



Research article

Stealing Callisto: Reclaiming Maternal Mythologies in the Work of Grossi Maglioni

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Abstract

This article examines Grossi Maglioni's *Beast Mother* project (2015–ongoing) as a feminist reappropriation of classical maternal mythology. Through a comparative reading of *Beast Mother* and Titian's *Diana and Callisto* (1556–59), based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it argues that the Italian artist duo reclaims Callisto's punitive transformation into a bear as a site of maternal agency, collective strength and resistance. Drawing on feminist theories of motherhood, monstrosity and the maternal symbolic, the article "steals" Callisto from patriarchal myth in order to expose the structures that have historically cast pregnant and maternal bodies as shameful, vulnerable or monstrous. It focuses on three interconnected strands of Grossi Maglioni's practice: *Gesti di relazione*, which re-enacts gestures of judgement and submission embedded in Western visual culture; *Beast Mother*, which transforms maternal monstrosity into a feral and generative counter-mythology; and *Occupazioni*, which brings care labour into public space as artistic and political action. By placing Renaissance mythological painting in dialogue with contemporary feminist art, the article reconceptualizes motherhood not as private burden or biological destiny, but as a collective, creative and transformative practice.

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1. Introduction

‘La mitologia che sottende il patriarcato non è cambiata.’
(The mythological framework underlying patriarchy has remained unchanged.)¹
(Luce Irigaray, 2007, p. 22)

This article examines the reappropriation of classical maternal iconography in the work of the Italian artist duo Grossi Maglioni (Francesca Grossi and Vera Maglioni, 1982, Rome), whose interdisciplinary practice spans performance, installation, and participatory art, with particular attention to their multi-year project *Beast Mother* (2015–ongoing).² Through a comparative reading of *Beast Mother* and Titian’s *Diana and Callisto* (1556–59), based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, I argue that Grossi Maglioni subvert dominant patriarchal narratives of motherhood by reclaiming the figure of the monstrous mother as a site of agency, collective strength and feminist resistance.

At the centre of both Ovid’s myth and Titian’s rendering lies a paradox fundamental to feminist theorisations of motherhood: the maternal body as simultaneously powerful and powerless. On one hand, motherhood is constructed as a source of social recognition and authority; on the other, it is historically framed as a condition of vulnerability, marginalisation and monstrosity. The myth of Callisto makes visible this ambivalence: her maternal transformation becomes the instrument of her exclusion, but also the reason of her immortality. Grossi Maglioni respond to this power/powerlessness nexus not by resolving it, but by inhabiting it, transforming the figure of the *Beast Mother* into a site of ethical complexity, creative possibility and emancipation.

This reading is grounded in feminist theories that have re-evaluated the maternal beyond its traditional containment within patriarchal structures. While earlier critiques focused on the institution of motherhood as a mechanism of women’s subjugation, more recent thinkers have shifted attention to its potential for self-discovery beyond the male symbolic order.³

Drawing on this maternal turn, I approach Grossi Maglioni’s work as a feminist counter-mythology in which maternal monstrosity becomes a revelatory form. Following Jude Ellison Sady Doyle’s account of the monstrous feminine (2021), we understand monstrosity not as an inherent female quality, but as a patriarchal designation imposed on women who exceed or resist normative forms of femininity. In this sense, the monstrous – much like the feral explored in Andrea O’Reilly and Casey O’Reilly-Conlin’s collection of essays on unruly women (2025) – functions as a critical lens through which the constraints of gendered identity become visible. The fear such monstrous or feral figures provoke exposes the boundaries of acceptable womanhood and reveals the cultural mechanisms through which female bodies and desires are regulated. Maternal monstrosity, through its resistance to domestication and its drift into a feral state that blurs the boundaries between animal and human, plant and mineral, thus emerges as a mode of existence that resists erasure, challenges the authority of the patriarchal gaze, and reclaims visibility.

Following Adriana Cavarero’s methodology, I will rely on contemporary feminist scholarship to “steal” the figure of Callisto from its original context of origin, and use the void created by the theft to reveal the patriarchal structure that keeps mothers captive (Cavarero 1990). In so doing, this article joins in recent

¹ Translation by the author.

² Grossi Maglioni (2023) has recently published the most significant outcomes of the *Beast Mother*. The book offers the artists’ analysis of their own artistic journey and three scholarly contributions by external scholars and art critiques.

³ Veronica Frigeni (2025) published a concise introduction to the history of feminism approaches to motherhood in Anglo-American academic thought, offering to the Italian public an overview of recent developments in scholarship that underline the revolutionary power of mothering as social change.

investigations on mothering in Ovidian works. Notably, Simona Martorana's recent publication (2024) has shown how motherhood, as told through Ovid's voice in the *Heroides*, can become an opportunity for the Ovidian heroines to formulate a subversive discourse and generate a sense of self that lies beyond male symbolic order.

