contemporary art society

The art of mothering: Caroline Walker's intimate portraits of women at work

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Caroline Walker, Daphne, 2021, oil on linen © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London; and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh. Photo by Peter Mall

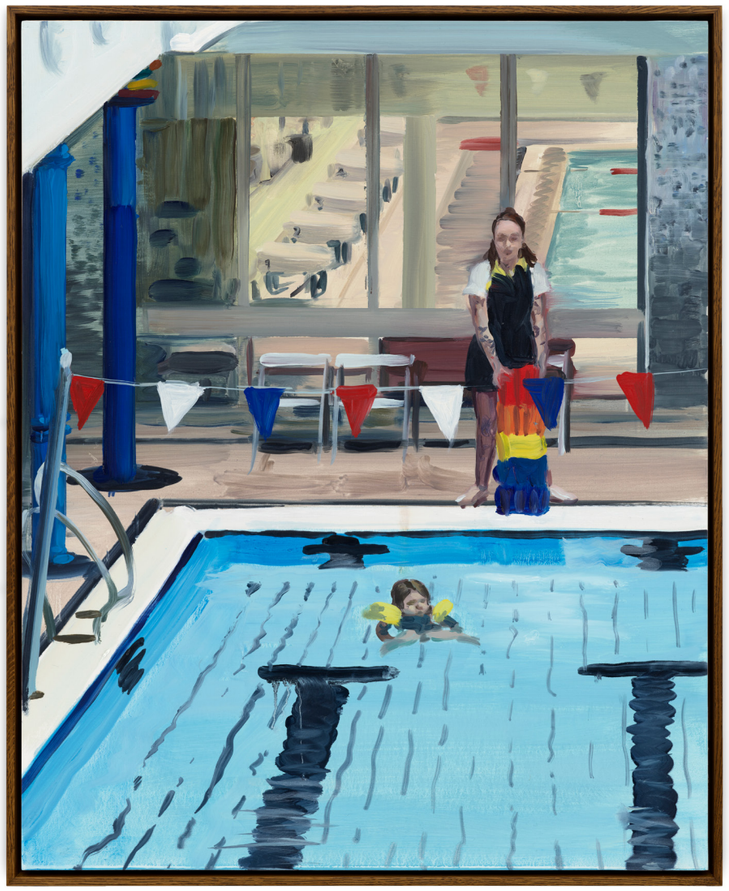
Mothering: Caroline Walker

Hepworth Wakefield

The paintings of **Caroline Walker** are about women's work. Over the course of her career, she has painted hotel maids, models, and care workers, but her recent work has homed in on the work of mothering. Using that word as a verb is purposeful in its expansiveness: the women in these paintings aren't just the biological mothers of children, they are also grandmothers, paid caregivers, and medical professionals, all of whom enact their own forms of mothering. Walker's new exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield takes that word as its title, featuring works made in the past five years that look at the many different ways in which women mother.

Walker first began exploring this theme in 2021 when she painted her own daughter. The finished work, *Daphne*, is one of her most arresting, capturing the moment of twilight when household lights are on, but curtains have not yet been drawn. Houses become goldfish bowls, delectable little worlds that are briefly visible to the viewer, who stands outside as the indigo blue light of dusk fades into darkness. After completing *Daphne*, Walker continued to paint autobiographically. The works in this exhibition show her sister-in-law's pregnancy and early months of motherhood, her own children and mother, and nurseries they attend, as well as moments from her residency in the maternity ward at UCLH.

> *"Walker's works are radical in their unflinching interrogation and celebration of the realities of mothering, which has rarely found a place on gallery walls."*



Caroline Walker, Daphne's Swimming Lesson, 2023, oil on board © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London

Quietly luminous, Walker's paintings play with scale. Tiny yet intimate works like her diptych *Night Feed*, reveal the artist's sister-in-law and infant sitting in a dimly-lit room beside a crib. The dimness evokes both the soft glow of a nightlight and the grogginess of intense fatigue. Another little work, *Daphne's swimming lesson*, shows the artist's daughter floating in the electric aqua blue of an indoor pool; her little body painted with wet, squashed and squidgy strokes.

There are also huge works like *Daphne* or Walker's multi-canvas, wall-spanning paintings of nursery scenes. One work, *Sticker Dolly Dressing*, shows Daphne with Walker's mother sitting in an old-fashioned kitchen. The painting is at least life-size, if not larger, and seems to wrap the viewer up in the damp warmth of the vanilla walls, hot Aga, and slowly drying clothes hung from the ceiling.

In another large work, *Imaginative Play*, a young child lifts a costume off a rack filled with dress-up clothes on the left side of the canvas. On the other side of the picture, an adult nursery worker sits on the floor alone, reaching for a pile of blocks. She might be cleaning them up, but she might also be playing with them – at first glance, the painting is telling a story of parallel play as much as of care. It's a quiet scene, even though it's filled with clutter and colour. Conveyed by the work's title, the painting captures the way that mothering is also an experience of reliving childhood, as within the composition, both figures of different ages are playing (you might say).



Caroline Walker, Morning at Little Bugs, 2023, oil on linen © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London

Walker's work, unsurprisingly, has a particular resonance for those who mother. A *Guardian* headline about this show reads "the stunning parenting paintings every mother should see." But I think that does them a disservice. It remains a taboo in the art world to make art about being a parent, especially a mother, as the writer and curator Hettie Judah has explored at length. Walker's works are radical in their unflinching interrogation and celebration of the realities of mothering, which has rarely found a place on gallery walls. Her paintings are remarkable – *everyone* should see them, not just other mothers. There is still a narrative around work by and about women that it is also *for* women, which is an assumption we do not often make about work by and about men.

"Her paintings interrogate the highs and lows of the care economy with the nuance that comes from close observation and empathy – and from living it."



Caroline Walker,Sticker Dolly Dressing,2024, oil on linen © Caroline Walker.Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery,London and New York; GRIMM, Amsterdam / NewYork / London; and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh.Photo by Peter Mallet

There are two self-portraits in the show, one of which shows Walker's face for the first time on canvas. She has painted herself in the mirror holding her youngest, Laurie, as a baby. Titled *Six Weeks Old*, there is a shaky vulnerability to the painting, as if it was painted while Walker held Laurie in one hand, juggling art and motherhood as maker as well as subject. Beside it is another self-portrait, of sorts: *My Bottle and Pumps* shows a clutter of feeding paraphernalia on a drying rack. Its painterliness is ravishing, with shades of white, blue, and pink blending in thick, wet strokes to make a surface that almost reads like a pattern or abstraction rather than a figurative work. It captures the overlapping mundanity and magic of feeding an infant, and the way a mother's identity can be reduced to simply keeping herself and her baby alive.

The labour carried out by the women in these paintings is often invisible, and often unpaid. Walker has talked repeatedly about the way her own mother escaped a heritage of being paid to clean houses, as her mother had done, only to spend her life cleaning her own for free. Her paintings interrogate the highs and lows of the care economy with the nuance that comes from close observation and empathy – and from living it.

Eliza Goodpasture, freelance writer and art historian

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Until 27th October 2025