

the Whitworth

PRESS RELEASE

Barbara Walker: Being Here

Friday 4 October 2024 – Sunday 26 January 2025

The first major survey exhibition by acclaimed British artist Barbara Walker will open at the Whitworth this autumn.



Barbara Walker: Being Here will bring together over 70 works spanning Walker's career from the 1990s to today, including her Turner Prize nominated portrait series *Burden of Proof* (2022-23) and rarely seen drawings alongside a major new wallpaper commission. This significant exhibition will survey the evolution of her compelling figurative practice and her unwavering commitment to transforming perceptions of Black presence, power and belonging in Britain.

Walker is celebrated for her sensitively rendered drawings, grounded in extensive periods of research. From delicate pencil drawings on archival documents to monumentally scaled charcoal wall drawings, she uses the most traditional of techniques to give powerful presence to the conditions of our time and the histories they are rooted in. Playing with techniques of visibility and erasure, such as enlarging, cutting, obscuring and blanking out, she challenges conventions of representation to ask what it means to be seen and who and what is remembered. Intensely observed and empathetic, her work brings forth themes of body politics, power and citizenship.

The exhibition will chart the seven major series of works that Walker has made to date – brought together for the first time. It will begin with early vividly coloured paintings from *Private Face* (1998-2002) depicting intimate moments of her family and within communities in Birmingham. *Louder than Words* (2006-09) presents a tender series of mixed media drawings on police

dockets and newspaper articles made in response to her son being repeatedly stopped and searched by police. Reflecting Walker's research driven practice, *Shock and Awe* (2015-20) foregrounds the overlooked contributions of Black servicemen and women to contemporary and historic war efforts, using techniques of erasure such as blind embossing to disrupt the archive. *Vanishing Point* (2018-present) and *Marking the Moment* (2021-present) repeatedly engage with European Old Master paintings, transforming the historic image to spotlight the once marginalised Black figure, creating alternative of ways of seeing for a new generation.

The monumental series *Burden of Proof* (2022-23), commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation with the support of the Whitworth, imbues a sense of humanity and reverence to the Caribbean-born individuals impacted by the Windrush scandal. A major new wallpaper installation, *Soft Power* (2024) will further spotlight these histories and the artist's continued experimentation with materials. Inspired by the Whitworth's internationally renowned collections of textiles and wallpapers and the history of French Toile de Jouy design, Walker will expand upon her vast wall drawings to create an enveloping patterned wallpaper environment featuring Windrush communities in Manchester alongside landscape and decorative elements.

The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated catalogue generating new research and understandings of Walker's celebrated practice.

Barbara Walker, Artist, says: "Since the 1990s I've been consistently using painting and drawing to think through acts of erasure within our shared histories and within our present moment. I'm always thinking about how to push this further, how to keep experimenting, intervening and disrupting dominant forms of image-making. To bring all of my artistic projects together across 25 years is a landmark moment and comes at a time when I'm thinking my practice anew. I am incredibly excited for this exhibition at the Whitworth and to see new relationships be activated across my work."

Darren Pih, Head of Exhibitions & Collections, says: "The Whitworth is delighted to present the first major survey of Barbara Walker's work. Walker is one of the most important British artists working today. Her powerfully humane works expand the possibilities of portraiture. Exploring themes of social justice and belonging, it helps transform and elevate Black presence in contemporary society and historically. We look forward to welcoming new and future audiences to our galleries this autumn and winter."

-ENDS-

Notes to Editors

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Image credit

Barbara Walker, *The Sitter*, 2002 © Barbara Walker. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2024.

Photo: Gary Kirkham

Listings information

4 October 2024 – 26 January 2025
The Whitworth, The University of Manchester
Tuesday to Sunday 10am-5pm, Thursday late opening until 9pm
Free entry

Related publications

An illustrated catalogue will accompany the exhibition, edited by Whitworth curators Poppy Bowers and Hannah Vollam, with contributions from Mora Beauchamp-Byrd; Eddie Chambers; Alice Correia; Leanne Green and Rianna Jade Parker.

Credits

Curated by Poppy Bowers (Senior Curator, the Whitworth) and Hannah Vollam (Assistant Curator, the Whitworth). The exhibition was initiated by Leanne Green (Head of Exhibitions & Displays, Tate Liverpool, formerly Curator at the Whitworth).

The exhibition is generously supported by Cristea Roberts Gallery and Friends of the Whitworth. With thanks to our official paint sponsor Little Greene.

About Barbara Walker

Barbara Walker MBE, RA (b. 1964, Birmingham, UK) is a British artist described by art historian Eddie Chambers as “one of the most talented, productive and committed artists of her generation.” Walker studied Art and Design at the University of Central England, Birmingham (1993-96) and Wolverhampton University (2003-04). She has had regular solo shows throughout her career including at Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham (2002, 2007, 2016); Jerwood Gallery, Hastings (2018); and Turner Contemporary, Margate (2019-21). Her work has been included in over sixty group presentations since 1995, most recently: *The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure*, National Portrait Gallery, London (2024); *Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance*, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (2023); *Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present* (2023); *Life Between Islands, Caribbean - British Art, 50s to Now*, Art Gallery Ontario, Canada (2023) and Tate Britain (2021) and *Lahore Biennale 02: Between the Sun and the Moon* (2020). In 2023 Walker was nominated for the Turner Prize and elected to the Royal Academy of Arts.

In 2021 the Whitworth acquired three works from Walker’s *Shock and Awe* series (2015-20). Her work is held in public collections including Arts Council Collection, UK; British Museum, UK; Government Art Collection, UK; Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA; Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE; Tate, UK; and Yale Center for British Art, USA.

The Whitworth

The Whitworth is proudly part of The University of Manchester, operating as a convening space between the University and the people of the city. Founded in 1889 for “the perpetual gratification of the people of Manchester” it continues this mission today in new contexts. The gallery, its park and gardens are home to the collection of over 60,000 works of art, textiles, sculptures and wallpapers and provides a platform for artists from around the world. The Whitworth is driven by a vision to actively seek and manifest connections between art, creativity, and their role in developing a more resilient and caring society through its exhibitions and award-winning civic engagement programme.

Gallery opening times: Tuesday to Sunday 10am-5pm, Thursday late opening until 9pm
www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth