

CRITIC'S PICK

It's Time to Put Alice Neel in Her Rightful Place in the Pantheon

A large retrospective feels at home in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's grandest galleries and should silence any doubt about the artist's originality or her importance.

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Alice Neel: People Come First NYT Critic's Pick

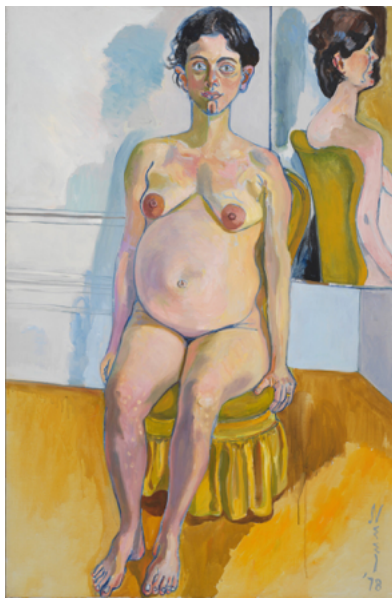
It is said that the future is female, and one can only hope. But it is important to remember that the past, through continuous excavation, is becoming more female all the time. The latest evidence is the gloriously relentless retrospective of Alice Neel (1900-1984), the radical realist painter of all things human, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“Alice Neel: People Come First” is a momentous show of more than 100 paintings, drawings and watercolors from streetscapes, still lifes and interiors to the portraits of a veritable cross section of New Yorkers, occasionally nude, that are considered her greatest work.

The largest Neel retrospective yet seen in New York and the first in 20 years, it reigns over prime Met real estate — the Tisch Galleries, typically host to historic figures like Michelangelo, Delacroix and Courbet, and only now to a female artist. This array confirms Neel as equal if not superior to artists like Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon and destined for icon status on the order of Vincent van Gogh and David Hockney.



“Cindy Nemser and Chuck,” 1975. Estate of Alice Neel



"Margaret Evans Pregnant," 1978. Estate of Alice Neel



"Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd," 1970. Estate of Alice Neel

"People Come First" opens with a gut-punch, a 1978 portrait that almost dares you to enter: "Margaret Evans Pregnant." Evans, wife of the collage artist John Evans, is naked, her belly and breasts swollen by the imminent arrival of twins. She perches on what appears to be a gold velvet slipper chair, her pose at once regal and precarious, her staring eyes mimicking Neel's scrutiny. Her profile and left shoulder register in a mirror close by, the reflection foretelling how childbirth will deflate her form. The painting announces several Neel themes: motherhood, female agency, individual personality and the body.

Neel liked, she said, the plasticity of pregnant women's bodies, conjuring both her own distorted forms and her endless demonstrations of oil paint's malleability. In 1980, at 80, four years before her death, she would unveil her own sagging nakedness in one of art history's most quietly shocking and forthright self-portraits. But her sitters also guarded their privacy, as in the 1975 "Cindy Nemser and Chuck," a nude double portrait of the well-known art critic and her husband. The pose is decorous, but the real cover stems from Nemser's expression, which is alert with vigilant curiosity.

“Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian,” 1978. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

“Robert Smithson,” 1962. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Neel’s “Nancy and Olivia,” 1967, left, is juxtaposed with van Gogh’s “Madame Roulin and Her Baby,” from 1888. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Neel's star has been on the rise since 1974, when, after several decades on the art world's margins, her confrontational, solidly painted portraits were finally acknowledged with an overdue survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Today, she is a cult figure, an early feminist, inborn bohemian, erstwhile Social Realist, lifelong activist and staunchly representational painter who bravely persisted, depicting the people and world around her through the heydays of Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Minimalism.

Neel's greatness lies in the different levels of realism she combines in her art. They include social and economic inequities; the body's deterioration through time; and the complex interior lives of her subjects. There's the reality of Neel's own personality, ever-present in her work; her insatiable curiosity about people; and her instinct for pushing the envelope, especially by cajoling her sitters to pose nude. The realities of her tumultuous life are a constant, too. We see her family, lovers, children (from three different fathers), friends, neighbors (and their children) in Spanish Harlem and denizens of the New York art world. Life's tragedies included the death of her first child, a daughter, from diphtheria, and the destruction of much of her early work at the hands of a jealous lover.

