TANDEM

# Watching Caroline Walker

## Modern empathy, labor, and the act of looking



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FEB 20, 2026

I love to watch. I am constantly getting myself into trouble for staring. The last time I was in Bedstuy, New York, I got cursed at by an old lady because I was staring at her while she struggled to bring her bags into her apartment. I was imagining her life – did she live alone? How long has she lived in this neighborhood? I watched for what must have been an uncomfortable amount of time. Painter Caroline Walker also likes to watch. She watches women, both real and imagined, performing similar, everyday tasks like the woman I watched in New York.



Caroline Walker, *Daphne*, 2021, Oil on linen, 190 x 255 cm© Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London; Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York. Photo: Peter Mallet.

Walker knew from a young age that she was bound to paint women. "That was all I wanted to paint and draw," she tells me. In her childhood home, "there was a big cupboard in the kitchen at home, and I set up a little desk inside there. It was like my studio, and I'd be scribbling away, drawing these pictures of what I described as fancy ladies. They were quite glamorous women with fancy dresses on."

These days, Walker paints the mundane or the regular. Her work shows women in their spaces of daily life, which are often overlooked. They are cleaning, cooking, and interacting with children: caring. The paintings, while realistic, avoid the hyperreal. Through larger brushstrokes and often obscured or undetailed faces, her work toes the line between the individual and the archetypal. The effect makes her paintings feel simultaneously unique and universal. Is that my mother? Grandmother? Or the woman whom I saw cleaning an office building the other day? Both yes and no.



Caroline Walker, *Me and Laurie, Six Weeks Old*, 2024. Oil on board, 45 × 36 cm. © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London; Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York. Photo: Peter Mallet.

Walker sources her subjects from life. "Sometimes the subjects are outside my immediate life," says Walker, "like women working in hotel housekeeping. I had to cold-call hotels, and eventually got access through contacts via my galleries." She goes on to explain, "For the hospital series, I wrote a proposal to the curator. Other times, the subjects are my family – my mom, my sister-in-law – and I collect photos more casually. Right now, I'm working on nurseries my children attended."

When I was talking to Caroline, I told her that her work felt new. I expected her to emphatically agree, and she surprised me by telling me, "Someone said to me recently, 'Nobody's done this before,' but of course they have – there are countless paintings of women and children. What's new is the contemporary context and the specific viewpoint."

Caroline paints her women with the same stature and seriousness as any traditional subject, without the male gaze. Throughout her work, there is an overwhelming sense of care and empathy. She explained, "Maybe there's a different quality of empathy when a woman paints subjects whose lives she can relate to. It's not about otherness. But some of my favorite paintings of women are by male artists, so it's not about lesser or better, just different."



Caroline Walker, *Maternity 12*, 2021. Ink on paper, 47.5 × 33 cm. © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London; Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York. Photo: Peter Mallet.

One of my favorites is a recent piece by Walker entitled "Pre-Snack Play." In it, a woman sits on the ground surrounded by three children who are playing with trains. In the right third of the painting, placed slightly above the women and children, a child dressed in white plays with blocks. Formally, the composition feels traditional, following the triangular structure found throughout art history, popularized in the Renaissance, to paint women and children. What separates this piece from its Renaissance predecessors is the hallmark of Walker's work: context and empathy. The scene is set in a preschool, and the children, rather than being her accessories, are deep in movement and at play. The subjects interact with both the scenery and the figures.



Caroline Walker, *Pre-Snack Play*, 2025. Oil on linen, 180 × 134.9 cm. © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London; Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York. Photo: Peter Mallet.

Walker's paintings remind us that (art) history repeats itself; subjects, stories, and scenes are circular. What changes are context, emotion, and perspective. Caroline has taken a traditional subject, women and children, and removed them from the stiff confines of previous paintings. Now, they are depicted in their true reality as the primary subject.

I like to watch Walker's subjects because they produce the same sensation as the woman I saw on the street: an intimate snapshot into daily life that can be expanded into so much more. Walker's work stands on both the canvas and in the imagination, acting as the beginning or the middle of a story, and asking the viewer to complete the narrative.