

The Motherload: A Visual Documentation of the Modern Mother Kylee Isom

The historical push for women into the domestic sphere has sculpted the narrow way in which society views gender, today. Women, historically, have been expected to raise children and grow a family, equating self-worth with maternal fulfillment. However, with the collapsing model of the single-income household and a growing state of societal shift, women comprise over half of the professional degrees and nearly 67% of the workforce. Women, today, lead more nuanced lives in terms of equality and responsibility independent from the home. Despite this change, cultural attitudes of women remain rigid and intact. Women have been thrust into the balancing act of working and caretaking, as they are expected to fulfill the role of worker and mother, often at the expense of individual dreams or priorities. This project investigates the cognitive dissonance of the multi-faceted role of the modern mother. The weight of these roles is often at odds with the individual and leaves a residue of guilt and shame in the wake of societal standards. Though many struggle through shared experiences, women feel alone and insecure in admitting the load-bearing role of motherhood. This project looks at the additive expectations of women as mothers and individuals and how the challenges of motherhood are often shadowed by the looming standards of the modern mother.

I grew up with a single mother who worked the graveyard shift and woke up the next morning to be a full-time, first-generation college student, all while raising my sister and me. This project is driven by the little girl who watched her mother closely. This project is authored by the girl who saw every tear-filled, sleep-deprived night and saw her mother waking her sister gently to get her ready for school the next morning, dark circles under her eyes and a fake smile on her face – the little girl who watched her mother get the promotion, secure the degree, and cultivate a life for her children without even batting an eye. This project is both a reflection of my mother and a pulse of the experiences of many mothers, like my own. This series of photographs depicts mothers that I approached in the public realm, accompanied by their individual recollections about the reality of motherhood through their personal experiences. By developing this project on a public front, I am attempting to retrieve a read of the public-facing stigma of this issue. Because these subjects do not know who I am, there is a level of performance in the projection of these topics, and it has been crucial to the project that I acknowledge my presence as a stranger approaching the public about a topic that is often taboo and rarely spoken about, especially amongst people meeting for the first time. When gathering photographs, I had a hard time getting individuals to participate, as many shied away from speaking about their experiences in motherhood. It is for this reason that the project functions as a beacon of light to the otherwise dark and lonely reality of the hardships as a mother. This project stitches the public with the private, weaving an intricate connection between the public perceptions of motherhood and the intimate experiences of mothers. This project was conducted to bring a collection of voices and shared experiences to an often-overlooked issue: the motherload.