

Alice Neel

Hot Off The Griddle

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Introduction

Born on 28 January 1900, Alice Neel liked to say that she was just four weeks younger than the century. She studied in Philadelphia, where she discovered that she had exactly what she needed to be a good artist: 'hypersensitivity and the will of the devil'. These two strengths can be felt in the vivid portraits that have come to define her 60-year career: each radiates with her impression of the dignity and humanity of her sitters.

Working predominantly in New York, Neel painted figuratively during a period in which it was deeply unfashionable. And she chose to portray individuals who were not typically painted – including pregnant women, Black intellectuals, labour leaders, neighbourhood children and queer couples – retaliating against exclusionary histories. She was crowned the 'court painter of the underground' and persisted with her quirky, expressionistic style, even though it meant that for most of her life she lacked material comfort, let alone critical recognition.

This exhibition – the largest to date of Alice Neel in the UK – highlights her understanding of the fundamentally political nature of how we look at others, and what it is to feel seen. Neglected in the last century, Neel has come to be championed in our own for the searing candour with which she looked at the world. 'One of the reasons I painted was to catch life as it goes by,' she explained, 'right hot off the griddle ... the vitality is taken out of real living.'

*Alice Neel at
the age of 29, 1929*

Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel

Nancy Baer
Collector of Souls, 1978

Film, silent, 1 min, 40 secs (edited)
Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel

Exhibition continues upstairs

Telling It As It Is

Alice Neel was 80 when she finished her first painted self-portrait. It had taken her five years and her cheeks were flushed because 'it was so damned hard'. With characteristic irreverence, she chose to depict herself unapologetically naked. Perched on her favourite stripey blue chair, she assumes the role of both artist and sitter – neither of which would typically be expected of a woman in her eighties. Biting back against the history of the female nude, in which young women are posed as erotic objects, Neel presents us with her ageing body in all its glory.

When painting, Neel felt radically free from society's expectations and constraints. She described it as a space in which she could be 'completely and utterly myself. For that reason, it was extremely important to me. It was more than a profession. It was even a therapy, for there I just told it as it was.' In this self-portrait, she stares defiantly out at both herself (behind the easel) and at us (her imagined viewers), one eyebrow raised in a playful challenge to match her courage for looking – for telling it as it is.

Self-Portrait, 1980

Oil on canvas
National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution

Havana

Neel had grown up in a small, conservative town – Colwyn, Pennsylvania – that had little by way of culture. She knew from a very young age that she wanted to be an artist but remembered her mother telling her: ‘I don’t know what you expect to do in the world, Alice? You’re only a girl.’ In 1921, she enrolled at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, where she found ‘you could more or less paint as you wanted’, and in the summer of 1924 she went to the Chester Springs Summer School, where she met and fell in love with the Cuban artist Carlos Enríquez Gómez.

They married on 1 June 1925 and the following February went to live in Havana, which was Neel’s first trip abroad. Struck by the brilliant light and lush colour of her new surroundings, she made paintings of passers-by on the street, as well as an intimate portrait of Enríquez. These works show a strong affinity with Robert Henri, who had taught at the Philadelphia School many years earlier and whose book *The Art Spirit* (1923) Neel had taken with her to Cuba: ‘Paint what you feel,’ he insisted, ‘Paint what is real to you.’ In December 1926, Neel gave birth to a daughter, Santillana del Mar. The couple kept active in the modernist scene in Cuba, and when they exhibited side by side at the Salón de Bellas Artes in March 1927, the critics considered their work ‘a revelation’.

*Alice Neel and Carlos Enríquez
in Cuba, c.1926*

Photographer unknown
Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel

French Girl, 1920s

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

*Mother and Child,
Havana, 1926*

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Carlos Enríquez, 1926

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Carlos Enríquez was born in 1900 to one of the wealthiest families in Cuba (his father was doctor to President Gerardo Machado). He soon became disillusioned with his family's conservative attitudes – as they were with his bohemian ways. Machado declared: 'Well, doctor, your son is an insolent bastard, and if he doesn't leave Cuba on his own, and quickly, I'm going to throw him out!' In 1920, his family sent him to Philadelphia to study finance, but his heart was set on painting, so in 1924 he went to the Chester Springs Summer School. There he met Neel – only to be expelled, as she recalled, 'for doing not much more than taking walks with me'. After the pair married and moved to Havana, they painted constantly. When they returned to the US, they struggled with poverty and the death of their first child; their relationship dissolved soon after the birth of their second daughter, although they remained legally married for the rest of their lives. Enríquez went on to become a central figure in Cuba's Vanguardia movement.

*Beggars, Havana,
Cuba, 1926*

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

*Havana Cathedral,
Cuba, c.1920*

Photograph by Arnold Genthe

Greenwich Village

We are powerless. I can't bear that.
I hate to be powerless, so I live by myself and do
all these pictures, and I get an illusion of power.

In 1930, Neel had a nervous breakdown, which led to several periods in psychiatric hospitals. As she put it, 'I didn't do anything but fall apart and go to pieces.' Santillana had died of diphtheria just a month shy of her first birthday, and Enríquez had taken their second daughter, Isabetta, to live with his family in Havana. Making art became critical to Neel's recovery.

