

Elizabeth Neel Interview with Sheryl Nonneburg June 2006

-In every essay I try to have bio info, info on style and technique and specifics about the piece.

--We have to, of course, speak of your grandmother. What influence did she have on your decision to become an artist? Did you ever try portraiture...or is this a genre you avoid?

EN: Alice was a great inspiration in terms of her work and her character. I drew precociously as a very young child and she was extremely supportive of that. Although I was aware that she had suffered a great deal in her life as a consequence of her choice to be an artist, her achievement in a male dominated field made me sure that anything was possible if I put my mind to it. In terms of the work itself: The freshness and immediacy of Alice's paintings is something I really respect. I made paintings of people in art school during figure classes. This was a great way to learn how to understand space and color – but portraiture never seemed like the best way to represent my own experience of the world. I am fascinated by cultural history in a state of ambiguity, motion and change and not so much interested in exploring the psychology of the individual.

--You studied history at Brown, how does that affect, inform your work?

EN: I went to Brown because I wanted to study a wide range of intellectual subject matter. Although I went on to a studio program at The Museum School after college, majoring in Medieval European History and studying Science at Brown proved essential to my artistic practice. Learning to dissect, construct and invent narratives within a variety of contexts and subjectivities helped me make work that continues to do this on a visual level.

--What causes you to stop and consider certain images from the Internet; is it just the imagery or the story behind the picture?

EN: The Internet has changed the way we access information about our culture. Never before have people been able to consume so many disparate images and texts so quickly. In the process of looking and sifting through this material, I generate energy to make my work. My activity has a pseudoscientific feel – I think of it as an ongoing excavation. I often combine elements from several images – even things that are ostensibly unrelated. Anonymous images are most interesting to me because they are the least over-determined. Certain images are perplexing or provoke uneasiness in me and that makes me want to work with them. Sometimes the “story” or subject matter from the sources will

pervade throughout the painting process and other times only the palette from a photo will survive in the finished work.

--A lot has been written about you and other young artists paying homage to the Abstract Expressionists - what do you think about that? Is there a particular artist of that movement who speaks to you?

EN: I never really had any particular interest in Abstract Expressionism as a movement though I like certain painters that are considered part of it. I always felt that gesture and immediacy had been unfairly termed "macho" by association with this group label. It seemed odd to me that a drip or splatter would be any more coded to the masculine or to the transcendent than to the abject or to the humorous. Guston's awareness of the absurd is more interesting to me than DeKooning's pure virtuosity for example. I want to work in a space where I can engage with Art History while, at the same time, re orient it. My paintings are as much the result of observation as any purely internal condition. I feel as much kinship with representation as abstraction and I often find the distinction between them to be academic. I tend to look at artists that incorporate narrative, space and motion in rigorous ways – Paul Pfeiffer, Isa Genzken, Bacon, Degas, Delacroix, Carravaggio...but I look at a huge variety of artists in all different media.

--Please tell me the specifics about Sapper's Breach...source...what you wanted to convey. There is a lot of movement, action, even speed in the painting...it's almost dizzying.

EN: I painted Sapper's Breach from two different sets of images. I collected several pictures from the Gold Rush period, specifically from the Dead Horse Trail. The ruthless ambition, greed and courage of these desperate searchers seemed wonderfully American to me and I wanted to tap into this material. I also used images from European trench warfare, mainly from WWI. A Sapper is someone who places and wires explosives to destroy enemy defenses or otherwise gain advantage in combat – So Sapper's Breach refers to an opening or break created by such a person. Manifest Destiny and modern combat are dizzying both in terms of action and moral implication.

--What is it about working in oil that you enjoy?

EN: Oil painting has a long History and being part of that lineage is exciting. Oils are very malleable but also extremely difficult. I like the challenge and I like the effects that are possible. I use Acrylics on paper and they are great for making archival drawings, but on canvas, I prefer Oils.

--Making videos offers a completely different means of expression, I would

think.

Do you plan to continue working in both media?

EN: I like making video because it supplies a different perspective on my intellectual interests. Investigating cultural history with a time based medium feeds my painting practice and vice versa. I am making videos in an ongoing collaboration with my brother who is a filmmaker. Digital video is a very painterly, flexible medium and it is a great meeting point between painting and film. My painting and video practice complement one another though they don't resemble one another in a strictly formal sense.