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## Alice Neel's Penetrating Eye

### Stockholm art

In 1960, Frank O'Hara was a prince of the New York art world. Not yet 35, he had just been made a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. That year he also sat for a portrait, painted by his polar opposite – a 60-year-old woman with no power and no reputation named Alice Neel (1900-84), whose penetrating realistic style was ludicrously out of place in the art scene, then dominated by abstraction. Neel completed two versions. The first, in profile, had a haunted, romantic quality, while the second, finished in a single sitting, was marked by something much stranger. "Frank O'Hara No. 2," showing O'Hara smiling through teeth that the painter later compared to "tombstones," is one of Neel's masterpieces, and one of the great works of American figurative painting. It treats O'Hara not as a glamorous, brilliant matinee idol, but as a doomed grotesque, whose ugliness heightens his humanity.



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Alice Neel

"Frank O'Hara No. 2," 1960, by Alice Neel, on show in Stockholm.

"Frank O'Hara No. 2" is one of only 11 works included in "Alice Neel: Collector of Souls," an outstanding mini-retrospective at Stockholm's Moderna Museet. Curated by Jeremy Lewison, former director of collections at London's Tate Gallery, and superbly lit, the show brings together works from around the world and includes portraits from every phase of Neel's career. By treating Neel's work as intimately as she treated her subjects, the show's organizers have found the artist's ideal setting.

From the 1930s through the late 1950s, Neel painted in near-obscurity in a range of realistic styles, from expressionism to something like social realism. The period is represented here by several compelling portraits, including "Nadia and Nona" (1933), which shows two naked lesbian lovers in competing stages of repose and shame.

Neel's artistic and professional breakthrough came in the 1960s, when she found her mature, more individual style painting portraits of members of the New York art world, whom she often stripped down, both physically and psychologically. In her 1972 portrait of another young New York curator, named John Perrault, Neel created a male version of Manet's notorious "Olympia," which shocked mid-19th century Paris with its frank depiction of a nude courtesan. Neel's Perrault – who lies spread-eagled, his exposed groin placed in the center of the frame – shocks us not because the subject is naked, but because he is so plainly bored, like a patient waiting for the doctor to come back.

— J.S. Marcus