

Kay Miller, February 2012 OOM

“Richard Gibbs,” Alice Neel, 1968, L2011.68.1



Questions:

1. What's going on in this portrait? Describe the sitter's gaze, body language, setting and clothing.
2. Alice Neel liked her portraits to expose in her sitters the very aspects of themselves that they'd rather keep private. What might she have been revealing about Richard Gibbs?
3. Neel said that the poses that her sitters assume unconsciously reveal "what the world has done to them and their retaliation." What might the world have done to Richard Gibbs? How does he retaliate?
4. Neel's oft-stated goal was to "capture the Zeitgeist," to memorably document her era, using people as evidence." How does this portrait conjure the late 1960s?
5. Neel is known for portraying her subjects with disproportionate body parts. Gibbs' head is unusually large. How does this distortion affect the image?

Richard Gibbs, the portrait:

1. Seethes with life, color and fetid nature, casual sensuality and warm, tactile sunlight.
2. Great example of Neel's signature portrait style: expressive distortion, brilliant color sense and inventive composition that captures the sitter's physiognomy and body language. Straight-forward gaze. Large hand braced

on a knee. Disproportionate rendering of anatomy and form: There is no anatomical logic to Gibbs' figure. The well-crafted head is too large. It sinks into a nonexistent, highly abstracted torso that is little more than a visual bridge to the massive fore-fronted and ambulatory shapes that loosely describe Gibbs' hands and feet. Arms and legs form distinctive angles.

3. We don't know Gibbs is. Neel often painted friends, neighbors, other artists and obscure people whom she found interesting. The L.A. Louver Gallery included Gibbs' portrait in its 2010 show, ***Alice Neel: Paintings***. A gallery representative said, "People are the [Neel] foundation don't know, but assume Gibbs was a friend."
4. Gibbs is caught in the act of trying to look nonchalant and cool. His forked hand-to-the-head gesture exposes his discomfort or tentativeness. He looks posed, uneasy, frozen to the spot. At any minute, he might just bolt from the room.
5. Reflects the Zeitgeist: The sitter's loud yellow-and-orange striped T-shirt could be a set piece from "Easy Rider" or "Alice's Restaurant." It competes with Gibbs' figure for the viewer's attention. You could image Gibbs following Timothy O'Leary's advice to "turn on, tune in, drop out."
6. Neel achieves the look of live skin without using flesh-colored pigment, which she disliked. Instead, she mixes intense combinations of mustard, orange, yellow, light blue and gray.
7. Compared with Neel's nudes, haunting images and outrageous images [think Joel Gould with three penises], Gibbs' portrait is quite tame.
8. Long, messy brushstrokes crowd the surface of this and other Neel canvases. The turbulence of her work of the early '60s ripened into what would become Neel's signature style for the rest of her life.
9. Neel's composition of Gibbs is very deliberate. Every element in the painting is in exactly the right spot. The painterly figuration has the deliberateness of stained glass and the urgency of a sketch.
10. The portrait is typical of Neel's portraits from the late 1960s, in which she incorporated most, if not all, of a figure's body and head on a large canvas four to seven feet high.

Key Points:

1. Neel endured an extraordinarily difficult life to become one of the 20th century's most powerful and important portrait painters. Her paintings are brutally honest, her style raw, never fussy. She paints with irony, humor and economy, with no redundant or unnecessary elements. Her portraits are characterized by expressive distortion, a brilliant color sense

and inventive compositions to reveal the physiognomy and body language of her subjects.

2. Neel labored, mostly in poverty and without critical acclaim **for 40 years**, first because she painted portraits in an era that figurative work had been declared dead, and second because she was a woman. Buoyed by feminism, she received recognition in the 1960s and 1970s. By the time she died at 84, she was a bona fide art star, painting Andy Warhol, being feted at Gracie Mansion and twice appearing on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*. She was the subject of books, novels, movies and documentaries. Most of her sitters couldn't afford to buy their own portraits, so Neel still owned most of her work when she died. By 2009, when the Cleveland Museum of Art bought Neel's double portrait of "*Jackie Curtis and Rita Red*" at auction, it paid \$1.65 million.
3. Neel called herself a "**collector of souls.**" Her portraits are expressionistic and deeply **incisive psychological studies**. Much like photographer Annie Leibowitz, she catches sitters in uncomfortable moments that reveal their true selves. An avowed sensualist, Neel was famous for asking sitters in the 60s and 70s to pose nude. Her gambit was to **discover and expose** in her sitters the very things they would rather **keep private**. She said it was a test of wills: hers versus the sitter's. In unconsciously assuming their most characteristic poses, her sitters reveal "What the world has done to them and their retaliation." Even when her sitters are clothed, they seem naked, given the artist's uncanny ability to reveal their personalities.
4. Neel was one of the first artists of 3,749 artists employed during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) easel program and one of the very last to get off it (from 1933 to 1943). Starting at a \$30/month stipend (later, \$103.40/month), Neel was obligated to turn in a 23"x 30" painting every six weeks. "I don't know how I would have eaten without this support," she later recalled. The money was a godsend, yet Neel often ran afoul of WPA bureaucrats, who wanted inspirational art they could place in such public settings as schools, post offices and schools. When Neel wasn't painting forbidden nudes, her work could be graphic, macabre, bloody and otherwise "difficult." Said friend and fellow artist Joseph Solman: "She turned a person inside out. If she did a portrait of you, you wouldn't recognize yourself...She would almost disembowel you."

