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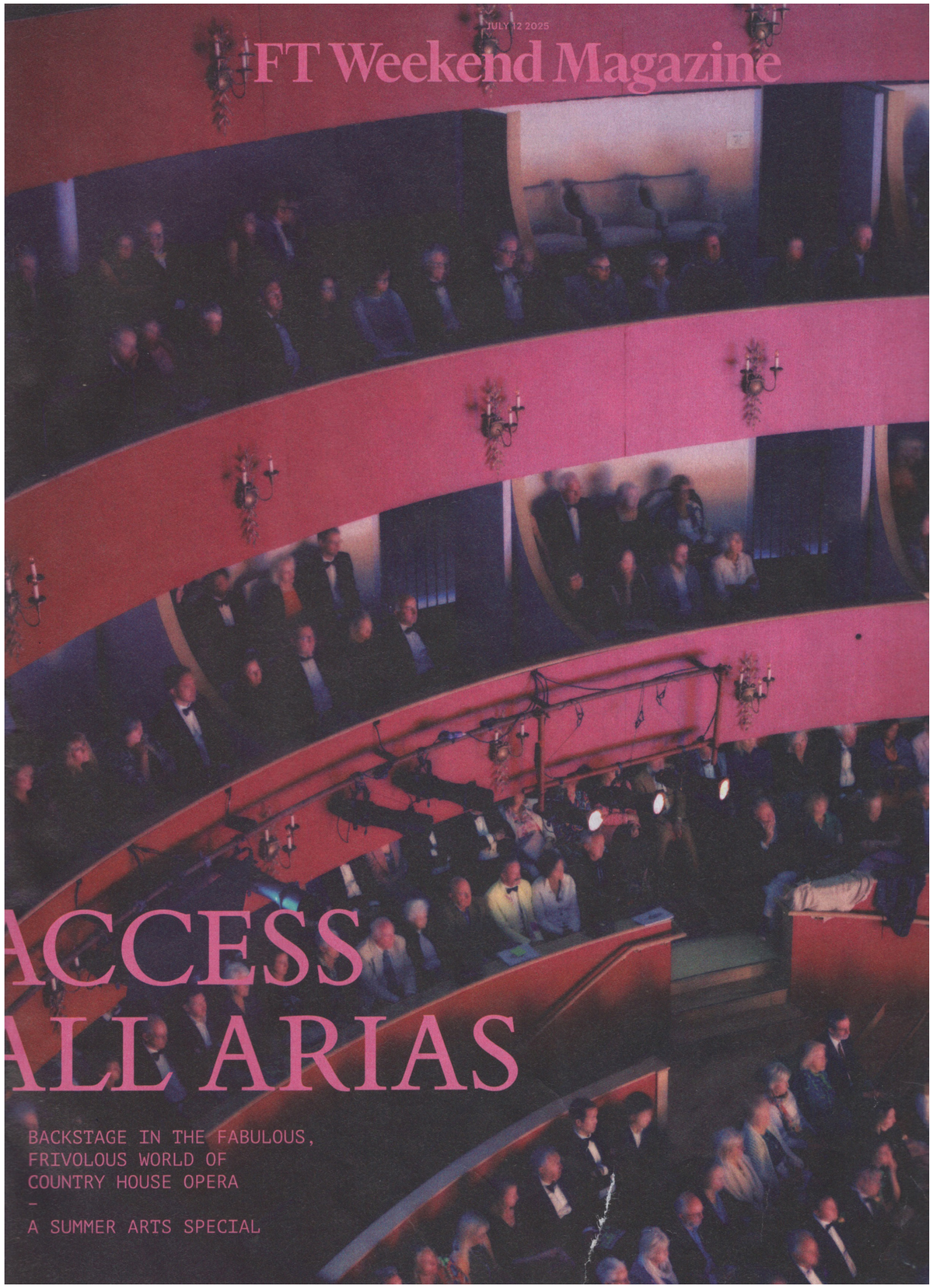

ACCESS ALL ARIAS

BACKSTAGE IN THE FABULOUS, FRIVOLOUS WORLD OF COUNTRY HOUSE OPERA

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A SUMMER ARTS SPECIAL

PAINT, FEED & PLAY

Modern-day Madonnas. Nurseries rendered in oils on a large-scale canvas. Welcome to the world of Caroline Walker. By Harriet Baker

In the first painting, the baby is one week old, mottled and skinny, his clenched fists raised to his shoulders in what is known as a newborn's startle reflex. In the second, he is crying, his month-old body rigid in protest at the cold plastic of the scales on which he has been placed. In the third, in which he sits on the woman's lap, he has an eight-month-old's sturdiness, his cheek rounded and his mouth puckered in an expression of displeasure as she pulls his clothes up and over his face. An ear has been caught in the neckline of his top. Only one wrinkled navy sock remains.