In 1931, she moved to an apartment at 33½ Cornelia Street, New York, where she painted the beatnik community amid the bohemian spirit that prevailed there. Neel was drawn to raw moments of intimacy, such as her friend the painter Ethel Ashton sitting naked on a bed looking up at her, or a humorous scene of Neel with her lover John Rothschild – one peeing into the toilet, the other into the sink. Her portrait of Joe Gould, a notorious Greenwich Village character, features multiple tiers of genitalia and was considered so scandalous that it was not publicly exhibited until four decades after it was finished.

Joe Gould, 1933

Oil on canvas
Private Collection, Switzerland

A Harvard graduate from a well-off family in Massachusetts, Joe Gould was a regular at the cafés, bars and parties of Greenwich Village. He claimed to be working on 'An Oral History of Our Time' that would capture 'the sermons of street preachers, shouts in the night, wild rumours and cries from the heart'. Neel was kind to Gould – she recalled how he would 'knock on the door and say, "Ship Ahoy!" And nobody let him in, but I felt sorry for him'. Here she paints him as a naked satyr with a comically inflated sense of virility. Neel knew how radical her portrait was, but even 30 years after its making, when she tried to include it in her 1962 solo exhibition at Reed College, Portland, it had to be hung in a janitor's closet to avoid controversy. Gould's writing was widely believed to be a myth, but in recent years the dime-store notebooks filled with his 'Oral History' came to light and have now been acquired by Harvard.

Bronx Bacchus, 1929

Oil on canvas on wood panel
Estate of Alice Neel

Nadya and Nona, 1933

Oil on board

FWA – Foundation for Woman Artists, Belgium

Nadya Olyanova was a handwriting analyst and close friend of Neel's who moved to New York from a small town near Kyiv. In 1931, after Neel left a psychiatric hospital, Olyanova had her come to stay in New Jersey; later, when Neel suffered a stillbirth in 1937, Olyanova wrote a tender reminder to Neel of her mother's wisdom: 'Alice don't get wreckless'. Olyanova had a weekly radio show where she examined listeners' handwriting. Looking at the way Neel wrote her 't's, she identified the 'compulsive drive of the creative artist'. Nona's identity is not entirely clear: one possibility is that the name is an alias, an anagram of 'Anon'. In her notebook, Neel wrote how, when a visitor mistakenly identified Nadya and Nona as a lesbian couple, Nona retorted: 'What nonsense, we each had at least 3 husbands.'

Ethel Ashton, 1930

Oil on canvas

Tate: Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of Hartley and Richard Neel, the artist's sons, 2012

Christopher Lazare, 1932

Watercolour and cut and pasted paper
Estate of Alice Neel

Kenneth Doolittle, 1932

Graphite on paper
Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner

When Neel was staying with Nadya Olyanova in New Jersey, she met a charming, red-haired sailor called Kenneth Doolittle. Together they discussed society and politics and he would serenade her with workers' songs on the banjo. The two became lovers and in 1932 they moved together to Greenwich Village, where Doolittle introduced Neel to members of the Communist Party USA. Doolittle liked to smoke opium and would become fiercely jealous whenever Neel received attention from other men. In 1934, in a fit of rage, he burned over 300 of Neel's works on paper and slashed almost 60 of her paintings – her portrait of Joe Gould is visibly singed from the fire. Neel knew how lucky she was to have escaped alive. Later in life she encountered Doolittle again and was touched to find that he had changed his ways, becoming a devoted parent and committed labour organiser.

The Intellectual, 1929

Watercolour, ink and graphite on paper
Marcia Rafelman Collection

*Untitled (Alice Neel and John
Rothschild in the Bathroom), 1935*

Watercolour and graphite on paper
Nancy Magoon Collection

Alienation, 1935

Watercolour and graphite on paper
Antonia Johnson Family Collection

Neel met the wealthy travel agent John Rothschild when she was exhibiting at the first Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibition in 1932. By contrast to her lover Kenneth Doolittle, who had been raised in an orphanage and was largely self-taught, Rothschild was Harvard-educated and had the means to take her out for occasional dinners at a time when most New York artists were literally on the breadline. He became a keen admirer of Neel and her work, and his romantic pursuit of her sent Doolittle into a jealous rage. Neel fled the scene and lived briefly with Rothschild in what she called 'that swank hotel', where she would paint watercolours of their intimate life together, such as this one. Rothschild would later leave his wife and child in pursuit of Neel, but she never fully committed to him. They did, however, remain close and Rothschild lived with her for the last five years of his life.

The Great Depression

The WPA was marvellous. It was a great creative venture ... and kept us off the breadlines.

After the Wall Street Crash in 1929, America was thrown into the crisis of the Great Depression. As part of his New Deal programme to counter widespread unemployment and poverty, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the Public Works of Art Project in 1933. Neel signed up straight away, and later joined its successor, the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). She was paid \$26.88 a week and was expected to submit a painting of 23 by 30 inches every six weeks.