5. Neel's oft-stated goal was to "**capture the Zeitgeist,**" to memorably document her time, in what she called "the Human Comedy." She once said, "I paint my time, using the people as evidence." She said she was "attracted by the morbid and excessive." She often portrays her sitters' bodies as slightly disproportioned. Backgrounds are abstracted and simplified.
6. She started as a Social Realist, displaying a fervent social conscience. Her subjects were deliberately diverse, democratic slices of the culture. She was influenced by Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism (mostly in her backgrounds.) In the 1930s, the conflict between figurative and abstract art eventually evolved into a full-fledged aesthetic battle. At the height of Abstract Expressionism, Neel defiantly focused on portraiture, the least fashionable of realist genres. By 1944, there was such a backlash against Social Realism that Neel bought back some of her WPA canvases, sold **at 4 cents a pound** to a Long Island junk dealer, who peddled them to Henry C. Roberts, owner of a second-hand store in Greenwich Village. "They sold them as spoiled canvases to wrap pipes with," Neel later said.
7. Fiercely independent, unconventional and free-spirited, Neel was the quintessential Bohemian in Greenwich Village, living through the women's liberation and the sexual revolutions. In her 60s she was lauded for doing what she had done all her life – living as an independent woman, single mother and artist. She was to feminist art as Andy Warhol was to pop art: she both embodied it and stood apart from it. Like Warhol, she was a **skeptic about humanity** in general and American humanity in particular, which she **skewered** by selecting its salient features and pushing them to the absurd.
8. Neel's life story is a **great American saga**. She was born into a very proper Victorian family at the turn of the century. She was well-educated and worldly. She studied at the country's first all-woman art school, the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art & Design), receiving portraiture awards for two consecutive years. Her work followed in the realist tradition of Thomas Eakins and Robert Henri, an instructor at the Philadelphia School and founder of the Ashcan School. Like Henri, Neel aimed for the essential truth of a subject, while exploring social diversity. She pushed the envelope to its edge, developing her signature style.

9. **Neel suffered enormously** in her life: Her first child, Santillana, died in infancy. She soon was pregnant with her second child, Isabetta. Her husband, Carlos Enriquez, abandoned her, taking Isabetta back to Havana, where his family raised her while he went to Paris. At age 30, Neel suffered a massive nervous breakdown and several suicide attempts for which she was institutionalized for a year. (After one attempt, by putting her head in her parents' oven, her father grimly joked about how much the gas would cost.) In 1938 she left the bohemian claustrophobia of the West Village for the uncharted territories of Spanish Harlem.
10. Santillana's death filled Neel's paintings with themes of motherhood, loss, and anxiety throughout her career. Isabetta's birth in 1928 inspired the creation of "Well Baby Clinic" [below], a bleak portrait of mothers and babies in a maternity clinic reminiscent of an insane asylum. Neel captured the vicissitudes marriage and motherhood in raw, intimate nudes of pregnant women, from friends and neighbors to her own daughter-in-law that are among her signature works. She was a resourceful single parent, raising two sons, first in Spanish Harlem, then on the Upper West Side. She finessed scholarships for her sons at the tony Rudolf Steiner School. Both sons attended Columbia University, one in law, the other in medicine.
11. Neel was a notoriously bad judge of men. She had a series of violent, unfaithful lovers, one of whom probably gave her syphilis before leaving her and their infant son. Her street-smart sailor boyfriend Kenneth Doolittle burned her clothes and **slashed and burned 60 of her paintings, 200 drawings and watercolors** – much of her oeuvre and a record of her life. It was a central tragedy of her life that she termed a personal "holocaust." Later, she would occasionally run across pieces of her work at retrospectives and exclaim, "I thought that son-of-a-bitch had burned that one!"

With lovers like John Rothschild, on whom Neel depended economically, she could be sadistically cruel, earning the nickname, "Malice Neel."

Lover and filmmaker Sam Brody was so physically violent toward Neel's first son, John, that the boy threw up when Brody entered the room. He offered Neel a piano if she would throw her son out the window.

"Many creative people live tortured existences, not in the classic sense of the starving artist and all that, but maybe in order to be creative you have to be out there in some imaginary world. You have to be out there and not seeing what you see and not seeing what is in front of you," a person close to Neel friend told biographer Hoban. **Neel transformed her deepest wounds into her most humanistic work, refusing to become a victim.**

12. Through her 50 years of painting, Neel created an indelible portrait gallery of 20th Century America. Her subjects were her sons, herself, lovers, nude pregnant daughters-in-law, grandchildren, friends and acquaintances, art world figures and often people she encountered on the street - young black sisters from Harlem, elderly Jewish twin artists, American Communist Party chairman Gus Hall, Nobel Prize-winner Linus Pauling. She knew and painted many of the important political and contemporary movers and shakers of the left-wing, activist art world: art historian Meyer Schapiro, Partisan Review founder Kenneth Fearing, beat legend Joe Gould (famously portrayed with three penises), poet Frank O'Hara and earthwork artist Robert Smithson.

13. Neel's portrait of Warhol [below], generally considered among her best work, neatly condenses his complexity and androgyny. The piece took four or five sittings. It is memorable for the nifty way Neel depicts Warhol's vulnerability as a perpetual outsider (like Neel) and as a literal victim of his own celebrity. Warhol's input is also key, writes biographer Phoebe Hoban: His courageous self-exposure in itself is an artistic act.

"It's an astonishing portrait on every level," Hoban writes. Warhol rarely appeared without his trademark wig and sunglasses and once proclaimed that "nudity is a threat to my existence." Yet, he offered to strip to the waist for Neel, revealing scars from the assassination attempt by Valerie Solanas in 1968 and the corset he was forced to wear.

