Alice Neel: People Come First—A major retrospective of the American painter

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Alice Neel: People Come First, *exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, March 22–August 1, 2021*

Nearly four decades after her death, American painter Alice Neel (1900-1984) has received the major museum retrospective she has long deserved, *Alice Neel: People Come First*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Neel painted over the course of six decades, for the most part, until the last 20 years of her life, in relative obscurity. Her vibrant, idiosyncratic portraits are characterized above all by their candor and keen observation, which were at times unflattering but rarely without insight.

Neel's "Human Comedy," as she thought of her work, was conceived along the lines of French novelist Honoré de Balzac's series of interconnected novels (1829–1848) by that title, which depicted every social class. Through choosing sitters among bohemians in Greenwich Village, the working class in Spanish Harlem, labor activists and Communist Party leaders of the 1940s and '50s and art world figures of the 1960s and '70s, Neel aimed to give a representative portrait of American society in her era.

The most powerful aspect of her paintings, however, tends not to be their representative, but their original quality. Her nudes of pregnant women, in particular, are unprecedented in the history of art. Though pregnant women are obviously a fact of life, their presence for the most part either has gone unnoticed or been ignored in art. So to be confronted, for instance, by Neel's *Margaret Evans Pregnant* (1979), whose subject gazes wide-eyed and grips the too-small taboret upon which she balances with a belly that seems to have taken over her entire frame, is quite unusual. Neel's best work has this quality of looking at everyday life anew.

"I tried to capture life as it went by—art records so much, the feeling, the beliefs, the changes," Neel wrote. "One of the reasons I painted was to catch light as it goes by, right hot off the griddle. Now that doesn't mean that the work has to tell *about* your life, I mean it can be abstract or anything, but the vitality is taken out of *real living.*"

The Met exhibition organizes Neel's work into themes: New York City, Home, Counter/Culture, The Human Comedy, Art As History, Motherhood, the Nude, and Good Abstract Qualities. Helpful to a certain extent, this choice of organization by theme at times jumbles Neel's work, making it more difficult to discern the overall trajectory of her artistic effort and its development in historically specific phases. Nevertheless, the show is an excellent opportunity to see all aspects of Neel's work, from the lesser known watercolors of private moments with lovers, paintings of her children with herself at the easel mirrored in the background, cityscapes from her apartment window, along with the portraits painted in the 1960s and '70s for which she finally achieved recognition.

Born in 1900, Neel was aware as an adult that her own life spanned a turbulent century, and one can see her life and work developing in sync with it in several phases. As a young woman in the 1920s, she rejected the conventional expectations of her middle-class family in the small town of Colwyn, Pennsylvania, to do the only thing she wanted to do, which was to paint by enrolling at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art and Design) in 1921. She then plunged into Havana's burgeoning avant-garde art scene in the late 1920s with fellow artist Carlos Enríquez, the scion of a wealthy Cuban family, whom she met at a summer art workshop and eventually married.

However, upon the couple's return to Greenwich Village, the brutal reality of bohemian poverty resulted in the death of her first child from diphtheria. The desertion of Enríquez and his removal of the couple's second child to be better cared for by relatives back in Cuba led to suicide attempts on Neel's part and her hospitalization in 1930. These experiences give the *Well Baby Clinic* (1928-1929) and *Futility of Effort* (1930) a searing personal edge. The former, a cramped scene of frenzied mothers and squirming infants, looks more like an asylum than a place of well-being, while the Matisse-like simplicity of the latter starkly understates the trauma involved in a child's needless death from poverty.

While rooted in intensely private experience, Neel considered these works, along with others such as the spare drawing *Men from Bleecker Street* (1933) and *Investigation of Poverty at the Russell Sage Foundation* (1933), to have broader significance, reflecting the impact of the Great Depression on masses of middle- and working-class people. She herself developed left-wing views in the 1930s. *Futility of Effort* was reproduced under the name *Poverty* in 1936 in the left-wing periodical *Art Front* and exhibited in 1938 at ACA Galleries—dedicated to showing progressive political American art—alongside scenes of evictions and images of railroad workers and political activists.

In 1935, like many artists and intellectuals politically radicalized by the events of the decade, Neel joined the Communist Party USA. She also participated in the Works Progress Administration's easel division, which gave her, along with hundreds of other artists, a much-needed income in the depths of the Depression, in exchange for which she turned in a painting every six weeks. In *Synthesis of New York–The Great Depression* (1933) and *Ninth Avenue El* (1935), skeletal figures walk under subway tracks and huddle on street corners in grim cityscapes that reflect the influence of both Surrealism and German Expressionism.

In this period, Neel combined making art with political activity in the CP-dominated John Reed Clubs and in the Artists Union. She took part in demonstrations against fascism,which became the subjects of paintings such as *Nazis Murder Jews* (1936), in which a torch-lit procession of workers carry Communist Party banners.

And she painted portraits of the labor organizers and Communist Party figures she met, among them Pat Whalen, who led East Coast seamen in a 1934-35 strike. In Neel's portrait, Whalen is shown with his fists clenched determinedly on a copy of the *Daily Worker*.He became part of the gallery of what Neel took to be proletarian leaders, left-wing artists and intellectuals, which grew to include Max White (1935) who wrote novels inspired by artists' lives, both real and imagined, and her close friend

Phillip Bonosky (painted in 1948), novelist and eventually cultural editor and Moscow correspondent for the Stalinist *Daily World*.

