ALICE NEEL’S SOIRÉE

(After an Alice Neel Exhibition)

She greets us at the top of the stairs, not nude but naked, her flesh bulking forward as she heaves herself up from the striped chair. Her cheeks are pink but she’s not blushing. Unashamed of her Mother Hubbard body, she looks right at us through the only thing she’s wearing (glasses) as she invites us to take off our clothes.

We feel a little square for not complying until we see that most of the other guests are dressed, although a good third are wandering around in the buff, including a bemused and foul-smelling fellow who seems to have a couple of extra penises strapped to his pelvis and claims to be writing an oral history of the universe.

It’s an odd mix: curators, artists, family, neighbors, street people, transvestites, and one Fuller Brush Man with a boyish chipmunkly look, whose blue bow tie matches his eyes. He’s got a few samples in his breast pocket, and as he pulls one out I notice the numbers tattooed to his wrist. Nearby, someone clearly crazy, with scarlet ears, writhes in an armchair, snarling. I give him a wide berth. There are a few big names: Warhol appears to be meditating with his shirt off, his serene expression a sharp contrast with the long scars that crisscross his abdomen below his woman’s breasts. There’s Meyer Schapiro, wrinkled down to his eyelids but still lively. And there’s
the porn star Annie Sprinkle, sporting, among other accoutrements, a padlock in her vagina.

I hear someone say Allen Ginsberg might show up. Meanwhile, I keep almost recognizing people then blurting the wrong names, but most of them don’t seem to mind—except for one, a curator from the Met, who gets bitchy when I ask if he’s Truman Capote. The Wall Street tycoon (face shadowed with green) looks a little like Harold Bloom.

Alice waddles through the room, holding a paintbrush like a wand, or as if she were the nonchalant conductor of this human symphony. She’s put on a blue dress: “I was beginning to feel like so much meat,” she says to a woman wearing nothing but a huge blue hat and pink panties. “But you of course are a glorious creature.”

Then I see Frank O’Hara from across the room, his nose in profile like a small cliff, unmistakable, his eyes wide in a blue trance and the lilacs behind him seeming to crown his head, and I rush over to him as to an old friend and tell him how much I’ve always wanted to meet him, and when he turns toward me I’m not sure if he’s smiling or grimacing until he says, “Well, what on earth has taken you so long?”

- Jeffrey Harrison