Zoë: Exactly, what our physical bodies produce. 100 percent.

Grace: I do want to know what's next for you, but first, I want to congratulate you on the National Portrait Gallery acquisition. That's so exciting.

Zoë: Thank you so much. I so appreciate that. That was a really big one for me.

And what's next? I have work opening in a group show at SFMoMA next year. Then next September, I will have my first solo show at a museum in the south that will be up during the election. The work is going to span my practice to date looking at work that explores abortion, miscarriage, and birth. I'm not allowed to say the museum yet, but I'm super excited about that.