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From the galleries: three museum-quality shows in Berlin, Munich and Cologne

## The Portraitist from Spanish Harlem

*The market discovers the US painter Alice Neel: Aurel Scheibler presents in Berlin "Paintings and Drawings"*

Alice Neel liked to call herself an "old-fashioned painter – still lifes, landscape scenes and people." Nevertheless, the New Yorker did not dole out her artistic passion evenly: "I was mostly interested in people." Over the last few years the artist, who died in 1984, has been rediscovered as a portrait painter, as an unacknowledged master of recent American art history. The Moderna Museet in Malmö has just opened a retrospective that had been on view in London and Houston earlier this year. During her lifetime Neel had to wait a long time to achieve much recognition for her realistic-figurative art. She was born in Pennsylvania in 1900 and at age 27 moved to Greenwich Village. Although she was known in artist circles for her stubbornness and manic portrait production, it wasn't until the end of the 60s, beginning of the 70s through the museums that she gained recognition. The aesthetic hegemony of the abstract expressionists and the curators and critics associated with them was too strong in the post-War era, as was the opposition of the male-dominated American art world toward confident, politically articulate women artists.

The emerging women's movement was first to recognize a pioneer and ally in Alice Neel: "Art isn't interested in whether you are a man or a woman. You have to have talent, and you have to work like crazy," were the words of the confident outsider.

The political side of this staunch socialist and women's right activist is apparent in the Berlin gallerist Aurel Scheibler's new solo exhibition "Paintings and Drawings" in which thirteen paintings and nine drawings from all phases of her career once again offer an overview of her work. Two years ago he showed her work for the first time in Germany. Aurel Scheibler curated this exhibition together with Jeremy Lewison in London, who advises the Estate and also works with David Zwirner, New York, and the British gallerist Victoria Miro.

A crayon drawing from 1937 calls for union work ("Support the Union," \$43,000), an ink and gouache drawing from the following year show a street scene from Spanish Harlem (\$45,000). At that time Alice Neel had already turned her back on the Village, in part as a result of disappointment about the egocentrism rampant in the art scene. She lived until 1962 in Harlem and maintained an empathetic relationship to the area, to the neighbors on the street with their faces marked by weariness and anxiety. The women who sat for her "would not fit in a dress from Saks 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue," as Alice Neel herself once put it. In her search for faces she invited family members, befriended artists, musicians, union workers or authors as well as simple passers-by to sit for her in her studio, even after she had moved her studio to the Upper West Side during the 60s and become more involved in the art scene. The painting of befriended artist and filmmaker Michel Auder from 1980 (\$ 650,000) proves the mastery with which we worked into her old age: As if with a magnifying glass Neel focuses in on Auder's face, his eyes; she keeps the rest of the painting light, any other intimations are restricted to the most essential. Neel knew what she was capable of and enjoyed her work. "I would have made a good psychologist. But it's more fun to be an artist."

Until January 14, 2010. [www.aurelscheibler.com](http://www.aurelscheibler.com). The exhibition catalogue "Alice Neel: Paintings and Drawings" is available for 35 euros.