

have similar blank, open-mouthed expressions, outfits, and hairstyles and are flanked by a piece of furniture, the legs of which echo the twins' legs, as though they were auxiliary limbs. The twins' "otherness" is exacerbated by small details: the child on the right has a strangely withered left arm and miniature left hand; their heads seem a little outsize; and their complexion is dominated by a sickly green cast.⁶⁴ As the critic Harry Gaugh wrote in 1979: "Neel's insistence on retaining, simultaneously, a subject's singular identity while zooming in on tell-tale features intensifies specificity to a painful threshold."⁶⁵ It was this "zooming in" on the distinctive features of each sitter that provided a flavor of the grotesque. Lawrence Alloway, former curator at the Guggenheim, critic, and academic, and married to the realist painter Sylvia Sleigh, noted this: "Actually she is earthy and characterizes people not by subjective revelation but by the odd shapes they make on earth. William Hogarth distinguished between *character*, the study of individual traits, and *caricature*, which draws on the grotesque. Neel's work lies somewhere between those kinds of representation, but is closer to caricature than is the work of most portrait painters."⁶⁶ What Alloway represented as caricature was, for the most part, no more than acute observation of the overlooked, and certainly no more caricatural than earlier German painting.

In depicting old age, Neel did not flinch from an honest account of the ravages of time and the presence of death. Arthritic hands, wrinkled faces, exhausted expressions, and sagging protuberances all feature in Neel's portraits of the elderly. Misquoting a statement by Cézanne, she remarked: "And guess what he said: 'I love to paint people who have grown old naturally in the country.' But you know what I say? 'I love to paint people torn by all the things that they are torn by today in the rat race in New York.'"⁶⁷ She faced old age head-on, without endowing it with grandeur, nobility, or serenity. As she said to Eleanor Munro: "Old age . . . is hard. You lose all your escapes."⁶⁸ Two years earlier, she described death as "a dreadful black hole, an everlasting void, a nothing."⁶⁹

In *Last Sickness* (1953) (plate 62), Neel painted a compassionate but unflinching portrait of her mother in her final days. Neel's mother is a spent force and deep in depression, her sunken cheeks and indented jaw misshapen by the loss of teeth, her glasses hanging carelessly askew, her right hand

twisted as though arthritic, and her gray hair wispy. With her face predominantly in shadow, the lights are going out on her life. Her nose slides down her face just as her body slips down the chair, anchored only by the cord of her dressing gown. The majority of the gown is thinly painted with areas left bare, the gown as threadbare as the body that inhabits it. Painting a parent in this condition was probably distressing but perhaps also comforting, a way to spend time with and pay attention to a dying parent and to engage with the mourning process. The picture expresses filial duty and concern. Painted seven years after her father's death, it must also have been a sharp reminder to Neel, at the age of fifty-three, of her own mortality.

For Neel, the blankness of her mother's eyes must have been particularly painful. She explained to art critic Judith Higgins that it was through the expression of her mother's face that she judged her own actions: "My psychiatrist told me I got interested in painting portraits because I liked to watch my mother's face. . . . It had dominion over me. Since she was so unpredictable, he thought I watched her face to see whether she approved of things or not."⁷⁰ In her mother's blankness she observed the extinction of her own life.⁷¹ Four years later, after Sam Brody had moved out of her apartment and her boys had gone to college, she began the aforementioned psychotherapy. Her *Self-Portrait, Skull* (fig. 20), a drawing of 1958, testifies to preoccupation with her own death at this point.

When Neel painted a portrait, she strove not only for a likeness but also for an expression of a person's inner soul. To achieve that, she stated, she had to project herself into them: "I become the person for a couple of hours, so when they leave and I am finished, I feel disorientated. I have no self. I don't belong anywhere. I don't know who or what I am. It's terrible, this feeling, but it just comes because of this powerful identification I make with the person."⁷² The sitter, like Neel's mother, thus acts as a mirror, reflecting back to Neel her own persona. As the critic Lawrence Campbell observed: "Miss Neel seems to detect a hidden weakness in her sitters which she drags out yelping, into the clear glare of day. But if one knows her sitters, one realizes that it is not the hidden traits of character she has painted, but her own aggressions—which one would not detect in her own manner and benign exterior."⁷³



Fig. 20 Alice Neel, *Self-Portrait, Skull*, 1958, ink on paper, 11½ × 8½ inches (29.2 × 21.6 cm), Estate of Alice Neel.

