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Elizabeth Neel: interview

The People, The Park, The Ornament
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by MK PALOMAR

The American painter Elizabeth Neel makes paintings and sculptures that converse with each other. Born in Vermont, granddaughter of painter Alice, sister of film-maker Andrew, Neel lives and works in New York. Informed by her background – the rural and urban, the knowledge of film, and the use of paint to conjure figuration and story – Neel's practice also looks to diverse conceptual sources such as formal art history and serendipitous images gleaned from the internet. These provide Neel with a rich variety of visual signs and themes, resulting in a powerful battle between form and exploded form through energetic gestures and meditative marks that together conjure a powerful choreographic flow.

MK Palomar talked to Neel on the opening day of her exhibition The People, the Park, the Ornament, at the Pilar Corrias Gallery.

MK Palomar: This is your second solo show in London; your first was in 2011. I was looking online and read that you said: "When I paint, I am looking at things that are in the world." What were you looking at when you began these paintings?

Elizabeth Neel: Each painting has a specific set of references, but then there's a shared archive of images that are constantly in circulation.

MP: [We are looking at Neel's painting *Black Moon Socket,* 2013]. Can you give me an example?

EN: Yes, there are certain ones that I love. An image of an x-ray of a dog's stomach with strange objects it had swallowed inside it.

MP: Where did you find that?

EN: Well, there are all sorts of things online like that. I think people, when they're at the office, when they're bored, they look at the toy duck in a dog's stomach. Kind of odd, but it's a visual tool so it informs the way I work formally, but also the content of it has to do with insides and outsides of the body. The ways technology allows us to look in and look through … that would be an example of a universal image that I always have around, it becomes part of my iconic set. But for one like this [gestures to *Black Moon Socket,* 2013], it could be anything, from an art historical reference, such as a Rousseau painting, or there are images of indoor jungles from the Victorian period, or pictures on people's vacation blogs in Brazil, or something like this. And sometimes the image will strike me because there's something a bit wrong about it, or the person taking it either doesn't care at all about formal concerns, and so strange warts appear in the image, or they care specifically so much in making it look like something that already exists in the world and conforms to a set of our predetermined desires about what nature is, and how it should look – the greenness of the green, the edges. And you see this a lot in iPhone photos, of course, because they're hypersaturated. Sometimes, I'll actually get a feeling of anxiety because it's this hyperness of the world – and so, yeah, working on a painting like that [gestures to *Black Moon Socket,* 2013], I might have a set of images.

MP: Do you print them up and put them around you?

EN: Yes. It's not so much a computer experience – it really becomes an object that I pin up.

MP: That you own – in a way?

EN: Yes, and I sort through them. It's a physical process that is meditative in a way and then generates ideas, but also it's like reading a real book – I've never read a Kindle book, but I don't really want to because I like flipping pages.

MP: The tactility?

EN: Yes.

MP: There's a sort of physical digging – something like that?

EN: Yes, even looking through a pile of things to find something, you inevitably find something else that you weren't looking for. Or at least the way I am, because I have a lot of piles of books and things around and so that moment of discovery is a kind of archaeological mini-moment, and then it can become a sort of a [pauses], you know – not so much of a eureka, but it can become this thing that moves a piece forward.

MP: Can you explain this one [*Gape,* 2013]?

EN: Sure, yes. It's important that all the sculptures are made at the same time and the same space as the paintings are being made, so there's always a visual dialogue that's happening and they inform each other. Sometimes I'll be able to solve a painting or move it forward based on a gesture that happens in the sculpture and then vice versa.

MP: [Looking at Neel's sculpture *Gate,* 2014 and its shadow on the floor] Nice shadow.

EN: Yes it's like the pincers of a dung beetle or something. It was important to me when I started making sculpture to bring painting issues and sculpture issues together. Often, I think they're separated in a curatorial role sort of unnecessarily, maybe because it's a matter of convenience. There are all sorts of reasons why people don't think about paintings in as rigorous a way sometimes as they think about sculpture. So when I make these [gestures to *Gate* 2014], I'm not interested in making a 3D version of a painting, because painting does what it does through a process partially of illusionism. Because it's a flat surface and then there's the feeling of depth created by different thicknesses of paint and other kinds of drawing techniques. Whereas a sculpture is already real and in the world – it's not an experience of illusion so you can't just pour paint over a lump and have it do what a painting does because it intrinsically has a different life in the world and a different physical relationship to a person. So the idea with making sculptures that seemed worth making was to employ the kind of linguistic thought process and series of actions that happen in the painting with objects, and that way create a more open dialogue rather than just a kind of mimicry.

