

## The paintings of New Yorker Alice Neel still shock

Alice Neel (1900-1984) was the consummate New York artist—not because she painted city scenes, although she sometimes did—but because she painted the city’s people in a way that captured their quirky, urban, individualistic essences. Even today, her work has the power to shock. Encountering a portrait by Neel is like rushing around the corner in a subway tunnel, and almost crashing into another wired New Yorker. “So, sorry,” you murmur, averting your eyes and trying to pass by. But each time you move to the left, the guy moves to the left. And each time you dodge to the right, he blocks you there. Finally you have no choice but to look up and meet that person’s eyes. Neel looks into the eyes of her subjects—and she’ll make you look too. What you find there may make you squirm or laugh or even hoot. But it will make you feel. It will also make you think. Because Neel almost always had something to say about the people she painted. During the 1940s and 50s, when [Willem De Kooning](#) and the New York painters known as the [Abstract Expressionists](#) were hanging out in Greenwich Village, Neel chose to live in Spanish Harlem. There, in her little apartment on East 107th Street, she painted portraits of her friends and neighbors—George Arce, a boy she met on the street, who later landed in prison; José Santiago Negrón, a nightclub singer and the father of Neel’s oldest son; Margarita, José’s sister; two little girls named Antonia and Carmen, and many other men, women and children that Neel met uptown. For most of her life, Neel swam against the current. At a time when portrait painting was dubbed hopelessly old-fashioned, she painted portraits. When the movers and shakers of the art scene were hanging out downtown, she moved to Harlem. In so doing, Neel placed herself outside the mainstream. She also may have given herself the freedom and emotional sustenance to develop into one of the 20th century’s great painters. Two shows—“Nudes of the 1930s” at [Zwirner & Wirth](#) on East 69th Street and “Selected Works” at [David Zwirner](#) on West 19th—offer small glimpses into Neel’s prolific body of work. Both are well worth seeing—“Nudes” for the insights it offers into her early development, “Selected Works” for its collection of 16 attention-grabbing portraits from the 1940s-80s, beautifully displayed in

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natural light. Taken together, the two shows only begin to sketch the outlines of her singular artistic trajectory. In addition to the works themselves, at David Zwirner there are showings of a [documentary about Neel](#) made by her grandson, Andrew Neel, that offers interpretations of her life and raises disturbing questions about what it takes to be an artist—especially a female artist—in our society. It is an informative and provocative film. But before getting too wrapped up in the biographical conundrums of Alice Neel, it is best to take a good, hard look at her paintings. Three portraits of children are among the finest in the downtown show and suggest Neel’s powerful identification with the small and powerless. In “Cindy” (1960) a pale little girl of about six stares straight at us with a serious, worried expression. She’s dressed in a brown and red plaid jumper, her skinny arms clasped around her knees. Her wide green eyes, outlined in black, look apprehensive beyond her years. Sitting on her straight-backed chair, Cindy seems so little and vulnerable you want to wrap your arms around her and promise that everything will be okay: President Kennedy and Martin Luther King are not going to be assassinated. The war in Viet Nam will come to a speedy end. And Cindy’s parents will, of course, remain happily married and live forever. If only! On the wall next to “Cindy” hangs “George Arce” (1959), a painting of the young Puerto Rican teenager who was one of Neel’s neighbors on East 107th Street. Neel shows him as a beautiful boy, dark and thoughtful. He rests his chin on one hand and looks out at us as if considering weighty questions. Neel has painted his skin in a multitude of golden browns and burnt umbers, with a marvelous, loose brush that is part Soutine, part Van Gogh but all Neel. It’s a gorgeous, lyrical yet passionate canvas—one of the finest in the show. And it made me hunger to see more like it. With its strong colors and black outlines, Neel’s 1952 portrait of her son Hartley, at age ten, sitting in his shorts and striped t-shirt in a garden, is another compelling work. Hardly a painting by Neel does not compel in one way or another. Yet, compared to some portraits of Hartley that Neel did later, which were not included in the show, this is a reserved encounter. A brilliant painter, giving her child the Modigliani treatment, perhaps. I’ll wait a few years, she seems to be saying, until you grow up. Neel’s portraits from the 60s and 70s are brighter, bolder and more aggressive. She paints bearded artists, bourgeois mothers with chubby toddlers, graphic designers dressed to the nines and even the porn star-turned

