Paradox bedevils women artists’ access to art historical production and discourse. The status of abstraction versus representation in feminist critical discourse is a case in point.

It may be the case, as Lucy Lippard has suggested, that “the mainstream has always preferred its women artists abstract, and its feminism abstracted, or diffused, defused” (qtd. in Stoops 51). Lippard notes as an example the 1994 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, “Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties,” the only thematic group exhibition MoMA ever dedicated exclusively to women artists. The body was generally referenced in this show through cultural symbolism in the use of gender-coded readymades such as eye makeup or lipstick, used as structural components of minimalist artworks that often reference minimalist artworks by male artists such as Richard Serra.
Nevertheless, in general, representation and, more specifically, figuration have proved more useful than abstraction to those wishing to discuss gender difference and feminist issues in visual art. Feminist content has been easier to perceive when iconographic analyses of representation and image-based narratives can be brought to bear on the work. Consequently, much to the dismay of women working in abstraction who consider themselves feminists, they are often not included in exhibitions and panel discussions on feminism and gender representation. For example, “The Body Politic: Whatever Happened to the Women Artist’s Movement?” a panel at the The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in December 1998, included four women meant to represent four generations of feminist artists: Nancy Spero, Mary Kelly, Renée Cox, and Vanessa Beecroft, none of whom is an abstract artist. The subject of abstraction never came up as an alternative feminist practice within the Women Artists’ movement. Conversely, exhibitions or panels on abstraction rarely include women who consider themselves feminists or who refer to feminism as a significant factor in their work. In fact, it was a cry from the heart by a woman artist on a panel titled “Women and Abstraction” at the landmark women artists’ collective A.I.R. Gallery in New York City in 1997 that made me begin to think about the subject of women and abstraction in relation to feminist art practice.

To this day, although minimalist abstraction has become the establishment default style for art in corporate offices or for memorials, representation retains its popularity. Two of the most successful painters of the past decade, John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage, both specialize in representations of half-naked young women, a type of Victoria’s Secret catalog content reformulated and rendered with old master painting high-value/high-finish style to give it aesthetic legitimacy. A full-page, full-color ad of one of Currin’s smiling half-naked girls appeared in the New York Times Friday Arts section every week for the full run of Currin’s Whitney Museum show (November 20, 2003–February 22, 2004), exemplifying that in our commodity-oriented era, representation, in particular representation of sexually alluring women, is prized for its efficiency as a tool of commodification. As Yuskavage has said, “You can’t put an abstract painting on a banner. It’s less readable when you’re flying by in a cab” (qtd. in Solomon).

The problematics of considering women artists’ work in abstraction are also ensnared in the subtext of the ideals of abstraction as a universal, ergo genderless, language in the hypermasculinist rhetoric of the
New York School and in the dangers of essentialism lurking in any efforts to perceive difference in the work of abstract artists who are women. It is perhaps because of these pitfalls, particularly the last, that I will engage in a paradoxical move of my own in this essay, that of making an abrupt turn from the consideration of women abstract artists that would be suggested by my introductory remarks in order to consider the work of Alice Neel. I will approach Neel from a formalist and process/materialist-oriented point of view, as a great abstract painter, which goes against the grain of interpretations of her work that stress the visual articulation of a female gaze and also against her own self-presentation, rooted in autobiography and anecdote.

In order to contextualize Neel’s work—which spans the period from the 1930s to the 1980s—and particularly her experience as a representational painter during the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism, a general introduction to abstraction and postwar American women artists may be useful.

It has been widely noted by feminist art historians that women artists faced a double problem with regard to painting in the postwar years leading up to the development of the feminist art movement at the end of the 1960s. The utopian ideal of pure abstraction had allowed women artists an entrée into art, since a truly universalist art practice would be gender free; to this day, many women who are successful abstract painters have not specifically articulated any desire to create visual equivalents of female experience. The universalizing rhetoric of modernism precluded such content and, practically speaking, to have pursued such a focus would have returned them to the marked identity of “woman artist” from the privileged identity of simply “artist.” The problem was that the universalism of pure abstraction turned out to be a myth, a myth that was exposed once theory began to critique the assumptions underlying modernism’s notion of universality as put forth by Western white men.

