Art & Exhibitions(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/exhibitions)

Elizabeth Neel Grew Up Painting With Her Famous Grandmother. Now, Her New Abstractions Are Getting Attention in New York and London

The artist returns from a prolific period in lockdown with double-header gallery shows.

Elizabeth Neel. Photo courtesy of Salon 94, New York.

Sarah Cascone (https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25) August 22, 2021

Elizabeth Neel (http://www.artnet.com/artists/elizabeth-neel/) was eight years old when she got her first set of oil paints, a Winsor & Newton paintbox, as a gift from her grandmother, the late, great portraitist Alice Neel (http://www.artnet.com/artists/alice-neel/).

Neel's earliest painting experiences were with Alice, working side by side. But there was never any pressure to follow in her footsteps.

“I liked to draw a lot and she wanted to encourage that, because she thought I was good and she had a connection with me. We had a lot of fun together,” Neel told Artnet News. “She was a great grandmother, even though she never allowed anyone to call her that. She was always Alice to us.”

“A lot of people will say to me, ‘It must be hard that your grandmother was always so famous’—but she wasn’t,” Neel added. “For me, she was this intelligent, charming human who made these beautiful, insightful pictures that we lived around all my childhood. I think it would have been really different if she’d been a man and she’d been properly famous—that could have been oppressive.”

Elizabeth Neel, *Dog Dog* (2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Instead, Neel, now 46, was able to enter the art world on her own terms, first getting a certificate at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, followed by an MFA at Columbia University in New York. She’s shown her abstract paintings regularly since 2005, and she enjoyed a 2010 solo show at

SculptureCenter in Queens.

The past few months, however, have been a particularly busy time, as Neel was preparing for not one, but two solo shows. "Arms Now Legs (https://salon94.com/exhibitions/elizabeth-neel-2021)" is currently on view at her New York gallery, Salon 94. "Limb After Limb (https://www.pilarcorrias.com/exhibitions/255-elizabeth-neel-limb-after-limb/)," featuring paintings she originally planned to exhibit in a deconsecrated church, will debut next month at Pilar Corrias, Neel's London dealer.

"The Salon 94 title references certain kind of transformative imagery in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and the show at Pilar's is a more John Milton-esque image of the world in a transformative state of turmoil, so I see the two as very connected," Neel said. "Given the way I work, which is organically with a set of ideas, it was impossible for them not to be related. Everything that I'm reading about or thinking about or listening to goes into the work."

Installation view of "Elizabeth Neel: Arms Now Legs" (2021). Photo by Dan Bradica, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Each piece starts with raw canvas and a primer coat of clear acrylic polymer that keeps the painting from sinking in all the way through the fabric. It also allows Neel to use white to create lighter areas against the background, many areas of which she leaves untouched, to "preserve a lot of air in the canvas," she said.

But unlike her childhood oil painting sessions with Alice, Neel chooses acrylic paint to create her many-layered works.

“When I worked in oil, it took so long for every layer to dry that I would get out of the headspace I needed to feel a kind of continuity in the painting,” she explained.

Neel has a deep bag of tricks at her disposal to achieve her complex compositions, sometimes folding the painted canvas to create a Rorschach-like effect, and employing a wide variety of tools in her mark-making. “I use rollers, I use rags, I use my hands with rubber gloves on—and once in a while, I do use a brush too,” she said.

Elizabeth Neel, *Exchange Principle* (detail, 2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Neel has been living and working almost exclusively at her childhood home in rural Vermont, pressing the barn space above her parents’ garage into service as her studio. The change of scenery from her longtime home in Brooklyn proved inspirational.

“It was incredible to be able to step out into a snowy landscape or a sunny world of grass and flowers. Much more refreshing than stepping out onto a concrete slab with loud noises,” Neel said. “It felt almost like being a hermit or a monk. It was frightening, to a degree, to begin making a show without any human context, but it

was a challenge that ended up being really good for me."

Elizabeth Neel's Vermont studio. Photo courtesy of Salon 94, New York.

She made one of two trips back to New York for the opening of her grandmother's critically acclaimed retrospective (https://news.artnet.com/opinion/alice-neel-was-a-commie-a-battlefield-of-humanism-1958503), "Alice Neel: People Come First, (https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2021/alice-neel)" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (https://www.metmuseum.org/) in March. (The exhibition closed earlier this month.)

"I'm incredibly happy that she's getting what I think is her due," Neel said. "Alice is really inspirational for me. I don't think I ever met a person who was more tenacious or had more guts in the face of lack of interest than she had."

Elizabeth Neel, *Darlest Dearing* (2020). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Alice's struggles for recognition and financial compensation, which were documented in the show, were part of the reason her two sons were drawn to the professional world, becoming a doctor and a lawyer. But Elizabeth and her brother, filmmaker Andrew Neel, turned back to pursue creative careers. (He made a feature-length documentary about Alice in 2007, and is currently completing a documentary short about Neel that Corrias will debut during Frieze London in October.)

