

Alice Neel's Feminist Portraits

Women Artists, Writers, Activists and Intellectuals



Cover: *Bonnie Bremser*, 1963
Ink on paper, 29¹/₂ x 22 in. (74.9 x 55.9 cm.)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Wagman, New York

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Alice Neel appeared to burst on the scene in the 1970s with her riveting portraits of public figures like a bare-chested and bandaged Andy Warhol after he had been shot by Valerie Solanis (1970), a towering portrait of a round-breasted Bella Abzug (1975), and later, New York City's then-mayor Ed Koch (1981). Despite being a regular in New York City's art world in the 1930s, it wasn't until the 1970s that Neel began to gain mainstream visibility when her colorful life story, ebullient personality, and passion about showing her work began to attract the media's attention. By this point she was in her seventies, and her grandmotherly but ribald persona and outlandish portraits had become the subject of frequent feature stories in mainstream newspapers and magazines including *Newsweek* and *People*. Her irreverent sense of humor even helped land her two guest appearances on the *Johnny Carson Show*.

Critics and scholars lamented this inordinate focus on Neel's personality and life story to the exclusion of sustained attention to the quality of her work and the importance of her contributions to twentieth-century art. This charge has lessened in recent years as recognition of her work continues to grow following the national tour of her first major retrospective exhibition in 2000 and 2001. In addition to her visibility in 1970s mainstream culture, Neel was quite successful professionally during this time, exhibiting widely in galleries and small museums around the country and lecturing tirelessly at college campuses. Among other awards and honors, in 1976 Neel was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1979 she was invited to the White House by President Jimmy Carter to receive the National Women's Caucus for Art Award.

Although the increased attention paid to Neel and her work in the 1970s is attributed commonly to the rise of Second Wave feminism, an association made explicit through Neel's outspoken activism in support of women's rights, in fact Neel had an ambivalent and rather complex relationship to feminism that is evident in her portraits of leftist women artists, intellectuals, and writers and in the other portraits of women she painted and drew from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Neel portrayed some of the most interesting and compelling women from U.S. twentieth-century history. In some of her portraits of ordinary women (whom she met on the street or who were her neighbors and friends), Neel explored such chronic female hardships as domestic violence, child abuse, and poverty. She created many of these works long before Second Wave feminism drew attention to these issues. She also frequently explored race and class differences between women and was consistently critical of white privilege, often through the use of parody and humor, in ways that contemporary feminists have only recently begun to explore.

By looking closely at Neel's portraits of women as a category of their own, we can uncover this neglected legacy of her work and gain a more complex understanding of Neel's politics and relationship to feminism, perspectives that have been largely absent from the recent critical response to her work.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 375-76.

Alice Neel 1900-1984

Biography

I don't give a damn. I was women's lib before there was women's lib.

–Alice Neel

Much of Neel's work is unmistakably autobiographical. According to feminist art critic Ann Sutherland Harris, Neel's oeuvre stands as a "kind of diary" to the people, events, and experiences of her life. She was born in Merion Square, a suburb of Philadelphia, in 1900 to a middle-class family. Her father, who Neel described as a "very refined...wonderful, kind man," was the head of the per diem department of the Pennsylvania Railroad. He came from a family of opera singers. Neel's mother, Alice Concross Hartley, a descendent of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was an intelligent, well-read, and strong-minded homemaker who took Neel regularly to concerts and the theater. A highly sensitive child, the fourth of five children (one of whom died), Neel remembered feeling completely bored with small-town life but credited her mother with being the only one who "stimulated (her) mind."

From an early age Neel reported a heightened awareness of class distinctions and a disdain for bourgeois conventions. As a young adult she enrolled at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, but rejected the impressionist style in favor there, stating, "I never saw life as a picnic on the grass." Instead, she was influenced by the Ashcan School of realism through one of its main proponents, Robert Henri, who had taught at the Philadelphia School of Design. The Ashcan School made urban poverty its subject and asserted the importance of using feeling in art. Neel remembered how "on the way to school I would pass old gray-haired women who had been scrubbing office floors all night and would...feel guilty to be drawing classic statues." Her social conscience developed further in the leftist climate of Greenwich Village, where she moved in 1927 and where she briefly joined the Communist Party. Although she said she was "never a good Communist" because she "hate[d] bureaucracy," she remained committed to its ideals and loyal to its members, many of whom she painted through the McCarthy era and up until her death.

