

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Women's Work

Glimpsing the work of the world, or what painting invites us to notice

Griselda Pollock

2021

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What happens when you leave your messed-up hotel room and unmade bed in the morning, returning later to find total order restored? What invisible labour has occurred in your absence in your temporary home from home? How many of us hotel guests speak to or even acknowledge the army of workers on whom the magical hotel experience depends?

Caroline Walker has made observing the unseen a project for painting.

When I look at her painting *Bathroom, Stanley Room* (2018), I am drawn into an interior where an inner space opens up an artificial but golden glow that backlights a single figure in black. Framed in the tall rectangle of the inner doorway, on a floor patterned with black and white tiles, and echoed by silvered lines of bathroom furniture, showerheads and the dark edging of a half-seen mirror, this figure is turning slightly towards the larger space with plastic bottles in her busy hands. This warmly lit inner space punctures the foreground space which expands from a point of view across the still unmade bed whose fluffy bedding drives into the pictorial space in a triangular wedge. Our gaze mounts the rumpled duvet whose edge defines the lower limit of the distant bathroom scene. The bedroom is a symphony of greys, with one tiny patch of warming reds on the left. This space is architectural, that is, defined by uprights: door frame, wardrobe, table legs or rectangles such as the TV screen on the pale grey wall. White punctuates this harmonised tonality, itself a receiver of blue reflections: pillows, duvet, skirting boards, plug sockets, a mirror. This white calls out to the solitary globe in the bathroom and the plastic bottles the woman in black is holding.

I have described what I see in this kind of detail because this is the *work of painting*: to make an imaginary if once observed space *visible* before it can become *readable* as the scene of an event we might name as *Woman cleaning a hotel suite*. Without the re-structuring Caroline Walker's composition has delivered, what we are being asked to look at would be banal because it contains no drama, no anecdote, no singularity. Only in recognising what has been remade being remade by the *work of painting* – composition, colour, facture – will we begin to discern what we are being invited to look at by this artist.

The painting signifies work, on two registers. There is a moment from the thousands of chambermaids' daily regime: clean the toilet, wipe down the shower, replace the towels (or not), mop the floor, empty the bin, check the toilet rolls folding their ends into a neat triangle, then change or not the bed linen, make the bed, restore the room to its pristine, anonymous state. Such repetitive forms of labour were hardly recognised as work in the classic sense until feminism alerted us to the socio-economic value of reproductive labour of housework and childcare hitherto performed and unvalued as simply women's destiny on earth.

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Edouard Manet, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882

There is also on show artistic work. For all the sense that Caroline Walker's paintings convey a sense of the world *glimpsed in passing*, seen by chance by someone walking the streets, passing an open door, wandering a corridor, the painting only comes into being through intense observation and precise construction. *Corridor, Outside Room 535*, (2018) produces the feel of a Hitchcock movie with its patterned red carpet laid along the receding corridor flanked by identical white doors with their sharp black frames and blue number plaques, all dimly lit by a single line of tiny bulbs that plot the recession of the ceiling. Blocking the corridor is the bulky trolley and the blue laundry bin of the cleaner, who stands quietly studying her worklist. Her form is illuminated from above by the first light we see on the ceiling, a device that secures her in space. The solitariness of this figure in the uncanny, daytime hotel corridor is framed within the picture, however, by the wooden doorway (that defines the frame of the painting) through which this scene was once glimpsed and then photographed by the artist as she hunted her subject by haunting a world of women's daily labour that has never been given the dignity of exquisitely realised painting.

As an art student and now an accomplished painter Caroline Walker looked back at painting in Paris in the 1860s–1890s and specifically at the work of Edouard Manet (1832–1883) and Edgar Degas (1834–1917). Both artists changed the possibilities of painting through the combination of what and how they painted. The Manet whose paintings are invoked here in dialogue with a painter of the 21st century are the traumatic works he dared to create about

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Preparatory sketch for Housekeeping series, 2018

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You come. You take the list. You go upstairs. You think of your family; maybe your child is in your country. Maybe your mum is not with you. It's very hard. And you say 'It's ok, I can do it!' You take your trolley. You start to clean the rooms. You see a nice lady, nice dress, from one of the rooms. Maybe you're thinking one day I'll be like her and somebody will clean my room and you say 'Good morning, ma'am' and you don't receive nothing. I have this feeling so many, many times. The rest is fine. It's a job.
Ana Maria

