

Tactile Moments of Care: The Work of Caroline Walker and Clare Woods

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Painters Caroline Walker and Clare Woods share a compulsive habit: intently documenting their surroundings, they collect photographic images, a process of scrutiny, aggregation, indexing and filtering that feeds into their respective painting practices, sometimes years after the original images were taken. They each distil scenes and motifs from thousands of shots, reinterpreting them in scores of sketches, a fraction of which eventually results in the actual paintings. In their work they turn a perceptive gaze to contemporary society and interrogate established hierarchies to elevate the often-dismissed still life and genre scenes: on a grand scale, they consider the mundane, the fleeting, the overlooked.

Caroline Walker's 2024 Frieze London presentation is part of a body of work around nurseries, focusing on the setting her daughter, Daphne, attended until the family moved from London to Scotland two summers ago. The series is set in June 2022, Walker had just completed *Lisa*, a series following her sister-in-law in the final months of pregnancy and first weeks of motherhood. With Daphne two-and-a-half years old by then, much of Walker's thinking had been focused on the early stages of bringing up a child and the people involved in their care, predominantly women. *Overwhelmingly*, women. While Walker's work has long focused on labour – often unseen, always female – in recent years her investigation has taken a more personal spin, with series centred on her mother (*Janet*, 2019–20), the maternity unit where she gave birth (*Birth Reflections*, 2021) followed by *Lisa*. Much has been said about the first 2,000 days – or five years – of a child's life, as formative for their development. As Daphne's nursery routine set in, Walker became fascinated by this transfer from the home to the external childcare context. Planning this new series, Walker captured the different spaces and activities of the nursery, framing her photographs like she would frame paintings, creating narrative sequences to build a picture of the place, the people and what happens there. More than a replication of what is offered at home, professional care is filled with activities and stimulation that are distinct from what a busy parent can offer, whether working or having to look after a home as well as a child. Walker was drawn to the ordered clutter of the visual environment – stuffed with the paraphernalia of educational 'resources', the abundance of primary colours, the walls covered in kids' artworks – but also the types of care, from one-to-one contact and group learning to solitary meal-making. Each painting thus has a different locus – that of baby, toddler or preschool room, the kitchen – or focus. Like Walker armed with her camera, as viewers we assume the position of the observer/voyeur, at the edge of the scene – seeing a part of the children's everyday that parents don't usually get to see.

In *Palette Preparation*, a toddler looks up as an early-years teacher squeezes the contents of a bottle of paint into a tray. A warm light floods the scene, captured in delicious thick brush strokes that dwell on every detail; from stacks of drawers to the curls of the child's hair and cardboard suns suspended from the ceiling. The figures' facial features are largely concealed, yet they are clearly locked in an exchange that is both intense and tender, the child full of eager anticipation, the adult engaged. The same trusting familiarity and affection is evident in *Reading Books*, set in the baby room. The child, ensconced on the reader's lap, looks away from the book to gaze up to her face, perhaps studying the movements of her mouth as she enunciates words that will join the child's growing vocabulary. The key protagonists in the series are the working women, their uniform – a cerulean blue T-shirt – the unifying element from one painting to the next. If children are part of the scene,

what captivates Walker is the interactions with and interior lives of these women as they play out in the paintings. In *The Spanish Class*, pre-school children sit in a semi-circle, listening to a language teacher who has been left out of the picture frame. The children are all looking in the same direction but there's a slightly different tension to their concentration: a mouth slightly opened, a tilted head or a slouched body, one girl stretches while another fidgets with her legs and sucks her thumb. Sat slightly behind the group, a teacher holds two of the seated girls' hands. There is a particular softness to her gaze; her attention more on those little hands than on the scene in front of her, her smile more related to touch than to the lesson – a 'tactile moment of care' that Walker identified in her earlier body of work, *Birth Reflections*. By contrast, in *Imaginative Play I*, another teacher sits cross-legged on the floor, seemingly playing with carpet toys by herself. Walker has framed the scene cutting out the child to the right, through which the woman appears lost in her own thoughts. Behind her, some 'independent play' is going on as a little girl searches through aprons hanging on a peg. Whereas the framing is deliberate, Walker has edited out very little from the busy environment, and if her scenes look serene, there is a slightly unreal sense of silence and calm, at odds with the reality of a nursery setting full of noise and movement.

