Alice Neel in New Jersey and Vermont

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Alice Neel's cottage at Spring Lake, c. 1950

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Alice Neel in New Jersey and Vermont

Xavier Hufkens

A Sense of Place

Jeremy Lewison

Alice Neel on vacation. The concept seems faintly ludicrous in relation to an artist for whom painting was a way of life. Does an artist ever have a vacation? Do they ever switch off from observing, noting and thinking in pictorial terms about what lies before them? Neel travelled to New Jersey more or less every summer from 1934, initially renting a house on the shore in Belmar where her daughter Isabetta could visit from Cuba, and then purchasing her first small cottage in neighboring Spring Lake the following year, with the help of her parents and possibly her sometime lover and lifelong friend, John Rothschild.[1] Just over 60 miles from Manhattan, it was a short journey from home, but the change of scene was dramatic. Swapping urban density, towering architecture, compressed space and multi-ethnic peoples for breezy open skies, low-level domestic buildings with gardens and greenery, wide vistas and a predominantly white population provided new contexts in which to paint, and a different outlook on life. Initially the flow of paintings made at Spring Lake was relatively gentle, but once the children were older it became stronger and more so as grandchildren appeared. Richard, the lawyer in his corporate suits, became Richard on vacation clad in a towel. Hartley, the medical student, was transformed into a motorcyclist. Being on vacation meant being off guard, for the family at least. Vacations are for relaxation. They allow time for family groups to be together, away from the demands of school and college, work and regimented life, and they permit a more liberated atmosphere, the opportunity to lose track of time, for drift and reverie, for play, donkey rides and gardening. Neel's paintings from Spring Lake and Vermont capture the essence of all this, the spirit of place.

Very few early New Jersey paintings have survived, but those remaining suggest that vacations did not always provide release from the tensions of life. Neel's now celebrated painting of her daughter *Isabetta* (1934) and her profile portrait of *Richard* (c. 1952) intimate that all was not quite right. *Isabetta* is often seen as evidence of a confrontation, her ice blue eyes penetrating, her hands on hips defiant. The tipping up of space thrusts the young child, perhaps unwillingly, into the mother's orbit. Yet, this is summer and maybe a five-year-old girl is caught running around naked in the heat, is asked to pose and not knowing what to do with her hands props them on her body. The space is confined. Distorting it is a means for depicting the full height of the child. The resulting image is in so many respects perfectly natural. But any experience of posing is awkward and arduous, especially at the request of a person who, frankly, was a fairly unknown quantity to a girl who had not seen her mother for four years.

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The painting is highly ambiguous, the attitudes of painter and model ambivalent. It is an indoor painting, and unusually, but not uniquely, Neel describes the interior in some detail. In her paintings executed outside New York, the environment seems to matter. Neel situates Richard in the garden, beneath a vine. Her thirteen-year-old son has reached the age of puberty and seems sullen and preoccupied. As a Dionysian or Bacchic symbol of sexuality, Neel had deployed grapes with heavy irony in the early *Bronx Bacchus* (1929), but in this intimate portrait of Richard, irony is abjured for a more subtle announcement of his arrival at this important stage of life. The environment evinces a state of mind.

Referring to the spirit of place, the British artist Paul Nash called it the *genius loci* by which he meant a special quality inhering to a particular location.[2] This is what distinguishes from her New York production the paintings Neel made at Spring Lake, Spring Lake Heights and at Hartley and Ginny Neel's farmstead near Stowe, Vermont. Whether it is the fall or the intensity of the light, the inclusion of the landscape or the focus on landscape itself, the observation over long periods — more than just successive sittings — of members of the family, the pleasure taken in plants and blooms, the sight of a bird hopping across the lawn, it is repeatedly apparent that environmental factors are at play. Neel can enjoy patterns created by shadows in *Ginny and Elizabeth* (1976) or *Light* (1980). Shadows in her New York

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Bronx Bacchus, 1929

paintings tend to be amorphous shapes cast in the background behind the sitter, but in these paintings they take on a life of their own adding complexity to the reading of space.

The choice of where to locate the motif is not arbitrary. A jug of flowers could be painted anywhere — in the kitchen, the sitting room or a bedroom — but in *Light*, Neel places them on a table in the porch, transforming a painting of an object into one conveying atmosphere, light and place, while at the same time merging inside and outside. The porch is a confluence, a place of transition or an intersection of different worlds, of nature and culture, light and dark, interior and exterior, and perhaps, given Neel's reading of shadows in such paintings as *107th and Broadway* (1976), of life and death.[3] That same table is deployed in *Roses* (1983) three years later, this time indoors. The light is more diffuse, the shadows less pronounced, and the blooms become the focus of attention rather than the surroundings in which they are placed. The serpentine stalks suggest the energy of youth in the crinkled cut glass vase of yesteryear. The painting is emblematic of a youthful mind in an ancient body.

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Light, 1980

Richard, 1959

Generally, whether in Vermont or in New Jersey, there was a deliberateness to Neel's choice of location in which to paint. In 1973, Neel painted Richard in the garden. The idea to wrap him in a towel came from observing him emerge from the shower regularly so clad, but transposing him to the garden adds another dimension. Although, according to the family, this vision reminded Neel of Egyptian reliefs, and thus ennoblement, Richard looks uncomfortable and exposed. He is only a slip of the towel away from disaster. p. 61