Neel exaggerates those disturbing details to indelible affect. She shows Warhol, one of the 20th century's most voyeuristic and perceptive artists, with his eyes tightly closed, Hoban writes. Neel gives the androgynous Warhol an almost feminine form, with small, drooping breasts and wide hips. Cleverly referencing Warhol's early work as a commercial illustrator doing shoe advertisements for I. Miller, Neel renders Warhol's shoes in beautiful, shiny detail.

14. **Posing for Neel was an experience.** She entertained subjects, disarming them with a nonstop stream of racy stories, politics and philosophical musings. She was witty, acerbic and magical. She had a foul mouth and the devil in her eyes. She'd raise topics for conversation, only to slam them shut with her own pronouncements. She had a diabolical knack for capturing moments of extreme detachment between couples. [see "Red Grooms and Mimi Gross" 1967, below]

MoMA Curator John Perreault vividly recalled modeling for Neel's odalisque portrait of him:

"I'm posing stark naked; Nancy, her daughter-in-law, is coming in and out of the room; Alice is chatting away about the Depression and this boyfriend, and that boyfriend. She looked like a grandmother – a *Saturday Evening Post* grandmother. She had that beauty that an older woman can have. She had great eyes; she had the devil in her eyes. She had a foul mouth, and she was a vicious gossip. So there I was, lying naked in front of a vicious gossip."

Artist Benny Andrews, described Neel's clever ploy for capturing her prey in its most vulnerable state:

"It was interesting because she would just come up with these stories. In fact, that was one of the things that was so effective about her, because then you were listening, and you were interested in what she was telling you, so you got involved in that. 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*, and you didn't even realize it."

15. Neel never liked using flesh-colored pigments for skin, preferring raw, intense combinations of pinks, purples, mustards, and grays for faces and hands. Long, messy brushstrokes crowd the surface of Neel's canvases. The turbulence of the work of the early sixties ripened into what would become Neel's signature style. A Neel portrait from the late sixties through early eighties usually incorporates most, if not all, of a figure's body and head on a large canvas generally ranging from four to seven feet tall.
16. In the 1930s, Neel's world was composed of artists, intellectuals and political leaders of the Communist Party, all of whom became subjects for her paintings. Her work glorified subversion and sexuality, depicting whimsical scenes of lovers and nudes. At the end of the 1950s, Neel began to paint portraits of people in New York's art world. She began by inviting the poet Frank O'Hara, who was also a curator at NY's MoMA, to pose for her in early 1960. This may have been a careerist ploy – or a genuine search for kindred spirits - the artists, critics and dealers she met at galleries and parties. By 1960, Neel was painting people who had created for themselves the kind of art life she wanted.
17. Her work was always personal and political [compare to Barlach]. Neel participated in the first Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit. (One piece, "Degenerate Madonna," drew protests from the Catholic Church

and had to be withdrawn.) She was a member of the Artists' Union. She was a long-time member of the Communist Party, USA (with an hefty FBI file to prove it) and painted many party members. In 1953, she commented on Cold War policy in her powerful painting "Eisenhower, McCarthy, Dulles," portraying a terrible trio hovering over the western half of the globe. She was also highly aware of issues of race and painted members of the civil rights movement. She became the *defacto* artist of the feminist movement. When *Time* magazine featured Kate Millet on its cover in 1970, Neel was asked to paint the portrait [below]. Neel was America's first feminist, multi-cultural artist, a populist painter for the ages.

18. She was the model for a feisty WPA artist played by Elsa Lancaster in the 1948 film "The Big Clock." Susan Sarandon played Neel in "Joe Gould's Secret" (2000), in which her infamous three-penis portrait of Gould appears. The novelist Millen Brand portrayed Neel in two best-sellers: "The Outward Room" (1937) and "Some Love, Some Hunger" (1955). She made a film appearance in 1959 alongside a young Allen Ginsberg in his classic Beatnik film, *Pull My Daisy*.
19. When Neel turned 80, she painted herself nude, casting as merciless an eye on her own vulnerable body as she had with hundreds of sitters. In the self-portrait [below], she perches on a chair, naked but for her glasses, a paint brush and a rag.
 - The **flesh sags , "dropping off the bone,"** as Neel put it. But her painting ability remains forcefully intact.
 - The self-portrait is a radical departure from standard artists' self-portraits. Its stark veracity beautifully illustrates her original and enduring American vision.
 - Neel rises upright, defiantly proclaiming the nude's right to come to life and fight back. Art historian Mary Garrard writes that in doing so, Neel breaks three artistic conventions:
 1. Most often the female nude is the object of the male gaze.
 2. This naked old woman escapes the critical gaze through irony – wielding a paintbrush (the tool that artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner strategically positioned at the groin, forging a metaphor between pen and penis). Neel's right toe is erect, setting the painting's curves into rhyme, pulling the lumpen shapes of a sagging, aging body in aesthetic harmonies of pure design.
 3. She breaks the taboo that old women are not fit subjects for art. Unlike Rembrandt, who preserves his aged dignity through fine clothes, Neel parodies this ponderous notion of dignity by taking away its defenses.

20. Neel could be outrageous, as she was at the First National conference on women in the visual arts, Corcoran School of Art in Washington, April 1972. Neel, then 72, took the podium, armed with carousels, and started showing hundreds of slides of her work. She wouldn't stop and had to be dragged from the stage. "Then came her legendary, second performance. Impatient with long lines at the ladies rooms, Neel lifted her skirts and let loose in a corridor of the Corcoran. With this aggressive, outrageous behavior, Alice Neel showed us what it means to be really free of 'feminine' constraints," art scholar Mary Garrard writes. Garrard found this bit of personal theater reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's drunken urinations in the fireplace.