"I think that actually happens lot in creative families, where you'll have a flip-flopping effect," Neel said. The poverty that her father, Hartley Neel, and her uncle, Richard Neel, experienced as children drove them to seek more stable career paths—an impulse that Neel, who took the LSAT before entering art school, understands fully.

"Alice suffered terribly on a physical and emotional level at the hands of her art and the art world," she said. "That's not something that you jump into lightly!"

See more works by Neel below.

Elizabeth Neel, *Stranger's End* (2021). Photo courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, ©Elizabeth Neel.

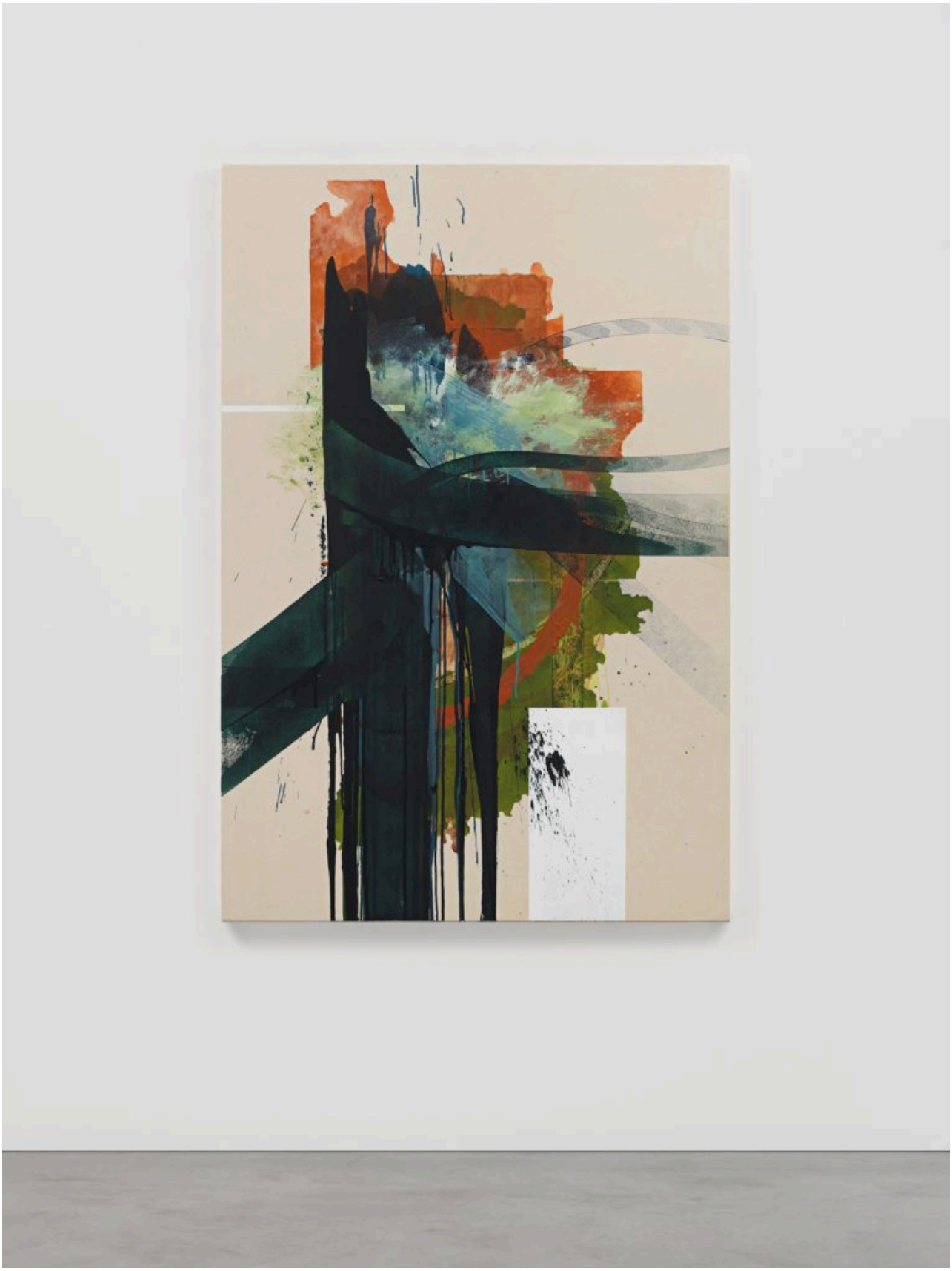
Elizabeth Neel, *Ark Scenario* (2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Elizabeth Neel, *Ark Scenario* (detail, 2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Elizabeth Neel, *Following the Birds* (detail, 2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Elizabeth Neel, *Eve 2* (2021). Photo courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Elizabeth Neel, *Sister (Sibling 1)* (detail, 2020). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.



