



Touching, tender and a bit wild... Alice Neel's *Pregnant Woman* (1971). Photograph: Estate of Alice Neel

The weird world of Alice Neel

The American painter's troubled life fed into her disturbing, exhilarating portraits – of family, friends, artists and socialites. A new show of her work reveals her spellbinding strangeness

Adrian Searle

Alice Neel was a painter of uneasy and diffident men, confident fathers and protective mothers, awkward pre-adolescent girls, of a critic in his underpants. I wish I had been painted by Neel, been the object of her eye. For a start, I have the same long-fingered hands as most of her subjects. But there's a wonderful inconsistency to her work: sometimes she painted hands emphatic and plain, sometimes as spindly cartoon appendages. She painted hands that grapple with the air. She is great at feet, too – at clunky shoes, elegant brogues, baby feet and the abjectness of men in socks.

Everything in Neel's art counts, in all its varying registers. She took her subjects as they came – naked and hairy, voluptuous, nervous, arrogant, dying or dead. She painted uptown sophisticates and troubled artists, the very young and very old, people's vanities and vulnerabilities.

Her most famous portrait is of Andy Warhol – self-contained and self-composed, with his eyes closed and absorbed in his own silence. The artist sits primly, hands clasped, naked above the waist to show his sewn-together torso two years after he was shot. He sits on a divan that almost isn't there. It is just the barest outline, and Warhol seems to levitate though his shoes are planted on the floor.

At once scrappy and intensely focused, everything that's right and wrong about Neel's art is here in

this portrait. What she leaves out is as important as what she describes; and what's wrong in Neel is nearly always right, a wonkiness that gives her art its character. Contrasting Warhol's sagging male tits and self-conscious poise – the trussed-up belly, that wig, the neatness of his shoes – she gets both his woundedness and his affectation.

As the painter Marlene Dumas rightly says, it's one of the great portraits of the last century. Frank Auerbach is another who, perhaps surprisingly, joins her in declaring his admiration for Neel's work.

Born in 1900 in Pennsylvania, Neel was a hero not least of her own troubled and interesting life. A breakdown in 1930 following the death of her small daughter from diphtheria, and several suicide attempts, led to the truly disturbing paintings which open this show.

These include a small, possibly dead child threaded between the bedposts in a grey room. Next to this is a painting of a weird doll whose genitals are hidden by an apple – the doll depicted as a sort of devotional object wearing a huge red glove. There is something truly frightening here.

Soon after this, Neel painted the priapic and hilariously macabre Joe Gould. The picture is a symphony of cocks – flaccid, semi-erect, on the way up and on the way down. This artist paid attention to penises – to Gould's; to a new born baby's; to the critic John Perrault's, slumped across his thigh.

Neel moved on through husbands and lovers, living on welfare well into the 1950s. She began to paint the artistic and cultural milieu of New York in its cultural ascendancy and in all its weirdness, tackling her subjects with an intimacy and strangeness; a waywardness that was all her own.

Here's a father with his son on his knee, like a medieval Virgin with the infant Christ. The boy, who has cerebral palsy, is a lively, querulous little presence. But Neel wasn't always so sympathetic towards her subjects, and her ambivalences give her encounters with her sitters a painted charge.

Her portrait of the poet, curator and critic Frank O'Hara – with its horrid, unattractive mouth and receding hairline – show something bordering on dislike. This might stem from the fact that Neel hoped O'Hara would write about her, but he never did.

The artist Robert Smithson looks handsome in a used kind of way, while the critic Gregory Battcock sits in his underwear next to his boyfriend, David Bourdon, who wears a suit. (Bourdon once appeared as a leather-clad living bedpost in a Warhol movie.)

The subplots to Neel's paintings are played out across their surfaces, the relationships measured in body language, in dress, undress and degrees of attentiveness. A big toe with its painted nail pokes out of a hole in a transvestite's tights. This detail, in her double portrait of a cross-dressed Jackie Curtis (the Jackie of Lou Reed's *Walk On the Wild Side*) along with Jackie's lover, Ritta Redd, is just one of several terrific moments in a painting that is a tour de force when it comes to shifts in style, from realism to caricature.

Indeed, the longer you look at this painting, the more mad it gets. Ritta looks solid and real while Jackie's whole anatomy is thrown together; apart from her Hollywood siren stare, she is wonderfully provisional in every way.

And that, I think, is the point. How can a painting so all over the place be so convincing? "I don't do realism," Neel once said, going on to declare that a room, a chair, a table and a person were all the same to her – except that a person is human and therefore essentially psychological.

So, one might add, is an artist, whose stray thoughts and fixation on details become part of the psychology of a painting itself. So, too, are the disjunctions: a leg appearing under a table that can't belong to the man behind it, an arm so skinny it's unreal.

There is certainly something scandalous about Neel's art. Her pieces slide about, and what seem like

flaws and slippages are integral to the relationships she depicts, as well as to the paintings themselves. It's exciting to look at. We see her plunging in, at once nervous, distanced, and wholly committed to the act of painting.

Neel went on to depict herself at 80 – naked apart from spectacles, a brush in one hand, a rag in the other, seated in a striped chair so as to produce a better contrast with her bulging skin. She is herself and doesn't care for dignity, though she has it anyway. She is blunt and to the point; funny as well as self-appraising.

There are hints of Van Gogh here, of German Neue Sachlichkeit there. If Neel, who died in 1984, was never a realist she was never wholly an expressionist either. In her pictures of New York buildings, there are hints of Edward Hopper and of the 19th-century German painter Adolf Menzel. The ghost of the abstract expressionist Clyfford Still and his sooty trowelled surfaces is intimated in a painting of a slabby night-time wall, illuminated by a single yellow-lit window. What's going on in that room? What's being played out in there? Neel would like to know, too, so she could paint it.

The Whitechapel gallery's exhibition is a revelation – exhilarating, touching, tender and a little bit wild. Neel was an odd one out and so were many of her subjects. She could make their awkwardnesses and anxieties appear right at home whether she was painting a girl on the verge of adolescence, a drag queen, a naked pregnant woman or a Fuller Brush salesman with his bow tie and pocketful of pens.

Even an undressed critic might feel he had a place here.