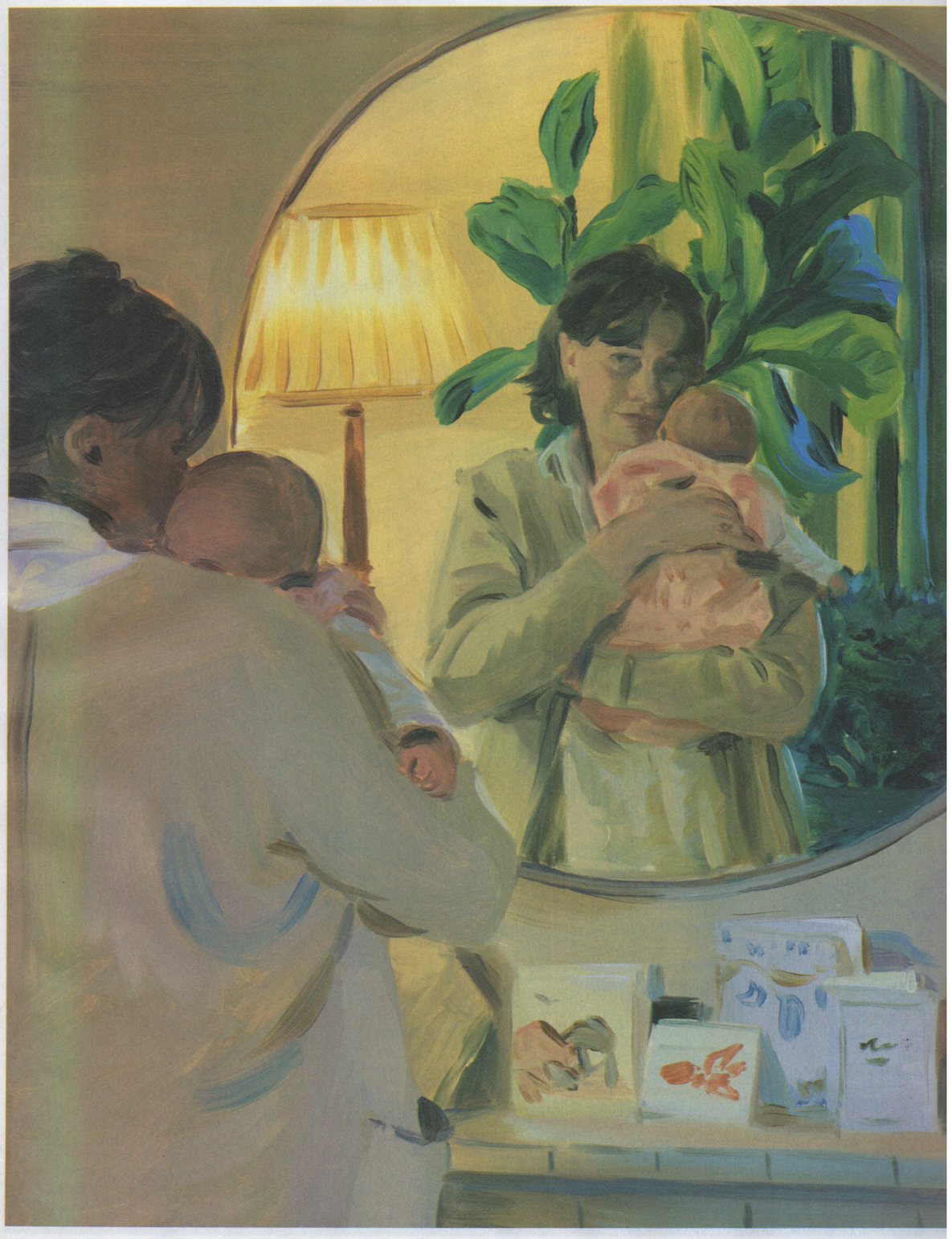
Without their titles, these three small oil paintings show a woman ministering to a small baby. She is perhaps a little old to be his mother, but she is gentle, her hands swift and confident as they perform actions they have carried out many times before. The series recalls the work of the 19th-century impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, who depicted the bonds between mothers and their infants in images of breastfeeding, bathing and dressing. In these contemporary equivalents, the scene is also private, domestic. The woman is a modern Madonna of sorts. As she dandles the child on her knee, there is tenderness, and an undisguised painterly delight in the pinkness and plumpness of his flesh.

