

# MONICA SJÖÖ'S PAINTING METHODS AND THE TREATMENT OF 'WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK'

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## Abstract

Monica Sjöö (1938–2005) was an artist, writer, and activist, who had a prominent role in the feminist art movement in the UK and was an important link between the movements in Sweden and Britain. This article offers a new perspective on Sjöö's work by describing the materials and techniques that she used to create her large paintings, nearly all of which are on hardboard (Masonite), a relatively underexamined material in the conservation literature despite its popularity among many twentieth-century painters. The article explores the reasons behind Sjöö's choices of materials and techniques, and gathers clues to her views on restoration and repair. It then discusses the circumstances that led to the creation of the painting 'Wages for Housework' (1975) and its historical significance before outlining the treatment that the painting underwent, which involved the repair of a fracture in the hardboard support, to prepare it for exhibition.

## Introduction

Monica Sjöö (1938–2005) was a Swedish-born, UK-based artist, author and activist. Driven and prolific, she is known for co-authoring a pioneering feminist art manifesto and for co-organising the first feminist art exhibitions in the UK (White 2018, p.16, n.1). The continuing relevance of her art is evidenced by the recent retrospective exhibition of her paintings shown in Stockholm, Oxford and Malmö in 2023 and 2024 (Ørskou and Hobson 2023, pp.12–13), as well as the significant presence of her work in Tate Britain's exhibition, 'Women in Revolt!: Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990' (Young 2023, p.297).

Thus far, writing about Sjöö has highlighted her dedication to fighting injustice; her pro-feminist, pro-racial-equality, pro-queer, and pro-environment beliefs (Klein, 2023, 154); her commitment to neo-paganism; and her capacity to bring together painting, writing, lecturing, and activism (White 2018, pp.10–15). In addition, it has underscored the dual influence of Swedish and British culture on Sjöö, and her own influence on the feminist art movements in both countries (Widoff and Budd 2023a, p.16). Nevertheless, as Widoff and Budd (2023a, p.16) emphasise, there are still areas of Sjöö's work in need of further study. One such area is the methods and materials Sjöö used in her painting practice. Accordingly, in detailing the conservation of one of her paintings—'Wages for Housework' (1975)—for the Tate Britain exhibition, and in contextualising the methods and materials used by Sjöö, this article seeks to remedy this gap.

## Keywords:

Conservation, feminist art, hardboard, Masonite, oil paint, structural treatment.

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To begin with, Sjöo's life and work are briefly outlined, and various influences on her paintings are discussed. Next, her painting methods are described; while Sjöo worked across a number of different media,<sup>1</sup> this article focuses on her methods for creating large paintings, the vast majority of which were in oil paints on hardboard (known as Masonite in the USA).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, it explores the reasons behind her choices of materials and techniques, and clues to her views on restoration and repair are also surmised. The article then discusses the historical significance of 'Wages for Housework', before outlining the treatment that the painting underwent. In doing so, it provides new insight into Sjöo's work, while also contributing to a hopefully expanding literature concerned with preserving hardboard, an underexplored subject in the field of conservation despite its popularity among many twentieth-century painters (Miller 2019, p.2).

## Introduction to Monica Sjöo's life and work

Monica Sjöo was born in Härnösand in 1938. Her parents, who were both artists, separated when she was three years old: Sjöo described her childhood in Northern Sweden with her mother and grandparents as contented, but, after moving to Stockholm and her mother's remarriage, she became increasingly unhappy, leading her to leave home at 16. After supporting herself with various part-time jobs and travelling across Europe, she settled in Bristol in the 1950s, and the UK remained her home for life (Sjöo 2004).

In the UK, Sjöo began making paintings and became involved in political activism, with each activity benefiting the other. Sjöo's artworks reflected her political beliefs, and her early activism was invigorated by the censorship that her artworks suffered. Her artistic output attracted controversy from the start, most notably her painting 'God Giving Birth', which depicted a woman of colour giving birth above the painting's title in red capitals: in 1970, in St Ives, Cornwall, her exhibition of six paintings, including 'God Giving Birth', was taken down within hours by council officials (Sjöo 2004).

Soon after, in a letter published in three feminist publications—*Women Speaking*, *Socialist Woman* and *BIT*—Sjöo proposed for women artists to work together (White 2018, p.57), which resulted in her co-authoring a feminist art manifesto (Sjöo and Berg, 1971). Around the same time, she co-organised the first feminist art exhibitions in the UK; Sjöo was a key contributor to the London exhibitions at the Woodstock Gallery in 1971, the Women's Liberation Conference at Acton in 1972, and Swiss Cottage Library in 1973 (White 2018, p.16, n.1). Further controversy arose at the Swiss Cottage Library exhibition around 'God Giving Birth' when police were called to the venue on complaints of obscenity and blasphemy; the press coverage gave Sjöo increased visibility in the art world, and, as a result, she was invited to exhibit her work in the Arts Hall in Lund, Sweden (Klein 2023, p.150). Following this, Sjöo also became a prominent activist within the growing

Swedish women's art movement, and, as such, was an important link between Sweden and the UK (Öhrner 2023, p.29).