Elizabeth Neel, *Blue Black Bleed* (2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Elizabeth Neel, *Eve* (2021). Photo courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, ©Elizabeth Neel.

Elizabeth Neel, *Exchange Principle* (2021). Photo by Genevieve Hanson, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York, ©Elizabeth Neel.

"Elizabeth Neel: Arms Now Legs" is on view at Salon 94, 3 East 89th Street, New York, June 30–August 27, 2021.

"Elizabeth Neel: Limb After Limb" will be on view at Pilar Corrias, 2 Savile Row, London, September 16–October 23, 2021.

Sarah Cascone

Senior Writer

(https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25)

Art

10 Women Artists Capturing the Beauty of Nature through Abstraction

Maxwell Rabb

Apr 11, 2024 3:20PM

Art and nature are often so closely intertwined that distinguishing them is impossible. While this might seem obvious when it comes to landscapes, this is equally true of abstract art. “I don’t paint nature, I am nature,” said Jackson Pollock in response to Hans Hofmann’s critical

jab that Pollock should paint scenes based on the natural world.

Many dismissed Abstract Expressionist works like Pollock's as merely avant-garde explosions of color, and yet these artists also found inspiration in the flora and fauna of the world around them, though this was only recognized after the movement's peak. In 1958, the exhibition "Nature in Abstraction" at the Whitney Museum of American Art challenged the limited view of abstract art, arguing that nature's influence was fundamental to Abstract Expressionism.

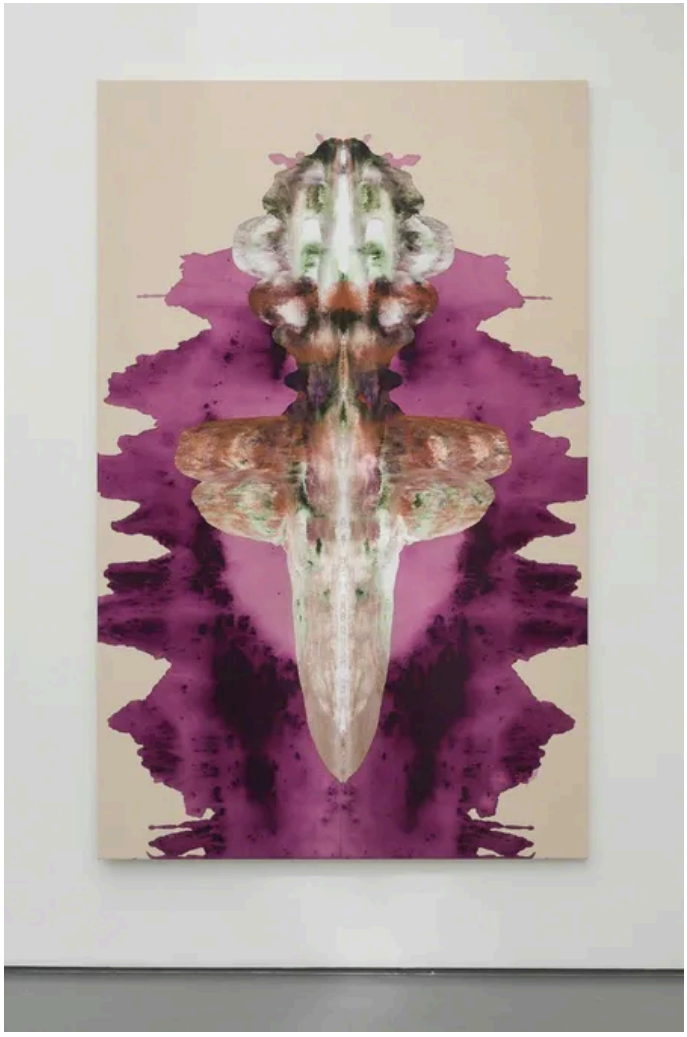
Nonetheless, that exhibition was limited in its own way, ignoring women artists from the movement, such as Joan Mitchell, Lee Krasner, and Grace Hartigan, who were conspicuously absent. Today, a new version of this narrative is being planted at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila in the Philippines, where "Wild: Women Abstractionists on Nature," on view through June 22nd, spotlights 34 women artists working to capture the beauty of nature in abstract form.

"Women have long been associated with nature and the environment, and with 'Wild,' I wanted to highlight the lasting impact of nature as inspiration through abstract works by

these women artists," said Kathy Huang, the show's curator. "The difference now is that it has become increasingly more common to be someone of the diaspora, fusing visual references from a collection of places one might consider home."

As contemporary women artists continue to build on the legacy of nature-inspired abstraction, for our increasingly international world, we explore the work of 10 women artists whose abstract work explores the beauty of the earth.

