

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Janet
Interview: Hettie Judah and Caroline Walker
Hettie Judah
2020

INTERVIEW

How did this new series start? Where did it come from?

CW: When I was a little girl all I wanted to draw was either very glamorous looking women or domestic scenes – which were basically pictures of my mum. I carried on painting her into my early twenties, and then I started looking elsewhere. For the past ten years I've worked with models, or people I didn't know. I liked that objective, distanced view. It was the project for Kettle's Yard [*Home*, 2018] which brought me back to dealing with people personally, because it ended up being portraits of women, responding to their particular lives rather than me dictating how a picture would look. Off the back of that I started a series of hotel housekeeping staff [*Housekeeping*, 2018]. Spending time with those women, getting a sense of the repetitive nature of that job – twenty bathrooms to clean in one day, twenty beds to change – I thought about who does that work. It's all women, women as cleaners. I started speaking to my mum about it, and my granny – her mum – was a cleaner. Her mum before her was also a cleaner.

My mum has spent her whole life cleaning her own house: the last 40 or so years doing repetitive tasks. I started thinking about the invisibility of that work women do. Around the same time I was up in Scotland and thought, 'I'll just take some pictures of Mum while she's doing her jobs,' but I didn't think about what I was going to do with them. It wasn't until *Housekeeping* got more developed that I started to think there could be something interesting in this more personal perspective; within the theme of women at work, but much closer to home. When I started speaking to Richard and Florence about the show suddenly I thought, this was the perfect setting. If I'm going to make paintings of my mum, they should be shown in Scotland.

You've framed your mother in quite different ways. In some you're looking in at her through the window, in others, you're behind her or seeing her glimpsed through the doorway. Were you thinking about your point of view?

CW: I think I was employing all the same visual tactics that I use in all my work. I've got a specific way of approaching my subject, something I developed from making more staged paintings with a location and models. I can't switch off that way of looking. I like moving between that slightly voyeuristic position and then actually being in the room, becoming much more implicated in the scene. In *Lighting Candles, Evening, March* there's a cup of tea in the foreground. That's my cup of tea: I'm in the room as well, though the viewer doesn't necessarily know that. In *Bathroom Sink Cleaning, Mid Morning, March*, Mum's turning round and talking to me: in others she's totally engaged in what she's doing. I'm just an annoying presence behind the window taking a photo, and she's trying to ignore me.

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The sense of time and place is really important in these paintings as well. Were you thinking of them as a sequence showing a cycle of time?

CW: Yes, I think so. The photographs were taken over the course of about a year, at quite sporadic intervals. I wanted there to be this sense that rather than capturing a snapshot of a particular moment, it's a continuous round of things that she's doing every day, or once a year, or every few months – and that's been going on for decades. Other than my mum aging, and the décor changing, I could have made these paintings 30 years ago and they would have been very similar.

There are also really specific things – like the basil pot from the supermarket, or the cleaning spray – that really locate the paintings in a particular place and time. Then there are elements that are harder to date, like the architecture. And elements that are intrinsic, like the light. You have talked about accusations of timelessness having really irritated you in the past, as a painter.

CW: I paint in quite a particular realist language that has possibly more in common with a 19th-century sensibility than contemporary painting, so I'm always thinking – how do I make what I'm painting look like it's about what's happening now? Like you say, it's those subtle signifiers: clothing or objects. I was in Sainsburys and saw a box of tissues and thought it looked really familiar – it was because I'd just painted it [in *Lighting Candles, Evening, March*!] In *Ironing Tea Towels, Late Evening, March*, there's a packet of Finish dishwasher tablets on the back worktop. I was thinking how familiar all these products are to us that we use all the time, but perhaps never pay much attention to.

Do you think of these in terms of Dutch genre paintings, for example, or are they collectively a portrait of your mum? Or, do you imagine them as female domestic history paintings?

CW: Maybe a mixture of all of those. They're a portrait of my mum and her relationship with that house. But I hope they would also be more universal: that people would look at them and think, 'Oh, that reminds me of *my* mum, or of what *I* do every day.' They have the wider subject of women and domesticity, which is such a recurring theme in the history of painting, and Dutch genre painting has been a huge influence on my work, so I would definitely see them in that line, or hope that people would see my appreciation for those artists in these paintings.

Were there other artworks you were looking at – for example the Kitchen Sink painters?

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CW: Yes, definitely, I was looking at a lot, and the Kitchen Sink painters were among them. But my focus was a little earlier – mainly late 19th and early 20th Century painters, which is often the period I'm looking at most. The domestic scenes of Manet, Degas, Hammershøi, Vuillard and Bonnard, but also the Scottish colourists Cadell and Peplow, whom I was particularly looking at when considering the garden scenes.

We were talking about Winifred Nicholson last time. Is the history of women painting the domestic sphere something you've explored?