Beast Mother unfolds through a series of exhibitions, installations and participatory workshops across Europe. This article will focus on three ongoing lines of investigation in Grossi Maglioni's work, *Gesti di relazione* (Relationship Gestures), *Beast Mother* and *Occupazioni* (Occupations), and is structured in four sections. The first section examines Titian's *Diana and Callisto* in relation to Ovid's myth, focusing on the visual construction of Callisto's pregnancy, exposure and expulsion, and on the patriarchal moral frameworks that shaped Renaissance readings of her story. The second section turns to *Gesti di relazione* (Relationship Gestures), showing how Grossi Maglioni re-enact and reframe gestures of judgment, submission and care in order to reveal the persistence of gendered power relations within Western visual culture. The third section focuses on *Beast Mother*, reading the figure of the monstrous mother as a feminist counter-mythology that transforms Callisto's punitive metamorphosis into a collective, feral and generative mode of becoming. The final section analyses *Occupazioni* (Occupations), where the maternal body and the labour of care are brought into public space, challenging the isolation of motherhood and reclaiming mothering as an artistic, political and communal practice.

2. Titian's Diana and Callisto and the Ovidian myth

In 1554, Titian promised King Philip II of Spain two paintings featuring female nudes (Panofsky, 1969, pp. 154–63). Between 1556 and 1559, he completed *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon*, which he then dispatched to the Spanish court. These works are part of a larger series of seven mythological paintings commissioned by Philip II: *Danaë*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Perseus e Andromeda*, *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon*, *The Rape of Europa*, and *The Death of Actaeon*. Collectively, they are referred to as "poesie" (poems), a term Titian himself used to describe them (Dalla Costa, 2020, p. 197). All seven are inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which in the Renaissance, especially through vernacular translations, became a primary source of inspiration for visual artists all around Europe.⁴

Among the seven mythological paintings, *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon* serve as perfect conceptual and compositional counterparts. Identical in format, size, and theme, they were, according to art historian Erwin Panofsky (1969, pp. 154–63), designed to be contemplated together. Likely hung side-by-side, they offer to the spectator erotic nudes captured in dynamic motions. Both works are dominated by the imposing presence of Diana, who embodies the severe Goddess of Chastity, imposing discipline and judgment.

According to Hettie Judah's groundbreaking investigation of motherhood in the art, *Diana and Callisto* is arguably the earliest extant depiction of a naked pregnant woman in Western art (Judah, 2024, p. 52). In Ovid's account, Callisto was a nymph devoted to the Goddess Diana.⁵ As such she was bound to a vote of chastity. She spent her life in wilderness, engaged in hunting alongside Diana's female followers. Jupiter found Callisto alone and tired after a hunt and was immediately captivated by her beauty. To approach her, he assumes Diana's appearances and rapes her. After the assault, Callisto, too ashamed to confess the

⁴ In recent years, medieval and early modern scholars alike have recognised the impossibility of fully understanding Ovid's reception without considering the vernacular cultures of Europe (Hexter 2002):

416). For a study of the vernacular translations in text and illustrations of the *Metamorphoses* in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, I refer you to my co-edited volume (Pellissa Prades & Balzi, 2020).

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II. 416–530.

assault, conceals her pregnancy and reunites with the other nymphs. One day, as her entourage stops to bath in a stream, Callisto is forcibly undressed by the other nymphs. Once exposed, Diana exiles her. For Callisto, pregnancy initiates a series of violent transformations. Juno, Jupiter's wife, punishes Callisto for her beauty by transforming her into a she-bear. Years later, her son, Arcas, unaware of her identity, nearly kills her during a hunt. At the last moment, Jupiter intervenes, transforming both mother and child into constellations to prevent matricide.

3. Gesti di relazione (Relationship Gestures)

Titian's iconographic choices in his painting *Diana and Callisto* stand out as remarkably original compared to earlier representations of the same myth. A rich collection of such visual depictions can be found in *Iconos*, a digital archive featuring approximately 200 myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and around 8,000 illustrations spanning from antiquity to the eighteenth century.⁶ According to *Iconos*, Titian's interpretation is unprecedented.⁷ Earlier artworks primarily focused on Jupiter's seduction of Callisto, Juno's punishment of her, or her desperate flight after being transformed into a bear. In contrast, Titian introduces a unique severity in Diana's demeanour. Her commanding gesture, particularly the pointing finger, was, according to Panofsky (1969, p. 160), inspired by Roman reliefs. However, the true innovation lies in the harshness of the undressing scene: never had Callisto been depicted falling to the ground, naked and exposed.