Elizabeth Neel
Herald, 2019
Pilar Corrias Gallery



Elizabeth Neel
First Man in Situ, 2016
Pilar Corrias Gallery

Elizabeth Neel

B. 1975, Stowe, Vermont. Lives and works in New York.

As the granddaughter of portraitist Alice Neel, Elizabeth Neel continues in her relative's painterly footsteps. However, unlike her grandmother, Elizabeth Neel explores humans' relationship with the natural world through abstraction, inspired by various references culled from the internet, television, and other archives.

Neel, who is represented by Pilar Corrias Gallery, is known for her turbulent, even violent canvases, several of which (like *Herald*, 2019, and *First Man in Situ*, 2016) explore the bilateral symmetry that occurs within many living organisms, often resembling chromatic Rorschach tests.

Through her abstractions, Neel also probes the impact of human interference in the natural world. For instance, in *Swamp Dump* (2005), a painting inspired by a 1996 plane crash in the Florida Everglades, the artist portrays the man-made wreckage in one of the least human-populated sites in the United States.

APOLLO
THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

INTERVIEWS

In the studio with... Elizabeth Neel

Apollo

22 SEPTEMBER 2021

Elizabeth Neel: LIMB AFTER LIMB (still detail; 2021), Andrew Neel. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

Elizabeth Neel's paintings draw on Old Master paintings and classic films as well as her own observations of the natural world. 'Art is like the food processor,' she says. 'It slices and dices these things up and transforms them.' The American artist paints with acrylic on canvas, using fingers, rags, rollers and brushes to create images that hover between abstraction and figuration. 'Elizabeth Neel: Limb after Limb', an exhibition of recent paintings, is currently on view at Pilar Corrias on Savile Row in London (until 23 October). During Frieze week the gallery will also present a new film directed by the artist's brother Andrew Neel, which touches on their family history – they are the grandchildren of Alice Neel (1900–88), who gave Elizabeth her first set of paints when she was eight years old.

Where is your studio?
I work in the Greenpoint area of Brooklyn, NY and also in Stowe, Vermont.

What do you like most about the space?
It's isolated at the end of a protracted hallway full of plants and there are very few noise distractions. I also like that the building is ethically managed and includes small-scale manufacturers – real experts – as well as a few artists.

What frustrates you about it?
It's a long walk to the bathroom!

Eve (2021), Elizabeth Neel

How messy is your studio?
My studio goes through reasonable cycles of disorder on a daily basis.

What does it smell like?
It smells like raw canvas and wood and sometimes soup.

What's the weirdest object in there?
Old piano keys and a coyote skin. I don't find them 'weird' as in strange – they strike me more as uncanny.

Which artistic tool could you least do without?
Bounty paper towels.

What's the most well-thumbed book in your studio?
The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson and *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann.

Do you pin up images of other artists' works?
Yes. Sarah Lucas, Georgia O'Keefe, Francis Bacon, Cy Twombly, and Wolfgang Tillmans are up right now... but many, many others too, especially the work of anonymous archaic specialists. Often, I put up works because they are good, not necessarily because they relate to what I am doing. It's a matter of respect and a reminder of how incredibly difficult it is to make even one great thing.

Do you cook in the studio?
I don't think you could call it cooking exactly... I heat things up on a tiny hot plate. I don't like to eat a lot when I am working because it slows down my mind and my body.

Stranger's End (2021), Elizabeth Neel

What do you listen to while you're working?
Baseball is the best but essentially I listen to anything other than music. Repeating structures, melodies and lyrics tend to get carbon copied on to my brain when I am hyperfocused and then they beat away relentlessly in my dreams at night which prevents me from resting properly. I save music for outside the studio.

What do you usually wear while you're working?
I wear large black cotton Hanes sweatshirts and whichever bottoms the temperature requires – usually with a set of basketball knee pads.

Do you ever sleep in your studio?
I have a six- to nine-hour window of productive, intense concentration: after that I become tired and confused so it's best to create physical and emotional distance by going home and sleeping in my bed. It took me a long time to figure that out about myself but now I cannot live any other way.

Who's the most interesting visitor you've had to your studio?
Loose lips sink ships! Probably best not to answer that question.

'Elizabeth Neel: Limb after Limb' is at Pilar Corrias, Savile Row, London untilA 23 October.

The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/arts/design/seven-painting-shows-to-see-in-new-york-art-galleries.html

ART REVIEW

At 7 Art Galleries, the Ecstatic Flow of Paint and the Stories It Can Tell

By Roberta Smith

Sept. 27, 2018

Few truths about paint are more basic than this: it tends to go on wet, whether on canvas, furniture or buildings, and then it dries. Once dried, it can preserve a sense of its original fluidity to greatly varying degrees. In the postwar years it became a sure sign of modernity and freshness. It's dynamic, at times volcanic, like artistic genius is supposed to be, but it can also have a comedic, even ironic quality. It conveys immediacy, material reality, improvisation as well as flamboyance and glamour, savoir faire.

