

LIVING

How does a mother shape her daughter's life? Sara Davies meets photographers exploring the relationship,

I'd walk a million miles for one of your smiles

'WOMAN's stormiest love affair', was Phyllis Chesler's view of it. Simone de Beauvoir looked back on it as 'a subjection that I loved and hated'. Thousands of feminist pages, thousands of hours of consciousness-raising have gone into the anguished dissection of the relationship between mothers and daughters.

Women's writing, fictional and non-fictional, has long recognised that this is the big one — the subject that lasts into the small hours, the conversation that unites any group of women in immediate sisterhood. We are all daughters, and lord, don't we tie

know, if she has any daughters, they aren't the ones who count in her symbolic family, and yet they are the ones who will grow up in their turn to assume, or kick against, her mantle.

A *Daughter's View* is an exhibition of work by 13 women photographers exploring the theme of daughterhood. Its impact comes from the sheer concentration of its theme: more than a collection of work by women, it highlights the first, and most significant relationship in most women's lives, and the one that forms and informs their own lives as women.

you *have* to work at some point on your relationship with your mother,' says Rosy Martin. 'It's a life process.'

The show's curators, Sue Isherwood and Joan Solomon, found the women they asked to contribute jumped at the chance. 'Wherever you look,' says Sue Isherwood, 'there are women working with these ideas: how to make images of this complex relationship, how to use photography to deal with the intensity of feeling our mothers generate in us.'

For some of the photographers, it has been a cathartic experience. Sue Wilson is a news and features photographer, and her sequence of photos about what she calls her journey to her mother was her first consciously autobiographical work.

'It was really good for me. I realised I'm obviously very angry about the past, and frustrated that other people always seemed to have a much more honest and open relationship with their mothers than I can.'

'I think it's made me much more forgiving. When I came to make the photographs I realised I remember her as always angry with me, always trying to make me behave, and myself as always trying to keep out of trouble, but no matter how hard I tried, always failing. So there's an image of a woman with her back turned, a rather menacing and rejecting figure; another one of a pair of hands at a sink, with this admonishing gesture I remember so clearly.'

'But in making the photographs, I came to a sort of understanding about why she was so angry with me, and seemed to make so many demands. She almost couldn't help it, she was so well programmed by her mother and her upbringing.'

Janet Edmeades's photographs, by contrast, bear witness to a genuine friendship between mother and daughter. 'I'm really lucky. I don't know anyone else who has that relationship — they're always asking, "Oh, can't we borrow Gracie?"'

Like several of the contributors, Janet has made a creative assault on the conventions of the family album to explore what lay behind the public face of childhood. 'In photographs of me as a little girl I always look jolly, with my little red bike and my curls. But actually I was ill all the time. I was asthmatic as a baby, and needed constant looking after, which was what my mother did.'

'I think if you're a woman photographer or a writer or a cultural producer of any kind,



Acceptance is what we seem to crave as daughters, and what our mothers find most difficult to bestow. 'Aren't You Like Your Mum?' by Janet Edmeades.

That's what brought us close, and it has kept us very close.'

Janet worked with her mother on the series, a collaboration that they both enjoyed. 'Because of my illness, we can't do a lot of the things that "ordinary" mothers and daughters do. Talking about the photographs has brought us even closer, and I think it's confirmed her acceptance of me as I am.'

Acceptance is what we seem to crave as daughters, and perhaps what our mothers find most difficult to bestow.

Brenda Prince made a series of portraits of lesbian women and their mothers, accompanying her own with a letter to her mother that, despite its particularity, strikes a note that must be familiar to generations of women.

'Dear Mum,' it begins. 'It was good to see you this weekend in your new home. I always come away from you feeling slightly depressed and guilty. Guilty for not being the daughter you would have liked me to have been.'

There are other daughters' voices in the show: the teen-

age mothers in Melanie Friend's photo-journalistic series talk on an accompanying tape about their relationship with their own mothers.

Angela Coombes's gentle portraits of her friends and their daughters appear side by side with the daughters' comments about the photographs: a 77-year-old daughter is surprised to see her 102-year-old mother looking so strong and intrepid; an 18-year-old and her Down's Syndrome sister write of their love for their mother.

As a mother, Joan Solomon's 'The Family Snaps', a series of studio shots posed by actors, was inspired by reading psychologist Alice Miller's *The Drama of Being A Child*. 'I wanted to explore the whole idea of parents using their children to fulfil their ambitions, to show the dynamics of what's going on underneath the traditional family album photograph.'

There will be few women who will leave the exhibition without having had at least one moment of insight. It made me remember a dream I had as a 21-year-old, just embarked on a year's travelling and suddenly madly in love with a man in my very first port of call.

One night my mother appeared to me, hand raised in stern reproof, and reminded me of my travel plans. I left the next day for Mexico, and I've never even remembered to thank her.



From 'The Family Snaps' by Joan Solomon.

ourselves in knots about our mothers. The books sit on our shelves: *My Mother, My Self*; *Of Woman Born*, *The Good Mother*... telling of guilt, resentment, pride, love and a hundred other emotions.

There have been far fewer attempts to convey the relationship visually. Images of motherhood itself are plentiful. The iconic mother gazes out from paintings, sculptures and photographs, wreathed in the virtues we have assigned to her. More often than not, she cradles her boy child. Sometimes she represents an even loftier idea: mother church, mother country, mother of Parliaments. We

The starting point for the exhibition was a long-term project on mothers and daughters by pioneer photo-therapists Jo Spence and Rosy Martin — work that has inspired several younger photographers in the show. In a therapeutic process that often extends over months or even years, they use photographs to re-enact and explore the memories and emotions of childhood. Together and in partnership with other photographers they have contributed some of the show's most compelling images.

'I think if you're a woman photographer or a writer or a cultural producer of any kind,



Natasha, Jessica and their mother, by Angela Coombes.



'Mother's Pride', by Melanie Friend.

'A Daughter's View', Gallery One, Watershed Media Centre, 1 Canons Road, Bristol (0272 276444), until Nov 24 then on tour.