

ALICE NEEL SJÄLINSAMLAREN COLLECTOR OF SOULS

Alice Neel

1900 – 1984

Född/Born:

1900 / i in Merion Square Pennsylvania.

Utbildning/Education:

Philadelphia School of Design for Women (nu/now Moore College of Art and Design) 1921-25,
Chester Springs summer school vid/of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts 1924.

Första separatutställningen/

First solo exhibition:
1926 Havana

Första gruppställningen/

First group exhibition:
1927 XII Salón de Bellas Artes, Havana

Senaste separatutställningen/

Latest solo exhibitions:
2000 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

■ Alice Neel var en pionjär bland kvinnliga amerikanska konstnärer. Med särigen mämlödveten ågnade hon sig att åtta måla av mäniskor, eller "samla själar" som hon uttryckte det, men hon var aldrig i ropet eller med i någon avantgardistisk rörelse. I hennes tidiga arbeten ser man att hon var influerad av konstnärer främst från norra Europa och Skandinavien, som Otto Dix och Edvard Munch, men hon hade en egen, omväckläng stil och inriktning på sitt måleri.

Neel föddes 1900. Hennes tidiga karriär präglades av en livskris som utlöste av att henne första barn dog vid två års ålder och av det misslyckade äktenskapet med den kubanska målaren Carlos Enriquez. Hon fick ett barn till med Carlos men det togs omhand av dennes föräldrar på Kuba. 1930 drabbades hon av en nervsmärtbrott och hamnade på sjukhus. När hon skrev ut återupptog hon måleriet och börja måla av sina vänner, som Nadya och Nona. Nadyas riktiga namn var Edna Meisner men efternamn hon var grafolog ville hon ha ett artistnamn som låt mer exotiskt. För Neel "representerade hon dekaden" vilket är utmärkande för den tyska Nya sakligheten.

Nadya och Nona, 1933, är en av Neels första nakenstudier. För en kvinnlig konstnär var det ett provocerande och vågat ämne som väckte frågor om lesbisk kärlek. Målningen påminner om Gustave Courbets realistiska mästerverk Sötaven. Courbets målningar medvetet deler erotiska, förörfiska övertonerna förknippade med den voyeuristiska manliga blåken. De två kvinnorna uppvisar kontrasterande egenskaper; Nadya ser barsk och avvisande ut, men samtidigt vänder hon sig mot betraktaren på ett öppet och själsvärt sätt. Nona döljer sina könsorgan och klamar sig oroligt fast vid kudden. Neels psykologiskt inträngande blick är uppenbar redan tidigt i karriären, liksom hennes tendens att projicera sina egen känslor på figurerna.

På 1930-talet bodde Neel i Greenwich Village och umgicks i litterära vänsterkretsar. Som medlem i Artists' Congress ansökte hon sig 1933 till det statfinansierade projektet Public Works of Art Program, där arbetslösna konstnärer fick ekonomiskt stöd mot att de producerade verk. När projektet lades ner anmälde hon sig till Works Progress Administration där hon målade stadslandskap. Många av hennes målningar från den här perioden har starka självbiografiska inslag: barnfödsel, barnadöldhet, fattigdom och politiska protester.

Neel tyckte att Greenwich Village började känna sig först 1938 flyttade hon till Spanien Harlem på jakt efter "sanning". Hon hade ett förhållande med den puertoricanska sångaren Jose Santiago Negron och 1939, efter ett missfall två år innan, fick hon en son, Neel, som senare döptes till Richard. Tre månader senare övergick Jose henne.

På Upper East Side målade Neel av sina vänner, grannar och tillfälliga bekonstnärer. Sanningen som hon sökte fanns runtomkring henne; invandrare som hade det svårt under depressionen och kriget. The Spanish Family, 1943, som i framställningen av modern och barnet framför ett staket påminner om Manets Gare Saint-Lazare, är typisk för Neels osentimentala skildring av tillvaron i de låge samhällsskiktet. Medan Manet höll distans till figurerna såg Neel mäst i rågonten dem utan att rygga undan för invandrarfamiljens vedermördar.