Giving full voice to the liquidity of paint has gone in and out of style since it was liberated in the 1940s by the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, Janet Sobel and Norman Lewis. In the mid-1950s, Helen Frankenthaler opened further possibilities. Working on the floor, she thinned her paint to the consistency of water, creating floods and eddies of color that soaked into the canvas. Her techniques established the Color Field School in the United States. The Japanese artists of the Gutai took wetness to fabulous excesses, making it a

lavalike substance. Things turned ironic with Andy Warhol's Oxidation series, achieved by the artist and others urinating on canvases painted with copper metallic paint.

Sometime in the 1970s, Color Field fell out of favor and visibly liquid paint had a much a lower profile. You could say it flowed underground. But it never went away, and right now, seven shows in New York galleries give both its present and its recent past a new visibility.

Elizabeth Neel

Through Oct. 27. Mary Boone, 541 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-752-2929, maryboonegallery.com.

Elizabeth Neel's "Madonna as a Man" at Mary Boone Gallery. Mary Boone Gallery

Like Mary Weatherford, Elizabeth Neel adds unexpected elements to her painterly abstractions: hard-edge geometric shapes in black or white as well as textured rubbing-like silhouettes of insects. These added elements accent the methodical way the paintings are built up, for example with mirroring Rorschach-like motifs. The paintings have a new clarity that makes them Ms. Neel's most impressive efforts so far. The show's title — "Tangled on a Serpent Chair" — suggests an artist on the hot seat, which may, creatively speaking, be a good place to work from.

A correction was made on Sept. 28, 2018*: An earlier version of this article misstated the year of a Gary Snyder Gallery exhibition. It took place in 1998, not 1988.*

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 15 of the New York edition with the headline: The Paint Remains The Point

Glitter, Neon, and Good Old Fashioned Paint: Three Abstract Painters Pushing the Medium Forward

By Artspace Editors

OCT. 6, 2016

Elizabeth Neel's *Black's Pond (Eating Languages)*, 2014

Abstract art *may have shocked the world when it appeared in the wake of* ***Modernism****, but its widespread acceptance over the intervening century means that non-figurative works are now at the center of contemporary painting. (Sometimes to a fault—see the "crapstraction" craze of the early 2010s.) This doesn't mean that there have been no new developments, of course—as this excerpt from* ***Phaidon's*** *new* Vitamin P3 *shows, some painters are constantly experimenting to find novel new tools with which to expand the purview of the medium.*

ELIZABETH NEEL

Born 1975, Stowe, Vermont. Lives and works in New York.

The Builder, 2015

In the work of Elizabeth Neel there is a tension between figuration and abstraction. Her paintings are acts of accumulating fluid, immediate gestures within a narrative trajectory. She believes in action and response. Gestural marks are historically associated with emotions; but for Neel, there is no problem in the historical coding of emotion, she cites and works with this information, using emotion as a narrative strategy and tracking the historical progress of painting. As the granddaughter of the indomitable portrait painter Alice Neel (1900–84), the younger Neel is aware of the past but is emphatically of this moment. Her paintings could only emerge now, in a digital age, when the past is seemingly accessible in endless variations online. While her paintings are not digital or high tech, their context and intellectual rigor are reflective of our high tech moment.

Neel takes risks—shifting from oil to acrylic paint and constructing sculptural works as extensions of the spatial dynamics of her paintings. Unlike digital processes, Neel can't revert to an earlier version—she has to proceed without erasing. The performative aspect of her marks recall painters such as Jackson Pollock (1912–56) but also, in less obvious ways, performance artists such as Gilbert & George (b.1943, b.1942). Sometimes Neel folds a wet canvas to create images that resemble those found in Rorschach tests (whereby a patient of psychoanalysis is shown abstract patterns and asked to identify what he or she can see). In The Builder (2015) the symmetrical result from such a fold-over creates what could be interpreted as a body viewed from above, or, alternatively, a strange animal face or totem. Building, as with painting, is an optimistic act that is also destructive. While Neel's titles can be difficult to explain, The Builder reveals how Neel constructs potential meaning that remains unresolved.

ADBC, 2015

Because the paintings are abstract but reference figuration, Neel's use of language is both specific yet poetic. Her titles are vital components, expanding on narrative suggestions made within the paintings. ADBC (2015) references the alphabet, but is disordered. This is how history is formed; it is not ordered systematically as it occurs. Sometimes we have to recuperate a perspective, or reflect on the bias of another to realize what has been omitted. With the intensity of applied paint in thick strands of splashed-on blues that veer toward black at the centre and swathes of raw canvas on the edges, ADBC is like the visualization of the big bang—history swirls out as it is being formed. If it can be said that all history is patched together, Neel's practice displays the same progressive and regressive tendencies. The artist doesn't believe in "newness" as a stipulation for what artists do. One can use history and productively repeat aspects of what one's predecessors have made, but the very act of choosing it makes it relevant now.

