

Sweet, 2009, oil on canvas,
51 x 41 cm. Courtesy Monica
De Cardenas Galleria, Milan



Elizabeth Neel uses gestural brushwork reminiscent of early-1950s New York action painting: violent and energetic mark-making, on a variety of surfaces, ranging from thickly plopped-on and opaque paint to thin transparent washes. In the 14 large and medium canvases and works on paper that comprise the Brooklyn painter's first solo show in Milan, she approaches the history of painting knowingly, through a technique that teeters between abstraction and figuration. Or to put it another way, in order to paint figuratively she seems to have allowed herself to see and paint abstractly, or vice versa. In so doing, Neel manages to achieve clarity through swirling forms, colour and revealing images that are sometimes culled from the Internet. This is the case with *Sideshow* (2008). In this large-scale canvas, the artist creates a remarkable tension by leaving the four corners of the painting white; this determines that the action takes place in the centre, where after travelling around broad, circular brushstrokes, one's eye ends up resting cautiously on a fishlike form.

On a curious biographical note, the painter is Alice Neel's granddaughter – though possibly Cecily Brown would be a more pertinent artist to mention when critically considering Elizabeth Neel's painting. Brown certainly paved the way for artists born in the mid-to-late 1970s who chose to take up the violent brushstrokes connected to action painting's macho past. Neel escapes Brown's shadow, however, by avoiding those explicit depictions of sex that made the British artist famous and allowing for more breathing room by not filling her pictures with unnecessary paint. So one is able to make associations with sexuality in a work like *Love Canal* (2009), but may in addition consider how the themes of sex, love, beauty and mortality are approached differently through the floral motifs present in a number of other works in the show, all of which evoke the affecting tradition of *vanitas* painting.

Most of these smaller-scale *vanitas* works play with a figure-ground relationship wherein the floral theme emerges from liquid paint. A larger version, titled *American Standard* (2009), is nevertheless the strongest of the series. The image resembles a still life, a floral bouquet executed with strong blacks complemented by pinks, greens and turquoise. The painting's title, in combination with the still-life theme, could reference any number of things, but gives the impression of ironically playing on the idea of normal, garden-variety abstraction or even provincial local-gallery floral favourites. Neel, though, is no Sunday painter, and with this exhibition she succeeds in convincing one that emotional sincerity is still worth exploring through the sumptuousness of paint. *Andrew Smaldone*

Elizabeth Neel

Monica De Cardenas Galleria, Milan
15 September – 14 November