It was not the first time that Neel had portrayed her eldest son scantily clad. In 1959, she had depicted Richard seated inside wearing only underpants or perhaps swim trunks. The interior setting imparts a sense of privacy and intimacy to the painting, as though mother and son could be together undisturbed. By contrast there is something rather startling about a mother painting her son in a loincloth for all the world to see and on such a large scale. He is afforded little protection. It took three or four sessions of about three hours each to complete. Richard's discomfort is manifest. Standing still, concentrating on the pose and being scrutinized, possibly in full view of others, either from within the grounds or from the house or, maybe, through the hedge by passers by, looks like an ordeal. There is no joie de vivre, just a sense of completing a task. Compare Richard's apprehension with the confidence of Hartley in the similarly sized *Hartley on the Motorcycle* (1966). Neel's youngest son leans forward towards his mother returning her gaze, with equal intensity rather than in the retiring manner of Richard.[4] Hartley is comfortable on his Honda 305 Super Hawk, at the time the best motorcycle in its class, and Neel was fascinated by it, focusing in particular on one of its unique characteristics — the double leading shoe front brakes as well as the headlight with its red button. According to Hartley she was enthralled by the power and sleekness of the motorcycle and was determined to paint her son on it, not least because it had become a regular part of their lives. On the weekends, Hartley would ride all night to Spring Lake Heights from Dartmouth College in Hanover, Massachusetts, where he was studying for a Masters degree in chemistry, and during the week would use it to commute between Neel's New York apartment and the Sloan Kettering Institute in New Jersey, where he was involved in research into thalidomide analogs under the direction of Dr. Heinz Wuest. The painting is as much a portrait of the motorcycle as of her son, here wearing tennis rather than motorcycling gear. There was obviously no way of painting such a motif from life indoors, so being at Spring Lake offered a unique opportunity. But it is more than just a simple portrait; she transported the motorcycle in her imagination to a hilly landscape to suggest a devil-may-care attitude, as though Hartley had arrived cross-country like a messenger from the gods. He becomes a modern day Hermes, the patron and protector of travelers, brother to Dionysus. In comparison to the portrait of Hartley in psychic pain completed earlier in the year in New York,[5] this outdoor work reveals the release he felt when riding his motorcycle, evidenced as much by the joyous landscape, the bright light and the undulating hills, as by his expression. p. 49

There seems to be a closer bond in these paintings between mother and younger son than mother and older son, which may have something to do with the pose she asked them to strike, or possibly to their actual relationships. Richard is tense and concerned, Hartley relaxed and engaged. One is portrayed in domesticated nature, the other in nature untamed. While Richard is imprisoned by the hedge, Hartley is set free to roam the hills. The sense of place is critical to the interpretation of these paintings.

This contrast between suburbia and nature at large is nowhere more manifest than in the two paintings of the surroundings to the house at Spring Lake Heights and the farm near Stowe, Vermont. In *Spring Lake* (c. 1973) the focus is on the tree, with hedging and a neighbor's house in the distance. In the foreground is a large bird, perhaps a songbird known as a yellow-breasted chat that is commonly found in North America. The garden is neat, the boundaries defined, the stillness disturbed only by the breeze ruffling the foliage, to judge from the blurring of the brush strokes. It is an image of confinement, a modern variant on the *hortus conclusus*, something of a safe haven, apart from the world. By contrast, in *Vermont* (1971) Neel paints as far as the eye can see, from a post and wire fence in the foreground, to the barns in the middle ground, and the distant mountains beyond. Bright, open and more or less uncultivated, Neel enjoys the freedom of the wide-open space. Both paintings suggest an homage to Cézanne, *Spring Lake* recalling the Aix master's paintings of the Jas de Bouffan while *Vermont* pays tribute to the paintings of the Mont Sainte-Victoire, the mountains and the vegetation just beyond the fence, a mix of colors laid down in patches redolent of Cézanne's late painting.

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Vermont also bears a trace of the "partially cultivated country" so beloved of Henry David Thoreau, the author of *Walden*. His journal entry of August 14, 1854 encapsulates Neel's painting of the Vermont landscape: "Ah! I need solitude. I have come forth to this hill at sunset to see the forms of the mountains in the horizon — to behold and commune with something grander than man. Their mere distance and unprofanedness is an infinite encouragement. It is with infinite yearning and aspiration that I seek solitude, more and more resolved and strong; but with a certain weakness that I seek society ever."[6] No one sought society more than Alice Neel as she summoned her sitters to her New York apartment, but in Vermont and Spring Lake, she sought refuge from what she called the "barbarity" of life in the city.[7]

For someone so obsessed with humanity, she was an adept *plein air* painter of landscape. The variety of brush marks in *Vermont* testifies to a facility with paint and the representation of nature. The short, vertical, slightly dry marks describing the edge of a wheat field along the line of the fence, contrast with dilute longer strokes denoting mountains, while the puffy clouds are embodied

Alice Neel painting *Vermont*, 1971

in a thicker impasto. Great forces seem to be at play: stability and movement, wind and calm, and the potential for rain and sunshine. A strong feeling of laterality, encouraged also by the diagonal line of the field, promises a wide expanse beyond the edge of the painting. This lateral movement is arrested by the verticality of the largest tree that leads the eye upwards to the mountains and the clouds, and indicates the scale of the land. There is a lyrical quality to the painting, as though the act of painting landscape could provide Neel with a release, a kind of catharsis, a cleansing from the invasive rigor of painting portraits.[8]

Even on "vacation," however, Neel could not resist the return to "work." She invited people to her Vermont studio to sit for portraits, which, in appearance look like those painted in the city.[9] In the paintings of Hartley's colleague, Ed Sun, and the neighboring farmer Harold Dyke, Neel returns to a neutral interior where the shadows are generalized, the light no more intense than in New York, and the interior nondescript, certainly unlike the actual interior of the wooden outhouse. There is no sense of place here. This contrasts with *The Family* (1980) where the outside vegetation identifies the location

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The Family, 1980

as Spring Lake Heights and, rather like Picasso's paintings of the mid-1950s depicting the studio at La Californie, integrates interior and exterior. The inclusion of the palm trees seen through the window in Picasso's paintings of the studio was at once a challenge and an homage to Matisse's stained glass at the Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence (completed 1951). The impact was to confer some spiritual radiance upon the studio setting. For Neel, too, the inclusion of foliage is transformational, permitting an illusion of escape from the intensity of the stark *huis clos* she has set up. This group portrait, which in the eighteenth century would have been called a conversation piece, explores family dynamics, highlighting the relationship of grandmother to granddaughters who gaze at her attentively, and the separateness

Philipp Otto Runge, *Die Hülsenbeckschen Kinder*, 1805–06

Elizabeth on the donkey, c. 1978

of the twins from the central mother and child. While Victoria clings to her mother Nancy, Neel accentuates the apartness of Antonia and Alexandra, as well as the apparent depression of their mother, who gazes vacantly into space, looking anywhere but at the artist or her children. Conversation piece would be an ironic title for this work in which there is only silence. As Jean-Paul Sartre indicated in his play *Huis Clos* (1944), hell is other people, by which he implied the perpetual experience of being caused to see oneself from the consciousness of others. This family group is forever condemned to such a situation.