Mirroring is at the heart of the apprehension of old age. While one may feel young inside and have a youthful self-image, the apprehension of one's peers, encountered intermittently, confirms one's own aging process. It was poignant, therefore, when, twenty-six years after having painted Max White (plate 9) in 1935 at the age of twenty-nine, and having endowed him with the power of "the Olmec people and their ancient sculpture in Mexico," she revisited the subject with a portrayal of a man "ravaged by arthritis."⁷⁴ Whereas in 1935 White sat foursquare to the viewer in the center of the canvas, addressing the gaze, in 1961, he sits less potently at an angle, his head off to the right, his body shifting uncomfortably, his eyes diverted slightly to his left, his head bald rather than powerfully shaven, his right hand twisted like a crab making slow progress down the arm of the chair (plate 64). His head is half alive and half dead. Neel modeled the right side of the face in a thick impasto with contouring and contrasts of light and shade. The left side (as the viewer sees it) is rendered flat by downward strokes of the brush, as though numbed and lifeless. A shadow cutting across his forehead and down the left side is emblematic of death. When she painted it, Neel recalled that she "didn't think he'd live that long. . . . He lived to about 77 but always with that terrible arthritis."⁷⁵ The fold in his left cheek testifies to the effect of time and culminates in his scrolled chin that has lost the powerful definition of his youth. This portrait illustrates Neel's claim: "I was attracted by the morbid and excessive and everything connected with death had a dark power over me."⁷⁶

When she came to making the portrait *The Soyler Brothers* (1973) (plate 65), Neel was painting fellow travelers. She captured their apprehension as they gaze into the abyss of death, personified by Neel herself. Staring at Neel, they perhaps recognized their own decrepitude (Moses, the figure on the right, was to die within a year). Their veins are pronounced, suggesting a thinning of the skin, Raphael's brow is deeply furrowed, and their suits seem outside, as though their bodies have shrunk. They are so light that they leave no impression on the bed. Dwarfed by the space, they look diminished. The shadows they cast on the surface of the bed and the floor are their doubles, what Freud referred to as "the uncanny harbinger of death,"⁷⁷ their souls on the escape. Neel's representation of old age, far from being sentimental, is honest, showing

it as a grotesque distortion of the youthful body-ideal and health. Both Moses and Raphael suffered from Paget's disease, which explains why Moses's head is enlarged. Raphael's right foot is supported by a four-inch heel "because it shrank."⁷⁸ Speaking from the perspective of her eighties, Neel remarked about this painting: "Old age even by itself is poignant. But the struggle. Look at Raphael's face. See how he struggles. Both of them."⁷⁹ The struggle for survival is one of the themes of Neel's work.

In Neel's portrait *Gus Hall* (1981) (plate 67), the former leader of the Communist Party USA and recipient of the Order of Lenin appears as though having just arrived from Moscow. By 1981, the U.S. Communist Party was a spent force, but Hall, an antirevisionist Marxist-Leninist who continued to defend the activities of Stalin, appears to cling to the wreckage, wearing a Soviet-style hat, his blue eyes burning brightly, his mouth fixed in a grimace.⁸⁰ Again, a strong, featureless shadow suggests the ominous presence of death, although he was not to die until 2000. Philip Roth's description of the Communist leader Johnny O'Day in *I Married a Communist* is an equivalent for Neel's portrait: "zealotry had bestowed the look of a body that had a man locked up inside serving the severe sentence that was his life. It was the look of a being that had no choice. His story had been made up beforehand. He has no choice about anything. To tear himself from things in behalf of his cause—that's all there is for him to do. And he is not susceptible to others."⁸¹ Hall is a man whom life has bypassed, a sad relic of an era of idealism, but he remains resolutely proud and unswerving in his defiance, so resolute in his beliefs that he refused to allow Neel to show this work in Russia in 1981 because he was opposed to the cult of personality.

If Hall maintains a dignified expression of strength, his flesh and veins betray the frailty of age. The sagging jawline belies the jutting chin; the thick impasto on his face is literally the mask of age, plastered on by Neel like exaggeratedly heavy makeup to disguise his years, but to no avail—his hands reveal his true age. At the age of seventy-one, Hall sits in the antechamber of death, a Marxist to the end.

Neel was aware of her own age and degraded appearance. The artist Benny Andrews recalled that, when painting the double portrait *Benny and Mary*



Fig. 21 Alice Neel, *Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews*, 1972, oil on canvas, 60 × 50 inches (152.2 × 127 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Agnes Gund, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund, Arnold A. Saltzman Fund, and Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund (by exchange).

