Beyond the pale: Alice Neel and her legacy

Jeremy Lewison
The String Of Alice Neel Exhibitions that have taken place in the last eighteen months in New York, Los Angeles, Houston, London, Malmö and Berlin might suggest that she is a hot new artist. So it is somewhat astonishing when the unsuspecting gallery-goer discovers that Neel was born in 1900 and died in 1984. There can be few deceased artists accorded such renewed attention, especially one who in her own lifetime was so studiously ignored by the major American institutions and their European counterparts. In Berlin the other day I was asked if Neel was now considered part of the artistic canon, confirmation of the fact that this once overlooked artist might possibly have made it to the upper echelons of critical acclaim. But the very fact that she could be perceived in such terms suggests that the canon is no longer relevant, for what the fascination with Neel demonstrates – as this is not a revival but a new interest – is that there is no canon. In our postmodern era such restrictions have become redundant. While certain artists can be herded into easily defined categories – abstract expressionism, pop, minimalism, and so on – others resist pigeonholing in this way.

How would you define Alice Neel? As a realist, an expressionist, a psychological portraitist (even though she also painted still lifes and landscapes) or what? Although she might be identified with artists normally tagged with the social realist label such as the Soyer brothers, her art is as far removed from their output as it is from pop. If one can identify Neel’s roots in an admixture of the Northern European tradition – Munch, Dix, Beckmann, Van Gogh, Cézanne – and New York’s Ashcan School, and to some degree American primitive painting, there seems to be something unique about Neel’s art that defies categorisation. Fresh, vital, idiosyncratic, moving, amusing, cruel, tender, mournful, penetrating, grotesque, painterly, sparse – these are just some of the often contradictory adjectives that her art brings to mind, and it is this variety of impressions that has led to many artists, young and old, flocking to her travelling survey show, ‘Alice Neel: Painted Truths’, seen most recently at Moderna Museet, Malmö.

Neel was painting at a time when a modernist view of the world was ascendant. Her own beginnings in the teachings, at second hand, of Robert Henri – a member of the Ashcan School whose book The Art Spirit (1923) was Neel’s bible – led her to a social engagement that was unfashionable at the time. Her affiliations with the communist movement and her empathy with the immigrant underclass would not naturally endear her to the wealthy collectors of New York, nor to the institutions they controlled through their various trusteeships. But above all, Neel’s devotion to the realist depiction of the human form in an era of increasing abstraction – whether figurative, geometric or expressive – confirmed her position as an outsider. One only has to look at the career of an artist such as Oskar Kokoschka – for whom Neel had an early enthusiasm – to realise that the pursuit of an expressive humanist idiom risked professional, or at least institutional, suicide. Neel fell outside the expected norms of leftist painters for whom works amounted to rather obvious allegories of the social situation (not that Neel herself did not paint a few works on such themes); she rejected the post-cubist approach to the figure that Picasso and his followers adopted; and she avoided abstraction as a mode of painting because of its narrative limitations. One might say that Neel, like Balthus or even Morandi, remained isolated in a world of changing styles, each seemingly progressing towards a goal where painting would be about nothing other than the stuff of painting.

Yet Neel was cognisant of all these developments, with her paintings reflecting the influence not only of the Northern Europeans but also the abstract expressionists. Her 1952 portrait of Dore Ashton, for example, and the background of many of her paintings, refer to the techniques of her New York contemporaries, whose talks at The Club she would regularly attend in Greenwich.
Village. Pop art makes its appearance not so much in the manner in which she painted but in the subjects: her 1969–70 portraits of Andy Warhol, Gerard Malanga, David Bourdon and Gregory Battcock, and Ritta Redd and Jackie Curtis (the subject of Lou Reed’s 1972 hit song, ‘Walk on the Wild Side’) all testify to Neel’s entree to the world of Warhol’s Factory. But where Warhol’s portraits are all surface and sheen, Neel’s explore interiority and psychological depth, sociality, the extraordinary in the ordinary – aspects of personality that are evident to an outsider but of which the sitter may be unaware. Neel burrows beneath the surface to make poignant and sometimes uncomfortable portraits that evidently were too discomforting to her subjects, for she sold very few works in her lifetime. They are the product of dialogue not monologue, exchange rather than fixity.