For the first time, painting was being recognised as wage-earning labour, and many of the artists involved in the WPA felt exhilarated to create politically conscious work. One of the only restrictions was that nude paintings would not be accepted, so Neel focused on capturing scenes of adversity in the city and her involvement in protests against these conditions. *Magistrate's Court* (1936), for example, was painted from memory after she was arrested for picketing with the Artists' Union.

Female Communists show their support for the Spanish Loyalists against the forces of Fascist Germany during the Spanish Civil War, by marching in front of the German Consulate in New York City, c. 1938

Photographer unknown

Cityscape, 1933

Gouache on paper
Private Collection, New York

West 17th Street, 1936

Watercolour on paper
Collection of Margaret and David Blakelock,
courtesy Bali Miller Inc.

Support the Union, 1937

Coloured crayon on paper
Courtesy The Museum of Everything

Magistrate's Court
(The Courtroom Scene), 1936

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Uneda Biscuit Strike, 1936

Oil on canvas
Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel
and Victoria Miro

From January to May 1935, thousands of employees at the National Biscuit Company (NBC) went on strike against poor labour conditions. With the country still reeling from the Great Depression, the 1930s were a time of job insecurity and increasing unionisation. But even as early as 1928, NBC employees were calling for 'better wages and more protection for those of us who get sick' in the pages of the *Daily Worker*, and seeking security from 'the oppression of our palm beach suit bosses'. Neel's painting refers to the many arrests and violent clashes that occurred during this four-month period, with policemen using clubs against striking employees. One witness quoted in the *New York Times* described police action as 'one of the most vicious and inexcusable attacks upon men and women in a picket line' he had ever seen.

Longshoremen Returning from Work, 1936

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

*'El,' Second and Third
Avenue Lines, 24 April, 1936*

Photograph by Berenice Abbott
Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York / SCALA

Nazis Murder Jews, 1936

Oil on canvas
Rennie Collection, Vancouver

After Doolittle introduced Neel to members of the Communist Party USA in 1932, she began regularly attending their demonstrations. In 1935 she became a card-carrying member herself, though she was often frustrated by the bureaucracy of their meetings. A major focus for the party at the time was public demonstrations against the rise of right-wing movements around the world. The same year that Neel joined the party, the American Artists' Congress was formed to bring artists together in the fight against fascism. In September 1936, six months after Adolf Hitler marched German troops into the Rhineland and imposed anti-Jewish laws, Neel joined artists from the WPA programme in a torchlit protest against fascism – a powerful moment, which she captures here.

In The Street

In 1938, Neel met a Puerto Rican nightclub singer called José Negrón. Together they moved to East Harlem, also known as El Barrio or Spanish Harlem, where they could afford a 'tremendous apartment' with 11 windows – crucial for creating a studio space at home. José left when their son, Richard, was only three months old, but Neel stayed in the area and remained friendly with his family. The shadowy mother flanked by three young children in *The Spanish Family* (1943, on show next door) is José's sister Margarita, whose husband, Carlos, Neel also painted.

The photographer Helen Levitt – who moved in the same social circles as Neel – similarly aspired to make work that captured the spirit of everyday life. This documentary film is a love letter to their shared home of Spanish Harlem, offering us a glimpse of the area as it looked 75 years ago. Like Neel, Levitt had a way of encouraging her subjects to collaborate in her work, as they wink and flirt for the camera.

Helen Levitt
In the Street, 1948

Film, silent, 12 mins, 33 secs
© Film Documents LLC,
courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne

Puerto Rico Libre!, 1936

Watercolour on paper
Estate of Alice Neel

Spanish Harlem

'I love you Harlem,' Neel wrote in her diary in the early 1940s, 'for the rich deep vein of human feeling buried under your fire engines.' Given her financially precarious situation as a single mother with no stable income, Neel knew all too well the hustle required to survive in the city, which is felt in these sympathetic paintings of her family and neighbours from the area.

Some sitters, like the young Georgie Arce, whom Neel met when she was out walking her boxer dog King, she would paint on multiple occasions, allowing different moods to emerge on the canvas. In a period of racial segregation, Neel flipped the power dynamics of portraiture (which had almost exclusively featured privileged white sitters), painting subjects like Arce with great character and compassion. As she explained: '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.'

Spanish Mother and Child, 1942

Ink on paper
Estate of Alice Neel

Mother with Children, 1943

Ink on paper
Estate of Alice Neel

A Quiet Summer's Day, c.1963

Ink and gouache on paper
Estate of Alice Neel

Spanish Party, 1939

Oil on canvas
Lance Uggla

Georgie Arce No. 2, 1955

Oil on canvas
Lonti Ebers, New York

Georgie Arce (born Jorge Alberto Arce) was a Puerto Rican boy who met Neel in the street in 1954, and with whom she shared a unique and long-lasting friendship. Arce often came up to the apartment to be drawn and painted by Neel; she recalled how he would 'beg me to adopt him', lying down outside her apartment door if she was away. Although most of his extended family remained in Puerto Rico, Arce seems to have been close to his grandmother, Marcelina: when he was 18, Arce listed her as the 'person who will always know your address' on his draft card. Arce is only 11 in this painting, but the rubber knife he holds now feels like a strange omen given that he went on to be convicted of murder and conspiracy to commit murder in 1974. Arce remained in touch with Neel even after being incarcerated, exchanging letters and greetings cards and sending 'love and regards to the whole family'.

