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Agnese Čivle: „Straightforward, without any glorification“

Q&A with Jeremy Lewison, a leading expert in Alice Neel's work

Alice Neel

Ateneum, Helsinki

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Alongside the riches of the Ateneum Art Museum's permanent collection – which, in addition to classics of Finnish national art, also contains several hundred works by world-renown artists, from Vincent van Gogh to Edvard Munch – in June the temporary summer program will be opened with a retrospective of the works of American artist Alice Neel (1900-1984). This will be only the second presentation of such scale, featuring the works of this grand master of figural painting, to be held in Europe (the first was held at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 2010). Alice Neel has gone down into the annals of art history with her straightforward manner, one that lacks any hint of model glorification – if they were ugly, then that's how she painted them. She didn't spare herself in her only self-portrait, either.

Curating the exhibition is Jeremy Lewison (former Director of Collections of Tate), a leading expert in Alice Neel's work. Lewison revealed to Arterritory.com the reasons why he is so taken with Neel's oeuvre: “I first saw the work of Alice Neel in 1987, and since then have been increasingly interested in understanding her place in the history of art. Portraiture is often undervalued, and during the years when American abstraction was dominant, her work fell from view. Now, in present times, we have a greater appreciation of the variety and validity of expressions that occur in any one period. Neel's interest in humanity, her ability to capture personalities and to have a finger on the pulse of a century of social and political change, makes her work endlessly fascinating. Finally, her ability to manipulate paint to support her artistic endeavor is second to none.”

Around 70 of Neel's works will be on view. The exhibition will be installed in a chronological sweep, beginning with works from 1926 and ending with one of her final paintings executed in 1984, the year of her death. “Within that overview, there will be a rare opportunity to see not only portraits but landscapes, cityscapes and still life paintings. The exhibition will give a rounded view of Neel's career, showing her to be a radical painter in the figurative tradition – which was unjustly eclipsed in a period of high abstraction. Now that we have some distance on this period of American art, we can see that there were equally valid and important artistic expressions that have been omitted from conventional narratives of art history”, explains Jeremy Lewison.

Arterritory.com asked Lewison to describe some of the more profound pieces to be included in the upcoming exhibition, amidst them are the portraits of the circle of Andy Warhol. “Among them are Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd, who were part of the Factory. Jackie Curtis was one of Warhol's “Superstars“ who performed both as a male and a female, and who was referred to in Lou Reed's famous song, Walk on the Wild Side. Neel captures Curtis in two paintings, one as a transvestite, and the other as a man”, Lewison illustrates.

Another notable highpoint of the exhibition, Lewison points out, is Neel's self-portrait, painted at the age of 80: “Curiously, for an artist whose career focused on painting people, this is the only self-portrait she painted; and, she depicts herself naked. As a painter of truth, Neel could not have been more frank about herself.”

Neel was born near Philadelphia in 1900 and trained at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. She became a painter with a strong social conscience and equally strong left-wing beliefs. In the 1930s she lived in Greenwich Village, New York, and enrolled as a member of the Works Progress Administration for which she painted urban scenes. Her portraits of the 1930s embraced left wing writers, artists and trade unionists.

Neel left Greenwich Village for Spanish Harlem in 1938 to get away from the rarefied atmosphere of an art colony. There she painted the Puerto Rican community, casual acquaintances, neighbors and people she encountered on the street. In the 1960s she moved to the Upper West Side and made a determined effort to reintegrate with the art world. This led to a series of dynamic portraits of artists, curators and gallery owners, among them Frank O'Hara, Andy Warhol and the young Robert Smithson. She also maintained her practice of painting political personalities, including black activists and supporters of the women's movement.