The good painter must depict two principal things,” said Leonardo da Vinci, “man, and the concept of his mind.” Modern artists are exhaustively depicting the latter while largely ignoring the former. Outside of professional portraitists, who provide a service rather than create art, the portrait has almost disappeared among serious contemporary painters. Instead, the camera and photojournalism provide those quick-frozen images which tell modernds what they look like in the spasmodic rhythms of their lives.

In this situation, portraitist Alice Neel is like an old pagan priestess somehow overlooked in the triumph of a new religion. Indeed, with her shrewdly cherubic face, her witty and wizard eyes, she has the mischievous look of a maternal witch whose only harm lies in her compulsion to tell the truth. . . . Neel’s painted truths have made her magnificently unfashionable in the art marts, and the most powerfully original portrait painter of her time.

Neel’s new show at New York’s Graham Gallery makes an extraordinary impression. The walls are alive with people—not “real people,” but art-people, humans caught in the torrid, temperate and frigid zones of their passage through the human span. “It smells of mortality,” says Shakespeare’s Lear of his own flesh, and Alice Neel’s portraits strike all the senses with the superbly scary impact of mortality. She is uncanny at bodying forth the history of compromise, surrender and curdled victory that is written in the flesh of human beings.

Her “Human Comedy,” as she calls it, is thus a symphony of victimizations—except for children, whom she paints masterfully in their wary sweetness. Here are bitter kids from Spanish Harlem, slightly hysterical, cozily shrill ladies, millionaire art collectors wearing luck like cologne. She is wonderful with Negroes, capturing the condensed rainbow of color hidden in their flesh—here is Abdul [Rahman], a cabdriver and Black Muslim, amused by his own charade of kingliness in fez and robe; and former CORE director James Farmer, tight, controlled, efficient, with the thoughtful anger of the professional problem solver.

Neel is the heir of the European expressionist painters who saw modern man distorted by unmistakable demons. But the weather in her world is not depressing; it shows deep affection for the hard work the ego must do to find reasons for comfort and self-love.

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