

Artist Interview: Barbara Walker

Barbara Walker MBE creates intensely observed and empathetic portraits of individuals and communities. Working in painting and drawing, she addresses questions of scale and visibility that bridge the aesthetic and the political. She spoke with curator Sophie Ridsdale-Smith about her process and the spaces depicted in Boundary I and Boundary II. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

SRS: What was it that interested you in documenting this community?

BW: So, these paintings are almost 19 years old. This work was conceived when I was doing my BA, and I started them in my third and final year...I wanted to capture a culture and a lifestyle of the African Caribbean that spoke to me whilst I was growing up in Birmingham. A new form of identity politics was revealed to me, a new visual language. In many ways, the concept somehow opened up a set of formal values and aesthetics and sensibilities that wasn't immediately accessible to me at the time, though it was an inherent intuition, I suppose.

I was interested in paying homage and celebrating, as well as adding to the narrative of other Black artists. It was important to pursue this idea, in order to tell our stories. Often enough our experience and our histories are interpreted by others, but here you had someone from inside, not from outside, giving their perception—my perception at that time.

Boundary I and Boundary II came from a series called *Private Face* (completed in 2002). It was one of my most ambitious projects. Subsequently over a two-year period 21 pieces of work were produced. From there I had my first major show, at the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham.

SRS: How do you think that *Boundary I* and *Boundary II* relate to the exhibition's theme, 'capturing the everyday'?

BW: I think the works relate to the title on a few levels. These paintings celebrate a snapshot moment in time. They capture real people, real lives, real relationships, which an audience can resonate with...I was inspired by the idea of taking normality and something simple, and transferring it into something extraordinary, spectacular, and meaningful.

SRS: There's such a strong insider's perspective in these paintings. How did you gain the trust of your subjects?

BW: ...Basically, I tend to work slowly and meticulously. There's a lot of thinking and testing my hypothesis and unpacking involved in my process. I would say that's 80 percent, and then the rest is painting, the practical side, production. There is always a natural drive to take on projects or subjects that are new to me. Anything too familiar doesn't excite me and can end up being predictable. I like challenges, I like things that make me think. If anything is too familiar, I'm not learning. So, I'll dive in and from there...see what happens.

Going back, and re-considering these paintings, I was drawn to the ideas of looking at spaces, looking at everyday rituals and practices in communities, at daily activities. It could be looking at figures and the interplay and complexities of group compositions. I was also trying to capture the private and spaces in between. I wasn't interested in the posed or staged. I wanted to come in very naturally and represent the energy, spirituality and the alchemy of subjects.

After identifying where I wanted to go and who I wanted to figure in the work—barber shops, hairdressers, dance halls and everyday individuals...It took me a while to work up the courage to enter the barber shops...Before I pushed that door, I think I circled it—like a hawk circling its prey! Then I thought, let's take the plunge.

There were two barber shops in question. The group composition [in *Boundary II*] is on Soho Road in Handsworth, Birmingham. When I entered it, I immediately just sat down among a row of men and waited. Obviously, they saw me there, but they didn't say anything and they just carried on in conversation with each other. The shop was really full at that time of day. Eventually I plucked up the courage to ask the owner, who was at the time working. I explained I was an artist and my ideas for the project. And he just said, 'Carry on. Do your thing.' I explained to him my process, that I make sketches and take photographs, and asked, 'Do you mind?' And he just said, 'No, you carry on.' He didn't really ask the customers, although equally they could have said no! Luckily enough they allowed me. From then, once I had the go-ahead...

SRS: How long did you spend in the shop that first time?

BW: I spent about two hours. I didn't want to just go in and snatch a moment and then depart. It's about the emotions, understanding what was in front of me and taking the experience away with me, which would ultimately translate into the painting. Mentally and physically, it's quite strange, quite exciting. I was nervous, but also passionate, almost ruthless in the sense that I wanted to get this work...I was just sitting there witnessing the moment and listening to conversations like a fly on the wall. I've never had that experience before. As I said, I like certain challenges, and the paintings are coming from a female perspective in the male environment of the barber's shop.

The other composition of the two men was from another barber shop. That one I had to try a bit harder to win their trust, and for them to be comfortable with me. It was a slow simmering moment and ended up with me spending longer time there. It was a smaller barber shop, not as bright

as the other one, with little room to navigate and move around. I followed my usual protocol, I introduced myself and explained why I was there. Immediately there was a resistance. 'Why do you want to take these photos?' 'Who are you?' From that moment, I had to really reassure them that I'm from the community and how my parents lived down the road and show that I was who I said I was...Eventually they sheepishly, grudgingly allowed me to go ahead but I could only take photos under their conditions, so had to work from a vantage point behind and to one side of the two sitters.

