



Above: 'Spitz For Blitz', 2022



GOOD HOUSE KEEPING

Caroline Walker's painting elevates deeply familiar forms of female labour into high art that evokes the Dutch golden age. By *Alex Hyde*



Above: 'Atrium', 2018
Opposite: 'Bathroom Sink Cleaning, Mid Morning, March', 2019

There is a painting in Caroline Walker's series *Janet* of her mother cleaning the bathroom sink. It's a nice bathroom, the morning light a soft pink echoed in the pink of her mother's jumper. The light from the window filters through the pale blue bottle of bathroom cleaner, matched by Janet's blue rubber gloves. She looks up, mid-swirl around the basin.

It's a tender portrait. In it, I recognise both my own mother and her pristine bathroom. It was my mother who taught me how to clean a bathroom, and I often marvel at my partner's lack of knowledge of these things - for example, how one must polish the taps with a dry cloth. (Ideally, one needs two cloths for cleaning the basin, one dry and one wet.) And don't even mention the mirror.

"Houseproud" is a word with negative connotations. Yet what emerges from Walker's portraits of her mother is how dignified and intimate her work maintaining the house is. Something about the soft, womb-like light of the bathroom signals comfort, a degree of middle-class luxury, with the nostalgic aesthetic - Victoriana, *bidet* - of a now-empty family home, slightly out of date. In the faint smile it captures, and the way the scene is framed by the edge of the shower enclosure, Walker elevates the status of the work in which her mother is engaged to something beyond domestic labour.

This isn't how I'm used to thinking about housework. When writing my novel *Violets*, I took the opposite approach. Women are prone, on their hands and knees, scrubbing at stains that others have made. I wrote housework into the novel from

beginning to end, quite deliberately. It's a second-world-war novel, but the world it depicts is domestic, bound up in women's work and women's bodies while the fighting, and the men, carry on elsewhere. It's a world of small, repeated gestures: in the munitions factory, in the home, between lovers, between mother and child. The book is partly based on the story of my father's birth and, as I see it now, I realise that it is suffused with the very particular domesticity of my paternal grandmother. That is, working class and striving for respectability through the trappings of home, the knick-knacks and drop-leaf table giving the appearance of upward social mobility. But also through cleanliness and order, all signs of bodily processes scrubbed from sheets, from clothing, from floors. My grandmother was of a different time and place, but when I looked at Walker's painting of her mother titled "Ironing Tea Towels", I thought of her.

What's compelling about Walker's portraits is the habitual gestures and practices captured in easy, unselfconscious motion. In a series titled *Housekeeping*, Walker portrays scenes of hotel staff cleaning corporate suites. The contrast of these interiors is stark in comparison with the comfortable domestic spaces in which the portraits of Walker's mother are set. Yet here again are women's bodily movements captured with momentary exactness - the shoulder hike of picking up a pile of towels, turning with them; the neutral expression of repetition.

It is this sense of doing, expressed in loose brushstrokes with a luminosity that evokes the Dutch golden age - graceful, almost genteel - that is so striking. That's not to say Walker idealises the work of cleaning and hoovering (one of the portraits of

"THESE WINDOWS AND DOORWAYS ARE THE INTIMATE BOUNDARIES THAT WALKER'S PAINTINGS PERMIT US TO CROSS"

her mother is titled "The Housekeeper", another "Hanging Out His Overalls"), it's just that what hits you first is the dignity of each act, leaving us to ponder the politics of it ourselves. She creates a sense of subjecthood in the women she portrays, without it ever feeling heavy handed. I know I was striving for something like this in my book (and strive I did, reducing every word to its precise weight, investing every domestic act with meaning). What Walker achieves is almost weightless.

She makes her paintings through a process of observation, shadowing women in the workplace or, for a series currently on show at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, spending time with her sister-in-law Lisa in the months after she became a mother. Working from sketches and photographs to create both large-scale and smaller works in oils, Walker has explained how her paintings go beyond mere factual record. They are imbued with the memories and emotions that come from spending time with her subjects. Perhaps it is in this process of synaptic connection that her paintings are invested with their warmth. The medium of painting seems important too, the process of rendering life in a new form - less immediate than a photograph, more layered, such that the paintings glow.

