

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## *Alice Neel: Hot Off The Griddle*

Barbican Art Gallery, London

16 February – 21 May 2023

Media View: Wednesday 15 February 2023, 10am – 1pm

[www.barbican.org.uk/AliceNeel](http://www.barbican.org.uk/AliceNeel) #AliceNeel @barbicancentre

*This exhibition was made possible with Art Fund support.*



L: *Alice Neel at the age of 29, 1929*. R: *Self-Portrait, 1980*  
 © The Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel

*‘One of the reasons I painted was to catch life as it goes by, right hot off the griddle... the vitality is taken out of real living’*

*Alice Neel: Hot Off The Griddle* is the largest exhibition to date in the UK of the work of American artist Alice Neel (1900–1984). Based predominantly in New York, Neel painted figuratively during a period in which it was deeply unfashionable to do so. She persisted with her distinctive, expressionistic style, even though it meant that for most of her life she lacked material comfort, let alone critical recognition. Crowned the ‘court painter of the underground,’ Neel chose to portray individuals who were not typically the subjects of painting – pregnant women, Black intellectuals, labour leaders, neighbourhood children and queer couples – retaliating against exclusionary histories. Each of her paintings radiates with her sense of the humanity and dignity of each subject.

Drawing on international public and private collections, *Alice Neel: Hot Off The Griddle* brings together works spanning her 60-year career. Neel’s vibrant portraits are shown alongside archival material from the time, including photography, letters and film. The exhibition sets her work amid her shifting cultural context, from the formative year she spent in Havana in 1925 with her husband, the Cuban artist Carlos Enríquez, to Spanish Harlem, where she made her home for much of the 1940s and 50s. Largely unrecognised for her work in the last century, Neel has since come to be championed for the candour with which she looked at the world. This exhibition highlights Neel’s understanding of the politics of seeing and what it means to feel seen; organised in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou Paris, it opens at Barbican Art Gallery on 16 February 2023.

**Will Gompertz, Barbican Artistic Director**, said: “*We are delighted to present Alice Neel: Hot Off The Griddle. A radical, creative artist undervalued for much of her six-decade career, Neel dedicated her life to producing vital, revealing portraits of New York’s bohemian scene. Remarkably, her work has been little seen in the UK, making this a wonderfully exciting opportunity for visitors here to experience the extraordinary power of her work.*”

Born in Colwyn, Pennsylvania, Alice Neel enrolled at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women in 1921 where she decided she had just what it took to be a good artist: ‘hypersensitivity and the will of the devil.’ Following a breakdown in 1930, making art became central to Neel’s

recovery. Her youngest daughter had died of diphtheria and Enríques had taken their second, Isabetta, to live with his family in Havana. In 1931, Neel moved to Greenwich village, where she painted the bohemian spirit that prevailed. She depicted scenes of startling intimacy, considered shocking at the time. Works include a portrait of her friend and writer **Joe Gould**, featuring multiple tiers of genitalia – a painting so scandalous it was not publicly exhibited until four decades after it was made – as well as a humorous scene of Neel with her lover **John Rothschild** in the bathroom, both stark naked, one peeing in the toilet, the other into the sink.

The exhibition charts Neel's painting during the Great Depression, when she became one of the first artists to enrol on the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Her experiences during this time consolidated her desire to bear witness to the hardship of life as experienced by most Americans. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Neel's own existence was financially precarious, and she was reliant on government welfare to support her and her two sons. She focused her energy on making portraits of neighbours and friends which are remarkable for their depth of empathy, as she set out to 'reveal the inequalities and pressures as shown in the psychology of the people I painted'.

A self-described 'anarchic humanist', Neel was a member of the US Communist Party from 1935 and remained committed to left-wing politics throughout her life. Her eclectic line-up of portraits from this era includes many figures whom she admired for their political commitments: from the Marxist filmmaker **Sam Brody**, who became her partner and the father of her son Hartley, to the communist intellectual **Harold Cruse**. In an age dominated by abstraction, Neel's decision to paint people was political – and she sought out subjects who shared her desire to restore humanity to all individuals, regardless of their race, class, or gender.

In 1959, Neel featured in the short film *Pull My Daisy*, which marked a critical juncture in her career, as she began to mix with a wider circle of artists and became an increasingly beloved figure among New York's community of artists. This widely celebrated Beat film was directed by **Robert Frank** and **Alfred Leslie** and features an improvised narrative by **Jack Kerouac**. It is shown in full in the exhibition.

The downstairs galleries at the Barbican are dedicated to highlights of Neel's later portrait paintings from the 1960s and 1970s, when she made some of her most celebrated work. Neel invited her subjects into her studio, at this time the bay window of her living room in her apartment at 300 West 107th Street. Her sitters included poet **Frank O'Hara** (1960), then a curator at the Museum of Modern Art; artist **Benny Andrews** and his partner **Mary Ellen Andrews** (1972); **Jackie Curtis** (1972), the actor and star of Warhol's Factory; and the performance artist and sex activist **Annie Sprinkle** (1982). The Barbican exhibition also includes her only full-sized self-portrait, completed when Neel turned 80. The painting took five years to finish because, in her own words, 'it was so damned hard.' Rallying against the history of the female nude, in which young women are typically posed as eroticized objects, Neel presents her aging body in all its glory.