Titian constructs a stark visual opposition between Diana and Callisto. A fountain placed at the centre of the composition divides the scene both spatially and thematically. On the right, Diana stands tall and imperious, pointing in judgment toward Callisto, who appears on the left side of the painting. Callisto is depicted as physically and metaphorically fallen: collapsed on the ground, closing in on herself in shame. This bodily contrast reflects a deeper relational dynamic: one figure commands, the other submits. The surrounding nymphs, arranged around the two central figures, are the most complex and delicate part of the composition (Wivel, 2020, p. 163). Their interwoven gazes invite the viewer to share in the emotional weight of the unfolding banishment.

Titian's iconographic innovations echo in the nineteenth-century painting of *Diana and Callisto* by Pietro Paoletti (1801–1847), a central focus in Grossi Maglioni's recent project: the short film *Gesti di relazione: la ballata* (Relationship Gestures: the ballad), presented on June 18 at AlbumArte in Rome (Grossi Maglioni, 2025a).

The film is set in the Casino Nobile of Villa Torlonia, Rome. This neoclassical villa, renovated between 1802 and 1806 by the Torlonia family, features an abundance of paintings, frescoes, sculptures and reliefs by prominent nineteenth-century artists (Campitelli, 1997). The Casino was designed as a temple to Western culture, celebrating myth, epic, poets, and conquest. In the twentieth century, it gained darker significance as Mussolini's residence in Rome (1925–1943), thus becoming a symbol of fascist power (Agati, 2007).

The *Diana and Callisto* painting featured in the film is in a space inspired by Renaissance "Stufe" (heated rooms). It was part of a cycle of five mythological paintings by Paoletti, who, between 1835 and 1842, worked on the decoration of the Casino Nobile under a commission entrusted to him by Duke Alessandro Torlonia (Maraghini Garrone, 2014). The series includes *Leda and the Swan*, *Pan and Syrinx*, *The Birth of Venus*, *The Rape of Europa*, and *Diana and Callisto*. Like Titian's composition, Paoletti's painting spatially divides the

⁶ Claudia Cieri Via and others, 'Iconos' at < <http://www.iconos.it/> > [accessed 28 July 2025]. Another similar projects is *The Ovidius Pictus* project, which gathers all the illustrations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (in Latin and in vernacular books) printed between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

⁷ See the page dedicated to Titian's *Diana and Callisto* authored by Anna Cola, in 'Iconos', < <http://www.iconos.it/le-metamorfosi-di-ovidio/libro-ii/giove-callisto-diana/immagini/28-callisto/> >.

scene: Diana appears on the right, seated triumphantly on a rock, while Callisto is on the left, defeated. They are spatially divided by a tree. Diana's finger points in judgment; Callisto crouches in shame, arms crossed over her pregnant belly, gaze cast downward. Only one nymph assists in undressing her. Paoletti's *Diana and Callisto* captivated Grossi Maglioni and became central to their exploration of relational gestures.

According to the artists, their project on gestural dynamics began during a crisis in their long-standing collaboration (Grossi Maglioni, 2025b). They recognized that their creative partnership had become imbalanced, marked by power asymmetries and emotional strain. This realization sparked a process of introspection, where they examined how bodily gestures encode dynamics of control, dominance and vulnerability. They scrutinized their interactions, pored over family photo albums to trace gestural patterns, and then turned outward, to culture and architecture, examining how the Casino Nobile, as a monument to Western ideals, reflects and reinforces such dynamics. The resulting film, *Gesti di relazione: la ballata*, is the product of this multilayered inquiry.

The film follows Grossi Maglioni as they walk hand-in-hand through the Villa's ornate rooms. The rhythm of their heels echoes in the empty corridors. These scenes are interspersed with close-up shots of the villa's mythological paintings. At one point, we see them standing before Paoletti's *Diana and Callisto*. They initially face the camera directly, then assume the painting's poses: one standing, finger pointed; the other crouching in self-protection. Grossi Maglioni argue (2025b) that to fully grasp the meaning of gestures in art, one must engage with them in relation, with another person. Re-enacting these poses together reveals their political weight. This act of doubling, the twin gaze of the two artists, becomes central to their artistic practice.

Peering beneath the grandeur of the Casino Nobile, Grossi Maglioni uncover a troubling thread: the foundational myths celebrated here are often narratives of violence against women. *Diana and Callisto*, *Leda and the Swan*, *Pan and Syrinx*, *The Rape of Europa*: all recount sexual assaults. These tales revolve around domination and the erasure of female agency, often culminating in divine offspring. The underlying message is not about love and desire, but about reproductive control, about neutralizing female autonomy. Even the last one of Paoletti's paintings in the heated room, the myth of Venus's birth, reinforces this anxiety: the goddess emerges from foam produced by the severed genitals of Uranus: a male-only conception that bypasses female participation altogether.