It was to portraiture that Neel repeatedly returned and, in the sequence of family portraits, she documented the growth of her family and the process of maturation of each individual. Thus *Nancy and the Twins (5 Months)* (1971) segues into, among others, *Antonia and Alexandra* (1974), a bucolic pastoral scene where the children's dresses complement the field in which they stand. Such a painting is redolent of the portraits of children by the German Romantic artist, Philipp Otto Runge, not least in the arresting sense of scale of the infants relative to their surroundings, suggesting a world seen through the eyes of a child. Every blade of grass, every dandelion, seems almost as tall as the twins. *Elizabeth on the Donkey* (1977), painted in Vermont, maintains this sense of child-centeredness. It depicts the two-year-old daughter of Hartley and Ginny as though she were as tall as, if not taller than, the donkey. While this may in actuality have been true,

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the impression is nonetheless of an inversion of scale largely the result of the compression of the animal's length. This is *Alice in Wonderland*.

Seen from the distance of the present day, these portraits are memorials to a past enjoyed in the company of family. But there was one person always missing, who appeared briefly in 1934 and 1939, never to return: Isabetta. She remained a presence in Neel's imaginative life but was not often talked about. How extraordinary that Neel should have addressed this subject in *Memories* (1981), the year before Isabetta finally succeeded in committing suicide.[10] It is a haunting image that takes as its starting point the painting of 1934 but erases from it nearly all color, as though the memory was fading leaving only a ghost, standing in her mother's mind's eye. It is not an unfinished painting nor is it a copy. She may have started out by mapping the original composition in pencil, an unusual practice for Neel, but she painted it until she felt it was complete and signed it. At the end of her own life, like many artists, she returned to an early work to rethink it and create it anew, imbuing it with a contemporary meaning.

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Alice Neel in her Vermont studio, c. 1973

1. She sold that house in 1959 and purchased a larger one in the more affordable Spring Lake Heights.
2. See Paul Nash, *Outline*, (Columbus, London, 1988, first published 1946), pp. 106–07.
3. Neel described the shadow creeping over the façade of West 107th Street as the shadow of death.
4. Perhaps Richard's unease can also be partly attributed to his very poor vision.
5. *Hartley* (1966), National Gallery of Art, gift of Arthur M. Bullowa, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, 1991.143.2.
6. Bradford Torrey (ed.) Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Journal, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company. The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1906, vol. 6, ch. 9, p. 439, https://www.walden.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Journal-6-Chapter-9.pdf, accessed September 28, 2018.
7. Quoted in Eleanor Munroe, "Alice Neel," *Originals: American Women Artists* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1979), p. 130.
8. Neel commented about painting portraits: "I become the person for a couple of hours, so when they leave and I am finished, I feel disorientated. I have no self. I don't belong anywhere. I don't know who I am or what I am. It's terrible this feeling, but it just comes because of this powerful identification I make with this person." Quoted in Judith Higgins, "Alice Neel and the Human Comedy," *ARTnews* 83, no. 8 (October 1984), p. 78.
9. In New York City, Neel could not afford a studio and painted in a room in her apartment. In Vermont, she was able to convert a reasonably large outhouse into a studio.
10. Isabetta (Isabella Enríquez) succeeded in committing suicide on her fourth attempt.

ILLUSTRATED WORKS

Bronx Bacchus, 1929, oil on canvas, 66 × 78.4 cm (26 × 30 7/8 in.) Estate of Alice Neel
Light, 1980, oil on canvas, 127 × 91.4 cm (50 × 36 in.) Estate of Alice Neel
Richard, 1959, oil on canvas, 142.2 × 68.6 cm (56 × 27 in.) Estate of Alice Neel
The Family, 1980, oil on canvas, 147.6 × 127.3 cm (58 × 50 in.) private collection
Philipp Otto Runge, *Die Hülsenbeckschen Kinder*, 1805–06, oil on canvas, 131.5 × 143.5 cm (51 1/4 × 56 1/8 in.) Hamburger Kunsthalle

Isabetta on the boardwalk in Belmar, New Jersey, 1934

Alice Neel painting *Ed Sun* in her Vermont studio, 1971

Epiphanies

Philip Larratt-Smith

I.

"The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenaline in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house..." – Flannery O'Connor [1]

II.

Louise Bourgeois, who was admirer of Alice Neel's, nonetheless declined to sit for her because she thought her portraits were cruel.

III.

Flannery O'Connor's short story *Good Country People* gives a series of interlocking portraits. Mrs. Hopewell and her malcontented daughter Joy live together on a farm in rural Georgia. Joy has a wooden leg from a childhood hunting accident and likes to clump around the house purposely to annoy her mother, who feels guilty that her daughter has never had "any *normal* good times." Joy has renamed herself Hulga, which her mother considers "the ugliest name in any language." Even though she's thirty-two, Joy/Hulga dresses in a "six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it," which Mrs. Hopewell finds "idiotic" and proof that her daughter is "still a child." Joy has taken a Ph.D. in philosophy, which mystifies her mother:

You could say, 'My daughter is a nurse,' or 'My daughter is a schoolteacher,' or even, 'My daughter is a chemical engineer.' You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.' That was something that had ended with the Greeks and the Romans.

Joy stridently asserts her atheism and intellectualism over against her mother's homiletic bromides, half fortune cookie, half Hallmark card.

One day a Bible salesman named Manley Pointer shows up at the Hopewells' door. Pointer strikes Mrs. Hopewell as earnest and naïve, a good Christian boy — "good country people," as the saying goes. When he wrings his hands and regales her with a sob story about having a heart condition, the parallel with Joy (who was born with a weak heart, and who on that account is unlikely to live to be forty-five) overwhelms her, and she invites the boy to stay to dinner. During the meal, Pointer bores mother and daughter stiff with the story of his life; Mrs. Hopewell politely asks him questions, while Joy refuses to engage. As he is leaving the Hopewell home, however, Pointer succeeds in making a date with Joy for the following day.

