



ELLA WALKER

Chorus

In her first institutional solo exhibition, artist Ella Walker combines a variety of historical and cultural motifs and figures into painterly and thematically complex works that become stages for human interaction across time. In her constant engagement with iconographies of Christian painting, mediaeval manuscripts, theater, dance, film, poetry, and fashion, she searches for time-transcending motifs and formulae of the human figure and existence, coexistence, and the nearness of pain and beauty.

The large-scale paintings in the exhibition and the smaller works in the *colored drawings* series of works on paper all show a kind of stage, rudimentarily equipped only with a floor, a background and props, which places the performing or dancing figures in the center. Like a collection of small sketches and individual groupings that often find their way into the stagings of the larger works, the small works on paper function like fragments, rehearsals of the actresses and sub-narratives in Walker's painterly oeuvre. In almost all the works, figures are gathered in one or more groupings, echoing the exhibition title *Chorus*, which denotes a group of singers, dancers or performers. In ancient Greek theater, the chorus usually represented the common people or society and their voice (*vox populi*). In a sense, as an metaphor of society, the chorus also functioned as a commentator on the action, provoking and anticipating certain reactions from the audience, thus, according to Schlegel, making it the "ideal spectator." Not only in times of deep social and political division is the chorus, the represented voice of the people, a motif of high topicality in its significance for democracy and community. Walker also draws links to other historical forms of theater and ballet, particularly the *commedia dell'arte*. From the early Renaissance onward, this form of theater was mostly performed by itinerant groups who improvised their plays more around rough plots than a fixed script. At the center were a selection of recurring roles or archetypes, which were clearly recognizable to the audience through their characteristics, movements, and clothing. The most prominent of these roles was the *Arlecchino* or *Harlequin*, a hybrid figure who was at times amusing, entertaining, and clownish, but at other times suspicious, feared as unpredictable, crazy, and deceitful. In his checkered costume, this character spread throughout Europe in various forms of theater. Not only is he a central figure, role, and costume in Walker's works, but he also appeared as a motif in the works of artists such as Degas, Picasso, and Cézanne. Just like comedy in general, with its eccentric play, exaggeration, and themes such as lust, desire, corporeality, and death, the anarchic, sometimes obscene nature of the harlequin later became a source of anger for Enlightenment tendencies striving for reason and morality. In a sense, the large eponymous work *Chorus* acts as the central stage of the exhibition. Being the largest work Walker has exhibited to date, it features a large stage with various backdrops and hints of curtains and is populated with various groupings and plots. Boundaries between main roles and the chorus seem to have been abolished. Figures and groups from the smaller drawings come together on this large stage in a complex simultaneity of different actions and interactions.



PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA, *Death of Adam*, ca. 1466 (Detail)

Along with elements from the *commedia dell'arte*, Walker's works also incorporate many references to other pre- and early Renaissance art. Mediaeval paintings, before the refinement of linear perspective, did not yet suggest a proper illusion of depth in space. The mostly Christian scenes or persons were painted on a monochrome, often golden background, which made the depictions float in an almost celestial sphere. In the works of Giotto di Bondone, who died in 1337, one can already see the first signs of illusory perspective. In his works, most of which were executed as frescoes, the scenes took place in front of monochrome, often blue backgrounds, similar to Walker's, and formations of land-

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*Is Bliss then, such Abyss,
I must not put my foot amiss
For fear I spoil my shoe?
I'd rather suit my foot
Than save my Boot –
For yet to buy another Pair
Is possible,
At any store –
But Bliss, is sold just once.
The Patent lost
None buy it any more –
Say, Foot, decide the point –
The Lady cross, or not?
Verdict for Boot!*

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*After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?
The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –
This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –*

c. 1862

– Emily Dickinson

pe or architecture were positioned more like parts of a stage set behind the figures.

However, viewed through Walker's works, even the first paintings with the refined linear perspective of the early Renaissance, such as those by Piero della Francesca, seem like stages for the painterly depictions of mostly biblical stories. In addition to elements of scenery and architecture, figures and faces from this period also repeatedly find their way into her works, such as the person with spread arms from a fresco by Piero della Francesca, who can be found in one of the drawings in the exhibition. Her facial expression could be read as horror or ecstasy, and the gender, as with some of the figures, also eludes clear legibility. However, the fact that most of them can be read more as female and individual figures also shows a clear break in Walker's works with their historical predecessors and models. Apart from portraits of wealthy benefactors or as embodiments of a few biblical figures such as Mother Mary or Mary Magdalene, female figures were mostly relegated to roles of decorative extras. Often the figures in the paintings had nearly identical facial features, a so-called type, which was reproduced like a mask by painters for different figures. Walker reverses this simplicity of identities by giving her characters individual faces and composing her stage plays almost exclusively of female performers.