Throughout her career, Sjöo drew on a variety of inspirations that shaped both the content of her paintings and her practice. With no formal higher education, she described working as an artists' model in Gothenburg after leaving home at 16 as her "art school training" (Sjöo 2004), perhaps both in reference to the later development of her own style of figurative art and her radical feminism; as the object of others' art, she felt treated as "a cross between an apple or chair and a part-time prostitute" (Sjöo 2004). She was also passionate about researching ancient cultures and repeatedly visited sacred pagan sites, which became regular motifs in her work (White 2018). Another significant inspiration for her was the birth of her second son in 1961, during which she described having a powerful spiritual experience of the "Great Mother" (Sjöo 2004), which led to a deeper pursuit of what has been described as the "Matriarchy or Goddess aspect of feminist art" (White 2018, p.125). For Sjöo, the act of painting itself became a spiritual undertaking: "For me, painting is ritual & prayer & this is how I communicate with the Spirit" (Sjöo 1994 in White 2018, p.240). Sjöo described that her experience of painting was "as if I was being used as a medium by Ancient Women, who were speaking through me – or Mother Earth or Goddess speaking through me – wanting me to make these images" (White 2018, p.82).

Since for Sjöo there was "No spirituality without politics" (Sjöo 2004), it follows that she also considered the act of painting a political one. Certainly, she chose figurative painting, at a time when others were embracing abstract and conceptual art, deliberately and in protest against "empty abstractions" (Sjöo and Berg, 1971). Her uniquely monumental style of figuration, and dense, unusual compositions, were developed in opposition to what she viewed as predominantly pornographic portrayals of women by male artists throughout art history (Tobin 2023, p.71). Furthermore, the placard-like rigidity of her paintings recalls political protest. Although her large hardboard paintings themselves were too heavy to use as protest placards, Sjöo photocopied the images and used them in acts of activism (White 2018, pp.122,237,251). She also added text to her paintings, often in the language of protest slogans, because, she said, "sometimes an image wasn't enough and you had to spell it out in words" (Dickens, 2022).

Fed by such a multiplicity of influences, beliefs and strong convictions, Sjöo was a determined and productive artist. White's edited compilation of Sjöo's notes and letters suggests that, alongside her writing, lecturing and activism, she produced a steady stream of three to eight large paintings most years from the 1970s onwards (White 2018). She, in fact, sometimes created faster than she could afford to buy materials, complaining in a 1958 letter that she had "bought a pound of Titanium white for 4/6 and finished it in 2 days. Horrid isn't it? Bought Zinc Oxide in the chemist today.

I'll see if that lasts longer. The powder colours are rapidly disappearing [...]" (reproduced in White 2018, p.19). Clearly setting herself high expectations, in the same letter, she reprimanded herself for only completing seven pictures: "not much in four months is it? Ah well!" (Sjöo 1958 reproduced in White 2018, p.19).

## Monica Sjöo's materials and methods

Despite her prolific output, there are no recorded observations of Sjöo at work on her paintings, nor did she seem to write about her processes. Nobody tended to visit her while she was painting, and Sjöo never had any purpose-built space for working (Dickens 2022). There is a photograph of her with a painting just completed at the Durdham Park squat in Bristol, where she lived in 1980, and, presumably, it was created there (White 2018, p.117). She described working in her "damp little cottage" while living in Southwest Wales in 1980–85 (Sjöo 2004), and, later, while living in a tiny flat in Bristol, she used a friend's spare room (White 2018, p.229).

Throughout each move from one makeshift studio to another, Sjöo appears, overall, to have been methodical and consistent with the construction of her large paintings. Her spiritually-guided approach to composition could suggest an overall haphazard approach to artmaking, but her large paintings indicate otherwise. The 2023–2024 retrospective exhibition charting her life's work contained 30 large paintings completed over 32 years between 1967 and 1999 (Widoff and Budd 2023b, pp.171–174). All 30 were constructed in the same way; they are on hardboard, mostly of standard sizes as supplied by builders' merchants—183x122 or 244x122 cm (6x4 or 8x4 feet)—and some cut from larger sheets.

In the twentieth century, many artists who, like Sjöo, could not afford expensive artists' materials, turned to hardboard as a solid, reliable painting support. Hardboard is made for the construction industry, not for artists, but its rigidity, relative cheapness and ready availability made it useful to painters (Miller Zohn 2019, p.2; Crook and Learner 2000). Its attractive properties have to do with the way it is manufactured; it is made from inter-felted lignocellulose fibres—often waste from the lumber industry—consolidated under heat and pressure, and the lignin of the fibres bonds them together. If a screen is used on one side of the wet fibre mat during manufacture, hardboard has the screen texture on one side (Miller Zohn 2019, p.5). Some hardboards have some oil or resin content, which is added to make them more resistant to moisture and mechanical damage (Granum and Eustis 1999).