Within this context, *Diana and Callisto* no longer reads as a conflict between two women. Cavarero (1990, p. 18) has pointed out how myths are an emanation of a male symbolic order. The protagonists of ancient mythology are never neutral but project a worldview that reflects and sustains male dominance. Diana, despite her feminine form, is an agent of this order: a female figure shaped by and complicit in male authority. In Titian's and then Paoletti's painting, she enforces chastity not to protect female autonomy, but to uphold patriarchal discipline. Grossi Maglioni, by mimicking Diana and Callisto's gestures, draw attention to the patriarchal symbolic order from which these myths emanate.

According to Grossi Maglioni (2025b), the goal is to look at art with a critical eye. Classical art is so steeped into violence and domination that we have become blind to it. We too often stop to contemplate and praise the beauty of a painting or a statue, without questioning the value system from which it emerged. If we look at Titian's *Diana and Callisto*, for example, it has long been argued that its composition was so original that it was born, as Panofsky (1969, p. 160) has stated, almost *ex nihilo*, from nothing. A closer examination that dares to question the status of the male artist as the solitary "genius", shows that Titian's composition has its roots in medieval misogynistic readings of the *Metamorphoses*.

Carlo Ginzburg (2000, pp. 133–57) has demonstrated that Titian accessed Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through a vernacular translation written by Niccolò degli Agostini (d. c. 1526) and first printed in 1522.⁸ Agostini's

⁸ In the field of Ovid's reception in the Italian vernacular in the Middle Ages, Bodo Guthmüller's *Ovidio metamorphoseos vulgare* remains a fundamental reference point. This study, first published in 1981, follows the changing styles and

translation was far from a faithful rendering of the Latin text. He translated in verse a fourteenth-century vernacular translation of the *Metamorphoses*, which was itself an adaptation of a Latin *Expositio* to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* written by the Italian University master Giovanni del Virgilio (Guthmüller 2008, pp. 119–25). Therefore, Titian read Ovid through its medieval tradition, which was steeped in moralism and misogyny. We read in the commentary accompanying Agostini's translation:

La Allegoria di Calisto & Arcade convertiti in orsi è historia onde sappiamo Giove esser stato figliuolo di Saturno re di Crete, & fu innamorato di una detta Calisto vergine, la quale co suoi ingegni sì la corruppe Onde dice Ovidio che la fu fatta orsa, questo non importa altro se non che la donna che datta a corruzione è fatta sì come orsa, la quale per Philosophi è affigurata & appropriata alla corruzione. Calisto s'ingravidò di Giove & fece uno figliuolo chiamato Arcade, imperoché fu nodrito in Arcadia & di quindici anni gli fu detto che era figliuolo di una meretrice. (Agostini, 1547, fol. Ci r.)

(The Allegory of Callisto and Arcas transformed into bears is a story from which we learn that Jupiter was the son of Saturn, king of Crete, and that he fell in love with a certain virgin named Callisto. Through his cunning, he corrupted her. Thus, Ovid says she was turned into a bear—but this means nothing other than that a woman who has fallen into corruption is made like a bear, which, according to the philosophers, is the figure and symbol of corruption. Callisto became pregnant by Jupiter and gave birth to a son named Arcas, so called because he was raised in Arcadia. At the age of fifteen, he was told that he was the son of a prostitute.)⁹

In the commentary, Callisto is portrayed not as a victim but as corrupt, even labelled a prostitute. Compassion is absent, and there is no condemnation of the abuser. Reading this source, we can see a connection with Titian's innovation of Callisto's exposition and undressing. The violence of the painting reflecting the brutality of the commentary. By placing myth in dialogue with memory and personal history, Grossi Maglioni help us dig deeper into the history of art and suggest the endurance of gestures of power. Gestures of power that then become engrained in our daily repertoire of relational gestures.

The final scene of Grossi Maglioni's film features a nineteenth-century quadrille, a historic social group dance. When they shoot the scene, the actors danced without music, only guided by the metronome's beat. During the film presentation (Grossi Maglioni, 2025b), the actors reported entering a trance-like state, the repetitive rhythm of the metronome suggesting a timeless continuum. This haunting performance underscores the core message of the project: gestures of power, domination, and resistance echo across generations. They are transmitted through culture, reinforced by aesthetics, and remain woven into the fabric of our lives.

4. Beast Mother

The woodcut illustrations accompanying Agostini's *Metamorfosi* often encapsulate multiple episodes of a myth in a single woodcut (Huber-Rebenich et al., 2014, pp. 73–81). Titian was familiar with Agostini's vernacular translation and drew inspiration from its iconography (Ginzburg, 2000, pp. 133–57). However, Titian adopted a distinctly different visual approach: rather than condensing the entirety of a myth into a unified composition, he isolated and elevated a single, emotionally charged moment, Callisto's exposure and exile, as the focal point of the narrative.

fortunes of the translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from 1333 to 1561, and his emphasis rests on the influence and afterlife of medieval translations and Ovidian readings in the Renaissance. For the list of reprints and details of publication of Agostini's translation see Balzi (2020, p. 264) and Guthmüller (2008, pp. 302–10).