Alice Neel Bio: January 28, 1900 – October 13, 1984

Early life. Alice Neel was born in rural Merion Square, Pennsylvania, and moved to the rural town of Colwyn, Pennsylvania, when she was about three months old. She took the Civil Service exam and got a high-paying clerical position after high school to help support her parents. After three years of work, taking art classes by night in Philadelphia, Neel enrolled full-time in the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. Neel often said that she chose to attend an all-girls school so as not to be distracted from her art by the temptations of the opposite sex.

Cuba. In 1925, she fell in love with Cuban painter Carlos Enríquez, the son of wealthy parents. Shortly after finishing her studies in 1925, they married and moved to Havana the following year to live with Enríquez's family. In Havana, Neel was embraced by the burgeoning **Cuban avant-garde**, a set of young writers, artists and musicians. In this environment Neel developed the foundations of her life long political consciousness and commitment to equality.

Personal difficulties, themes for art. In 1926 she became pregnant with her first child. Following the birth of her daughter, Santillana, Alice returned to her parents' home in Colwyn. Carlos followed soon after, and in 1927 the family moved to New York City. Just before Santillana's first birthday, she died of diphtheria. Neel's life began to fall apart. The trauma caused by Santillana's death infused the content of Neel's paintings, setting a precedent for the themes of motherhood, loss, and anxiety that permeated her work for the duration of her career.

Immediately following Santillana's death, Neel became pregnant with her second child, Isabetta. Isabetta's birth in 1928 inspired the creation of "Well Baby Clinic", a bleak portrait of mothers and babies in a maternity clinic more reminiscent of an insane asylum than a nursery.

In the spring of 1930, Carlos returned to Cuba, taking Isabetta with him. Mourning the loss of her husband and daughter, Neel suffered a massive nervous breakdown. After a brief period of hospitalization, she attempted suicide. She was placed in the suicide ward of the Philadelphia General Hospital. Deemed stable almost a year later, Neel was released from the sanatorium in 1931 and returned to her parents' home. Following an extended visit with her close friend and frequent subject, Nadya Olyanova, Neel returned to New York.

Soon after her release, Neel began living with a drug-addicted man who slashed 60 of her paintings. Two subsequent relationships – with the Puerto Rican guitarist Jose Santiago and the Russian-born filmmaker Sam Brody – were also volatile.

Depression era. There Neel painted the local characters, including Joe Gould, whom she famously depicted with multiple penises in 1933. Her world was composed of artists, intellectuals, and political leaders of the Communist Party, all of whom became subjects for her paintings. Her work glorified subversion and sexuality, depicting whimsical scenes of lovers and nudes.

At the end of 1933, Neel was hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which afforded her a modest weekly salary. In the 1930s Neel gained a degree of notoriety as an artist, and established a good standing within her circle of downtown intellectuals and Communist Party leaders. While Neel was never an official Communist Party member, her affiliation and sympathy with the ideals of Communism remained constant.

In 1939 Neel gave birth to her first son, Richard, the child of Jose Santiago, a Puerto Rican night-club singer whom Neel met in 1935. Neel moved to Spanish Harlem. She began painting her neighbors, particularly women and children. José left Neel in 1940.

Post-war years. Neel's second son, Hartley, was born in 1941 to Neel and her lover, communist intellectual Sam Brody. In this decade, Neel made illustrations for the Communist publication, *Masses & Mainstream*, and continued to paint portraits from her uptown home. Between 1940 and 1950, Neel's art virtually disappeared from galleries, save for one solo show in 1944. In the 1950s, Neel's friendship with Mike Gold and his admiration for her social realist work garnered her a show at the Communist-inspired New Playwrights Theatre.

Neel even made a film appearance in 1959, after director Robert Frank asked her to appear alongside a young Allen Ginsberg in his classic Beatnik film, *Pull My Daisy*. The following year, her work was first reproduced in ARTnews Magazine.

Toward the end of the 1960s, interest in Neel's work intensified. The momentum of the Women's Movement led to increased attention, and Neel became an icon for Feminists. In 1970 Neel was commissioned to paint Feminist activist Kate Millett for the cover of Time magazine. In 1974, Neel's work was given a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and posthumously, in the summer of 2000, also at the Whitney.

By the mid-1970s, Neel had gained celebrity and stature as an important American artist. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter presented her with a National Women's Caucus for Art award for outstanding achievement. **Neel's reputation was at its height at the time of her death in 1984.**

Neel's life and works are featured in the documentary "Alice Neel," which premiered at the 2007 Slamdance Film Festival and was directed by her grandson, Andrew Neel. The film was given a New York theatrical release in April of that year.

Alice Neel was to be the subject of the upcoming retrospective "Alice Neel: Painted Truths" organized by The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, and on view March 21-June 15, 2010. The exhibition will travel to Whitechapel Gallery, London and Moderna Museet Malmö, Malmö.

The Estate of Alice Neel is represented by [David Zwirner](#), New York, Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Galerie Aurel Scheibler, Berlin, and is advised by Jeremy Lewison Ltd.

Quotes:

"I'm cursed to be in this Mother Hubbard body. I'm a real sexy person."

"I paint my time, using the people as evidence."

"The road that I pursued, and the road that I think keeps you an artist, is that no matter what happens to you, you still keep on painting."



Self Portrait, Alice Neel, 1980, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.



Andy Warhol, *Alice Neel*, 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



***Red Grooms and Mimi Gross*, Alice Neel, 1967, Private Collection**



Well Baby Clinic, Alice Neel, 1928, Private Collection (This after her first daughter died)



“Joe Gould,” Alice Neel, 1933, Private Collection on loan to the Tate Modern, London



Portrait of Kate Millett on Time cover

Resources:

"Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty," Phoebe Hoban, St. Martin's Press, 2010

"Alice Neel and Me," Mary D. Garrard, Woman's Art Journal, Fall, 2006, pp 3-7.

