

Painting during a pandemic: Caroline Walker's women in interiors

Caroline Walker's New York show, *Nearby*, is momentous. It tells of the precarious present that the world has been plunged into because of Covid-19 – where every moment outside the house becomes magnified. Walker is known for her breathtakingly evocative portraits of women in interiors. The lens now is on the women who populate Walker's life as she paints during a pandemic, producing a body of work made between 2020 and 2021. She visits her bakery, café, pharmacy, dry cleaners, where workers toil away diligently, burdened with the safety regulations of disinfecting their environment. These previously unnoticed spaces become pregnant with meaning. They are reminders of the simple pleasures of buying fresh bread, enjoying a coffee, and all the odd jobs we do in between working hours, like picking up clothes and other supplies. These activities, part of the routine of so many, and so central to human engagement have become alien encounters, both for workers and customers. We observe the palpable emptiness of shops. The eponymous Rebecca in the pharmacy crowns the jam-packed shelves of shampoo bottles and creams. Lost in thought, she stands under the neon pink 'prescriptions' sign, waiting for customers or something else to divert her attention. In another, Giorgia and Noemi stand back to back, each concentrating on their duties. In the dry cleaners Alem is less tense as she handles customers' dry-cleaned clothing, hanging them up, careful to check the labels. Perhaps the tension in *Giorgia and Noemi* comes from the fear of the Other that has been instilled in the psyche, resulting in the need to keep one's distance at all times. They work back-to-back, safe in their personal space, locked in their own thoughts. In *Raabs V* a tired bakery worker rests on the counter while finishing a well-needed drink, her posture slouched. In the foreground stands a bottle of sanitiser hand gel, a marked reminder of the change in culture.

Under normal circumstances we wouldn't even notice such details because of the regular bustle, but these activities take on a starkness and stillness that is sobering. The anticipation of customers is realised and takes on a grave edge when it happens. *Raabs III* reflects this powerfully. With shades of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, all figures face outwards; their eyes peering over constraining masks. We know not who these women are but their piercing glances disturb. They are enigmatic; their features masked except for their eyes, which are difficult to read and could convey fear or indifference. Moreover, are they socially distant or crowding together? Either way they are obstructing us. Their drabness contrasts with the warm glow of the lighting and ornate Christmas decorations. The mood in *Raabs IV* is poignant. The mournful look on the worker's face as she carries out her weighted down paper bags of goods from the bakery, with uniformed workers in the background, prompt a reminder – a note of relief in fact- that we are not in a hospital or a morgue.

The presence of the sole female figures at work or leisure is a standard configuration in Walker's oeuvre. But in previous series of works singularity in number does not equate with loneliness or isolation. It is instead symptomatic of another kind of experience; possibly the atomisation of urban life. Here the feeling of solitude is overwhelming and is heightened by the presence of the other, in the social or public realm. Take *Janet*, Walker's previous series, shown at Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh (2019), which features the artist's mother in her family home as she undertakes her domestic activities. Janet is seen changing pillowcases, going shopping, hemming pyjamas, lighting candles, and hanging out overalls. She goes

about her daily chores as the women in the New York series do but there isn't the same sense of unease in her family home. Is this because the home has become the space of necessary retreat, of sanctuary, of contemplation, and the new norm? It may have become too familiar, boring even, but for many it is a comforting space, and demarcates the threshold between safety and the potential dangers that lie outside the front door.

In an attempt to restore humanity and even community to her surroundings, Walker personalises the mask-wearing workers. She names them: Alem, Giorgia, Noemi, Shahela, Rebecca. Veiled behind their sanitised uniforms and masks, these are individuals known to Walker who are, in their own ways, attempting to continue with life to the best of their abilities whilst providing the services that make life meaningful. They are reminders of the loss endured during Covid but also of the hope that awaits. Hope too is embodied in *Daphne*, Walker's baby daughter, and her *Studio*, which is where it all begins. The show, revealingly too is titled after the artist – her works become snapshots of her reality in the last year or so. And this experience only of the local in lockdown has become a shared collective reality.

In current times access to the work will be experienced virtually, as many will not be able to visit the show and so will miss the chance to see the exquisite surfaces of the paintings. One of the most seductive aspects of the painting is the richness of the palette and the sharp and evocative shifts between the warm interior lighting and the twilight of outdoors. The photorealistic aspects of her paintings combined with their intriguing angles and sense of depth create the perspective of a voyeur. This description fits *Daphne*. Looking through the window, the viewer has access to the whole of the lounge and beyond, in strongly lit tones. The viewer, some feet away, is veiled in darkness and looks without being seen. Walker conveys an illicit sense of looking into the worlds that she creates and the viewer delights in the vista of possibilities, piecing together the visual clues that lie in each of the rooms. The artist is deliberately disengaged from her subjects as they go about their routines without interruption or judgement. Occupying a role of quiet detachment in her earlier series was not challenging as the women were languorous. Whether lying by the pool or being made up, they exuded glamour. The position of disengagement takes on a poignancy in more recent series, from 2017 onwards, as the lens is cast on disempowered subjects who are on the fringes of society because of their socio-economic or political status. They lead invisible lives. The series *Home* (2017) presents candid portrayals of refugee women. And, like the subjects of the current series, they are humanised and personalised. We know their names and the private spaces in which they inhabit. The coming together of the objective and the subjective points of viewer in relation to women's experience is integral to Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly's 1973-75 series *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry*. The photos, film and other aspects of the work powerfully convey the hardship of women's labour, a theme Walker expounds. The objective and yet humanising perspective makes for an intriguing paradox. Never has the precariousness of life been felt more than in the current climate, as displayed by the workers who make up the artist's environment. This takes on a new significance in Covid times which has resulted in the inevitable looking at the world from outside-in, through the screen, frame or equivalent. Walker's motif of the woman in the interior is rethought too. Before Covid-19 home life was deemed to be insignificant and kept out of the public gaze. Now the gaze has turned inwards where the home becomes the centre of social and work realms, and the site

(and also often sight) of life. In its grim and poignant ordinariness, Walker's show captures brilliantly the mood of the times, serving as a visual document of this moment in history.

Nearby was at GRIMM, New York from 25th March – 1st May 2021.
<https://www.carolinewalker.org/index.html>