⁹ Translation by the author.

The figure of Diana as the Goddess of Chastity also reinforces the thematic parallel with *Diana and Actaeon*, the twin painting designed for Philip II. In both works, Titian visualises the moment in which the female body becomes visible to others, and is immediately subjected to surveillance and judgement.

Though the immediate aftermath of Callisto's exile does not occupy the foreground in *Diana and Callisto*, it is discreetly embedded within the painting's background. Alessandro Rossi (2021, pp. 46–52) has argued that these elements function not as mere embellishments but as narrative continuations. In the upper left quadrant, above the nymphs undressing Callisto, a bolt of lightning signifies Jupiter's divine presence (Rossi, 2021, p. 51). Just above it, two luminous streaks of light frame a small female figure, whom Rossi identifies as Juno (2021, p. 52). Further to the left, beyond the treetops, a bear's silhouette is faintly discernible. Thus, the painting subtly anticipates the myth's subsequent developments, depicting Juno (the punisher), Jupiter (the saviour), and Callisto herself, who is foreshadowed in her ultimate celestial form as Ursa Major, the Great Bear, known from the asterism of its main seven stars, which has been called The Big Dipper or The Wagon.

The most significant metamorphosis, however, is hidden in plain sight. Callisto, surrounded by three nymphs, collapses to the ground. One nymph supports her fall; another holds her raised arm, reaching towards the sky. Between these limbs, what initially appears to be a soft veil escapes Callisto's hand. On closer inspection, Rossi (2021, pp. 45–46) has revealed that the folds of this veil subtly trace the contours of a bear. Once perceived, this hidden detail transforms the painting's meaning. Callisto's wide-eyed, terrified gaze, once read as directed toward some distant void, now appears to be fixed on the looming form of her imminent transformations. The soft veil becomes a premonition, a double allusion to her terrestrial metamorphosis into a bear and her celestial ascent as a constellation.

The veil materialises one of the enduring paradoxes of motherhood in Western culture: the power/powerlessness paradox.¹⁰ On one hand, motherhood has historically offered women a form of social legitimacy and moral authority. On the other hand, as Adrienne Rich (2021) has famously argued, motherhood has long been instrumentalized to restrict women's autonomy, anchoring them biologically to care and thereby excluding them from political and public life.

Through the veil, Callisto glimpses a version of herself immortalized among the stars by Jupiter, rewarded for bearing his child. However, the same bear-shaped veil is a symbol of her ties with the cycles of nature, to a realm historically considered inferior to the immortal, disembodied ideals upheld by patriarchy. Greek philosophy privileged the incorporeal and immaterial as places of truth and contributed to building a society on the idea of the human being as male (Cavarero, 1990, pp. 66–68). Since the symbolic order in which we live is male-centred, all women are off-centered, different. They are, according to Braidotti (2002: 61), at the threshold between what is human and what is not human: animals, plants, minerals, the divine. Titian's bear-shaped veil underscores the association of motherhood with all that lies beneath the symbolic order, beyond the human. It speaks for the monstrosity of women, which has its roots in sex and in the possibility to procreate (Sady Doyle, 2021, p. 16). This intersection of monstrosity and maternity forms the conceptual core of Grossi Maglioni's *Beast Mother* project.

Grossi Maglioni's first formal exploration of the *Beast Mother* theme began in 2015 during a residency in Cosenza. Francesca Grossi, having recently given birth, attended the residency with her newborn. As Vera Maglioni recalls, the lack of child-friendly accommodations and the vulnerability of Grossi and her infant heightened her own sense of protective urgency:

¹⁰ Mairéad McAuley (2016) has focused on a selection of Roman literary texts from the Augustan to the Flavian period to explore the nexus power/powerlessness in the maternal, showing the importance of Ancient Rome for the consolidation of this paradox in Western culture.

La situazione di emergenza mi spingeva verso una condizione di protezione istintiva, irrefrenabile, mi sentivo come un'orsa che deve proteggere i cuccioli e Francesca e Bianca in quel momento rappresentavano la fragilità di cui mi dovevo occupare.

(Grossi Maglioni 2023: 56)

(The emergency of the situation pushed me into an instinctive, uncontrollable state of protection, I felt like a she-bear guarding her cubs. At that moment, Francesca and Bianca embodied a fragile life I had to defend.)¹¹

Here, the myth of Callisto reemerges in its zoomorphic dimension. Yet, in Grossi Maglioni's reimagining, the transformation into a bear does not happen to the mother but to the friend: a shift that queers traditional narratives of motherhood. Their *Beast Mother* is from its inception not a biological inevitability but a form of care that involves a broader community. It is, as Laura Bissel (2025) has argued in her essay on Rachel Yoder's novel *Nightbitch* (2021), an escape from gender normativity and an outlet towards a new form of creativity and generativity.