—Kathleen Madden

Identity

Messy Art to Depict Our Messy Lives

By Olivia Parkes

November 13, 2015, 3:05pm

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.

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.

Tagged:

ALICE NEEL ART BROADLY CULTURE CULTURE FEMINISME PAINTING

The Guardian

Artist of the week Painting

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

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

Skye Sherwin

Thu 22 Sep 2011 05.40 EDT

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 funereal bouquet, is similarly morbid.

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.

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.

Super-gran: The young Elizabeth caught the painting bug from her grandmother, the iconic portraitist Alice Neel.

Where can I see her? At Pilar Corrias gallery, London until 7 October.

interview

Elizabeth Neel

By Michel Auder
Photographed by Mario Sorrenti

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The talent gene seems more prevalent amongactor and musician families than it does in fine-art clans. Very few art-world giants produce kids or grandkids who continue in the fine-art game. One recent exception is the Neel family. Although Alice Neel painted her pellucid portraits of the men, women, and children who came into her world for much of her life, it was only in the 1970s and ’80s that she achieved tremendous acclaim (and New York celebrity) as one of the great figurative painters of the 20th century. Her grandson, filmmaker Andrew Neel, created the haunting documentary *Alice Neel* about his late grandmother, in 2007. But it is his older sister who stands as the most likely inheritor of the painterly talent. The 34-year-old Elizabeth Neel, who lives and works in Brooklyn, creates violent, gestural canvases that border on abstraction but are in actuality deeply rooted in the facts of the physical world. While she rediscovered painting only as an adult, she has quickly become one of the rising young stars to take on new expressive abstraction (Neel, however, may consider her work more a subjective form of realism, always pushing the barrier between the things she’sobsessed with and how she portrays them in paint). Her subjects tend to swirl around

loaded themes of birth, life, and death. Neel grew up on a farm in northern Vermont, but came into New York City often as a child, visiting her grandmother and watching her work. It was in 1982 that she first remembers meeting artist Michel Auder at a party in honor of Alice at Gracie Mansion. Auder was photographing everyone in attendance—the Neel family, Andy Warhol, Annie Sprinkle, and the rest of the motley Manhattan crew there to celebrate the painter. Alice Neel was a central focus of Auder's film work. Elizabeth reconnected with Auder when she moved to the city to pursue her art in 2002. Here, in Neel's Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio, the two talk about old times and new ones and the painterly value of brunch.

ELIZABETH NEEL: I figured you'd be the most interesting person to do this because when we talked in the past, it seemed like even though we work in different mediums, there's something similar in terms of the immediacy that connects our work. Plus, we've known each other for a long time.

MICHEL AUDER: You've been painting since '95 or something like that, right?

NEEL: Well, I started fooling around with it when I was little, with Alice. That was the beginning, when she gave me that Winsor & Newton paint box. That was the "big, fancy gift." Then I stopped for all of high school and college.

AUDER: How old were you when she gave you that gift?

NEEL: She died when I was 9, so I must have been 7 or 8 . . . something like that. It's really hard to use oil paints, actually. I would sit next to her when she would set up her things, and I'd set up mine, too.

AUDER: Do you still have some of those early paintings?

NEEL: Yes. I'm sure Mom and Dad do. Everything's always piled up under something.

AUDER: Right.

NEEL: But I didn't think of being an artist until after I went away to boarding school. There were other things to be interested in. And it seemed like a nightmare. I mean, look at Alice's life. From the outside, from a child's perspective . . . Dad used to joke about artists eating dog food for dinner and stuff.

AUDER: So the information you collected as a child about your dad's mother, it was a certain hard kind of life?

NEEL: Yeah, a meaningful life, but one full of suffering, basically. Not that I didn't try dog food. I was eating Milk-Bones, but I did that just because I was weird, you know? [*laughs*]

AUDER: Dog food by choice. [*laughs*] Weren't you going to be a lawyer?

NEEL: That came as the moment of truth. I had studied history at Brown and didn't feel like doing anything with it. What does one do with a history degree besides become a historian? And the professors in school, it seemed like they were just writing books for other professors to comment on, and vice versa—it was the most self-referential, boring world you could ever imagine. Out of concern, my parents thought I should go to law school. "You're analytical. You're articulate." I thought, Why not? I studied for my LSATs and got into the room to take the test. I looked around and was like, "Fuck this. There's just no way." Instead I told my parents about this little school in Boston known as The

Museum School that basically had no requirements. I said I was going to go there for a summer program. Of course, my parents were very generous to even consider the idea, but Dad really couldn't say no because his entire cultural existence had been about the art world.

AUDER: This was '98, right? He could have said no, but his mother was famous. So becoming an artist was a window of opportunity for you. I'm sure he wasn't thinking that, but it could have been in the back of his mind.