It would be wrong to suggest that Neel was avant-garde, at least in the way that concept is traditionally understood. She was a painter with a remarkable facility for paint – witness the way she renders the white shirt of her son Hartley in his 1965 portrait – but her application of materials, or even her interest in materials, has nothing to do with Greenbergian orthodoxy. Neel’s painted surfaces are descriptive, her brushstrokes at the service of narrative, her compositions unashamedly referential. Rather than comparing her work with the development of twentieth-century painting, it would be more constructive to situate it within the context of photography. The somewhat documentary style of Neel’s early street scenes echoes some of the work of the Film and Photo League, whose founding member was her lover Sam Brody. Early portraits such as Max White, 1935, have the quality of a Nadar or Rodchenko photograph; others suggest the work of August Sander. The proximity of such paintings as The De Vegh twins, 1975, to the work of Diane Arbus is often commented on, while the stark white backgrounds of the late portraits recall the work of Neel’s contemporary Richard Avedon. Since photography had supposedly replaced the art of the painted portrait, it was quite strategic for Neel to have adopted these tools to make her compelling images.

It is this relationship of painting to photography in Neel’s work that seems to have captured the imagination of artists working today. While there is an obvious link between Neel’s work and portraits by Elizabeth Peyton, their differences are equally clear. Whereas Peyton’s images seem frozen in time, Neel’s are alive, the viewer replacing the artist in the conversation with the sitter. Although Peyton does work from life she also works from photographs. Thus her images are records of particular moments rather than, as with Neel, the passage of continuous time. There is a romantic side to Peyton that has nothing to do with Neel’s work. It is delicate where Neel is bold; complete where Neel feels deliberately unfinished. Above all Peyton is wistful where Neel is tough.

Based on a photograph of the naked artist, Peyton’s Alice Neel in 1931, 2007–08, is a touching homage to one of her mentors. Peyton prettifies her, turns her smooth flesh into a painterly surface and intensifies the setting so that Neel becomes a contemporary woman masquerading as a Matissean odalisque, endowed with the melancholy of Delacroix’s Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement, 1834. For a painter who typically uses high-key colours, Peyton’s subdued reflection was a surprise find in a recent show at London’s Victoria Miro Gallery which explored Neel’s influence on contemporary painting and which played alongside ‘Painted Truths’ at the Whitechapel Gallery.

‘In the Company of Alice’ highlighted some of the other artists who are or were in Neel’s orbit. Among the lesser known were Boscoe Holder, one of Peter Doig’s discoveries in Trinidad and Tobago, whose intimate portraits of Caribbean men and women, often nude, cross the divide between Gauguin’s luxuriant colour and Neel’s stark realism. If Doig’s recent output has been influenced by Holder, it bears no less the imprint of Neel’s Dark
girl, 2007, presents the gawky self-consciousness that Neel revealed in her no-holds-barred portrait of her granddaughter, Victoria and the cat, 1980.

Marlene Dumas, also in the Miro show, is another artist who has acknowledged the influence of Neel on her work, notably in an essay in the catalogue that accompanies 'Painted Truths'. Here Dumas is struck by the essential modernity of Neel’s work, its specificity and the fact that she did not paint portraits but people. But above all she admires Neel’s sense of empathy – not her engagement with the now clichéd notion of identity, but her ability to identify with her subjects. Dumas’s quasi self-portrait The painter, 1994, is indeed indebted to Neel’s Andy Warhol, 1970, sharing that work’s sense of isolation and exposure.

‘In the Company of Alice’ included Dumas’s Alfa, 2004, which, while not outwardly bearing the hallmarks of Neel, like much of Duma’s work manifests a strong empathy for the victim – a characteristic of Neel’s compassionate portraits of her immigrant New York neighbours in Spanish Harlem. It might be compared most specifically to Dead father, 1946, Neel’s sole paternal portrait, with both artists capturing the permanent fact of death, the nec plus ultra.

The riskier side of Neel – for she painted gay people well before it was legal to be homosexual, as well as transvestites and pregnant women who did not conform to the traditional ideal – has more recently been taken up by the likes of Nan Goldin, John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. Then there’s fellow Philadelphian Karen Kilimnik, who reduces Neel’s abrasive quality to an equivalent of the eighteenth-century rococo. Where Neel’s subjects are people ravaged by a life in New York, Kilimnik’s images are self-consciously pretty and knowingly historical – for example, recasting Paris Hilton as Marie-Antoinette out for a country walk.

In today’s post-Duchampian world of neo-conceptual art and critical theory it is refreshing that artists and public alike can appreciate a figure who was always apart, someone who had no conceptual program other than to ‘paint the truth’, but whose deep sense of humanism fuelled a flame that seemed bound for extinction. There is nothing of the emperor’s new clothes about Alice Neel. Viewing her work is a direct visceral experience that plays with the emotions. She could be precise or sketchy; clunky or refined; wicked or compassionate; serious or witty; realistic or caricatural. Neel’s work is constantly on the move, sliding and slipping and hard to pin down. What artists seem to take from her now is her immediacy, her refusal to conform to normative behaviour whether in art or life, and above all her receptivity to all that life threw at her.