A true bohemian, she deliberately chose a lifestyle free of convention. For most of her life she struggled as an artist and single mother, a white woman who lived from 1938 to 1962 alone with her children in the New York City neighborhood that was then called Spanish Harlem and today is known as El Barrio. As a young woman she married a Cuban art student, Carlos Enriquez, who came from an aristocratic and wealthy family. They had two children; one died in infancy, and the other was raised by Neel's in-laws. She had several stormy relationships with often-troubled men, including one who slashed scores of her paintings. She had two more children, Richard and Hartley, and later in life became a devoted, although eccentric, mother and grandmother.

Because of her unconventional lifestyle, precarious class status, and political sensibilities, she was sensitive to the pretenses of social class, the ethnocentrism of the hegemonic white culture, and dominant ideologies around mothering, family, and femininity that shifted and changed over her lifetime. Her portraits of women, by virtue of their range of class, race, ethnicity, and historical moment, demonstrate quite well the shifting and multiple meanings of the construct "woman" during much of the twentieth century.

Neel's art enjoyed some recognition from the 1930s to the early 1940s while she was enrolled in the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and the Works Project Administration (WPA)/Federal Art Project. During this period, her work was mostly social realist in style; she painted Depression-era street scenes and Communist radicals and intellectuals like Mother Bloor, the poet Kenneth Fearing, and the union organizer Pat Whalen. When these federally-sponsored programs ended, Neel continued painting in relative obscurity. When Abstract Expressionism became the dominant style in the 1940s and 1950s, Neel lived in Spanish Harlem, and her subjects were mostly her Latino and African American neighbors and her own growing children.

Outside of her neighborhood and family, Neel's choice of sitters almost always reflected her own political and social concerns; overwhelmingly, her sitters were avant-garde and left-wing subjects. It wasn't until World War II, however, that Neel began to paint women artists or activists. Neel was ahead of her time, picking up currents in the culture's direction and presciently recording late-twentieth-century U.S. women intellectuals, writers, artists, and activists.

In the early 1960s, Neel's work began to regain visibility as figurative work returned to fashion and leftist politics returned to favor. By the 1970s, when the women's movement and a feminist art movement were in full swing, Neel joined other women artists of her generation, like Louise Nevelson and Louise Bourgeois, in being touted as role models. Not only was the social and political environment receptive to Neel and her art, but her personal life had also become freer with both sons grown and in college.

Neel contributes to the legacy of other women artists—such as Suzanne Valadon and Käthe Kollwitz—who have similarly transgressed, and therefore transformed, canonical codes for representing women. Starting from her social realist portraits of the 1930s—in which she explored women, poverty, and oppression—to the increasingly autonomous, revolutionary women she painted—feminist activists and artists from the 1970s and early 1980s—Neel's portraits of women chronicle twentieth-century U.S. feminist history.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 375, 385-86, 393-94.

Degenerate Madonna, 1930

Oil on canvas, 31 x 24 in. (78.7 x 60.9 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

It is inviting to look at romantic, artfully-staged portraits of mothers and children—cherubic, irresistible children and serene, smiling mothers—because they offer us the fantasy of a privileged ideal. These Madonna and child-inspired images belie the messy realities of mothering and raising children; they are relics of an historical tradition in which maternal subjectivity was invisible and women artists were (are) largely silent and silenced.

In a macabre inversion of the Madonna and child tradition, Neel painted the wildly expressionistic *Degenerate Madonna* in 1930.... However, in this moralizing work, Neel casts her friend Nadya as the “bad mother.” Nadya never had children, perhaps because she had had multiple abortions from which she suffered permanent physical damage. Here Neel plays with the virgin/whore dichotomy that persists in Western culture in which a bad mother would also be a sexual one.... *Degenerate Madonna* is a startlingly crude, mostly black and white painting of a disfigured bare-breasted woman and her deformed child.... When it was shown at the Washington Square Park annual outdoor art exhibition in 1932, the local Catholic church demanded that it be removed, viewing its monstrous image of the Madonna as sacrilege.

—Denise Bauer, “Alice Neel’s Portraits of Mother Work,” *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), pp. 102, 108.



The Cafeteria, 1938

Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Alice Neel was a political radical intensely interested in issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender long before these issues became academically fashionable. Neel's exploration of difference is evident in this little known portrait of three women in a restaurant, *The Cafeteria*. In a public setting, Neel nearly caricatures how different class and racial identities form women's appearances, attitudes, and stations in life. Significantly, the most socially marginalized person—the aging black woman—is foregrounded, while the most socially privileged one—the young white woman—is profiled on the side. The ordinary, white, working-class woman remains in the background, almost unnoticed.