In response to hardboard's natural tendency to warp and expand at the corners, artists have tended to support them with subframes attached to the back and protective battens attached to the sides (Katlan 1994), and Sjöo also followed this practice. She preferred to paint on the smooth side, so fixed wooden frameworks to the textured side, and secured them with nails hammered at

roughly 20 cm intervals from the front. The subframes comprise wooden battens along the back of all four sides, and a number of cross-battens, depending on the size of the hardboard sheet. She attached broken scraps of hardboard, often painted on the smooth side, with nails at the junctions between the subframe battens, possibly to further strengthen the structure. She also added wooden battens around the edges of the hardboard, secured with nails through the sides of the subframe, to protect the edges of her paintings. It is unclear whether she added these before or during painting as paint occasionally spills onto the frame battens. The frames, however, were certainly part of Sjöo's original constructions, rather than much later additions. Some feature in photographs of her holding just-completed works, such as 'Spirit of the Stone' (1980) (White 2018, p.117).<sup>3</sup>

Sjöo complicated the otherwise plain, smooth surface texture of the hardboard by adhering pieces of fabric to it, and occasionally photographs and newspaper. The fragments are not arranged in any discernible pattern or in relation to the compositions painted on top. The fabrics vary and some appear to be cut from garments, with occasional seams and armholes visible through the paint. It is not known whether these had any significance beyond Sjöo's preference for the textural interest they gave her paintings (Johnston 2024), but they may have been connected to her desire for her work to transcend being viewed as decorative: "A lot of contemporary painting seems to be only concerned with the surface decoration. I feel I want to go beyond that" (White 2018, p.23). Finally, Sjöo would prime the front of her supports with a household white paint bought, at least on some occasions, from Woolworths (Johnston 2024).

While Sjöo surrounded herself with her sketches and photographs (Dickens, 2022), she tended not to use these directly in her paintings, nor to plan out her compositions with underpaintings or underdrawings (Tobin, 2023, p.70). Tobin (2023, p.70) has suggested that this process allowed Sjöo to maintain a spiritual connection between her ideas and the act of painting, with which the filtering or refining process of underdrawing and planning may have interfered. Sjöo often painted on white backgrounds, building up her images in a series of overlapped, textured brushstrokes. She favoured the effects of overlapping colours against bright white as they recalled for her the luminal effects of childhood winters in Sweden, where snowy landscapes refracted the light (Tobin 2023, p.72). Preferring to brush on her paints, in 1962 she recorded only a short experiment with palette knives early on: "Did some work during four months in St Ives 1958, working with palette knife. Find now a brush better for me" (White 2018, p.22).

Overall, Sjöo's choice of materials, particularly the hardboard supports and primers, are likely to have been driven by her economic situation. As a young artist, Sjöo was frustrated by her lack of funds to buy materials: "I'm always suffering from lack of money.

Finding it very hard to progress without being able to buy materials and pay models etc. those who think that an artist develops because of his poverty and misery – how wrong they are!!!” (White 2018, p.21). Later, in the 1970s, particularly after the publication of her book ‘The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All’ (1975), her writing began to have more impact and she received small, steady fees for book sales and lectures, and for the reproduction of her images in various books by others (White 2018, p.10). Notably, however, despite these changes in her circumstances, Sjöo continued to distance herself from the commercial aspects of art (White 2018, p.14), and seems to have remained consistent in her painting method and employment of hardboard.

Aside from economy, Sjöo may have chosen hardboard because it was robust enough to withstand travel and exhibition, and likely to endure over time. Sjöo seems to have had a strong belief in the importance of her work; she described having a waking dream at the age of only three that she had an important destiny to fulfill (Sjöo 2004), and this may have been why she documented every aspect of her life so meticulously, seemingly for posterity (Dickens 2022). It perhaps follows that she may have had longevity in mind when constructing her paintings. Within her lifetime, at least, it seems that above all else Sjöo wanted her paintings to be seen and her messages to be heard. She tirelessly exhibited around Europe and North America, despite frequent obstacles and difficulties. For example, in 1975, when she accepted Anna Sjödahls invitation to exhibit with her in the Lund Arts Hall, Sjöo soon realised the enormity of the task: “I had to spend about 4 months trying to work out how to get the paintings to Sweden ... In the end I had to borrow the money from the Swedish Women’s movement in Stockholm — Group 8 (Grupp 8). Then we had to build a huge solid crate for the paintings in the hallway outside our flat ... I was sending 5 years worth of work — nearly 30 paintings — which are all on solid hardboard & pretty large. They weighed, with the crate, 1000lbs” (454kg) (White 2018, p.78).

