

Caroline Walker: 'Who we perceive to be the maker of an image affects how we consume it'

Caroline Walker's quietly charged, often luxurious, spaces frame half-told narratives that complicate traditional ideas of the woman as subject. She talks about her process and how feminism is a nuanced concept



by EMILY SPICER

The paintings of Caroline Walker (b 1982, Scotland) explore femininity in our modern, image-conscious age. Be it the private interior of a minimalist home in California, or the more public space of a nail bar in London, she imbues her works with a quiet tension that is sometimes social and sometimes psychological. And while she gives us tantalising clues about the lives of the women in her paintings, nothing is fully explained. They are players without a script, frozen mid-scene, and it is up to us, the viewer, to fill in the gaps. And how we do that, Walker explains, tells us as much about ourselves as it does the image.

Emily Spicer: Tell me about your process? I've read that you have a particular way of working.

Caroline Walker: It's quite an elaborate process that starts with finding a location for a photoshoot. When I have a location, I look for models, props and clothing. I start to build a story in my head and then I spend a day on location, photographing the models. I almost try to storyboard that, like doing a primitive version of a film shoot, I suppose, although I usually go off track quite quickly and start ad-libbing. I might get hundreds of photographs. Then I'll work with them back at the studio and start making lots of drawings and oil sketches. So I start putting together potential big paintings, thinking about how they might join up narratively.

ES: Why do you so often set your paintings in modernist interiors?

CW: I think that started with my desire to bring my subject matter into a more contemporary context because, up until about 2010, it seemed that I was always painting interiors of traditionally decorated Victorian houses. At some point around 2010, I began to think about how the environment would affect how you feel about the figures in the paintings and what their situation is. I had the opportunity to use a contemporary home as a setting for a photoshoot and the resulting paintings immediately seemed to engage more with how we live now, instead of looking as though they could have been painted any time in the last 150 years.

ES: But modernism is a 20th-century phenomenon.

CW: Actually, apart from the mid-century house I painted in Palm Springs, none of the locations I have used are modernist buildings. They're all new-builds. The house I'm painting at the moment – which is in the Czech Republic [Czechia] – was only finished about two years ago. I'm interested in the idea of the grand-design house, a very 21st-century idea of building your own home, somewhere that is very "you", with every part of it made to measure and designed for your needs and your taste. This is often a contemporary rehashing of that modernist style. And maybe that rehashing keeps the aesthetic of modernism, but loses some of its social or moral intentions.

ES: The way you paint your figures in these spaces makes it feel as though we are spying on them; it's quite voyeuristic. We are viewing them through windows, often from a height or through bannisters as though we're sneaking around the house, and this creates a bit of a tension. Is that something that you are striving for, or is it a byproduct of a different aim?

CW: There is definitely a strong sense of voyeurism in my work. I'm interested in challenging the position of the viewer, particularly in relation to my female subjects. And the paintings are very large, so there's a sense that you could almost step into the scene. I don't want the paintings to feel like pictures of something that's happening somewhere else. I want you to feel like you're involved or implicated in what's going on.

ES: Traditionally, that way of looking at women has been via the much discussed "male gaze". But you're a woman watching women.

CW: My work definitely engages with that history of painting women, which has largely cast the male artist as the portrayer of the female realm. I suppose I'm revisiting that, but through a female gaze. And I'm interested in whether the knowledge that something has been painted by a woman might change the way you feel about what you are looking at, or challenge your assumptions about a relationship between artist and model. There are a couple of paintings of mine in an exhibition of figurative painting in the Czech Republic at the moment that address this subject directly.

ES: Are those Ward Round I (2012) and Ward Round II (2012)?

CW: That's right. They depict two women lying on a bed and it is quite sexually provocative, I suppose. A journalist came up to me and said he couldn't tell that a woman had painted them, and that he found himself in the position of objectifying the subjects. I think he was implying that I was reiterating a male gaze. But it was me in that house, photographing those women, so, instantly, there's a different dynamic between artist and model, one which can often be about the interactions of an all-female group. I suppose it's asking a question about how you look at something, rather than telling you how to look at it. In the same way, if you look at Walter Sickert's Camden Town Nudes with the knowledge that he was alone in a bedroom with a female prostitute as a model, the sense of sexual threat is intensified. I think who we perceive to be the maker of an image affects how we consume it.

I'm often drawn to using houses that are quite masculine, and at times, clinical in character. The Ward Round paintings can suggest a kind of high-end psychiatric hospital. This was an instinctual decision made in the moment, but directed by some of the formal considerations of the shoot; composition, light, colour. I might like the way the colour of a skirt is going to look with a top against a bedspread, for instance. Everything links back to what might be happening narratively; what I want you to think as a viewer. When I'm back in the studio, it will start to make more sense and nothing that stays in the paintings is arbitrary.