Although the child's dependence is matched by the adults' devotion, the two-way relationship is as ephemeral as it is deep. Soon the child will move on to the next stage of their education and the memory of these significant adults will fade away. How do these women feel, I wonder, when they have to sever ties with children they have seen grow, perhaps having watched their first steps, heard their first words or witnessed their 'eureka moments'? How does it feel to say goodbye over and over as children come and go? Do they become desensitised to that bond, is it just a part of the motions of their job, or is each time a moment of heartbreak? Do they still think about these kids years later? Walker's pictures are emotionally charged, and yet, she eschews the pitfalls of sentimentalism. Instead, there is a certain social commentary that is not unlike Mary Cassatt's and Berthe Morisot's sensitive portrayals of 'wet nurses', foregrounding the hard labour of the women hired to feed, clean, comfort and educate the offspring of women of higher socioeconomic status. To the question 'are you a realist', Walker responds with an emphatic 'yes', mentioning Édouard Manet alongside Cassatt and Morisot as influences, a trio of painters who captured the realities of late-nineteenth-century Parisian life in a 'buttery way of modelling paint', which she sees as distinctly French. But Walker's artistic lineage runs deeper, finding roots in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings focused on a single figure framed in three-quarter length, an influence most obvious in *Preparing Breakfast*. 'That woman in profile engaged in an activity, that particular sense of light, is something that I have come back to again and again', she says, 'the kind of [Johannes] Vermeer inspiration when I am composing something'. A pose she finds herself searching for when she collects, camera in hand, the material for her next paintings. Early on in her career, Walker's works were deliberately staged, hiring locations, models and clothes to create particular scenes, and the impetus of these set-ups was often to interrogate the genre paintings in which women are objectified, engaged in supposedly virtuous womanly tasks, and how loaded a subject like 'women's work' is. A 'Vermeer-esque' treatment still permeates her paintings in the way women inhabit the composition and are defined by the surrounding light. We think of Vermeer's as silent paintings and Walker creates a similar sense of quietness; her protagonists arrested in time but not without a touch of humour. If the children appear calm, there is something surreptitious going on in *Imaginative Play I*. A painting about painting, *Palette Preparation* anticipates an episode of messy play. In *The Spanish Class* the children are listening attentively, but they might erupt into ear-splitting squeals and laughter any second. Suspending these moments in what is a fast-paced and noisy environment, Walker offers snapshots of these children's lives, but also captures something

'that is happening over and over again to all sorts of women all over the world'; women leaving their children at nursery doors and those opening their arms wide as they walk in.

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'It's complicated', says Clare Woods as we talk about her latest body of work, still lifes that sit on the cusp of landscape scenes. The conversation moves from weeds to the history of slavery, from gardening to struggle, family to death, pleasure and suffering. As the conversation unravels, these issues are both related and contradictory, implied and explicit, contained in the work and not. Make no mistake, Woods' still lifes are not innocuous 'flower arrangements', as the genre has often been dismissed as; on the contrary, they contain and project the full gamut of human emotions. Intensely personal, they are at once conceptual and physical, figurative and abstract. They may be still lifes but they feel distinctly 'of the body'.

Like for Caroline Walker, photographs are Clare Woods' starting point, even if it often takes years before she uses them to develop new work. In fact, this new series stems from Frieze 20 years ago, when Woods snapped her way through Regent's Park, London. In *The Improver* we see luscious emerald stems and crimson flowers erupting out of a stone container. In Woods' work, title and painting are developed separately, for she collects titles too – some 23,000 and counting – which she pairs with a painting after she completes the work, through an association of words and image that locks in naturally. While the titles are neither descriptive nor intended to explain what the painting is about, they give a sense of how Woods likes to hold together several ideas. She is a keen gardener – a pursuit she describes as a safe place and from which she learns – and in planting 'an improver is something to make the soil better, but I also like the idea of improving oneself, making oneself better in some way', she explains. This dual meaning is felicitous, and the painting itself feels like a joyous explosion of colour and form. But more often her titles carry connotations that feel contradictory or have sinister undertones. If *The Planters* could be simply describing flowerpots, it also alludes to Britain's colonial past and the name given to enslaved people working on plantations. This title was paired with a painting of overgrown weeds that is almost monochromatic, where the gradations of green are exclusively achieved through pressure, the paint in places pushed very thin, extraordinarily textured and shiny in others. Woods turns out to be surprisingly knowledgeable about weeds – a subject that in turn made her think about desirability, or the lack thereof, of displacement, of things considered to be in the wrong place. While looking at plant history may reveal that there are not so many native plants in British gardens, the subject of 'invasive species' has become pervasive in gardening discussions in recent years, not unlike the language used by some groups speaking about human migration. Woods muses that Japanese knotweed was sought after and fashionable in Victorian times, but as gardeners gradually lost control of its rhizomatic growth, it became undesirable in the UK while its flowers remain a culinary delicacy and are used in traditional medicine in Japan. Like much else, the way we choose which exotic plants are desirable turns out to be about control. Woods' fascination for history, and the layers of meaning that words acquire also comes in with *The Diggers*, a term used to refer to people who opposed the Enclosure Act (and called for the abolition of property and aristocracy) in the seventeenth century, but also for the tool used to extract dandelions from the soil. (Like knotweed and bindweed, pulling on dandelion will only result in its root breaking, ensuring regrowth). Inspired by Albrecht Dürer's *Great Piece of Turf* (1503, Albertina, Vienna), the viewpoint here is from the ground up, elevating the weeds, the fuzzy dandelion clocks becoming like vaporous clouds. She also cites Eliot Hodgkin's paintings of weeds pushing through the rubble of London's bombed sites as inspiration. There's a resilience

