

PRIVATE FACE

Paintings by Barbara Walker

Barbara Walker is an unfashionable artist. Unfashionable because in this age of instant imagery -typified by the digital camera and the computer scanner- her work represents itself as the very antithesis of contemporary image making. Her work, exclusively painting, requires a considerable degree of skill, commitment and dedication, as well a considerable amount of patience and labour. Good paintings like these cannot be produced in a hurry. These painting speak to us of long and varied periods of engagement and gestation, before an image is committed to canvas and the physical work of 'painting' begins.

There is nothing particularly methodical in the way in which Walker works. An image may lie dormant in their mind for extended periods of a time before she commits a version of it to canvas. She sometimes has to work hard to win the trust and confidence of her subjects before she can begin to sketch or otherwise document these people and their everyday or regular activities. Doubts have to be overcome - not just by those the artist wishes to sketch and paint - but doubts of the artist herself and of those closest to her. For everyone involved, not least Walker herself, the right to paint familiar subject matter has been earned. Having earned that right has to be nurtured, protected and never abused.

Walker does more than simply 'paints' her community, her family, her friends and herself. She is in effect a chronicler, a faithful and friendly documenter of lives and culture of African – Caribbean people around her in her native Birmingham. Her work is merely social documentation, important though social documentation is, for it effortlessly exudes a warmth, familiarity and a humanity seldom within genuine reach of even the most accomplished and empathic photographer. Walker Has grown up in, as well as grown out of, the 'community' that she takes for the subject matter of her work. Born into an African-Caribbean family in Birmingham, itself a solid home to many Britain's Post-war Caribbean Immigrants, Walker grew up in the Pentecostal church, one of many predominately or exclusively 'Black' churches that practice baptism by total immersion. She has also grown up with a familiarity with the reggae dance hall and many other social or religious environments in which African- Caribbean people congregate, worship and socialise.

Miscellaneous attempt 'documents' black life are of course very familiar to us. However these images, primarily photographic, lack the familiarity and the intimacy of Walker's work. Being very much a 'local' person obviously helps Walker to paint these pictures. She is in no sense of the word an 'outsider' to the scene she depicts. Having raised three children to adulthood within Birmingham. Barbara is very much at home within the community she depicts. Yet, familiarity itself could never be enough to guarantee Walker the access she needed in order to paint these pictures. Her painting speak of a trust between herself and her subject matter. Too often Black people have found themselves the objects rather than the subjects of people's image making but Walker's work contains none of the brutal and harsh objectifying that has tended to characterise social documentation of Black people. Walker

makes clear to her subjects that they and their images are 'safe' with her. That she will do nothing to brutalise or dehumanise them.

The importance of this point cannot easily be overstated. Though Black people have been in this country for a long time, within the mass media images of them still exist in decidedly problematic ways. You would have imagined by now that a range of pressures would have mitigated against the continuing circulation of images of Black people as being socially dysfunctional, under-achieving and criminally minded. Yet within these racist stereotypes doggedly persist, to be interrupted only by equally problematic images of Black British sports personalities wrapping themselves in the Union Jack

Walker does much good to undermine these corrosive and negative images. Through her paintings, she ensures that the ways which we see ourselves and the way in which others see us avoid what we might bluntly call the 'racist' stereotype. The people in Walker's painting have real lives, real relationships and real needs, In other words, they are real people- people to whom we can, quite effortlessly, relate. They go to church they have their hair cut, they play dominoes (of course they play dominoes!). Real people, real lives. Within her work, Walker is playing homage to, as well as building on the work of other Black artists. As such, she is contributing to an important and worthy canon as she herself acknowledges, 'I want to challenge the stereotyping and misunderstanding that abounds, and offer a sophisticated and positive alternative in a mainstream setting, as a member of other Black artist have tried to do.' For good measure, and adding another dimension,

Walker has added, 'I am interested in the quality of painting and what it uniquely has to offer.'¹ In many ways, what painting uniquely has to offer to both Walker and the subjects of her paintings is gravitas, status and respect. By painting in frequently subdued and restrained colours and palettes, Walker lays quiet calm to the tradition and that belief that to be painted is to be made visible in a range of profoundly respectful ways. Her characters have a quiet but determined dignity. Only painting - good figurative painting- can do this.

Perhaps without consciously knowing it, Walker's painting depicts history, or more specifically, contemporary history, if we can use such a term. Her paintings represent something more than, something other than history book history. They represent instead a living, breathing historical document of the modern day Black Brummy: relatives in Jamaica, roots in Africa, home in Balsall Heath. Or Edgbaston or Handsworth or Erdington or Mosely. Accents like Jasper Carrott. These are valuable paintings because they proved us with copious evidence that the cotemporary Black presence in England's second city is not- as media would have us to believe- a fractious and dysfunctional presence. It is instead a settled presence, typified by ordinary people, living ordinary lives, going about their day to day business - and being painted by a extraordinary artist.

As one commenter has recorded, 'Walker see herself not (just) a portrait painter, but rather as a commentor of the histories and experiences of people she knows and the Birmingham community in which they live... Walker is a contemporary history painter...'² In years to come, as much as at present time, we will thank Walker for these paintings.

Dr Eddie Chambers, March 2002

- 1 Private Face – Artist Statement, December 2001
- 2 Visual communication ARTICLE- The subject; works by Barbara Walker and Eugene Palmer by Gen Doy