THE TIMES

It’s the mother of all exhibitions

Caroline Walker captures nappy changes, night feeds and nurseries in her ambitious paintings of women. By Alice Jones

Caroline Walker paints the moments others ignore. A woman scrubbing the bathroom sink, blue Marigolds on. A nail bar worker sitting patiently at the feet of a client. A new mother changing her first nappy. Her paintings are often vast, always detailed and teem with life in all its mundane, marvellous glory. They combine the richness and scale of history painting with the clutter of contemporary life – sticker books, armbands, half-drunk glasses of water, a tray of just-washed bottles and buttercup yellow Medela breast pumps.

Mothering at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester brings togther Walker’s work from the past five years, all of it, as its title suggests, focusing on women and childcare – from new mothers and midwives to nursery staff and grandparents. *Lisa* is a series that follows Walker’s sister-in-law from the final months of her pregnancy – packing her hospital bag, making up the Moses basket – through to new motherhood, draped in muslins and knee-deep in brightly coloured toys or staring into the murk during a night feed.

Birth Reflections, made on the maternity ward at University College London Hospital, captures women in the moments after giving birth, or in the case of Birthing Pool, in labour. “I was in the room with her for maybe an hour,” Walker says of its exhausted subject. “We’re still in touch.” One of the canvases from *Birth Reflections* – a 3m-wide, dimly lit, hushed oil painting titled *Ultrasound* – was bought by Tate this year.

Elsewhere, Walker’s two children, Daphne, five, and Laurie, two, start to appear – the former’s little head glimpsed through a sitting room window at dusk like a sweeter version of Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, the latter being weighed by a healthcare worker or being held by Walker in one of those tired mirror selfies so many new parents will recognise. And there is Walker’s mother, Janet, laughing as she dries her grandchild’s hair in *Granny’s Hair Salon*.

Walker, 43, has painted women for as long as she can remember. When she was a girl, growing up in Dunfermline, she would draw endless variations on her mother doing chores or glamourous “fancy women” – “It’s like a thought there were only two types of women,” she says.

At the Glasgow College of Art, she painted the workers at the hotel she worked in during her holidays. Later, at the Royal College of Art, she became increasingly interested in feminism and the relationship between artist and subject. She remembers seeing a show of Walter Sickert’s *The Camden Town Nudes* at the Courtald in 2007. “I absolutely love those paintings. They’ve got an inherent voyeurism and a sexually threatening quality because it is a male artist looking at a vulnerable female subject.

“I thought about all of these paintings that I really loved and they were almost all paintings of women made by men. And I began to think, what does it mean to paint these subjects as a contemporary woman?”

The difference is power. Walker still operates at a remove – her subjects are seen through doorways and windows, rarely seem aware that they are being watched and often are captured in deeply intimate moments. The spaces she operates in – bathrooms, hospital wards, baby sensory rooms – tend to be private and undocumented. “The fact that I’m a woman is what’s given me that access and allowed me to be invited into a private and intimate space with other women who might be in quite a vulnerable situation.”

Walker photographs her subjects – sometimes, in the case of the hospital series, in a matter of minutes – then makes oil sketches and large-scale charcoal drawings before setting brush to canvas.

While her paintings can now sell for up to £1 million at auction, when Walker was training, figurative art was not fashionable.

“It wasn’t cool. When I started at Glasgow in 2000, no one was doing painting, really. It felt like what I was doing was not very relevant, or just very old-fashioned.

“It took quite a long time before I didn’t feel embarrassed when somebody asked, ‘What do you do?’ And I’d say, ‘I’m a painter.’”

In her final year at the Royal College of Art, a tutor told her that her work looked like it could have been made 150 years ago. “And it got my back up,” Walker says. “It thought, well, how do I marry up my interests with painting from that period, make it relevant and contemporary?” The answer is in the contemporary settings and details – nail bars, hospitals, hotels and homes, crammed with objects that leave you in no doubt who you are looking at and where they are.

In recent years her work has become increasingly personal. Looking at her portraits of hotel workers, Walker’s mother reminded her that her grandmother had worked as a cleaner. “And it got me thinking about how my mum didn’t have to clean other people’s houses for money, but she had spent the last 40-plus years cleaning the family home.

“I had a realisation that I was always looking outside of myself for all these subjects, but that all of those things were also happening in my life and that’s why I was interested in them in the first place.”

She began by painting her mother absorbed in domestic labour in works with titles such as *Changing Pillow Cases, Mid Morning, March* and *Making Fishcakes, Late Afternoon, December*. Then increasingly turned to her own life. “I was definitely nervous. I thought, who’s going to care? I didn’t want the work to become too myopic, just a reflection of my own life. I’ve always found it interesting to think about women’s experience, but I’ve always been more comfortable looking at it through other people’s lives.”

She moved from London back to Fife three years ago. Now her studio looks out on sheep rather than street lights and – when we speak – a gaggle of builders who are converting a grain barn on her previously derelict farmstead into a new, bigger studio, designed by her husband, an architect. The surroundings have already fed into her latest work, which has a more outdoorsy feel, featuring her son’s forest school nursery and the kaleidoscopic entertainment of holiday parks among other bustling subjects. Her next exhibition will focus on her nursery works, which may well be the first time a ball pit has featured in a grand oil painting.

There is, still, something radical about making fine art out of often-ignored women’s work, domestically and professionally. “I’m interested in the politics of the things I’m representing in the work. But I don’t want them to tell people what to think. They’re really just reflecting what I see around me,” Walker says. “I’m mostly concerned that they might be sentimental. I’m always trying to check myself. The contemporary context, mundanity of life and the materiality of the objects help to remove it from what might be considered more of a timeless romantic look at childhood or motherhood.”

On Instagram last month she posted a picture of Daphne standing proudly in front of a lithograph of herself cosying down on the sofa. “Oh, my kids love it. I have to remind them it’s quite weird, but they get excited about seeing themselves,” she says. “My mum is still quite embarrassed.” Does her husband get a look-in: is there a fatherhood series planned? “Apart from anything else, I find men really difficult to paint. I’ve only included men a few times in paintings, but they always cause me a lot of headaches.”

Will she carry on painting her children as they get older? “I’m starting to let other things back in,” she says. That said, motherhood is the gift that keeps on giving. “Now that Daphne is at school, we’re in the phase of never-ending parties, which have a very set formula. I’ve started looking around and thinking about the woman who does the face painting…” She breaks off, dreamily.



Me and Laurie, Six Weeks Old, 2024, by Caroline Walker

“Motherhood has opened up – keeps opening up – new subject matter. New realms of women’s work that I hadn’t previously considered.”

Caroline Walker: Mothering **is at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, to Apr 26; “babes-in-arms” curator’s tour for mothers and babies on Dec 11, Feb 12 and Apr 23.**