

## Alice Neel, Uptown

Curated by Hilton Als

**Private View 5.30 – 7.30pm, Saturday 15 July 2017**

Exhibition 15 July – 16 September 2017

**Victoria Miro Venice**, Il Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124 Venice, Italy



Image: *Mother and Child*, 1938

Oil on canvas

20 x 16 inches

50.8 x 40.6 cm

© The Estate of Alice Neel

Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London and Victoria Miro, London

**A new chapter of the acclaimed exhibition *Alice Neel, Uptown*, curated by the Pulitzer Prize winning critic and author Hilton Als, will open at Victoria Miro Venice. Curated by Als especially for the Venice gallery and including a number of previously unexhibited paintings and works on paper, this concise exhibition draws on the rich body of work created by Neel during the period in which she lived and worked in upper Manhattan, first in Spanish (East) Harlem, where she moved in 1938, and, later, the Upper West Side, where she lived from 1962 until her death in 1984. The exhibition shares themes with presentations of *Alice Neel, Uptown* at David Zwirner, New York (February – April 2017), and Victoria Miro, London (until 29 July 2017), while offering a new focus on Neel’s paintings and drawings of women and children.**

Intimate, casual, direct and personal, Alice Neel’s portraits exist as an unparalleled chronicle of New York personalities – both famous and unknown – and the extraordinary diversity of twentieth century New York City. A woman with a strong social conscience and equally strong left-wing beliefs, Neel moved from the relative comfort of Greenwich Village to Spanish Harlem in 1938 in pursuit of what she termed “the truth” – of her experience and that of others. There she painted friends, neighbours, casual acquaintances and people she encountered on the street, and just as often cultural figures connected to Harlem or to the civil rights movement. As Als writes, “what fascinated her was the breadth of humanity that she encountered”, and it was through this

fascination, which drove Neel's choice of subjects, that her work engaged with issues of racial and gender inequality, labour struggles, family dynamics and domestic upheaval.

The exhibition includes figures from Harlem's cultural circle, including Sarah Shiller who, with her husband, supported left wing artists such as Neel during the period. While candour and empathy are hallmarks of Neel's art, her portraits of women and children, such as *Mother and Child*, 1938, and *Baby on Blue Sofa*, 1939-40, are especially expressive of intimacy and compassion, as seen through the prism of her own experience as a woman and a mother. Neel moved with her lover, Puerto Rican musician José Negron, to East 107th Street when she was thirty-eight years-old. She had, by that time, lost her first child, Santillana, in infancy to diphtheria, while her second daughter, Isabetta, had been taken to Cuba by her father when she was two years old. Negron left Neel shortly after she gave birth to her elder son, Richard, in 1939. In 1940, she met the photographer Sam Brody, with whom she had her younger son, Hartley, in 1941. A year later, Neel moved to a third-floor apartment at 21 East 108th Street, where she lived and worked for the next twenty years, creating some of her greatest work chronicling the world around her, with little by way of critical or financial support.

In an undated poem, Neel wrote:

*I love you Harlem  
Your life your pregnant  
Women, your relief lines  
Outside the bank, full  
Of women who no dress  
In Saks 5th Ave would  
Fit, teeth missing, weary,  
Out of shape, little black  
Arms around their necks  
Clinging to their skirts  
All the wear and worry  
Of struggle on their faces...*

Commenting on Neel's Harlem milieu, Als notes: "As a single mother of two trying to make ends meet, she recognized the struggle on her neighbors' faces, because children clung to her skirts, wrapped their arms around her neck as well. She was needed and was needy."

Equally, Neel was unflinching in her depiction of the female body, often in states of awkwardness and unease, as seen in the painting *Childbirth*, 1939, and assured of her own freedom as an artist, challenging a Western tradition that regarded a woman's proper place in the arts as sitter or muse. As such, the truth she sought – and won – was both the truth of the individual and the collective truth of the era and the community in which she lived.

