

Alice Neel's Well Baby Clinic, two pages from a biography:

(see Anna Bethune with questions)

Additional info from NYU Langone Health:

<https://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/10401>

And our own label:

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/137640/well-baby-clinic-alice-neel>

Neel's account of her visit to the hospital just before her second child was born is full of the poignant but brutal imagery that soon found its way into her painting *Well Baby Clinic*. She described the "coarse" women she saw there, with their "heavy faces and blunt fingers."

... I feel sorry for them all—can realize their hard burdens, but I hate their stupid faces and I hate like hell to be their thin white robed companion. When I look at their poor bodies I begin to imagine where and how and under what romantic dream they all indulged in that so enjoyable privilege—the act of life. . . .

... And sometimes their life is too hard and their children die or are killed in the crowded streets and grief completes what labor has so well begun and their heavy bodies and blank grief-stricken faces grow to look at the streaming luxury of the rich—without even desire or envy so heavy has been their loss. For now all the wealth and comfort of the universe could not restore the children they have lost—perhaps for want of an oil stove on a damp and foggy day—or a doctor in time.

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Neel gave birth to Isabella Lillian Enríquez on November 24, 1928. She and Carlos called their daughter "Isabetta." (According to Isabetta's husband, Pablo Lancella, they got the name from a voluble Italian family in the hospital, who kept shouting it out.) Her birth certificate, issued on December 3, states that Isabetta was born at Fifth Avenue Hospital at 105th Street and Fifth Avenue to Alice Hartley Neel, age 27 (housewife) and Carlos Enríquez, age 28 (artist).

Just several weeks later, Neel documented her memory of childbirth with the remarkable painting *Well Baby Clinic*. The work is a return to the use of oil paints, and quintessential Neel: skeptical, psychological, and powerfully cynical. Neel was already embarking on a lifelong career as the anti-Cassatt. She recognized as much in herself. "*Well Baby Clinic* makes my attitude toward childbirth very dubious. I wondered how that woman could be so happy, with that little bit of hamburger she's fixing the diaper for." As she said, "When people would mewl over little kids, I just wanted to paint them."

The painting depicts a maternity ward with rows of beds filled with writhing, faceless infants. One mother, teeth bared, is about to breast-feed her child. A nurse cradles a baby, while the woman with the "hamburger" prepares a diaper. To her right is a gentler image, "that nice-looking one"—Neel herself, with Isabetta. A doctor proffers pills. Neel referred to the

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contrast between the clinic's neat white walls and pure nurses' outfits and the "sloppy humanity there, all ragged at the edges. . . . The walls look so hard and neat and the people so mangy and wretched."

It is certainly one of the least sentimental depictions of new motherhood ever created. The painting is also very much in keeping with the painfully personal pieces Neel was painting during this period, when much of her work was unabashedly autobiographical.

Neel suffered from phlebitis immediately after Isabetta's birth, causing her to be confined to bed for a few weeks, and to walk with a cane for several months. Alice spent some of her confinement writing a strange short story, "The Dark Picture of the Kallikaks," which describes the primitive coupling in a swamp of a young woman, Nona Kallikak, "the last scion of her disreputable family," and Unik Edwards, a young man from the upper class. (Nona is also the name of one of Nadya Olyanova's friends, whom Neel painted in a 1933 double nude portrait of the two, which she called *The Two Little Tarts*, but this character does not appear to be based on her.)

Although Hills remarks that the story reflects the 1920s preoccupation with eugenics and the differences between genders and classes, its raw sexual energy is its most striking feature. The story contains a passage which has a satiric pornographic tone that would later surface in Neel's intimate watercolors of herself and John Rothschild. Certainly the "most repressed creature that ever lived" now had an overt and worldly view of sex.

Nona bent more and more backwards and then leaning against the bank gradually lay down, her black eyes more sad and strange than before. Unik Edwards didn't care. He unbuttoned her loose blouse. He kissed her white stomach, her round white breasts one in each hand he pushed them together. They looked like white birds then and he kissed their pink beaks. The flat thick slit of Nona's mouth was working in and out rhythmically with primitive emotion. And now the sharp clean shaven lips of Unik fell into the soft red jelly of Nona's lips. She felt his watch tickling on her bare white belly, the buttons of his vest hard places in his soft wool suit. She felt his motions were too jerky and she did her best to mold him with the slow passionate movement of the purple mud.