"Ninth Avenue El," 1935. Estate of Alice Neel

"Elenka," 1936. Estate of Alice Neel

"Pat Whalen," 1935. Estate of Alice Neel

She painted her dying mother, the psych ward where she recovered from a nervous breakdown brought on by her baby daughter's death, her failing marriage and two suicide attempts. She portrayed contemporaries in various spheres, whether labor leaders like the union organizer Pat Whalen or the civil rights leader James Farmer, Jackie Curtis of Andy Warhol's Factory, or Warhol himself stripped to the waist showing the road map of surgical scars from Valerie Solanas's attempt on his life. In 1967, she also painted a portrait another member of the Warhol circle, Henry Geldzahler, the Met's curator of 20th-century art, with whom she had a testy relationship. She asked Geldzahler for a place in his "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970," an enormous exhibition that would open in Oct. 1969 with one woman — Helen Frankenthaler — among its 43 artists and only a few Pop Art deviations from abstraction. His reply: "Oh, so you want to be a *professional*?"

And let's not forget the dazzling reality of Neel's paintings as objects, the insistence of her color, light and flattened compositions, the undisguised preliminaries, drawn in blue, and her surface textures. Thick strokes of paint alternate with loosely brushed backgrounds, outlines and patches of empty canvas — all possibly absorbed from Abstract Expressionism. Somewhat like their loquacious maker, Neel's paintings refuse to shut up and part of their power is their ability to remain abstract. "I don't think there is any great painting that doesn't have good abstract qualities" she announced late in life. And yet in their depictions of individual beings, Neel's images go beyond painting in her figures' psychic honesty, they press out at us, like an unusually tactile version of photography. They have, as one writer put it, "an overkill of likeness," reminiscent of visceral avidity of the photographs of Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus.

"A Spanish Boy," 1955. Estate of Alice Neel

“Two Girls, Spanish Harlem,”
1959. Estate of Alice Neel

“Spanish Harlem,” 1938. Estate of Alice
Neel

The show is brilliantly installed by its organizers, the Met curators Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey, segueing from chronological to thematic, linking works early and late and demonstrating Neel’s fluctuations among various realist styles — tight, loose, expressionistic, surreal. The first two galleries encompass works from the 1930s to the late 1950s and show how foundational to her development were New York City — its buildings, problems, people and the neighborhoods in which she lived — Greenwich Village, the Upper West Side and especially Spanish Harlem. She moved there in 1938 to be with José Santiago Negrón, the father of Richard, her first son, and stayed until 1960. (José had moved on by 1940.)

There are several middle galleries dedicated to her portraits of the 1960s and ’70s, considered by many to be her best work — and, for a while, as her fame was growing, her only efforts of merit. But the show affirms that she was outstanding from the start, for example, as in a 1926 El Greco-infused portrait of her first and only husband, Carlos Enríquez, the father of her two daughters, from whom she separated early but never divorced.

At various points, works from the past disrupt the narrative that seems to be forming. In the Counter/Culture gallery, where works from the ’50s and ’60s dominate, three portraits from 1935 and ’36 — “Pat Whalen,” “Max White” and “Elenka” — fit right in, showing how early she began to hit her mature style.

“Death of Mother Bloor,” 1951. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

“Black Draftee (James Hunter),” 1965. Sasha Arutyunova for The New
York Times

"Carlos Enríquez" from 1926. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Along the way three small sidebar galleries contain idiosyncratic mixes that roam around in time. In the Home section, small watercolors of Neel's love life after Carlos. These are followed by a startling nude portrait from 1934-35 of their second daughter, Isabetta, around 6; and a painting of Hartley, her second son and youngest child (with a photographer named Sam Brody), in 1943, as a toddler on a rocking horse, staring out with light-struck blue eyes. It concludes with three magnificent still lifes: the bristling 1952 "Cut Glass With Fruit" next to two from the 1970s, once more defying chronology and the notion that only late Neel is great.

The Human Comedy section includes tortured artists like Warhol (1970) and Robert Smithson (1962), but also the more typical suffering of low-income mothers seeking help in the chaotic "Well Baby Clinic" of 1928-29. Its cartoon Expressionism spares nothing. Alice is on the right, middle, diapering Isabetta.

Art as History begins by pairing Neel's "Nancy and Olivia," a 1967 portrait of her daughter-in-law and grandchild, with a mother and child by van Gogh. "Ninth Avenue El" from 1935 reaches back to Neel's distinctive Social Realism, combining beauty and political commentary. Its luminous blue twilight sky and inky shadows scintillate while New Yorkers with little skull faces go about their business.

This show is an excavation of its own. It sustains return visits and careful attention to the text labels. Take in the portraits whole and then in parts. Look, for example, at the strikingly rendered hand and the emotional notes they add.

Neel's achievement is being celebrated at a moment when figurative painting is ascendant, arguably more prominent than it has been in over 70 years. It expands her cult status, moving her squarely into art's most trafficked thruways — past, present and oncoming.

Alice Neel: People Come First

Through Aug. 1 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.