**The exhibition at Victoria Miro Venice is a companion exhibition of *Alice Neel, Uptown*, which was shown at David Zwirner, New York (23 February – 22 April 2017) and continues at Victoria Miro London (until 29 July 2017).**

**An accompanying book, jointly published by David Zwirner Books and Victoria Miro, includes essays by Hilton Als on individual portraits and their sitters, in addition to new scholarship by Jeremy Lewison.**

**Alice Neel** was born near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1900 and died in 1984 in New York. Renowned for her portraits of friends, family, acquaintances, fellow artists and critics, Neel was among the most important American artists of her time. In 1974 a retrospective exhibition was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, an event that was repeated in 2000, marking the centenary of her birth. Recent solo exhibitions have included *Alice Neel: The Subject and Me*, Talbot Rice Gallery, The University of Edinburgh (2016); *Alice Neel: Intimate Relations* at Nordiska Akvarellmuseet, Skarhamn (2013); *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, a retrospective that toured to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (2010), the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2010) and the Moderna Museet, Malmö (2010-11). *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, a major survey of the artist's work featuring some seventy paintings was organised by Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki in 2016. It subsequently travelled to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague and is on display at the Fondation Vincent Van Gogh in Arles, France (until September 2017), before concluding at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg. The Estate of Alice Neel has been represented by Victoria Miro since 2004; this is her sixth solo exhibition with the gallery. Her work is in the collections of major museums internationally including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; the Denver Art Museum; the Milwaukee Art Museum; the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Tate, London and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**Hilton Als** became a staff writer at *The New Yorker* in 1996, a theater critic in 2002, and chief theater critic in 2013. He began contributing to the magazine in 1989, writing pieces for *The Talk of the Town*. Before joining *The New Yorker*, Als was a staff writer for the *Village Voice* and an editor-at-large at *Vibe*. He has also written articles for *The Nation*, *The Believer*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *4Columns*, among other publications, and has collaborated on film scripts for *Swoon* and *Looking for Langston*. His first book, *The Women*, a meditation on gender, race, and personal identity, was published in 1996 (Farrar Straus & Giroux). His most recent book, *White Girls* (McSweeney's), discusses various narratives around race and gender and was nominated for a 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism. In 1997, the New York Association of Black Journalists awarded Als first prize in both Magazine Critique/Review and Magazine Arts and Entertainment. He was awarded a Guggenheim for Creative Writing in 2000 and the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism for 2002-03. In April 2017, Als was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism.

In 2009, Als worked with the performer Justin Bond on *Cold Water*, an exhibition of paintings, drawings, and videos by performers, at La MaMa Gallery. In 2010, he co-curated *Self-Consciousness* at the Veneklasen Werner Gallery in Berlin, and published *Justin Bond/Jackie Curtis* (After Dark Publishing, 2010), his second book. In 2015, Als co-curated, with Anthony Elms, at the ICA Philadelphia, a retrospective of Christopher Knowles' work and organised *Desdemona for Celia* by Hilton, an exhibition of work by Celia Paul, at the Metropolitan Opera's Gallery Met, in New York (an accompanying catalogue was published by Victoria Miro). He is also the co-author of Robert Gober's 2014-15 Museum of Modern Art retrospective catalogue, *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*. In 2016 Als curated *Forces in Nature* at Victoria Miro, a group exhibition exploring ideas of man in nature, featuring works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Alice Neel, Chris Ofili, Celia Paul and Kara Walker, among others. The same year, he was awarded a Windham-Campbell Prize for Non-Fiction, and produced a six-month survey of art and text at The Artist's Institute, New York. His work was recently included in the group exhibition *Looking Back: The Eleventh White Columns Annual* in New York (14 January – 4 March 2017). Als is an associate professor at Columbia University School of the Arts and has taught at Wesleyan, Wellesley, Smith, and the Yale School of Drama. He lives in New York City.

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