Without funds to employ professional transporters, Sjöo often transported them herself. This was also partly because explaining her art and message in slide shows and talks that ran alongside exhibitions seems to have been intrinsic to her artistic practice. After the Lund Arts Hall, for example, the exhibition ‘Kvinnoliv’ (Woman-life) toured several venues in Sweden, Norway and Finland with the artist in tow (Sjöo 2004). As another example, in 1982, the exhibition ‘Women Magic’ travelled from Bristol to Denmark, and then on to several venues across Germany, and Sjöo and the other exhibitors drove themselves and their paintings from place to place all summer (White 2018, p.151). Comparing the care with which professional teams packed and transported Sjöo’s paintings for her recent retrospective, Johnston (2024) recalled how, in contrast, Sjöo would put the paintings in the back of her friend’s old post office van and “cart them off”.

When not on display, Sjöo stored her paintings where she could. Occasionally, she ran out of funds to bring her paintings back again from touring exhibitions (Johnston 2024). ‘Woman Magic’ travelled again to Finland and Sweden in 1987, after which it was stored for four years in Gothenburg, then exhibited at the Women’s Arts Museum in Skelleftea and then stored there for a long period (Sjöo 2004). Another group of works were held in a friend’s attic in Stockholm between exhibitions in Stockholm in 1967 and in Gothenburg in 1998 (White 2018, p.258). Following Sjöo’s first retrospective exhibition in Bath in 2004, many of her paintings were deposited with friends in Cornwall (White 2018, p.279). She kept others in her flat in Bristol, in the hallway, and visitors recollect having to squeeze past the stacked paintings to enter (Johnston 2024).

Thanks to their methodical and sturdy construction, Sjöo’s paintings appear, on the whole, to have survived well.<sup>4</sup> Common con-



Figure 1. ‘Wages for Housework’, 1975, 124.7 x 185.4 cm, photographed after conservation treatment by the author. Reproduced courtesy of the Monica Sjöo Estate and Alison Jacques, London, © Monica Sjöo Estate.

dition issues include scuffs, scratches, graffiti, and rusting nail heads where Sjöo attached her hardboard to the subframes with concomitant stained and lifting paint (Johnston 2024). Sjöo was not known as someone who would have been overly concerned by occasional rusty nails and superficial marks (Johnston 2024). However, there is some evidence to suggest that Sjöo was not happy to let all marks and signs of ageing show, as there is a record of her restoring her own paintings on at least one occasion; she was photographed in 2001 repairing and retouching paintings she had left years earlier in Skelleftea in Northern Sweden (White 2018, p.274). Small touches of paint, particularly in the white background, can be seen neatening edges and corners and reinforcing lost paint over nail heads on many of her paintings, although it is unclear how soon after completing the paintings these were added.

## Wages for Housework

### Historical background

Wages for Housework was an international campaign that demanded governmental recognition and pay for work done in the home, which was most often done by women. The campaign first took root in Italy with its manifesto issued in 1972; its founders, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici and Brigitte Galtier, argued that the economic system was unjustly built upon free domestic labour which, should it be withdrawn, would bring the system to its knees (Bowes 2022). One of the founders, Selma James, also helped form the Power of Women Collective in London and Bristol in 1973 (Toupin 2018, p.87). This became the English branch for the international campaign, which organised the first English Wages for Housework march in 1975 (Toupin 2018, p.110).

Sjöo's involvement in the Wages for Housework campaign was, typically for her, a multimedia endeavour. In the same year as the Wages for Housework march, she produced her painting with the same title (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> Also in 1975, she wrote 'Married to the State' for the collection of essays, 'All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework and the Wages Due', which focused on the circumstances of women in the UK. Complementing her painting in its directness, her essay critiqued the then 'cohabitation rulings' from the perspective of 'unsupported mothers', and obstacles to claiming social security income. It argued against the enforced economic dependence of married women, and, in its conclusions, called for women to "FIGHT TOGETHER FOR EVERY WOMAN'S RIGHT TO AN INDEPENDENT INCOME, WHETHER SHE IS MARRIED OR NOT" (Sjöo 1975, p.96).

### Materials and methods

The painting 'Wages for Housework' (1975) presents a group of women engaged in housework, nursing, childcare, and protest. Partially overlapping, they are arranged across the picture on varying scales that serve to distance the composition from the

confines of traditional, western figurative art. The figures emerge from a white background in a series of overlapping, energetic brushstrokes of varied colour and opacity. Sjöo has allowed lower layers of colour to show through upper applications by skipping her relatively dry brush over the surface, leaving a network of gaps and strokes that charge the image with energy. The figures are then defined in outline by thin, bold strokes of dark blues and browns. Clarifying the painting's message, she has painted free-hand in black paint, "HOUSE-WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE", and has used red paint through a stencil for "WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK". In the final stages of 'Wages for Housework', or perhaps revisiting the image sometime later, Sjöo has added some reinforcing brushstrokes of white near the edges, which occasionally spill onto the frame battens, and neaten edges and corners.