Black Spanish-American Family, 1950

Oil on board
Cranford Collection, London

T.B. Harlem, 1940

Oil on canvas

National Museum of Women in the Arts,
Washington, D.C. Gift of Wallace and
Wilhelmina Holladay

In 1939, after José Negrón left Neel and their three-month-old son Richard, she remained in touch with his family, including Margarita, who was married to José's brother Carlos. The following year, Neel painted Carlos while he was recovering in a tuberculosis hospital in order to comment on the epidemic of TB that had broken out in overcrowded areas of New York. The bandage on the left of Negrón's chest is from a thoracoplasty, a surgical procedure common at the time which involved removing several ribs and collapsing the lung. In this period before effective antibiotics were widely available, TB treatment was brutal, and Neel spoke of the 'crucifixion' that the 24 year-old Negrón went through in his recovery, not least as he developed a drug addiction after codeine was administered to ease his pain. In titling this work after the disease rather than the specific patient, Neel highlights the situation as a social rather than an individual issue. As she explained: 'East Harlem is like a battlefield of humanism, and I am on the side of the people there.'

The Spanish Family, 1943

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Anarchic Humanism: Room 1

Throughout the 1940s and '50s, Neel painted people that 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. During an age in which abstraction dominated modern American art, her very decision to paint people was political. As she explained to the *Daily Worker*, 'human beings have been steadily marked down in value, despised, rejected and degraded'. The paintings in these two rooms reflect the community who shared Neel's desire to restore humanity to all individuals, regardless of their race, class or gender.

A member of the Communist Party since 1935, Neel had experienced economic precarity first-hand; after the Federal Art Project finished in 1944, she relied on government welfare. The Cold War induced a feverish national anxiety towards left-wing politics, and Neel was investigated by the FBI, whose files quite accurately describe her as 'a romantic, Bohemian-type communist'. When two agents came to interview her in 1955, she brazenly asked if they would sit for her, but they politely declined. Neel lived with a poster of the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin on her kitchen wall until the end of her life, and when asked about her politics she replied: 'I am an anarchic humanist.'

Mercedes Arroyo, 1952

Oil on canvas
Daryl and Steven Roth

Mercedes Arroyo (born Maria Mercedes Romero) was a social activist who lived on West 109th Street in West Harlem. In December 1950, not long before this portrait was painted, the writer Mike Gold described her in the *Daily Worker* as 'well known for her heroism'. She was a powerful public speaker who taught at the Frederick Douglass Education Center and the Jefferson School of Social Science, where Neel took classes and once gave a lecture. As a member of the Puerto Rican Commission of the Communist Party, Arroyo denounced 'the tragedy of discrimination, rent-gouging, overcrowding and terrible slum conditions under which 400,000 of us Puerto Ricans, together with our [Black] brothers and sisters, live in this great city of New York'. The FBI kept files on Arroyo, whose activities would have aroused deep suspicion at the time, especially given her support for Puerto Rican independence. Arroyo was killed in a fire on 8 July 1964, which her family believe to have been a targeted act of arson.

Sam, Snow
(How like the winter), 1945

Oil on canvas
Lillian and Billy Mauer Collection

Phillip Bonosky, 1948

Oil on canvas
Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection

Horace Cayton, 1949

Oil on canvas
Mark Gordon Family Collection

Horace R. Cayton was a sociologist, best known for co-writing *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945). The grandson of Hiram R. Revels, the first Black Senator in the US, Cayton refused to serve in the army during the Second World War because it was segregated, enlisting instead in the Merchant Marines. In 1949, just before Neel painted him, Cayton quit his job as the Director of the Parkway Community House, a centre supporting the local community on the South Side of Chicago. In his autobiography, Cayton described the centre as a 'sop thrown to the [Black] community by wealthy and middle-class whites' and explained his fear of becoming 'part of the machinery by which [their] subjugation ... was perpetuated'. Soon after, Cayton moved to New York, where he experienced increasing bouts of depression and alcoholism, which led to brief stays in hospital. He died in 1970 while working on a biography of his friend and fellow writer Richard Wright.

Harold Cruse, c.1950

Oil on canvas

Antonia Johnson Family Collection

Neel met Harold Cruse around 1950, when he was an active member of the Communist Party and was working a series of short-term jobs, including being an orderly at Harlem Hospital and a copy boy for the *Daily Worker*. When the FBI interviewed Cruse in 1955, he had become disillusioned with Communist Party politics: he 'realize[d] the CP was not helping and could not help the [Black] race'. In the 1960s, Cruse taught at LeRoi Jones's Black Arts Repertory Theater School and published *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), which was scathing in its attack on other Black thinkers for their assimilationist approach. He went on to become a prominent intellectual and a professor at the University of Michigan, where he founded one of the first centres for African American Studies. Neel and Cruse fell out of touch until reconnecting in 1974, when Neel wrote to say 'it was so good to see you after all these years ... Write + tell me all you're thinking and feeling'.

