

FRIEZE

"Nicole Wermers Takes Us to The Cleaners"

By Phin Jennings

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At The Common Guild in Glasgow, the artist's sculptures combine traditional female reclining nudes with tools of service labor

Nicole Wermers's *Reclining Female #6* (2024) looks out over Glasgow. The sculpture's upper portion, a nude female, rests on one elbow as she admires the view from her vantage point atop a wooden board balanced firmly on the work's lower half: an abundantly stocked housekeeping trolley. The Capella Building, where she sits, is a plate-glass office development in the city's business district. The large, seventh-floor gallery space had remained unoccupied from the building's completion in 2008 until it was taken over temporarily last year by The Common Guild. Despite her corporate surroundings, however, Wermers's figure is most definitely not at work.

Four similar sculptures are dotted around the room. In public spaces, trolleys like this are so ubiquitous that they all but disappear. Here, there is something beautiful about them. Flanked by fabric bags for clean and dirty linen, *Reclining Female #7* (2024) reminds me of a little theatre set, curtains drawn back to reveal a cast of various bottles and cloths in pastel colours. An unlabelled spray bottle hooked onto *Reclining Female #1* (2022) unlocks a memory from my own time as a professional cleaner. I would fill a bottle like this with a 10:1 ratio of water and a thick, caustic liquid from a jerry can, producing a candy floss-coloured concoction that made surfaces sizzle on contact. The generic products are always more potent than the branded ones.

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Nicole Wermers, *Reclining Female #7*, 2024, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist; Herald St, London; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Los Angeles; Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; and Produzentengalerie Hamburg; photograph: Ruth Clark

The bottle on this cart is unlikely to see such action. In fact, if housekeeping trolley is as housekeeping trolley does, then this isn't one at all: it's an artwork that's been wheeled here to be seen, not used, and the potions inhabiting it have been arranged with an artistic, rather than practical, sensibility.

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Nicole Wermers, 'Day Care', 2024, installation view, The Common Guild at 60 York Street, Glasgow. Courtesy: the artist; Herald St, London; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Los Angeles; Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; and Produzentengalerie Hamburg; photograph: Ruth Clark

The exhibition text compares Wermers's reclining nudes to Henry Moore sculptures. To my eye, they seem to reference a storm of similar depictions of women from across art history, such as Antonio Canova's *Reclining Naiad* (1819–24) and Hans Josephsohn's *Untitled* (1971). I learn from Chloe Reith, the exhibition's curator, that this is the first time Wermers has sculpted by hand. Yet, their appearance is deceptive: seemingly formed from loosely modelled clay, the works are, in fact, made from styrofoam coated with pigmented plaster. With this knowledge, the figures feel like playful caricatures of the work of the (invariably male) traditional nude sculptor.

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Nicole Wermers, *Reclining Female #5*, 2022–24, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist; Herald St, London; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Los Angeles; Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; and Produzentengalerie Hamburg; photograph: Ruth Clark

Artist, life model, cleaner: the presence of these trope-like characters is alluded to through the accoutrements of their labour, their jobs forming a short list that runs the gamut of pay and perceived merit. Yet, while the show might appear to contain evidence of these forms of work, Wermers in fact offers us a carefully constructed simulacrum: artist-made cleaning trolleys and solid-seeming sculptures built around lightweight polystyrene cores, displayed in a corporate office that has never been used for business.

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Break (2024), a sculptural intervention for which the artist removed a row of floor tiles and filled the resulting gap with cigarette butt-littered sand, makes me smile, imagining it as the place where these disparate spectral workers might congregate. Sculptor, cleaner, artist's model: everyone has to make a living. There is one thing, however, that they can all look forward to. In Wermers's microcosm of the working world, just as strange and hierarchical as our own, there is that one small promise of escape: the cigarette break.



Nicole Wermers, *Break*, 2024, installation view, 'Day Care', The Common Guild at 60 York Street, Glasgow. Courtesy: the artist; Herald St, London; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Los Angeles; Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; and Produzentengalerie Hamburg; photograph: Ruth Clark

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