

Sleepwalking

Marco Livingstone

What first attracted me to Caroline Walker's recent paintings was the seductive, effortless painterliness with which apparently photographically-derived images of domesticity at once oddly familiar and disquieting are translated into an entirely convincing and coherent visual language all her own. By taking as her subject matter female figures in residential interiors, presented in moments of stillness like frames from a cinematic narrative but distilled into silky free brushwork, she conveys a restrained and unexplained eroticism that permeates the caresses of her brushes as well as the glamorous look of the settings and furniture through which her women glide as if in a trance. Strongly lit and with a mysterious, sometimes somnolent, presence, these pictures conjure the atmosphere of movies not yet made or seen while also paying homage to the enduring allure of painting itself. Vermeer, Manet, Sickert, Hopper, Hockney and Fischl are among the many illustrious predecessors whose guidance one feels when confronted by these pictures, not because Walker makes any self-conscious or pretentious bid to set herself up as their heirs but because her imagined and self-contained world is so confidently and consummately realized.

Glimpses into contemporary interior spaces inhabited solely by anonymous women invite us conspiratorially into a collusive voyeurism all the more engaging, but also unnerving, for the feelings of impropriety and intrusion that it provokes. That the women often appear half-clothed or nude, but apparently oblivious to the fact that they are so intimately on display, intensifies the intimations of sinister intrusiveness that cast a shadow over what at first might be taken as a scene of serenity, retreat and relaxation. The viewer, depending on one's own identity and assumptions, becomes either a silent witness and participant or, more ominously, an unseen stalker. Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, to which the French film director François Ozon pays homage in the recently

released *Dans la maison* – a movie that provides telling parallels with Walker’s own observational dramas of fact blending into fantasy and fiction – could be as useful a point of reference in decoding Walker’s pictures as the canvases of any of the painters previously cited. Though devoted to paint, this young artist, still only 30 years old, shares with others of her generation an awareness of, and ease with, the dominant modern medium for visual narrative, the feature-length film. Resisting the temptations of video and the moving image, and opting instead to revitalise the medium of oil paint on canvas, now entering its eighth century, Walker also cleverly provokes sensations of narrative while constantly defusing the possibility of such linear or literal readings. The continuity of specific but unnamed people inhabiting highly particularised spaces that one recognises from one painting to another within each group of pictures teases with the prospect of a sequential story, but no such resolution is ever offered. Important gaps are deliberately left between one scene and the next; each work remains stubbornly, and enticingly, adrift and self-sufficient.

Walker elegantly negotiates her way through the many traps that could assail a young artist painting figuratively in the early 21st century. She takes her own photographs as reference points for constructing her paintings, but then adamantly refuses to be enslaved to them in their retelling through paint, which frees her from the constraints of the photo-realist painters who came to prominence just before she was born. She carefully chooses the locations that serve as the stages for each group of works – often, though not exclusively, sleek contemporary Neo-Modernist homes – and then auditions professional models or actors in those spaces and has them play parts that are left to the viewer’s imagination to explain. By such means she imbues the work with a performative and filmic atmosphere that signals a wholly contemporary take on what might otherwise have appeared to be a project still mired in the late 19th-century modernity of Vuillard’s *Intimisme*. Yet it is to the poetic potential of image-making and the transformative powers of the hand-painted mark – in other

words to the traditional territory of representational painting – that Walker constantly and unapologetically returns.

The prevalence of mirrors and doubled images in Walker's paintings, like her delight in interpreting such intangible and transient matter as light refracted through glass or water, attest to her understanding that to make a believable picture of the world involves more than mere sleight of hand, though she has that technical adroitness at her disposal. Each picture is presented as a kind of mirage, a fiction imposed by stealth and through force of will. *La vida es sueño* – life is a dream – as the 17th-century Spanish writer Calderón de la Barca declared in the title of his most celebrated play. Walker's paintings may look, at first glance, like economical transformations in paint of ordinary day-to-day experiences, but everything in them has been carefully plotted, constructed and played out. The women in her paintings, all in some way functioning as stand-ins for herself or as imagined aspects of herself and more widely of her experiences and identity as a woman, often appear to be lost in thought or even asleep, dead to the world but still highly active in her (and by extension in our) imagination. Perhaps it would be more useful to think of those depicted women as sleepwalkers dreaming themselves into the paintings, and in so doing insinuating their imaginary existence into the blunt factuality of the world in which we ourselves live and breathe. The women shown fast asleep on perfectly made beds, or dozing in the sun by the still waters of luxuriant swimming pools, may not appear to be doing anything at all, but still they manage to hold our attention. They will carry on indefinitely in that state of delicious indolence, the prerogative of surrogate humans whose existence will be held in suspension forever as paint on canvas.