Corridor, Outside Room 535, 2018

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women in places of modern labour. For his Baudelairean moment of 'the painting of modern life' (the poet Baudelaire called upon his contemporary artists to engage aesthetically with the new sites and subjects of metropolitan urban modernity in 1863), Manet made visible the working girl's workplace: her bed (*Olympia*, 1863–5 Paris: Musée d'Orsay) or the bar of a café-concert (*Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, London: Courtauld Institute of Art). I would not have been able to write the above statement had I not gone back to Manet's work having spent time looking at the works of Caroline Walker. It was what she has introduced into painting – work – that made me realise that I should now define Manet's images, more often discussed in terms of sexual transactions, leisure, class, as images of working-class women's places of labour and of their labouring bodies with its toll on their disregarded minds. The women who work as hotel cleaners, often newly arrived in Britain in search of work and new lives form the current, gendered proletariat, sisters to the teenage sex worker seen in Manet's *Olympia* and exhausted barista at the Folies Bergère, all made up and decked out in fashionable finery, standing dully behind a bar where she is being chatted up. For me there are two give-aways in Manet's painting that shockingly interrupt the glitz and glamour of the night-out. One is the fact the dress does not quite fit her (he noticed her underlying thinness). The other is her work-worn hands planted on the bar, which are pink from her other labour. Possibly the model had also a day job as a laundress, and again Manet noticed and made visible this sign of work. *Bathroom, Room 608* (2018) is beautifully knowing in the translation of Manet but also Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) both of whom subtly use mirrors in their compositions to double the fictive space of painting. The reflection in Walker's painting captures a gesture and the concentration of a woman cleaning a sink while also showing her face-on, making us, like the painter as she stood to record this moment with a camera, come face-to-face with her as an individual.

Caroline Walker wanders the city, seeing in, sometimes going deep into basements, for instance, of Saville Row Tailoring establishments, where she was surprised to discover women working their amazing hand skills as tailors. Here her compositions capture the vivid colour of these artificially illuminated environments: threads, surfaces, materials, tables, tools, clutter. These paintings are significantly named after the activities and the skills – *Pressing* (2019), *Mark-Stitching* (2019) – in an area of work traditionally imagined as predominantly masculine.

Her paintings of scientists and medical researchers form another revelation about women and their workplaces. The aesthetic singularity of these paintings arises, however, neither from harmonies or colour contrasts, but from the clinical whiteness that prevails in machines, cabinets and the sometimes-named researchers' white coats. This challenge for a painter is matched by her equally intense fascination with the incongruous or contrasting vivid modern colours of plastics and latex that are the materials of these women's practices. Here again, I see how Caroline Walker has also deeply understood what has been named the 'trauma' that was Manet and behind him his seventeenth century Spanish inspiration Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). Trauma means that these painters did something *in* and *with* painting that was 'impossible' in the terms of their contemporaries' practical and theoretical models for painting. The radical interventions of Manet and Velázquez lay unharvested for centuries, admired but not taken up since no one knew how to. Drawing on these artists, is not going back into art

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history. Rather it means bringing the virtual possibilities of these paintings into the present, and in relation to contemporary issues for painting. Caroline Walker's paintings show how she brilliantly grasped the shock of Manet's bold use of blue-black, for instance, in *Heleen* (2019), a painting of immense formal and colouristic complexity even as it delivers an image of a scientist, an investigator, using eyes and hands to see and know the otherwise invisible world of microbes and antibodies.

It is here that the argument we can make for the significance of Caroline Walker's paintings as studies of the theme of women and work needs to be qualified. She is also, I suggest, painting a new kind of portrait, the genre of art that pictures an individual not a type. *Three Maids* (2018) is, therefore, actually a triple portrait. No longer working, these three women

Mark-Stitching, 2019

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are having a break, squashed together into a tiny space, sitting at cheap folding tables, having a snack, checking the phone, dreaming perhaps of missed sleep. Identical in their black uniforms, possibly sharing a language and a country of origin and the disappointment of migrating to this kind of working non-existence, they are individuated by the painter. Her painting endows her sitters with psychological interiority and a presence in the world that art can create for us to contemplate through the protocols of painting's mute arrest of this moment in time.

