

Caroline Walker: Labours of love

Laura Smith

It should be very simple: while he is awake, you care for him. As soon as he goes to sleep, you do the most important thing you have to do and do it as long as you can, either until it is done or until he wakes up. If he wakes up before it is done, you care for him until he sleeps again, and then you continue to work on the most important thing. In this way, you should learn to recognize which thing is the most important and to work on it as soon as you have the opportunity.

—Lydia Davies, “What You Learn About the Baby”¹

Caroline Walker’s new body of work, titled *Lisa*, shown at Stephen Friedman Gallery in spring 2022, captures a very specific time that many women viscerally recollect later. Charting the first few months of new motherhood, Walker’s series of oil paintings and sketches, and black and white ink drawings, document the simultaneous joy, love, bliss, delirium, boredom, loneliness and claustrophobia that accompany the first days at home with a newborn baby. Over four months Walker observed her sister-in-law, the titular Lisa, at home during the final days of her pregnancy and then, returned from hospital, with her baby daughter as she adjusted to new routines and domestic priorities. In one painting, *Hospital Bag* (2022), we see Lisa packing said bag, her tummy bulging as she calmly folds an airy, pink robe that catches the light from the window behind her. In *Sleepsuits* (2022), Lisa sits, still heavily pregnant, gently organising the soon-to-be-worn romper suits in a wardrobe (which the artist informed me was built by her brother). Elsewhere, once the baby has made an appearance, Lisa is seen feeding, holding, playing with her daughter, or vacantly watching TV, making a cup of tea in the same airy, pink robe, or washing up. Walker’s paintings are poignantly intimate, raw and honest, and for anyone who has been through this experience, they reveal the complexity of emotions that are happening all at once with an innate sensitivity.

Walker is an artist whose paintings register the social, cultural and economic experiences of

¹ Lydia Davies, excerpt from “What You Learn About the Baby”, in *The Collected Stories* (New York: Picador, 2009), p. 626.

women living and working in late capitalism. Her works muddy the often very thin line between lived, personal experience and seemingly objective documentation. Most often she works from photographs she takes of her subjects in situ over an extended period of time. The photographs are then worked up into ink and oil sketches, sometimes constructed from composites of several photographs, which in turn are the basis for her large, freehand oil paintings. As if to emphasise the often marginalised work of women, Walker's figures tend to be glimpsed – and photographed – at a slight remove: we see them through windows, or doorways, behind kitchen cupboards, piles of towels and laundry, or from the outside looking in – as if they are being watched by a benevolent onlooker. Walker deliberately distances herself from her subjects and toys with ideas around voyeurism that so often complicates portraiture. We know that she is present as she is the artist depicting this scene for us, but she consciously does not implicate herself in it and presents her protagonists as oblivious, or at least unaware of her presence. This sense of seeing the unseen permeates both the artist's approach to making as well as her content. She frequently highlights the overlooked or made invisible jobs performed by women – from beauticians to cleaners, from waitresses to tailors, and from nurses, doctors and midwives to mothers. As she comments:

the subject of my paintings in its broadest sense is women's experiences, whether that is the imagined interior life of a glimpsed shop worker, a closely observed portrayal of my mother working in the family home, or women I've had the privilege of spending time with at their place of work. From the anonymous to the highly personal, what links all these subjects is an investigation of experiences that are specifically female.²

The paintings that Walker creates have a cinematic, epic quality that suggests imagined narratives, feelings of time passing and of collected, private moments being observed and shared. Her brushstrokes are tight but easy and swift, with a quiet, confident self-assurance that reveals her skill and dexterity as a painter. Her palette is always naturalistic but skewed ever so slightly by warm lights, strong contrasts between natural and artificial illumination and the difference between day and night. The faces of her subjects are frequently lit – by a lamp, a screen or a window – so that they glow in a way that resembles religious Renaissance portraiture, while the scale and architecture of her paintings often recall nineteenth-century

² Caroline Walker, see <https://www.stephenfriedman.com/artists/81-caroline-walker/> (accessed 11 May 2022).

history painting. Elsewhere her approach to domesticity or interior imagery, and how her works emit a sort of universal intimacy, resonates with scenes from Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Vilhelm Hammershøi, or the Scottish colourists Francis Cadell and Samuel Peploe.