But it is not only on a compositional level or by adopting the figures of those pictures that Walker makes references to mediaeval and early Renaissance painting. Particularly through her nuanced use of various painting techniques and the incorporation of powdered stone such as marble, an intense engagement with the flat surface of painting emerges. Due to their voluminous rough texture, the canvases and papers sometimes appear like the centuries-old frescoes painted on the stone walls of a Tuscan chapel by Giotto or other painters. In addition to the very lively dancers and performers, there are also figures that, like the bent ballerina, appear dynamic, yet also petrified due to their marble color. One figure shown entirely in gray makes its entrance onto Walker's painterly stage as a reference to a historical tomb lid.



ELLA WALKER, *Chorus*, 2023 (Detail)

Like a revelation of the material illusion that the paintings are in fact not frescoes on the surface of the wall, the large canvas hangs at a short distance from the wall, allowing a glimpse behind the painterly surface. In addition to the titles, some works carry certain messages and secrets on the back that are hidden from the viewers. On the reverse side of the drawing *The Circle of the Lustful*, in which a group of bodies that can also be found in the large-scale painting seem to be surreally piled up, the title is accompanied by a name and three verses from Dante's *Inferno* (v. 133–136). The verses describe a yearned-for kiss and still feel contemporary in their depiction of tenderness, considering that they date back 700 years. The name Francesca da Rimini not only belongs to a character in Dante's work, but also to one of his contemporaries, who was murdered by her husband because of an affair. Already with Dante, the boundaries between real figure, literary treatment, and the exploration of a timeless state of desire, tenderness, and brutality are blurred. Walker picks up the theme and figure again and subtly weaves them into her painted *mise en scène*.

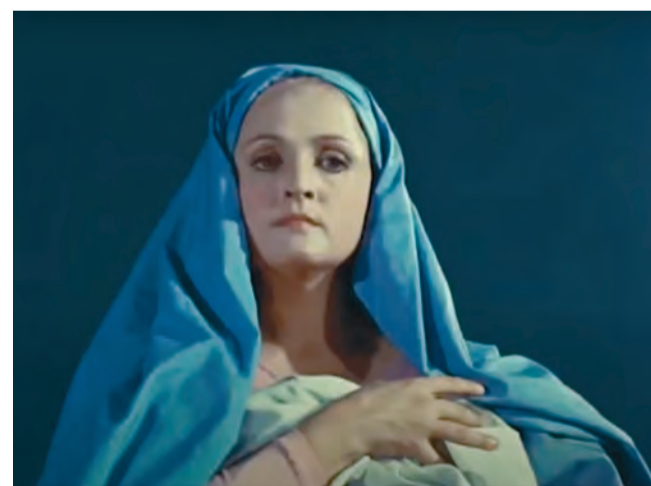
Ella Walker's works do not necessarily require the ability to recognize the iconographies of the specific figures. Rather, they find their way into her productions as anonymous performers, as references to something historically and culturally preceding, but with their gestures, actions, and emotions far from antiquated. Together with the techniques that partly imitate historical painting methods or backgrounds, they all bestow on Walker's works what she herself describes as a "feeling of past." An awareness of something past, which, however, is not completely separated from our present, but, as Walter Benjamin outlines in his reflections on the concept of history, persists and does not make our present an isolated point, but rather a part of a continuum that is constantly in interplay with moments of the past. As Aby Warburg also stated in his studies on Renaissance art, in which he already found countless pathos formulae and elements connected to ancient imagery, figures, and stylistic devices,

it is difficult to understand culture as an ascending system of evermore refinement, but more as "an ahistorical anarchy that can return to a former state without any discernible trigger." Also the painter Giorgio de Chirico incorporated an intensive exploration of the art-historical past into his works, and his paintings of empty Renaissance cities also seem to have a „feeling of past“ inherent in them. Especially in his costumes and sets for the Ballet Russes, he played with a variety of references to painting and architecture from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Similar to Walker in her painting, the Ballet Russe, which caused a sensation at the beginning of the 20th century and was groundbreaking for the avant-garde, combined the various artistic genres of ballet with extraordinary costumes and stage sets designed by artists in its productions. Under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev, outstanding Russian dancers performed a ballet to contemporary music and important artists such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau created concepts, sets and costumes for avant-garde stage shows.



