

The term Alma Mater has its roots in the figure of the nurturing, benevolent mother. In ancient Rome, it referred to goddesses of fertility, care, and well-being. Today, the term is also used to describe educational institutions such as universities, seen as places of protection and knowledge transmission.

But how do these qualities hold up when conservative rhetoric brings traditional gender roles back into public discourse, and political decisions—like banning gender-inclusive language at universities or the failure to legalise abortion—have direct impacts on the language and bodies of FLINTA* individuals?

Rather than investigating conventional images of “maternal” care, Julie Bender Herdina, Ximena Ferrer Pizarro, Kristina Schmidt, and Milena Wojhan offer insight into alternative models of attentiveness and solidarity in Alma Mater. Through queer-feminist perspectives, they explore forms of (self-)empowerment and mutual support rooted in free, independent structures outside of formal, established institutions. Together, their works approach the question of how we can nourish and protect ourselves and one another—emotionally, intellectually, artistically.

In *Self-Portrait as Wi-Fi Signal*, bodies are arranged in a wave-like formation. The focus is less on identity markers like gender or skin tone, and more on the dynamic relationships that emerge through the interplay of figures and positions. Only in their diversity and difference do the blue creatures form a complete (self-)portrait. Julie Bender Herdina explores the theme of self-care, metaphorically asking what it means to be a good friend to oneself. A sense of ambivalence runs through the work—do the various inner selves support one another, or do they also impose limitations?

Milena Wojhan addresses both internal and external demons in *Productive Depression Mask II*. Drawing on ancestral masks and ritual practices, the aluminium mask becomes a shield of resilience, warding off evil forces. Its witch-like grimace defies conventional beauty ideals and symbolises a feminine power found in liberating oneself from patriarchal control over the female body.

Bodily presence and its representation also take centre stage in the paintings of Ximena Ferrer Pizarro. In *Salsa Sensual*, she reflects on intimacy and closeness within Latin American dance—not from a Eurocentric and often sexualising viewpoint, but with a focus on movement and communal experience. In another work, large eyes stare directly out from a fragmented composition. A depicted PoC figure bites with evident pleasure into a juicy pork knuckle. For Ferrer Pizarro, this gesture is not merely physical but also an engagement with the privilege of food access. She foregrounds the significance of everyday acts that are often taken for granted.

Kristina Schmidt explores the connection between nourishment, embodiment, and music through hyper-realistic ceramic potatoes that double as small ocarinas, producing different sounds through their openings. Originating in South America, the potato was cultivated by Indigenous cultures such as the Inca and brought to Europe in the 16th century. Today, it is a staple food in many cultures, deeply entwined with global (colonial) entanglements. With the tongue-in-cheek persona of the “Potato Uncle”, Schmidt playfully questions the folkloric and traditional associations of the potato in German-speaking contexts.

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