The Guardian UK

Breast pumps, babygrows and unfinished drinks: the stunning parenting paintings every mother should see

Chloë Ashby

Thu 15 May 2025 11.14 BST

From intimate panels to breathtakingly cinematic canvases, Caroline Walker explains how she set out to capture the many sides of motherhood, right down to the first nappy change



A rare self-portrait ... Me and Laurie, Six Weeks Old, which features in Mothering.
Photograph: Peter Mallet/© Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stepher Friedman Gallery, GRIMM and Ingleby Gallery

Ten years ago, when the Scottish painter Caroline Walker was in her early30s, she noticed something happening to her artist friends who were having babies. "They were suddenly taken less seriously," she says. At the time, she didn't have children of her own, and she was sure that if she ever did, her life as a parent would remain separate from her art. "It still felt hard enough to be taken seriously as a woman artist," she says, "without adding in this other thing, let alone making it the subject of your work." She smiles wryly and raises her eyebrows.

We're speaking ahead of her largest museum show to date - an exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield titled Mothering. Now 43, Walker has built a dazzlingly successful career as a figurative painter, and is the mother of two small children. Ever since she was a student, first at Glasgow School of Art, then at the Royal College of Art in London, from where she graduated in 2009, she's been closely observing women. Rendered on intimate panels and breathtakingly big cinematic canvases, her subjects have ranged from bakers and beauticians to tailors and housekeepers - and, lately, the constellation of mostly female workers providing support during childbirth and early-years care.



Intimate moment ... First Nappy Change by Walker. Photograph: Peter Mallet/© Caroline Walker.
Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, GRIMM and Ingleby Gallery

Walker began painting all-things parenthood when she became a mother for the first time in 2019. She was already in touch with London's University College Hospital about the prospect of doing a residency before she got pregnant, and during her appointments there she decided to focus on the maternity wing. The paintings in the Birth Reflections series are awash with cobalt blue - medical scrubs, disposable gloves and hairnets - yet within the coolly sterile setting is a warm sense of dedication. It's there on a sonographer's face, strained as she picks out details from a grainy black-and-white image on a screen, and in a midwife's fingertips, softly pressing a stethoscope to a tiny baby's chest. It's there in the anxious glance across the operating theatre of a mother newly stitched up after a caesarean section, and in the concentrated poses of the eight uniformed strangers attending to her and her baby.

> *I didn't anticipate that I would be repeatedly mining my children for subject matter*

"I was still slightly reticent about how it was going to be received," Walker says of this newfound interest. "That it would be seen as less interesting or a bit of a cliche: 'Oh, she had a baby and now she's going to make a load of paintings about that.' But I tried not to limit myself, just to let things develop, and now it seems very understandable to me that artists would respond to this life event through their work because it's such a big shift in identity and daily life."

Birth Reflections is one of four series included in the show. Another, Lisa , explores what happens when a new mother brings a baby home. Following her sister-in-law over four months, starting when she's heavily pregnant, these knowing paintings show what Walker describes as "a more subjective view on the transition into motherhood and the domestic space in which so much of this time is spent". Padding around in pyjamas; groggily breastfeeding in bed in the middle of the night; lounging on the sofa while the baby sleeps on you, vacantly watching television in the middle of the day.

Meanwhile, Walker's work has become more autobiographical. The earliest painting on display features her daughter, Daphne, as a toddler, glimpsed through the window of the family's old flat in London in 2021. "It was the first time I'd painted her, and the first time I'd used my own life as a direct subject. It was supposed to be for sale, but I felt I had to hang on to it." She laughs. "I didn't anticipate then that I would be repeatedly mining my children for subject matter."

