

Matrons & Mistresses

Caroline Walker

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“When I was a little girl, all I painted or drew was women. They were either very glamorous and I called them “fancy ladies,” or they were thinly veiled depictions of my mom engaged in domestic chores. I guess I had this quite polarized idea of the roles women could occupy.”

- CAROLINE WALKER

Courtesy the artist, Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: John McKenzie

INSTALLATION IMAGE OF “JANET”
INGLEBY GALLERY

Just last week, my friend posted a photo of her whites soaking in the tub with the caption, “A moment when domestic life becomes a visual feast.” I cannot think of a better way to describe Caroline Walker’s most recent exhibit, *Janet*. Choosing as her subject the person she has known the longest and the home in which she grew up, Caroline paints her mother at work... work that some might deem menial—the act of creating and caring for one’s home. Yet, there is great respect within these paintings... an appreciation and understanding that for Janet, her garden and her home have always been her canvas.



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mullet

Elizabeth Mathis Cheatham: I so enjoyed the information that you sent me prior to our chat and your current book is amazing. As I dove more into your work, one thing I noticed was that in 2017, your focus started to move away from models and somewhat staged scenes to real life—specifically, women in their day-to-day lives and their work. Was there something in particular that shifted that focus for you?

Caroline Walker: Yes. I think it was partly a gradual thing. I'd done a project in 2016 about nail bars in London and that was kind of semi-staged. The nail bars were all working shops, so the people in them were doing their jobs as normal, but I took models in to have manicures, so I was controlling some of the visual aspects of what was going on. Letting go of some control had interested me, but then I'd gone back to making another series that was very constructed and staged. In 2017, I got commissioned to make some work in response to the refugee crisis by Kettle's Yard Gallery in Cambridge. I think that was a really big turning point for me. It took me a long time to work out how to respond to that as a brief and what would be an appropriate way for me as an artist to tackle it. After months of thinking and talking about it, I ended up partnering with a charity in London called Women for Refugee Women.

The project was a series of portraits of 5 women in the charity's network and the accommodation they were staying in that summer. It was such a different way of working for me. I met a couple of the women before I went to their places, but a few of them I had never met before. Of course, as I was entering these spaces, I had no expectations, and I had to let go of that ability or desire to control my subject and their surroundings. The purpose of the work wasn't about me dictating some narrative; it was about me responding to somebody's life and what they were telling me and showing me. I think it was a light bulb kind of moment back in the studio. I'd been spending all these years making things up, but actually, real people's lives are so interesting and there's so much to tell there. One of the women I painted lives ten minutes walk away from me, and it made me think about how I'd been going off to the other side of the world doing quite elaborate projects when actually....



Courtesy the artist, Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

HOOVERING, FIRST THING, DECEMBER
CAROLINE WALKER



Courtesy the artist, Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

MAKING FISHCAKES, LATE AFTERNOON, DECEMBER
CAROLINE WALKER

EMC: 'They're right here.'

CW: 'The subject's right here.' That was a bit of a turning point for me.

EMC: What did you learn through the process of painting these women and getting to know them... from shifting away from the models to hearing women's real stories? Was there a particular story that really impacted you, or was it more the overall experience of interaction?

CW: I think it was the interaction that I had with each person. Every meeting was totally unique, as they each had very different life stories to share and their circumstances at the time were also quite different. Maybe it was a return to that personalizing of my subject that really felt like a big shift for me. I'd spent a number of years working in a more distanced way with hired models that I often met just once, asking them to be a conduit for another idea, rather than them being the subject themselves.

With this project, suddenly it was really personal and this interaction was a really key part of what would make the work interesting and engaging. I was talking to these women about their situation, and some of the things they were facing, like displacement, homelessness and abuse. These were really difficult to hear, but I was struck by their resilience and strength, which they each showed in their own way. I had to think on the spot about what the paintings could capture about their individual circumstances, whether that was through what they were depicted doing or by picking up on things in the room that would be clues to a viewer about who this person is. When the women talked about seeing the paintings in the gallery, they told me that being the subject of them made them feel visible when they often felt very invisible in society.