MP: It's very interesting … that a painting is set aside from the viewer's physical space whereas a sculpture is taking up some of that space …

EN: Yes, it lives in it with you, and it's very mute but is a character.

MP: You have to negotiate it (the sculpture) in some way?

EN: Yes, you have to, and this is why people have trouble living with it, because it's obtrusive [laughs] … but that's why some people love it also because there's a giveness to it that's so solid, there are those actual elements in my paintings that lend themselves to that kind of dialogue. This one's called *Workers Work* (2013), part of that was because, after the painting was finished, this rib-cagey stack of lines created by the tape and then the gesture moving across it started, to me, to feel like a person carrying a valise or some stack of wood, and moving in a very humped-over way towards some stressful event or necessity. And then, also, the very redness of it made me think about socialist propaganda, notions about how work is done, how workers behave, how workers are treated – Eisenstein's Strike! And all that dramatic cross-cutting. My work doesn't begin with some socio-political premise, but the idea that there can be overtones that are both somewhat humorous and serious in the work, but also it's important to me that those aspects co-operate, have to co-operate with formal requirements.

MP: But interestingly enough in describing [the painting], you again describe something physical.

EN: Yes, that's true.

MP: The bent-over man carrying a sack, and maybe oppressed by the government or politics …

EN: Yes, I think in this one it's generally just a feeling of oppression and the rawness of an externalised flayed mass of something … so all of the literal physical touch of my hand, whether it be the swipes or the smears, the drops, flung however they are applied, is a record that can be traced.

MP: It's your trace – a trace of your actions.

EN: Yes, and, for me, it operates … each way of making marks is like a letter in the alphabet. It's a sign, it's part of the language that can be manipulated to create a reference in the real world, but also it always maintains its selfness, which is the residue of my hands, so it can turn into being like a lump of fleshy meat, but it is also paint and references a history as diverse as Goya and modernist abstraction.

MP: And your own history has fed into your work … reading history at college and then going on to … The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and your grandmother [painter Alice Neel] – but there was something else I wanted to say. A number of people have said there is an element of violence in your work. I don't necessarily see that. I do see energetic gesture, and a powerful battle between form and exploded form that conjures a strong rhythmic flow – people read things differently – but then you talk about how perhaps it's more violent to have some event happen at your home in Vermont as opposed to in the city, and I wonder if there's an urban-rural tension in you and how that plays out in your work?

EN: Definitely, because I love the city, but I get anxious to be out of it sometimes, and then the country's a different kind of trap [laughs], so having become accustomed visually to a certain set of colours and behaviours and things in nature, and certainly also having grown up with my grandmother's work on the wall in our house there. She always used to say when she came to visit us: "Oh, I can't stand living in the country because everything dies here." Well, of course, in New York everything dies too, but it just dies a bit differently.

MP: And it's hidden when it dies.

EN: Yes, usually. It can be very easily depersonalised. Terrible things happen in the city all the time, unbelievably wretched things, all you have to do is ride the subway for a few minutes and you see that. But it's disconnected from a kind of physical reality because it's enclosed by man-made architectures all the time, and there's concrete and all this. So there's a separation between the dirt and the figure somehow all the time, and I think that tension does come into the work. I feel stressed by it, so it must.

MP: Can you take me to a painting that you're happy with – that's not a very good word to use, I'm sorry, but …

EN: Yes, let's see. I'm happy with that one [she points to *Fixtures Morning to Evening,* 2014].

MP: Is that Naples yellow [points to a lovely smear of ochre-gold floating over a large blue smudge]?

EN: Raw sienna and yellow ochre – veridian mixed with ultramarine.

MP: And there's some drawing …

EN: Yes, so sometimes when I see the edge of a paint mark or a wipe-away mark, it may suggest an image and so I try to quickly cartoon around that in order to remind myself of those moments. But then it also ends up being a driver to move the painting forward because this association here [points to central area of painting], started to feel a bit like a hanging wing or a waterfall – the gesture is important. Once it started to happen, it reminded me of these little figurines – where you would have a character that if you swung the string would go back and forth – so the bear would chop wood …

MP: Or the chickens would peck.