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/N/neel.html>

"Portraits: Alice Neel's legacy of Realism," by Phoebe Hoban, April 22, 2010

"Alice Neel Paintings," Shana Dys Dambrot, WhiteHot magazine of Contemporary Art, July 2010.

"Alice Neel at L.A. Louver Gallery," Marlena Donohue, Visual Art Source.

http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=4253

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.

<http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/356586-alice-neel>

<http://www.timesquotidian.com/tag/tom-wudl/>

<http://www.virginiamiller.com/gallery/News/Articles/MAG00.html>

Conversation with Ginny Neel – Jan. 27, 2012 – daughter-in-law of painter Alice Neel and co-manager of the Estate of Alice Neel. She is married to Dr. Hartley Neel, Alice’s younger son.

The purpose of MIA docent Kay Miller’s interview was to discuss Neel’s 1968 painting of “**Richard Gibbs**,” loaned to the MIA by Eric Dayton. We started by talking about the documentary, “**Alice Neel**,” directed by Andrew Neel, Ginny’s son and Alice’s grandson.

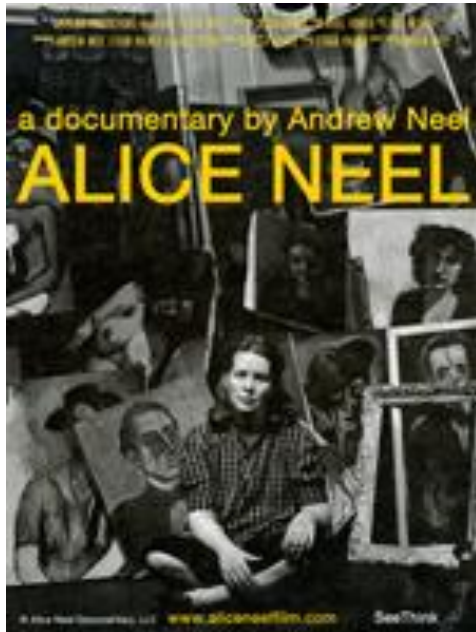


Photo by Sam Brody

Kay Miller: I found Andrew’s documentary sophisticated, moving and informative in ways that give such a different feel for Alice’s life than do many of the books and articles written about her.

Ginny Neel: For a long time the family wanted Andrew to do the film. We knew that the better known Alice became, the more she became everybody else’s property. We had some difficulty with people presenting inaccurate facts about Alice’s life and those inaccuracies got repeated as facts. Information got skewed. So we said, “Why don’t we get Andrew to make one?” He doesn’t like doing biopics. But when he came to the idea that he could make it about obsession – including his own obsession with film – showing the damage and glory, the good and bad that comes from such an obsession, it became more interesting to him. We had no direct input into the film, although as a courtesy he let us see it before it was presented publicly.

Kay: One wonderful part of the documentary was watching Alice paint you, seeing how she began with that single, long, defining stroke, and watching her fill in with the impossibly large brush. What was it like for you to model for her?

Ginny: Hartley filmed that. We were living together in San Francisco. I had met her before I met him. In 1969 I went to San Francisco because everyone was moving to San Francisco and I had just spent two years working with children in the inner city of New York and was quite discouraged. He went out there because he had his medical internship there. Being two easterners who both knew Alice, we floated together and fell in love. I was 26 and he was 29.

Early in the summer, Alice found he was so lonely and had planned to come out and spend a couple of months with him. Then, I was there. That wasn't what she expected. But she and I had a great time together – Hartley was working 24 hours a day most of the time.

That was the first painting she ever did of me. She had given Hartley that Bolex movie camera when he did part of his medical study. He went through the Kennedy Foundation to Pakistan and he wanted to document his work there, so she got him that camera. He'd been back a couple of months and had some film left. He said, "I'm going to film you painting."



Ginny Neel with the first portrait that Alice Neel painted of her, *Ginny in Blue Shirt*, 1969, oil on canvas, 48x24 inches. © Estate of Alice Neel

Kay: How many portraits did Alice paint of you?

Ginny: About 10. People say she did a lot of her family. It wasn't that she was absorbed that way, in painting her family. She was absorbed with *painting*. If you were there, she painted you. When she came to Vermont to visit, she would paint me or Hartley or my brother who was visiting - or a dog, because no one else was there.

Whoever hung around Alice was likely to be painted or drawn quite a lot, not because she favored them as sitters but because they were *there*. She'd get hit by an image: "Oh, I want to paint that shirt!" Or that pose. If you lived near her or she came to visit, she'd paint you and new people too. She'd see somebody and they would attract her.



Richard Gibbs, Alice Neel, 1968, #L2011.68.1, portrait loaned by Eric Dayton, © Estate of Alice Neel

Kay: In our first email exchange, you mentioned that you had met Richard Gibbs, the subject of the Alice Neel painting that we have on loan at the MIA. You had written that he was a young artist and friend of Alice's who she knew in Spring Lake, New Jersey. And that he was one of a number of young people who admired Alice and enjoyed her unconventional and sympathetic friendship. Do you remember the portrait? And what can you tell me about Richard and how Alice came to paint him?

Ginny: I do remember the painting...[slight hesitation]

Here's the thing about Alice's paintings. And this is important because you're a docent: Our feeling about Alice's career...People say that she wasn't noticed early on. That wasn't true. In the 1930s, she really *was* noticed. She was in group shows that the New York Times reviewed favorably. That was at the beginning of what would normally be a trajectory in her painting career. But with the ascent of Abstraction, that trajectory was halted.