And yet the paintings are not sentimental. What is being portrayed is a more complex delineation of work and care. Look closer at "Sarah Weighing Laurie, 4 Weeks" (2024) and you'll notice that in the mirror above the mantelpiece lined with cards celebrating the baby's arrival, a second figure is present. This woman – only partially visible, her face obscured by the camera with which she records the scene – is his mother, and the painter of the picture. The delight in his flesh is her delight (he usually sits on her lap), but in painting herself off-centre holding a camera, she is also showing herself as an artist at work. In these paintings, her subject is not her son so much as his care under Sarah, a health visitor, for whom the undressing and weighing of small babies are necessary tasks of her job.

A working artist who is also an expectant or new mother may well grapple with the question of whether to make motherhood the subject







LEFT: 'ME AND LAURIE, SIX WEEKS OLD', 2024
RIGHT: 'SARAH WEIGHING LAURIE, 4 WEEKS, 2024

PREVIOUS PAGE: 'IMAGINATIVE PLAY 1', 2024

of her work. Will the work be thought sentimental? Will she be taken seriously? The Scottish painter Caroline Walker has done so, but in the questioning and quietly assertive vein of her previous work. Walker has long been interested in depicting women's working lives. Previous subjects have included manicurists, hairdressers, shop assistants, waitresses, bakers, tailors and hotel cleaners. An ongoing series shows the painter's mother, Janet, at her home in Fife as she goes about her daily round of domestic duties - unstacking the dishwasher, hoovering, making beds. In her cool, spacious paintings, Walker depicts these women engaged in a variety of often menial tasks. The paintings draw attention to their unseen labours, making clear the value of their work.

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In the past four years, following the births of her children, Walker's world has shifted, but her gaze remains the same. A considerable body of new work - four series, now on display at the Hepworth Wakefield in Yorkshire, in an exhibition titled *Mothering*, her largest solo museum show to date - depicts babies and young children being cared for in environments rarely portrayed in paint. In one, a child is read to by a staff member on the floor of a nursery, her face uplifted inquisitively, the worker's legs outstretched. For Walker, entering these settings has provided a prism through which to continue her commentary on the world of women's work. Her new paintings reflect powerfully on the labour involved in bringing children into the world, both seen and unseen, paid and unpaid.

The exhibition's title is important. There is a distinction, Walker suggests, between *motherhood*, and the specificity of the mother-child relationship, and *mothering*, open to a constellation of women, engaged in innumerable acts of care.

Walker's inquiry into mothering begins behind closed doors. The first series is titled *Lisa*, depicting the painter's sister-in-law at home, preparing for and in the weeks following the birth of her first child. Two paintings show Lisa in her bedroom, the roundness of her stomach mirrored by the birthing ball on which she sits. She fiddles with the pump, examines the mattress of the Moses basket, spreads tiny folded sheets in tidy piles on the bed. One senses that this feels new to her, and a little strange. The space has been carefully mapped: an open doorway, a sense of moving from room to room. With the arrival of the baby, Lisa's interior space contracts. In "Refreshments" (2022), she is drawn down and on to the playmat on which her baby lies on the floor. But the painting's subject is not so much the interaction between a new mother and her baby, than the objects accumulating on the table: undrunk glasses of water and juice, television remote controls, a folded cloth, a mobile phone. Walker draws attention to the visual changes wrought to the domestic landscape when a baby arrives - the endless laundry, the clutter. She is perhaps the truest chronicler of the domestic reality of early motherhood. Elsewhere, a draining board is illuminated by the buttery yellow of a Medela breast pump.

