

In the Company of Alice

Victoria Miro, London, UK

As a female figurative artist active in an age of virile action painting and transcendental abstraction, Alice Neel was for years the consummate outsider. Much has been made of her marginality, her belated critical recognition and her turbulent biography, sometimes at the expense of her visually compelling and psychologically incisive oeuvre. With the return to figuration, Neel's legacy has been revived and reconsidered, most recently in the current retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery (the artist's first in a European institution), to which 'In the Company of Alice', a group show at Victoria Miro, served as a companion piece. A hagiographic effort, the exhibition purported to feature work that is influenced by Neel's practice and reflects her ongoing influence. Within this disparate and diverse presentation, the works sometimes invoked Neel specifically but often concerned the genre of portraiture more broadly.

Neel's portraits conform – superficially at least – to convention, depicting mostly full-length or half-length figures reposing in interiors or sitting in abstracted spaces. Within these parameters, however, Neel shrewdly invigorates the pictorial space, angling her sitters, introducing slight asymmetries and imperfections, and leaving some sections schematic and unworked. This strategy – animation through awkwardness – is also evident in the gawky visions of Chantal Joffe, Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton. At Victoria Miro, the comparison was made explicit with the adjacent hanging of two works: the first, Neel's *Sarah Shiller* (1952), melds Picasso-esque distortion with the nervy psychological acumen of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting; the second, Joffe's *Megan* (2010), borrows Shiller's blue cardigan, mustard background and serene yet vaguely tormented stare. Both sitters' gentle gazes belie a sense of disquietude, indicated by their unbalanced eyes.

While some artists in Alice's company evoke the grotesque and caricatural (yet unceasingly humane) aspect of her work (as with Joffe or Verne Dawson), others mirror her formal strategies. Boscoe Holder's paintings recall Neel's bold palette, her sharply contrasting highlights



Alice Neel
Sarah Shiller
1952
Oil on canvas
56x46 cm

and shadows, and her flat planes of colour. His *Hands on Hips* (1999), a full-length black nude, gleams with cerulean highlights reminiscent of Neel's trademark blue contours. Set against a background of green and chartreuse, the figure found an unlikely counterpart at Victoria Miro in Neel's *Richard* (1973): outlined in a heavy stroke of lapis-hued paint, the eponymous figure stands on a vivid green lawn, framed by hedging and leafy treetops. But while Holder emphasizes his sitters' physicality, rendering them sensuous and solid, Neel's sitters seem somehow provisional.

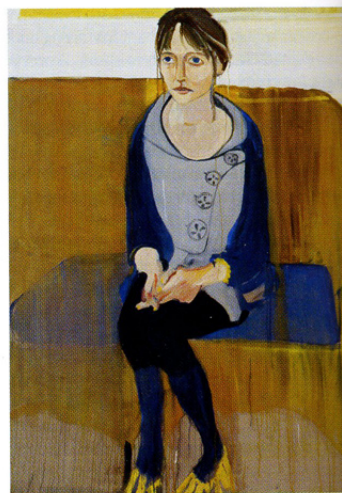
Peyton's contribution, *Alice Neel in 1931* (2007–8), portrays the artist in an imagined pose, inspired by her notorious personal history. After her husband left for Cuba in 1930 with their one surviving child in tow, Neel suffered a massive nervous breakdown, was briefly hospitalized and attempted suicide. Peyton's monochrome portrait depicts the artist following her release from the sanatorium. Shown unclothed in a Buddha-like pose, Neel's closed eyes and tilted head express a contemplative weariness, a sad exhaustion. The inclusion of Marlene Dumas' *Alfa* (2004), a disembodied head with eyes closed and mouth agape, also alludes to the artist (even though the portrait represents a dead Chechnyan woman): when in 1984 Robert Mapplethorpe approached Neel to photograph her, months before her death from cancer, the artist suggested posing with her eyes shut and

mouth open. When he asked why, Neel said she wanted to see herself in death.

Other works, from Grayson Perry's glazed-ceramic gilded icon, *Transvestite Looking in Mirror* (2009), to Yayoi Kusama's self-portraits, *Self-Portrait Belros* and *Self-Portrait Tobblo* (both 2010), relate more tenuously to Neel's practice. N.S. Harsha, for instance, created a bird's-eye view of a miniature crowd overlaid with the shadow of large silhouetted figure – a kind of conceptual portrait. In John Currin's wonderfully odd *The Lobster* (2001), the image of New York collector Dianne Wallace is oriented on its side, unfurling a vanitas cornucopia. An amalgam of varied textures, the figure is presented as simply another object in Currin's still life, given equal treatment with the violin, bunch of grapes, glass jug and titular lobster.

Such surprising inclusions, including some artists making their first foray into portrait-making, suggested the elasticity of the exhibition's remit, but this diverse group assert the continued relevance and universality of portraiture, a genre once summarily dismissed by the art establishment. 'In the Company of Alice' also situated Neel, a longtime outsider, well inside the circle, establishing an illustrious lineage of artistic progeny. As Miro herself said in a recent interview, Neel has finally 'come in from the cold.'

Natasha Degen



Chantal Joffe
Megan
2010
Oil on canvas
2.1x1.5 m