Neel frequently painted women like these together in public. These scenes, however, markedly contrast the sheltered, domestic scenes of women together drinking tea, reading books, or attending to children as interpreted by nineteenth-century women artists like Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. Lacking what feminist art historian Griselda Pollock called "spaces of femininity," Neel's images of women were often captured in public. And, unlike Cassatt's and Morisot's depictions of private life within their own social class, Neel's images of women together critique and lay bare differences of race, class, and age. Neel's earlier rejection of impressionism in art school reappears in her disavowal of many of its bourgeois conventions.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 387.



Peggy, 1949

Oil on canvas, 18 x 36 in. (45.7 x 91.4 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

At the same time Neel focused on her sitter's individuality, she also underscored the ways women are victimized in a misogynist society. By focusing the male gaze in a strategic way, Neel expressed the myriad reactions and feelings experienced by women who are without personal or political power. Her female subjects reflect fear, apprehension, and self-consciousness of the objectifying male gaze and illustrate the effects of tabooed social problems such as emotional abuse and domestic violence.

One such portrait is *Peggy*, which depicts a woman with a blackened eye and a bruised face. Her bent arms are raised up around her, as if to fend off an attack. Neel exaggerates the attenuation of Peggy's thin arms in an unusual rectangular-shaped canvas. The wild gesture of the arms in this head-and-shoulder's portrait emphasizes her badly battered face and down-turned mouth. Peggy was Neel's neighbor and the victim of domestic violence. Alice frequently told the story that Peggy was found dead in her bed one morning after taking an overdose of sleeping pills; her drunken husband had slept beside her dead body all night.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 387-8.



Death of Mother Bloor, ca. 1951

Pencil on paper, 10 x 13 in. (25.4 x 33 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

In this highly unusual portrait sketch, Alice Neel depicts Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor, one of the only women leaders in the American Communist Party, as she lay in her coffin during her funeral. In a finished painting of the same subject, mourners of different races and ethnicities, including a mother with an infant in her arms, are pictured as they pass before the foregrounded image of the dead woman. This diverse collection of people embodies the inclusive world that Bloor fought to create. However, in an ironic and bitter way, Neel uses Bloor's death to signal the death of such a vision. In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee had begun prosecuting suspected Communists in the U.S. government and Hollywood. For communist sympathizers like Neel, the beginning of the McCarthy Era extinguished any hope for imminent social change.

Several years earlier, Neel had also painted from memory a portrait of her father in his coffin, *Dead Father* (1946). Very much like this drawing of Mother Bloor's funeral, Neel depicted her father's corpse in a closer, more intimate view without mourners. There is a custom of painting portraits of the dead in Latin cultures, which Neel no doubt encountered. What is striking, however, is that the portrait of the artist's dead father is commonly reproduced and discussed, whereas the image of Mother Bloor, which is so politically and historically interesting and complex, has virtually been ignored.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 389-90.



Death of Mother Bloor, ca. 1958

Oil on canvas, 26 x 36 in. (66 x 91.4 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Dore Ashton, 1952