One of the most interesting ways in which Walker creates that intimacy, as well as the sense of layered narratives, is through the time that she spends with her subjects. Each new body of work, each new exhibition, reveals the concentrated period she dedicates to one person, place or idea. In *Lisa*, for example, we are invited into her world through 24 new works, some smaller, quieter studies, and others so huge in scale that you could walk into them. In the exhibition, the works are paced to create a rhythm between their scales but not arranged in a chronological order – from pregnancy to being at home with the baby. Rather, they seem to cross temporality loops and warps – as it does when at home with a newborn. Imagery repeats and recurs, and scenes shift ever so slightly as if we are looking at the same view from a number of different vantage points. Through *Lisa*'s everyday tasks we begin to feel that the house is mapped out for us, reenforcing a sense of intimacy, domesticity and claustrophobia, as well as a familiarity between us, her and the house. That idea of familiarity is important to Walker, as is the question of what it takes to produce familiarity, to create a feeling of belonging, without becoming overly romanticised or sentimental. She does this deftly, with the mood of her work being ambiguous, charged with a complex mix of emotions that evade any easy, sunny reading. As she says herself, “I think I have quite a morose gaze!”³

How Walker incorporates very particular elements – cups of tea, television remotes, baby bottles, certain clothing, smart phones – into her paintings, situates them firmly in our contemporary space and time and takes them away from any idealised or nostalgic timelessness. There are only two still lifes in the exhibition: *Deliveries* (2022) reveals bunches of celebratory flowers, some unpacked, others not, besides books, bottles and potions. As a painting of flowers, it couldn't be less 'pretty', it feels matter of fact, unemotional and straightforward. The other, *Bottles and Pumps* (2022), shows a sink full of baby bottles and breast-pump parts ready to be sterilized – “I'd never seen a painting of a breast pump!” Walker remarked.⁴ Her intention was neither to glamorise nor diminish this experience, but to somehow

³ Caroline Walker, in conversation with the author, 10 May 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

find an honest articulation of the very particular emotions of new motherhood: “I wanted to be quietly suggestive of the claustrophobia, the loneliness, the joy of the connection you feel with this person you made, but also the mix of other emotions.”⁵

When Walker was visiting Lisa in preparation for this project, she was also researching another body of work, called Birth Reflections, through a residency at the maternity ward at University College Hospital in London, where Walker gave birth herself. This project reveals the more clinical side to labour and motherhood. When thought about alongside the paintings created for Lisa, these parallel projects serve to broaden the conversation around the role of women, invisible labour, care and domesticity. Two enormous horizontal, almost panoramic works from the Birth Reflections series stand out as particularly revelatory: Theatre (2022) shows a woman just after she has given birth surrounded by a cast of masked doctors and nurses, midwives, pediatricians, anaesthetists and theatre staff. Exhausted but jubilant, the woman smiles – through the teams of medical attendants – across the painting towards her new baby, wriggling in an incubator on the far left. Ultrasound (2022) depicts a woman during an ultrasound, the screen for which takes centre stage – and therefore so does the growing fetus – emitting a warm glow that illuminates the otherwise darkened room. These images reveal the very modern moments of new motherhood, surrounded by machines and groups of people, but still alive with feelings of care and empathy and the quiet resilience of women’s work.

In her exploration of domestic labour, Walker turned her attention even closer to home in another series, Janet (2020), presenting a series of paintings that focused on her own mother, Janet, as she went about her daily tasks. We see her cooking, cleaning, tidying and tending the garden of the Fife home where the artist spent her childhood. By elevating the status of the work her mother is engaged in to something beyond domestic labour – something worthy of epic-scale paintings – Walker creates not only a portrait of her mother and childhood home but also a careful study of the quiet dignity of housework captured in fleeting precision and repetition. In their candid and natural depiction of the veiled work, these paintings, like many of Walker’s, bring to mind the writings of radical feminist Silvia Federici and her campaign Wages for Housework in which she asserts: “We must admit that capital has been very successful at hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women. By denying

⁵ Caroline Walker in conversation with Charlotte Jansen, see <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-caroline-walkers-intimate-paintings-motherhood-resist-expectations> (accessed 10 May 2022).

housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone.”⁶

Walker’s work create a real sense of subjecthood in the women she paints, without ever feeling heavy-handed. In our conversation she explained to me how she hopes her paintings go beyond simple factual records. They are infused with the memories and emotions that come from spending time with her subjects. It is through this process of connection that her works are invested with their warmth, familiarity and intimacy. Although all created in twenty-first century Britain, there is a universality to her content and the way that she portrays it, which for me presents each moment in as a small but radical act of celebration and defiance. Walker’s paintings reveal the true value of ‘women’s work’ while also allowing us a personal introduction to these women, their homes, places of work and inner lives. Whether we are safe in the comfort of her childhood home, following the relentless work of NHS midwives and nurses, or privy to the labour and labour of new motherhood, Walker invites us to question what we understand as work. Her paintings hum with a tenderness and feeling of care, while her ability to avoid any sentimentalism establishes her skillfulness and dexterity as a woman painter at work. Through her attention for and elevation of these very familiar forms of work, Walker asks us to look at them anew and appreciate the effort that so often goes unseen.

⁶ Sylvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework”, in *All Work and No Play: Women, Housework and the Wages Due*, edited by Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming (Bristol: Falling Wall Press and Power of Women Collective, 1975), p. 3.