

Lenka Clayton



A meditation on motherhood and artistry

By Emily Rolan

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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



Lenka Clayton at The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. Photo credit: Carlos Avendaño

For Lenka Clayton, there's a certain distance between her and her son that she can tolerate. But soon enough, she says, there's this rising panic in her chest that bubbles over—she can allow a literal distance between them grow until it's just impossible.

And then, she chases after him.

Clayton, currently based in Pittsburgh, portrays this feeling in the short video piece "Measuring The Distance I Can Be From My Son." It was made while the artist was in residency with, well, herself.

It all began when her firstborn son was almost one year old. It was 2012. Out of her struggle to maintain an art practice and be a full-time caregiver and parent, she created her own residency called Artist Residency In Motherhood. It was done out of her own home—complete with funding, a manifesto, childcare, appointed mentors, organized exhibitions and a website.

The work from the residency is currently on display at the Fabric Workshop & Museum, including her video project on her son Otto, who Clayton says has an uncanny knack for running away. After she became a mother, Clayton says she realized how discouraged she was from sharing her experiences in parenthood. Searching for role models was difficult.

“There’s an unspoken and sometimes spoken necessity to not speak about your kids,” she says. “And I found that really offensive.”

During the residency she intended to figure out what was making it hard to be vocal about life as a parent, and use that as her material.

Her work includes an alphabetical grocery list from Trader Joe’s, a series of inexplicably detailed typewriter drawings and a photography book on “Objects Taken Out of My Son’s Mouth.” There were 32 projects in total.

Clayton remained in the residency for three years until she opened it up on Mother’s Day of 2016 to any artists interested in joining. Now, it’s in 31 countries hosting 300 artists.

Her work since the residency, however, has been quite extensive. Her newest exhibition in Philly is called “Object Temporarily Removed” at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (1214 Arch St.) through July 9.

Her next step: a summer residency in California at the Headlands Center for the Arts.