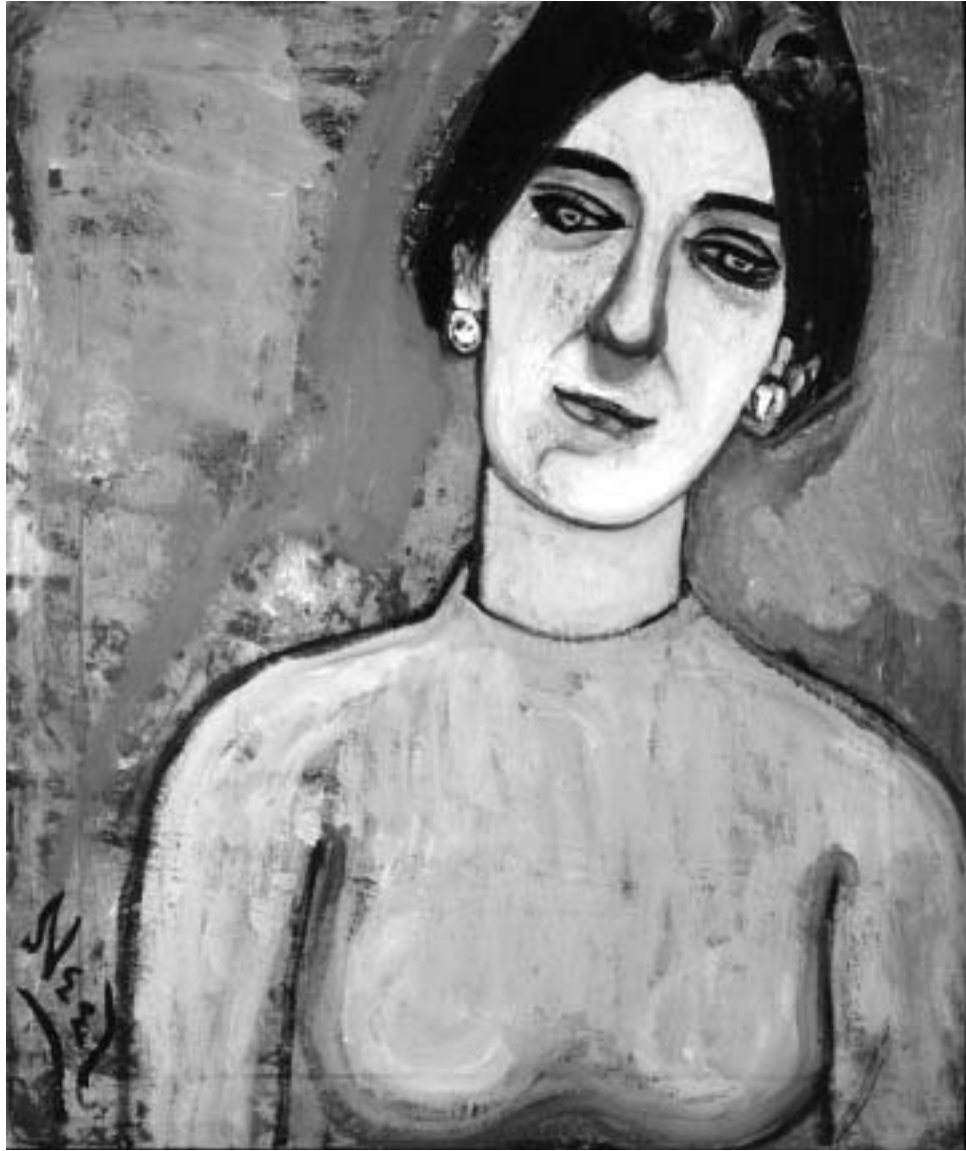
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

This rendering of Dore Ashton is one of the most abstracted and stylized of Alice Neel's portraits. The figure's oval head and attenuated neck have formal affinities to works by the twentieth-century Italian modernist Amedeo Modigliani. The bold color and expressive brushstrokes in the background possibly make reference to the sitter's connections to the history of modernist and abstract painting in America at mid-century. Today a professor of art history at Cooper Union in New York City, Dore Ashton is one of America's most respected writers on art. She is possibly best known for her survey *American Art Since 1945* (1982) that has served as a seminal introductory text to post-war visual culture in the United States. As author of *The Life and Times of the New York School* (1972) also published as *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (1973)—as well as monographs on the artists Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston and Robert Motherwell—Ashton is a leading scholar of the Abstract Expressionist school of American painting. Ashton's writings also include books on women artists, such as the nineteenth-century French painter Rosa Bonheur and the contemporary American sculptor Ursula Von Rydingsvard. In addition to her scholarly accomplishments in the field of art history, Ashton has been a voice for human rights and freedom of expression around the world. As a member of the Freedom to Write Committee of PEN American Center, Ashton voiced opposition to the disregard for human dignity and creative endeavor displayed by emerging military dictatorships in Guatemala, Chile, and Brazil during the 1970s and early 1980s.

—Karl Emil Willers, Curator, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art,
SUNY New Paltz



Mercedes Arroyo, 1952

Oil on canvas, 25 x 24 1/8 in. (63.5 x 61.3 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Arroyo was an activist in Harlem, beginning in the 1930s, and remembered by those in the community as *la elocuente oradora y leader obrera Puertorriquena* ("an eloquent speaker and leader of Puerto Rican workers"). Presumably she was born in Puerto Rico. She devoted the majority of her energies to the growing Puerto Rican community, and to bridging the struggles of the neighborhood's Caribbean and African American residents.

One center of gravity for her activism was Spanish Harlem on the East Side, where she became a popular community leader in this period. Arroyo's work was centered on organizing cultural activities, and she was especially pivotal to the establishment of an art school for East Harlem's children.