At the same time, the postwar discourse of painting in America associated with the New York School had been particularly aggressive in the masculinity, indeed the misogyny, of its rhetoric. This gendered aesthetic warfare contributed to the efflorescence of feminist art, yet even today it continues to constitute a large part of the mythos about the postwar period. We see evidence of this in major popular biographies such as Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swann’s recent biographical study, *de Kooning: An American Master*, with its emphasis on de Kooning’s sexual exploits. It is also part of a common rhetoric: when the usually highly articulate art
historian and Museum of Modern Art curator Kirk Varnedoe was interviewed on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on the occasion of the 1999 Museum of Modern Art retrospective *Jackson Pollock*, he invoked the words *macho* and *masculine* over and over again to describe Pollock’s work. Such insistence on masculinity is a clear but apparently unconscious reaction formation to the highly complex gendered narratives surrounding this artist; “macho” discourse wards off the more feminized or homosexual implications of Pollock’s life and art practice. I would suggest it is also a clear reiteration of the anxiety male artists in the postwar period in the United States experienced about the perception of painting as a feminine activity, an anxiety that had to be masked by hypermasculine practices.

The gendered aspects of the work of this period have been the subject of several significant studies by women art historians: for example, just in the last ten years, the work of Helen Frankenthaler and her positioning as a generative but transitional figure between Jackson Pollock and the postpainterly abstractionists Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland has been the subject of studies by Griselda Pollock, Lisa Saltzman, and Marcia Brennan. Juxtaposing photographic documentation of Pollock and Frankenthaler painting on canvases laid on the floor, Griselda Pollock notes that such comparisons lead to questions such as:

*Do Pollock’s slashing and throwing of paint, his gyrations around a supine canvas, enact a macho assault upon an imaginary feminine body? Are the traces of paint on canvas the residues of a psychic performance? Is this écriture/peinture masculine at its most vivid? How then could we read Helen Frankenthaler’s pouring, pushing, smoothing gestures as she stood in the canvas, or knelt near its edge as a surface continuous with her space and her body’s large spreading and delicate shaping movements. Is this a feminine modality inviting us to invent metaphors that might link female bodily experience to fluidity in order to account for the sensuousness and lusciousness of her effects? (247–48)*

Frankenthaler’s germinal technique of paint application has long been a vexing issue for feminist analysis. It lends itself to an essentialist reading centered on an analogy between the flowing and staining of paint and female flow. Further, Frankenthaler, however, has not associated herself with any particular feminist interpretation of her work (nor has she allied herself with feminist art or feminism).
Pollock continues, “Something different must occur if the painter who paints with such a body is, in fact, a woman artist, painting from (or to find) ‘the creative woman’s body.’” But, despite invoking Luce Irigaray’s “Gesture in Psychoanalysis” to wonder whether Frankenthaler’s technical “innovation” and relation to painting space, “with stain and soak, with annulling the material distinction between her mark and the canvas’s surface by the immersion of the one in the other and the loss of fixed boundaries, [is] the site of an inscription of the feminine dimension of loss and separation” (258), Pollock warns that “this is not to drag in an essential idea about what that body is” (250).

Brennan extends the discussion by examining the meanings of Greenberg’s comment that “Helen Frankenthaler served as a ‘bridge between Pollock and what was possible’” (116). Here, Frankenthaler’s work is used to make a transition from Greenberg’s instrumental use of Jackson Pollock’s all-over painting as a trace of the artist’s gestures and body to his later critical support of a nontactile, optical, and anonymous postpainterly abstraction represented by the work of Louis and Noland, whose visit to Frankenthaler’s studio provided the terms for the transition not only for the painters but, more importantly, for Greenberg, who shifted his own aesthetic program: the woman artist’s “feminine” abstract mark is recoded as “disembodied or otherwise unmarked by gender [privilege] . . . exclusively reserved for her male colleagues” (Brennan 131). Thus, “formalism continued to derive an idealized conception of masculine artistic subjectivity through a contingent, dialogical relation to the feminine” (155). The stain had been purloined and regendered in an object lesson of the problematics of gendered formal analysis of certain tropes of abstraction in the work of women artists.

Greenbergian formalism successfully emptied the field of the rectangular canvas (and the theoretical ground on which it rested) of all personal, narrative, and literary content and pushed women artists to the theoretical and critical margins. As a consequence, when women artists began to try to imagine visual embodiments of female experience, painting was not the logical space for this search. Other less established media proved more hospitable to women’s desire for formal experimentation in the exploration of previously repressed content; sculpture, which had for many years been a troubled discipline but that could accommodate both the real and metaphorical abstraction referential to the body, and new media including performance art and video.
differences

Hannah Wilke, *Of Radishes and Flowers*, 1972. Latex and snaps, 76" × 52".