Joy takes him for the hopeless simpleton that he seems to be and indulges in fantasies about seducing him and then opening his eyes to the delusion of religion and the nothingness of life. They meet the next morning, walk to a storage barn behind two back fields, and climb into a hay loft, where they start kissing. Joy proudly claims to be "one of those people who see *through* to nothing," and assumes she has the upper hand. Yet Pointer manages to take her glasses off and put them in his pocket without her realizing it; and she is caught by surprise when Pointer asks to see where her wooden leg joins on, for

...she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away.

It is precisely this flaw, Pointer insists, that makes her "different." Joy feels that "for the first time in her life she [is] face to face with real innocence," and that Pointer has inexplicably touched the truth about her. She passively gives in to his request, and allows him to roll up her trouser leg and uncover the wooden prosthesis "in a white sock and brown flat shoe, [...] bound in a heavy material like canvas" and "[ending] in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump."

Having learned how to detach the leg, Pointer sets it out of her reach before pushing himself on top of her. Without her leg, Joy feels disoriented and vulnerable, and meekly asks to have it back. Ignoring her, Pointer, who is ready to have a good time, opens his valise and sets out its contents before the "mesmerized" girl: a hollow Bible containing a flask of whiskey, a pack of condoms, and a deck of dirty playing cards. Confused and unsettled at seeing him for what he really is, Joy raises her voice and demands her leg back. Pointer reacts with surprise and disappointment that she too is not what she pretends to be. Gathering up his accoutrements as well as her prosthetic limb in his valise, he abruptly exits the hayloft, revealing as he goes that Manley Pointer is not his real name and taunting her with a barbed parting shot: "I'll tell you another thing, Hulga, you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" [2]

IV.

Fuller Brush Man, 1965

Religious Girl, 1959

V.

Flannery O'Connor was born in 1925 in Savannah, Georgia. She lost her father at an early age to lupus, and she would later say that becoming a writer was a "fulfillment of what he wanted to be." [3] O'Connor came to attention as part of a generation of writers grouped under the rubric of Southern Gothic that included Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Truman Capote, though her writing is too stubbornly sui generis to belong to any movement, in part because she was a devout Catholic in the predominantly Protestant South. She is best known for her short stories, which she began publishing in the late 1940s, and which display her unusual descriptive powers through an array of portraits and narratives drawn from life. Ill health forced her to return home to her mother's farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she lived, wrote, and raised peacocks for the rest of her life. Diagnosed with lupus in 1952, O'Connor died in 1964 of complications relating to the condition which she inherited from her father.

VI.

"It is the business of the artist to uncover the strangeness of truth."
– Robert Fitzgerald [4]

VII.

In the paintings of Alice Neel, it is the integration of her art into life and her life into art that accounts for the quality and singularity of her perceptions. To situate Neel in the history of 20th and 21st century portraiture may be historically valid — and valuable, given the neglect she encountered for most of her career — but it is not wholly satisfying. Though her portraits belong to the lineage of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Munch, Schiele, and Soutine, and though there are affinities with more recent figures such as Arbus, Freud, and Dumas, there is something in her art that has not been fully digested.

By its very nature portraiture presupposes narrative, even if it does not necessarily depict it. Speaking of her sitters, Neel stated that "you see everything in their faces: [...] [t]heir inheritance, their class, their profession. Their feelings, their intellect. All that's happened to them." [5] Each portrait is a record of Neel's encounter with an identity that has been formed in the constant rapport between inner psychic life and the external world. Yet the merger of art and life in Neel's work means that her paintings inevitably contain not only the stories of her sitters but also her own.

Neel once remarked that she could have been a psychiatrist if she hadn't been an artist because of her high level of "psychological acumen." [6] (After all, what are Freud's case histories if not portraits and short stories?) Elisabeth Leibovici among others has invoked the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and countertransference as an analogy for Neel's unique manner of engaging with her subjects. During the sitting, the recording of objective reality becomes inflected with something deeper, as Neel hooks in with the undertow of her sitter's psychology and the narrative of her life intersects with that of his. The sitter projects his emotional state outwards through his expression, posture, clothing or lack thereof. Neel's gift for identification makes her peculiarly perceptive, and vulnerable, to these states. Like a psychic or a medium, she channels the dialectic that is established between the sitter's inner and outer reality and the whole of her conscious and unconscious reactions to this reality. This is the epiphany in which the complex interplay of perception and identification between subject and artist crystallizes into an image.

It is the view of human existence that Neel reveals portrait by portrait that connects her art to the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. For it could be said that Neel is to painting what O'Connor is to literature, and that both artists occupy similar, and similarly anomalous, positions within their respective arts. O'Connor's stories are pervaded by a sense of human vulnerability, of the difficulty of keeping one's dignity in the teeth of a hostile environment. Her sophistication contrasts with her use of the demotic and depiction of the mores of different classes and races, the dress codes and values of her native Georgia. Such close observation of detail is counterbalanced and

unified by the philosophical underpinnings of O'Connor's religious beliefs, which have a parallel in Neel's lifelong sympathy for and solidarity with the underdog ("I am only showing the barbarity of life" [7]). Much like Neel's sitters, O'Connor's characters are implacably subjected to the violence and cruelty of existence. Some lose a leg, others are killed, and still others are not able to die. (The author's own life hewed closely to the same tragic pattern.) As in classical tragedy, each story builds to a climactic moment in which recognition and reversal are joined and the protagonist's illusions are destroyed.

Neel and O'Connor share a preference for the concrete over the abstract, a preoccupation with identity, and a penchant for cruelty towards their characters. The element of the grotesque in O'Connor's fiction, which corresponds to the element of caricature in Neel's paintings, aims at truthfully capturing the events, the damages and traumas, that have made her characters who they are. Each short story by O'Connor turns on the revelation in which the protagonist is confronted, sometimes brutally, with the truth about himself and the nature of existence. Each painting by Neel is a compound narrative in which the truth about her sitters, "what the world has done to them and their retaliation," [8] is disclosed.

VIII.

Joe Gould, 1933

Andy Warhol, 1970

IX.

i. "I mean, if you've ever spoken to someone with two heads, you know they know something you don't." – Diane Arbus [9]

ii. "Jack can see that he sees
what Jill can't see
but Jack can't see
that Jill can't see
that Jill can't see it" – R.D. Laing [10]

iii. "...her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it." – Flannery O'Connor [11]

X.