Anarchic Humanism: Room 2

*Pro-Willie McGee Demonstration,
Washington, DC, 1951*

Photograph by George Skadding

Save Willie McGee, c.1950

Oil on canvas
Defares Collection

In November 1945, Willie McGee, a Black grocery truck driver living in Mississippi, was convicted of the rape of Willette Hawkins, a white woman. Many, including Neel, believed the charge to be false – a reflection of the 'Jim Crow' South refusing to accept an interracial extra-marital affair. McGee's legal ordeal included three circuit-court trials, several reversals and four failed attempts at a full review by the US Supreme Court. His defence was paid for and managed by the Civil Rights Congress, the New York-based civil rights arm of the Communist Party USA, and the lead lawyer was a young Bella Abzug (whom Neel would also later paint). By 1951 the case was an international cause: President Truman received over 10,000 letters demanding McGee's release, while Albert Einstein signed a statement in the *New York Times*. This painting presents protestors at the statue of Benjamin Franklin across from New York's City Hall; it was likely made around 6 May 1951, when demonstrators in Washington picketed the White House before chaining themselves to the Lincoln Memorial. Two days later, despite the public outcry, McGee was executed. On his final night, he wrote to his wife: 'Tell the people to keep on fighting.'

Death of Mother Bloor, c.1951

Oil on canvas
Defares Collection

In 1951, Neel was placed under observation by the FBI – her home was described in one of their reports as ‘the main storage place for Communist literature in the Harlem, NY, area’. Flying in the face of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, who were zealously denouncing communist sympathisers, Neel painted an increasing number of party members. In this work, she marks the death of Ella Reeve Bloor, known affectionately as Mother Bloor. A labour organiser and founding member of the Communist Labor Party, Bloor stressed the important relationship between socialism and suffrage, and worked tirelessly to achieve an equal vote for women within the Communist Party. Her public funeral in Harlem was photographed for *Life* magazine by Bernard Hoffman, which may have been Neel’s source for this painting.

Art Shields, 1951

Oil on canvas
Lillian and Billy Mauer Collection

Mike Gold, 1952

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Mike Gold (born Itzok Isaac Granich) was a writer, editor and friend of Neel's who was known as the 'Dean of US Proletarian Literature'. An ardent socialist, in 1927 Gold protested against the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti – Italian anarchists who had controversially been convicted of murder. He wrote a regular column called 'Change the World' for the *Daily Worker* and founded the Marxist review *New Masses* (a copy of which sits alongside his right hand here), in which he claimed: 'the one political problem of our time ... is how the working class can be organized and led to the conquest of the state'. Gold was a mentor to Neel: in 1951, the year before Neel painted him, he organised an exhibition of her work at the New Playwrights Theatre, describing her in the catalogue essay as a 'pioneer of socialist realism in American painting'. After Gold's death in 1967, Neel made a second portrait as a memorial, based on this original but adorned with a skull and lilacs.

Rita and Hubert, 1954

Oil on canvas
Defares Collection

Exhibition continues downstairs

Human Creatures: Room 1

In 1958, Neel began to see a therapist for the first time – Dr Anthony Sterrett – who encouraged her to be more ambitious with her work. As she reflected, ‘if it hadn’t been for the psychologist my work would never have gotten before the world ... There’s something of the pack rat about me.’ She plucked up the courage to approach the poet Frank O’Hara, who was then a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, to sit for her. The picture was reproduced in *ARTnews* in 1960 alongside a review by Lawrence Campbell describing how ‘her paintings cast a spell’.

That same year, Neel wrote an artist statement for Alfred Leslie’s *Hasty Papers*, in which she declared her commitment to ‘the human creature’. It was the beginning of a brave new era, as sweeping social justice movements and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and ‘70s brought fresh interest in her work. In 1962 she moved into an apartment at 300 West 107th Street, where she set up an easel in the middle of her living room and invited a motley collection of people to come and sit for her – from a local taxi driver, Abdul Rahman, to the so-called King of Pop, Andy Warhol. Her work began to glow with a newfound confidence as she lured her sitters into metaphorically (and often literally) laying themselves bare. As one critic wrote in 1963: ‘The presences that people her canvases are extraordinarily alive: she paints the shells they have chosen, and penetrating their shell, probes and exposes their inner being.’

