

A U R E L S C H E I B L E R

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Benschop, Jurriaan: „Alice Neel, Collector of Souls“

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In the first room of Alice Neel, Collector of Souls at Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, displaying a dozen or so small-sized early paintings from the 1930s, one already can apprehend Neel's legacy as a portraitist. Her asymmetrical portrait of a woman, Elenka (1936), and the calm and frontal Gerhard Yensch (1935) bring you close to her subjects. The two works, each executed in different styles—the first loose in brushstroke, the second tight and precise—exude a resulting psychological content, and are stronger works among the many portraits that Neel would make in the following decades. In color, Neel's early works are often dark, navigating stylistically between a Neue Sachlichkeit kind of cool precision and observation, and a more expressionistic, nervous mark making.

In retrospect, we can say that Neel defines her place in the art historical canon with her works from the 1960s and onwards, which combine light and clarity in composition with an experienced eye for her portrayed subjects and the situations in which they find themselves. In Mother and Child (Nancy and Olivia) (1967) the mother appears vulnerable, her eyes wide open, a little anxious, yet the work is both intimate and joyful. Works produced since the '60s show a rougher, almost carefree approach, leaving parts of the canvas open, for instance, or “unfinished” as in Michel Auder (1980) where part of the filmmaker's trousers, as well as part of the room, are left blank.

Moving in 1962 from a small Harlem apartment to a large and light-filled space at 300 West 107th Street possibly contributed to this development. There she met new people from artistic circles in the neighborhood, and received her first serious review in ARTnews magazine. At home, Neel would paint the rest of her life. Though the experience of space and light in the studio, one can imagine, is essential for a painter, Neel's developments were certainly the fruit of many years of practice and gaining freedom of expression—as an individual unbound to conventions in figuration.

In later works leading up to her death in 1984, Neel's portraiture seems to depict a meeting of minds rather than a portrait of an autonomous person. The artist, who invited many to sit in her studio, implicitly commented on the bohemian, self-conscious attitude of some of her protagonists by accentuating coolness, vanity or other features. Looking at the painted figures offers a tour through artistic life in the 20th century; one encounters artists such as Andy Warhol and Robert Smithson, and Metropolitan Museum conservator Henry Geldzahler. Without idealizing her models, her way of depicting people became, in certain ways, bold, focusing on all of the peculiarities of their appearance with an almost caricature quality. While not usually shown laughing, people are instead characterized by the tension, distance, or self-absorption legible in their faces. It is particularly interesting to follow the lines around their mouths that create certain wrinkles, forming an epicenter of the persona they like to stage (or the pose they assume).

While Neel is best known for her portraits, there are a number of paintings that portray the view from her window from different apartments. In the exhibition there are four examples; one titled 107th and Broadway (1976) shows a white building with a large blue shadow of another building projected on it. Here one finds a different expression of Neel's joy in the spectacle of seeing and her sensitive attention to details of light; they appear as a direct projection of her state of mind.

Only in the last decade of her life did Neel enjoy wider public recognition. From the literature published and the documentary made by her grandson in 2007, also on display in the exhibition, one interprets that she led a rather fragmented and turbulent life—losing a child, having children with different partners, and suffering hard years of poverty. Yet, despite unsold paintings stacking up in the corridor of her apartment, she was persistent in her pursuit of her artistic goals.

In the final room of the exhibition, coming full circle to the first room in fact, a self-portrait hangs, at the age of eighty. Here, the artist looks severe. Naked, with the physical traces of gravity visible, Neel offers an example of the harsh, yet colorful view she developed on people, including herself, both concluding and giving a glimpse of what is about to come.