

Alice Neel *The Early Years*

September 9–October 16, 2021
537 West 20th Street, New York

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Alice Neel, *Spanish Party*, 1939. © The Estate of Alice Neel.
Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner

I paint to try to reveal the struggle, tragedy and joy of life.
—Alice Neel¹

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Alice Neel (1900–1984) from the first decades of the artist's influential career. On view at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location, the focused presentation centers on works from the 1930s through the 1950s, and includes interiors, memory paintings, New York City streetscapes, and portraits of family and others close to Neel. At turns atmospheric, somber, and deeply personal, these works offer a chronological account of this significant period of Neel's life and work, and engage themes of interiority, intimacy, and the negotiation between private and public, which continue to resonate in our present moment. *The Early Years* is curated by gallery Senior Partner Bellatrix Hubert and Ginny Neel.

Painted from life and from memory in New York—first in Greenwich Village, and later in Spanish Harlem, where Neel lived until 1962 before moving to the Upper West Side—the works in the exhibition examine the foundational decades of Neel's career, when she was struggling as an artist and mother during a time of social and economic upheaval and change. They reflect her commitment to figuration while abstraction was ascendant as well as her sensitivity and compassion toward her subjects. She is now widely acknowledged as one of the foremost American artists of the twentieth century, and these canvases and drawings register an introspective mood and the early personal struggles Neel faced.

¹ Alice Neel, quoted in "The Art of Portraiture, in the Words of Four New York Artists," *The New York Times* (October 31, 1976), p. D29.

The exhibition includes the evolving cityscapes and street views that reveal the grit and resilience of New York, where Neel lived from the late 1920s until her death in 1984. Capturing the Depression era, her social-realist compositions from the 1930s show the economic conditions and disparities that permeated the city. In *Under Brooklyn Bridge* (1932), Neel features men going about their work on an otherwise empty lower Manhattan street. *The Cafeteria* (1938) juxtaposes a haggard older woman with a youthful figure in evening finery seated beside her, as a waiter clears the table behind them. Neel likewise presents the thrills of metropolitan life. The dreamlike *Movie Lobby* (1932), painted from memory, shows two women seen from a distance, arm in arm and enjoying a night out on the town, surrounded by the swirl of pattern and texture of a movie theater interior. In the atmospheric composition *Spanish Party* (1939), couples dance and children of all ages play at an apartment gathering in Spanish Harlem, where Neel moved in 1938. Later images, such as the moonlit snowy scene depicted from life in *Harlem Nocturne* (1952), evoke her emotional connection to her neighborhood.

Also on view are canvases that reveal significant personal and emotional moments Neel experienced in her life. These include *Alice and Her Child* (1930), a rare self-portrait in which the artist is shown cradling a baby in a cemetery. Painted a few short years after the death of Neel's first daughter with Carlos Enríquez, Santillana, it memorializes her infant who died of diphtheria before her first birthday. The work's setting, restrained color palette, overcast sky, and Neel's downturned eyes capture specific and universal feelings of maternal heartbreak and loss. The year in which the work was painted was a devastating one for the artist, Enríquez left her, taking their second daughter, Isabetta, with him to Cuba. Neel suffered a nervous breakdown, which resulted in her hospitalization over the course of the next year. *Dead Father* (1946), another work painted from memory, was composed the day after her father's funeral, and it presents his body in an open funeral casket, placing the viewer in the position of a mourner.

The exhibition features portraits of those closest to Neel, including lovers, family members, friends, and intellectual peers. These are the works for which she is best known, and she would return to these subjects throughout her career. On view are a number of significant paintings of Neel's children that speak to the intertwined and at times conflicting roles she held of mother and working artist. Her studio was the home she shared with her sons, who are depicted as young children in their Spanish Harlem apartment in *Christmas, Hartley and Richard* (c. 1943–1944), a disquieting, domestic holiday scene. Another canvas, *Sam and Hartley* (c. 1945), shows her youngest son being clutched tightly by his father, the photographer and filmmaker Sam Brody, who was Neel's partner between 1940 and 1958. The image is pervaded by an emotional, tense atmosphere. Neel's portraits of her family form a kind of record of her personal sphere and chronicle her children's maturation. Among the works on view are the artist's tender portraits of Hartley and Richard as earnest teenagers in the 1950s, poised for adulthood.

Alice Neel was born in 1900 in Merion Square, Pennsylvania, and died in 1984 in New York. Although she exhibited sporadically early in her career, her work has been shown widely from the 1960s onwards. In 1971, a comprehensive solo exhibition of Neel's paintings was held at her alma mater, Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, and in 1974, she had her first retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. It was followed by a large-scale presentation of eighty-three paintings in 1975 at the Georgia Museum of Art, The University of Georgia, Athens. In 1978, the Graham Gallery, New York, organized the first retrospective dedicated to the artist's works on paper, and in 1979, a survey of her paintings was cohosted by the University of Bridgeport and The Silvermine Guild of Artists in Connecticut.

To celebrate the centenary of the artist's birth, the Philadelphia Museum of Art organized a solo exhibition of Neel's work, which debuted in 2000 at the Whitney Museum of American Art before

traveling to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, among other venues. In 2010, the survey exhibition *Alice Neel: Painted Truths* was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and traveled to the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Moderna Museet Malmö, Sweden. In 2016, the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, presented *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, which traveled to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, and the Fondation Vincent van Gogh in Arles, France, before concluding at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg.

Alice Neel: People Come First, a major traveling retrospective, is on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through August 1, 2021, and will subsequently travel to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (2021–2022) and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (2022). In 2022, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, will present *Alice Neel: Un regard engagé*.

The artist's work is included in numerous museum collections internationally. David Zwirner has represented The Estate of Alice Neel since 2008, and the present exhibition marks the sixth solo exhibition of the artist's work at the gallery.

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