Frank O'Hara, 1960

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie

Pull My Daisy, 1959

Adapted for film by Jack Kerouac

Film, with audio, 27 mins, 28 secs

Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

In 1959, the writer Jack Kerouac adapted the third act of his play *Beat Generation* into a film. Directed by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, it features the poets Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Gregory Corso, alongside cameo appearances by artists including Neel. The bizarre scenes are laced with an improvised narrative by Kerouac, which the *New Yorker* described as giving 'comic ripples to seemingly spontaneous shenanigans'. Neel's inclusion in what would become a defining work of the Beat period represents a critical juncture in her career, as she began to mix with a wider circle of artists and became a beloved figure in New York's cultural community. When Leslie invited her to contribute a statement to the *Hasty Papers* she wrote how she wished she could 'make the world happy, the wretched faces in the subway, sad and full of troubles, worry me'.

Abdul Rahman, 1964

Oil on canvas
Lonti Ebers, New York

Mother and Child, 1962

Oil on canvas
Private Collection

Gerard Malanga, 1969

Oil on canvas
Courtesy Locks Foundation

Gerard Joseph Malanga was born in the Bronx in 1943 to an Italian family. A poet and photographer, he began working with Andy Warhol in 1962 and moved with him to the abandoned workshop space at East 47th Street that became famed as The Factory. That same year, Neel was introduced to him at a party by the underground filmmakers Willard Maas and Marie Menken. Malanga went on to become a key collaborator of Warhol's: he assisted with screen-printing; appeared in films; worked on the three-minute silent *Screen Tests* (1964–66); and, the year of this painting, co-founded *Interview* magazine. Malanga remembered coming to sit for Neel in her living room over three sessions, each of about two hours, and how 'the conversation really, in a way, became part of the portrait. It helped her along. She made me laugh.'

Wellesley Girls, 1967

Oil on canvas
Private Collection, Piedmont, California

Ruth Nude, 1964

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

Ruth Alscher (born Ruth Halberthal) was a teacher who lived on 99th Street in East Harlem. In the early 1950s, Alscher was investigated by the FBI after they accused her of attending a dinner party with Julius Rosenberg – the American engineer who was later executed with his wife, Ethel, for allegedly being Soviet spies. Now believed to be a communist, Alscher struggled to find teaching jobs, and instead worked as a taxi driver to support her three children. Around this time, Neel spotted Alscher and her daughter in Central Park and approached them saying ‘I must paint that child!’ Neel painted Alscher’s daughter, Jan, in 1953 and Alscher in 1964. The two remained friends, with Alscher later describing how she respected Neel as ‘a woman on her own who was fierce about her painting’.

Pregnant Julie and Algis, 1967

Oil on canvas
Estate of Alice Neel

The Family
(Algis, Julie and Bailey), 1968

Oil on canvas
Charlotte Feng Ford Collection

Black Draftee
(James Hunter), 1965

Oil on canvas
Comma Foundation, Belgium

Neel met James Hunter in 1965 when he had just been drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. Hunter had only a week left in New York, so he did not get to come back for another sitting. Neel decided 'it would be interesting to leave a work in progress', with the painting becoming a powerful metaphor for the unknown status of so many men sent to fight against their will – especially in 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson was radically increasing ground forces in South Vietnam. Hunter's exact identity has remained a mystery. Our research suggests that he may be an individual called James Leroy Hunter, who served in the US army from 15 October 1965 to 26 September 1967, after which he returned safely to New York. James Leroy Hunter died in 2009 and is buried in the National Calverton Cemetery on Long Island.

Human Creatures: Room 2

Andy Warhol, 1970

Oil and acrylic on linen

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of Timothy Collins, 80.52

Neel remembered first meeting Warhol in 1963 when 'we were both hanging out in the penthouse at the Museum of Modern Art, and he said "Oh, you're that woman that paints those wonderful portraits. I want a portrait!"' She met him again in 1970 and he suggested, 'why don't you paint me with my scars?' which she did, over four or five sittings, revealing the damage from the June 1968 assassination attempt by Valerie Solanas (a former member of The Factory entourage) and the surgical corset he was now forced to wear. Given that Warhol was famously squeamish about his appearance, calling nudity 'a threat to my existence', the painting is a remarkable image of vulnerability, demonstrating Neel's special talent for putting her sitter at ease. As the feminist artist Judy Chicago commented, 'instead of being presented as an iconic art hero', Warhol allows himself to be seen as 'wounded, bandaged'. The background of the canvas is left quite bare, a device Neel increasingly used in order to accentuate the sense of emotional exposure, or what Neel called the picture's 'hypersensitive economy'.

Jackie Curtis as a Boy, 1972

Oil on canvas
John Cheim Collection

Jackie Curtis was an influential figure in Manhattan's underground scene who became one of Warhol's 'superstars', featuring in his films *Flesh* (1968) and *Women in Revolt* (1971). An acclaimed actor and playwright, as well as a singer and sometime poet, Curtis was characterised by Warhol as 'a pioneer without a frontier'. In 1970, Neel painted Curtis in glamorous drag, with a full face of make-up and glowing red hair, alongside friend and collaborator Ritta Redd. In this work, Curtis appears off duty, in all-American jeans and a baseball jersey. The phrase 'as a boy' in the title emphasises gender as a space of play, in which a person might move fluidly between roles, as Curtis did over the years and across various sittings for Neel. At the time of this painting, Curtis regularly carried around a book on the actor James Dean, believing that his spirit had 'jumped' into their body when he died. As Lou Reed sings in his 1972 song 'Walk on the Wild Side', 'Jackie is just speeding away / Thought she was James Dean for a day'.