A tender darkness creeps in. In "Night Feed I" (2022), Lisa nurses the baby by an uncurtained window, an image of companionship and acute aloneness. The light coming in from outside has the amber glow of a streetlamp. The brushstrokes are loose, languid. Time with a baby is often measured in phases. They can be fraught, also fleeting. The series includes Walker's first registered self-portrait, "Me and Laurie, Six Weeks Old" (2024), in which the painter shows herself holding her son. She looks tired, and "not terribly happy". She made the painting for herself, she told me, when I called her up after seeing her show at the Hepworth, as a way of marking the passage of Laurie's babyhood in her own life.



There are affinities between painting and childcare: arranging shapes and colours, feeling the tackiness of things, repeated actions like wiping

Walker is a documentarian of a kind. She begins with taking photographs, amassing a quantity of material from which she works in stages: pencil and charcoal sketches, small studies in oil, gridded-up drawings (no projections) on stretched linen, before underpainting freehand in acrylic and then oils. She works in series, so that each subject, explored across a number of related paintings, has the quality of a body of research. Alongside *Lisa*, Walker was beginning an artist residency at University College London Hospital, though which part of the hospital she would spend time in had yet to be determined. The event of her own pregnancy focused her attention on the maternity wing, and its predominantly female workforce. She would now be both patient and artist-in-residence at UCLH.

Attending her appointments and scans, the colours and surfaces of the hospital appealed to her. During her labour, she fixed her attention on the curtain drawn around her bed, deciding she would paint it ultramarine violet and cerulean blue. She described this process to me as a kind of "logging": exciting, almost involuntary, difficult to switch off. The start date of her residency was ultimately deferred by the pandemic. A year after the birth of her daughter, Walker re-entered the wing as an artist, equipped, as a result of her own experience, with a kind of "knowingness".

From her research at UCLH, Walker began her most compositionally complex painting. "Theatre" (2021) is brightly lit, and the baby has already been born. In the long interval following delivery (stitching up, cleaning), two uniformed nurses attend to the baby in its crib, four to its mother, while two further figures stand behind a trolley towards the back. One clasps her hands behind her back, looking perhaps a little bored. The painting has an almost sensory quality, of hushed, airless warmth,





ABOVE: 'THEATRE', 2021

RIGHT: 'MORNING, LITTLE BUGS', 2023



LEFT:
'STICKER DOLLY DRESSING', 2023

RIGHT:
'SENSORY PLAY', 2025

of shoes squeaking on linoleum floor. Walker is describing the calm and efficiency of the operating theatre, the choreography of the figures, so that only afterwards do we notice how the new mother turns her head in the direction of her baby. All the painting's vitality is concentrated into this sightline.

A theatre shrinks to a cubicle. I particularly like the ink drawings Walker produced following her rounds of the postnatal ward with a midwife, armed with a pile of consent forms and books of her work. Implicit in each is Walker's presence, and the generosity of the women, so lately having given birth, in allowing a stranger to observe their first bewildered attempts at mothering their babies. "I did some rounds with the midwife, and I would wait outside the curtained cubicle, and she'd ask them, and she'd say, 'It's OK, you can come in,'" Walker told me. Her loose, inky strokes convey such tenderness as a doctor examines a baby, or a midwife shows a new mother how to change a nappy, or breastfeed. Walker explores the concept of mothering in its most expansive sense, as something which can be taught and learnt.

