

Alice Neel

Painter of Modern Life

A Modern Woman's Social Conscience

by Annamari Vänskä

A direct, challenging gaze. Long, dark hair. A man's white collared shirt and red-and-white striped trousers. Leaning slightly forward, the figure looks as she might rise at any moment and attack the viewer.

The subject of Alice Neel's 1970 painting was the radical feminist Kate Millett, an icon of second-wave feminism. The portrait was commissioned by *Time* magazine that year, around the time Millett published *Sexual Politics*, which went on to become a classic of feminist literature. The book immediately gained cult status owing to its harsh critique of the patriarchal social system. Literary scholar Millett argued that such major figures of twentieth-century Western literature as American writers Norman Mailer and Henry Miller, as well as English author D. H. Lawrence, demonstrated in their works a social system based on machismo and hatred of women and homosexuals.

Although *Sexual Politics* met with a mixed reception, it soon became the bible of the feminist movement as Millett became its figurehead. When *Time* wanted to personify the movement on its "Women's Lib" cover, it was no wonder that the magazine chose Millett as the subject. To portray her, it hired Alice Neel, an American painter who was establishing her status as a major female artist. The writer did not like the idea, however. She refused to pose, telling Neel that no single individual could personify a broad social movement. As a result Neel had to resort to using photographs of Millett to create her painting. This may also lie behind the picture's alleged anger. Although the portrait undoubtedly symbolises the feminist movement's anger, it may also represent Neel's dissatisfaction at the model's refusal to cooperate.

No matter how it is interpreted, the commission for *Time* speaks to Neel's status in the American art world. Neel did become more broadly known and recognised through the feminist movement. In the same way that Millett criticised Western literature's failure to recognise women, feminist art criticism lashed the art world for its androcentrism. The early seventies was the era when women began to gain a higher profile as artists. Another American feminist art historian, and a soon-to-become friend of Neel's, Linda Nochlin, published her well-known essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *ARTnews* in 1971. The 40-year-old Nochlin asked simply why the art history canon did not recognise any great female artistic geniuses. This influential, polemical essay questioned the white-male-dominated history of art and demonstrated that its concept of "genius" was completely masculine. Nochlin also claimed that women had not made it into the art world because their status was both socially and societally weaker than that of men and because art schools did not admit them as students. Nochlin laid the blame on the "romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art

history is based.” Thus she accused all the players in the art world, from researchers to museum curators, who favoured and exhibited male artists.

Nochlin’s critical essay set into motion a feminist art revolution that previously remained under the surface, and that benefited Neel among others. Many feminist art publications and activist groups popped up on the American art scene, including Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (LACMA), the Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Group, Women in the Arts (WIA) and the Women’s Caucus for Art (WCA). In 1979, Neel was one of five artists honoured by the latter group with its first Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Neel may well be considered an example of how the rise of feminist art criticism began to raise “forgotten” women out of the depths of history and onto pedestals. The feminist movement made room for women artists who are now both globally known and recognised, as well as for a generation of feminist art historians who have carried on a critical analysis of the art historical canon, adding female artists to it until the present day. Neel was one of the first living female artists to enjoy the fruits of this change. In spite of this, she had an ambivalent attitude towards feminism. While she conceded that she was discriminated against as an artist because of her gender, she also said that she had always respected men more than women. “Women terrified me. I thought they were stupid because all they did was keep children and dogs in order,” Neel’s biographer Phoebe Hoban quotes her as saying.

Regardless of Neel’s personal view of women, feminism and the movement’s relationship to herself, it is clear that her career as an artist is a powerful example of a social change set in motion by feminism, and an affirmation of it. When Neel was born on 28 January 1900 into an ordinary lower- middle-class family in Pennsylvania, a middle-class woman’s opportunities to pursue a career – not to mention an artistic career – were close to nil. By the time she died on 13 October 1984, women had become some of the central figures in the art world as researchers, critics and artists. Neel is known to have said: “I am the century.” Even though she was referring to her age, Neel’s life and work exemplify how radically the position of women artists changed socially in fewer than one hundred years.

Neel was born in the Victorian era, characterised by strict customs, class structure and categorical separation of the sexes. She died in an era when that social system was history and women had attained many of the privileges previously reserved for men. Neel came of age in the heyday of the suffragette movement during the First World War. She was past middle age by the time she experienced the second wave of the feminist movement and the sexual revolution in the sixties.

All of this can be seen in Neel’s work. Unlike most nineteenth-century female artists, she did not content herself with depicting the domestic and private realm. Neel painted her friends, homeless street people, public spaces and famous individuals. Her human figures do not fit the traditional gender roles: the men do not look heroic or the women weak. Nor did Neel shy away from subjects that were considered improper for women, such as nudity. In her portraits people are often naked, regardless of their gender, age or status, without cultural status symbols. Her

subjects' nudity is not idealised, either. Every fold of skin, wrinkle or other body form is exaggerated. For Neel, the body was material to be shaped and stripped of hierarchies linked to various values. This can also be seen in the gallery of individuals represented in her portraits. Posing in these works are members of the intelligentsia and the cream of society along with those marginalised by society in various ways: New York's Latinos, African-Americans, gays and drag queens. Indeed the driving theme of Neel's output is her social consciousness. This was most likely shaped by her own status as a female artist in the male-dominated art world, her political convictions as a member of the Communist Party and the changes in women's societal rights that she experienced.