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Nevertheless, in the early 1970s feminist artists and critics attempting to theorize a female aesthetic proposed visual organizing principles and images such as central core imagery, layering, and repetition as visual embodiments of women’s complex and multiple sexual experience and subjectivity. For a moment, at least, abstract art seemed like a privileged locus for feminist art. Important feminist critics such as Lippard supported a number of women artist working abstractly in the postminimalist movement, such as Eva Hesse and Hannah Wilke. “I was looking for sensuous, even sensual, abstraction, an off-center, three-dimensional imagery that shared minimalism’s bluntness and presence but didn’t cut off all content, all kinesthetic and emotional associations” (qtd. in Stoops 26). One of the problematics of considering women artists’ relation to abstraction is touched on almost in passing in the ironic subtexts of this statement: the fact that women artists always work within the stylistic paradigms of their time, and the assumption that the feminist critic should look in women’s work for a feminine variation on something already done by men. “In the seventies we talked a lot about ‘female sensibility’ and ‘body identification’
in abstraction, about tactility, and transparency and layering as ways in which women's work could be distinguished from men's” (qtd. in Stoops 31). Lippard argues that the early strategies of women artists were not “a retreat from formalism. We just left it behind [. . .] or put it to the side, or relegated it to the bottom layer. Which did not mean form was ignored, only formalism.” Lippard continues, again referring to what male artists were doing: “Hardcore minimalists also saw themselves as ‘anti-formalists’ in their rejection of composition and a certain seductiveness or ‘sublimity’ that was associated with ‘post-painterly abstraction’; their work was concrete rather than abstract” (qtd. in Stoops 29). Lippard gradually moved toward other political concerns and lost interest in writing about abstract art (and in fact about women artists or feminism specifically):

*I became more involved in issue-oriented feminist art from the mid-seventies on [. . .] I wrote less and less about abstract art because there was less there to get my teeth into, given my own preoccupations. [. . .] It’s just harder to see the subversion and the confrontations in an abstract framework, even when the artist is politically supportive of feminism. (qtd. in Stoops 31)*

In consciousness-raising sessions during this time, women talked frankly about aspects of their experiences that had not been thought fit for high art. Of course, the main topics of discussion—money, sex, family, and power—are the basic subjects of much art by men as well as by women. Yet, as Anna Chave has argued, most recently in “Minimalism and Biography,” the biographical basis of such themes are veiled in a rhetoric of objectivity when it comes to male artists, even when the critical texts that serve to place them within the canon are generated by their female companions, wives, and lovers. “Marxist-informed criticism has largely persisted in depreciating the biographical, in so doing finding common cause at once with much poststructuralist art criticism as well as with the deindividualizing impetus underlying key Minimalist initiatives” (287).

But discussions about family, relationships with men, clothing, one’s body, domestic labor—all of these narratives seemed to be most usefully articulated visually within figuration and representation. Here, my experience as a participant in the noted early feminist art project Womanhouse, in Los Angeles in 1972, is instructive: twenty-three artists, mostly students at CalArts led by the artists and teachers Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, were given the opportunity to work in a “room of one’s own” in an abandoned mansion in Hollywood. Only three did paintings,
although many thought of themselves as painters or had begun their professional lives as painters. Of the three room paintings, only Robin Mitchell’s *Painted Room* was abstract, a walk-in abstract expressionist painting. But even the representational or figurative painting, including my own self-portrait, *Red Moon Room*, and Ann Mills’s *Leaf Room*, were the subject of incomprehension by the viewing public. These room paintings did not meet the audience’s expectation of illustrative representation of the ideas of Women’s Lib as successfully as installations that included specific references or incorporated real objects (shoes, lace, wedding dresses, and so on) or as the agit-prop performances that hammered the feminist message across as effectively as a Punch and Judy show. Thus I learned

*By permission of the artist.*

Mira Schor, *Red Moon Room.* Installation detail from Womanhouse, 1972. Oil on canvas, 8' × 10' × 4'.

*By permission of the artist.*
early on that within a political (here a feminist) project, abstraction was considered less instrumental than representation and, at the same time, that painting in itself had a degree of inherent abstraction that made it less useful to the elaboration of a political thematic than did the “real.” Thus even abstract sculptures such as Hannah Wilke’s Of Radishes and Flowers (1972) could be interpreted metaphorically and through an allusion to the real by virtue of their physical presence: latex as skin, for example.