EN: Yes, and, because of the forces of gravity, there had to be a vertical horizontal, a vertical horizontal and a repetitive motion, so the way I work involves a lot of switching between vertical and horizontal.

MP: Is the canvas on the wall when you work, or flat on the floor?

EN: I work on the wall and then, as paint moves across the canvas, I may at certain times want to arrest that movement and that means I have to quickly take it down, lie it flat and then give it whatever time is required, depending on how thin the medium is for it to set up. So this [points to a spray-painted line with dots] is a grommeted curtain that I had and I used it as a mask on the edge there – so sometimes things from around the studio will get into the work and lend themselves to something. This spray-painted shape [points to a small, double-curved shape], is actually half an apple.

MP: Gosh, it's big [laughs].

EN: It's an American apple [laughs], not organic probably.

MP: It looks like a bottom.

EN: Right, it does, which is funny. I also just happen to be kind of in love with bilateral symmetry that happens in nature, so if you cut something crossways you'll get this kind of psychoanalytic mirroring thing that happens, but the way the figure goes down in the gesture, like this [points from the upper right to the lower left side of the canvas], it also made me think about the apocryphal Newton story about gravity and the apple falling. And this is this moment in which we understand why things fall. I like it when a painting has several different kinds of associations for me, and I know that when people look at it and it strikes them even further in other ways than it struck me, and yet maintains a solid formal presence as a logical image, pushing those limits of control also and complete chaos – then it might be done.

MP: Then it might be done?

EN: Yes.

MP: There's a dance in your method?

EN: Yes, I think a lot about choreography because it is a choreographed process that isn't preplanned entirely, but the set of moves is an index that gets used, reused, erased, added
subtracted.

MP: And was this one [*Fixtures Morning to Evening*, 2014] partly triggered by one of the images you found?

EN: Yes, I had an image of this amazing bird from somewhere in South America and the feathers were blowing across in the wind. I really like the texture of it and something about this [marks on the canvas] seemed to feel like that under-fluff. Plus, the colour is very intense, and some of these birds have amazing reflective feathers that do extraordinary things.

MP: And where you put tape down [on the canvas] very straight, is that to contain in some way?

EN: Yes, I think of them as damns or shelves or punctuations, parentheticals. Sometimes they glow like fluorescent lights. It really depends – I start with them and then I grind with my hand a base paint colour – in this case it's ultramarine blue – some of which are harder to make co-operate; browns are easier to make co-operate and that's why they are traditionally a basic drawing colour – and this forms the armature that the rest of the painting ends up hanging on, but the armature then gets destroyed somewhat during the process of painting. So moments of clarity and logic – or a quotational notion of that – will intercede, but then sometimes they get pulled into a state of oblivion.

[EN and MP go downstairs to look at the lower gallery of paintings and sculptures.]

EN: This one's called *Prairie Pagoda*. When I was making it, this shape here and this [gestures to a curved line and a grid made from white tape] reminded me of a Hokusai print that I'd seen. Of course, thinking about modernist painting and references to earlier Asian art made me think about that kind of architecture, too. I thought about how modern architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright took those kinds of structures and kind of dropped them in the middle of the Midwest, which interestingly made sense for the landscape, but also doesn't make sense at all in some way, and they are hard to live in. So this painting had this kind of [points to the turning/tossing shapes on the canvas], balls of sagebrush and wire …

MP: A rebelling landscape?

EN: Yes and it made me think of falling water somehow, too – the idea of putting a concrete monstrosity that's actually really beautiful on top of a waterfall like that. So this one's about conflict of architecture and landscape, but then how they can make sense even in the midst of all these programmatic ideas that people have about how things should be, and what's new.

MP: It's interesting how the oil has bled [on the canvas]. How did that happen if it's sized?

EN: My process is kind of a hybrid in that I use an acrylic primer gesso, and then at the very end I do a skim coat of a traditional oil-based primer. What that does is keep these washes of paint sitting more on top, and then what happens if it's very washy and has a lot of oil in it and turpentine, the oil moves laterally into the little squeegee marks that are naturally part of the canvas pre-primed. And then when I spray paint areas – the oil that separates – immediately the spray paint clings to it and gives it a feeling of scientific slides.

MP: There's a glassiness, a beautiful texture.

