

Alice Neel, Uptown

Curated by Hilton Als

Exhibition 18 May – 29 July 2017

Victoria Miro, 16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW



Image: *Benjamin*, 1976

Acrylic on board

29 x 20 inches

75.9 x 52.7 cm

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

Curated by the celebrated US critic and author Hilton Als, *Alice Neel, Uptown* focuses on paintings made by the artist during the five decades 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.

Intimate, casual, direct and personal, Alice Neel's portraits exist as an unparalleled chronicle of New York personalities – both famous and unknown. 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 “the truth”. There she painted friends, neighbours, casual acquaintances and people she encountered on the street among the immigrant community, and just as often cultural figures connected to Harlem or to the civil rights movement. Neel's later portraits, made after moving to the Upper West Side, reflect a changing milieu, yet remain engaged more or less explicitly with political and social issues, and the particularities of living and working under, as Neel put it, “the pressure of city life”.

Highlighting both the innate diversity of Neel's approach to portraiture and the extraordinary diversity of twentieth century New York City, in this exhibition Hilton Als brings together a selection of Neel's portraits of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and other people of colour. As Als writes, “what fascinated her was the breadth of humanity that she encountered”.

The selected portraits include cultural and political figures admired by Neel, among them playwright, actor, and author Alice Childress, and sociologist Horace R. Cayton, Jr., whose 1945 *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* is among the key academic studies of the African American urban experience in the early twentieth century. Other figures include neighbours and acquaintances, such as an anonymous nurse and a travelling businessman (Peter Kanuthia).

The exhibition at Victoria Miro follows its presentation at David Zwirner, New York (23 February – 22 April 2017). An accompanying book, jointly published by David Zwirner Books and Victoria Miro, will include essays by Hilton Als on individual portraits and their sitters, in addition to new scholarship by Jeremy Lewison.

“From the start Alice Neel’s artistry made life different for me, or not so much different as more enlightened. I grew up in Brooklyn, East New York, and Crown Heights during the 1970s when Neel, after years of obscurity, was finally getting her due. I recall first seeing her work in a book, and what shocked me more than her outrageous and accurate sense of color and form – did we really look like that? We did! – was the realisation that her subject was my humanity. There was a quality I shared with her subjects, all of whom were seen through the lens of Neel’s interest, and compassion. What did it matter that I grew up in a world that was different than that which Linda Nochlin, and Andy Warhol, and Jackie Curtis, inhabited? We were all as strong and fragile and present as life allowed. And Neel saw.

In the years since her death, viewers young and old have experienced the kind of thrill I feel, still, whenever I look at Neel’s work, which, like all great art, reveals itself all at once while remaining mysterious. In recent years, I have been particularly intrigued by Neel’s portraits of artists, writers, everyday people, thinkers, and upstarts of colour. When she moved to East Harlem during the 1930s Depression, Neel was one of the few whites living uptown. She was attracted to a world of difference and painted that. Still, her work was not marred by ideological concerns; what fascinated her was the breadth of humanity that she encountered in her studio, on canvas.

But by painting the Latinos, blacks, and Asians, Neel was breaking away from the canon of Western art. She was not, in short, limiting her view to people who looked like herself. Rather, she was opening portraiture up to include those persons who were not generally seen in its history. Alice Neel, Uptown, the first comprehensive look at Neel’s portraits of people of colour, is an attempt to honour not only what Neel saw, but the generosity behind her seeing.” – Hilton Als

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 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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