By the 1940s and into the 1950s, Arroyo became a regular speaker on the history of cultural and political collaboration between African Americans and Caribbean immigrants, and the continued necessity of such alliances. Arroyo's dark complexion also spoke to the ways Puerto Ricans spanned the racial categories of black and white, and she worked to counter the complex racial divisions within Harlem by organizing across the racial binary that dominated life in the United States.

—Jennifer Guglielmo, Assistant Professor, Department of History,
Smith College, and former adjunct instructor of Women's
Studies and History, SUNY New Paltz



June, 1955

Oil on canvas, 34 x 25 in. (86.4 x 63.5 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

This portrait depicts a woman with her legs tucked under her, seated on a bed against a wall. She sits as if on edge, her body uncomfortably folded. One hand is clenched, the other is unnaturally turned upward and passively lying on her lap. Her eyes are rounded and fearful, expressing a heightened self-consciousness of the implicit male gaze. *June* is a riveting portrayal of a painfully self-consciousness woman, captured from a perspective that accentuates her vulnerability. June's oversized eyes look fearfully out at the viewer. Her hesitating and reserved pose speaks to the awkwardness and self-consciousness that women often feel about their bodies. Through the use of body language in *June*, Neel represents women through the male gaze and, significantly, also represents the internalized injuries the judging male gaze imposes on women.

–Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), p. 388.



Bonnie Bremser, 1963

Ink on paper, 29¹/₂ x 22 in. (74.9 x 55.9 cm.)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Wagman,
New York

Bonnie Bremser was born Brenda Frazer in suburban Washington D.C. in 1939. At the age of nineteen, she met her future husband—the poet Ray Bremser—and was introduced into the circle of writers and activists that became known as the Beat Generation. In the early 1960s, Ray Bremser jumped bail in New Jersey and, to avoid prosecution, went on the lam in Mexico with Bonnie and their daughter Rachel. In her autobiography, *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969), Bonnie Bremser relates how she prostituted herself to support their drug habits while they remained fugitives from justice living south of the U.S. border. After five years of marriage, Bonnie left her husband, gave her daughter up for adoption, and moved back to New York City. There she met Allen Ginsberg and became a resident of Ginsberg's upstate farm in Cherry Valley. Although the lives of the Beat poets are often idealized and romanticized, there was a deeply misogynistic and oppressive strain inherent to Beat culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Bonnie Bremser's life and struggles bring these elements of the Beat experience into focus. In her book *Sisters, Saints & Sibyls: Women and the Beat* (1996), author Brenda Knight comments that, "The women of the Beat are the epitome of cool. They were the black-stockinged hipsters, renegade artists, intellectual muses, and gypsy poets who helped change our culture forever. They were feminist before the word was coined, and their work stands beside that of the men. To the Beat men, these women are sisters, saints, and sibyls. Jack Kerouac, who had many women in his life, once said, 'The truth of the matter is we don't understand our women; we blame them and it's all our fault.'"

—Karl Emil Willers, Curator, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art,
SUNY New Paltz



New Jersey Bride, 1968

Oil on canvas, 29 x 22 in. (73.7 x 55.9 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Alice Neel liked to paint “types”—people who personified certain human characteristics, stations in life and/or social roles. For example, she painted *Fuller Brush Man* (1965) representing the overly eager door to door salesman of that period. In *New Jersey Bride*, Neel uses irony and humor to contrast the role of “bride” with that of an unadorned and unsmiling woman dressed in brown. With eyes half-closed and a steady stare, this “bride” looks decidedly bored and disillusioned. Neel created this image in the wake of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which critiqued the institution of the white, middle-class housewife just at the dawn of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

Neel's radical politics included more rights and respect for women, but not as a single, isolated goal.... She explained, "For practical purposes the aim of women should be to break the insulting and limiting life to which they have been and are subjected. In a culture where the ethos is 'dog eat dog' perhaps the whole philosophy of life would have to be changed." A source of her ambivalence about the women's movement was that she had already lived a lifetime of gender-based struggles that were newly discovered for young feminist activists. In her 1971 address to her alma mater when she was awarded an honorary doctorate, she said: "The women's lib movement is giving women the right to openly practice what I had to do in an underground way."

—Adapted from Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), p. 391.



Dorothy Pearlstein, 1969

Oil on canvas, 39 ³/₄ x 29 ³/₄ in. (101 x 75.6 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

It is instructive to compare and contrast this portrait of Dorothy Pearlstein with the one painted by Alice Neel four years later in 1973. Both images show the wife of painter Philip Pearlstein still wearing a winter coat—seemingly compelled to sit for her portrait the moment she walked through the door. In both portraits, Dorothy Pearlstein is depicted staring directly out at the viewer, but subtle shifts in body posture and facial expression provide differing insights into character, demeanor, and mood.