In many ways what seemed to me at the time a restriction and the apprehension I felt, actually played in my favour, and offered me a challenging and as it turned out, a very interesting composition: pointing up the subtlety of these two individuals and the connection between them. And I love that angle, because it immediately adds another layer of mystique, of mystery: who are these individuals? By presenting that composition, I'm allowing the viewer to implant or insert their perception of who these individuals are...and the nuances of this everyday relationship.

I was working in a very limited palette, because an aspect of my process is that I do as much sketching as I can from the photographs. At the time I was working in black and white film. Sometimes colour in photographs can be a bit too artificial and get in the way, and create another interpretation. Black and white is just that—very graphic, it's concise and succinct. Once in my studio, I will create several sketches, just to get familiar with the composition and formal planes. Then I'll translate those drawings into a painting and incorporate my colours. I'm constantly creating and playing through ideas, but at the same time taking references from art history and from popular culture in terms of colour and painting styles.

SRS: Why do you think that artists have been drawn to depicting barber shops as significant spaces in Black communities?

BW: I can't speak for other artists, but the barber shop space has been in my consciousness for many years. The barber shop is a familiar street-scape presence in the Handsworth area of Birmingham, where I grew up. Not surprisingly, the barber shop is very much a male-dominated environment, which can be intimidating and alienating to me. But in documenting a space like this, I sought to dispel and set aside the somewhat negative association that dominated media images of Black men. I wanted to present a sensitive, empathetic interpretation of one of the very few spaces in which Black men could freely congregate and fraternise. You see the framing here of these individuals. They are not framed as sports personalities, musicians, protesters, or hyper-sexualised bodies. These are just men: figures in a space. The paintings seek to depict the social interactions that take place in environments such as this, where the rituals and ceremonies of everyday Black life occur.

SRS: Did you stay in contact with them?

BW: I stayed in contact. Interestingly enough, this series of work is a trilogy, and the owner bought the third, *Boundary III*. There is a large poster reproduction of the original painting in the shop. Sadly, some of the figures in the paintings, I know have now passed away.

SRS: I know you're interested in the hierarchy of materials. Can you talk about the importance of the medium in your work?

BW: I define myself as a painter, working in the spaces of painting and drawing. However, in recent years I've been working largely in the area of drawing. After the *Private Face* series, I began to have a crisis around painting: an

introspective moment in what painting does, what painting can achieve. As artists we live constantly in the space of insecurity and sometimes can doubt ourselves. So, while trying to figure things out in my head, I moved into drawing. I think I was intimidated by painting, because at that time, I was asking myself the question 'Was I good enough?' I was measuring myself up to artists from before, since painting has a long history. Looking back, I admit I was immature and lacked confidence. I made a mistake in terms of comparing to what had gone before, instead of adding to the narrative and trying to contribute something better or additional to the story.

But when you talk about hierarchy—I chose painting for that long history, for that reverence, for that gravitas. I wanted to use painting as the tool and symbol to represent a story. These paintings are large, some of them are six foot by five, or seven foot by four. It's about making them monumental...I was interested in the idea of painting, and the symbolism, and the marker of painting, and how it sits within perception and contemporary practice. I could have created these works through drawing, but I thought it was important to use that medium to make a political mark and a political statement... Talking about this hierarchical concept, drawing always seems to come at the bottom. There's painting, sculpture, and drawing always sits on the periphery or is marginalised. I thought about that for these recent works, making an argument that drawing can sit equally, side-by-side. It can hold its own. So, I'm always going back and forth. Maybe if I do paint again, I will be playing with these ideas, unfolding these ideas.

SRS: Can you speak about the importance of scale and colour in these paintings?

BW: Scale was very important and still is today. Going back to one of the reasons for creating these works, within my

research I realised that...this community had been shaped by photography. But I hadn't come across any paintings that documented African Caribbeans in the mainstream in the UK. Those pigments hadn't saturated contemporary art practice at the time. Now there is a celebration of the Black figure and the Black body. But at the time, I recognized that there was an absence and that absence posed questions for me. It became a problematic for me.

Going back to scale—scale is about taking the anonymous, powerless, and lonely, and making them monumental. I purposely aimed to position my work in mainstream settings and galleries. That's where I wanted these works to be seen and understood and respected. And in doing so, to change perceptions. Arguably, you could create something just as monumental and powerful that is small. But at the time my aims were to work really large. I wanted to be free with these paintings, I wanted them to seduce, so that the viewer would be surrounded and confronted with this work.