Figure 1: Grossi Maglioni, *Beast Mother*, 2022. Workshop, Fondazione smART, Roma. Ph. Mirai Pulvirenti. Courtesy Grossi Maglioni.

Since that initial experience, Grossi Maglioni have continued their investigation into motherhood and monstrosity. In 2022, they held two workshops under the *Beast Mother* theme. At Fondazione smART in

¹¹ Translation by the author.

Rome, mothers and children co-created monstrous costumes, imagining frightening traits for maternal figures (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 83). Later, at the bookshop Libreria Postrufazio in Bari, another workshop invited mothers to embody their maternal relationships through monstrous garments and performative poses in a staged photoshoot (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 111). That same year, at <rotor> Centre for Contemporary Art in Graz, they led The Childbirth Positions workshop, inviting participants to explore both experienced and desired birthing postures (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 103). The traced outlines of these experiments—figures with multiple limbs and heads—depicted mothers as fertile, multi-formed beings: embodied, expressive and unruly.

These practices, as Francesca Grossi has explained (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 60), aim to reclaim the term “monster.” Rather than a label of exclusion, monstrosity becomes a tool of feminist critique. Monsters, as deviations from normativity, disrupt the symbolic order and hold the potential to expose patriarchal contradictions. Grossi Maglioni draw inspiration from Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy, where hybrid reproduction between human and non-human forms reveals the generative potential of difference (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 62). It is through this lens that Grossi Maglioni began the collective writing of a new myth that is born outside of the male symbolic order: *Occupazioni: The Perpetual Dialogue*.

In this reimagined myth, the *Beast Mother* is not cursed but simply is. Her transformation is neither inflicted by others nor chosen for redemption, it is part of her everyday existence:

Nativity

The story begins at night

The Cave

Far away, near a cave, live a woman and a child

Clouds

Outside the cave, enchanting and threatening clouds loom. Their transparency is such that they capture and alter the eyes, which look through them in defiance

Beast Mother

From within the clouds, the gazes watch the woman transform herself into an unrecognisable beast. Her shape and form become a mystery

(Grossi Maglioni, 2021)

By normalizing her monstrosity, Grossi Maglioni subvert the punitive logic of Callisto’s myth. They strip male authority from the narrative and reclaim metamorphosis as a site of magic empowerment.

The myth also revisits the theme of matricide foundational to Western thought. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Callisto is separated from her son, Arcas, who nearly kills her, unaware of her identity. Jupiter saves them by making them stars, erasing their mortality in favour of symbolic immortality. This act silences the complexity of our fraught engagement with the maternal, with our origin and life on earth. As Irigaray (2007, p. 21) and Cavarero (1990, p. 51) note, Western philosophy has long erased birth in its quest to overcome death.

Grossi Maglioni resist this. In their myth, mother and child are sources of terror and magic power. The child, like Arcas, is scared by the monstrous incarnation of the mother. Their meeting point is not in tragedy, however, but rather in negotiation:

The observing child

The child creature, fearing its own metamorphosis and frightened by the vision of the beast, flees in terror

The magical body

Left completely alone in the desert of nothingness, the child wanders in search of its mother, whom it no longer recognises. It walks and walks, and at every step a tree appears, at every footprint a bush, at every glance a stone or spring of gushing water. The desert flourishes under the weight of the creature's body

The desert of nothingness, the landscape

What used to be a desert has become a canyon, a riverbed, a large stone wall. Seized by fatigue, the creature makes a nest out of a hollow rock, arranging trees and bushes for shelter and protection. From a crevice it glimpses the tents of an encampment in the distance

The feast

It hears, amidst the indistinct chatter, a familiar voice. The creature follows the voice to a tent larger than the others: inside, its mother is preparing for the feast that is about to begin. It turns to her, serenely

The cave and the feast are spaces for ongoing conversation—symbolic of relation, not separation. The creature, like Arcas, is armed, but in this version, it poses more danger to itself than to its mother. The crisis in the maternal bond translating into the failure to care for the world and ourselves.

The split child

As the days and nights pass, the creature grows, but so do strong, conflicting urges, until one morning it splits into two people

The forest of sights

Afraid of itself, the creature runs away into the forest, eventually losing its way. The fear is so great that it begins to build defensive weapons: a guillotine, a boomerang, an arrow, and a pitchfork

The gaze and the weapon

Advancing through the forest, it meets its double, armed in the same way. Eyes meet eyes and they become one with their weapons: neither wants to surrender, as if the union of their gaze holds up the entire universe

A tent for perpetual dialogue

A moment of distraction ends the battle. Just outside the forest, voices attract the creature like a magic flute. Upon reaching an open field, it sees a crowd of people sewing various pieces of cloth together. "What are you doing?" it asks. "We are building a tent for perpetual dialogue"

This myth favours transformation over stasis. Instead of Jupiter's immortal stillness, Grossi Maglioni imagine a world of constant change: embodied, connected, ecological.