In 1930, Neel had a nervous breakdown. The precipitating cause was the split with her husband Carlos Enríquez, who took their two-year-old daughter Isabetta with him to Havana. The couple had already lost a first daughter, Santillana, to diphtheria in 1927, shortly after they returned from a year and a half in Havana. The double blow shattered Neel's psychic equilibrium and, in August 1930, she suffered a total collapse (she would later say that during this period she "died every day" [12]). After two suicide attempts she was hospitalized in the suicide ward of the Philadelphia General Hospital, where she remained, on and off, for just under a year.

This was a harrowing experience that nonetheless marked a turning point in her artistic development. For one thing, Neel turned it into an opportunity to hone her extraordinary talent for observation:

> I had forced myself to notice everything about them. To begin with, the mentally ill, I realized, are usually physically ill as well. They are physically depleted. I was analyzing them all the time. I even studied the psychiatrist while he was analyzing me. I would look at his hands and think he was probably impotent. They looked old and frizzled enough for him to be impotent. [13]

More importantly, coming up to the brink of psychic disintegration enhanced Neel's already pronounced sensitivity to human suffering and her uncanny insight into the psychological truths that lie hidden within external reality. Neel later credited her art with having brought her back to sanity and with providing a way of recuperating the losses she had experienced at such a terrifying level of emotional intensity. In her life Neel had been made vulnerable and passively dependent on the actions of others. Art offered her an arena where she was in complete control, and where reparation and restoration of her damages and losses were achievable.

Freud drew his famous distinction between mourning and melancholia in terms of the relationship (conscious versus unconscious, normal versus pathological) to the lost love object. In Neel's case, one could speculate that her grief for Santillana (commemorated obliquely in *Futility of Effort* (1930) in which an infant child appears to be strangulated on a bed frame) was compounded by Carlos's abandonment and the loss of Isabetta. In Freudian terms, normal mourning for the dead Santillana deepened into pathological mourning for the lost Carlos and Isabetta, and eventually led to suicide attempts. (The reproaches that in mourning are directed against the lost love object come to be turned against the self in melancholia.) Neel would only see Isabetta several times again in her life. On one of these occasions, in 1934, she made a portrait of her daughter — an early masterpiece in which Isabetta appears naked in a defiant pose, her hands on her hips and her gaze looking directly at us — that provides an example of how Neel would use portraiture as a way of mastering her grief and successfully internalizing the lost love object. In her rendering, Isabetta reads as strong and self-sufficient, which is perhaps a projective identification whereby she was assigned the characteristics Neel wished to have for herself. Perhaps it was also a means of assuaging any guilt feelings on Neel's part over having abandoned her.[14]

The breakdown and its aftermath were thus an artistic passage into being, the epiphanic moment when Neel was born into a new identity as an artist with full powers. *Isabetta* (1934) is symptomatic of the realignment of her melancholia from a pathological fixation to an attitude towards external reality that permitted her to renew her

"endless commitment" to the lost love object by unconsciously playing it out with each successive sitter. Neel's inability to detach herself psychically from the loss of Carlos and Isabetta meant that she was compelled to reenact it artistically. (Neel appears to have suffered mainly from reminiscences, which is in keeping with her self-diagnosis as having had "Freud's classic hysteria" during her breakdown.)[15] The real-life encounter with the sitter, as well as the act of painting itself, is a sublimated form of remembering for Neel that observes the pattern laid down by this prototypical episode.

In 1981, Neel painted *Memories*, a late reprise of the 1934 portrait of Isabetta.

XI.

i. "Mrs. Hopewell, who had divorced her husband long ago, needed someone to walk over the fields with her; and when Joy had to be impressed for these services, her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell would say, 'If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all,' to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am — LIKE I AM.'" – Flannery O'Connor[16]

ii.

Self Portrait, 1980

Isabetta, 1934

XII.

i. "In torment there are islands of silence." – Louise Bourgeois [17]

ii. In Neel's landscapes, formal qualities come to the fore, and there is at times a sense of respite and repose that is rarely found among her paintings of people. In that sense her landscapes are perhaps utopian: bereft of human presence, and therefore of human conflict and drama. (The country landscapes are distinct from the urban landscapes, where the evidence of humanity is inescapable.) There is a double movement as her body is projected out over the landscape and the landscape is introjected into her body.

iii. "When the peacock has presented his back, the spectator will usually begin to walk around him to get a front view; but the peacock will continue to turn so that no front view is possible. The thing to do then is to stand still and wait until it pleases him to turn. When it suits him, the peacock will face you. And you will see in a green-bronze arch around him a galaxy of gazing, haloed suns. This is the moment when most people are silent." – Flannery O'Connor [18]

XIII.

i. "The most basic observations of the self are to be made in two domains: body image and social relatedness." [19] Like O'Connor, Neel favors concrete particulars over the vagaries of abstraction, and while she mercilessly exposes each sitter's flaws in her portraits — Warhol's wig and womanly breasts, her own paunch and prehensile big toe — such details count first and foremost as real facts, though they do not exclude symbolic or metaphorical meanings. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, these are bodies as lived in by their subjects.

ii. "The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character. Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not. Then, too, any character in a serious novel is supposed to carry a burden of meaning larger than himself. The novelist doesn't write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated, and the novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, the total experience of human nature at any time. For this reason, the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama." – Flannery O'Connor [20]

XIV.

i. "Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I'm always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system."
– Flannery O'Connor [21]

ii. "If I have any talent in relation to people, [...] it is my identification with them. I get so identified when I painted them, when they go home I feel frightful. I have no self — I've gone into this other person. [...] Patricia Bailey said in a review of my exhibition at Graham in 1980: 'Her work has been a way of diminishing her personal sense of separation from life.' That's right. It is my way of overcoming the alienation. It's my ticket to reality." – Alice Neel [22]

XV.

i. Neel once traced her interest in portraiture back to a situation from her early childhood:

> My psychiatrist once told me that I got interested in painting portraits because I liked to watch my mother's face... It had dominion over me. Since she was so unpredictable he thought I watched her face to see whether she approved of things or not. [23]

Neel is surely one of the great artists of maternity in the 20th century. Her exploration of motherhood and its discontents is unsentimental and at times brutal. Her portraits of pregnant women, young mothers, and children are shot through with ambivalence, not least because Neel's own desire to have children was in conflict with her ambitions for herself as an artist. (In much the same way O'Connor struggled to reconcile her literary ambitions with her religious faith.) They are resonant with the unspoken dark side of being a mother. The numerous paintings Neel made of her children and grandchildren growing up constitute an ongoing record of her own life whose diaristic fidelity to real life gives reassurance that she was a "good-enough mother" but also underscores the fact that her children and grandchildren were her creations.

