CNN style

How motherhood is being reframed in art

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"Refreshments" is among the artworks by Scottish artist Caroline Walker, in a major new show exploring themes of "mothering" at The Hepworth Wakefield gallery in England. Caroline Walker

London, United Kingdom (CNN) — In Caroline Walker's 2022 painting "Bottles and Pumps", various breastfeeding paraphernalia lies drying on a white tray. "That's been an interesting one, in terms of how people have responded," she wrote to CNN over email, relaying the painting's reception as part of "Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood", a touring group show curated by art critic Hettie Judah. "It was the painting men responded to most when it was first shown (at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London), with (their) memories of bottle feeds or being tasked with cleaning and sterilizing the apparatus in those strange first months with a new baby," said Walker.

The work was initially produced as part of "Lisa", a series of paintings capturing Walker's sister-in-law in the weeks immediately before, and three months after, giving birth.

At The Hepworth Wakefield gallery in the north of England, pieces from "Lisa" join other artworks by the Scottish artist in a major new solo show, titled "Mothering," in an intimate survey of early motherhood and the extended support network that helps new mothers navigate the experience — from midwives and cleaners, to grandmothers and childcare workers. The show includes work made during Walker's 2021 artist's residency at a London hospital maternity ward ("Birth Reflections") and depicting her young daughter's nursery ("Nurture").



According to Walker, men responded most to her 2022 painting "Bottles and Pumps" when it was first shown at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London. Caroline Walker

"'Mothering' felt like an expansive title that could describe acts of care, which weren't limited to the relationship between biological mother and child, reflecting the wide range of people who become part of our lives in the early years of childhood," shared Walker, reflecting on the deliberate reframing of how motherhood is characterized and tethering it to the socio-economic structures of labor she has previously studied. "I liked that the term is a verb describing the act of providing care and nurture, rather than a specific identity or fixed relationship."

Modern interpretations

The theme of motherhood has been a core focus for artists for centuries, though it is often with men in the role of the author, rendering scenes they only know secondhand. See Gustav Klimt's "The Three Ages of Women", or Caravaggio's controversial "Madonna and Child with St. Anne (Dei Palafrenieri)" — indeed, the many depictions of the Madonna and Child make it perhaps the most widely celebrated and frequently circulated image in the genre of mother and children in art.



For Walker, motherhood is not limited to the relationship between biological mother and child, but also the people involved in the early years of childhood. Pictured, "Daphne." Caroline Walker

For Walker however, it wasn't always an obvious subject matter. "Motherhood wasn't a preoccupation for me, so I wasn't looking for it in the world around me," she said. "I've always been drawn to images of women in painting. Some of course were depictions of motherhood, but it wasn't something I was especially drawn to."

"My work is very routed in a Western painting tradition and frequently references, directly and indirectly, specific genres," Walker continued, "but I try to approach these through a contemporary female lens, asking if the perspective of a woman artist can add something different." In Walker's own research, she found a sense of commonality in the work of Impressionist painters Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot; "The Wet Nurse Angele Feeding Julie Manet", made by Morisot in 1880, in particular shares a dialogue with her own perspective.

"The relationship of exchange that's at play in the painting really interests me. Morisot is paying another woman to nurture her child, so she can work and make that exchange the subject of the work itself," Walker explained, referencing the balancing act that has commonly been an obstacle for women who are parents, especially working-class individuals and those from marginalized communities, generally and also within creative industries, where income is typically less stable. "I've been thinking a lot about the relationship between paid and unpaid care and the transactional nature of nurseries and paid childcare, a service we rely on as a society and which I myself utilize."



The roles and associated rituals of motherhood are a growing vehicle for expression among female artists, many of whom have begun to receive their flowers. Pictured, "Sticker Dolly Dressing." Caroline Walker

“Mothering” then, in title and content, stretches the typical narrative and asks the viewer to revise how we might imagine motherhood to be presented creatively, building on the vast visual library constructed by women artists over the last century. Louise Bourgeois for example, whose “Maman” sculpture recently returned to London’s Tate Modern, frequently interrogated ideas about motherhood and maternity in her work, while Alice Neel often painted mothers and their children informed, in some part, by her own understanding of the relationship (in an early piece from 1930, she fused her own story with the Virgin Mary’s, producing “Degenerate Madonna”).

In photography too, these roles and the associated rituals have regularly been a vehicle for expression, from Carrie Mae Weems’s “Kitchen Table Series”, featuring a mother and daughter make-up session, to Rineke Dijkstra’s “New Mothers”, wherein the photographer documented women and their hours-old newborns. In 2020, the American photographer Maggie Shannon began accompanying midwives on home visits for what would become “Extreme Pain, Extreme Joy”, an echo of Walker’s hospital residency. And in 2023, Andi Galdi Vinko’s “Sorry I Gave Birth I Disappeared But Now I’m Back”, a confronting but ultimately warm account of the first years of motherhood, won the UK’s Kraszna-Krausz Foundation Photography Book Award.

New traction

While hardly a new arena, in 2025 it seems there is a considerable effort, as part of a wider campaign of awareness and correction, to foreground these artists, just as women artists more broadly have begun to receive their flowers. The volume of interest in Walker’s work is a prime example of this. In addition to “Mothering”, her paintings are currently on display in three group shows: the Scottish leg of “Acts of Creation” at Dundee Contemporary Arts, “Good Mom/Bad Mom” at Centraal Museum in Utrecht, and at Dussedorf’s Kunstpalast in “MAMA: From Mary to Merkel”.



Walker has increasingly observed the balancing acts of motherhood, especially for working-class individuals or those from marginalized communities. Pictured, "Friday Cleaning, Little Bugs." Caroline Walker

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> Artist Caroline Walker

In “Mothering: The Family Reborn”, the closing chapter of a Thames & Hudson publication that accompanies Judah’s “Acts of Creation” exhibition, the critic celebrates the notion of mothering as perceived by queer artists, oftentimes in a political context, exploring how “committing to networks of care” and a broader sense of shared responsibility has previously been, and has the potential to, further comprise modern iterations of motherhood. Here, she references artists such as Sadie Lune, Zanele Muholi and Cathy Cade.

In Walker’s case, the term mothering arrived via a member of the team at her daughter’s nursery, who explained that it was a key part of their training. Subsequently, Walker said she began reflecting on “the constellation of women that are part of my children’s care and education, performing vital work and informing a period of a child’s life, which research has shown is important to their development throughout childhood and beyond.”

“I had been exploring the subject of women’s working lives for a few years but becoming a mother really opened my eyes to this whole area of women’s labor in relation to the bearing and rearing of children,” Walker continued. “Women artists have been responding to the demands of motherhood for decades but haven’t always enjoyed the same exposure or validation. If I was making this work 10 years ago, I don’t think it would be getting so much traction.”