Their vision reclaims Callisto from the male symbolic order and suggests a way to steal her away from Titian's painting. Read through the lens of the new mythology created by Grossi Maglioni, we might be able to see that Callisto's terrified gaze, frozen in Titian's canvas, is not fear of becoming a bear or a star. It is fear of being fixed, of being cut off from transformation. She, who thrived among women in the wilderness, reassured in the mutual knowledge of their changing bodies, now petrified in eternal stillness. Perhaps she never feared the bear that she saw in the veil. Perhaps she feared the end of change, the end of the world that the experience of her body led her into.

Grossi Maglioni, together with singer-songwriter Eva Geist, composed the lullaby *Il Carro* (the chariot) (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 66). Again, Grossi Maglioni's path entwines with Callisto's, who was transformed

by Jupiter into the asterism known as the Chariot. The lullaby serves as a perfect alternative ending to Callisto's myth:

A terra le stelle emergono viola
 poi cadranno in mare e saranno lacrime
 le lacrime sbocciano
 domani saran fuoco [...]
 ora io non piango più
 non sono più sola

(Stars emerge violet from the earth / then fall into the sea and become tears / the tears bloom / tomorrow they'll be fire [...] now I don't cry anymore / I'm no longer alone)

Even stars, the lullaby suggests, are not eternal. They fall, change and transform. Everything exists within a cycle of becoming: a perpetual dialogue. Callisto, a solitary chariot in the sky, is stolen from her immortality and reconducted into a queer, expansive and porous becoming. She is forever crossing animal and human boundaries, rooted in materiality, never the same, never alone. Grossi Maglioni, with their theft offer a possibility to pull maternity back into nature, not above or beyond it. They decolonize our imaginary from the iconography of the Virgin Mary, who is forever fixed and surrounded by stars while she presses the head of a snake, and replace it with a mother figure that is allied with the power of the earth (Pinto, 2023, p. 41).



Figure 1: Grossi Maglioni, *Torta di terra*, 2022. Ph. Mirai Pulvirenti. Courtesy Grossi Maglioni.

5. Occupazioni (Occupations)

Grossi Maglioni's lullaby ends with the word *sola* (alone). Solitude defines Callisto's condition in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as it too often marks the experience of motherhood in Western societies (Jones, 2024, pp. 149–51). Raped by Jupiter and then rejected by her companions and protector, Diana, Callisto is ultimately transformed into a bear. Ovid explains that Juno chose this form to isolate her from human contact and rob

her of speech, so she could not express her pain or share her sorrow. This loneliness also resonates in Titian's painting, which subtly expresses another enduring paradox of motherhood.

Pregnancy is visibly marked on the body, as seen in Callisto's public exposure and expulsion. Yet, the violence that causes it remains hidden. In Titian's canvas, the rape itself is omitted, as it is omitted from the commentary that he had access to. This paradox extends beyond the image: although child-rearing is of public concern, the labour of care remains largely invisible, relegated to the private space of the home. Jacqueline Rose (2018) has written on this contradiction: how motherhood is simultaneously hyper-visible and erased.

At the core of Grossi Maglioni's work is a desire to challenge and subvert this paradox. Their project *Occupazioni: Natività* (2015)—the first formal iteration of the *Beast Mother* series—puts the intimate fragility of domestic life on public display. During a residency in Cosenza, in a glass and wooden house, the artists assembled a makeshift tent, its structure held together by a shopping trolley. Inside, a mattress lay on the floor where Francesca Grossi and her newborn daughter sat. Reinterpreting the Christian Nativity, Grossi Maglioni replaced painted depictions with lived experience: the mother and child were fully visible through the glass, inviting the public to witness the labour of care.

This early version of *Occupazioni*, a series they would revisit in later years, reframed the Nativity from a feminist perspective (Ventrella, 2023, pp. 24–25). Unlike traditional representations created by male artists, this “nativity” was embodied and staged by women, making space for a parallel between biological and artistic creation. Creation here is not simply symbolic or aesthetic; it is both physical and lived.

On March 8th, 2019—International Women's Day—Grossi Maglioni deepened this parallel between biological and artistic labour through the installation *Occupazioni: Natività 2019*. For this performance, the artists breastfed their children on a Roman sidewalk beneath a tent painted in collaboration with artists Sara Basta, Maria Pia Picozza, and Guendalina Salini. Interwoven across the fabric was the phrase: *SIAMO DELLE MOSTRE*, a wordplay on the double meaning of *mostre* as both “exhibits” and “monsters.”