In *Nancy and the Twins (5 months)* (1971) Neel said she painted the twins to look like gladiators. Their eyes are alert and sensitive, but their body language communicates helplessness and vulnerability. Nancy lies behind them like a wall, her right arm abnormally elongated as if in protection. A more somber note prevails in *Ginny and Elizabeth* (1976). Though her seated posture and arms contain and frame her daughter, Ginny's gaze, brooding and abstracted, is not focussed on her child. Rather, she seems lost in a private preoccupation, or perhaps simply exhausted by the rigors of motherhood. Elizabeth's expression telegraphs anxiety.

Neel was fascinated by children, and proof of the fact is found in the many portraits she made of them. To Neel, children are unfiltered and somewhat feral beings, anarchic and polymorphous perverse. They have not yet been socialized into conformity nor interpellated as subjects within a capitalist world order, and in this respect they are mirrors of the artist herself. Yet there is no more idealization in this subgroup of work than in the rest of Neel's portraits; the Victorian cult of the child has no purchase here. Rather, as with her portraits of mothers, the paintings of children are properly ambivalent: they simultaneously attest to the centrality of family to Neel's conception of herself and its repudiation through her bohemian lifestyle and artistic vocation.

ii. "Every person that comes into this earth... is born sweet, and full of love. A little child loves ever'body, friends, and its nature is sweetness — until something happens. Something happens, friends, I don't need to tell people like you that can think for theirselves. As that little child gets bigger, its sweetness don't show so much, cares and troubles come to perplext it, and all its sweetness is driven inside it. Then it gets miserable and lonesome and sick, friends. It says, 'Where is all my sweetness gone? Where are all the friends that loved me?' and all the time, that little beat-up rose of its sweetness is inside, not a petal dropped." – Flannery O'Connor [24]

XVI.

i. a. "I'm cursed to be in this Mother Hubbard body. I'm a real sexy person." – Alice Neel [25]

b. "My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well not have made me. And the feeling I egg up writing here lasts approximately a half hour and seems a sham. I don't want any of this

artificial superficial feeling stimulated by the choir. Today I have proved myself a glutton — for Scotch oatmeal cookies and erotic thought. There is nothing left to say of me." – Flannery O'Connor [26]

ii. a. "The idea of oral incorporation emerges in the years 1912–15 (*Totem and Taboo* [1912–13]; 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1917e]). In particular, Freud brings out the role of incorporation in melancholia, where the subject identifies in the oral mode with the lost object by regressing to the type of object-relationship characteristic of the oral stage (see 'Incorporation', 'Cannibalistic')." [27]

b. Introjection: "Process revealed by analytic investigation: in phantasy, the subject transposes objects and their inherent qualities from the 'outside' to the 'inside' of himself." [28]

c. "Whereas the paranoiac expels from his ego the impulses that have become unpleasant, the neurotic helps himself by taking into the ego as large as possible a part of the outside world, making it the object of unconscious phantasies [...] One might give to this process, in contrast to projection, the name of *Introjection* (1a)." [29]

XVII.

Alice Neel once told a young male sitter, "Your hands look just like veal chops."

August–September 2018.

1. Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1971), p. 285.
2. All quotes in section III. from Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1971), pp. 271–91.
3. Flannery O'Connor, as quoted in: Hilton Als, "This Lonesome Place," *The New Yorker*, 29 January 2001 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/01/29/this-lonesome-place).
4. Robert Fitzgerald, quoted in: Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* [1979] (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1988), p. 343.
5. Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1979), p. 130.
6. Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York, 1983), p. 100.
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9. Diane Arbus, quoted in the documentary film "Masters of Photography: Diane Arbus," dir. John Musilli (Creative Arts Television, 1972).
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11. Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1971), p. 273.
12. Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 2010), p. 74.
13. Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1979), p. 127.
14. When Isabetta attended a lecture Neel gave in Fort Lauderdale in 1980, Neel appeared not to recognize her own daughter. See Phoebe Hoban, pp. 314–15.
15. Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 2010), p. 74.
16. Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1971), p. 274.
17. Louise Bourgeois, c. 1950.
18. O'Connor, "The King of the Birds," *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1970), pp. 9–10.
19. Linda Mayes, , "Definition of the Self," *The Evolution and Dissolution of the Self*, in *Journal of Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychotherapy* (Other Press, New York, Fall 2000), p. 8.
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21. Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1970), pp. 77–78.
22. Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York, 1983), p. 183.
23. Alice Neel, quoted in: Adam Phillips, "Sitting Targets," *Alice Neel: Family* (The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 2011), unpaginated.
24. Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* [1952] (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1967), pp. 150–151.
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26. Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2013), p. 40.
27. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1973), p. 206.
28. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1973), p. 229.
29. Sandor Ferenczi, "Introjection and Transference," [1909] quoted in: J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1973), pp. 229–230.

