



Feminist icon: Alice Neel in a documentary made by her grandson, Andrew Neel (released by SeeThink, in 2007)

## **Alice Neel was the art world's best kept secret**

**Ben Luke**

Alice Neel's reputation is on the rise. Only now, 26 years after her death, is the American painter winning the recognition she deserves. An army of artists across the world, including Chris Ofili, Frank Auerbach and Chuck Close, now pay tribute to her influence and the extraordinary power and uncompromising honesty of her portraits. So it is remarkable that the retrospective opening next week at the Whitechapel Gallery is the first major show dedicated to her in Europe.

Neel's relative obscurity in Britain is inexplicable, since there has always been an appetite here for her brand of stark realism and visceral expression, as the huge popularity of Lucian Freud testifies. Though often lighter in tone than Freud, Neel matches him in her unflinching focus, which is at its height in her best known work, a 1970 portrait of Andy Warhol. Neel was not seduced by the glamour that surrounded the pop icon and persuaded him to sit for her naked from the waist up, revealing his corset and the ugly scars across his pudgy abdomen left by the near-fatal shooting by radical feminist Valerie Solanas two years earlier. Neel captures the vulnerability and isolation of Warhol, which were rarely presented at that time, but which countless diaries, memoirs and films have since reflected.

Alice in wonderland: Neel's portrait of Andy Warhol, 1970, when he stripped to the waist to expose the scars of his 1968 gunshot wounds.

**ScheiblerMitte**

**Evening Standard • Alice Neel was the art world's best-kept secret • Ben Luke • 29 June 2010**

At the time of the painting, Neel, who was born in 1900, had just begun to achieve some recognition in her native US. From the early Sixties onwards, she regularly attended exhibition openings in her hometown, New York, and would use these social occasions to propose that she painted portraits of figures in the art world. She had met Warhol as far back as 1963, so it clearly took some time to persuade him to sit for her. When he did, she claims it was his idea to pose half-naked.

Despite being in close contact with the ultimate art world superstar and his Factory crowd, many of whom she painted at the same time, Neel was still largely ignored by the art establishment but in 1974 she was finally awarded a retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. After that, fame was assured, and she even appeared on Johnny Carson's chat show in 1984, the year before her death.

For most of her life, though, she struggled alone, pretty much unrecognised. Even when New York became the centre of the post-war art world, success escaped her — in making figurative paintings and looking to Van Gogh, Cézanne and Munch for inspiration, she failed to chime with critics and galleries in thrall to successive American movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism. There was no place in that modernist canon for her disarmingly frank portraits of the poor immigrant communities surrounding her in Spanish Harlem, of underground artists and writers (often naked), or of the family that accompanied her through her troubled life.

And as Frida Kahlo, another powerful, psychologically perceptive female painter, discovered, being a woman was a huge disadvantage — Neel was shunned by the male-dominated art world of the day. Her determined commitment to that lonely artistic path was remarkable given the difficult circumstances in which she worked. Santillana, her first child with Cuban painter Carlos Enríquez, died of diphtheria before her first birthday in 1927, and her second child, Isabetta, was left by the errant Enríquez with his family in Havana. Neel then attempted suicide and spent several months in a Philadelphia sanatorium. Later, she became essentially a single mother to two children, Richard and Hartley, by two fathers, largely dependent on welfare to survive and to continue painting. Her constant struggle between motherhood and artistic ambition made her a shrewd commentator on life as a modern woman. Her portraits of pregnant women and mothers with children are particularly compelling. *Pregnant Woman* (1971) features Nancy, Neel's daughter-in-law, two weeks before she was due to give birth to twins, with the face of Richard, the artist's oldest son, comically popping up behind the sofa on which Nancy lies. This is not a harmonious image of a couple on the brink of a miraculous moment — Nancy's face is racked with anxiety and Richard appears helpless. An earlier portrait of Nancy and her baby daughter, Olivia, reflects the difficulties of the early stages of motherhood.

In depicting Nancy's embrace of Olivia, Neel captures her love for her child but Nancy's wide eyes and exhausted appearance betray desperation. It has been suggested that we should see Neel in all her portraits, that the fears and anxieties in her paintings were as much her own as those of the people she portrayed. When she painted an actual self-portrait in 1980, she did so with the same devastating candour she had shown for others. She sits naked on a blue-striped armchair, paintbrush in one hand, rag in the other. Her posture is hunched and her 80-year-old body, its contours outlined in blue paint, sags and bulges. Particularly arresting are her eyes, which directly meet our own — we catch the ruthless gaze that led to so many dramatic portraits.

The attraction of Neel for feminists is obvious and she was hailed as an icon by a new generation of women artists in the Seventies, even though most of them were not figurative painters. Her influence has continued to grow. In the Whitechapel exhibition catalogue Frank Auerbach is quoted. "As I get older," he writes, "I feel, increasingly and dauntingly, that artists have to be heroes. Alice Neel is one of mine."

In an intriguing complement to the show, Victoria Miro Gallery is presenting one of its own, *In the Company of Alice*, with Neel's paintings displayed among works by artists she has inspired, from Ofili to Grayson Perry. Among those on show most clearly indebted to Neel is painter Chantal Joffe, who told me that, in painting naked pregnant women and naked men, Neel had given her a licence to create her own uncompromising, intense portraits, and given her the confidence to be a figurative painter in an age when the discipline has been derided as unfashionable or worse, dead.

As Joffe confesses, she initially felt a certain fear of Neel's garish, almost comic directness, and this is what makes the paintings enduringly fascinating. So much about them appears wrong or awkward — the floppy hands and feet, the eyes set at different angles, the strange blue outlines, the patches of bare canvas. But once they click, their acute frankness makes it almost impossible to take your eyes off them.

Francis Bacon once said that he preferred to work from photographs rather than real life. "[Sitters] inhibit me," Bacon said, "because, if I like them, I don't want to practise before them the injury I do to them in my work." Neel nearly always worked in front of the model, and had no such qualms. That fearless commitment to capture the truth led to some of the most vivid portraits of the 20th century, and now, at last, we have a chance to see them.

Alice Neel: Painted Truths runs July 8–Sept 17 at Whitechapel Gallery, E1