Harper's BAZAAR

The artist shining a light on modern motherhood and invisible labour

Caroline Walker celebrates the everyday lives of women

BY LISA NIVEN-PHILLIPS PUBLISHED: 20 MAY 2025



MORNING AT LITTLE BUGS , 2023 © CAROLINE WALKER. COURTESY THE ARTIST; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK; GRIMM, AMSTERDAM / NEW YORK / LONDON; AND INGLEBY GALLERY, EDINBURGH. PHOTO BY PETER MALLET.

In the 19th Century, a new genre of portraiture emerged. "Hidden mother" photography refers to the bizarre Victorian practice of photographing infants against a seemingly neutral backdrop, which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be their mother, holding them still, with a sheet or drape covering her from head to toe. (Creepy? Yes. Google it.) The long exposure times of early cameras often meant that children had to sit still for several minutes at a time, which for anyone under five is, of course, impossible. So the mother was very much needed for the photograph, as a literal prop, and yet the desire was for her to fade into the background. In other words, she was to become invisible.

The symbolism is almost too obvious. I, along with many of the other mothers I know, have, at least at some point, felt invisible. And many of us have also felt an extreme disconnect between the sheer graft involved in caring for young children, and the value society places on that work. The labour is necessary – essential, in fact – but perceived as unremarkable, sometimes even undignified. Just throw a metaphorical sheet over us and take the picture.

But for one contemporary artist, whose remarkable rise over the past decade now culminates in a major exhibition at Hepworth Wakefield, this hidden work is something worth dedicating to canvas. Not tentatively or vaguely, but with an arresting, accomplished, and quietly radical clarity. For much of her career, Caroline Walker has zeroed in on the everyday lives of women and the often overlooked jobs that they perform. She's painted nail technicians buffing and filing, chambermaids cleaning, and her own family members carrying out household chores. But since the birth of her daughter in 2019, Walker's focus has been squarely on mothers.



DAPHNE , 2021 © CAROLINE WALKER. COURTESY THE ARTIST; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK; GRIMM, AMSTERDAM / NEW YORK / LONDON; AND INGLEBY GALLERY, EDINBURGH. PHOTO BY PETER MALLET

Becoming a mother is – or certainly was for me – completely seismic. But for all the stratospheric highs and miserable lows, one of the things that really kicked my legs out from under me was the domesticity of it all. Between the nappy changes, the endless laundry and the preparation of small, frequently uneaten meals, I found myself tethered to our home far more than I anticipated. Walker's works capture this way of life – how simultaneously stultifying and wonderful it can be – perfectly, memorialising acts like the folding of tiny sleepsuits, or dozily breastfeeding on the sofa. There's something brilliantly knowing about *Married at First Sight:* a vast and almost cinematic painting of Walker's sister-in-law Lisa watching reality TV while her new baby sleeps in her arms, the table before her littered with mugs, laptops and other parenting detritus. Those early days are hazy, repetitive and often mundane, but there's so much beauty in them too.

"It feels significant to see something so familiar rendered in oils, and deemed worthy of a still life"

The first painting of Walker's I fell in love with was *Bottles and Pumps,* from her 2022 series *Lisa*, which follows her aforementioned sister-in-law as she becomes a mother for the first time. Its brilliant companion piece, *My Bottles and Pumps*, is part of the new Hepworth Wakefield exhibition, *Mothering.* Both depict breast pump parts, bottles and teats piled on drying racks awaiting sterilisation; Lisa's in the first painting, and Walker's own in the second, following the birth of her second child in 2023. Teetering like a child's tower of blocks in the milky afternoon sunshine (Walker does light so well), these plastic parts are treated with a reverence that feels true to what they represent. The work of feeding a new baby looms large in the early weeks of motherhood. When I first saw *Bottles and Pumps* while pregnant with my second child, it felt significant to see something so familiar rendered in oils, and deemed worthy of a still life. If we're talking about the invisible work of a mother, these are her tools.



CAROLINE WALKER MY BOTTLES AND PUMPS, 2024© CAROLINE WALKER. COURTESY THE ARTIST; GRIMM GALLERY, AMSTERDAM/NEW YORK/LONDON; INGLEBY GALLERY, EDINBURGH; AND STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK. PHOTO: PETER MALLET

Also featured in *Mothering*, and among my favourites of Walker's works, are *Night Feed I* and *Night Feed II,* two intimate oil paintings depicting that dead-of-night pacing that all parents know well. They are so tender and evocative – and now that I no longer breastfeed my children, achingly nostalgic too – that I could gaze at them for hours.

But in *Mothering*, Walker also asks the question of what it really is to "mother", and who does the mothering. Her daughter, Daphne, appears in many of the paintings – frog-limbed at her swimming lesson, with her little friends at nursery, or perusing stickers – but it isn't always Walker doing the care work. Instead, a new cast of women are introduced: the nursery workers guiding outdoor learning, the teacher on the edge of the pool, and the grandmother holding the sticker book.



STICKER DOLLY DRESSING, 2024 © CAROLINE WALKER. COURTESY THE ARTIST; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK; GRIMM, AMSTERDAM / NEW YORK / LONDON; AND INGLEBY GALLERY, EDINBURGH. PHOTO BY PETER MALLET.

As most parents know, raising a child shouldn't be a solitary pursuit. There's a reason people tell you "it takes a village" almost daily when you have a baby – whether they're offering to help or not. Walker has said that the name of the exhibition was inspired by a member of staff at her daughter's nursery, who had noted that "mothering" the children was a significant aspect of her training. In *Friday Cleaning, Little Bugs,* three children and a nursery worker surround a low table in the evening darkness. With their faces illuminated by lamplight, they almost look like subjects in a painting by one of the Old Masters. Care work is famously undervalued in our society, so to witness Walker centring the women who join her in caring for Daphne feels quietly moving.



FRIDAY CLEANING, LITTLE BUGS, 2024 © CAROLINE WALKER. COURTESY THE ARTIST; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK; GRIMM, AMSTERDAM / NEW YO RK / LONDON; AND INGLEBY GALLERY, EDINBURGH. PHOTO BY PETER MALLET.

These are paintings that make you feel represented as a new mother, as a working mother, as a grandmother, or as anyone else who contributes to the vital work of raising a child. Care work is often considered an "unskilled" job, but if you think reversing out of a parking space while singing *Twinkle Twinkle* to a screaming baby and simultaneously passing your toddler a cracker isn't hard-won expertise, then we'll have to agree to disagree. Illuminating women's work in raising the next generation shouldn't feel revolutionary at all, but through Walker's careful and deliberate brushstrokes, it does.

Caroline Walker: Mothering is on at Hepworth Wakefield until 27 October, then at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester from 22 November until 10 May 2026. An illustrated monograph of the same title will be published by Lund Humphries in September.