

## **Alice Neel: Painted Truths** **Whitechapel Art Gallery, London**

Robin Blake

The life of Alice Neel, born in 1900, is a chronicle of poverty, cruelty and personal tragedy under which many less resilient artists would have sunk to oblivion. Extremely talented male painters of her time were used to their fawning followers, not least among women. Contrast the equally talented Neel. When her husband, the Cuban painter Carlos Enríquez, left her, taking their two-year-old second daughter with him to Havana, their first child had already died of diphtheria, aged 11 months. Neel suffered a mental breakdown, attempted suicide and spent a year in an asylum. Three years later her live-in boyfriend, a merchant seaman, slashed 50 of her oil paintings and immolated hundreds of works on paper in a jealous rage, while her next beau abandoned her three months after the birth of their son, later becoming an Episcopal minister.

As we see from her portraits of trade union activists and committed writers (Art Shields, Kenneth Fearing) the young Neel found consolation in leftwing causes. She was a Depression-era New York leftist, whom the McCarthyite FBI later described as “a romantic, Bohemian-type communist”. She was signed up by the Federal Art Project, which supported thousands of impoverished artists in the 1930s. But the FAP played an unpleasant game of cat-and-mouse with Neel, continually suspending and rehiring her while steadily reducing her pay. Neel’s resentment burst out in a vengeful portrait of Audrey McMahon, the FAP’s director. This is one of the standout exhibits in the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s magnificent display of 60 paintings from across Neel’s career. McMahon emerges from a stygian background, a withered, vampiric figure, scratching at her face with a bird-like claw.

With the end of the FAP in 1944 Neel, a single mother in a rundown apartment in Spanish Harlem, was dependent on welfare. Yet she was steadily turning herself into one of the most astute and committed portrait painters in America. In the 1940s and ’50s she worked against the fashionable grain, being neither abstract expressionist nor minimalist. Critics called her “realist”, though hers is no photographic version of reality but a tough psychological realism that owes much of its power to the examples of Munch, Van Gogh and Goya.

By the 1960s Neel’s fortunes had begun to rise. She connected with a new generation in the New York art world, painting such luminaries as Geoffrey Hendricks, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. The latter is a pitiable, half-naked victim displaying the grotesque scars inflicted two years earlier by the bullets of the would-be assassin.

Besides these public portraits, Neel obsessively returned to more personal subjects. One is pregnancy, which has rarely been painted with such rounded (in all senses) empathy. She was also a strong painter of children, giving them a wistful, even weird pathos. Double portraits were a particular speciality – she yearned to paint the two FBI agents who interrogated her in 1955 but, regrettably, they refused – of which twins are a recurrent subset. These range from Neel’s granddaughters to her contemporaries, the elderly Soyer Brothers, who sit sorrowfully together in 1973 as if weighed down by the double bind of twinhood.



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By the time she painted her own defiantly naked self-portrait, at the age of 80, Neel had travelled far, from being an abused and impoverished Marxist with symbolist leanings to a celebrated, hard-nosed, often feminist portrait-painter, guided not by ideology or fashion but her own unflinching perceptions, toughened after years of abuse and impoverishment. When Robert Mapplethorpe called to photograph her in 1984 she was mortally ill with cancer. Instead of applying make-up, she suggested she pose just as she was, but with her eyes shut and mouth open.

When he asked why, she said she wanted to see herself in death. That is how unflinching she was. Until September 17