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

BATHROOM, ROOM 608
CAROLINE WALKER



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

THREE MAIDS
CAROLINE WALKER

EMC: Speaking of knowing someone you paint... your latest body of work is based on your mother and her work as a homemaker. There is a quote from the introduction of your book around your latest exhibit of your mom, Janet. It says: "In the same way that one might find an overabundance of spatulas in a domestic kitchen, quaint or comic, but not the overabundance of brushes in a painter's studio, the labor of creating and maintaining a home is often diminished as though it were not work at all, but some kind of concocted routine for filling empty time." I remember when my oldest son was little, I was home with him for a while and I used to cringe when people would ask if I worked. Though I was probably working harder than I ever had before, I found that I had this tendency to answer that question by telling people what I used to do, and then be like, '...but I'm taking a break to be home with my son.' It was just this kind of side note, because I, too, didn't place as much value on being home as I did my previous career. Within some of your articles/write ups that I've read, you've said that the work you did in painting other women, specifically when you were doing work around hotel housekeeping, really made you re-assess the way that you viewed your mother's work. I wonder if you could share a little bit more about this? Also for a good portion of the time you were working on the exhibit, you were either pregnant or a new mom. Has that, too, shifted the way you see her?...That was a really long question!!

CW: No, that's an interesting question. I think I'd always appreciated that my mom was working hard, even when I was young. When I was a little girl, all I painted or drew was women. They were either very glamorous and I called them "fancy ladies," or they were thinly veiled depictions of my mom engaged in domestic chores. I guess I had this quite polarized idea of the roles women could occupy.

EMC: And they were very different. Yeah.

CW: I definitely recognized even as a girl that my mom was doing all the cooking and cleaning around the house. My dad was away working quite a lot of time or involved in big DIY projects when he was at home. She had made the decision after my brother was born to stay at home and look after the house and bring up the children. I don't think I quite appreciated what this really involved fully until I started making the paintings of the hotel housekeeping staff.

I think it was a bit of an eye-opener spending the day with those women and seeing the repetitive nature of that job and being reminded how physical cleaning is and how boring it can be. I was talking to my mom about it and she reminded me that her mom was a cleaner, as was her mother before her. I was thinking a lot about this work that women are paid to do, but that they're then going home and doing the same work, but unpaid. My mom has never had to clean anybody else's house for money, but she spends the equivalent of a full-time job cleaning her own for nothing, you know? She says something and I don't know if you heard—

EMC: Oh, she cracked me up. I loved that audio of her...

CW: She's quite straight and tells it like it is! She said, 'There's always housework. It's always with us, and somebody's got to do it, and I think if you don't do it yourself, you're most likely to be paying another woman to do it, and I just like cleaning up my own mess.' I suppose it made me think a lot about that... even when I was making those housekeeping paintings a couple years ago, at the time I was doing quite a lot of decorating in our apartment. All I seemed to do for weeks on end was either be at home painting the house and cleaning it, or going to the studio and painting people cleaning.

EMC: 'I need to get away from this!'

CW: Yeah! Then I suppose there's been an extra dimension to this work, thinking about motherhood this year, because most of the paintings I've actually made since Daphne was born.

EMC: Yes.

CW: And...how does it make me think about my mum? It definitely makes me appreciate how that work is harder than going to a job. Me and my husband share looking after the baby, so I get three days a week in the studio, and I see those as the easy days. On my days with Daphne I'm trying to clean up, cook, do housework, and get laundry done in between entertaining her ... it's a twelve-hour day, and I'm tired at the end of it! I think it's interesting to make paintings about something that you're also very much experiencing. I don't know that I answered the question, though.



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— CAROLINE WALKER

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INSTALLATION IMAGE OF 'JANET'
INGLEBY GALLERY

EMC: No, absolutely, you totally did. So I have learned not to ask what somebody's favorite piece is in an exhibit. Partially because I was recently asked about some of my favorite artists and I was like, 'Oh, that's so hard!'

CW: That's the most difficult question! My mind always go blank.

EMC: I know! So I'm not gonna ask that. I'm really hoping this question is far enough away from that. I was thinking as I was looking at your paintings of your mom that when I think about mine, I immediately envision her in her riding clothes with her hair in a ponytail and either her pug or one of her horses nearby. I was wondering within—I think that I read that you had taken five hundred photos or more of your mom, and I'm not sure how many paintings ended up in the exhibit, but was there one painting that above all, you're like, 'That's how I see my mom' or, 'that's how I remember her growing up.' If so, will you talk us through that painting a little bit from your process and also inspiration?