The support for 'Wages for Housework' was constructed according to Sjöo's typical process. It is a hardboard support of standard dimension 183x122 cm (6x4 feet), with wooden reinforcing battens on the reverse, attached with nails hammered through from the face, and wooden strips nailed to the sides that form a simple protective frame. Sjöo has also nailed painted scraps of hardboard to the junctions between the reinforcing battens, which are perhaps recycled parts of other paintings she no longer wanted (Figure 2). Prior to painting the composition in oils, she applied roughly cut pieces of fabric, which lend the final surface a highly varied texture, and a white priming to the smooth side of the hardboard.



Figure 2. Reverse of 'Wages for Housework', photographed after conservation treatment by the author. Reproduced courtesy of the Monica Sjöo Estate and Alison Jacques, London, © Monica Sjöo Estate.

### Condition before treatment

A significant artistic reminder of an important early-1970s movement, 'Wages for Housework' was selected for display in Tate Britain's exhibition, 'Women in Revolt!: Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990', which ran from the 8th of November 2023 to the 7th of April 2024 (Young 2023, p.61). The painting required treatment to repair a centrally-positioned fracture in the hardboard. The accidental fracture was thought to have occurred since 2005 when Sjö's family gathered her paintings and archive together initially in Portugal, and then moved them to storage in the UK (Johnston 2024).

Unrelated to any significant historical event, the fracture was repaired for aesthetic reasons and also to ensure the painting's structure was stable for travel without further damage. The fracture was branched and flaps of hardboard in the area had been pushed backwards. Some paint had been lost around the damage. The fractured area was partially covered on the front by one of the artist's applied pieces of canvas; over the fracture, the canvas was loose from the hardboard beneath, which was dented. The canvas reduced access to the fracture from the front, meaning that it needed to be secured from the reverse (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Detail of the fracture through 'Wages for Housework'. The paint is applied directly to the hardboard to the left of the arrows, and canvas lies between the paint and hardboard, and covers the fracture, to the right of the arrows. Photographed before conservation treatment by the author, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd.*

The treatment also addressed other, more minor condition issues. Occasional small areas where paint and priming were lifting away from the hardboard, worn corners, and a loose frame batten required stabilisation (Figure 4). There was a visible layer of dirt on the surfaces, and there were some stains and losses to the paint



*Figure 4. Detail of an area of lifting paint and priming, photographed before conservation treatment by the author, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd.*



*Figure 5. Detail of two of the nail heads, photographed before conservation treatment by the author, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd.*

around the nail heads. The nail heads and surrounding stains were particularly noticeable along the top edge, and the treatment sought to reduce them through cleaning and retouching, thereby removing this visual interruption to appreciating the whole image (Figure 5).

Before treatment, the paint and hardboard of 'Wages for Housework' were tested in very small, discreet areas. Exposed fibres tended to swell and expand upon contact with water. The paint layers were not sensitive to water, if applied for short periods with minimal mechanical action, nor to non-polar solvents with minimal aromatic content. The paint showed signs of sensitivity to solvents containing aromatic compounds, and to polar solvents other than water. A subtle increase in gloss of the paint surface was detectable when warmed to above 50 °C. This informed the selection of adhesives and solvents for the treatment steps.

## Conservation material selection for fracture repair

For the hardboard fracture repair, an adhesive that had sufficient strength, did not wick into the hardboard and cause staining, and that was safe to use near the paint film was required, and this was not straightforward to find. Informal testing on pieces of hardboard suggested that different ages and types absorbed adhesives differently, and not all were equally prone to swelling with water, which may relate to varying oil content in different hardboards. As different paint films can also exhibit a range of behaviours, the findings for this repair (summarised in Table 1) may not be repeatable for other paintings.

The adhesives and fillers considered for this treatment were informed by discussions with conservators who had previously repaired hardboard and by the conservation literature (see, for example: Young, New and Marchant, 2009; Williams, 2009). While adhesives and fillers for repairs of traditional panel supports have been explored in the conservation literature, only one published article could be found detailing the repair of a painting on hardboard: the repair of Ben Nicholson OM's, 1951 'Festival of Britain' Mural by Tate conservators (Green and Hodge n.d.). This treatment used BEVA® 371, with coconut shell flour as a bulking agent, but this was ruled out for the 'Wages for Housework' treatment as the paint would not have withstood the temperatures required to manipulate the heat-activated adhesive. Further examples of structural treatments of paintings on hardboard or adhesive testing on hardboards could benefit the conservation literature.

