

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Laura Knight & Caroline Walker: A Female Gaze
Looking at the Overlooked: The Paintings of Caroline Walker
Jennifer Higgle
2022

In 1985, the group of anonymous artist activists known as the Guerrilla Girls made a poster that asked a deceptively simple question:

Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?
Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.

In recent decades – thanks, in the main, to the energy of feminist activists, artists, art historians and curators – a long overdue spotlight has been shone on female achievement. However, walk through most art-historical galleries and it's clear the old tropes persist. Although women have always made art – and, of course, have worked at everything from ploughing fields to running countries – we have, for too long, been depicted as types: mothers, goddesses, angels or temptresses. Across the centuries, it was a rare male artist who explored a woman's inner world – or recognised the importance of her labour.

In 2019, the Scottish artist Caroline Walker asked her mother if she could portray her daily routine: cleaning, gardening, ironing, preparing food in the house in Fife the family has lived in for four decades. The resultant series of studies and paintings, *Janet* (2019–2020) is, in its quiet way, a radical act of celebration – of a mother's care, the dignity of domestic work, and the bonds between a mother and daughter. As if to emphasise the marginal status so often given to women, Janet is often glimpsed through a window, a doorway or overshadowed by plants. The paintings' titles are specific: *Dusting Pictures, Late Morning, March; Bathroom Sink Cleaning, Mid Morning, March; Hemming Pyjamas, Late Morning, December; Watering Rhododendrons, Mid Morning, May.*

To create her paintings, Walker studies her subject, taking numerous photographs. She then sketches in the outlines of the painting from a composite of shots, underpaints in acrylic and then works over it in oils. Unlike many artists, she eschews projections, working freehand from gridded drawings. Her debt to the virtuoso explorations of daily life by the 19th century French artists she's drawn to – such as Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot, Édouard Manet and Édouard Vuillard – is clear in her swift, sure brushstrokes; her nuanced portraits are at once naturalistic and rich in colour and tone. Like her precursors, Walker is adept at both setting a scene and highlighting the details that animate the whole; the flash of a red watering can echoing the crimson blooms shining above it; a tissue erupting from its box like a flame that stirs a fireplace; a tiny statue of a buddha at the edge of a composition implying that 'this too will pass', the mantra of anyone who has ever cleaned a house, day in, day out.

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In the quietest way imaginable, narratives unfold: Janet, deep in thought, waters the lush garden in a purple and pink top that hums like another plant amidst the foliage. She hangs out laundry beneath a blue sky, her arms raised in a gesture that brings to mind the supplication at the heart of great religious paintings. She lights candles at night, and the warm room glows; it's clear that she's the architect of a sanctuary in an abrasive world. The presence of Walker's father is suggested in a single painting: *Hanging Out His Overalls, Early Afternoon, May*. Beneath abundant foliage, near the bins and a neatly stacked wood pile, Janet holds up a large blue coverall, about to peg it onto the washing line.

Walker is fascinated by the lives she glimpses from the bus or walking along the street. She has painted manicurists, hairdressers, shop assistants, refugees, waitresses, tailors, nurses, doctors, and scientists. Her series *Housekeeping* (2018) comprises portraits of hotel cleaners. When Walker approached the women to ask if she could observe them performing their duties, many of them were baffled, wondering why on earth she would want to focus on their menial tasks. But spend time with these paintings, and the artist's intentions become clear: *Housekeeping* is a sensitive, understated portrayal of women doing a variety of jobs – making beds, vacuuming, cleaning bathrooms – that honours the individuality and stoicism of the workers while making clear the value of their labour.

As in *Janet*, some of the women are seen from afar, through windows or around corners. Others are placed centre stage: in *Corridor, Outside Room 535* for example, a young woman checks a printout in front of a large pile of linen, her face lit as lovingly as a saint in a renaissance altarpiece. *Three Maids* is like a 21st century version of the three graces: three young women are on a break, checking a phone, eating, dreaming. Their work might be menial and often exhausting, but their rich inner worlds are inviolable.

In 2021, Walker, who had recently become a mother herself, took up residence in a maternity ward at the Elizabeth Garret Anderson Wing at UCLH, London. When I visited the artist's studio in January 2022, she was completing the monumental painting *Theatre*: it is, she told me, the most complicated work she's ever made. A woman has just given birth; we see her, attended to by a mix of masked doctors, midwives, and theatre staff. Her experience is at once individual and universal; she's exhausted and triumphant, smiling radiantly at her baby, who is swaddled in a nearby incubator. The painting is something of a companion piece to the equally monumental *Ultrasound*: a chiaroscuro study of a room occupied by three women

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and a long-haired man cast in shadow, three of whom are masked. An expectant mother's body is obscured by a doctor's ministrations; a black and white embryo glowing on a screen forms the beating heart of the composition; a consultant, her face softly lit by her computer screen, is in the midst of typing. Both paintings depict a very modern moment – new mothers, surrounded by machines as they are people – and a centuries-old one: the beginning of life, a scene as dramatic in its scope as a 19th century history painting.

Walker is currently working on a series of portraits of her sister-in-law that capture both the joy and claustrophobia of having a small baby. The paintings are atmospheric, tender, intimate. Looking at them, I thought of my own mother who, despite having four children, was often asked if she worked. Sick of the question, she stuck a magnet to our fridge. It declared: 'every mother is a working mother'.