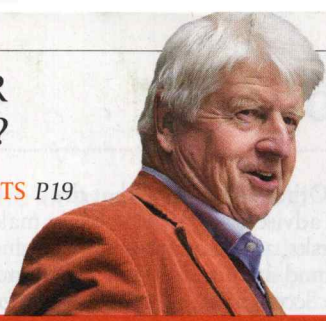


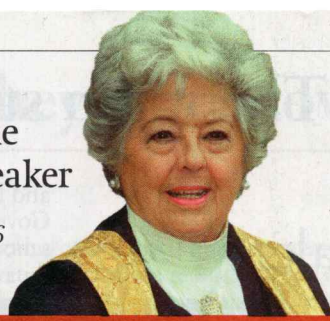
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11 MARCH 2023 | ISSUE 1426 | £4.99

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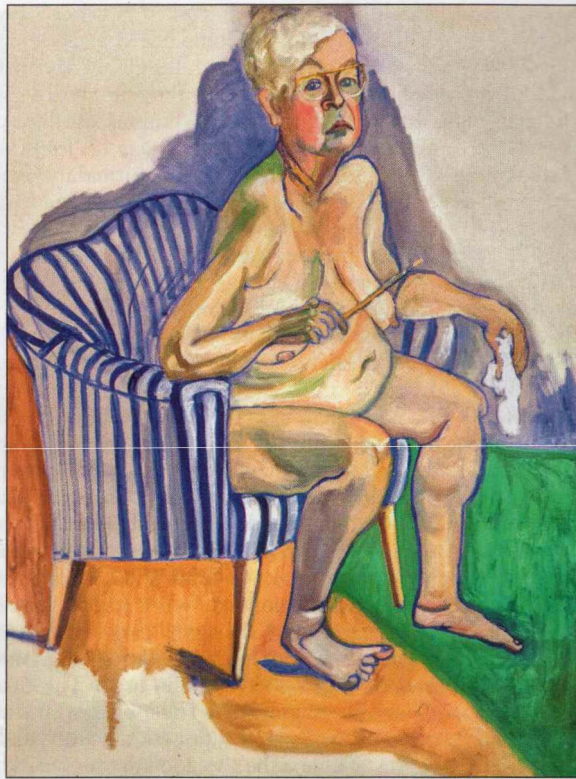
theweek.co.uk

Exhibition of the week **Alice Neel: Hot Off the Griddle**

Barbican Art Gallery, London EC1 (020-7870 2500, barbican.org.uk). Until 21 May

The painter Alice Neel was neglected in her lifetime, but is today “celebrated for her unflinching yet compassionate gaze”, said Chloë Ashby in *The Times*. Born into a conservative family in Pennsylvania, Neel (1900-1984) rejected her roots, married a Cuban émigré and became a committed communist, living a bohemian existence in New York’s Spanish Harlem. She specialised in “candid and unconventional” portraits of “lovers and neighbours, heavily pregnant women, queer couples, artists and writers, black intellectuals” – looking beyond the conventions of portraiture to focus on figures marginalised on account of their sexuality, race or class. “Life itself, unvarnished and fresh – hot off the griddle, she called it.” Neel was painting while abstraction was in its heyday, and she was ignored for much of her career. In recent decades, however, her eccentric figurative work has won her cult status – and as this thrilling survey at the Barbican demonstrates, the attention is well-deserved. Bringing together 70 paintings from every stage of Neel’s long career, the show is a testament to her genius for capturing not just “outward appearances but inner lives”. It is a “momentous” exhibition.

Neel was not out to flatter, said Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph*. The first thing we see is a striking self-portrait she painted at the age of 80, in which she “presents herself as a grandmotherly, bespectacled lady with white hair, sitting



Self Portrait (1980): “candid and unconventional”

naked, while holding a brush”. She captures her “drooping breasts and wobbly tummy”, her hand “seemingly gangrenous”. It’s a work typical of her matter-of-fact approach. Yet while there is much that is admirable about Neel’s work, it’s hard to get past its fundamental “weaknesses”. She was “terrible” at painting hands, and had an annoying tendency to make her subjects’ heads “disproportionately large”. Some of these portraits are plain bad: she really “drops the ball” in a “marionette-like” portrait of Andy Warhol’s assistant Gerard Malanga, while a “horrid” likeness of the poet Frank O’Hara is “an abortive piece of painting”.

Neel’s style is certainly “ungainly”, said Laura Cumming in *The Observer*. Yet to criticise her work for lacking “correctness of proportion” or photorealistic accuracy is to miss the point. Her paintings are near to caricature, but much odder: they speak to the “weird” coexistence of our minds and our bodies. A “notorious” 1933 painting of the “wildly eccentric writer” Joe Gould has him surrounded by “tiers of male genitals”; her lover John Rothschild is “seen peeing in the sink” as he examines a “wriggling critter” in the palm of his hand. Elsewhere, Warhol himself is memorably depicted half-naked shortly after a 1968 attempt on his life, in a surgical truss. Overall, this is a “terrific” show that captures Neel’s tremendous “force of personality”.

Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

Kathryn Maple

at Lyndsey Ingram

In 2022, the London-based artist Kathryn Maple set herself the Stakhanovite challenge of completing a new drawing every single day of the year. The result – *A Year of Drawings* – is an impressive body of work, consisting of 365 oil pastels on paper with a handful of paintings thrown in for good measure. The works are representational, expressionistic depictions of Maple’s year, a kind of travelogue documenting the places around her area and the gradual changes they undergo as the seasons pass. January sees her gazing from an upstairs window at bare trees, the street illuminated by the eerie glow of old streetlamps; by May, she is exploiting the spring weather to sketch the skyscrapers over the river at Canary



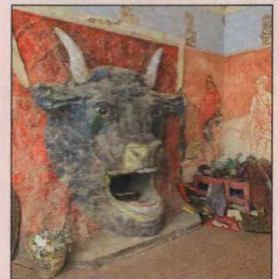
7/6/22 (oil pastel on paper, detail)

Wharf; in December, she captures both turbulent winter skies and a bohemian living room glimpsed through a window, the space cut up by the slats of its blinds. It’s deeply compelling stuff, personal without ever lapsing into sentimentality. Prices range from £500 to £1,000.

20 Bourdon Street, London W1 (020-7629 8849). Until 22 March

How Ron’s Place was saved

Over three decades, Ron Gittins created “an extraordinary palace of outsider art” in his ground-floor flat in Birkenhead, says Mark Brown in *The Guardian*. Gittins, a self-employed artist



who suffered mental health problems and died in 2019, painted classical murals on his walls, and installed a fireplace shaped like a minotaur (pictured). The hallway looks like an Egyptian tomb; the front room appears to be inspired by Pompeii; and in the kitchen sits what seems to be a Roman altar. Gittins “rarely invited anyone in”, so the discovery of the flat’s interior after his death “was a surprise, to say the least”. Local campaigners had hoped to open Ron’s Place, as it’s known, to the public, but when the house was recently put up for auction, it was feared it might be stripped of its art. Last week, though, they received a loan from a benefactor, the Muller Wimhurst Trust, and were able to buy the whole building for £335,000. It will be used as a cultural and community space.