Although Neel was clearly conversant in and responsive to traditions of art history, she can perhaps best be understood as an iconoclast. Overall, she took a decidedly oppositional stance to the traditional canon of art history and the cultural traditions that had shaped her. Refusing appellations such as "woman artist" and "portrait painter," she preferred to describe herself on her own terms: "I never followed any school. I never imitated any artist. I never did any of that. I believe what I am is a humanist. That's the way I see the world, and that is what I paint. And I have to be myself." One of the most obvious ways that Neel "was herself" was her highly unconventional interpretation of portraiture. Art historian Pamela Allara describes Neel's approach as adapting psychological portraiture from Degas to van Gogh to include the social and political aspects of a subject's identity and place in society." As Neel herself often stated, it was her aim to record both the individual and the *zeitgeist* in her portraits.

—Adapted from Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 391-393.



Marxist Girl (Irene Peslikis), 1972

Oil on canvas, 59 x 42 in. (149.9 x 106.7 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

In the 1970s, Neel painted the new generation of leftist women activists and artists who were leading the women's movement. *Marxist Girl (Irene Peslikis)* features a radical feminist artist and activist who founded one of the first feminist art journals, *Women and Art* (1971-72). Its inaugural issue featured two pieces on Neel, which were among the first feminist recognitions of Neel and her work. Peslikis played an active and influential part in the early women's liberation movement and was a major proponent of consciousness-raising. Like other radical women of her time, Peslikis represented a stark contrast to the well-groomed, made-up conventional woman of this period. Rather than wearing a dress, stockings, and a carefully arranged hairdo, Peslikis is without make-up, her hair is tousled, and she is clad in jeans and a tank top, donning the "women's liberationist" look of the period. In a full view, Neel dramatizes her "unladylike" pose; she has one arm up over her head, perhaps to highlight her unshaven armpit, and one leg casually draped over the arm of the chair. Her aggressively undemure pose and unsmiling face casts Peslikis as a serious-minded radical. This point was furthered by the title Neel gave her portrait, *Marxist Girl*, naming Peslikis for her politics.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 391-2.



Diane Cochrane, 1973

Oil on canvas, 43 x 30 in. (109.2 x 76.2 cm.)

Private Collection

Decked out in coat and tie over a conservative skirt, it is today difficult to judge whether the sitter is emulating or satirizing the traditionally male preserves of corporate business that her attire evokes. This admirable portrait serves to impress upon viewers the way that modes of dress send coded messages and communicate meaning. A definitive example of how women could “dress for success” in the 1970s, *Diane Cochrane* expresses a strongly feminist statement about the power of fashion, as well as its unique ability to conjure up and allude to a very specific historical moment.

Neel's relationship to feminism was not without its complications. Just as she believed in the ideals of communism but wasn't a good party member, she had ambivalent feelings about the women's movement. For example, she described not being interested in the white, middle-class perspective espoused by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). She said, "I couldn't identify with a housewife from Queens. I didn't have her aids—her washing machine, her security." And, rather than seeing men as the source of women's oppression, Neel was more likely to see the capitalist state as the oppressor of all people. As she put it, "They think I'm a big women's libber. I am, but I stop short of them. I don't want to stress it every minute. There's more to life than just women...."

—Adapted from Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 390-91.



Dorothy Pearlstein (No. 2), 1973

Oil on canvas, 44 x 30 in. (111.8 x 76.2 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Only rarely painting for commission, Neel deliberately selected sitters who interested her, capturing their character through their gestures, facial expressions, and especially their body language. Her penetrating vision often exposed the sitters' underlying anxieties and aspects of their identities that were otherwise obscured by surface finery like their clothing or social standing. While at times this resulted in less than flattering portrayals, Neel insisted that it was not her intent to "take any virtue away from my subjects. I just show them scarred by life as we all are."

Neel identified closely with her subjects, explaining: "In the process I become the person for a couple of hours, so when they leave and I'm finished, I feel disoriented." This process contributed a characteristic intensity to all her portraits. Her tendency to exaggerate an individual's physiognomy—the face, head, hands, breasts, or arms—helped to expose each sitter's character, sometimes in a caricature-like way. Most often, there is little spatial depth in a Neel portrait: the subject is thrust forward in the picture plane and often there is little depicted other than the sitter and her chair. Generally there are no cast shadows either, so the subject seems pinned like a specimen under an unblinking fluorescent light. Her portraits are acute psychological analyses of her sitters' makeup that art historian Patricia Mainardi applauded for their "almost scientific observation of gestures and poses, of 'body language' and its role in communicating states of mind and feeling."