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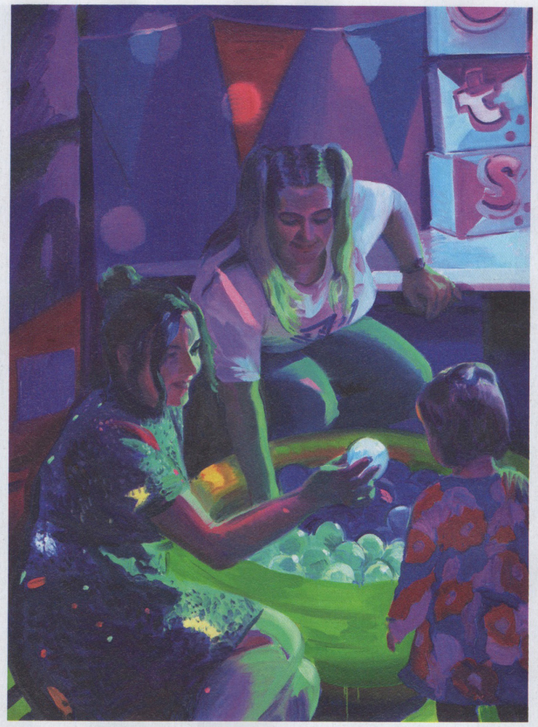
Having a small child has made me think about artmaking, and especially painting, differently. There are affinities between the processes involved in painting and those of looking after young children: choosing and arranging shapes and colours, feeling the tackiness of things, repeated actions like wiping. At my son's settling-in session at his new nursery, I noticed the tactile and visual appeal of the activities laid out for him: kinetic sand, putty, a shallow tray filled with water and brightly coloured plastic sea creatures. A small world catering to a child's developing aesthetic sense. In Walker's *Nurture* paintings, depicting scenes from her daughter Daphne's nursery, there is sheer pleasure in colour, light and surface texture. In "Sensory Play" (2025), the light is purplish, the plastic balls pearlescent, the floral pattern on the dress of the little girl almost juicy with paint. Elsewhere, one senses Walker's enjoyment of reproducing the children's artworks on the walls, even a nursery worker's cascading blonde hair. The scale of the paintings is astounding. To stand before "Morning, Little Bugs" (2023), at over eight feet tall, is almost to walk beneath the protective tree canopy into an environment both stimulating and safe.

> Perhaps nowhere in the history of art has a child's sensory play area been the subject of a large-scale painting

Walker is resistant to the idea that her paintings are radical, but perhaps nowhere in the history of art has a child's outdoor or sensory play area been the subject of a large-scale oil painting. And as the curator Hettie Judah has observed, to paint creativity in early-years settings is inherently political, as Walker is describing the environment in which a child first encounters artmaking as it is being steadily removed from primary education in British schools.

Instead, Walker would prefer to think of her work as the more muted yet respectful practice of paying attention. She paints what is happening, and what is there. The nursery workers are a continuation of the manicurists, hairdressers, shop assistants, waitresses and hotel



cleaners of her previous works. Their profession can be menial, repetitive, certainly undervalued. There is a sense that they might glance out of the window or at the clock, concentration lapsing into their own thoughts. As she photographs her subjects, Walker looks for such small breaches in a person's presentation of themselves to the world. In this way, her paintings of women caring for children narrowly resist becoming idealised portrayals of maternal care, or depictions of such womanly qualities as gentleness and compassion. Her subjects' interior lives are unknowable; they are real individuals, existing in their own private worlds.

Often in Walker's paintings, a transaction is taking place. She has been permitted into a workplace, a woman's home or a hospital cubicle shortly after she has given birth. Or, she is paying another woman to look after her children, so that she can do the work of painting them. Recent paintings reflect upon a no less complex phenomenon: the role of grandparents in the care of young children. In her ongoing series *Janet*, Walker reflects on the changing role of own mother, and the ways in which, in becoming a grandmother, Janet's unpaid labours have expanded. In "Sticker Dolly Dressing" (2024), Janet sits at the kitchen table (at which Walker sat as a child), absorbing Daphne in a sticker book. In "Granny's Hair Salon" (2025), Janet lovingly dries Daphne's hair. One can almost hear the quiet murmurings, the little jokes.

These paintings, among Walker's most affectionate, are a meditation on familiarity, which has become both subject and methodology for her over the course of her career. Returning to recognisable places and settings allows her to record time passing, children growing and the ways in which even our most important relationships are subject to change. Janet has been influential in Walker's working life for many years. Perhaps Walker's most powerful message, if we are to look for one, is that nurture is the work of many hands, stretching across generations and beyond family. Care begins at the beginning, the web by which we are all connected. FT

Harriet Baker is the author of "Rural Hours: The Country Lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann". "Mothering" is at the Hepworth Wakefield until October 26, then at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester from November 22-May 10 2026

CAROLINE WALKER. COURTESY THE ARTIST; GRIMM, AMSTERDAM/NEW YORK/LONDON; INGLEBY GALLERY, EDINBURGH; AND STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK. PHOTOS: PETER MALLET