



BEST OF 2010

“ALICE NEEL: PAINTED TRUTHS”

Whitechapel Gallery, London
[Anne M. Wagner](#)

Opposite page, left: Alice Neel, *Linda Nochlin and Daisy*, 1973, oil on canvas, 55½ x 44".

Opposite page, right: Alice Neel, *Andy Warhol*, 1970, oil on canvas, 60 x 40".

Right: View of "Alice Neel: Painted Truths," 2010, Whitechapel Gallery, London. From left: *Pregnant Woman*, 1971; *Pregnant Julie and Algis*, 1967.



BEST: NOT A WORD I'VE EVER MUCH LIKED when applied to exhibitions. I think my discomfort comes from the way the term seems to brook neither comparison nor argument, or at least implies that the arguing and comparing are over, when in fact they may have only just begun.

The exhibition I want to argue for is "Alice Neel: Painted Truths," a show originated by Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. I saw it at the Whitechapel Gallery in London on a late afternoon this past September, when the streets were teeming with people, and the shopping and selling were still going strong. The perfect setting, somehow, though it was not the noise and jostle that made it so. It was the endless stream of bodies and faces, all ages, all colors, all classes, all types, all shapes.

Neel's portraits stop that stream. They reach out to catch hold of their subjects, sit them down, and give them a long hard look—though of course it is Neel who is doing the looking. Her sitters, if they can manage it, look back. If not, it is often because the person in the painting is somehow unable to withstand such fierce summing up. They may be too young or too old, or perhaps too shy or too self-absorbed—in some quite other mental space. Robert Smithson stares off into some collapsing future, while Andy Warhol sits scarred and shirtless, closing

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his eyes, almost as if he's waiting for a nurse to draw his blood.

It is striking that Neel, who was so keenly interested in how to make a person present in a picture, set up so many portraits in which the problem of the fragility of a separate identity comes into view. The threat of the dissolution of self is put before us every time the artist shows us a couple, gay or straight, or a family unit, usually with child or baby making three. Or a parent and child. Or twins. Or, most worryingly, a pregnant woman. Neel presents this last condition as an opposition, an inhabiting, with the female body all but taken over by the alien within.

In all these instances—or so the Whitechapel show seemed implicitly to argue—looking at a Neel portrait becomes an especially charged activity. It is comparative, evaluative: You cannot help moving from face to face and back again. You might as well be in the midst of some social situation, one in which—as so often happens around a table or in a living room—you come to realize that people aren't necessarily equal in the roles they play. They hold power differently, and sometimes compete. It is not always clear who will win.

In the best of cases, their differences make for different kinds of urgency, as in the portrait of Linda Nochlin with her small daughter Daisy. The child glows; she is like a new penny, in the openness of her face and in the bright falling curls running off into curving antipatterns that convey the still not quite coordinated energy of a four-year-old. Nochlin, by contrast, is all force and focus, her face coming together in a way that seems both gentle and unstoppable—though here perhaps I am reading in.

But this is what one does with Neel's portraits, as seeing them together conveys. She forces us to think about the people she shows us, how they are

organized as images, and how images, selves, and bodies become one. Features take on lives of their own. We ask ourselves how we know who or what another person is—what a body really has to say. Neel's paintings do not provide answers, but they insist that these questions are worth building into acts of observation. As so often with great painting, depiction here proposes a model of how to see a social world.

In the Whitechapel, the social cacophony of the neighborhood—largely South Asian, substantially Muslim, but profligately cosmopolitan at the same time—managed, against all the odds, to filter into the interior spaces, reminding me that Neel had worked in a New York neighborhood, Harlem, that was also widely regarded as "other." The chain of associations seemed to bring home again the ongoing necessity of such civic models. And "Painted Truths" made it abundantly clear that discovering them was part of the ethics of Neel's work. In this she comes across as a female August Sander, minus nationalism and stereotype and plus a mastery of paint. But some of Sander's sociology survives even so. It is visible in the impulse that led her, so the story goes, to ask the FBI agents investigating her Communist Party involvement to sit for her, no doubt to serve as contrast to the radicals, labor organizers, transvestites, and assorted others she portrayed. Which is to say that their visages would have been perfect additions to a gallery that, updating Sander, we could call "Men and Women of the Twentieth Century." For Neel, the compendium was inevitably inclusive, as this exhibition was selected to show. Now the question is how difference survives and matters, both ethically and artistically, today. □

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