NEEL: My parents were supportive, essentially believing my decision came from some rational,
meaningful place. So I went back and started painting at about 23. I started right from the beginning, going to figure class where they set up a model. I was really familiar with representational figurative painting because I've been around it all my life.

AUDER: We can still find the figurative in your paintings today. There is always some kind of image that is realistic somewhere in the work. You recognize something in time: flowers or a banana or a building or a vase. Would you call your paintings more realism or abstract?

NEEL: Well, there seems to be this constant discussion in the art world about things being abstract or not abstract or somewhere in between. But for me, it's not really abstract. Some of the marks have a strong relationship to the history of abstraction. But I see my work as having a relationship to the visual world, not just some emotive residue of my feelings. It relates to something that exists, or might exist, rather than a transcendent mental state or something like that.

AUDER: I guess it's what some people sometimes call abstract realism? I don't think your painting is that, but is that what it becomes when there is a part about painting itself, and another part is something you recognize?

NEEL: It's weird, because then would I describe Velázquez as abstract realism? No, I mean, Velázquez is . . .

AUDER: Totally realism, with some abstraction.

NEEL: There are parts in Velázquez that are seriously abstract and weird and only have to do with painting. They stand in for the real world but aren't real.

AUDER: Or Turner.

NEEL: Yeah. It's an interesting debate because people want to categorize everything. All I can say is that when I paint, I am looking at things that are in the world.

AUDER: But there is a certain violence to it, so for me, your work is kind of like a realism of violence, an explosion . . . In that way, it's gestural. There always seem to be a lot of violent - connections. Shit is happening there. What about this new one with the egg?

NEEL: Oh yeah. I wanted to paint brunch. Dad was sending me all of these photos he took. If he were younger he could have been Roe Ethridge or Wolfgang Tillmans, you know. He takes these laissez-faire still lifes, and he has a good sense of humor and composition. I didn't have any ideas at the moment, so I thought it would be interesting to paint a proper still life, since I don't usually paint something so stagnant. But, of course, with Cézanne, things aren't really sitting still either. For this painting, I wanted it to be like you were looking down on a plate. When I eat, I always pick out the best parts in the middle

and leave everything else on the side. It becomes a big sculptural mess, but there are nice compositional elements about how it all sits on the table. It seemed like a challenge to paint that. It's only halfway through. I'm still trying to figure out how to make it work. I like parts of it formally already. There are parts that remind me of Canadian bacon.

AUDER: Yeah. I see it. It's funny the way the painting works. At first I don't see all of that. But then things come up. Like, I see a tennis racket . . . a net with two balls or a banana with two raisins. And I keep looking and suddenly there's the egg and meaty stuff, and up comes the plate.

NEEL: It's slow-acting, yeah. I guess I feel a painting is a success when it has an initial appeal—whether it be a color, or a shape on the surface—that causes the viewers to hold their attention for a moment, long enough that they start to unravel another layer of possibilities.

AUDER: That's what I appreciate in the work. There are also details where your skill as a painter starts to come in. Like, the yellow of that egg is fully developed as a painting on its own. If you wanted to paint some eggs on a plate in 18th-century still life–style, I have little doubt you could probably do that. But there's that violence that becomes the painting. Like, shit is happening in your head.

NEEL: It's weird, I think so much of that goes back to living in the city. It's such a violent place, right? But the violence in New York feels really mundane and banal to me. Whereas in the privacy of one's own home, say, like the farm I grew up on in Vermont, the kinds of things that can happen seem much

more extreme. Maybe because it's more personal. Or maybe because you block out the things that happen in the city. But it's like seeing things born, live, die, fall apart, and start over again, without any intermediary clean-up steps from some corporate organization. Even though I don't have any larger spiritual or ideological system, there is some logic in concert with a huge number of beautiful, disconcerting, screwed-up variables that results in a certain visual pleasure in violent things. Like a broken egg yolk can be the most violent thing I've seen all day, if I'm in the right mood. But also tons of trash in the woods or a burned-up trailer park can also come across as especially violent.

AUDER: Or just daily life, when you look at the images that are served to us around the world.

NEEL: Like everything that you can touch that isn't yours.

AUDER: It's funny, looking at your painting. The violence really isn't in the egg, it's in the paint—the way the paint is applied next to the egg.

NEEL: That happens sometimes with paint.

AUDER: Did you always do painting, or did you ever try another medium?

NEEL: Actually I stopped and made videos and digital photographs for a while. I was getting frustrated with painting because everyone was making paintings from opaque projections, like Luc Tuymans and Gerhard Richter. When those guys do it, it's great. When art students do it, it isn't so. It was a real fad. I figured I'd make work related to source material that I was interested in—images I found on the Internet. But then I realized that the transcription from photograph to wall had to be

filled in by me. Otherwise, the piece becomes a second-rate version of the original source. Like, you love a thing and take a picture of it, but it may not hold any of the qualities of that original thing you loved. It's like when you see a sunset outside, you say, "Holy shit," and take a picture of it with your camera. There's none of the feeling left.

