

ELIZABETH NEEL



The talent gene seems more prevalent among actor 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's obsessed 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, *The Feature*, co-directed with Andrew Neel, received the New Vision Award at the Copenhagen film festival in November 2008.*