## ENDS

### Notes to Editors

#### Press Information

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#### Press images available online from the Barbican Press room

A link to the image sheets can be found in the 'Downloads' box on the top right-hand side of the page from <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/alice-neel-hot-off-the-griddle>

## Barbican Press room

All Barbican Centre press releases, news announcements and the Communication team's contact details are listed on our website at [www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/](http://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/)

## Press Tickets

All press tickets can be booked 48 hours in advance by contacting a member of the Barbican's Visual Arts Press team. You will be unable to enter without a pre-booked ticket so please do get in touch prior to your visit – the inbox is monitored weekdays 10am-6pm. Please let us know if you have any access requirements. We look forward to welcoming you to the Barbican.

## Public Information

Barbican Art Gallery, Barbican Centre  
Silk Street, London, EC2Y 8DS  
[barbican.org.uk](http://barbican.org.uk)

Tickets available on the Barbican website <https://www.barbican.org.uk/AliceNeel>

## Opening Hours

Sunday – Wednesday 10am - 6pm (last entry 5pm)  
Thursday - Saturday 10am - 8pm (last entry 7pm)  
Bank holidays: Please check the website as opening times vary

## Exhibition

*Alice Neel: Hot Off The Griddle* is at Barbican Art Gallery from 16 February – 21 May 2023. The exhibition is curated by Eleanor Nairne, assisted by Andrew de Brún and Annabel Bai Jackson, and designed by Gatti Routh Rhodes with graphic design by Wolfe Hall. This exhibition was made possible with Art Fund support.

The exhibition will tour to Munch, Oslo, from 2 September – 26 November 2023, for more information visit: <https://www.munchmuseet.no/om-oss/kontakt/>

## Events

A dynamic programme of events will accompany the exhibition. Check the website for full listings as they are updated: <http://www.barbican.org.uk/artgallery>

## Book

A richly illustrated book *Alice Neel: Hot Off The Griddle*, edited by Eleanor Nairne, with essays by Eleanor Nairne, Hilton Als and poetry by Daisy Lafarge, accompanies the exhibition and is published by Prestel, March 2023. £24.99 hardback (Barbican shop price £15.00). ISBN: 978-3-7913-7966-1.

For press information about the book, please contact Kate Burvill PR, [kateburvill@googlemail.com](mailto:kateburvill@googlemail.com)

## Barbican Art Gallery Shop

A selection of exhibition merchandise will be available from the Gallery Shop: [www.barbican.org.uk/shop](http://www.barbican.org.uk/shop)

## About the Barbican

A world-class arts and learning organisation, the [Barbican](http://www.barbican.org.uk) pushes the boundaries of all major art forms including dance, film, music, theatre and visual arts. Its creative learning programme further underpins everything it does. Over a million people attend events annually, hundreds of artists and performers are featured, and more than 700 [staff](#) work onsite. The architecturally renowned centre opened in 1982 and comprises the Barbican Hall, the Barbican Theatre, The Pit, Cinemas 1, 2 and 3, Barbican Art Gallery, a second gallery The Curve, public spaces, a library, the Lakeside Terrace, [a glasshouse conservatory](#), conference facilities and three restaurants. The City of London Corporation is the founder and principal funder of the Barbican Centre.

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## **Barbican Art Gallery and The Curve**

Our visual arts programme embraces art, architecture, design, fashion, photography and film. Many of our exhibitions explore the interconnections between disciplines, periods and cultures, and aim to imagine the world in new ways. Designers, artists and architects are our collaborators in this process.

We invest in the artists of today and tomorrow; The Curve is one of the few galleries in London devoted to the commissioning of new work. Through our activities we aim to inspire more people to discover and love the arts. Entrance to The Curve is free. Through Young Barbican we offer £5 tickets to 14–25 year olds for our paid exhibitions, children under 14 attend for free.

Our exhibitions are complemented by comprehensively researched catalogues and a full range of public events. We develop engaging online content for audiences and offer special tours for schools. In partnership with renowned museums and art galleries, many of our exhibitions travel to reach both national and international audiences.

The Barbican believes in creating space for people and ideas to connect through its international arts programme, community events and learning activity. To keep its programme accessible to everyone, and to keep investing in the artists it works with, the Barbican needs to raise more than 60% of its income through ticket sales, commercial activities and fundraising every year. Donations can be made here: [www.barbican.org.uk/join-support/support-us/for-individuals/make-a-donation](http://www.barbican.org.uk/join-support/support-us/for-individuals/make-a-donation)