Skildringen av en mor och ett barn, och en främlingar far, kan tyda på att hon identifierade sig med motivet. 1941 fick Neel sin andra son, Hartley, med fotografen och filmaren Sam Brody. Brody

2004 A Chronicle of New York, Victoria Miro, London

2005 Alice Neel's Woman, National Museum of Women

in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

2007 The Cycle of Life, Victoria Miro, London

2007 Pictures of People, Aurel Scheibler, Berlin

Senaste gruppställningarna/

Latest group exhibitions:

1939 In Memory of My Feeling: Frank O'Hara and American Art, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

2001 The Human Factor: Figuration in American Art, Contemporary Art Centre of Virginia, Virginia Beach

2007 Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles

bodde från och till med Neel under de kommande två decennierna men ansvarat för att uppföra barnen vilade utan tvivel på Neel. Pojkarna spelade en stor roll i hennes liv och hon målade starka porträtt av dem, som Richard at Age Five, 1944. Neel fick få beställningar på porträtt och de verk hon lyckades betingade låga priser. Hennes separatutställningar 1938 och 1944 blev inga framgångar.

På 1950-talet blev Neel föremål för utredning på grund av sina sporadiska kontakter med kommunistpartiet. Det var en orolig tid för väntsympatisörer. Som målaren Joseph Solman skrev i katalogen till hennes utställning 1950: "Bland kryper det i hennes verk en känsla av kuslighet, som hos Munch, och det finns pröttar som nästan känns som dissekeringar."

Neel deltog i möten på Abstract Artists Club och det var där hon träffade förflattaren, poeten och curatorn Frank O'Hara, en av Jackson Pollocks främsta förvarare, som 1960 blev intendent vid Museum of Modern Art. O'Hara gick med på att sätta modell för henne. Hon gjorde två porträtt, det ena en "romantisk, falkliknande profil med en bukett syren", som tog fyra sittningar, och det andra,

frimodighet är kanske den dominerande egenskapen i Neels konst. I sin skildring av konstnären Don Perls och Elizabeth Peyton har påverkats av hennes och henne som en banbrytare. Peyton har skrivit: "Det är oerhort svårt att förstå hur hårt Alice Neel fick kämpa för att göra sina målningar. Det är smärtamt att titta på det och det gör mig alltid så arg. Hur kan man ha förnekat viken att det hon gjorde?"

Intresset för Neels konst har ökat sedan hennes död 1984, mycket tack vare det förnyade intresset för figurativt måleri och insikten att det finns många olika sätt att berätta den moderna konstens historia. Samtida målare som Marlene Dumas och Elizabeth Peyton har påverkats av hennes och henne som en banbrytare. Peyton har skrivit: "Det är oerhort svårt att förstå hur hårt Alice Neel fick kämpa för att göra sina målningar. Det är smärtamt att titta på det och det gör mig alltid så arg. Hur kan man ha förnekat viken att det hon gjorde?"

■ Alice Neel was a pioneer among American women artists. Doggedly pursuing a career as a painter of people or, in her own words, 'a collector of souls', Neel was never fashionable nor in step with avant-garde movements. Although one can identify stylistic influences on her early work, particularly from northern Europe and Scandinavia – for example Otto Dix and Edward Munch – she painted in a style and with an approach distinctively her own.

Born in 1900, Neel's early career was severely marked by a personal crisis precipitated by the death of her firstborn at the age of two and her failing marriage to a Cuban painter, Carlos Enriquez. Her second child by Carlos was taken into care by his parents in Cuba. By 1930 she suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. On leaving she returned to painting and began to paint her friends like Nadya and Nona. Nadya's real name was Edna Meisner but, as a gynaecologist, she took an alias to sound more exotic. For Neel she 'represented decadence' which is a characteristic of German Neue Sachlichkeit painting.

Nadya and Nona, 1933, is one of Neel's earliest nudes. For a female artist it was a provocative, daring subject raising issues of lesbianism that recall a masterpiece of realism by Gustave Courbet, *Sleep*, but deliberately eschewing the erotic, seductive, overtones of the voyeuristic, male gaze. Neel's two women display contrasting characteristics; Nadya, unapologetically grim-faced but open and confident, facing the viewer, Nona hiding her sexual features and clutching the pillow with apprehension. Neel's psychological penetration is evident at a very early stage in her career, as well as her tendency to project her own feelings onto her subjects.

In the 1930s Neel lived in Greenwich

ning med temat den nakna mansfiguren som han höll på att organisera för New York School of Visual Art. Hon sa ja, under förutsättning att han också tog med ett av hennes senare verk, men eftersom hon inte hade några nakna mansfigurer så erbjöd han sig att sätta modell. Porträttet av Gould låg fokus på dennes penis som förekom tre gånger i målningen. Porträttet av Perreault ritkar Neel in sig på den slaka lemmen och de uppsvallda testiklarna, vilket ger verket en upprökande frimodighet och dessutom gör det till en omtagning av Gould-målningen. I en ironisk parfrasi på Manets Olympia lägger Perreault på ett vitt lakan och tittar starkt mot betraktaren vilket gör honom till en modern manlig prostituerad som visar upp sina tillgångar. Neels koncentration på kroppshäret och armbålen är en, kanske oväntad, parodiering av Manets framställning av häret under Olympias armar.

