

Caroline Walker paints the unseen women of London's service industries

Words: [Ruby Beadington](#)
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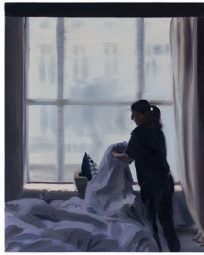
In 2016, Scotland-born, London-based painter Caroline Walker noticed the proliferation of nail bars in the area next to her studio. It was an observation that kick-started an ongoing work documenting women at work, a series in which Caroline has now documented, with a thoughtful sense of realism and serenity, women working in bars, hotels, kitchens, offices, nail bars, hairdressers, tailors and everything in between.

Caroline studied painting at Glasgow School of Art before gaining an MA from the Royal College of Art. But her proclivity for the medium began at a much earlier age. "I was mad about drawing and painting from a very early age, and would spend countless hours in my first studio (a large kitchen cupboard I commandeered) drawing endless pictures of women," she tells us. "So I would say it was hard wired from the start." Why she was drawn to painting specifically, however, she attributes to a trip her mum took her on to see the "Scottish colourist paintings in Kirkcaldy Museum, and Raeburn, Gainsborough and 19th Century Glasgow boys paintings in the Scottish National Gallery. I still love these paintings now."

Having begun documenting women working in nail bars, Caroline's ongoing body of work really took off in 2017 when she was commissioned by Kettle's Yard to collaborate with charity Women for Refugee Women to make a series of paintings documenting female refugees and asylum seekers at their accommodation in London. "Making these works really opened my eyes to the idea of invisibility, of those overlooked lives in the city around us and about who occupies what spaces and at what times," Caroline says. "This led to me becoming interested in women working in service industry jobs, particularly retail, hospitality and cleaning, often professions dominated by a female labour force, but which are largely taken for granted or, in the case of hotel housekeeping, designed to be unseen."



Left: Bathroom, Room 608, 2018. Oil on board, 45 x 38cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York



Right: Guest Change, 2019. Oil on board, 45 x 38cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York

In turn, Caroline's paintings are a testament to these women, immortalising them and reinstating their value through paint on canvas. Often with subtle attention to light and gesture, Caroline's works hint to a wider narrative, weighing in on how these subjects are indicative and reflective of much larger social, economic or political issues.

Aesthetically, Caroline's painting sits firmly within the world of naturalistic realism, she tells us: "It's important to me that as a viewer you would feel you're looking at a real space occupied by real people." The paintings, however, are loosely painted, sacrificing a certain clarity for abstract brushwork as you get closer to them. Colour, is an important aspect for Caroline and she consciously varies her palette from painting to painting "in order to evoke the atmosphere of the different places in which my subjects are seen."

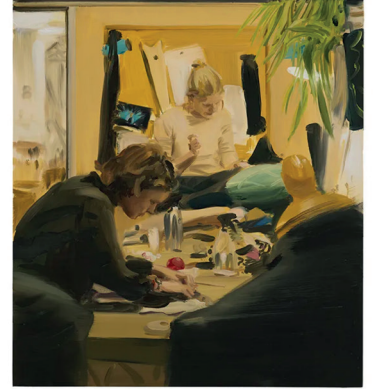
She achieves this by working first from photography, a process she's developed over the past 15 years. "This has ranged from creating very constructed scenarios in which I have directed models on location to evoke specific narratives, to a far more documentary approach in which I take an observational role, recording the reality of women's daily lives in the space of the city," she explains. "The resulting paintings I make are a mix of the factual record of something that the photographs represent and my memories or emotional response to being in a particular place or spending time with the people I'll paint."

It's the immediacy and tactility, particularly of oil paint, which dictates Caroline's choice of material, a factor that is clear throughout her visceral, almost textural work. "[Oil paint] has the ability to be totally evocative of the material world around us, while also still being completely about the materiality of paint itself," she concludes. "I get great pleasure from the alchemy of moving paint around on a surface and the often unexpected things that can happen when one mark meets another."

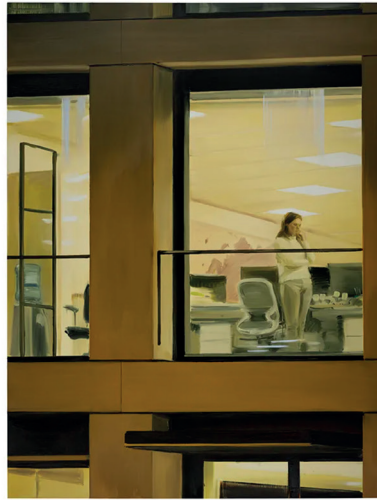
Caroline's work will be on show at the [Victoria Miro](#) gallery from this Friday (7 June) as part of a group show in association with [The Great Women Artists](#). The exhibition, which also features artists [María Berrío](#) and [Flora Yukhnovich](#), will rethink traditional genres to touch upon themes of migration, the workplace, and the gendered language of painting. She will also be hosting a solo show at [Grimm Keizersgracht 241](#) between 31 August and 5 October.



Above: Brazilian Blow Dry, 2019. Oil on linen, 232 x 300cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York



Above: Shopping, 2019. Oil on board, 40 x 36cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York



Above: Empire, 2019. Oil on linen, 240 x 180cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York and Victoria Miro, London / Venice



Above: Attium, 2018. Oil on linen, 200 x 260cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York



Above: Pinked, 2019. Oil on linen, 200 x 155cm. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam / New York and Victoria Miro, London / Venice

Partner site: www.carolinewalker.org

About the author:
Ruby Beadington
Ruby joined the It's Nice That team as an editorial assistant in September 2017 after graduating from the English Communication Design course at Central Saint Martins. In April 2018, she became a staff writer and in August 2019, she was made senior writer.