Carmen and Judy, 1972

Oil on canvas

Oklahoma City Museum of Art
Westheimer Family Collection, 2005.008

Carmen Gordon (born Marie H. Polynice) lived a few blocks from Neel and helped manage her household. She was born in 1928 in Haiti, where she became an acclaimed clothing designer. In the 1960s her husband fled to the US after campaigning against the Haitian president Jean-Claude Duvalier, a dictator who had many of his political opponents killed. A few years before this work was painted, Gordon joined her husband in New York, where she would occasionally accompany him in peaceful protests against the Haitian government. Gordon's daughter, Judy, developed health complications shortly after her birth and died not long after this painting was finished. It was a powerful reflection of their intimacy that Gordon allowed Neel to paint her while she was feeding her child. She died in 2021 at the age of 93, and her youngest son remains close to the Neel family to this day.

Margaret Evans Pregnant, 1978

Oil on canvas

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee
Collection of Art by Women

Margaret Evans (born Margaret McConnell) was a friend of Neel's who was born in Alabama and grew up in Nigeria and Italy. During a hitchhiking trip through Europe and Asia, known then as 'the hippy trail', a friend wrote to encourage her to meet the artist John Evans, whom she went on to marry in 1976. At the time of this portrait, John was 47 years old and Margaret was eight months pregnant with twins: in Neel's words, 'God has forgiven John Evans for not having a baby all these years by sending him 2 at once.' She travelled by bus for an hour and a half to each of the sittings, where Neel would gossip away while marvelling at Evans's body. In her diary, Evans wrote that Neel called herself a 'vicious old woman', although 'I haven't seen her vicious side – only the grandmotherly side and the artist side'. Evans still lives in New York, close to her twin daughters India and Honor.

Marxist Girl (Irene Peslikis), 1972

Oil on canvas
Daryl and Steven Roth

Irene Peslikis was an artist born in 1943 to a Greek American family in Queens. A founder of the radical feminist group Redstockings, Peslikis hosted members in her loft on East Broadway, where they made posters with slogans such as 'Tell It Like It Is' and 'Bitch Sister Bitch!' Peslikis remembered the late 1960s as 'electric ... I knew I was part of making history'; in 1969, before abortion was legalised in New York, she organised a speak-out for women to talk candidly about their experiences. In 1971, Neel wrote for a journal that Peslikis had co-founded called *Women and Art*: 'I have always wanted to paint as a woman,' Neel explained, 'but not as the oppressive and power mad world thought a woman should paint.' After two issues, the journal was abandoned, with half the editors rejecting the left-wing approach taken by Peslikis and others. When Neel heard about this rift, she asked to paint Peslikis and the other editors deemed Marxist because, she felt, 'we need radicals'; but only Irene made it to the sitting.

John Perreault, 1972

Oil on linen

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of anonymous donors, 76.26

The young art critic and curator John Perreault approached Neel in 1972 to borrow one of her paintings for an exhibition on the male nude at the School of Visual Arts, New York. He was particularly keen to borrow her 1933 portrait of Joe Gould. Perreault recalls: 'She seemed very reluctant. She pulled it out of her storage, and then she started looking at me with her brilliant, mischievous eyes.' Upon learning that other artists in the show would be displaying new work, she insisted that 'I have to do a new painting, too. And I've always wanted to paint you; you remind me of a faun. So lie down there on the sofa.' The painting eventually took 17 sittings to complete and Perreault remembers how she laboured over it with 'the devil in her eyes'.

Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews, 1972

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Agnes Gund, Blanchette Hooker
Rockefeller Fund, Arnold A. Saltzman Fund,
and Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund
(by exchange), 1988, 27.1988

Benny Andrews was an artist and activist who co-founded the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in 1969, advocating for racial equity in the art world. Andrews remembered getting to know Neel 'before she was famous', when they exhibited together in Spanish Harlem in the early 1960s. Andrews said he 'identified with her because she was fighting against all of the things that I was fighting against'. They became close friends and Neel joined several protests he organised in 1971, including over the Whitney Museum's exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, and over the handling of the Attica Prison riot. Andrews later recalled the experience of sitting for this painting with his wife, the photographer Mary Ellen Andrews: 'I always said she was looking at you like an X-ray, and you were sitting up there laughing at her jokes while she was seeing right through you.'

Ron Kajiwara, 1971

Oil on canvas

Alkar Contemporary Collection (ACC), Bilbao

Ron Kajiwara was a graphic designer who worked for *Vogue*. Born in 1944, Kajiwara and his family were held in an internment camp in California as part of the mass incarceration of Americans of Japanese descent after the US joined the Second World War. By 1971, when Neel painted him, Kajiwara was winning industry awards for his designs, with his graphics accompanying articles on environmental damage and global food shortages. Alongside his work for *Vogue*, where he went on to become Art Editor, he also designed stage sets, collaborating with the radical Theater for the New City in the East Village. One critic in the *New York Times* said of his set design for the 1982 play *The Dispossessed*: 'Remember his name if you have a loft or a play you want decorated.' Kajiwara died in 1990 from an AIDS-related illness.

