

# Alice Neel

## Painter of Modern Life

### Painting Crisis

by Jeremy Lewison

During the mid-thirties Neel painted friends, Communist political activists and the bohemian characters of Greenwich Village. If her style varied between the expressive (*Elenka*) and the so-to-speak photographic (*Max White*) it was because Neel was perhaps torn between her Robert Henri inspired training in Philadelphia, and her own discovery of photography, European and American, that must have occurred around this time. Henri's *The Art Spirit* (first published in 1923) was something of a bible to Neel, whose paintings would continue, perhaps increasingly, to reflect the absorption of his teachings. Henri's belief in spontaneity, in the primacy of the brush stroke and its ability to transmit the state of the artist, in the need for speedy execution and painting from memory, in the depiction of the background as just air, in the power of the look of the unfinished over the finished, were all to play a key role in Neel's work, although she was also to observe these characteristics in the paintings of some of the artists she most valued, Cézanne, Edvard Munch and Vincent Van Gogh. But on the other hand there was the increasing visibility of photography and her greater exposure to it once she met the photographer and filmmaker, Sam Brody, who was to become her partner for just over 18 years from 1939.

It was the year before this meeting, while still living with José Santiago Negrón and pregnant with his child, that Neel moved from the bohemian quarter of Greenwich Village, to the gritty, immigrant neighbourhood of Spanish Harlem. Although an overwhelmingly African-American district of Manhattan, Harlem had pockets where different nationalities would congregate, forming ghetto-like conurbations. Spanish Harlem, later to be called El Barrio, was the Eastern enclave populated predominantly by Puerto Ricans and Latin Americans. While Neel moved there to be closer to Negrón's family, cutting herself off from Bohemia, it was not as much a removal from the cultural world as some writers have suggested, for Harlem underwent a "renaissance" of African-American culture in the twenties and thirties. Neel undoubtedly had contact with some of its protagonists. Nevertheless, the principal motive for her departure from the Village, she announced retrospectively, was to seek out the "truth", and in that sentiment she echoed the words of the pioneer American photographers.

In his article "The Reappearance of Photography", published in 1931, Walker Evans described a reawakened interest in "simple" and "honest" photography and an abandonment of the romantic aestheticism of Alfred Stieglitz. Evans and his contemporaries introduced a new aesthetic that foregrounded decay, hardship, obduracy and pathos and that, in the context of the Great Depression, became an index of truth. Their portraits of tenant farmers, the unemployed, the starving and the desperate did much to refocus the minds of city dwellers, and demonstrated more than anything else that America had no single identity but was a nation of many parts (fig.

4). This interest in documenting America and focusing on ordinary people and their harsh lives was consistent with the views of Neel's Communist friend, Mike Gold, who advocated a proletarian realism, a functional art concerned with facts. His rejection of bohemianism, as Andrew Hemingway has explained, was commonplace among Communist Party members. For another Communist like Brody, films and photography were weapons in the class struggle.

Photography was considered at the time to be a measure of authenticity. Ostensibly objective, often published anonymously, it became a tool of social reformers and a means to communicate honest truths. The public gave little thought to the means by which photographers could actually shape their intentions by editing, lighting and cropping. Neel was, therefore, among a number of artists and photographers who came to realise, as an anonymous writer opined in the programme notes for the Film and Photo League (a slightly later incarnation of the Workers' Film and Photo League of which Brody was a founder member in 1930), that "the only honest approach to art is TRUTH".

Three paintings of the middle of the decade, *Max White*, *Elenka* and *Kenneth Fearing* (1935, cat. 12) suggest that Neel was at a crossroads. If *Max White* had a high focus, almost photographic quality, and *Elenka* was to a certain degree expressionistic, the portrait of Fearing was to a large extent allegorical, consistent with such works as *Futility of Effort* (1930, private collection, fig. 31), *Degenerate Madonna* (1930, cat. 3) and *Symbols (Doll and Apple)* (c. 1933, cat. 7). The fact that she chose to pursue the line set by *Elenka* suggests that for Neel "truth" was more than naturalism, more than being faithful to appearance and required greater restraint than the fantasy required to create allegory. Although she was a great admirer of the allegorical, didactic and propagandistic murals of Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco (she regarded Orozco as the greatest of the three), and seemed to nod in the direction of Rivera in her depiction of *Pat Whalen* (1935, Whitney Museum of American Art, fig. 6), she must have felt that the complexity of their works, replicated to some extent in *Kenneth Fearing*, was too illustrational, too much in the service of narrative and maybe too impure in painting terms, for rarely in their mural work was paint allowed to remain paint. Theirs was essentially a graphic, almost comic strip art, that deferred to the models set by *trecento* and *quattrocento* Italian religious painters for recounting holy narratives.