CW: It's difficult because I'm so familiar with that house and my mom there. So every painting to me has a significance, but I think probably there's one—and I think my brother would confirm this—this is the one he said makes him think of home too. It's one called *Making Fishcakes, Late Afternoon, December*. It's a view into the kitchen window, and my mom's at the worktop making dinner. There's a front entrance to the house, but we always just go in the back, via a little yard, and that's where the kitchen is.

This scene, looking into the kitchen, is late afternoon in winter and it's getting dark outside so the white wall appears a blue/purple colour, but inside is really warm because of the electric light, and the warm decor of the kitchen. I think for me and my brother, that would be the painting that probably would sum up our feeling about our mom and that home. I don't know how many thousands of times we've walked past that window and seen that scene, because she's in the kitchen a lot of the time. For most families, the kitchen is the heart of the house, isn't it?

EMC: So true.

In the book, one of the things that I enjoyed seeing and also from one of the videos was kind of your process from taking the photos to—there's a lot of stages that you seem to follow. Can you talk about a little bit about that too?

CW: So, as you know, I take a lot of photos which I will edit a little on the computer, but really I'll get anything which I think is even vaguely interesting printed. I have all these photographs in the studio, and then I start working—Actually, I'll show you what I'm working on at the moment because I'm just starting my next show and I'm in this early stage.... I don't know if you can see?

EMC: Oh great! Yes!

CW: I start sorting the photos out into different groups, going through what's interesting, and already thinking about what the series will look like. It's never about an individual work. Even at this stage, I'm thinking, 'What's the interplay of these images together?'



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

REBECCA (STUDY)
CAROLINE WALKER



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

REBECCA
CAROLINE WALKER

EMC: You know, Caroline, I was going to ask you about this later, but I'll hop around it a little bit since you're talking about this. Is this for your show in New York that's coming up?

CW: Yes.

EMC: Okay. As you talk about your process, do you want to just tell me about what the theme is for that?

CW: In many ways it's a bit of a follow-on from the personal approach I had to making the paintings of my mum, mixed with the broader theme of women at work, which I've been following over the past 3 - 4 years. It's all about the area where I live in London and some of the women that feature as part of my daily life.

Like most people, I've been spending a lot of time close to home this year. But I think this felt even more intensified for me, because I had a baby, so even before lockdown, life was quite restricted! I live on an estate, and I know quite a few of the women that live around me, so some of the paintings are scenes from my window of them walking their dogs or pottering in their front yards. Other paintings are of the women working in some of the shops I visit regularly. There's my favorite cafe, the chemist, the baker's, and dry cleaners. I've been working on a big painting of the chemist this week. I started off with making lots of drawings for this, working out the rough parameters, composition... Sometimes I'm working with a composite of a few photos, so the drawings are where I pull these together.

EMC: Right.

CW: Then I make a lot of these kind of drawings.

EMC: Is that graph paper?

CW: Yeah, I find this helps me work out the exact size for the canvas I want to use. I might have an idea about roughly what size it should be, but the graph paper is useful for working out dimensions and scale.

EMC: As you have painted these women, have masks now become something you need to factor in?

CW: There's a painting of a woman working in my local baker which is part of this series, but that's not going to be in the New York show. A huge reproduction of the painting was part of an outdoor exhibition at the Southbank Centre called *Everyday Heroes*, which celebrates people that have worked throughout the pandemic.

EMC: Is that the one I saw on your Instagram a while ago? There's one piece, like a really large banner that was made—was that for that show?

CW: Yes, that's right. It was the first painting from the series, and it was the first time I had to paint someone wearing a mask. Looking at the material that I've got so far for the New York show, it's a bit of a mix. It depends what they're doing in their job. They'll have their mask, but sometimes they can take them off if there's nobody in the shop or they're in their own space, separate from customers or behind a screen. I think it'll be a bit of a mixture. I didn't know how I feel about painting all these people with masks on because I worried it would become too much of a 'pandemic' painting. Does it position it so much in this particular moment that it doesn't say anything else? I don't know. But my work is always about observing what's around me, so if that's what's around me at the moment, then it makes sense to include it.