AUDER: Yeah. And the space is all different.

NEEL: That's where the painting comes into play. Painting was the way I could resist turning something into a second-rate version.

AUDER: When I look around your studio and see all of the tools and jars, it's a very classical painting studio. But you get a real kick out of painting, don't you?

NEEL: Well, it's hard to do. Not just with the weight of art history and contemporary discourse. But it's actually technically very difficult to achieve. I guess growing up around my grandmother—Alice's way of applying paint in this fresh manner, but having these oscillating moments of incredible virtuosic realism—was totally inspiring. Because it was free and easy, but incredibly complex all at the same time. To me, the way she painted always seemed connected to living, more than just an exercise.

AUDER: Obviously, as a child you saw a way of creating, and that became part of survival. It's almost as if without knowing it, you're using the same tools. You're painting without specifically referring to your grandmother's style, but it's the same tools, same colors, same bottles of paint. They mix together differently and become their own strokes. They are

your own. But it's fascinating that you've followed her path.

NEEL: Yeah, it becomes part of your subconscious, I think. When you see something every day, it gets into your brain. For me, it feels really good because I never know what Alice would have thought or said . . .

AUDER: Thank god! We don't need Alice to come over and start telling you what to do . . . On the other hand, it wouldn't matter if she liked it or not.

NEEL: No. It was perfect because she was approving when I was a child and nonexistent when I was an adult. So now my relationship with her is through what she left behind.

AUDER: To have the strength to keep painting, even though everyone's always going to make that comparison, is very refreshing.

NEEL: But you knew Alice, so you know why that is. I don't think a comparison is possible. Her situation was so weird and unique. It's not like being related to some macho megastar where their shadow is cast so wide and long there's no way you could ever possibly get a breath in that space.

AUDER: You're absolutely clear that you're a painter. It doesn't matter who your grandmother was. You got some information from her at just the right time. It runs in the family but there doesn't seem to be any baggage.

NEEL: My brother is a filmmaker. I suppose it could have been hard for both of us. But I find it inspiring. I feel lucky, really. I was watching your film the other night, *Heads of the Town*, and I feel connected to the work of all those artists in every media of that time. And especially how you put these pauses in moments where it

dissolves into you—moments that could be described as abstraction and meaninglessness—but then it comes back into focus. That is a motivating formal factor behind what I do. It's an engagement with what's difficult to express. I'm not really medium-specific, even though people may look at my work and call me a painter's painter. I'm trying to connect so much with everything else in the world.

AUDER: I can see some of the paintings around here aren't completely finished. You leave them hanging around a while and then come back to them if you wish. You have layered canvases where you add other elements over time.

NEEL: I think it's a case of figuring out if the interactions between objects are dynamic enough to keep your interest.

AUDER: Sometimes you need to live with a painting for a while. Starting a painting can be easy, but finishing it . . . [*laughs*] that's the skill of the painter, how you finally know when it's done. A painter friend of mine . . . Well, I haven't seen him much since the '80s. I used to go and visit him all the time. We sniffed heroin together and everything. He was working on a painting. I would come one day, and the painting would be there, and it would look kind of amazing. Then the next day I would come and get some bags, and we would sniff a little dope, and he would be working on the same painting, but it was another painting entirely. He would talk about how important layers were. But then after, like, two or three months, he'd be painting other paintings over the same painting. It was fascinating and incredible, and he would erase a little bit here and there so you could see under the layers. So a finished painting is in the hand of the painter. No one else's.

NEEL: I was reading these interviews with Francis Bacon, and he was talking about how, a lot of times, he would stop going back to paintings only because somebody took them out of his studio when they were sold. The ones people left he would often push to oblivion, where they couldn't be recovered from this attempt to make the greatest thing ever. It's funny, because finished-ness is actually a function of accident, in a way. Or timing. Or whatever else. Basically you have a reliable intuition about what is okay to send out into the world.

AUDER: Yeah.

NEEL: But then there will always be those times when you think, Hmm, if I did it again now, I might do it differently. But, yeah, living with it for long enough, you have to exercise maximum self-control. You can't indulge in your inability to stop.

AUDER: It's a little different from film, because with film you can keep pushing back and forth. With a painting you can only push forward. With films, you can go back and move something and change the meaning of it and actually make another film out of the same one that you made. And if you're really skilled, both films are equally valid.

NEEL: I used to be jealous of Andrew because he could go back to the file that was untouched, before all of the things in it got screwed up. But then I realized that's part of what painting does. I'm the kind of person who likes to keep all of my options open all the time. It forces me to take risks, make choices, bite the bullet. That's when the best things happen.

Michel Auder is a New York–based artist and video filmmaker. His most recent work, TheFeature, co-directed with Andrew Neel, received the New Vision Award at the Copenhagen film festival in November 2008.