SRS: Did you draw inspiration from other artists and art-historical sources?

BW: Everything inspires me. There are hundreds of artists whose work I admire. It's also important to me to look outside the box of who is and who is not an artist. Having said that, whilst making the work, I inserted myself into the history of works by Gustave Courbet, Jean-François Millet, with these depictions of labour and of class. I was also exploring the language of painting, and these artists spoke to me and resonated with the issues I was dealing with.

Alongside those artists, I was looking at contemporary photographers who were grappling with these issues, so photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, Vanley Burke, Eve Arnold. I was looking at social documentary, and how they had captured a

community through photographs. I was trying to create that through painting. In particular, I was looking at Vanley Burke, and I resonated a lot with his documenting of the Black community in Birmingham.

SRS: Vanley Burke's work is in our show as well. What would you say is the significance of the title *Boundary*?

BW: Titles are funny things. They're often fluid. Titles can come well after the exhibition, or through literature, or a statement, or a conversation. It was whilst I was sitting and listening—there was a lot of listening—I was trying to make myself small, funnily enough, so the attention wasn't on me. I wanted to sit and bear witness to what was unfolding in front of me, to have that luxury of being allowed to witness.

What was starting to unfold was a conversation. There were certain men in that space who were starting to talk about nostalgia. They were talking about home, and the Caribbean, and Jamaica in particular... Their talk was filled with bravado and filled with charm, and there were stories unfolding in that space...What started to occur was what I interpreted as boundaries, in terms of location, culture, memories. They were reliving and reminiscing. There was that sense of existing in one space, but longing to be somewhere else. That's where the idea of boundaries sprang from. They were talking about boundaries, but also there were boundaries in the sense that I'm in that space. The work shows how close I got to them, and the distance.

To go back to the question of these characters, the barber shop is this place where men can come together. You have the usual suspects, you know. You have the agony aunt. You have the politician. You have the sympathiser. You have the different ages of the men, the relationship of the older, the senior men to the young men who enter that space. The energy and

the dynamics—trying to capture that in a painting. You can imagine, the way in which I work, there were some 40 photographs of that one barber shop, and I picked just one. I still have those images of people in my archive. You never know, I may go back to them again. They're there, as a legacy of that moment in time.

SRS: What relevance do these paintings have today, particularly in the context of isolation [brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic]?

BW: COVID has made us pause and reflect and slow things down. It's also shed a spotlight—COVID and before that, Grenfell—on inequalities that continue to exist in our society. For the BAME community and working-class individuals, it's highlighted the difficulties that they face day to day, which have worsened. The basics of life—feeding your family, educating your children, paying your rent—are acute for those who are low-paid or those already on benefits. Many people have lost their jobs or have young people who will find it more difficult to find work due to COVID, and the gap between rich and poor has been magnified.

On the plus side, the pandemic has shown how valued front-line staff are—shop workers, porters, delivery workers, nurses. It has put a spotlight on these individuals, and made us stop. There's a social consciousness at the moment. It's made us take stock.

SRS: When visitors are looking at your works online, what questions would you want them to ask themselves? What do you hope they'll notice?

BW: I never set up an expectation of the viewer or work in the context of explicitly eliciting a reaction. I just expect them to enjoy the work, get into the work, or even if they don't enjoy it, it's their reaction... Once I've spent time conceiving those works, I then put them out there for the

audience. I hope that they enjoy it, first and foremost, and learn from the experience of looking at the work, whatever that may be that they take away.

SRS: How do you feel that these paintings might change when they're viewed online? Do you welcome the online platform?

BW: Yes and no! I think, due to COVID, [the online platform has] been very beneficial in terms of connecting people and playing a part in inclusion and accessibility. But there's nothing like a physical exhibition, to be able to get up close and see the brushstrokes. It touches your all your senses—the visual, the smell, even a sound piece sounds different in a space. For sculpture, you can't walk around it, you have a screen that flattens images there and then.

However, I'm interested in my audience, and I use the online platform for accessibility. From my own research, I've learned that not everyone is comfortable entering the white cube space. This is more accessible and diverse.

Through Zoom, I've been able to access a lot of interesting conversations. [When I'm in one physical space] there are the complexities and issues of travel and our footprint...When thinking about online, I can think globally...I never think local; I think globally about audience and who can see the work. I'm thinking about a new generation, a younger generation, engaging with my work. With this online platform, there's no cutoff point for the exhibition at two months or a year. It has a longevity. It's now and archival at the same time.