Neel's move to Spanish Harlem precipitated not so much a change of subjects as additions to the range. She continued to paint left wing activists, but they included members of the African-American and Hispanic population that she would not have encountered in Greenwich Village, and she expanded her repertoire to embrace immigrant neighbours. Very few of her sitters, if any, would have been widely known.

The way in which Neel addressed her new subjects, the young Georgie Arce, for example, or the anonymous Hispanic and black children, echoed the approach of Lewis Hine (fig. 5). Hine photographed immigrants at Ellis Island and street children in the style of social documentary that was later taken up by Jerome Liebling, a member of the Film and Photo League, who began his career in the late 1940s. Hine's photographs were shown in a retrospective at the Riverside Museum, New York in 1939, the year after Neel moved to Spanish Harlem. The authenticity of

Hine's photographs and the innocence of children in the harsh urban environment pervade Neel's depictions of her downtrodden neighbours. Like that other Harlem street photographer, Helen Levitt, who had a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1943, her subjects were not citizens of the new streamlined, mechanised city but of the poor districts that modernisation passed by. This was closely observed New York, not the idealised vision presented in architectural models at the New York World Fair in 1939, where people were shown as encumbrances in an impersonal, Corbusian environment dominated by highways, skyscrapers and cars.

It is not clear how much Neel looked at photography before meeting Brody, but she was an admirer of the great French nineteenth century pioneer, Félix Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), whose work was bought and shown as early as 1931 by Julien Levy. "Nadar took photographs that were better than paintings", she told Jonathan Brand. "His picture of Balzac (fig. 7) couldn't have been outdone. And Nadar made a photograph of [Joseph] Conrad that is just one of the greatest things I have ever seen. He looks like a lion." What Neel must have admired in Nadar's work was the characterisation of the sitter, the power of the pose and the sense of intimacy that differentiated his work from routine photography (fig. 8). Nadar's methods of obtaining the pose were pretty much Neel's. Describing one of his late photographs of Adolphe Crémieux he wrote: "One sits down, one chats, one laughs, all the while readying the lens; and when [he] is in place, well positioned and drawn out for the decisive moment, radiating all his natural benevolence, warmed by the affection with which he feels himself surrounded" the shutter is released. Nadar, like Neel, was after an intimate moment when the sitter revealed his innermost character. She would talk constantly to sitters while painting, lulling them into finding a pose that would reveal what she regarded as their inner self.

Unlike the ornate interiors that formed the backdrop of the photographic work of many of his contemporaries, Nadar's photographs were austere, rarely full length, and with plain backgrounds. He seldom encouraged his sitters to express emotion, and a large number of his works portrayed people facing straight to camera or in three quarters pose. Neel adopted similar strategies in her portraits of the 1930s. Max White, for example, sits impassively staring straight at the artist (cat. 11). His clothes are plain and loose, muffling his body so as not to draw attention from his head, a strategy also employed by Nadar whose male sitters tended to wear black out fits so that their faces appeared as highlights. Like a Nadar photograph, Neel's painting is severe and intense with all concentration directed towards White's head. But the close-cropped hair, the chiselled features, the plain worker's suit and neutral background also bring to mind Alexander Rodchenko's portraits of Vladimir Mayakovsky of 1924 (fig. 9). Whether Neel knew these Soviet photographs or not, what she creates is a look associated with the proletarian thinker and writer.

*Elenka* also mimics Nadar's compositions; again an impassive look, a compressed space, but also the use of the arm of a chair to maintain a pose (cat. 18). There appears to be no conversation taking place, the sitter concentrating on keeping still, unlike in Neel's late portraits which could be restless. In Nadar's day taking a photograph needed such a long exposure that the sitter required props to maintain poses. Similarly the strong contrast between the light and

dark sides of Elenka's face are a feature of Nadar's photographs, for early on in his career Nadar photographed his sitters outside in full sunlight with the sitter placed so that one side of the face was more brightly lit than the other. Neel regularly adopted this strategy, nowhere more memorably than in the second portrait of Max White (1961, cat. 37) where the dark side of the face suggests infirmity attendant upon old age and reeks of mortality. The chiaroscuro portrait also became a familiar theme in the work of the photographic portraitist Irving Penn, but he used it for dramatic effect rather than to suggest any metaphoric reading. Penn, who spent time in Paris, was clearly influenced by Nadar as well.

The way in which Neel cropped her paintings also has a close relation to photography. Cropping came to play an increasingly important role in her oeuvre, and it can be no coincidence that it did so the more she looked at photography. "I lived with a man for many years who was a great photographer," she told Henry Geldzahler in reference to Brody, "and through him I had an interest in photography." Neel also had an involvement with *Aperture*, a photographic magazine founded in 1952. Clearly she realised she could choose how to frame an image. In *Richard at Age Five* (1945, cat. 25) the edge of the canvas slices off Richard's right elbow as it does Art Shields's in the eponymous portrait of 1951 (cat. 28). Shields's head of hair is also truncated so that the viewer concentrates more on his facial features. John Perreault's right elbow is omitted from his nude portrait of 1972 (cat. 59), and the arms of Don Perlis in the late *Don Perlis and Jonathan* (1982, cat. 70) are similarly cut off. These deliberate crops compress the image and give it greater informality, immediacy and tension.

