close up

Caroline Walker



Photo: Mark Blower

Installation view: Lisa, at the Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, 2022.
Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery.

Portrait of Caroline Walker



Copyright: Peter Mallet

Highly acclaimed Scottish painter Caroline Walker spoke to Susan Mansfield about why she's committed to painting women's experience, and how she came to use her own family as her subjects

How did you become an artist?
As a child I loved drawing, I was quite obsessed about it. There was a big cupboard in the kitchen and I got myself set up in there with a little desk churning out reams and reams of drawings – always pictures of women. From school I went to Glasgow School of Art and then, in 2007, to the Royal College of Art in London. It never really occurred to me to do anything other than be an artist, I think I've always been quite single-minded.

How have your themes and subject matter evolved?
I think the way I look at things, and what I want to draw and paint, hasn't changed very much. I've been painting figures in interiors for more than 20 years. At the Royal College, I started to question: why did I only want to draw women? I realised all of the paintings I had grown up looking at were paintings of women made by men. That got me thinking about the relationship between the maker and the subject. Trying to express something about what it is to be a woman living now is a broad subject, and I've kept finding interesting ways to make it new for me again and again.

> "I realised all of the paintings I had grown up looking at were paintings of women made by men. That got me thinking about the relationship between the maker and the subject."

Tell me about a few of the milestones in your career...
I got a Dewar Award to go to the Royal College and some funding from the Scottish Government which made me feel validated in my choice. Meeting a couple of curators the year after I graduated was instrumental in making my first relationships with galleries. Working with Grimm Gallery (a Dutch-run gallery with spaces in Amsterdam, London and New York) helped me move into a slightly different stage of my career because they helped me make decisions about who I would work with next.

Did you always use 'real life' subjects in your paintings?
No! I was asked to make work about the refugee crisis for a show at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, in 2018. At the time I was making elaborately constructed paintings using staged photoshoots at glamorous locations with models and props and clothing. However, I went ahead with it and made a series called 'Home', painting portraits of refugee women in London in the places where they lived. That was quite transformative for me. I realised I'd spent several years making up narratives for paintings because I felt that something too specific would be less interesting to people. Making those paintings made me realise that when something's personal it can actually be more powerful.

When did you start painting your own family?
Painting women working in housekeeping jobs in London hotels got me thinking about the work my mum did looking after her house. Making paintings of my mum (for the show 'Janet' at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, in 2020) was the start of using what was happening in my own life as a trigger for subject matter. Since then I've had two children (Daphne, five, and Laurie, two) and in 2022 my husband and I moved back to Scotland. The work becoming more personal and focusing on the subject of mothering and nurture has been both a choice and a necessity! The New York show (at Grimm Gallery until 3rd May) is called The Holiday Park, inspired by visiting family-friendly holiday parks in the UK – part research trip, part family holiday!

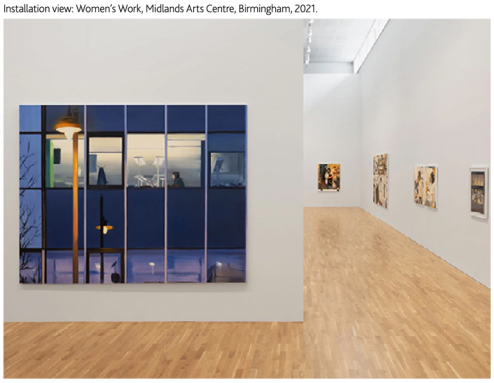
Describe a typical day (if there is one)...
It's less of a pattern now than it used to be because of family interruptions. Most of the daytime work will happen between 10am and 3pm, and then I might come out to the studio and work again in the evening.

What do you like to have around you when you work?
At the moment, I'm working on a painting of my mum attempting to dry Daphne's hair which reminds me of a painting by Mary Cassatt, so I have that beside me, but usually I prefer when there's not too much visual interference. I listen to audio books and, at the moment, I share my studio with the washing machine so there's the constant background noise of that!

What are the most enjoyable/least enjoyable parts of the job?
I really enjoy trying to paint something that I haven't done before, a different material or texture or different lighting. The things that I find trickier are often the parts of the painting that are the least interesting, but it's crucial to get them right or they become distracting. It's often those details that lead you to what the real action is in the painting.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?
The artist Moyna Flannigan was my tutor in my last year at GSA. I'd been making figurative paintings but the figures were not in any kind of context. She said: 'Put them somewhere', and the penny dropped. Where are they? What are they doing? That's been the premise for everything I've done since.

Installation view: Women's Work, Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, 2021.
Photo: Courtesy the artist and Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham



What's the first work of art you remember seeing?
I remember as a child having a postcard of Gainsborough's The Honourable Mrs Graham, which I'd seen in the National Gallery of Scotland. I loved the dress!

If you could own any work of art by any artist, what would it be?
I always said my favourite painting was A Bar at the Folies-Bergères by Manet, but then I saw The Railway by Manet in the National Gallery in Washington. I'd like a few! Manet, Morisot, Cassatt and the Glasgow Boys. Always portraits of women.

Who or what inspires you?
Day-to-day life, my family, people I meet. Often a brief conversation gives you a little insight into somebody else's life that triggers an idea for something you want to explore in a painting.

What are you looking forward to?
I have a show opening soon at the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, called Mothering, which brings together work I've made since 2021, including work from a residency I did in a maternity hospital in London, a series I made about my sister-in-law Lisa when she first became a mother, and paintings of the people who help nurture my own children. I'm also looking forward to having a bit of a break over the summer, and getting back into the studio in a more relaxed way to see where I go next.

Caroline Walker: Mothering is at The Hepworth, Wakefield, May 17 - October 27. hepworthwakefield.org

Installation view, Nurture, at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Ingleby Gallery.

Photo by John McKenzie