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), p. 393.



***Aryomni*, 1976**

Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 in. (116.8 x 96.5 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Although Neel was a traditional easel painter working in conventional genres, she also transgressed these conventions with her own subjective vision. In representations of women, she penetrated social artifice and dignified her subjects through a courageous, brutally honest approach to rendering an individual's character. In particular, her portraits of women revealed aspects of women's lives and experiences obscured in Western art history, which represented women primarily as muses, Madonnas, and idealized nudes.

Neel's portraits were a radical departure from the flattering commissioned works of Old World Masters. Never resorting to cliché, Neel's images of women instead reveal the often-unseen constellation of feelings and issues that have historically colored women's lives. More specifically, her portraits of women flew in the face of conventional notions of how the feminine was to be represented through most of the twentieth century. *Aryomni* is an honest and truthful portrayal of a mature woman's body. In such works, Alice Neel celebrates the individuality and dignity of her sitters, refusing to participate in the conventional use of the genre to satisfy a voyeuristic male gaze.

—Adapted from Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 376, 385.



Bella Abzug, 1976

Oil on canvas, 108 x 60 in. (274.3 x 152.4 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

This large, vertical, full sized portrait is a fitting tribute to a larger than life political personality. The flamboyant, hat-wearing Bella Abzug was a U.S. politician, born in New York City who helped found Women Strike for Peace (1961) and the reformist New Democratic Coalition (1968). Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from New York in 1970, she was a leader of the House antiwar movement and a vigorous proponent of women's rights. In the same year that this portrait was painted Abzug lost a Senate primary to Daniel P. Moynihan. In later years she co-created and was the president of the Women's Environmental and Development Organization (WEDO), a global organization.

Although Abzug is most often associated with the fight for women's rights, like Neel she was committed to fighting injustices of all kinds; her efforts were focused on building peace, human dignity, civil rights and environmental integrity.

—Denise Bauer, Coordinator of Women's Studies, SUNY New Paltz



Susan Rossen, 1976

Oil on canvas, 43 ³/₄ x 34 in. (111.1 x 86.4 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Gender distinctions began to blur in the face of feminist critiques of traditional sex roles during the 1970s. In *Susan Rossen* (1976), Neel evokes the androgynous style and attitude that came into fashion during the women's movement. Susan Rossen is dressed in a blouse, overcoat, and hat in striking contrast to the fleshy poses, demure dresses, and pleasing smiles of Neel's portraits of middle-class white women from the pre-feminist 1960s.

Feminists embraced Neel in the 1970s as a role model who had weathered decades of sexism and obscurity and had continued painting. She was an active and enthusiastic supporter of feminist causes, particularly women artists' causes. She was a tireless, outspoken, and often inspirational advocate for women's rights, traveling extensively to colleges and speaking on panels through the 1970s. Feminist art critic Patricia Mainardi wrote that "In the 1970s, [Neel] hits her stride and produces a long series of brilliant paintings."

Neel's decidedly anti-essentialist understanding of women's lives and experiences—demonstrated in the diversity of sitters and treatments in her portraits of women—is congruent with contemporary feminists' efforts to explore and valorize differences among women. However, Neel's motivation in her portraits of women was not necessarily to champion women, as was the case for many feminist artists such as Judy Chicago. Rather, it was part of her larger effort to give expression to a common humanity that included diverse women.

—Adapted from Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 391-392.



Evans Twins, 1979

Oil on canvas, 32 x 44 in. (81.3 x 111.8 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Mothers and children were a major motif throughout Neel's career, no doubt stemming from her own often tormented experiences as a young mother, her early ambivalence about having children, her difficult experiences as a single mother, and in later years, her view of the changing roles of mothers in society, mainly as observed through her daughters-in-law and grandchildren. Neel consistently made the experiences of mothers, the interrelationship of mother and child, and familial relationships the subjects of her work.

Neel often painted mothers and children as a single, joined form in a style sometimes reminiscent of German Expressionist Käthe Kollwitz's huddled mothers protecting their children. In *Evans Twins*, a mother encircles her arms around two children who lean into her lap. The children are represented as overlapping additions to the mother's body; the mother's embrace invites their connection. Neel described how children remained virtually connected to their mothers for the first two years of their lives. This sense of the mother-child relationship is visually expressed through the pattern of a single, joined form.