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performance artist Annie Sprinkle. Whomever she tackles she handles with a fierce gusto and an often satirical edge. Seated in a blue, striped chair, the bleached blond mother's head is tilted, slightly, so we look up her snout-like nose. Her little son dangles off the edge of the chair like a suckling pig. Decked out in leather, black feathers and genital piercings, Annie Sprinkle stares out at us with the inane face of a Barbie doll. These are not my people, Neel telegraphs, but they sure are part of our world. In "The Family (Algis, Julie and Bailey)," done in 1968, Neel lets lots of canvas show through and her paint is thin and streaky. Her line, in this and so many other paintings, is at once as subtle and brutally accurate as [Egon Schiele's](#). Yet, there is something completely American and nineteen-sixties in her vision of the trio. Algis, a lanky, smeary-faced man in jeans, poses almost menacingly, holding a disturbed-looking, gray-faced baby. Behind him lurks a little girl in yellow tights and a short, blue dress, who seems ready to cry. Poor child, you think, until you read the commentary and discover the "little girl" was his wife. In the world of Neel's paintings, family members may be arrogant, alienated, sad, self-satisfied, seething or strung-out. They are never content. In 1962 Neel made the momentous decision to leave Spanish Harlem for the Upper West Side. Around the same time, she also started cultivating the leading artists, critics, dealers and curators who controlled access to the New York Art scene. While she'd once painted the poor, the anonymous and the down-and-out, she began painting the socially and artistically important: Andy Warhol, Frank O'Hara, Robert Smithson, even the daughter of art critic Clement Greenberg. These portraits of the powerful are neither Neel's most soulful nor probing work, yet they are fresh, stylish and very much engaged. And they served their purpose. In a little more than ten years, Neel went from being virtually unknown in the art world to having a solo show at the Whitney. By the time she died in 1984, her place in art history books was assured. Her grandson's movie shows footage of Neel beginning a canvas with one long-handled brush dipped in black paint, making long, lovely lines. Though she made her name as a painter, her work is, first and foremost, about drawing. At the uptown show, you can see a few of Neel's drawings from the 1930s—dark, satirical and sometimes funny treatments of naked bodies. My favorite is a rear view of a woman with curvaceous bottom and legs that narrow into pointy ankles.

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Other work in the “Nudes of the 1930s” show makes clear Neel’s debt to the German and Viennese Expressionists: Egon Schiele, [Oskar Kokoschka](#), Otto Dix, Max Beckman and [Kathe Kollwitz](#). When Neel chose her masters, she chose the best. The thirties was a dark, desperate time in Neel’s life. In the space of four years, she suffered the loss of two daughters; abandonment by her husband, Cuban painter [Carlos Enríquez Gómez](#); and two suicide attempts. A black, malignant cloud seems to hang over the work in “Nudes of the 1930s.” One wonders not only how Neel managed to survive this period but also how she eventually flourished as an artist. Could the life she found in Spanish Harlem have been part of the answer? “I love you Harlem, your life, your pregnant women, your relief lines outside the bank, full of women who no dress in Saks 5th Ave would fit ... what a treasure of goodness and life shambles thru the streets...” Neel wrote in unpublished notes, quoted by [Pamela Allara](#) in “Pictures of People: Alice Neel’s American Portrait Gallery.” Like so many artists before and after, it seems Neel found what she needed in the city’s crowded streets, teeming with people and that intense human energy that is New York.