EN: They used to dye those specimens with very nice colours, such as pink and purple and red, so you could see where the cell walls were, so sometimes when I discover something works that way and then it reminds me of another thing that I'm interested in, I pursue it in more than one work and see what can be done. And so these paintings (*Prairie Pagoda* and *Click the Tongue*), were made while this sculpture, *The People, The Park, The Ornament,* was going on in the middle of the studio. My floor sculptures always tend to have a relationship to the idea of an architectural model. I love these urban planning scapes, but then when you look at it really, it's not a plan for anything except the experience of being in the world and relating to the painting. So with this table-type shape, suddenly it's unclear what's large and what's small in relationship to everything else. The skull is a 1:1 scale, it's a cast of a domestic sheep skull. And this [points to a white folded form] is an amazing material that I love: it's actually a combination of paper and clay. When it dries, it's very light and very strong, but it takes the pressure of hands and objects in a beautiful way that echoes the colour of these cast bones, but also feels like skin. This idea of mimicking this natural mortification [these bones] – I think is an interesting process. Because it has to do with impressions and then reproducing the thing through an impression – and a lot of the paintings using the spray paint, or the tape, or my hand have this idea of the impression, or the outline, or the profile of something.

MP: You've spray-painted round an object on the bottom there.

EN: Cloth – I drape cloth so that I get these …

MP: Figuration-ishes?

EN: Right. So this could be part of an intestine or it could be the tail of a medieval …

MP: The title?

EN: This one's called *Click the Tongue* – so it has a physical speaking …

MP: From the Cosa language [that encompasses tongue-clicking]?

EN: No, actually I was thinking about ducks and how they use their hardware to make noises.

MP: Oh, I see a duck there now. Am I meant to see a duck?

EN: Well I do … I love the fact that people when they look at an image – no matter what it is, even if they are familiar with the terms and they come in and say: "OK, abstract painting" – it will open up in this way, and that the natural impulse is to see the recognisable in everything. Even if the recognisable is just initially this idea of abstraction, then it also becomes the recognition of behaviours or objects, drawings and images. So the blue parts in the sculpture obviously have a colour dialogue with the work, but their kind of abjectness – as if they're not entirely formed creatures, they're snailing around the ground.

MP: This one definitely is some kind of two-legged thingummy.

EN: Yes, and so this shape, which I cut out with a jigsaw, is sort of a puzzle piece. It's very flat and gives you the feeling of being an objective viewer … whatever it is that's going on … it begins to appear like a sleeve or a piece of cloth

MP: Somebody's arm.

EN: Yes, something that's kind of crumpled and collapsed on top of itself – and then an artist told me it looked like an elephant's trunk so …

MP: Oh, yes – now I see that – but it's lovely because what you're doing is giving people triggers that may conjure one image or another.

EN: And then obviously there are art historical references – so when I made that kind of cage table, I was thinking a lot about the idea of boundaries, and spent a lot of time about interpretation of psychoanalysis and psychological issues that really come out in Giacometti's work, they come out in Francis Bacon, it was in his perimeter space. And then De Chirico town squares, in which he conveyed architecture way out of proportion in buildings – or a bust classical, he would plop very heavy-handed but quite amazing signs. The negative space of the same shape is used to conjure a different kind of body association where as this shape is more the man-made architectural reference, it's window-like –

MP: The physicalisation of the gestures in paintings?

EN: Yes – so they are kind of shish kebabs, but they are also like scientific experimental arrangements, so they feel like limestone or plaster or some other thing. When I was little, you could get one of those kits where you could make a plastercast of a dog's footprint – they were never very good, but there's lots of ideas that you'd have pressing an object … I've always liked that idea of trying to understand what something is by filling it up and flipping it back out again.

MP: And this wormy one [looking at a part of the sculpture titled *Customs* 2014]?

EN: Yes, well that's obviously suggestive of certain bodily functions. This part of the piece actually has a skull like [the other sheep's skull], underneath as its armature, and I was thinking a lot about how forensic reconstructions are done now, so they'll find a skull of somebody and try to

figure out who they were by making algorithms and building up layers – you know you've probably seen them with pins coming out – and I don't know if they end up resembling the person, but I think the process of trying to build up around what's already in there is interesting, and then you also get this sort of still-life-y lumpy body from it. It's an inaccurate recreation really.

Elizabeth Neel, 2014.