Aqueous adhesives including ethylene vinyl acetates and fish glues are frequently used by conservators in the repair of fractures in wooden panel paintings (Young et al. 2009; Williams 2009). While these are likely to have sufficient strength, the water content could swell the exposed hardboard, resulting in a ridge of expanded fibres at the join, which may have risked the repair remaining visually compromising. Various non-aqueous adhesives were also possible options. Paraloid™ B72 is, however, soluble only in solvents that, in this case, the paint layer was also sensitive to; although precautions were in place to prevent it, liquid adhesive running onto the paint surface may have caused damage. Paraloid™ B72 also tends to shrink upon drying, which can result in cavities in repaired fracture apertures (Young et al. 2009). Adhesives that are soluble in solvents orthogonal to the solubility of the paint surface of 'Wages for Housework'—Regalrez® 1194 and 1094—proved too weak. They can be melted instead of dissolved in solvent, but the resulting adhesive film was also too weak. This was tested by applying the adhesive to broken test pieces of hardboard, and then applying light pressure with fingers, which was sufficient to separate the adhered pieces

Finally, two-part epoxy adhesives were considered, which set upon mixing epoxy and hardener catalyst. These are also well-known in conservation for structural repairs (Williams 2009, p.113). Araldite® 1253 two-part epoxy adhesive was chosen as it proved to have a good working time and was sufficiently strong to hold the fracture securely together. Araldite® 1253 is also very viscous, so the risk of it running out over the face of the painting was minimal. Another advantage was that it did not soak into the

Table 1. Summary of adhesives considered for repairing the hardboard fracture.

Adhesive type	Adhesives	Notes on properties relevant to this treatment
Hot-melt, wax-resin	BEVA® 371 Regalrez® 1126	Require high temperatures to manipulate and set Lack sufficient strength
Aqueous	Fish glue EVAs	Tend to expand exposed hardboard fibres in unpredictable ways resulting in lumps along the repair
Resin delivered in solvent	Regalrez® 1126 Regalrez® 1094 Paraloid™ B72	Stain surrounding hardboard Lack sufficient strength Shrink upon drying
Two-part epoxy resin	Araldite® 1253	Sufficient strength for strong repair Bonds well to hardboard fibres Does not require heat or solvent No staining Possible to remove excess with mechanical action once dry Long working time

absorbent fibres of the hardboard and stain the surrounding area. Although not usually considered a reversible or re-treatable adhesive, as it is not resoluble or heat-softening, tests proved that it was safe to remove it mechanically from the hardboard because it did not soak into the fibres.

### Treatment process

To start with, loose, overhanging paint fragments around the complex fracture in the hardboard support were temporarily removed for protection. The fragments were adhered to a sheet of thick archival polyester film with a methylcellulose gel, which is water-reversible. Loose dirt was removed from the front, back and frame with dry brushes and cosmetic sponges. The sponges used were styrene-butadiene rubber cosmetic sponges supplied by Muji™. The sponges were rinsed to remove additives, such as whitening agents, and then dried before use.

The fracture in the hardboard support was addressed next. When hardboard is damaged the layers of fibres tend to expand and separate. The slightly lamellar nature of hardboard interior, and the tendency of exposed fibres to swell, means that the broken edges around a damage quickly become misaligned and expanded. As is often the case with hardboard, the edges of the fracture in 'Wages for Housework' no longer came together as a flat surface without the removal of some material from the fracture edges. Therefore, a surgical scalpel was used from the reverse to reduce and shape the edges of the fracture until the pieces could fit together in plane when pushed into place. The paint over the hardboard closest to the fracture edges had already been lost, so this process did not damage any paint.



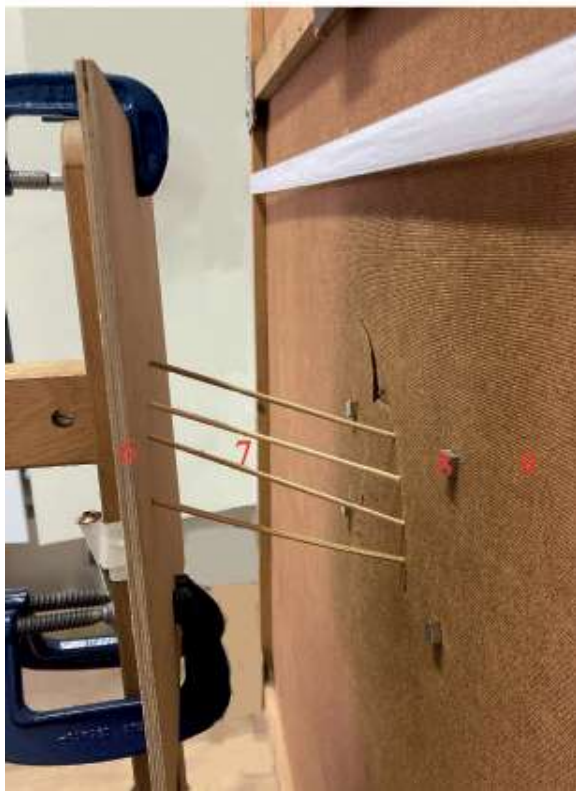
*Figure 6. Detail of the fracture before treatment taken from the reverse at an oblique angle to show the broken flaps protruding backwards, photographed by the author, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd.*



