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Artist of the week 156: Elizabeth Neel

This New York artist's seductive paintings veer between abstraction and depiction as she wrestles with themes of nature and death



Skye Sherwin

theguardian.com, Thursday 22 September 2011 05.40 EDT

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Flurries of paint ... Almanac (2011, detail). Photograph: Elizabeth Neel and Pilar Corrias Gallery/AP

Can a picture ever be as good as the real thing? That's one of the age-old problems Elizabeth Neel faced up to when her work first made a splash in her hometown, New York, a few years ago. The artist's answer was to create pulsing, gestural paintings veering between abstraction and depiction, where thick pigment in fleshy hues was stirred into turbulent layers.

As seductive as her swirls were, there was also something violent and dangerous in these works, where snarled, dense brushstrokes suggested bloody body parts. In Thanks Giving from 2008, a gush of pale rose shooting from a brown, feathery mass could only be a turkey recently parted from its head. Condolences, where scrunched-up shapes in pink and beige suggest the wilting blooms of a funeral bouquet, is similarly morbid.

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Translating nature into the manmade ... Gate the Shades (2011, detail). Photograph: Elizabeth Neel and Pilar Corrias Gallery

Nature and death have been big themes for this artist, who grew up on a farm with these daily realities. However, her source material is images from the internet, which she interprets not literally, but using abstraction to translate some of the stories and feelings carried by the chosen images. Take the ominous [Swamp Dump](#) from 2005, where sludgy brushstrokes set against a pitch-black ground suggest an overgrown wilderness. Its backstory is sinister: the painting is [based on the story of a horrific plane wreck in the Florida Everglades](#), where rescue teams famously struggled to find human remains – any surviving passengers were believed to have been eaten by alligators while awaiting rescue.

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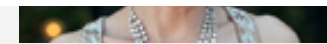


A watery world ... Relation of a Journey (2011, detail) Photograph: Elizabeth Neel and Pilar Corrias Gallery

In Neel's current London debut, her latest work shows a fresh, more conceptual direction. She still seems interested in the dance between abstraction and representation, but now she's underscoring the process behind her paintings. Paper print-outs of images including wolves, baby birds and braided hair are scattered on the floor, their forms echoed in the canvasses' stencilled patterns and the twin black orbs which stare like lupine eyes from a number of works.

There are still clouds of spraypaint in luscious colours like autumnal gold and mottled purple to get lost in. Yet Neel has offset her wilder mark-making by leaving sharp lines and squares of bald unpainted canvas. Balancing flurries of paint with patches of plain white, these striking compositions are a reminder that paintings are created using both spontaneity and control, translating nature into the manmade.

Why we like her: For the exquisite [Relation of a Journey](#), where intense ocean blues, the pale green of pond lily leaves and effervescent aqua sprays suggest a watery world of springs, stained rocks and rippling pools.



then people of the
Princess of Wales

19 comments



Christopher Kane's show at London fashion week

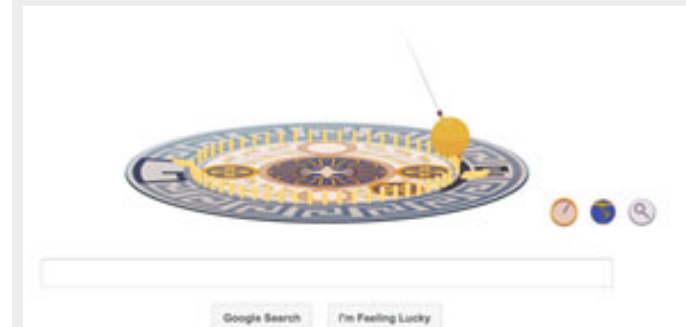
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Where can I see her? At [Pilar Corrias](#) gallery, London until 7 October.



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TheGrinch1897

22 September 2011 11:35am

2

Can a picture ever be as good as the real thing?

Not if Elizabeth Neel's behind it

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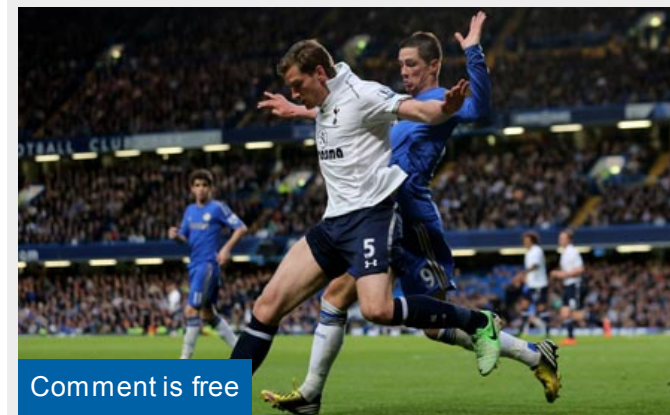
22 September 2011 12:36pm

2



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Brazilian president postpones
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race-hate word. Here's why



They look like the typical run of the mill mixed media paintings that are fashionable at the moment - they are ten a penny. The emperor has no clothes!



epinoa

3

22 September 2011 12:55pm

The stuff I did with masked shapes when I was 20.

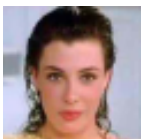


01billycat

1

22 September 2011 4:13pm

Well I love them! It isn't all about masked shapes, the white marks are beautifully drawn by the way, but the handling of the paint on the first one is gorgeous.



borris79

2

23 September 2011 10:07am

i'm always amazed at how many cynical comments are left on the art pages here

judging any work on the basis of small jpegs on a computer screen is not really a comprehensive judgement at all



oneorange

2

23 September 2011 5:43pm

I loved her show, very good sculptures and the paintings are amazing in real life

Comments for this discussion are now closed.

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