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Messy Art to Depict Our Messy Lives



by Olivia Parkes

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Elizabeth Neel, granddaughter of feminist icon Alice Neel, makes gorgeous abstract paintings. We spoke to her about the painting process, narrative, and how things have changed for female painters since her grandmother's time.

Elizabeth Neel's fluid abstractions wrench you into the physical world, even if they don't depict it. Bold marks breathe through negative space that in another moment of looking becomes positive form. The American painter's compositions are in constant motion, riots of form and color that wrestle the visual into the body. By conveying a sense of the movement that created the final image, these paintings ask you to look with more than just the eye.

Neel herself talks about painting as a kind of choreography of gesture—a physical transcription of the movement of the mind, a dance between impulse, association, and learned behaviors. Neel's paintings shift deftly between abstraction and depiction, suggesting and exploding forms that invite the viewer's own imaginative references and conjure the joyful mess of living.



Born in Vermont, Neel studied history at Brown before turning to painting as an adult. As the granddaughter of figurative painter and feminist icon Alice Neel, the artist is aware of the doubled history she picks up with the brush, her own past linked to an already weighty tradition. We talked with Neel about how things have changed for female artists since Alice's time—"arguably not enough"—and about her newest work.

In her most recent paintings, Neel has been using printmaking techniques and folding her canvases to create symmetries that echo forms found in nature or the blots of a Rorschach test. Though the focus has shifted from more narrative concerns in her earlier work, these paintings continue to evoke the link between body and mind, solidifying thought with gesture.

Neel speaks several times of the generosity of painting, and you can see why. The paintings feel like a conversation, opening up in a visual give and take that reflects the experience of perception. We can't bring you the canvases, but you can eavesdrop on our conversation with the artist here.



BROADLY: Your canvases are gestural in a way that feels directly related to the body. Even the most abstract passages often feel figurative. How do you think of painting's relationship to the body?

Elizabeth Neel: Painting's relationship to the body is literal—one stands in front of an image and has an experience of vertical orientation that is, in the case of my work, almost sculptural, due to the scale of my paint application and my use of negative space. There is

also a bodily reference in the narrative potential of the marks I make. You see the gestural residue of where I have actually been on the canvas. I create the suggestion of bodily forms, fluids and actions to reference the experience of the physical and intellectual world for the viewer. In a sense, the painting doesn't fully exist without the presence of the viewer and the tactile and associative references they bring in the act of looking.

That idea of the almost sculptural quality of a certain scale and of painting—it makes me think of the Joan Mitchell quote, "A painting is an organism that turns in space."

I like that quote—I love Mitchell's work—but I'm not sure that I agree. Marks can give the appearance of turning in space but the painting itself is locked in position. Marks can be sculptural in a dimensional sense, but a painting as an image is never really sculptural in that no painting can be experienced in the round. That's part of what makes paintings so seductive. They can never fully be known.

You often begin a painting with narrative associations—Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"—or a story or an image that you saw in the news. What is it that you need to start a particular painting?

I have a set of associations built into my body and brain over my lifetime, and I bring that cache of information to every image I make. I start with a mark from which a rolling sense of recognition begins. I respond to that mark with people, places, events, and objects in mind. Over the course of the painting process, which I often think of as a kind of choreography of marks, or a grappling with a visual word problem, equations are built and destroyed, shifted and manipulated until a legitimate formal proposition is established. This formal proposition must always provide the viewer with shifting narrative potentials and real world sensations beyond the basic establishment of a certain composition. No painting is finished unless it both challenges and satisfies the viewer. The best art has this kind of generosity built into it.



Do you ever just make a painting with nothing in mind, or do you need a narrative interest or reference image as a way "in"?

The way into a painting can be a mark or a framework of marks that suggests arguments and resolutions between forms in architectural and natural space. Those initial marks can be based on an image or an event and then migrate into an entirely other realm of possibility.

How are you moving between reference and painting?

That is a constant back and forth. It's a dance between physical marks and external associations that collide, tumble together, separate, resolve, and obscure. For me it mimics the experience of thought and behavior.



Do you work on the floor or the wall, or both?

I work both on the floor and on the wall. This is a practical matter based on the need to cooperate with the power of gravity (controlling paint behavior) and a need to view an entire composition. The interplay between vertical and horizontal is part of being in the world. I think the technical necessity to work both ways ends up allowing each painting to communicate both perspectives and positions of being. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* deals wonderfully with this tension between the vertical and horizontal. I often think of that book when I'm painting. On a basic level it deals with the dead versus the alive—and everything between.

Most of your paintings preserve a lot of white space. You also spray in silhouettes and cut-outs. How are you thinking about negative space?

Negative space is like air...around a body, around a sculpture, around an idea or an event. It's necessary.

Do you think that paintings are qualitatively different from most of the images we're inundated by today?

Yes. They are an encapsulation of time, and they unfurl (if they're any good) over the duration of time spent looking at them. But they don't hold you prisoner or placate you like other time-based products can—it's not like watching a movie. Paintings require attention, but they're generous in that they allow you to walk away and come back without the anxiety of having "missed anything" that happened.





Do you find the paintings in your studio in dialogue with each other?

I work on several things at once. The dialogue between paintings is impossible to avoid. I like that. All my paintings converse and argue with each other. It makes them dynamic individually but also as a group.

You've said in a previous interview that, as a child, your awareness of Alice's life was one of hardship and suffering—the life of an artist. Do you feel that art has now been professionalized?

Yes, it's definitely been professionalized. I don't see that as a bad or a good thing. It is just a fact. Populations, technologies, and economies change over time.

Do you think the climate for female artists has changed since your grandmother's time?

Only in as much as the climate for women has changed over time in general. Arguably it has not changed enough.

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Painting—especially the discourse coming out of abstract expressionism—has a very "macho" legacy. Do you think the art world has transcended that way of thinking, or do you still have to fight against being pigeonholed as a "lady painter"?

I'm not sure if fight is the right word—perhaps persist is more accurate. There are several successful and critically respected abstract painters that are women, but fashion and taste are always shifting and often fickle and market-driven. Persistence and articulate insistence are the only solutions to maintaining the nuance in the discussion of painting.



Painting has a lot of historical weight. Did you feel the weight of your own legacy as Alice Neel's granddaughter? Particularly of her status as a feminist icon?

Alice was certainly a concern for me when I made the decision to make paintings, but not because she was relatively well known at the time—because of the terrible suffering she endured, both psychological and physical. She was ignored and treated terribly by her peers and by critics for years because she wasn't playing along with the style of the time, and she wouldn't engage socially in a manner that forwarded her career. The art world is much larger now and somewhat more diverse.

You studied history at Brown and considered going to law school. What made you turn to art?

I wanted to take all the possibility of narrative—building, destroying, inventing, and speculating—that is part of the historical field to a place in which I could relate it to all other fields of study. I was repelled by the idea of arguing a single point or publishing something obscure as an "expert," for other "experts," out of the necessity to keep my tenure or my salary.

Who are the painters who make you want to paint?

All painters make me want to paint. Even the ones I think are bad make me want to go work.

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