*Figure 7. Arranging the rig and props during repair of 'Wages for Housework', photographed by Olympia Diamond, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd.*

The hardboard around the fracture had bent backwards and required significant pressure to return it to its original position (Figure 6). Humidity was not used to aid in softening the hardboard before closing the fracture in case it resulted in unpredictable swelling of the exposed hardboard fibres and a resulting bulge where the fracture faces joined. A rig was constructed that enabled realignment of the fracture edges with the painting upright, as the fracture's central position made it difficult to manipulate with the painting flat. The paint near the fracture was protected with a temporary layer of conservation-grade resin—RegalRez® 1094—, a sheet of silicone-coated polyester film, and a sheet of Perspex, which was held over the face of the fractured area with magnets. The clear films enabled the paint surface to be monitored throughout the repair while protecting the front from pressure marks. Props were placed between the rig and painting at the front and back to apply pressure in the required positions and directions to bring the bent pieces of hardboard back into alignment (Figures 7 and 8).

Araldite® 1253 was mixed and applied to the fracture edges from the reverse of 'Wages for Housework' in stages, working from the left side of the damage to the right. Once dry, the rig, props, and protective covers and coating were removed, and the fracture was



secure and in-plane. The painting was then placed flat, face-up. Dents in the hardboard beneath the loose flap of canvas over the repaired hardboard fracture were filled with shaped pieces of polyester sailcloth so that the loose flap had an even, flat support. Paraloid™ B72 was used to secure the sailcloth to the hardboard. The loose canvas flap was re-adhered with Regalrez® 1126 and weighted down until dry. Paraloid® B-72 at 20% w/v in acetone was chosen to adhere the sailcloth insert to the hardboard as it dried quickly and adhered the sailcloth more strongly than Regalrez®. Acetone was safe to use in this area, as there was no chance of it coming into contact with the painted surface. Regalrez at 50% w/v in a 1:1 mixture of Shellsol® T : isooctane was used to adhere the original canvas as the adhesive was sufficiently strong for this step, and the solvents would not disturb the dried Paraloid adhesive used for the previous step and were safer to use closer to the paint.

With the painting still flat, some loose hardboard fibres and lifting paint flakes were also secured. The paint flakes were too brittle to manipulate without prior softening. They did not soften sufficiently until warmed above 50 °C, at which point there was a risk of increasing the gloss of the matte surface, so heat was not used. Instead, moisture chambers were placed over each paint flake until they became sufficiently flexible to lower back into contact with the hardboard. A gel of Klucel G (hydroxypropyl cellulose) in isopropanol was brushed beneath each flake, taking care not to allow the isopropanol on the paint surface. The slight sensitivity of the paint to isopropanol greatly aided adhesion of the flake to the hardboard support. Flakes were weighted down until the adhesive dried. Paint fragments removed earlier were replaced and secured with the same adhesive. Delaminating hardboard layers at the bottom corners were stabilised with Regalrez® 1126, and the corners were clamped together until dry.

Exposed nail heads and hardboard in areas of paint loss were coated with Regalrez® 1126 to protect them from moisture. Afterwards, further dirt was removed from the whole paint surface with conservation sponges dampened with deionised water adjusted with added ammonia and acetic acid to pH 6 and 6 millisiemens. The sponges used were Hydrophilic Conservators

*Figure 8. Details of the rig and props from the front (top) and back (bottom) during repair of 'Wages for Housework', photographed by the author, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd. 1 – front of the painting secured upright on an easel. 2 – magnets holding Perspex sheet (covered with tape to ensure they did not fall). 3 – Perspex sheet covered on the side facing the paint with a sheet of silicon-coated polyester film. 4 – wooden props. 5 – rigid vertical surface. 6 – rigid vertical surface. 7 – wooden props. 8 – magnets securing Perspex sheet. 9 – reverse of painting. The positions of props were moved and finely adjusted as the repair progressed from left to right of the damage.*

Sponges™ supplied by Preservation Equipment Ltd (PEL). These are polyvinyl alcohol-based polymer sponges. This followed testing that showed the red and green paints were more sensitive than the other passages, and that water at this particular pH and conductivity was able to release the most dirt from the surface while not affecting these slightly sensitive passages. The brown stains near the top edge surrounding rusted nails were reduced