My daughter [Elizabeth Neel] is an artist and we can see the trajectory. You start out and get seen and get written about. You have your first show. It builds and builds. It started that way with Alice. When she first showed, she was noticed. It's not as though she was not noticed for her figurative work. But that trajectory got halted by the art world's complete obsession with Abstraction. When the figure came back she got noticed again.

For her, it was very hard for the 20-some, 30-some years when she was ignored. She was not ignored because she was being shown. It was not because she was in some attic somewhere. She *was* recognized as a great painter. But her subject matter was something nobody wanted to show.

Kay: What do you view as the turning point in Alice's career?

Ginny: There are several things that contributed to her resurgence. First and foremost was the return of the figure as an accepted subject in the art world. Given that breakthrough, it is hard to identify each important event. As momentum builds, each event brings new energy. However, another important thing was that she had begun to go to artists' functions, and people became aware of her again. The people she saw at those functions were often important in the art world, so the faces she wanted to paint were more influential for her career than the equally interesting, but less powerful, neighbors in Harlem. In this way, of course, she met and painted Frank O'Hara. She also met Hubert Crehan, an art critic for *Art News* who enthusiastically presented her work to the public again. Mixed with that was the women's movement. Although its focus tended to highlight her life rather than her art, it was critical to her Art Star

reputation. Her life and work were emblematic of how women were marginalized and Alice's lifelong battle against that appealed to all of the young women who were part of the battle against the double standard. She became a favored speaker on college campuses, where her wit and natural theatrical ability made her sought after. All this led to the Graham Gallery taking her on in 1963 and that was essential to being recognized as a professional. The Robert Miller Gallery who began representing her work in 1982 was one more step toward the solidification of her reputation.

So, our feeling, as an estate, is that because of that gap that took place and because the feminist movement loved to point to great women artists who had been overlooked, Alice told her life story a lot. That took over as what people were interested in. That became the way to view her work – in the light of those stories.

The other thing that happened, her paintings are so intensely personal, you immediately want to know who that person is. In the process, the anecdotes get in the way of people responding to the art. In general, rather than telling the whole story about somebody, we let people respond to the work because Alice was painting individual people, but in doing so, she was showing humanity in general: "Oh, my goodness, that's so much Elizabeth or Andrew [her grandchildren]." But she captured in them the humanity that we all share.

So you can *feel* their discomfort, their anxiety because she's talking about what makes each person human. She can talk about in paint Andy Warhol who is iconic and present him as utterly human. She can talk about in paint her janitor and he becomes heroic. They come out in the same place because, after all, no matter how wretched or iconic we are, we all are suffering from being human.

As representatives of Alice's estate, we try not to take that away.

Kay: That's wonderful. And it is very much in keeping with the way that we as docents are trained. We start by having visitors to take a good, long look at a painting, sculpture or other object. Then, we talk about what our visitors see, what they find interesting. Then, we build on their observations, bringing in bits of biography or other information keyed to their interests. So, that is the context in which we will use the information you give us about Richard Gibbs and Alice's life.

Ginny: I can't tell you a lot about Richard. He lived in Spring Lake, New Jersey, where Alice had a little house. The kids really loved that house. It was her refuge from the city in the summer. Later she got a larger one. When was this portrait done?

Kay: In 1968.

Ginny: Richard Gibbs lived there [in Spring Lake] around that time. His job as a teenager was gardening in the summer and he helped Alice with hers. Richard did some gardening for her. She was Bohemian and they had very little money, but she talked people into doing things for her. For example, she talked somebody into giving her sons full scholarships for the Rudolf Steiner School, which was a prestigious private school. Leftist friends criticized her for that as elite, but she didn't care. Alice went her own path. Even with her left-wing philosophy, she had her own ideas.

I think Richard was a potter. He had done a little pottery sugar bowl for Alice. That was the sugar bowl we all used. It sat on the kitchen table always, even after Alice died.

The fact is – and I don't think this is necessarily relevant to the painting – but Richard was an older teenager who was gay. In the 1960s, that still wasn't easy. Alice was a very sympathetic person, especially if you were part of any ostracized group or if you yourself felt ostracized or sad or insecure. She was very loving and made no judgment.

The main thing for somebody who felt ostracized, Alice had no judgment. She didn't paint people to judge them. She painted people as individuals. If she was painting a person – somebody who was gay or a woman or a laborer or black – she did not paint them to represent that group of people. They were painted to be quintessentially the individual. As that individual they represented their own humanness to which we could respond and empathize, as we are all suffering from the oppressions of society, just some more unfairly than others. Now during the 30s, she emphasized people as laborers, making their hands big or emphasizing the work they were doing. But she didn't judge.

People say Alice was tough: "*Who* would want to be painted by *her*?" Alice could have a very sharp tongue. But when she painted, she completely communed with you and *never* used the painting to judge somebody. Now, she did some paintings of people from memory and, in those, you can often see her critique of their personalities. So, her sympathy and embracing personality was really why she and Richard Gibbs became friends.

The one thing I remember about Richard Gibbs happened in New York. My roommate at Wellesley knew Alice before I did. We had gotten an apartment in New York, but it wasn't ready for us to move in. So, she asked Alice if we could stay with her. This was when Alice was living at West 107th St. I had to go downtown and he said he'd grab a cab with me. He was sweet and handsome and charming. I thought he had so many girlfriends. I got back and said that - that he had talked the whole way

about his girlfriends. Alice said he was gay. I said, "No, no! He talked about all his girlfriends. And Alice laughed, "Oh, that's just a *cover!*"

It was my first introduction to gays at the time. He was really darling.