Ellen Andrews (fig. 21) in 1972, “she’d say: ‘I am cursed to be in this Mother Hubbard body. I am a real sexy person,’” suggesting an internal image at variance with her external appearance.⁸² Dinora Pines commented on this archetypal discrepancy when she wrote about old age: “Older patients in analysis may rapidly develop an erotic transference to the analyst, as if their outwardly aged appearance were a theatrical mask behind which lies a live and pulsating mind and body which could not be used at an appropriate time earlier in life.”⁸³ Neel often remarked that if she had not been a painter, she would have been a psychiatrist. However, generally in the therapeutic relationship, the analyst is relatively silent and passive while the analysand is active and talks. Auder’s footage and the accounts of other sitters suggest that Neel did most of the talking. The painting session became the therapeutic session as Neel recounted her life, transferring her fantasies and anxieties onto the sitter while the sitter acted out a countertransference. As Andrews remarked: “It was so beguiling. She lulled you. And you can see it in my portrait. I am just lying in that chair.”⁸⁴ While Andrews intimates that his semireclining, open-legged pose is his response to Neel’s erotic talk, it also represents Neel’s transference, portraying him both as the male lover—a memory of Carlos Enríquez, José Negron, and Sam Brody perhaps—and as the sexually available female, his legs spread wide, the creasing and stitching in his crotch emblematic of the vagina. Benny’s wife, Mary Ellen, appears demure, legs tightly shut, repelling Neel’s advances. As in *Bronx Bacchus*, to which this painting might be compared, the presence of the artist is keenly felt.

Neel could act out the part of the flirt—as she famously did at the age of eighty-four on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson—but when it came to her only true self-portrait, begun in 1975 but completed in 1980, she was disarmingly honest (plate 66). Sitting in a chair that had so often accommodated her subjects, Neel turned the spotlight on herself, faithfully rendering her mirror reflection. A left-hander, she painted herself with a brush in her right hand as though to emphasize the difference between a painted mirror image and the object itself. This is a portrait of the artist as “other.” She holds a clean, white rag used to wipe off paint, which doubles as a symbol of surrender to the ravages of time. Her breasts sag and are supported by her distended belly. In a

cliché of unattractiveness, she wears glasses, the better to scrutinize herself and to repel the voyeuristic gaze.⁸⁵ There is no erotic fantasy. Neel is an ancient Susanna interrupted in her work, but the quest for an erotic frisson on the part of the spectator is disappointed. Her face is flushed, but its vim is belied by the hunched, flabby torso beneath, threatening to slide into entropy. Of all Neel's nudes, this is the most grotesque and yet the most poignant. Humorous and tragic, it presents the laughable with the fearful truth of decay and the certainty of death. Neither seducer nor temptress, her unidealized body evidences the reality of old age. Unlike Rembrandt, she does not seek pity in her plight but fights the sadness with humor. This is the true grotesque, a means to navigate the pain of life.⁸⁶ "Frightful isn't it?" she told Ted Castle. "I love it. At least it shows a certain revolt against everything decent."⁸⁷

Only in the late portrait *Ginny* (1984) (plate 29) does sadness overpower her tendency toward the grotesque. In mourning after the recent death from cancer of her mother, Ginny mirrors Neel's melancholia at the knowledge that the latter had inoperable cancer.⁸⁸ The distant gable end of the barn at Hartley and Ginny's house in Vermont resembles a pyramid, the archetypal necropolis. The conflation of inside and outside, the location of Ginny in the snow, is a metaphor for the cooling of the forces of life. Ginny is surrounded by death. Whereas Neel could see herself as though expired in the Mapplethorpe portrait, in Ginny she saw the expression of those who would preside at her funeral. Ginny sits grief-struck with her black hair draped around her shoulders like a shroud and her masklike face and staring eyes expressing the shock of loss. It is one of Neel's most poignant portraits, as though she had been disarmed by the pathos of their joint predicament. Reminiscent of Alfred Stieglitz's intimate photograph *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait (1)* (1918) (fig. 22), *Ginny* also recalls some of the great, late self-portraits by Edvard Munch—for example, *Self-Portrait by the Window* (c. 1940) (fig. 23) and *Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed* (1940–42)—and is an expression of endings and mortality.

In her final years, Neel's social activity diminished, and she spent more time with her family, painting her grandchildren. Honesty and a lack of sentimentality were also characteristic of the best of these paintings, for,



Fig. 22 Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait (1)*, 1918, photograph, palladium print, 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (23.2 × 18.7 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Alfred Stieglitz, 24.1724.