

Alice Neel

Painter of Modern Life

Alice Neel, a Marxist Girl on Capitalism

by Laura Stamps

La Víbora, Havana, Cuba

Neel's ideas about art were formed in Havana (Cuba), where she and her Cuban husband Carlos Enríquez (1900–1957, g. 33) lived from January 1926 to May 1927. The dictatorship of Gerardo Machado y Morales was under pressure, and Cuba was experiencing turbulent times. Although the couple lived with Enríquez's parents in a very prosperous suburb for the first few months, they regularly went into the city to paint portraits of people from the lowest social classes. Both painted in a realist style, though Enríquez's work was more romantic than Neel's. After several months they moved to La Víbora, a deprived neighbourhood where many left-leaning writers and artists had made their home. During this heyday of Cuban literature Neel met writers like Nicolás Guillén (1902–1989), Marcelo Pogolotti (1902–1988) and Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980), and became familiar with the methods they used to depict a society in process of change. She discovered, partly thanks to them, that art could be a political act. In their books they described the impact of American Imperialism on ordinary people's lives in Latin America. Neel shared their anti-American sentiments. In the years that followed, her own personal life was unsettled. She gave birth to a daughter who died at the age of one, and then she and Enríquez separated, one of the consequences being that their second daughter was raised by his family in Cuba. All these events led Neel to suffer a nervous breakdown and she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. At that time, her work was mainly autobiographical.

Greenwich Village, New York

By 1931 the tide appeared to have turned, and she moved to Greenwich Village. It was an interesting time to move to this part of New York. In response to the Great Depression, the artists, intellectuals and writers who lived there had become interested in Marxism, and many also became politically active. It was in Greenwich Village that Neel, who became a member of the Communist Party herself in 1935, started producing "revolutionary paintings". She developed her characteristic style, tending on the one hand towards Expressionism, and yet also towards the documentary, as propagandised in leftist circles. Although Neel produced a number of paintings there with explicitly political subjects, the majority of her work clearly consisted of portraits – a striking number of them of leading Communist figures. As in La Víbora, her artistic friends and acquaintances included many journalists, writers and poets. Thus she produced a new group of portraits of proletarian writers, including Sam Putnam, Joe Gould and Max White. The most striking of these was Joe Gould (1889–1957), a phenomenon in Greenwich Village. He was constantly hanging around drunk in bars and restaurants, working every day on a book he called "An Oral History of Our Time", an idea that came to him in 1917 when he was working as a reporter for the *New York Evening Mail*. "What we used to think was history – kings and queens,

treaties, inventions, big battles...is only formal history and largely false. I'll put down the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitude," he said. Gould was supported in his endeavour by certain private individuals and by the Federal Writers Project. His "Oral History" would never see the light of day, however.

Alice Neel painted two portraits of Gould in 1933 (cat. 8). By far the best known shows a grinning male nude standing before us, legs apart, knees slightly bent. Gould's genitals appear not only between his legs. Another penis and scrotum can be seen beneath his navel, and yet another "set" appears from beneath the stool. The genitals of two men standing either side of him can also be seen. Could these be echoes of his delusions of grandeur? He was after all engaged in "the greatest literary project of all time", the completion of which was already in doubt, given his drink problem and his psychological instability. It was known that Neel sympathised with the eccentric Gould. She remained concerned for him long after his patrons had dropped him. So why did she make him look so ridiculous? Did Gould's "Oral History of Our Time" give Neel the idea of creating a "visual history of her time" by portraying people from all levels of society? This is at any rate the ideal way of reconciling the genre of the portrait – which left-wingers generally associated with personal glorification – with Communist ideals. Neel may have painted this grotesque portrait of Gould to convince herself that Gould, the kindred spirit, was actually her opposite. The portrait of Gould as a spectre, was a constant reminder to convince herself that, though it might take many sacrifices and a lot of patience, her "Visual History" would one day see the light of day. The fact is that no other portrait by Neel is known to include the name of the subject alongside and the same size as her surname, which serves as her signature. It looks very much like Neel not only found her own style of painting in Greenwich Village, but also an all-embracing artistic concept which allowed her to reconcile her personal ambitions as an artist with the collective goals of Communism.