David Bourdon and Gregory Battcock, 1970

Oil on canvas
Blanton Museum of Art,
The University of Texas at Austin
Archer M. Huntington Museum Fund, 1983

David Bourdon and Gregory Battcock were New York art critics, creative collaborators and occasional intimates. Neel painted the men one year after riots broke out in Greenwich Village, in response to the violent police raid of gay club the Stonewall Inn, and the same year as the first gay pride parades took place in New York and San Francisco. Bourdon (right) was an editor at *Life* magazine; he recommended that Neel paint Battcock like this because friends who knew that he loved to work at home in his French underwear would find it funny. Battcock was a writer and activist who in 1970 published three anthologies of critical writings about new tendencies in art, but who was also known for his amusing articles in underground tabloids including *Gay* and the *New York Review of Sex*. Neel described the painting as one in which Bourdon looks like a 'cat who has had a lot of mice'.

*The Family (John Gruen,
Jane Wilson and Julia), 1970*

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess
Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2011.224

Linda Nochlin and Daisy, 1973

Oil on canvas
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Seth K. Sweetser Fund

Linda Nochlin was a pioneering art historian and professor of modern art at the New York University Institute of Fine Arts. In 1971 she published a defining article in *ARTnews* (ironically) titled 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' The following year she reproduced Neel's 1933 painting of Joe Gould in an article heralding a 'revolution' in erotic representation. When Neel became aware of her writing, she invited Nochlin to pose for her with her daughter Daisy. They sat six times for the painting, with Nochlin recalling how Neel amused Daisy with fairy tales. In contrast to other paintings of important feminists, Neel was keen to portray Nochlin as both an intellectual and a mother; 'You don't look anxious, but you are anxious' Nochlin remembers being told, feeling that Neel saw anxiety in everyone.

Mary D. Garrard, 1977

Oil on canvas
Private Collection

*Cindy Nemser
and Chuck, 1975*

Oil on canvas
Lillian and Billy Mauer Collection

*Geoffrey Hendricks
and Brian, 1978*

Oil on canvas
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Purchase,
by exchange, through an anonymous gift

Lifelong Commitment

Right up to the end of her life, Neel was determined to look with sensitivity and humour at the range of human subjects who had the courage to come and sit for her. As she wrote for a statement in the *New York Times* in 1976: 'As for people who want flattering paintings of themselves, even if I wanted to do them, I wouldn't know what flattery is. To me, as Keats said, beauty is truth, truth beauty ... I paint to try to reveal the struggle, tragedy and joy of life.'

This room brings together two of Neel's most striking late portraits, which reflect her lifelong commitment to painting candidly a community who shared her desire for a fairer society with greater sexual freedom. In 1981, Neel painted Gus Hall, the chairman of the Communist Party USA, the same year that she became the first living artist to have a retrospective in the Soviet Union. The following year, she painted the performance artist and sex activist Annie Sprinkle, who remembered how 'we both got a thrill out of her being 83 or 84 and me being the sex-goddess slut that I was'. Both paintings reverberate with their maker's extraordinary energy for life; a woman in her eighties who painted every day and was known to telephone friends just to say, 'Oh ... guess what? I'm alive!'

Annie Sprinkle, 1982

Oil on canvas

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner

Gus Hall, 1981

Oil on canvas

Lillian and Billy Mauer Collection

Alice on Alice

I know all the theory of everything, but when
I paint I don't think of anything except
the subject and me.

In her later years, Neel became famous for her slide lectures and university speeches, which she delivered with great zest, sometimes having to be persuaded to come down from the stage. One journalist who attended a lecture she gave in Milwaukee described her as 'white-haired and grandmotherly, but with a waspish wit that held her immediate circle in awed (and frequently amused) silence, [as] she expounded on everything from her lifelong struggle for liberation to the role of children in a woman's personal and artistic growth'. This documentary film by Nancy Baer allows us to hear how Neel framed her own artistic practice, with characteristic humour about the grit she had needed to succeed as a figurative painter in an art world riddled with discrimination.

Nancy Baer
Collector of Souls, 1978

Film, with audio, 37 mins, 56 secs

Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel

Living Room

Out of necessity as much as instinct, Alice Neel never worked in a professional studio space, which is one reason why her paintings are charged with a particularly intimate character. When her sons were young, visitors had to pass their sleeping beds to get to the living room at the other end of their Harlem railroad apartment.

This final exhibition space, inspired by those living rooms, offers reading material about Neel and the remarkable collection of people who came to spend time in her home, allowing her to set them down in paint. The choice of books reflects some of the texts that Neel kept in her personal library, which included Russian novels and Marxist literature.

The thread connecting these disparate interests is Neel's deep empathy, which made her endlessly interested in human stories. As she liked to say, her aim was to paint 'what the world has done to them and their retaliation'.

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