In her youth Neel witnessed the rise of the suffragette movement and how the radical National Women's Party (NWP) harshly criticised President Woodrow Wilson over his failure to allow universal suffrage in the second decade of the century. This led to the imprisonment of members of the movement in 1917, and eventually to women gaining the vote in 1920. Although Neel is not known to have taken part in the suffragette movement, she began her university studies in 1921, right after women gained the right to vote. She chose to study at the largest US women's art school, the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. Established in 1848, its aim was rather feminist and even revolutionary: to teach women a profession. It was also known as a place where female artists were allowed to draw nude models, unlike nearly all other art schools.

Neel could well be described as a "modern woman", the kind who for the first time in Western history had an opportunity to fulfill herself by working outside of her home. Neel was a tomboy, a flapper or a *garçonne* – which was considered to be "the new breed of women". Neel dressed tomboyishly in trousers or skirts that showed her legs and she was sexually liberated. She disregarded traditional codes of decency or behaviour expected of women. She personified the ideal of the emancipated modern woman who had experienced the First World War and the manner in which the most destructive war in history had paradoxically improved her social and societal visibility. When the men were away at war, women had to take responsibility on the home front. No wonder Neel could go off to study. She enjoyed freedoms that had been denied to the previous generation of women. The works she painted for public spaces also testified to this: women could now go anywhere without chaperones and do whatever today's women take for granted.

According to Neel, she chose the Philadelphia School of Design for Women for its freedom: "I didn't want to be taught a formal form. At least where I went it wasn't too organised, but you had freedom. You could do as you wanted, which was the most important thing in my life." Neel's desire for freedom also aroused bewilderment. As she put it, this was because she "didn't want to pour tea" or to wear "fluffy dresses", in other words to be a polite, obedient girl who would return home after art school to start a traditional family. Unlike many of her classmates, Neel was highly class-conscious and saw art as an arena for social criticism: "I worked so hard...not for my own family, but for all the poor in the world. Because when I'd go into the school, the scrubwomen would be coming back from scrubbing of floors all night. It killed me that these old gray-headed women had to scrub floors, and I was going in there to draw Greek statues."

Constructing this dramatic polarisation between working-class women and art school students is revealing of Neel's character of course, but also of her efforts to depict reality in a critical, unvarnished way. For instance, she had a sceptical view of Impressionism, saying that she "didn't see life as *Picnic on the Grass*" and that she "wasn't happy like Renoir". Neel dismissed the portraits of women and children by the leading American female painter, Mary Cassatt, calling them overly polished and conservative (fig. 50). As Neel sought to paint realistically, warts and all, she was considered too direct in her own time. It is precisely that directness that speaks to today's generations, which have grown up in the era of photography. Neel's works are fresh and timely.

Some of Neel's paintings, such as the mother-and-child image, *Degenerate Madonna*, from 1930 (fig. 51, cat. 3), which combine symbolism and gritty realism, are far from her contemporary female artists' portrayals of idyllic bourgeois family life. Unlike, say, Cassatt's pastel warmth and paintings suffused with maternal love, Neel's vision of motherhood is downright oppressive. There is no warmth, only death and loss: the woman's and child's proportions are distorted, the woman's face is like a mask, the child's skull is shaped like that of an alien, and both have corpse-like skin that is waxy and white. Another difference from Cassatt is that Neel's works depict her own experiences, unlike Cassatt, who never married or had children. Although the maternal model for *Degenerate Madonna* was Neel's close friend Nadya Olyanova, the painting may also be seen as a self-portrait. Neel created it just before her committal to a mental hospital, where she was treated for a year following a nervous breakdown. At the same time, her life was overshadowed by other concerns. Neel had fallen in love with Cuban artist Carlos Enríquez, with whom she had her first daughter, Santillana, who died in 1927 of diphtheria, before reaching her first birthday. Neel was soon pregnant again and gave birth to another daughter, Isabetta, in 1928. Two years later, she lost this child too when Enríquez took her to be raised by relatives in Cuba without asking Neel's permission. The tragic nature of the painting can be seen as questioning the norms of motherhood, which was not appreciated by her contemporaries. When the work was exhibited at the *First Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit* in New York in 1932, it stirred condemnation probably because of its blasphemous title, and was censored following a protest by the Catholic Church. Triggering such a furore makes Neel seem like an utterly contemporary artist.

One could even argue that shocking and breaking down the conventions of academic painting were key elements of Neel's artistic output. Another example is her self-portrait from 1980 (cat. 66). In this sketch-like work, the 80-year-old artist poses nude, seated in an armchair, wearing glasses and holding a paintbrush. The artist's gaze is penetrating and aimed directly at the viewer. The ageing woman's body is shown with sagging cheeks, breasts and belly. Neel does not hide or show shame over her deteriorating body but rather challenges us to consider the charged relationship between old age and nudity. Why do we not want to see the ageing body? Why do we only worship youth?