

# Alice Neel

## Painter of Modern Life

### **“I hate the use of the word *portrait*.”**

by Bice Curiger

Alice Neel knew that she could only say what she had to say through painting. The medium was an existential necessity for her and it is the unerring ability to hone in on essentials in her paintings of people that accounts for the extraordinary quality of this oeuvre. The likenesses of her twentieth-century colleagues may seem too polished by comparison, bogged down by convention or by an emphasis on form so wrought that the immediacy of the human encounter is attenuated.

Alice Neel's paintings show a great rightness of means in rendering straightforward events that oscillate between accident and destiny. Palpable in these pictures is the contribution the sitters make to the emergence of their likenesses through the intensity of their presence, so much so that Robert Storr was motivated to comment, “You see time happen.”

It is astonishing and telling that, given her unconventional temperament, Neel chose to dedicate herself to portrait art, which was more or less written off in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as one of the most conventional of genres! Her declared antipathy to the word “portrait” must also be assessed in this context, especially since she painted people who “sat” for her, as classical art terminology has it.

What is more, it is impossible to overlook the patently attentive, alert presence and wordless communication of Neel's sitters. The people she portrays are “centred”, both relaxed and mindful, wearing no armour metaphorically speaking, although they do occasionally reveal the way in which they garner support from their protective shells, i.e. their clothing but also gestural crutches and prostheses. “If there are very liberated people, I in turn feel very liberated and can paint them in a more liberated way,” she said.

In 1967, at the height of conceptual art, Giulio Paolini reproduced in black-and-white the Renaissance likeness of a young man painted in 1505 by Lorenzo Lotto. By calling it *Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto* (*Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto*, fig. 43), Paolini highlighted the facts that some five hundred years ago a young man directed his gaze at the artist while the latter painted him – and that we, as viewers of the image, now take the place of the artist in the act of painting.

Foregrounding the gaze, drawing attention to the meta-level of a likeness: Neel is not a conceptual artist but her paintings once again confirm the assertion that good art is conceptual by definition. Her paintings represent the art of the portrait *in actu*. Through her commitment to figurative painting, she courageously defied the ideology that dominated the art scene in New

York as the uncontested centre of post-war abstraction – which meant even more determined and vigilant consideration of her contribution within the larger context.

Almost in passing, Neel once remarked that “My painting always includes the frame as part of the composition,” as opposed to Russian painter Chaïm Soutine, who “is just like Rembrandt, inside the frame.”

These statements draw attention to the somewhat curious way in which her sitters often fill the space of her compositions. Neel establishes tension in the picture plane by wildly cropping the figures and zooming in, not only on the face but also the body. In her grandson’s film, we see the artist checking the framing by looking at the picture through the rectangle formed by her thumbs and index fingers, a frequent gesture, according to her sons (fig. 44).

Neel’s sitters take a bold and innovative stance when modelling for her. Neel claimed that she did not pose or arrange them, adding, in the same breath, that she observes how people sit down when she is talking to them. “They unconsciously assume their most characteristic pose, which in a way involves all their character and social standing – what the world has done to them and their retaliation. And then I compose something around that.”

In the film, we also learn that she occasionally suggested that her models undress and pose in their underwear because their clothing – a three-piece suit, for example – did not match her painting. In some cases they actually ended up naked on a bed or a couch. A case in point: *Cindy Nemser and Chuck* (1975, fig. 45), who seem to express this very circumstance with every breath of their being. Seeking protection, they have retired to a corner of the spacious couch, their serious but trusting gaze directed toward the painter.

Fortunately for posterity, some of Neel’s sitters were interviewed for the 2007 film, including Julie from the painting *Pregnant Julie and Algis* (1967, cat. 47). Julie speaks of the incredibly powerful and electrifying energy of an intense nonverbal dialogue; subjected to Alice’s laser gaze, she finds that she is staring at herself.

Julie faces us, looking out at the world with confidence, her decisive attitude as a pregnant woman is tangible in the panorama format of that painting that pictures her lying stretched out on the bed. Her partner, still fully clothed, seems to protect her although he is almost hiding behind her. The lively pattern of the red blanket underneath captures some of the tension of the moment, while Neel’s characteristically blue contours outline the woman’s body with masterful cogency, like a tender arabesque of liberty. “There is a new freedom for women to be themselves, to find out what they really are.”