I can relate to this process. *Violets* is, in many ways, my attempt to render family history into a new form (both poetry and prose), and I still wrestle with the factual record on which it is based. My father has annotated his copy of the book with his own observations about which bits are true, and who is really whom (Aunt Joan? Aunt Monica?) among the characters I insist are made up. Much like the titles of Walker's paintings - "Elaine", ►



'WALKER HAS EXPLAINED HOW HER PAINTINGS GO BEYOND MERE FACTUAL RECORD. THEY ARE IMBUED WITH MEMORIES AND EMOTIONS THAT COME FROM SPENDING TIME WITH HER SUBJECTS'

Below: 'Birthing Pool', 2021, from the *Birth Reflections* series



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◀ "Alem", "Torh", "Carol and Lil" – the balance between familiarity and anonymity is ambiguous. Her paintings take us beyond the act of seeing to a feeling of recognition, of knowing, instinctively, the social world she represents. Even if we have never met "Elaine", we probably encounter someone like her all the time. It's just that we might not notice.

Other scenes of work associated with women's labour, often migrant women's labour, are similarly invested with a sense of noticing that which often goes unseen. Women working in nail bars, hair salons, coffee shops, bakeries, dry cleaners; those who serve our everyday needs, some more frivolous than others. The relentlessness of those needs, and of our own consumption, is reflected back to us in a couple of paintings featuring bin bags stacked outside shops or cafés at dusk. This is the kind of labour we view as unskilled, disposable, whose use value resides in what we extract from it.

Most timely, perhaps, are Walker's recent paintings of health and social care workers, as in the series *Birth Reflections*, shown at Fitzrovia Chapel and University College London Hospital earlier this year. The balance between the provision of medical care and care of a subtler, more elusive kind is rendered beautifully in scenes that are clinical in terms of the processes and interventions they represent (an ultrasound scan, a Caesarean section, a birthing pool), yet hum with the physical presence of nurturance. There is something deeply empathetic yet professional, discreet, about the quiet stance of a midwife, hands behind her back, head to the side, during a woman's exhausted pause in labour.

The notion of familiarity is a constant in Walker's work. Implicit in much of it is the question of what it takes to produce familiarity, to create feelings of comfort or belonging, as in her series of portraits of asylum seekers titled *Home*. In a recent body of work called *Nearby*, Walker depicts the neighbourhood around her studio in north London. Some of the paintings capture life through windows from the outside, when the lights are on but the curtains have not yet been drawn. With the blue light of dusk contrasting with the warm yellows and ochres of artificial light from inside, Walker plays with a degree of voyeurism. It's an impulse I recognise. When I was growing up on the outskirts of Birmingham, my mother and I would choose a particular drive home through the more salubrious neighbourhoods of Edgbaston and Harborne in the early evening, slowing down to glimpse the swags and tails, fireplaces and furnishings inside. We were envious, of course, but we appreciated the warm glow of their promise. Walker's views through windows pull us in like that, as if we too are seeking warmth and light, or the comfortable interior worlds they represent.

This play of boundaries is also a feature of Walker's current exhibition, *Lisa*. The composition of many of the paintings relies on frames of interior space – down the hallway holding the baby, through an archway into the kitchen, doing the washing up and framed by what might be the height of a fridge or a larder cupboard. There is no doubt that the grace of Walker's subjects comes from the way that light animates their bodies and habitual movements (what, in another tradition, might have been the soft sheen on a milkmaid's forehead, the pale skin of her arm where her sleeves are rolled up and the milk pouring from the jug). But it is the distinction between natural and



Above: 'Night Feed', 2022, from the *Lisa* collection

artificial light that I find more striking. For me, the luminosity of Walker's paintings inheres in how light draws attention to the boundaries between interior and exterior space.

In one painting from the *Lisa* exhibition, we see Walker's sister-in-law from the outside through an upstairs window. The window's bevelled UPVC frame is slightly open, its interior handle visible. It is night, and the light inside is warm as the woman cradles her newborn baby, its head on her shoulder asleep. Another painting is of the inside of what might be the same room, in the deep quiet of the early hours when even the light from the lamp would be too bright. It is the light of the street lamp, instead, that shines in through the open curtains as Lisa sits breastfeeding in a chair. And it is light as it transcends these multiple framings of inside and outside, private and public, that signals something more about what we are seeing in Walker's work. These windows and doorways – but also shower enclosures, kitchen cupboards, stacks of towels and laundry – are the intimate boundaries that she permits us to cross.

Whether it's her mother in the comfort of her home, contract cleaners or NHS midwives, Walker questions what counts as "women's work" today. Her paintings resonate with a sense of care – in her skillfulness in rendering everyday gestures, in their luminosity and compositional depth. By elevating these deeply familiar forms of labour to the status of large-scale works of art, Walker prompts us to see them anew. **FT**

Alex Hyde is the author of *'Violets' (Grant)*. "Caroline Walker: *Lisa*" is at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London until May 28