ILLUSTRATED WORKS

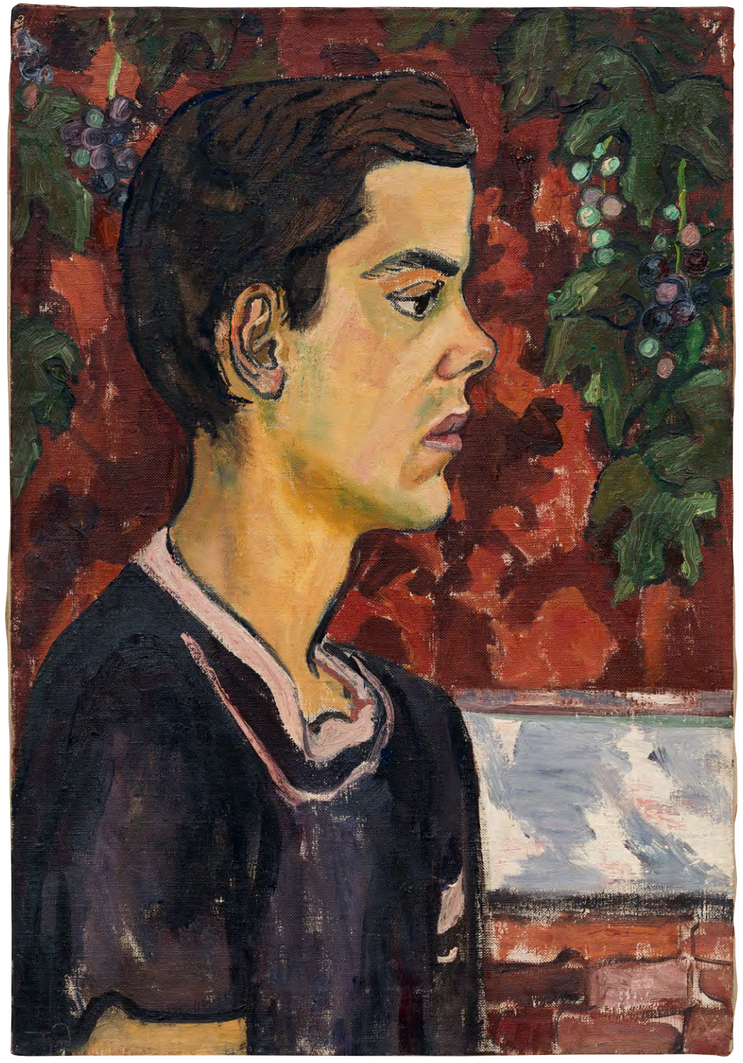
Fuller Brush Man, 1965, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 68.6 cm (40 × 27 in.) private collection
Religious Girl, 1959, oil on canvas, 61 × 43.2 cm (24 × 17 in.) collection of John Cheim
Joe Gould, 1933, oil on canvas, 99 × 78.7 cm (39 × 31 in.) private collection
Andy Warhol, 1970, oil and acrylic on linen, 152.4 × 101.6 cm (60 × 40 in.)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Timothy Collins
Self Portrait, 1980, oil on canvas, 137.2 × 101.6 cm (54 × 40 in.)
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
Isabetta, 1934, oil on canvas, 109.2 × 64.1 cm (43 × 25 ¼ in.) private collection

Alice Neel with her son Hartley in Spring Lake, c. 1950

New Jersey

Richard

c. 1952, oil on canvas
66.5 × 45.7 cm, 26 ⅛ × 18 in.



Hydrangeas

1967, oil on canvas
101.6 × 114.3 cm, 40 × 45 in.

Hartley on the Motorcycle

1966, oil on canvas
210.2 × 127.3 cm, 82 ¼ × 50 in.

Richard Gibbs

c. 1961, oil on canvas
63.5 × 40.6 cm, 25 × 16 in.

Still Life Spring Lake

1969, oil on canvas
75.6 × 101.6 cm, 29 ¾ × 40 in.

Blue House (version 2)

1964, oil on canvas
127 × 83.8 cm, 50 × 33 in.

Spring Lake

c. 1973, oil on canvas
108.7 × 127 cm, 42 ¾ × 50 in.

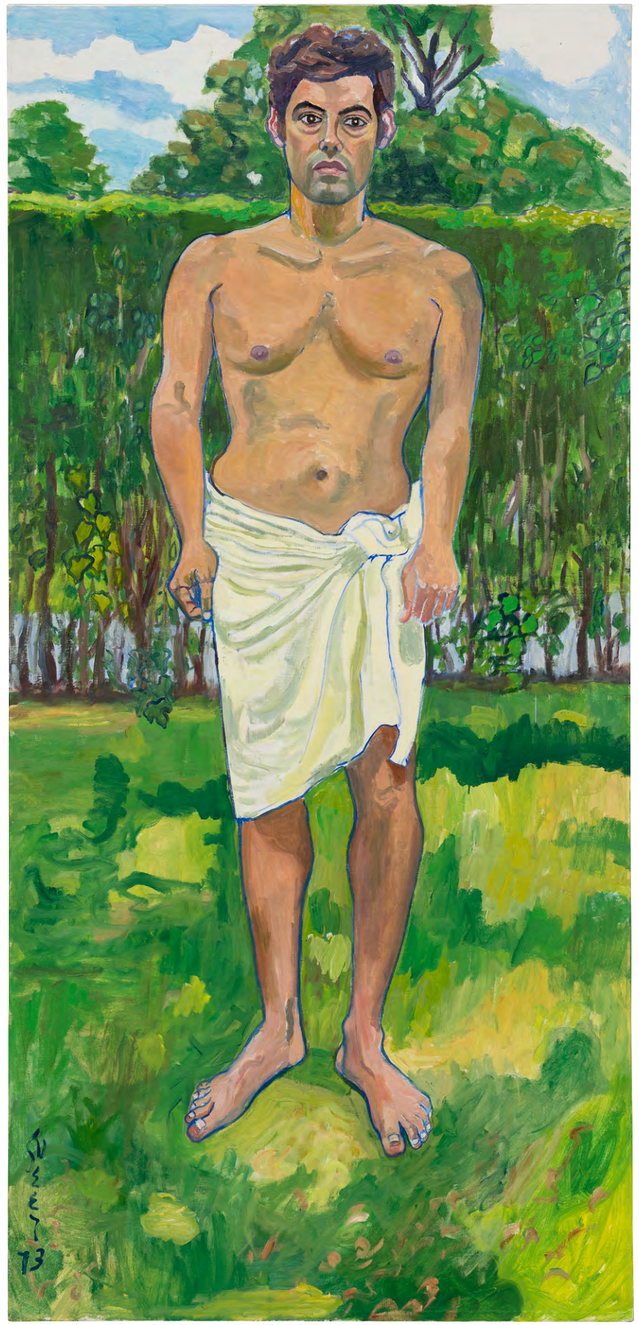
Nancy and the Twins (5 Months)

1971, oil on canvas

112.1 × 152.7 cm, 44 1/8 × 60 in.

