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Forbes

If You Love The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, You'll Love These Paintings By Caroline Walker
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Caroline Walker Tinseltown, 2017 Oil on linen 180 x 240 cm

Los Angeles, on the ground, is a sprawl of gritty strip malls, congested highways, and lifeless car dealerships. The weather is always nice, but there is no one outside, except for those wealthy enough to live in homes with pools and views; they remain invisible to all but themselves. In our cultural imagination, however, we have access to their mansions, nestled into hills with sweeping views of a city scrubbed clean by distance, and at night, a pattern of blinking lights.

We live in their Los Angeles on Bravo reality television shows like *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and *Million Dollar Listing: Los Angeles*; in the paintings of David Hockney; in the music of Joni Mitchell; in films like Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*. A list of references could fill websites.

The paintings of Caroline Walker, currently on view at Anat Ebgi, contribute to the fever dream of Los Angeles as a collection of perfectly appointed modernist homes filled with aging beauty queens ravaged by the excesses of plastic surgery. In an exhibition entitled "Sunset," Walker, who was born in Scotland and lives in London, presents large-scale paintings and works on paper that captured the feigned private life of the former Miss Colorado.

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“Los Angeles is somewhere I’m drawn to because it has this air of familiarity we all know it so well from TV and film, yet as a visitor it is still very unfamiliar, not least because it’s so unlike European cities,” Walker told me over email. “It’s real and somehow unreal: the architecture, the presence of the film industry and the resulting number of actors - so much about the city plays into ideas about artificiality, constructed identity and narrative, which are enduring interests for me in both the way I think about making paintings, and the subjects I depict.”

Walker almost exclusively paints female characters, usually in locations only the well heeled travel — Palm Springs, nail salons, spas, apartments in London outfitted with Scandinavian-inspired kitchens. As an artist, she’s interested in both the way that femininity is formed and performed, and in the corruptions that exist in places where the “good life” is supposedly lived. “My subject matter nearly always encompasses environments which aren’t that familiar to me, or aren’t part of my daily life so become somewhere I can see objectively, voyeuristically, or project a narrative on to which is not my own,” she told me.

Her paintings, even in digital reproductions, have the visceral appeal of the lush, gorgeous photographs of Slim Aarons and Cecil Beaton. She captures worlds that we know, as sensible people who detest the excesses of the wealthy, we should not care about; but that secretly, in our downtime, we want to inhabit through culture exclusively. By we, of course I mean myself.

The paintings in “Sunset” show a single woman — Suzan, who won Miss Colorado in 1977. Walker first met Suzan in Palm Springs in 2015. When she was offered a show in Los Angeles, she asked Suzan to play the role of an aging beauty queen going about her day in a home in the Hollywood Hills. To stage the scenes she wanted to paint, Walker rented a house on Sunset Plaza Drive, just above the Sunset Strip. For 24 hours, Suzan inhabited it — she took phone calls by the pool, she met with a glam squad, she exercised, she lounged, she looked in the mirror.

“These scenes were roughly planned and timed but I would ask Suzan to enact a particular activity or pretend to be the character in a scenario so the results were more a natural response to my directions,” Walker says.

Throughout, Walker took over 1500 photographs, which she then brought back to her studio in London. There, she created drawings and oil studies that eventually resulted in the large-scale paintings on view at Anat Ebgi. “From the early stages I was thinking of the paintings as a group rather than individual works, and planned them in relation to each other so that each one would be quite different but give an overall impression of the show representing a ‘day in the life of,’” she says.

The paintings are just as arresting as you want them to be. Suzan is beautiful, but flawed enough that you can’t stop looking at her. The scenes she inhabits are like candy; or perhaps, more accurately, like balm for those of us who live ordinary lives in small, ordinary spaces. They prove, if nothing else, that the myth of Los Angeles is eternal. It doesn’t matter how many times I see the same fantasy — I’ll never be full of it, especially not when it’s as well executed as Walker’s paintings.