CW: I was very aware when I was looking at all the artists I mention as influences, that those were all men depicting this 'female realm'. Inevitably they would have a different relationship to domestic subject matter than women artists, because historically it has been women that have run the household, even if they weren't personally the ones doing the cooking, cleaning and other housework. I spent a lot of time looking at Mary Cassatt, who made paintings about her female family members at home. They're really interesting because of what they tell you about the lives that middle class women had – one in which they spent most of their time in the house, confined to activities that were denoted as female. And that this was Cassatt's choice of subject demonstrates the restrictions on subject matter that she, as a woman artist, had. Unlike her male counterparts, who were out capturing the life in Parisian cafés and theatres, she was depicting the private lives of women. She made an interesting portrait of her mother reading a newspaper, but I haven't managed to find that many other examples of women artists painting their mums. I think there's bound to be a different relationship there, just because it's difficult not to project yourself.

My impression is that you've done an enormous amount of groundwork and then the actual paintings themselves are quite quick. What role does photography play? And the oil sketches?

CW: Photography's the starting point. For this particular series there were about 500 photos. There's a long process from taking them to making the big paintings. I spend a lot of time editing the photos and thinking about what's interesting, what's not. Once I've got them in the studio I start making pencil drawings.

But you're collaging photographs together?

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CW: Some of them. Sometimes I have what I'm looking for in a single shot. But a lot of the time, with the way I'm working now, not in any way posed, there might be twenty very similar photos. For *Hemming Pajamas*, *Late Morning*, *December* I used three different photographs and I moved things around. It took a while to get to the oil sketch stage because I was trying to work out what the best format was: portrait? Landscape? More square? How much of the hallway do I want to see? What's interesting about it? I spend a lot of time considering the crop of the image. When I've made pencil drawings, I move on to oil sketches, which are less about composition, more about palette and what colours I need to get the right atmosphere. Most of the paintings have one colour that's quite consistent through the whole image. For a few years I worked a lot with coloured filters and lights for photography, or in post-production: I liked how you could use colour to change something. Now I look for the same things, but occurring naturally, rather than superimposed.

There are paintings of yours that I associate with a very artificial light palette: those purple neon colours. But were the dominant colours and light something that presented themselves more automatically here?

CW: The material I'm working with is taken at different times of year, so naturally there is variation in the lighting, which also made me think about what it's like to be at that house at different times of year. Most of the garden images are from May 2018, which was an absolutely glorious summer when the garden was just so lush and green. At Christmas it gets dark at half past three and it's all about being inside in this cosy house. So a range of colour and atmosphere naturally presented itself, and in the house, each room is a different colour.

How is this bringing you into new territory? Is it more emotionally charged?

CW: Maybe it's bringing me into something that is more personal than I've been willing to do for quite a long time. Thinking about subject matter in a different way.

In the Sunset (2017) paintings, you used your sensibilities for mood, light, sense of place and time to suggest narrative. This is coming from a different angle.

CW: With the *Sunset* series I was working in the most staged way I ever had. Every scene was planned quite meticulously so that the model's activities were timed to coincide with the time of day and the associated lighting, atmosphere and my intended narrative. With these paintings of my mum, I'm not imposing anything or dictating what's happening.

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The Janet paintings give us a lot of information about what's going on in this house. I think it's interesting that there was a moment that you were excited by the suggestion of storytelling, and how that's evolved.

CW: I don't feel they have any less story in them now: I think the story's probably more interesting because it's not entirely manufactured by me. There's a subtlety and maybe even 'authenticity' in depicting the reality of ordinary people's lives which is difficult to recreate when inventing everything. I understand there's an element of me controlling how you're looking at the subject. But essentially, she's just doing what she does, and being who she is.

Has this experience of really studying change, and shifting light in one place over the course of a year, brought up new experiences and new ideas for you in the way that you're working?

CW: Letting something percolate in the background was a new way for me to work, and I like that. Before, I've had one shot to go and get the images that I'm going to use. Less so recently, because most of the subjects have been in London. But most of the photographs I was working from are still taken on one occasion. There's something interesting about that because you really are getting this little moment in somebody's day or their working lives. I didn't know what I was going to do with these photos of mum at first. I didn't download them from the camera for several months, then I looked at them and thought they were quite interesting. Next time I went up I was thinking 'What if this is a portrait of my mum's existence in this house? What's missing? What do I need to catch her doing next?'

There's a sense of time passing in a way that there isn't with your other series.

CW: I think that's important, because there is that sense of time passing over a very long period of time. Forty years is a long time to spend in one place. It's become such a part of my parents' identity that if it was just based on pictures that I took on one weekend, I don't think it would feel right. It needs to feel like it's covering the whole experience of being in this place. This is the house that I grew up in, and it's been my parents' lives' work, really.