and persistence to weeds that feels like life itself – ‘some weed seeds’, Woods marvels, ‘can lay dormant for 400 years.’

Our reading of Woods’ paintings depends on the perspective from which they are observed. From a distance, they are clearly figurative, but the closer you get the more abstract they become. The shapes dissolve and what is left is the paint, immersive and almost overwhelming. The series marks a shift in Woods’ practice in its abundance of detail and a very distinctive colour palette – deep greens and burnt umber, crimson and magenta – emerging out of the background’s inscrutable darkness, with luminosity – emerald, turquoise and soft pink – seeping through. The latter is achieved through technique rather than pigment: working horizontally, pressing her brush loaded with paint onto the aluminium surface, the more she applies pressure the more she achieves light and translucency. Counter-intuitively, it is the weight of the brush that affords the painting’s lightness. Its fluidity is deceptive: far from effortless, Woods’ painting requires hard graft and physical endurance. Her work may demand months of methodical preparation, but once she reaches the painting stage, she relinquishes control and proceeds more intuitively, working solidly over eight to ten punishing hours. When I ask if it leaves her exhausted and sore-muscled, Woods concedes that she once injured her arm and could not paint for months. The body keeps the score, to reference the title of a well-known book. There is a terrible splendour in the thick wiggles of fleshy, crimson flowers in *The Improver* and *The Left Behind*. I venture that there is something ‘of the viscera’ as they ooze out of the picture plane with anatomical slipperiness, teetering between beauty and repulsion. She agrees: ‘it is like congealed, just setting, but it still doesn’t have solid boundaries, there’s a movement to it, a spilling’. Some years ago, Woods had radical surgery: her colon was removed and she kept it in a pickled jar to draw it. Later she went to a postmortem, drawing and painting while the pathologist pulled organs out of a body. These experiences changed her colour palette, the movement of the paint and how she looked at the brush mark.

There is more to still life than the depiction of objects. Since its inception in the seventeenth century, still life has been the vehicle of choice for artists to interrogate the human condition. One of its major themes, death – its ineluctability, the temporality of things, the fragility of life – in the form of the *vanitas* and *memento mori* – the vain pursuit of worldly goods in the face of God and the reminder that all things that live come to pass – is often expressed in flower arrangements. Omnipresent in Woods’ practice, death feels both innate and lived rather than intellectualised. Sad and tender, but also achingly beautiful, *Dear James* is the last piece from the series. It was painted at speed, the morning of the funeral of her son’s friend, James. And yet there is also something uncomfortable and contradictory in the title, born out of her interest in history. It alludes to her research about King James I of England, who vehemently wrote about his distaste of tobacco, only to create a royal monopoly on the import of the crop once he realised its profitability – with dramatic impact on the slave trade. Personal grief and this reference to Britain’s shameful past operate on completely different registers, but her work abounds with these unlikely bedfellows.

While neither artist’s work could exist without an element of voyeurism, and making us into voyeurs alongside them, Walker’s and Woods’ observations of the everyday are both compassionate and profound. In seeking to bring to the fore the invisible and the ignored, their work not only carries an autobiographical element but touches on the universality of the human condition: of growing and declining bodies, of lives lived and remembered and the ways in which a space – be it in or containing a picture plane – may hold several viewpoints and alternate realities. Despite their scale, their work is intimate and draws you in, revealing that

genre scenes and still lifes can carry depth, richness and sometimes darkness that goes well beyond their subject matter.