It has become so commonplace that we hardly notice anymore how fundamentally cultural change over the past hundred years has included the frame in her compositions, by which she probably also meant the *zeitgeist*, “the feel of an era”, to which she so often referred.

In 1968, a year after she had painted naked, pregnant Julie and her partner, the picture appeared on the cover of the then tone-setting *Village Voice*. It must have struck like a bombshell, breaking

taboos in more than one way. For one thing, the self-conscious, perfectly natural image, an extremely unusual motif in painting, quite literally embodied the raging battle against the puritanism of bourgeois culture and society. For another, pregnancy was a taboo subject for feminists for fear that it could be enlisted as an argument “to send women back to their suburban prisons”.

Formally, Neel’s painting of *John Perreault* (1972, cat. 59), is the naked male counterpart to Julie. Stretched out, he lies there with legs bent, quiet and pensive, his genitalia unabashedly exposed.

There is nothing laboured about the profound intimacy of Neel’s paintings. “Psychological” is a term repeatedly invoked by writers and critics but what does that actually mean? Her work records a readiness to trust and confide. It reveals an awareness of others that unfolds in thrilling repose, leading to an encounter of a special order that takes time and allows for an unusual, communicative exchange.

In *The Family (Algis, Julie and Bailey)* (cat. 48), Neel painted the same couple again a year later in 1968, now with their baby; the lackadaisical nonchalance of their pose is staggering. Algis, centred in the composition, casually holds the child with one hand, the thumb of his other hand hooked into the pocket of his jeans (fig. 46). Their faces are questioning, serious and open, lending the painting a near existential urgency. But in the final analysis, the urgency lies in the very fact that these people are painted!

In the early days of photography, models had to stand immobile for minutes at a time and, as a rule, the pictures portray rigid, buttoned-up people, decked out in their Sunday best. Now that snapshot photography has become an omnipresent, all-embracing documentary companion in every life situation, Neel deliberately cultivates an entirely different ritual when she captures her images. She imposes a wilfully prolonged investment of time on her sitters, beginning with the extended journey they have to take in order to reach her studio – which is her apartment.

Brigid Berlin recounts that Andy Warhol asked her “to go with him to Alice Neel’s because he was afraid to go to Harlem by himself. I couldn’t believe we were going all the way up there.” In Neel’s 1970 painting of him, Warhol is seen facing front, seated and naked to the waist, exposing his invasive scars and assaulted body (cat. 51). The vulnerability is palpable in the artist’s gentle, tender brushstrokes. Avoiding her gaze, Warhol has his eyes introspectively averted. We are reminded of his secrets: Andy the Catholic, the churchgoer, his closely guarded inner life. Although he is wearing a corset, his hips seem to bulge and overflow, underscoring the feminine aspect. There is even something girlish about the way he is sitting with his legs and narrow feet so straight and close together. There is a touching, astonishing intimacy in the likeness of this inscrutable, provocatively indifferent figure that dominated twentieth-century art.

An important detail catches the eye in Warhol’s portrait: his very small hands. He is holding a cloth or his undershirt. Hands in Neel’s pictures are important indicators of character but they are also formal anchors for the figure in the composition and often appear variously distorted, sometimes scaled-down, as in *Henry Geldzahler* (1967, cat. 44); emphasized with mannered

positions of the fingers, as in *Sherry Speeth* (1964, fig. 15); holding hands in an exchange of strength and warmth among couples; or resembling the claws of a bird, as in *Mother and Child (Nancy & Olivia)* (1967, cat. 46).

Not only did Neel occasionally stylize her models' hands, their arms may also be explicitly emphasized, almost like overlong sausages, and yet, within the context as a whole, it is these elements that lend the compositions cogency, speed and even a wilful nonchalance. Rudimentary planes of colour around the figures morph into portions that are not completely "coloured in" so that we still see patches of primed canvas. Warhol is sitting on a bed, drawn in subtle contours that appear to have been pushed into the painting from the left, almost like a little wooden perch for a canary. Sparing, light-blue brushstrokes around his torso fan out above his right shoulder into the shape of a wing, reinforcing the birdlike implications or, in fact, actually transforming Andy into an angel. Neel frequently consolidates her figures by framing them in bold brushstrokes, thereby also underscoring the autonomy and vibrancy of the colouring and flow of her paintings.