GIOTTO DI BONDONE, *Visitation*, ca. 1306

But Walker draws not only on the culture of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages when choosing the models for her performers. In addition to references to contemporary fashion, there are also faces borrowed from the actress and Warhol muse Jane Forth whose replica sits in front of the stairs on the big stage or the opera icon Maria Callas, who also plays the Greek mythological character Medea in Pier Paolo Pasolini's film of the same title. While Callas is usually given undivided attention in her performances on stage or in film, here the mask of her face is lost as an inconspicuous part of the chorus, on the left side of the large stage behind the shoulder of a ballerina. Ella Walker sees many parallels between her own and Pasolini's work. His films constantly work with biblical stories, ancient myths, and fairy tales, while also weaving in contemporary questions and perspectives, always revolving around the search for something fundamental and primordial about being human and being together. A certain underlying conflict between nature and history, between instinct and culture, seems to be ever present. There are also several characters inspired by the actress Laura Betti, who appeared in several of Pasolini's films. In his movie *La Ricotta* she plays an actress who takes part in a reenactment of two Christian Renaissance paintings by Pontormo and Fiorentino as tableaux vivants. In Walker's work *The One Who Fell (Fallen Pierrot)*, one of her individual large paintings, Betti served as a model for one of the figures. These works are similar in dimension to older series of works, most of which, like *Chorus*, were still conceived unstretched and at some distance from the wall. Now mounted flat on the wall, stretched on a frame and with the resulting clear edges as well as the compact groupings of the figures, these works, in contrast to the central work *Chorus*, appear more like self-contained scenes.



PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, *La Ricotta*, 1963

In Walker's works, one can repeatedly find a strong relation, even a fluid transition from actions and gestures of tenderness, closeness, and togetherness to gestures of assault and violence. As in Christian iconography or Pasolini's films, closeness, tenderness, and drive go hand in hand with subtle gestures of violence or exclusion. Some bodies are covered with wounds that recall the stigmata of the crucified Christ, but in their patterning also resemble the ornamented clothes of other figures. Flowers held by one of the figures seem symbolic of the proximity of beauty and pain; the delicate white blossoms are carried by the thorn-covered stem. Especially in ballet, perfection and flawless form cannot be achieved without the constant sacrifice of the body and the endurance of pain. The poem by Emily Dickinson from 1862, a time when modernist developments in art and literature were gaining momentum, seems to be like an allegory for the art of ballet and Walker's painterly stagings. Walker reads this poem, which, like a hidden message, is on the back of the monumental work *Chorus*, among others, again and again during her work. It creates a lyrical image that not only conjures up a feeling of an indefinite past but also contains a numbness and pain that nevertheless comes with something sublime.



ELLA WALKER, *The gathering*, 2023 (Detail)

Especially when approaching the concept of the person as such and the origin of the word, it strongly touches on Walker's exploration of the various forms of theater, the stage situation, and the reproduction and appropriation of various figures, gestures, elements, and above all faces. The term person derives from the Latin word *persona*, which can be translated as mask, role, or character in theater. Also when considering the title of the exhibition *Chorus*, the groupings and accumulations of figures on the stage so to speak as an abstraction of society, another reference can be made on the subject of the person, always as an individual against a group or as a part of one. Carl Gustav Jung, one of the founders of analytical psychology, also used the theatrical term *persona* in his observations on depth psychology. According to him, the persona, "as its name implies, is only a mask of the collective psyche, a mask that feigns individuality, that makes others and oneself believe that one is individual, when in fact it is only an acted role in which the collective psyche speaks. (...) It is a compromise between the individual and the society about 'what one appears as.'" The allegorical play with disguise, with its constant reference to theater, painting, film, and literature, thus not only becomes a painterly exploration of the long history of cultural images, affects, movement, and icons in Ella Walker's art, but also a fundamental examination of the conditions of singular human existence and identity, in the face of a dialectic of individual and group in the continuum of time.

ELLA WALKER (*1993 in Manchester, UK) studied painting and printmaking at the Glasgow School of Art and drawing at the Royal Drawing School in London. Her work is included in several European permanent collections, including the Royal Collection in London, and was recently exhibited in a solo exhibition at Casey Kaplan in New York (2022) and at Huxley-Parlour in London (2021). She has also been part of group exhibitions at Casey Kaplan in New York, Platform Southwark in London, and the Edinburgh Art Festival (2021), among others. Walker's second solo exhibition with Casey Kaplan in New York is slated for March 2024. She currently lives and works in London.

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Front side

Ella Walker, *Chorus* (2023), acrylic dispersion, pigment, chalk, and pencil on unstretched canvas, courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

Back side

Giotto di Bondone, *Visitation*, ca. 1306, fresco, 150 × 140 cm, part of the fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy.

Piero della Francesca, *Death of Adam*, ca. 1466, Fresco, 390 × 747 cm, part of the fresco cycle in the Basilica of San Francesco, Arezzo, Italy.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La Ricotta*, 1963, film, 35 minutes, Arco Film-Cineriz.

Ella Walker, *Chorus*, 2023, Acrylic dispersion, pigment, chalk, and pencil on unstretched canvas. 273 × 540 cm, courtesy the Artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

Ella Walker, *The Gathering*, Acrylic dispersion, pigment, chalk, and pencil on stretched linen, 210 × 120 cm, courtesy the Artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.