Richard in Towel

1973, oil on canvas
203.2 × 96.5 cm, 80 × 38 in.



Fruit and Bottles

1984, oil on canvas
125.7 × 111.8 cm, 49 ½ × 44 in.

Antonia and Alexandra

1974, oil on canvas
111.1 × 102.2 cm, 43 ¾ × 40 ¼ in.

Roses

1983, oil on canvas
91.4 × 61 cm, 36 × 24 in.

Memories

1981, oil on canvas
109.2 × 63.5 cm, 43 × 25 in.

Vermont

Hartley

1971, oil on canvas
101.6 × 68.3 cm, 40 × 26 7/8 in.

Harold Dyke

1971, oil on canvas
121.9 × 81.3 cm, 48 × 32 in.

Vermont

1971, oil on canvas
106.7 × 117.2 cm, 42 × 46 1/8 in.

Ed Sun

1971, oil on canvas
106.7 × 76.2 cm, 42 × 30 in.

Lushka

1974, oil on canvas
116.5 × 106 cm, 45 ¾ × 41 ⅞ in.

Ginny and Elizabeth

1976, oil on canvas
112.1 × 81.8 cm, 44 1/8 × 32 1/8 in.

Elizabeth on the Donkey

1977, oil on canvas
111.8 × 127 cm, 44 × 50 in.

Hartley in Striped Shirt

1984, oil on canvas
106.7 × 81.3 cm, 42 × 32 in.

Alice Neel with her son Richard in Spring Lake, c. 1953

One of the great American figurative artists of the twentieth century, Alice Neel has not always been regarded as such. Ignored for much of her life because she situated herself outside the mainstream, it was only towards the end of her life that she began to be noticed. As an artist with left-wing sympathies, often painting contentious figures and scenes, and as a woman who was opposed to all kinds of discrimination, she did not shy from confrontation. Neel spent most of her life painting in her various apartments in New York City, first in Greenwich Village, then in Spanish Harlem and finally on the Upper West Side just south of Harlem. Her subjects ranged from friends and family to writers, artists, immigrants, neighbors, intellectuals, homosexuals, transvestites, nudes, still lifes and landscapes. If she is best known for her portraits, her work in other genres is highly distinctive and fresh. Focusing on the psychological aspect of portraiture, Neel demonstrated her commitment to the truth as she saw it and to revealing the pressures of life in the city. Her still lifes and landscapes, by contrast, disclose a sensitivity to the specifics of place.

It is less well known that Neel spent almost every summer in New Jersey from 1934 onwards, as well as considerable periods of time in Vermont, continuing to paint in both locations. This is the first time that a group of works made outside New York has been brought together.

Alice Neel was born in Merion Square, Pennsylvania in 1900 and died in New York in 1984.

Selected One Person Exhibitions since 2000

2017
— *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
— *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles, Arles, France
2016
— *Collector of Souls*, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague, The Netherlands
— *Alice Neel: The Subject and Me*, The Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
— *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland
2013
— *Alice Neel: Intimate Relations*, Nordiska Akvarellmuseet, Skärhamn, Sweden
2011
— *Alice Neel: Family*, The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2010
— *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
— *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK
— *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA
2008
— *Alice Neel: Drawing from Life*, Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, PA, USA
— *Moderna Museet Now: Alice Neel Collector of Souls*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
2005
— *Alice Neel's Women*, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA
2003
— *Alice Neel: Drawings*, The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
— *Alice Neel: Women Drawn*, Firehouse Center for the Visual Arts, Burlington, Vermont, VT, USA
2002
— *Duos: Alice Neel's Double Portraits*, Naples Museum of Art, Naples, FL, USA
2001
— *Alice Neel*, Denver Museum of Art, Colorado, CO, USA
— *Alice Neel*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA
— *Alice Neel*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, USA
— *Alice Neel*, Addison Gallery of American Art, Massachusetts, MA, USA
2000
— *Alice Neel*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA

Selected Bibliography since 2000

2016
— *Alice Neel. Painter of Modern Life*. Jeremy Lewison (ed.). Texts by Bice Curiger, Petra Gördüren, Jeremy Lewison, Laura Stamps and Annamari Vänskä. Mercatorfonds, Brussels and Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki
2013
— *Alice Neel: Intimate Relations — Drawings and Watercolours 1926–1982*. Text by Jeremy Lewison. Nordiska Akvarellmuseet, Skärhamn
2011
— *Alice Neel: Family*. Text by Adam Phillips. The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin
2010
— *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty*. Text by Phoebe Hoban. St. Martin's Press, New York
— *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*. Texts by Tamar Garb, Jeremy Lewison, Robert Storr and Barry Walker. Artists' appreciations by Frank Auerbach, Marlene Dumas and Chris Ofili. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
2008
— *Alice Neel: Collector of Souls*. Text by Jeremy Lewison. Moderna Museet, Stockholm
2003
— *Alice Neel: Drawings*. Text by Courtney Graham Donnell. The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago
— *Alice Neel: Women Drawn*. Texts by Denise Bauer and Elizabeth Hartley Neel. Firehouse Center for the Visual Arts, Burlington
2002
— *Alice Neel: Women*. Text by Carolyn Carr. Rizzoli, New York
— *Duos: Alice Neel's Double Portraits*. Text by Linda Chase. Naples Museum of Art, Florida
2000
— *Alice Neel*. Ann Temkin (ed.). Texts by Richard Flood, Susan Rosenberg and Ann Temkin. Philadelphia Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York

See www.aliceneel.com for an extensive biography and bibliography.

Selected Public Collections

- The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD, USA
- Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA
- Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, USA
- Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO, USA
- Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA
- Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., USA
- The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, USA
- The Jewish Museum, New York, NY, USA
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA
- Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
- The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, USA
- The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA
- Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA
- National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., USA
- National Museum of American Art, Washington D.C., USA
- National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA
- National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C., USA
- Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, USA
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, USA
- Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, Germany
- Tate, London, UK
- Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH, USA
- Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, USA
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA
- Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA, USA

Alice Neel painting Dr. Leonard Ellenbogen in her Vermont studio, c. 1980

Alice Neel on the lawn of her first house in Spring Lake, c. 1958

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