

Alice Neel: the art modernism neglected

A new exhibition will bring one of the great portraitists of the Twentieth Century in from the cold, says the curator Jeremy Lewison.

Jeremy Lewison

Alice Neel spent her life on the margins. Her art, which was more or less realist, came to maturity in the ascendant period of Abstract Expressionism and although there was a realist alternative she was more or less excluded from it.

She was not included in the major exhibitions of realist art that took place in the 1960s in, among other museums, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in spite of her efforts at ingratiating herself with two of the major curators of the time, Frank O'Hara and Henry Geldzahler, by painting their portraits. And when Abstract Expressionism was superseded by Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art she remained out of synch.

The feminist movement flexed its muscles but it embraced Neel as a personality and as a forerunner. Feminist artists tended to work in other idioms: performance, photography, video and conceptually based practices.

Painting, however, continues to have a large public and young artists setting out to be painters now need more than ever to see how artists of earlier generations successfully resisted the status quo and remained outside what evolved into an academic style, for this is what much of the conceptual, film and photographic work has become; merely another academy.

For such painters as Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton and Chris Ofili and even such sculptors as Robert Gober, to name but a few, Alice Neel provides a precedent, an outlook on the world and on art that acts as some kind of model.

Highly personal, engaged with humanity, politically aware, it was an individual take on life mediated through paint. Neel keenly observed the strengths, weakness and foibles of the people she encountered, and had an eye for the extraordinary in the ordinary, the whimsical and the eccentric, the cruel and the kind.

There was no showing off; just honesty, commitment and psychological acuity. There was also a facility with paint itself, of drawing and colouring with it, of using it as matter as well as descriptively, all of which strikes such a strong chord with painters today.

Neel had a natural flair for paint. She painted thick and thin, dry and wet, and in the later stages of her career ignored any conventions of finish, rather deciding for herself when a work was complete enough. At times she felt that a painting had reached a point where to go further would spoil it. In some instances she painted a second version. Ultimately what mattered to Neel was to keep the painting fresh and alive.

In our present era portraiture has been relegated to a minor art. The portrait survives largely in the wooden paintings commissioned by academic colleges or national portrait galleries from artists who have facility but little flair or psychological understanding or vision.

Photography has replaced painting as the means of choice for portraiture but photography is concerned with capturing the moment. Painting is about the synthesis of time. Moreover a photograph, with its smooth reflective surface, printed by a chemical reaction or digitally manipulated

with no material depth or presence, is entirely different from a painted portrait.

Neel's work, is an assimilation of many different moments and moods, a distillation of many hours of scrutiny of the subject that concludes in a single summarising image where the impressions captured over time are related not simply through an image but through the material quality of paint, the flicks of the wrist and the movements of an arm, paint laid on hastily and contours outlined slowly.

Neel's art displays a range of marks made in the service of communicating an image rather than at the behest of any conceptual programme, for Neel is a natural painter and apparently unselfconscious.

Looking at Neel's work now is to see a review of the twentieth century in New York. She represents changes in fashion and social mores, racial and gender issues, class differential, political agendas, feminist advances; in short her work effortlessly reflects a century of change as much as that of any photographer from the same era. With the abandonment of the modernist project museums and galleries now make room for multiple voices to be heard, to uncover the art of those whom modernism neglected.

Alice Neel: Painted Truths at the Whitechapel Gallery is the first major survey of Neel's work in Europe, bringing the warmth of her vision in from the cold.

Jeremy Lewison is the curator of Alice Neel: Painted Truths and represents the Alice Neel Estate