Figure 2: Grossi Maglioni. *Occupazioni: Nativity*, 2019. Temporary public installation, Rome; tent created in collaboration with the artists Sara Basta, Mariapia Picozza, and Guendalina Salini. Photograph by Mirai Pulvirenti. Courtesy of Grossi Maglioni.

This public installation radically reimagined the Nativity scene. Instead of the traditional mother-and-child dyad, here were multiple women co-caring for children—a plural, collective act of mothering. Grossi Maglioni's vision resists biological determinism. Care, they suggest, is not limited to birth mothers but belongs to all who choose to share in its labour. The phrase sewn into the tent underscores this dual meaning: they are both the object of display (mostre as exhibits) and monstrous others (mostre as monsters). They are mothers as artists, and artists as mothers.

Irigaray (2007, p. 29) has pointed out that the problem with how motherhood is viewed in Western culture is its reduction to biological reproduction. But mothering, she has argued, should extend beyond childbirth: to books, crafts, relationships, art. Only by expanding the possibilities of female creativity can women feel fulfilled outside the narrow frame of reproduction. Grossi Maglioni build on Irigaray's insight. For them, art and care are both acts of mothering. They hold the same generative power: they live under the same tent.

At the same time, the sentence on the tent is not only empowering, it is also ironic and accusatory. "We are the real exhibits/monsters" points to the way mothers, especially artist-mothers, are made hyper-visible when they step into public space, while also being denied structural support. The mother, alone in the city with her child, is terrifying because she claims a space that traditionally excludes her. She demands to be seen, and in doing so, destabilizes the patriarchal city that depends on the invisibility of maternal labour.

Grossi Maglioni are the "real exhibits" because they are at risk of marginalization and extinction. In a society that offers no meaningful welfare or protections for women artists, particularly mothers, they are forced to choose between art and care. In such a context, generative labour becomes mutually exclusive: one must choose either motherhood or artistic practice. Grossi Maglioni's installation exposes this injustice, making visible the social failure to support mothers in the arts.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this theme took on new urgency. Grossi Maglioni, along with other artist-mothers, authored an open letter denouncing the precarious working conditions of women in their position (Basta Grossi Maglioni, 2020). They demanded structural protections, recognition and support. That letter became the seed for a broader movement, the creation of a collective: The Glorious Mothers. This group now organizes annual residencies for mothers and children, creating spaces where maternal experience is honoured, shared and transformed into artistic practice.

Through *Occupazioni*, Grossi Maglioni turn personal pain into creative power. They become activists and respond to what Andrea O'Reilly has called 'empowered mothering' (2024). By transforming solitude into solidarity, Grossi Maglioni make mothering public, collective, and artistic. They suggest that it is not a private matter but a potential site of social and political transformation.

6. Conclusion

Through the *Beast Mother* project, Grossi Maglioni open a radical space for reimagining the maternal, not as a fixed biological role but as a generative, performative and political force. From Ovid's Callisto to Titian's omitted violences, from the solitary mother on public display to the communal tent on a Roman sidewalk, the works confront the paradoxes of motherhood: power and powerlessness, hypervisibility and erasure, reverence and neglect, the divine and the monstrous.

Starting from the fraught inheritance of the first painting of a naked pregnant woman in Western art, this article has shown how Grossi Maglioni dissect the lingering mythic, religious and artistic tropes that have long shaped the figure of the mother—passive, suffering, silent—and offer, instead, a model of maternity that is plural, active and self-determined. In doing so, this article reveals how mothering, like artmaking, is a powerful form of production that exceeds the boundaries of the domestic and the feminine.

By bringing care work into public space, Grossi Maglioni challenge the rigid divisions between public and private, political and intimate. In her Neapolitan Novels, Elena Ferrante has written about the porousness between home and city, where the violence and injustice of the streets translates on the bodies of women and children (De Rogatis, 2018, pp. 86-87; Rose, 2018, p. 175). Grossi Maglioni seem to build on this intuition and use the tent, repeatedly used as both symbol and structure, to cross private and public spaces. The tent becomes a site of resistance, of visibility and of collective empowerment. It shelters not just mothers and children but a new feminist imaginary: one in which the maternal is neither self-sacrificing nor solitary.

In reclaiming motherhood as a lived, creative and political practice, Grossi Maglioni confront the exclusions embedded in both art history and contemporary cultural production. Their work demands political change in Italy by asking for new systems of support, new languages of recognition, and a revaluation of care as a foundation for artistic and social life alike.

In the figure of the *Beast Mother*, they give us a potent metaphor: not a monstrous distortion of femininity, but a fierce embodiment of care's subversive power. Not a mother as defined by tradition, but a mother who insists on her place in the city, in the artwork, and in the world.

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