A burning objective contradiction existed between Neel's attachment to (and continued membership in) the CPUSA, on the one hand, and her sympathy for and allegiance to the working class, which Stalinism repeatedly and tragically betrayed, on the other. The Moscow Trials, in which the Bolshevik leaders of the Russian Revolution were executed in the Great Terror; the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939; and the murder of the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky, in Mexico in 1940 led many artists and intellectuals to leave the party, in many cases renouncing left-wing politics altogether. A few, like Lee Krasner, artist and the wife of Jackson Pollock, allied themselves with Trotsky and the Left Opposition, but then only briefly.

Neel moved with her lover,the Puerto Rican musician and nightclub entertainer José Santiago Negrón, to Spanish Harlem in 1939. Though the relationship with Negrón did not last long, she would live and raise their son Richard and her second son Hartley by Sam Brody, a founder of the leftist Workers Film and Photo League, in the same apartment for the next 20 years.

Neel continued to paint in a social realist vein, refusing to abandon what she called the humanism of the human figure in favor of abstraction, which placed her outside the mainstream art world. Her best work from the period, such as *T.B. Harlem* (1940) and *The Spanish Family* (1943), balance personal specificity—in both cases, the subjects, though unnamed, are her in-laws—with social commentary. In the latter work, her weary sister-in-law holds the family unit together, as does the intertwined iron grill-work behind them, while the three children with their thin arms and sad, inquisitive or side-glancing eyes seem to pull in different directions. The former, of her brother-in-law in his hospital bed after a lung operation for tuberculosis, a prevalent disease in sections of Harlem at the time, resembles that of a Christian saint.

By the end of the 1940s, Neel increasingly asked neighbors, and children in particular, to sit for her, a practice that would become central to her later work. In *Puerto Rican Girl on a Chair* (1949), *Two Girls, Spanish Harlem* (1959) and her portraits of Georgie Arce, whom she painted on multiple occasions, she honed her skill at communicating what she observed of the sitter together with a sense of how the sitter wanted to be seen. So, for instance, in *Georgie Arce No. 2* (1955), the intent-looking young man tries out a defiant, knife-brandishing pose that may, or may not, be play-acting.

The CPUSA, weakened and discredited by decades of slavish support for Stalin's crimes, as well as innumerable betrayals of American workers, was shattered in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech," lifting the lid on Stalin's monstrous crimes, and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. The party lost thousands of members and was reduced to a bureaucratic shell. Neel maintained affiliation with the party into the 1960s, perhaps out of misplaced loyalty in part and also due to her personal ties with CP leaders like Bonosky and Mike Gold (1894-1967), the leading proponent of the anti-Marxist "proletarian literature." Neel painted a portrait of Gold, a staunch Stalinist, in 1952.

By the 1960s and '70s, Neel's change in subject matter reflected the general drift of a generation of radicals toward Castroism, black nationalism and feminism. Now in her 60s and 70s, Neel enjoyed a late career blossoming. Ever the bohemian, despite her grandmotherly appearance, she shocked the conventional and even the hip-minded with her frank outspokenness. For a time, she was a darling of the underground art scene around Andy Warhol. She painted the latter looking beatific with eyes closed and baring his scarred and bandaged torso after the attempted murder by unhinged, knife-wielding feminist Valerie Solano.

Neel continued to paint her remarkable portraits. Irene Peslikis, the feminist activist, for example, sprawls confidently in a chair, even though the painting is given the rather slighting title of *Marxist Girl* (1972). She did portraits of self-styled Black Muslim nationalist *Abdul Rahman* (1964), along with Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leader and ally of Martin Luther King Jr., *James Farmer* (1964).Neel was among the first to paint openly homosexual, transgender and interracial couples. In addition to pregnant women, she painted men reclining as odalisques and power couples in the nude. As she continued through the 1970s, her palette became more colorful, her handling of the figures and compositions even more competent and selective.

Neel also painted portraits of many prominent feminist activists and intellectuals, from Kate Millett for the cover of *Time* magazine to critic and art historian Linda Nochlin, whose 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" examined the institutional barriers faced by women artists. Neel herself served as a case in point at demonstrations against the Museum of Modern Art for not including more women artists, although one suspects that official reservations about Neel had more to do with her politics and realist style than her gender.

The Metropolitan exhibition's curators and critics, unfortunately but predictably, have seized upon the racial, sexual and gender diversity of her subjects to make it seem that Neel was an early proponent of identity politics, a politics with which, in her lifetime, she explicitly disagreed. Ever willing to discomfit her feminist advocates, an uncomfortable fact that the current show's curators seek to avoid, Neel insisted that "injustice has no sex, and one of the primary motives of my work was to reveal the inequalities and pressures as shown in the psychology of the people I painted."

Neel was caught up, like many left-wing members of her generation, in the political disorientation and tragedy produced by the crimes and treachery of Stalinism. In her intimate art work, however, she maintained a ruthless and attractive honesty. Her most insightful portraits remain those of family members, like *Hartley* (1963), *Richard in the Era of the Corporation* (1978-79) and the several portraits of her daughter-in-law, Nancy. In one, from 1971, the younger woman is pregnant and, in another, *Nancy and the Twins* (1971), her subject opens her blouse to nurse two substantial infants, a work again quite unprecedented in its frankness about motherhood.

Culminating in her nude self-portrait at the age of eighty, Neel's sharp-eyed, unconventional engagement with her world and times, predicated on a basic hostility to capitalism and a life-long allegiance to the downtrodden, enabled her to realize what she set out to achieve in her work, namely that "the vitality is taken out of *real living.*"