

## NEL AERTS

### *Lord Nelson's Portrait Gallery*

Jokey and cheeky, but not really

5<sup>th</sup> September – 4<sup>th</sup> October 2014

We find ourselves at a gaudy gathering of colourful, comic figures, invited and immortalized as portrait-like pictures by Lady Nel Aerts.

*Herr Dino, Ritter der Nacht* opens the circle.

I implore you to take that grin off your face, thinks *Mr. Bow Tie*, the begging bubblehead on the other side of the room. The figure of the night cries his heart out. Like a punctured balloon he ascends into a cloud-filled blackness. His crocodile tears and bow tie steal the show, but mostly they invoke compassion. Other silently sobbing snivellers observe him from a lonely corner. Sculptural tears enclose them, whisper salty nothings into their ears. One-eye stands stiff as a board, taking it all in. Cross-eye with the curly wig cannot see beyond the end of his neck. The genie is trapped inside the bottle, floating on the water like a wobbly jellyfish. The sky opens up for the sailor on watch. He hopes yet to steer this fleet of frecklefaces, hammerheads and stiffnecks into the right direction. With fields of clouds, ice cream scoops, rain showers and crying fits drifting by on the horizon. Sluggishly they undergo their fate, floating like driftwood on the waves of their own carved-out and etched-on temperament. Certain 'head shapes' originate from many layers of rough incisions, reminiscent of scars or wrinkles. Other figures coincide with clearly delineated pastel colours, with the occasional dull opaque for skin. Such is the case for the *Queen of the Purple Dead*, with her proper hair and proper collar, posing in her Sunday dress. Another one greedily gobbles up the lilac-coloured clouds. The ice-cream man will irrevocably melt. Three slushy syrupy scoops trail down his pockmarked face. These figures like to spy on their neighbours whenever they can, and discreetly call each other names like blabbermouth, cry-baby, roughneck, woodenhead or worse, windbag, flapdoodle, slimeball, stinkpot, numbskull and so on.

Together they form a 17-headed company of abstracted still-life subjects, staring at us at eye level. The blubbery 'head shapes', attached to stick or serpentine-like forms, suggest humanity. These pictorial building blocks have been carefully constructed, though they always remain equally simple and expressive in their shapes and colours. The formal fullness of the composition simultaneously feels flat and primitive. This play with extremes serves the expression of poetic ideas and complex moods.

A recurring motif is the helplessness that causes the figures to remain immobile, nailed to the wood. They are not capable of acting, only of observing. They reflect the tension, the awkwardness even, which developed in the studio between the portrait-painter and her subject. Female, male, or genderless, their facial expressions mimic their own conflicted inner lives, and that of the painter by extension. They pose head-on before an undetermined background. A tear-stained or patterned colour field, for example, in which the figure is left behind in solitude. Even though they share a certain history and a similar fate, they present themselves as individuals, gathered here together for this one-time occasion. What would they want to say to each other and to us?

They are tragicomic in all the contrasts they cry out. Digging, sometimes protesting, the portraits came crawling out of the wood. Some of them are more extroverted than introverted, they scream rather than remain inert. Yet they are introspective and self-deprecating. This collection of portraits provokes deep, subjective doubts - a smile, a smirk, a watery eye. A 21<sup>st</sup> century portrait room filled with humour, light-hearted mockery and anguish.

Liene Aerts

Nel Aerts (b. 1987) studied at Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent (KASK) from 2005-2009. She lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium. Recent solo exhibitions include Castillo/Corrales, Paris (2014); Galleri Specta, Copenhagen (2014); Frankendael Foundation, Amsterdam (2013); Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2013) and Galerie VidalCuglietta, Brussels (2012). Group shows include Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (2014); Kunsthall Kade, Amersfoort (2014); Junior Projects, New York (2014); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2013); Be-Part, Waregem (2013); WIELS, Brussels, (2012); Kunstraum, London (2012); De Garage, Mechelen (2011) and S.M.A.K., Ghent (2009). This is her first solo show at the gallery.

The exhibition will be open from Tuesday – Friday 11 – 6 pm and Saturday 12 – 6 pm, otherwise by appointment. For images and further information please contact the gallery on 020 7684 8890, or email [info@carlfreedman.com](mailto:info@carlfreedman.com)