No one really knows what happened to him. But he died *quite young*, but it is thought that he died of AIDS.

Kay: I have read that Alice still owned most of her work when she died. Was Richard's portrait among the paintings in Alice's apartment at that time?

Ginny: Richard's painting would have been in her apartment when I stayed there. It was not until she went with the Miller Gallery in 1982 that most of her paintings were elsewhere. She had a lot at 107th by the time she died. The photograph that Hartley's father [Sam Brody, pictured on the documentary cover above] took, was at the apartment. When I was there in 1967, she had all the paintings at her apartment, stacked in racks. If an artist came to visit, she got them to build racks for her. When the Miller Gallery took her work, they had in-house storage.

Kay: Seeing how others see us can be so informative, but I would think it would be especially true for a young artist like Richard Gibbs. What might he have learned from seeing how Alice saw him? How long would he have sat for her? Would she have spent time afterward finishing the portrait?

Ginny: I wasn't there with Richard Gibbs, so I can't tell you what they talked about.

But, I can tell about what she did generally. First of all, she painted intensely for about three hours. You would have a minimum of three sittings. During that time, you would want to break. She'd talk and talk and talk. You'd laugh and she would keep you animated.

If you *dared* to move anything, she'd say, "No, no! Keep that hand where it is!" She was very strict about that. She'd get so into it that she wouldn't want to stop. You wouldn't move your lips very much, [Ginny demonstrates with a funny muffled plea]: "*Alice*, my right leg is *killing* me!"

"Ohhhh, just a second..." [in a very sweet voice]. 'She'd roll you along that way.

Finally she'd say, "All right, all right."

Then, you'd wait until she put tape where your feet and hands were to get you back into that exact position. There would be tape on the floor and tape on the chair, so you sat pretty much the same.

Kay: I've read that Alice liked her portraits to reveal in her subjects the secrets they would rather keep private and that she wanted to capture the Zeitgeist and the human condition, using people as evidence of what the world had done to them. How do you think this portrait does that?

Ginny: Looking at this again, I see that the light in this painting is wonderful! It was done at 107th [in New York]. But she brought New Jersey into it: There's grass! That's *not* the view from the window. The grass is coming right into the room. She's connecting Richard with New Jersey. I don't know what was in her mind. But that's where she knew him.

Kay: So, she met Richard in Spring Lake, but then he came to live in New York?

Ginny: Yes. Richard came to New York to do whatever art he did – which I think was pottery.

Now, I think it was Kurt Vonnegut who said everybody has a keyhole through which they look at things. You see what you see. The whole rest of the room is missing. All I saw of Richard Gibbs is that he was gay. And that that was difficult for him. And that he found solace with Alice. If he had a whole other life, and I imagine he had a whole other life, that I don't know.

Kay: What do you think the portrait shows of Gibbs' personality?

Ginny: If I knew him really well, I could maybe better postulate. There are some earlier paintings she did of him where he looks anxious. But here he doesn't. What do you think?

Kay: To me he looks anxious, as if he wants to bolt from the room.

Ginny: You can say, "People don't look happy in her paintings. After you sit for three hours, *nobody* looks happy." You begin thinking about all the things that worry you. Part of it is just being tired.

It would demean Alice to say that she painted just what she saw. She saw *more* than what was there, or would seem to be there. But it is hard to sit for a long time. He looks discouraged to me. I don't know if he was. Or if he wasn't liking New York.

For some reason, she paints the grass and blue sky in. Look at the light underneath!

I'm not competent [to analyze her work as an art historian], but people overlook a great deal. I help manage the estate. Or I should say that our advisor, Jeremy Lewison,

manages the estate with my help. He was the head of collections at Tate Gallery. He's an amazing art historian.

But I felt just before 2002 that Alice wasn't being looked at as other artists were being looked at. It's amazing, the marvelous ways she handles composition, focus and balance. That shadow under the chair is wonderful, as is the way that the light shines on Richard's leg.

Alice once said, "If you look at my paintings, you can *see the abstraction.*" Take that piece of leg. She chose to do that blue on the wall behind him in that way that takes away the corner. Maybe the corner was there and she didn't like what it took away from him.

What happened, in my opinion, when she first was re-noticed in the '60s was that she was in her 60s. They conflated her age and her ability. And they assumed sometimes – if they weren't very bright - that she didn't make choices. Well, she made choices all the time. She *chose* to make the windows speak that way. She made all those choices to make the painting better and balance it better. At the same time, she zeroes in on the psyche. She has abilities on so many levels.

In 1963, we were the younger girls at Wellesley. All the older girls were worried about getting married. And the freshman class worried about how *not* to get married. We thought we were inventing it. Along comes Alice and we said, "Wow, this isn't fiction. This is amazing."

There's a painting of me that she did that same year. People who are smart love it. For me it's that flying skull, that part of me that was passionate about politics and the world. In the retrospective, it struck me that we women from that age were doing things that we thought we discovered. We thought nobody else had done it before. When we were a little educated, we realized that *Alice* did it with absolutely no structure to depend on. We had all kinds of support: "You *should* be like this [independent]." Everything in her life was, "You *shouldn't ever* be like this."

Kay: What else in the Richard Gibbs portrait is typical of Alice's signature style and the work she produced throughout her life? I've read that she didn't like using flesh-colored paint.

Ginny: First of all, I don't know what she meant when she said she didn't like flesh-colored paint. Maybe there is a pre-mixed "flesh" color. She would not like that. She creates her own flesh. In fact, her work was included in a recent show called, "Paint

Made Flesh." She paints flesh with great skill, whether it is super light or very dark, or Indian or Asian skin. She picks up the tint of our skin.