Spanish Harlem, New York

In 1938 Neel moved to Spanish Harlem, a much poorer New York neighbourhood, where she would continue to live until 1962, working steadily on her "Visual History". She portrayed people from the street, alongside her portraits of Communist activists. She probably identified with people like Art Shields, a reporter for the *Daily Worker*, and Ford union organiser Bill McKie (fig. 34), who remained faithful to the party's ideals at a time when it was simply not done to be Communist in America. The use of colour, the lack of a clearly defined background and the emphasis on external characteristics in these portraits from 1951 (cat. 28) and 1953 (fig. 34) conjure associations with Van Gogh's paintings from his Arles period. He used intensely contrasting colours to portray normal life, as in his portraits of an old woman, a pipe-smoking farmer and a postman. With this reference to Van Gogh (fig. 35), Neel was paying tribute both to the leading Communists and to the artist whose Humanist art was admired within the Party. Thus, she once more underlined the fact that she was working on something that, though it clearly concerned herself, also transcended the personal.

Spanish Harlem is also the place where Neel gave birth to sons Richard (b. 1939) and Hartley (b. 1941), whose fathers were José Santiago Negrón and Sam Brody respectively. Neel's

relationship with Brody, a photographer, documentary maker and a founder of the “Workers’ Film and Photo League”, would last for almost 20 years. She regularly portrayed Sam, Richard and Hartley during this period. This not only gives us a view of the different stages of their lives, and their different moods, it also shows how the world around them was changing, as reflected in the clothes they wore, for example. Although she painted only her sons and lovers repeatedly, and later her daughters-in-law and grandchildren, she also produced several paintings of a few other people. For instance, between 1950 and 1959 she regularly painted Georgie Arce of Spanish Harlem (1959, fig. 36 and cat. 33). In one she would emphasise his childlike innocence or playfulness, while in another his intense look would dominate the picture. However, the most striking thing about this series of portraits is his growing tendency to strike the pose of a Puerto Rican gangster (complete with knife!). Was Arce adopting this attitude because it reflected some internal development in him, or because it was expected of him in the social milieu of Spanish Harlem? Was he living up to the preconceived ideas of the white ruling classes as to how a poor Puerto Rican would develop? Whatever the answer, we cannot help but relate to Arce when looking at Neel’s portraits of him. During Neel’s time in Spanish Harlem issues of race and discrimination were high on the Communist Party’s agenda. Neel reveals this in all its complexity in her portraits of Arce. For whom or what do we actually see in this series? Arce himself, Neel’s representation of him, our own views, or all these things at once, in some kind of “blur”?

Beginning in 1955 Neel began to attend meetings of the Club, an artists’ discussion group founded by non-representational gestural painters and sculptors who had broken with academic idioms. In doing so she slowly seemed to find a context for her work away from the Communist circle, although some of the Club attendees were undoubtedly also Communist sympathisers. In 1959 Neel acted alongside Allen Ginsberg in the film *Pull My Daisy* (based on a play by Jack Kerouac). Writers Ginsberg and Kerouac belonged to the Beats, a group to which Neel was also attracted, because it so clearly opposed American bourgeois morality. The movement was soon annexed by the media, which coined the term “beatnik” (based on the Russian word “sputnik”). The term signified an archetypal intellectual with a beard and a roll-neck sweater, to whom American youngsters who wanted nothing to do with “superficial” pop music and motorcycle culture could relate. Aspects of beat culture were adopted by the hippy movement in the 1960s, at a time when countercultures were no longer actively opposed, or ignored, but actually acquired cult status. Neel was well aware that this was her moment. Making a “visual history of your time” was one thing, but it would only be “read” if the “writer” was famous. Neel was 60 by now, and if she was not to end up like Joe Gould she would have to act fast.