—Adapted from Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 105-6, 115.



Annie Sprinkle, 1982

Oil on canvas, 60 x 44 in. (152.4 x 111.8 cm.)

The Estate of Alice Neel;

courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

One of Alice Neel's last portraits was of porn star/performance artist Annie Sprinkle, done in 1982 when Sprinkle was, as she described herself, still "in the mainstream sex industry—a professional call girl, a porn star and a sexual-rights activist." In recent years, Sprinkle has reinvented herself and become a "post-porn modernist" and performance artist, influenced by Alice Neel, whom she credits with bringing "the lowbrow into the highbrow."

In Neel's portrait, Sprinkle kneels on one knee in full costume, including fishnet stockings, black pumps, a black leather body suit with cut outs for her breasts, and a pierced labia (made visible by her odd pose). With feathers in her well-coifed strawberry blond hair, Sprinkle seems indifferent to the highly charged eroticism her pose and get-up suggest. This portrait, done in her eighties, was one of Neel's last; until her death in 1984, she continued to seize on the most contemporary issues, in this case the increasing feminist recognition and validation of sex work.

—Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002), pp. 392-3.



Works in the Exhibition

1. *Degenerate Madonna*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 31 x 24 in. (78.7 x 60.9 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
2. *The Cafeteria*, 1938
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
3. *Peggy*, 1949
Oil on canvas, 18 x 36 in. (45.7 x 91.4 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
4. *Death of Mother Bloor*, ca. 1951
Pencil on paper, 10 x 13 in. (25.4 x 33 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
5. *Dore Ashton*, 1952
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
6. *Mercedes Arroyo*, 1952
Oil on canvas, 25 x 24 1/8 in. (63.5 x 61.3 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
7. *June*, 1955
Oil on canvas, 34 x 25 in. (86.4 x 63.5 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
8. *Bonnie Bremser*, 1963
Ink on paper, 29 1/2 x 22 in. (74.9 x 55.9 cm.)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Wagman, NY
9. *New Jersey Bride*, 1968
Oil on canvas, 29 x 22 in. (73.7 x 55.9 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
10. *Dorothy Pearlstein*, 1969
Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 29 3/4 in. (101 x 75.6 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
11. *Marxist Girl (Irene Peslikis)*, 1972
Oil on canvas, 59 x 42 in. (149.9 x 106.7 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
12. *Diane Cochrane*, 1973
Oil on canvas, 43 x 30 in. (109.2 x 76.2 cm.)
Private Collection
13. *Dorothy Pearlstein (No. 2)*, 1973
Oil on canvas, 44 x 30 in. (111.8 x 76.2 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
14. *Aryomni*, 1976
Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 in. (116.8 x 96.5 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
15. *Bella Abzug*, 1976
Oil on canvas, 108 x 60 in. (274.3 x 152.4 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
16. *Susan Rossen*, 1976
Oil on canvas, 43 3/4 x 34 in. (111.1 x 86.4 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
17. *Evans Twins*, 1979
Oil on canvas, 32 x 44 in. (81.3 x 111.8 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
18. *Annie Sprinkle*, 1982
Oil on canvas, 60 x 44 in. (152.4 x 111.8 cm.)
The Estate of Alice Neel;
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

This exhibition is held in association with *Women and Social Action*, the 2003 Women's Studies Conference at the State University of New York, New Paltz. Special thanks are extended to Ginny and Hartley Neel for their support of this project, and to Nancy Neel for the insight she provided during the early stages of research. The assistance of Betsy Wittenborn Miller, Jennifer Benz Joy, Amy Young, and Michele Heinrici at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York has been very helpful and is greatly appreciated.

Alice Neel's Feminist Portraits was organized by Dr. Denise Bauer, Coordinator of the Women's Studies Department at SUNY New Paltz, and Dr. Karl Emil Willers, Curator at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art. The museum's entire staff contributed significantly to the realization of this project: Neil Trager, Museum Director; Wayne Lempka, Assistant to the Director and Collections Manager; Beth Hill, Coordinator of Visitor Services, Cynthia Dill, Preparator; and Owen Harvey, Graduate Assistant. This catalogue could not have been completed without the dedicated work of the Publications Department at SUNY New Paltz, and especially the layout and design efforts of Jan Harrison.



SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART
State University of New York at New Paltz

October 15-November 23, 2003

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