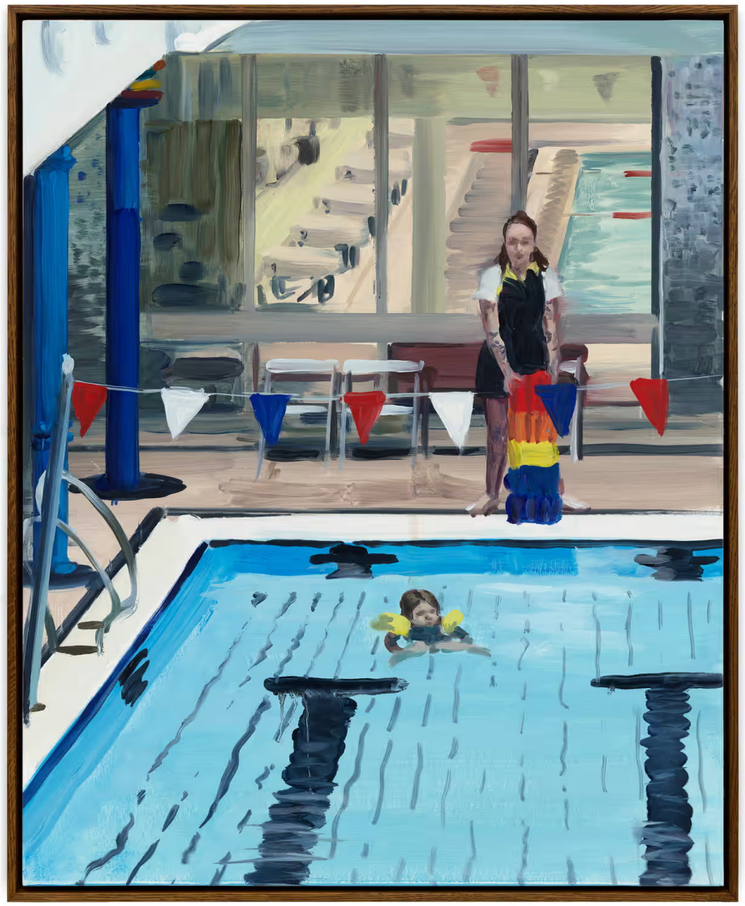


Glimpsed through the window … Daphne. Photograph: Peter Mallett/© Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, GRIMM and Ingleby Gallery

Daphne, who's now five and apparently delights in seeing herself in paint, appears throughout the exhibition. We see her bobbing about in a swimming lesson with yellow armbands and froggy legs, and sitting at the kitchen table with Walker's mother, Janet, and a cuddly hermit crab. And playing around at nursery, initially in London and more recently in Scotland, where Walker and her family have been living since summer 2022. The title of the show is borrowed from something a member of staff at Little Bugs, an outdoor nursery, said about "mothering" being part of their training.

"A lot of the time, I've been looking in on a subject as an outsider," says Walker, who begins by spending time with women and photographing their days. Being behind the camera at her daughter's nursery was different: "I was paying for another woman to look after my child, so that I could make my work, which in this case was portraying that woman looking after my child. There was a complicated relationship of financial exchange going on that made me think about how we value different forms of labour."

Throughout her career, Walker has taken small acts of unseen and under-appreciated work - plumping pillowcases, scrubbing sinks, buffing and shaping nails - and depicted them in oil paint on an epic scale traditionally reserved for history paintings. She does so by paying attention to paraphernalia as much as people. In this show's case, sterilised plastic bottles and breast pumps, half-finished drinks collecting on a table, fresh flowers still in their paper packaging, babygrows sprouting from a wardrobe like weeds. Modern motherhood with its all-consuming clutter.



Froggy legs … Daphne's Swimming Lesson. Photograph: Peter Mallett/© Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, GRIMM, and Ingleby Gallery

"When I was at home with Daphne, I remember looking around the house and finding it really claustrophobic, just the stuff everywhere," she says. "There was condensation continuously running down the walls from all these things drying because we suddenly had so much washing." She decided that this was what being a new mother looked like, and that she wanted to make paintings of it. "Because it is a mess, but it's also visually interesting. It tells a story, and it's very specific to that moment."

A rare self-portrait shows Walker with her then six-week-old son, Laurie. She was about to put him down in his cot when she paused in front of a mirror and asked her husband to take a photograph of the two of them. Walker's reflection meets us with an exhausted gaze. "I was so tired, and not having the best time, and it felt interminable." She drifts off and smiles. "Now every time I look at that painting it takes me back to what it felt like to hold this tiny little body and have these tiny little hands on my shoulder."

Walker and her family live in a converted farmstead on the fringes of Dunfermline, half an hour from Edinburgh, surrounded by fields of bleating lambs. Her parents are a 10-minute drive away, in the house where she grew up; she doesn't come from an artistic family, but she liked to draw from an early age, mostly women and the world around them. She has a small studio at home, and a larger one is in the works. "It's a different setup to living in London, of course, but actually workwise it's pretty good," she says. "The way I work is different now. It's bitty, but there are lots of bits, and overall I probably end up with the same amount of time I had before, or I use my time better."



'Those early years are so intense' … Morning at Little Bugs. Photograph: Peter Mallett/© Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, GRIMM and Ingleby Gallery

Will mothering still be her subject in a decade's time? "I suppose these early years are so intense that it's natural they would bubble up into the work, but my relationship with my children and the intensity of my involvement will obviously change," she says. For now, though, being a mother and an artist are one and the same. "My work and my life have become completely entwined."

• Caroline Walker: Mothering is at Hepworth Wakefield from 17 May to 27 October, and at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester from 22 November to 10 May 2026. The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated monograph of the same title, to be published by Lund Humphries in September.