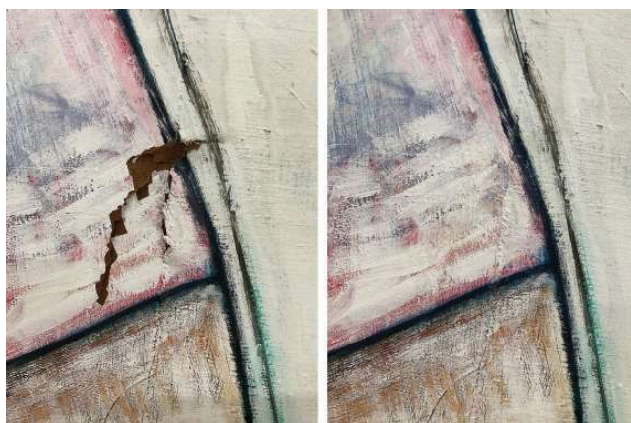


Figure 9. Details of the fractured area before (left) and after (right) treatment, photographed by the author, © Julia Nagle Conservation Ltd.

as far as possible with thickened aqueous solutions containing a small amount of chelating agent. The cleaning solution contained approximately 2% ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) and 1% Pemulen® TR2—a polyacrylic acid—to thicken the mixture. This was adjusted to pH 6 with sodium hydroxide. The solution was cleared from the surface with deionised water adjusted to pH 6. A brown accretion on the shoulder of the white figure was reduced with a non-polar solvent.

Paint losses were filled with a methylcellulose and kaolin putty, textured to match the surrounding paint. The fills were retouched with gouache to match the adjacent original colours. The remaining stains around the nails near the top edge were also lightened with gouache. This was carried out to a level that stopped the staining from being overly distracting for the viewer, while retaining some signs of wear judged to be commensurate with the painting's age (Figures 9 and 10). The retouching and fills will remain removable with water, should this be required in future. Final steps of treatment addressed minor instabilities in the frame battens. Small, loose fragments of wood around the frame were consolidated with fish glue. The right of the bottom frame member was loose; a missing nail at the bottom right corner was replaced, and a hole in the wood around the nail was filled with a putty made from coconut shell flour and Aquazol® 500—a poly(2-ethyl-2-oxazoline) adhesive—in propanol to avoid water-contact with the nail.



Figure 10. 'Wages for Housework' before (left) and after (right) treatment, photographed by the author. Reproduced courtesy of the Monica Sjöö Estate and Alison Jacques, London, © Monica Sjöö Estate.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined the treatment of Monica Sjöö's 'Wages for Housework' (1975) for the Tate Britain exhibition, situating the materials and methods used in that painting within Sjöö's wider work and life. In doing so, it has aimed to further the understanding of Sjöö's painting, while also contributing to the conservation literature concerned with preserving paintings on hardboard.

Sjöö's construction methods were methodical and successful; many of her paintings are in good overall condition despite eventful lives in exhibition, travel and makeshift storage. Significantly, Sjöö's primary wish was for her paintings to be shown and to be seen by others. At the same time, she seems to have very much cared about the preservation of her legacy. These factors all played a role in the treatment of 'Wages for Housework' (1975): a fracture in the hardboard was successfully repaired so that it no longer distracts from appreciating her composition and message, and the structure has the strength for ongoing travel and display; while ensuring the painting's longevity and clarifying the painted image, not all vestiges of history and age were erased.

## Endnotes

1. Monica Sjöö sketched frequently on paper; produced numerous paper-based collages with biro, ink, pencil, crayon, felt tip ink, gouache and Tipp-Ex on different coloured mountboard (Johnston 2024); designed and made silkscreen and lithographic printed posters (Widoff and Budd 2023b, pp.171–174); and made at least one painted sculpture (Öhrner 2023, p.21).

2. Only one of her surviving large paintings is on canvas, and one other painting was executed on jute canvas, used as a protest banner, and then later mounted onto hardboard (White 2018, p.148,170).

3. Johnston (2024) has confirmed that Sjöö constructed her hardboard supports herself.

4. Where Sjöö's paintings have not survived, there tended to be exceptional circumstances involved, unrelated to her choice of materials and methods. For example, in 1977, several paintings were lost when she moved after splitting with her second husband (White 2018, p.91). Others may have been lost during the eviction of Durdham Park Community Squat in 1980, which Sjöö (2004) described as "violent". Sjöö wished to give 'Indwelling Goddess of Glastonbury Tor' to the author Alice Walker, an influential supporter and patron, in 1990, but it disappeared somewhere on the way to the USA (White 2018, p.216). In 2001, her painting, 'Cromlech Goddess', was lost when its home We'Moon Land—a self-sufficient farm in America—burnt down (White 2018, p.271).

5. The Monica Sjöö Curatorial Collective (MSCC) website catalogues dates 'Wages for Housework' to 1973. In correspondence with the author, Johnston (2024) noted that Sjöö occasionally da-

ted photocopies of her paintings that are now in her archive with different dates to those found on the paintings' reverses, leading to some discrepancies between dates in different sources.

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