Another amazing thing about Alice is her confidence. To compare to her someone who I don't think is as good - Lucian Freud doesn't have the kind of confidence she shows in her brushwork. When she puts the paint down, it almost always is right. Somebody in London said, "Oh, my gosh, she does them so fast! Lucian Freud does 12 sittings." I said, "I compare them to Salieri and Mozart! And Alice is Mozart!" There's this odd idea if you don't spend a gazillion hours, you can't have done as great a job. But, it's because she's so incredibly talented that what she put down is the right thing.

She also wonderful at painting fabric. You see that in Richard's shirt. But you see her style also in his eyes, and his feet.

Kay: Watching her paint in the documentary, I was amazed to realize that Alice was a *lefty* – in painting, as in politics.

Ginny: Yes, she was a lefty [laughing]. Her self-portrait shows her as a righty because it was painted in a mirror.

My daughter, Elizabeth, who is an artist, pointed out to me how Alice *draws* as she paints. People talk about drawing - that drawing is more *immediate* than painting. The film shows that. People love drawings because they're not so worked over. It's not so over-thought. That immediacy comes through in her paintings. It's because she actually does draw when she starts her painting. She very seldom did any pre-drawing to work from. That immediacy comes through, and comes through in this painting.

[Hesitating, as if she hates over-analyzing] You never know...Who knows if the center of the painting is the crotch area. You can go on and on [speculating as to Alice's intention and focus]. Richard looks more confident to me here than in his younger portraits, more confident, more aggressive. Yet, I wouldn't feel he was an aggressive person. His head is a little forward. Before this, I'd seen him without a beard. Maybe he's relaxed. You could see this as relaxed, with his hand on his knee.

Often we take ourselves to a painting. It is what *we* make of it.

Kay: What other signature aspects of Alice's style do you see here?

Ginny: The eyes. You focus very much on his eyes. She's eliminated the right-hand side of the painting. It's almost a drawing.

Kay: The color choices she makes are wonderful. Do you know how did she thought about the artistic choices she made in painting a portrait?

Ginny: The fact is, she *did* paint what she saw to a certain extent. If you were wearing an orange and yellow shirt, it wasn't going to end up green and blue. She might emphasize one thing and leave others out. Richard's face is really very complete.

Kay: I loved the art historian's comment in the movie that Alice was spare in what details she chose to leave in. In writing, that is what we call the "telling detail."

Ginny: In Andrew's movie, he got his camera woman to focus on the details in Alice's paintings so you could really see them. So, Richard's elbow is orange. Then, it turns green. It is quite green up his arm. Then, there's a shadow. But she *chose* that green color, whether that color was actually reflected by the light, I don't know. She picks it up on his blue pants, there's a green area. Then, up his left arm is a different, more yellow green. She found ways to pull it together. She chose just green on the plant, the rest is a pink non-color. So, that green is important. She keeps bringing it into the painting. It unifies the painting.

If you look at the leg, the shadows on it are amazing. It just looks right. If you look closer, you see things that would seem like odd choices that are absolutely the right choices.

If you look at the Andy Warhol painting, if I remember correctly, the whole forehead is just canvas, except for one brushstroke that crosses the front of it.

Kay: As we as docents use this portrait, what would you and other family members most want visitors to know about Alice?

Ginny: We want people to know what a great artist she was. She *loved* people. And she is one of the great talents who could see them, empathize with them and translate them for us into an analogy – for all of us.

Kay: Can you tell me how many paintings Alice did in her lifetime?

Ginny: We don't know really. We have to figure she spent a lot of time painting and then multiply. Now, that people who [who own her paintings] are getting into their 80s and 90s and dying, works are surfacing. These are all old works. When Alice was young, she would pay for things with her paintings. We don't have a record of everything. Anyway she was just herself. If someone bought something, she paid for dinner for her kids.

Kay: Tell me a little more about yourself and your family?

Ginny: We live in Vermont on a farm. Hartley is a doctor. Our children, Andrew and Elizabeth, were brought up here. The kids now live in New York. And we spend quite a lot of time in New York working on the estate business.

Our daughter, Elizabeth Neel, is a painter. She is with Sikkema Jenkins in New York. My son, Andrew, as you know, is a filmmaker. And Elizabeth's husband, Uri Aran, is an artist with Gavin Brown.

Kay: Thank you so much for spending this time with me. You have caused me to see a very different side of Alice. It makes me grieve that I didn't get to know her. I'll leave in my original [Object of the Month for MIA docents] things like John Perreault's description of how she persuaded him to pose nude. But, this conversation really illuminates the power of Alice Neel, the artist and the person.

Ginny: She was amazing. She was funny. She was witty.

Let me just say, I won't take anything away from John Perreault. But, Alice really didn't ask *everybody* to take their clothes off. People *love* that line because it's a good line for them. The fact is, if she wanted to do you nude, that's why you were there. In general, she asked you to pose, partly because of what you were *wearing*. If what you were wearing was uninteresting, she might ask you to take it off. It became a thing to say about Alice Neel. She loved the body. She loved flesh. And *everything* was valid. But she wasn't voyeuristic.



Cindy Nemser and Chuck, Alice Neel, 1975, © Estate of Alice Neel

In the painting of Cindy Nemser and Chuck, my brother-in-law, Richard had a great line. In the painting, Cindy's sitting in front of her husband to protect him, and Richard said, "Oh, thank god, a normal couple!"

Alice would flirt with you to keep you alive. She loved men. She'd say something to get their eyes sparkling, like "Oh, I'd love to paint you nude." But, in fact, most of her subjects are clothed because that is how she saw them and that is how she wanted to paint them - as they were.