ES: The women in your paintings often seem trapped, if not literally, as in Ward Round, then socially. And although men are often absent in your work, the architecture is, as you say, very masculine, so there is this implied male presence within the images.

CW: I'm interested in representing women at differing social levels and in lots of different situations. The fact that someone might appear to have a great house and the perfect life doesn't mean that there isn't a lot going on beneath the surface that is far more complex, in a psychosocial sense. It's too one-dimensional to assume that these are woman you should feel sorry for. And you might feel that there's a lingering male presence, but actually a lot of what I'm interested in is the relationships between women, or how women perpetuate their own position in a patriarchal society.

I have just been working on a big series of paintings about nail bars in London, which are staffed, frequented and owned almost exclusively by women. I'm interested in the complexities of feminism and women's position within society. I suppose I want that to be reflected in the paintings. I don't want anybody to seem like a clear-cut character. All I ever drew when I was a little girl was pictures of women and they were always from my imagination. Even now, when all of these women are based on real life, they still end up morphing into characters I've invented. They're all me, in a way.

ES: As far as your painterly approach goes – and you are very masterly in your handling of paint – where do your influences come from? Where did you learn your craft?

CW: I've just worked out a lot of it myself. But the artists I've always liked looking at the most are 19th-century French painters such as Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas, whose paintings were observations of contemporary Parisian life. The way they were painted not only tells you about the things they were depicting and the ideas behind the painting, but about painting itself. I suppose that's what I'm always hoping will happen in my work.

It's really important for me that when you get close to my paintings, [you can see that they are] really just a series of splodges of paint. So much of what I'm interested in is illusion and reality, a mixture between something that really happened with these people I've met, and something more constructed or imagined in the paintings.

ES: Are you coming to subjects like nail bars with any judgments? Or do you examine the beauty industry with a sort anthropological distance?

CW: I never want anything I make to be too prescriptive about what someone should think. They are observations on what is a complex subject with lots of potential readings. Recently, a collector was looking at the nail bar paintings in the studio and suggested, as a criticism, that they weren't very "empowering". He thought the women depicted didn't look as if they were having a very good time. I explained that I didn't feel that it's my purpose to either empower or disempower. In an anthropological sense, they are observations of the world around me, some of which will make you feel one way about the subject, and others will suggest something different. I find it interesting that there might be this assumption that, as a woman, it is somehow my role to represent women in a way that should be considered empowering.

ES: It's interesting that men have brought these issues up, that men are questioning your representation of women.

CW: I think by the nature of their positions as male viewers, their response is coming from a different place. That's not to say that men don't have very thoughtful, considered responses to my paintings as well, but I find, in general, women often come to the work from a different starting point, which can be more experiential or subjective.

ES: What reactions do you get from women?

CW: I get quite different reactions, but often they'll identify with the position the subject is in, whether that's physically, by understanding the subtle details of the ageing female body, or psychologically. Often women tell me that they know exactly what it feels like, to be that person. They see themselves in those positions, whereas, I suppose, men are approaching it more objectively, as an onlooker.

ES: By painting women in beauty salons and expensive homes, you are highlighting, that, on the whole, women are still tied to interiors.

CW: I think in our contemporary lives most of us, men and women, are tied to interiors in some respect. There's nothing to say the women in these houses haven't paid for it all themselves. We assume they're in a subjugated position, which tells us something about how we read an image, which is interesting. Things have moved on and the opportunities for women to occupy different roles have increased enormously, but we are still confined to a lot of archetypal ideas about femininity in our society. With the rise of the beauty industry, with nail bars, beauty salons and more procedures intended to keep us looking young and polished forever, it sometimes feels as if we're actually going backwards. We're constantly being presented with more treatments that we need to make us acceptable.

ES: Obviously you don't have a crystal ball, but how do you think these images will be viewed, in, say, 50 years from now? Given the way things are going.

CW: I don't know – that's a tough question.

ES: How do you hope they will be viewed?

CW: What I really hope is that people will see them as a product of the time they were made in. All my favourite paintings tell me something about the culture, society and political times they were made in, but in a subtle way. I think that's what I would like.

ES: What do you have in the pipeline?

CW: I'm working with Kettle's Yard in Cambridge on a series of paintings focusing on women refugees in London, which will be exhibited there in 2018. We're in the early stages of collaborating with a charity, but it's my hope that the work will look at notions of home for women in this situation. So that will be a different area again for me.