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When Alice Neel was under FBI investigation in the 1950s, her file described her as a "romantic Bohemian type Communist." Far more revealing than the Red Scare classification was Neel's purported interest in having the agents who interviewed her sit for a portrait. Needless to say, her request was denied. It would have been fascinating to see how she dealt with the faces of bureaucratic antagonism.

Over six decades, Neel (1900-1984) painted her lovers, children and grandchildren, friends, fellow artists and activists, and strangers who intrigued her. Born near Philadelphia, she settled in New York, and was poor and under-recognized for most of her career. Her life was richly textured (she appeared, for instance, in the Robert Frank film, "Pull My Daisy," with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac) but also stained with grief: the death of her first child; estrangement from her second; suicide attempts and a nervous breakdown; a lover who destroyed much of her early work.

You can see in her portraits some of Schiele's tense angularity, Munch's brutal honesty, Cassatt's fascination with the maternal, as well as a hint of Goya's attraction to the shadowy and grotesque. You can always recognize Neel's hand, her energy, her nerve. She talked continuously and uninhibitedly through portrait sittings. The power of her work often lies in its paradoxical compression of raw immediacy and sustained encounter.

L.A. Louver's show of 16 Neel portraits, dating from 1940 to 1978, is a prized opportunity. The last tie so many of the artist's works were on view together in L.A. was over 20 years ago. Jeremy Lewison, an advisor to the Alice Neel estate, helped orchestrate this show, and co-curated the thematic survey of Neel's work now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In the catalog to the museum exhibition, Lewison aptly describes the portraits as "not so much a record of intimacy as a call to intimacy." They are invitations to the domains of both sitter and artist, to their psychic and physical shared space.

In nearly every canvas of Neel's, that space feels alive, dynamic, charged with emotional depth and formal energy. A 1965 seated portrait of her friend Frank Gentile is a stellar example. Neel peppers the image with destabilizing asymmetries as she anchors it with rhyming lines, curves and colors. Gentile's eyebrows rise; his eyelids droop. One downward hand notches the chair's arm and the other is raised as if for conversational emphasis. The path from one to the other traces a sideways S across the canvas, intersected by a vertical version running from torso through crossed legs. A dark gray patch in the amorphous background subtly frames Gentile's head and echoes the streak of his black-socked shin. His emerald jacket meets the gold chair with the saturated luminosity of stained glass.

In this, as in many of Neel's most striking works, she toggles between sketchy outline and more detailed finish. She leaves patches of canvas bare next to areas more fully rendered. As an analog to identity's lack of fixity, its perpetual fluidity, this pictorial strategy could not be

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more potent. It's also a compelling reminder that every realist painter is also practicing a fundamentally abstract art, organizing shapes and lines, solids and voids, hues and tones across a flat surface. Composition reinforces content and vice versa.

Consider the stunning "Peggy" (c.1949), in which the sitter's unnaturally lanky arms stretch out and double back, so that her hands (one open, one curled closed) come to rest on either side of her face like fragile but insistent arrows pointing to the cut above one eye, the bruises next to the other.

Neel considered herself a "collector of souls." In this fine assembly, it is clear how well she honored those she gathered, in all their restlessness, vulnerability and imperfection.