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

TORAH, 11.30AM, SOUTHALL
CAROLINE WALKER

EMC: That's a really interesting point. When will the exhibit be?

CW: It opens on March 10th.

EMC: Do you hope to come for any of it?

CW: I hope so. I guess we'll wait and see.

EMC: If you do, I'll come up! New York is super easy for me to get to during normal times, so if everybody feels safe traveling, I would love to see the exhibit and meet you in person.

Okay, back to process, so you do your photos—then sometimes you have multiple photos from a certain scene and you'll pull from different scenes, then you do a bunch of sketches, and then work to graph paper. Then did I see you actually do a small oil paint model or where do you go from there?

CW: So the drawings help me work out composition, but then I make these oil sketches on primed paper, and they're where I'm working out a color palette that I want to use in the big painting. Most of the time I use quite a limited palette. There's still quite a lot of colors in it, but it might be focused around one particular type of yellow, for example, or something that creates a unifying kind of light over the whole work. The oil sketch gives me a chance to work out some of those things and to move away from the photographic. So in that example I showed you there of the chemist, there's all these shelves filled with bottles and packets, but I'm trying to figure out how I start turning them into an almost abstract language of paint, while still keeping them identifiable enough that you might know what brand of suntan lotion is on the shelves. When I go to make the big painting, I'll be using that as much as the photograph, if not more.



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

PASSPORT TO HAPPINESS
CAROLINE WALKER



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

CHANGING PILLOWCASES, MID MORNING, MARCH
CAROLINE WALKER

EMC: Do you tend to work on multiple paintings at a time, or do you find that you take one from start to finish?

CW: I tend to work on one big painting at a time. Apart from anything, the studio's quite small, so I'm quite limited in that respect. But this week—I made a small painting on board yesterday, and today, rather than start the big painting, I'm working on another small piece. I quite like to change the pace, so I don't always go from big painting to big painting; I might swap back to something small or another oil sketch. They're quite different ways of working for me, even down to which brushes I use.

EMC: I hope you're keeping those oil sketches and whatnot, because they're so beautiful in and of themselves.

CW: I sell those, but I do keep quite a lot of them back. I keep all the drawings for myself. I've got reams and reams of those. Often those are nice because they're where the ideas start.

EMC: In an interview of your mother, she said something that really made me think. When she was talking about all the work she does in the home, she said, "Almost everything that I touch has been passed down through family, and some of my most precious pieces in my home came from my grandparents from before." I began to think, though, that it's not just possessions that get passed down. It's beliefs and loves and pains as well. I was wondering if you have thought at all about some of the things that have been passed down to you that you want to give to Daphne? And is there anything that you want to be a generational stop with you?



Courtesy the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam/New York. Photography: Peter Mallet

DISHWASHER LOADING, AFTER DINNER, MARCH
CAROLINE WALKER

CW: That's tricky! I think my mum's attitude that 'You must clean your own house' has unfortunately passed to me! I insist on my husband and I continuing to do all the housework in our home, when we struggle to find the time with looking after a baby and our work. My husband keeps suggesting we get a cleaner to help out, but I always think—'What would my mum think?', plus I think I would feel uncomfortable with someone else in my house cleaning up, another thing I've inherited from my mum, I think. So I wouldn't mind if that stopped with me.

Something I am very pleased to have inherited from my mum, though, is a real appreciation for my surroundings and home and wanting to surround myself with lots of interesting objects. My mom has—I don't know if you noticed in all the paintings— animals everywhere. There's lots of ornaments. I think we have a shared love of collecting decorative objects and to holding on to things that have been passed down. I have some things that were my granny's or great-granny's that my mum's already given me, and I enjoy using them. I have some towels that were my gran's, and I think of her every time I use them. It's what we associate with objects, isn't it, and what we think of when we use them that gives them significance.

EMC: Yes. Absolutely. I think one of the things that I love about your paintings, too, is that as you spend even more time with them, you see this real layering. There's so much depth to them. I think maybe part of that is your appreciation for the things that are in your environment and a commitment to really taking time to see them. That comes through in all your paintings.

CW: I'm really glad that comes across. That's a big part for me of being in that house, as well. Spending time with my mum—we like going shopping together, picking things and talking about how she's going to decorate a room or how to arrange something. That house is her creative output, in the way that mine is painting.

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