For an artist interested in portraiture of a realistic nature, photography was an obvious source of interest. Neel confessed to an interest in Hine, Margaret Bourke-White and the German photographer August Sander (fig. 10). In the interview with Brand Neel referred to an exhibition of Bourke-White's photographs at "the Russian embassy in the thirties" and reproductions of her work in *Life*. She judged Hine to be "magnificent" and Sander as someone whose work she "loved". Sander's typological project has certain parallels to Neel's self-proclaimed purpose of creating an equivalent to Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie humaine*.

If there are parallels in themes, compositions and approaches to subjects between Neel and various photographers past and contemporaneous, her address was substantially different, for a painting is a composite image built over time from hand-applied material, in her case leaving evidence of its build through brush strokes, *pentimenti*, changes of mind, and subjective choices of colour. Painting is ultimately a fiction, an imaginative creation, where brush strokes are to the final image as words are to a book. It is their accumulation that endows them with meaning. Neel's paintings are no more nor less real than the work of any abstract painter. They are constructs. *Daily Worker* journalist Art Shields's face, far from smooth, is a craggy massing of short brush strokes interspersed with bare, primed canvas suggesting the dry skin of a man who cared little for his personal appearance or retaining youthful skin (fig. 11). His ruggedness seems to underpin his steadfast belief in the integrity of left wing causes, evinced in his piercing, blue eyes staring at a distant vision of justice for all, redolent of Soviet photographs of pioneers. The severe portrait of Sam, executed around the time of his definitive break from Neel in 1958,

contains painterly passages, for example on his nose and forehead, which in themselves are a series of semi-autonomous abstract marks but cumulatively make a convincing form (fig. 12, cat. 31). The bulbous shape down the left side of the bridge, the ragged maroon patch diagonally down from it (repeated on his chin) and the trail of white that snakes its way up the bridge like some kind of protozoan discharge, coalesce into a convincing nose that reflects light and creates shade, but as a piece of pure painting is as abstract as the background that clearly mimics the prevailing tendencies in Abstract Expressionist painting Neel would have seen in the galleries and heard about on her attendance at meetings of the Club. In painting such backdrops, also seen for example in *Georgie Arce* (1959, cat. 33), Neel was domesticating Abstract Expressionism, feminising it, emasculating it even, suggesting, perhaps, it was no more than decorative. Abstraction, Neel seemed to be saying, should be placed in the service of figuration; it was not an end in itself.

It was no more purposefully employed than in the double portrait *Rita and Hubert* (1954, cat. 30). Hubert Satterfield, like Alvin Simon (cat. 34), was one of a number of black writers Neel painted, here with his white girlfriend Rita. The stark contrast between Rita's bright flesh and Satterfield's blackness, exacerbated by the freely brushed, maroon background which, behind him, is darker still and into which he sinks, conspires to make him less visible. Moreover, the bright and intricate pattern of his shirt distracts the viewer's eye from his face, which, but for the highlights on his nose, cheeks, lips and chin and the whites of his eyes would otherwise fade into the unlit world of the second class citizen. Visibility was the primary theme of a number of black writers in this period, not least the prize winning author Ralph Ellison whose exposition of racism and black activism, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, took the American literary scene by storm. The black narrator, who is neither described nor named in his first person account, establishes at the beginning of the book that in spite of being "a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids ... I am invisible ... simply because people refuse to see me." Neel translates this injustice in American society in the most vividly visual and painterly way, while at the same time not fearing to paint what was considered in this era of prejudice a transgressive relationship between a black and a white. Neel saw people like Satterfield and Alvin Simon as equals.

The backgrounds to Neel's portraits in this period, while embracing the prevailing idioms of Abstract Expressionism, were not merely expertly wrought passages of pure painting, but could also be pointed parodies. In the last portrait of Max White (1961, cat. 37) Neel paints a helmet of marks around his head, as though referencing her description of her first portrait of White as an Olmec head. Yet clearly she used these marks to cover up a shift in the contour of his cranium that she balanced by the spiralling, gestural marks on the upper left of the painting, probably pools of light, that call to mind, if not the swirling breasts on many of de Kooning's *Woman* paintings of the previous decade, then Ellie Poindexter's ample bosoms in Neel's acerbic portrait, painted from memory, the following year (cat. 39). Neel seems knowingly to be mimicking de Kooning, reclaiming these marks in her portrait of a withered, arthritic man and uneroticising the mammaries of a powerful, female art dealer she disliked on acquaintance.