

ALICE NEEL

Selected Works

May 14 – June 20, 2009



Sam and Richard (c. 1943)

Throughout her work, Neel expressed an interest in conveying the complexities and nuances of familial relationships. Here, Neel presents a charged portrait of her oldest son Richard being clutched by Sam Brody, who lived off and on with Neel between 1940 and 1958 (Brody was a photographer and filmmaker and was a founding member of the Film and Photo League. He and Neel had a son together, Hartley, in 1941). Richard's apparent apprehension at being held by Sam reveals their troubled relationship.



Sam, Snow (How like the winter) (1945)

Neel's unique ability to capture the individuality of her sitter in an unforgiving yet compassionate manner is reflected in this psychologically charged portrait of Sam Brody, in which he is shown seated reading a newspaper with the headline "Victory" (referring to World War II). His hunched shoulders and intense dark eyes seem to convey a complex mixture of agitation and defiance. (See entry for *Sam and Richard*, c. 1943, for biographical information on Sam Brody).



Young Woman (c. 1946)

This painting presents an elegantly-attired anonymous young woman seated with her hands and legs crossed; the slight smile of her lips conveys a sense of compassion and warmth. By emphasizing her jewelry and fur shawl, Neel intentionally draws awareness to the woman's social status. In this compelling portrait, Neel conveys her attraction to individuals whose outward appearance provides an indication of their milieu and whose physical demeanors reflect aspects of their personality.



Ballet Dancer (1950)

In this painting, Neel presents a portrait of a young unnamed dancer, posing lithely and rather suggestively with a dream-like gaze as he reclines on a sofa. Here, Neel has subverted the gendered conventions of figurative painting, while referencing countless historic depictions of reclining (female) figures, such as Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* (1814) and Manet's *Olympia* (1863). The unusual format of this painting is unique to Neel's work; it was chosen by the artist to suit the horizontal composition of the image.



Hartley (1952)

Neel often painted children in her work, beginning in the 1920s with portraits such as *Mother and Child, Havana*, 1926. In this painting, Neel presents a pensive, somewhat melancholic portrait of her son Hartley, shown as a boy of ten and seated outdoors in their garden at Spring Lake, New Jersey, where Neel and her family spent their summers. Neel would paint her own children at different stages of their lives; Hartley was the subject of numerous portraits.



Rita and Hubert (1958)

Neel's interest in conveying the dynamics of relationships is explicitly reflected in this portrait of a young couple posing in an expressionless and unaffectionate manner; they both look distracted as they fail to touch each other while reclining on a sofa. Hubert Satterfield was a communist writer; Neel also did a single portrait of him. Neel met him through his brother, a boxer who was active in left-wing causes.



George Arce (1959)

In this painting, Neel portrays George Arce, a young Puerto Rican boy from Neel's neighborhood (Spanish Harlem) who would often run errands for her. Neel enjoyed Arce's intelligence, and she painted him on numerous occasions. Arce would remain in touch with Neel throughout her life, even after he was imprisoned in the 1970s. The painting's abstract expressionistic background anticipates her well-known portrait of Robert Smithson from 1962, which is equally rich and intensely evocative.



Cindy (c. 1960)

Neel had an ongoing fascination with children; their innocence and acceptance of the world intrigued her. She was also attracted to their dress and the way in which their behavioral gestures and poses anticipated their adulthood. In this painting, Neel presents Cindy Wheelwright, the daughter of Farley Wheelwright. Farley Wheelwright was a Unitarian minister who would become involved in social activism; he and his wife were close friends of Neel's in the early 1950s. The abstract expressionistic field of color in the background of the painting reflects Neel's interest in the work of such artists as Clyfford Still.



Jerry Sokol (1964)

This painting portrays Jerry Sokol, a young mathematician, in a guarded, seated pose: his hands are shown resting awkwardly upon his crossed legs while his gaze, directed towards the viewer, seems to convey a complex mixture of reluctance and defiance. The rhythmic outline of the chair in the background mimics his curved posture. It was rare for the artist to paint such a descriptive background. Moreover, in the mid-1960s Neel began leaving extensive areas of the canvas unpainted, a characteristic she admired in Cézanne's late work.



Ruth Nude (1964)

Neel often explored the visual trope of nudity in her work. Her nudes, however, are utterly unconventional, in that they deconstruct, contradict, and satirize the limitations of traditional gender ideologies, especially with regard to the historical depiction of the female in painting. Here, Neel presents a nude portrait of her friend Ruth Alsher, portrayed in a brazen and defiant pose. The matter-of-fact way in which Neel exposes the female body anticipates certain feminist approaches found, for instance, in the work of such artists as Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke.



Mrs. Paul Gardner and Sam (1967)

Here, Mrs. Paul Gardner (the wife of a school friend of Neel's sons Richard and Hartley) is shown seated with her legs crossed, displaying a frank and apparently exhausted expression, as her young son awkwardly dangles off the side of the chair. This painting, similarly to *Sam and Richard* (c. 1943), exemplifies Neel's ongoing interest in conveying the intricacies of familial relationships.



The Druid (1968)

In this painting, Neel presents an unnamed seated man. While he poses confidently, his gaze, directed towards the viewer, remains inscrutable. Here, as in many of Neel's paintings, she reveals aspects of her subject's personality through his expression and gestures. For Neel, the identity of her sitters was not always of consequence; she was interested in painting people who seemed to reflect the Zeitgeist, and for her *The Druid* typified the late 1960s.



The Family (Algis, Julie and Bailey) (1968)

Here, Neel depicts a young couple with their child: the father dominates the canvas, clutching his infant with one hand, while his wife is shown behind him almost as if in his shadow. The individual sitters of this portrait, friends who would pose for Neel on different occasions, can be identified as Algis Alkaitis (who was a chemist in Berkeley, California, at the time and is now a neurologist; he studied with Neel's son Hartley) and Julie Alkaitis (who would become a psychotherapist) with their child Bailey.



Ron Kajiwara (1971)

In this painting, Neel portrays Ron Kajiwara (a graphic designer for *Vogue* who also worked as a set designer on a number of dance productions), seated cross-legged on a chair. While he is painted frontally, his gaze eludes the viewer's. Neel may have been attracted to his androgynous attire and long hair, demonstrating her ongoing preoccupation with portraying individuals whose expressions and appearances reflected their milieu and era.



Dana Gordon (1972)

This painting presents a seated Dana Gordon, a young artist and friend of the Neel family. At the time, Gordon was the boyfriend of Nancy Selvage, who also sat for Neel. Selvage had been a roommate of Ginny Taylor's at Wellesley College (Taylor would later marry Neel's son Hartley).



Stephen Shepard (1978)

Here, Neel presents Stephen Shepard (who sometimes went by the name Etienne), an art student at the time, posing seated and wearing boldly colored clothes against a pale blue background; his gaze is directed towards the viewer.



Annie Sprinkle (1982)

Neel's attraction to unusual individuals is especially evident in this painting of Annie Sprinkle posing in the leather outfit of a dominatrix. The unabashed quality of this image demonstrates the felicitous communion Neel had with the people she painted. Sprinkle was a burlesque porn star who later became a performance artist and self-proclaimed 'sex guru' and feminist activist.