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Alice Neel: Painted Truths; In the Company of Alice Whitechapel, London; Victoria Miro, London

Alice Neel: Painted Truths at London's Whitechapel Art Gallery is the revelation of the year.

Laura Cumming

How could it not be? It would be hard to think of a greater artist whose work has been so little seen in this country. At her death in 1984, aged 84, Neel was as celebrated in her native America as Louise Bourgeois, to whom recognition also came outrageously late. Yet this is the first survey of Neel's portraits in Britain.

Who did she paint? At first, it seems an outlandishly ill-matched assembly: union organisers and museum directors, communists and millionaires, ladies who lunch and nightclub strippers. The Fuller Brush salesman with his 50s bowtie and matching smile hangs next to the art historian with her tensed fingertips and brittle mask. No less attention is given to Andy Warhol displaying his wounds after being shot by Valerie Solanas than a pair of twin babies in nappies, glitteringly alert and expectant.

None of these paintings was a commission. Neel belonged to no groups, was sui generis and scarcely scraped a living when American art was dominated by abstract expressionism and pop. Her life as an outsider surfaces in the portraits of workers in Spanish Harlem, where she lived in the 40s and 50s, and in the likenesses of her lovers – the wealthy Cuban who more or less abducted their only surviving child in the 20s; the cabaret singer José Negron; radical film-maker Sam Brody and Harvard graduate John Rothschild.

Neel would, you feel, have painted almost anyone who came her way, so evergreen is her curiosity. It is no surprise to learn that when she came under FBI investigation in the 50s – the file describes her as a "romantic Bohemian-type communist" – she invited the very agents who pursued her to sit for their portrait.

Eventually, after decades in the wilderness with paintings stacking up four deep against the walls of her Manhattan flat, Neel summoned sufficient courage to approach art-world figures. Their response appears implicit in each portrait. Henry Geldzahler of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a pouting brat with anxious, twisty hands – "Oh, so you want to be a professional," his scornful denial of her appeal for help. The art critic Gregory Battock takes the opportunity to come out in bright yellow underpants. Frank O'Hara, poet and curator at the Museum of Modern Art, shows his discoloured teeth in a rictus of nervous laughter.

As well he might. For Neel's kind of portrait must have seemed more or less without precedent and still does. Her pictures are edgy, awkward, candidly unflattering, frequently humorous or grotesque. The heads are disproportionately big, the hands claw-like, the limbs flaccid or cricked and skewed in defiance of anatomy to get across further expression or character.

Freckles, fag-browned molars, awkward knees and bulging breasts, the indelible frown, the cavernous cleft, the nose that is more limb than feature: Neel cannot help but notice them all. She pays no attention to the sitter's fears of appearing graceless or gauche (her method, she said, was to converse until they unconsciously assumed their most characteristic pose in a chair, revealing "what the world had done to them and their retaliation".) Having no repertoire of conventional poses, or props, you might say she let her subjects hang themselves.

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And each is described in Neel's trademark blue outline – looping, breezing, brushing, sweeping in shape and contour – a figure that is then coloured in. To say that the later portraits verge upon caricature is not much of an overstatement.

You might ask why anyone would submit themselves to such an eye. My sense, looking at this exhilarating show with its exceptional range of emotional nuances, of life lessons and warnings and compassionate insights, is to learn more than one kind of truth. What made Warhol sit half-naked before Neel, exposing his sagging nipples and tea-coloured truss, blanket-stitch sutures embroidering his torso? Look at the portrait, in which he shuts his eyes to the viewer, and you see his complexity of character beautifully condensed: fragile yet commanding, male yet female with his dainty pins, vulnerable yet powerfully controlled. The body may be assailed, but never the soul.

What made Margaret Evans pose nude on a narrow stool, eight months pregnant with twins? The catalogue suggests there is something cruel about the pose, but to me it is acutely empathetic of Evans's condition (judging from my own experience). What the portrait shows is the trick of keeping one's balance as the new life takes over, leaving barely any breathing room, of trying to sit tight in this precarious state.

Evans's beautiful face is full of returned curiosity. You see that all the time in this show: children leaning forward and staring hard at the artist who looks back at them, avidity and animation among the adults. Neel's presence, her conversation: these are palpable in every portrait. By general consent, her portrait sessions were never silent.

Precisely what strength each image gathers from the sitter's response to the artist can only be surmised. But time spent with this sagacious woman, so unembittered by poverty and rejection, was evidently prized. The paintings extend that gift, drawing each person deeper into the stream of life.

The wide-eyed mother, exhausted and frightened of dropping the infant propped on her lap, is as unsteady at this stage of new motherhood as the baby itself. The art historian Meyer Schapiro, a study in mustard and purple, declines towards death. But still his mouth quivers with the hope of further talk: promise of continuing life.

You feel you have always known these portraits. This is partly to do with their freight of universal truths and partly to do with Neel's influence, subject of a show of contemporary art at Victoria Miro, **In the Company of Alice**. Some painters – Chantal Joffe, Elizabeth Peyton – have been inspired by the gawky, wry and caricatural aspects of her work; others by the expressiveness and mystery. Peter Doig's painting of his teenage daughter, white legs gleaming in a jungle of dark shadows, shows the influence of Munch on Neel, as much as Neel on Doig. It is not wrong to see her legacy all over the current art scene.

This surely has a lot to do with Neel's loquacity: she is powerfully outspoken not just in what she observes but how she paints. Her surfaces are very physical, the brushwork – sketchy, exuberant or fluid – openly declared. The famous distortions always have something to say about the exasperating business of having to coexist with one's body. The novelist lays out his arthritic hand, like a passive invalid, on the couch. The art critic reclines nude as an odalisque: brazen pose, but he still has to keep an impressively stern eye on the viewer just to compete with his own mighty genitalia.

It is the face versus the physique, the person in spite of his or her body. What it is to be young and self-conscious, yet inwardly irrepressible; old and irritable and yet intellectually resurgent: the discrepancies are a potent source of tragedy or humour. Critics of the day gave it the label expressionistic realism, but the directness of Neel's art now looks like a form of free speech.

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Dressed, half-dressed or nude, the sitters are all naked beneath her scrutiny. To anyone wishing to look their best – the flaws of the flesh concealed – she must have seemed disobligingly frank, though only if one believed in the body as the soul's representative. When Neel finally came to paint herself, at the age of 80, she aptly chose to strip bare. In her marvellously insouciant self-portrait, the artist appears in spectacles, wicker chair and nothing else but her own defiant intelligence.

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