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Moderna Museet Nu/Now: Alice Neel

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Village and mixed mostly in literary and left wing circles. A member of the Artists' Congress in 1933 she enrolled in the Public Works of Art Program, a government funded project intended to give out-of-work artists financial support in return for works of art. When this was disbanded she signed up to the Works Progress Administration by which she was required to paint urban scenes. In addition many of her paintings in this period have strong autobiographical allusions relating to childhood, infant mortality, urban poverty and political protest.

Greenwich Village felt like a cloistered environment to Neel and in 1938 she moved to Spanish Harlem in search of 'the truth'. She was already in a relationship with a Puerto Rican singer, Jose Santiago Negron, and, in 1939, having suffered a miscarriage two years previously, she gave birth to a boy, Neel, subsequently to be named Richard. Three months later Jose abandoned her.

On the Upper East Side, as well as her friends, Neel painted neighbours and chance acquaintances. The truth she was after was all around her; immigrants suffering hardship during the economic depression and war. The Spanish Family, 1943, which recalls Manet's *Gare St Lazare* in its depiction of a mother and child in front of railings, is typical of Neel's unsentimental portrayal of low life. Whereas Manet took an oblique view of the figures, Neel faced them head on, not flinching from confrontation with the immigrant family's plight.

The portrayal of a mother and children, absent a father, might signify an unconscious self-identification. In 1941 Neel gave birth to a second son, Hartley, fathered by the photographer and filmmaker, Sam Brody. Brody lived off and on with Neel over the next two decades but undoubtedly the responsibility for bringing up the children was left to Neel. The boys loomed large in her life and she painted intense portraits of them such as Richard at Age Five, 1944. Neel rarely received commissions to paint portraits and when she managed to sell them, commanded low prices. Her solo shows in 1938 and 1944 were not a success.

In the 1950s Neel was under investigation owing to her periodic involvement with the Communist Party. These were anxious times for left wing sympathisers. As the painter, Joseph Solman, wrote in the brochure for her 1950 exhibition: 'At times, an element of foreboding, akin to that in the work of Munch, creeps into her work; and there are portraits that are almost vivisections.'

Neel attended meetings at the Abstract Artists Club and it was there she met the writer, poet and curator Frank O'Hara, one of Jackson Pollock's chief apologists who, in 1960, became a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. O'Hara agreed to pose for her. She made two portraits, one a 'romantic falconlike profile with a bunch of lilacs', which took four sittings, and the second, shown here, which was accomplished in one day. 'I started with the mouth', she has explained. 'His teeth looked like tombstones; the lilacs had withered. ... The reason I wanted to do the second one was because when he came to the door he looked beat. I feel that it expressed his troubled life more than the first [portrait].'

O'Hara's portrait, titled 'Joe Gould's Folly', is a refreshingly candid but is a surprise of the Goud painting. Perreault's location on a white sheet and his brazen pose for works of art. When this was disbanded she signed up to the Works Progress Administration by which she was required to paint urban scenes. In addition many of her paintings in this period have strong autobiographical allusions relating to childhood, infant mortality, urban poverty and political protest.

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Perreault, a gay curator, was organising a show on the theme of the male nude at the New York School of Visual Art. He asked Neel to lend her 1933 painting of Joe Gould. She agreed as long as he would also include a recent work but, since he had no male nudes, he offered to pose. The portrayal of Gould had focused on his penis, which appeared three times in the portrait. Neel's concentration on the flaccid male member and bulbous testicles in the Perreault portrait not only displays a refreshing candour but is a surprise of the Goud painting. Perreault's location on a white sheet and his brazen pose for works of art also parodies, perhaps unknowingly, Manet's depiction of the hair in Olympia's axilla.

Candour is probably the overriding characteristic of Neel's art. Her depiction of Don Perls, an artist, and his son Jonathan, a variation on the theme of mother and child that preoccupied her throughout her career, does not flinch from the portrayal of Jonathan's disability. He is a wounded creature.

Since her death in 1984 there has been a revival of interest in Neel's art, not least because of renewed interest in figurative painting and a realisation that there are many different ways to narrate the history of modern art. Among contemporary painters Marlene Dumas and Elizabeth Peyton regard her as a crucial, pioneering influence. As Peyton has written: 'It is very hard to comprehend the depth of the struggle that Alice Neel went through to make her paintings. It is painful to think about that, and it always makes me angry. How could anyone deny the importance of what she did?'

Jeremy Lewison, Curator
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