In the materially realised and visual perpetuation of a once-observed moment, the artist makes an ethical appeal to us to imagine with her the subjective world of three women who have names and relations, histories and hopes that we cannot, however, know. The painting's compressed space brings us close to them, to note their informal gestures, their guarded response to the woman taking the photograph over whose formal and narrative elements she will later labour herself in her workplace, a studio. She will choose which moment her camera found for her now painter's eye. She will make drawings to understand the structure of the scene. She will make oil sketches to discern its colour relations. Then she will compose, construct and make first in acrylic and then oil paint, to bring into the world what the Western tradition defines as a picture, a tableau, a realised statement. This is not a painting of something where oil or acrylic is just a medium. *Painting* was classically, and can still be even in our post-conceptual condition, a way of thinking. Painters take up the world, re-forming the chaos of what we glimpse as we pass through daily life. When we are asked to pause before a created, restructured place – the painting – only long, slow looking will reveal to us what we, as non-painters, never saw or even noticed when rushing through our daily working lives. What is abstracted from time and given the space of painting with its invitation to look slowly can tell us about the world, its inequalities, its pain, its dignity.

Much seeing in art, notably when its subjects are women, have been structured by peeping, and even eroticised voyeurism, which has *masculinised* the position, whatever the gender or sexuality, of the viewer. Caroline Walker belongs in a now long tradition of artists who are women and who seek to see and show the world differently. They want to generate a different kind of gazing in and for their paintings, not as women, but mobilising the knowledge of women about our different experiences of and in the world. *Glimpsing* is one term I have used for the process Caroline Walker enacts to discover what she wants to see in the world. The final paintings are, however, resolved studio works, worked out over many stages during long hours of layered realisation in painted reformulation. What I discern as an effect of these stages and elements of her painting practice actively deflects and blocks the traps of voyeurism and mastery attendant or the invisible gaze at a woman observed. Caroline Walker's paintings makes us witness to the invisible moments and unfamiliar sites of contemporary women's labour only because of the time she has dedicated to fashioning – from the glimpsed, the unobserved and the unvalued experiences of different women – paintings. In their carefully crafted form and richly painted surfaces, the artist makes us want to look long and slowly and marvel at what she has made. Changing times of day, mood, colour, gestures, spaces, interiors, these are her vocabulary for trapping us into spending time with painting.

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Heleen, 2019

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Quitiz, 2019

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Two paintings, *Forecasting* (2018) and *Cut & Finish* (2018) keep the viewer firmly outside, with the wandering artist, on the streets, looking in or looking up either at a façade of glass and steel or into the lit interior of a hair dressing salon. They inscribe the painter's gaze from the outside, which makes us acknowledge the visual complexity of our urban architectural environments. Yet within these extraordinary compositions that perfectly adhere to the flatness thesis of modernist ideology, space is opened up to contain figures of women we cannot know because they are busy with their activity. Not waiting to be seen, they have, however, been brought into art by the dedicated labour of seeing, painting, seeing, finding, seeing, layering, searching and composing that is the painter at work. This is, in the end, what we the gallery visitors have come to experience.

We must, however, also see-feel in the aesthetic beauty of her paintings the pathos of lives Caroline Walker's works calls us to notice: the pathos of exile from a homeland, the loneliness of immigration, the anxiety caused by low pay, social exclusion, precarious work conditions. In other paintings, we are called to see struggle for recognition in certain gendered professions. Thus class, gender, and race are entangled and play across these beautiful surfaces. They unsettle the aesthetic pleasures offered by the paintings with what I name their 'moral' sentiment. Caroline Walker studies and paints people, women, in ways which respect their unknowability while clothing each individual with her respect and I would say love. This is not a personal sentiment about any one woman in these images. It is perhaps caring for their work and what it today now represents: the unacknowledged labour of so many women, mothers, cleaners, secretaries, carers, nurses, tailoresses, researchers, technicians, who have been someone's mother, sister or daughter. I feel sure that the artist's own memory of certain women's lives infuses and lines her work of wandering and looking, seeing and painting women of the city with this intensity. This affective dimension is held by the rigour of her compositional inventiveness and her skills in the very act of oil painting. Both then serve as the framework for the 'moral' charge her paintings deliver in a world that sees too much and does not look slowly enough to learn to feel. I choose the old-fashioned notion of moral sentiment to convey an ethical disposition, a way of being at once a witness and an observer of women and their dedicated portraitist.

The brutal brilliance of artist-men such as Manet and Degas was challenged in their generation by the terms in which their colleagues Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) and Mary Cassatt represented the world from their specific places as artist-women in the shared but gendered spaces of modernity. My slow looking at the works by Caroline Walker that so tenderly and toughly explore gender in the spaces of today's modernity – digital technologies, social media and proliferating images – reveals to me her subtle grasp of her forerunners' ways of seeing and painting their own contemporary worlds of daily life and work. Like Cassatt and Morisot, however, Caroline Walker's paintings have found a way to hold the formal and the moral, technique and sentiment, structure and pathos in an affecting tension that calls for our deep attention.

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