Thus, although some of the formal elements developing in the seventies in art and feminist theorization of what a female aesthetic based on female sexuality would look like—layering, multiplicity, repetition—seemed congruent with abstraction, the early feminist art seemed to orient itself in art practice, art history, and theory, around representation. Women analyzed and identified how the male gaze constructs femininity and how femininity is shaped in accordance with the desire of the male gaze. Feminist art historians were interested in women who developed a female gaze, a female construction of the body and subject. In the 1980s, the most successful women artists (and also the most significant of the women allowed into mainstream discourse) were photo-based artists working with codes of representation of femininity such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman. More recently, figurative artists such as Yuskavage continue
Ingrid Calame, “b·b·b, rr·gR·UF!, b·b·b,” 1999. Enamel paint on Trace mylar, 9m × 7.5m.


Photo: Shelby Roberts.

to work with codes of female representation in a painterly style, which, like that of her male contemporaries such as John Currin, is a hybrid of traditional realism, photorealism, and the simulacral. At the same time, women working within abstraction pose even more vexing questions for feminist analysis. Stylistic trends cut across gender, and essentialist tropes are muddied by transgendered characteristics. Many of the women working with abstract elements and processes, including spillage and staining, do so today with a high degree of historical consciousness and appropriational awareness (for example, Ingrid Calame’s works, in which stains found in the environment are replicated through a complex series of tracings and naming, and are painted with a deliberateness that completely contradicts the appearance of spillage). These artists often reject political content (in this they eerily replicate earlier yearnings for a genderless universal), while male artists such as Anthony Viti revisit Frankenthaler’s stains, in Viti’s case using his own blood and urine in radiantly beautiful sheets of translucent bodily substance, to embrace political content and speak metaphorically about AIDS. Despite the critical and market status of certain schools of high modernist abstraction, the question of whether the artist of contemporary life can be an abstract artist remains in play.
Can contemporary life endure the metaphoric realm of abstraction or is it literalist, information-, image- and representation-based?

It is perhaps because of the continued fraught complexities of these issues that I recently embraced the opportunity to give a lecture on Alice Neel, at a symposium held at the National Museum for Women during their exhibition, Alice Neel’s Women. I was invited to discuss her work from the point of view of “feminist theory,” which would have been an entirely reasonable topic considering the importance to feminist art history of Neel’s oeuvre as a figurative painter, including many memorable portraits of women in all stages of life and from all economic strata. Nevertheless, my somewhat unorthodox reply was accepted by the Museum, and the talk I gave was about my long-held belief that Alice Neel is a great abstract painter.

Alice Neel (1900–1984) began painting in the 1920s, in a realist style influenced at times by expressionism and surrealism. In choosing to remain committed to figuration during the 1950s, Neel overtly disobeyed the dominant legislation of high modernism that, as Griselda Pollock states, “outlawed questions of the social, that is, all ideological baggage that prevented art from saving itself within a capitalist system” (285). Neel’s artistic and personal trajectory was perhaps even more extralegal than her female contemporaries working within abstraction: she did not attach herself to a famous abstract artist. Though she lived a sexually adventurous life, she did so without the kind of social benefits that such an association would have offered. She had children, two of them later in life and “out of wedlock”; she maintained an activist relation to leftist politics, living in Spanish Harlem rather than in the approved territory of the art world below Fourteenth Street; and she committed herself to human subjects who often, especially early on, lived at the margins of established social hierarchies—women, the poor, poets, artists, the elderly, people of color.

Neel’s reputation and career grew alongside the development of the feminist art movement, when many young women artists and critics became aware of her work and when interest in representation—fueled by its ability to illustrate gender theories and promote the political message of Women’s Lib—overcame the marginalization of realist painting that had plagued realist painters during the Abstract Expressionist period. Neel herself said that she did not mind the Abstract Expressionists: “I’m not against abstraction. [...] What I can’t stand is that the
abstractionists pushed all the other pushcarts off the street” (qtd. in Hills 80). She elaborates,

*All my favorite painters are abstractionists: Morris Louis and Clyfford Still. I don't do realism. I do a combination of realism and expressionism. It's never just realism. I hate the New Realism. I hate equating a person and a room and a chair. Compositionally, a room, a chair, a table, and a person are all the same for me, but a person is human and psychological. (qtd in Hills 90)*

There is no doubt that Neel’s work offers a rich and original field of representations of women: she unsentimentally avoids clichés of standard prettiness or beauty, is a keen psychological detective, and is a brilliant, sometimes even a cruel, caricaturist. She brings all these qualities to her representations of men, and she is one of the few white artists in the history of Western art to paint with equal sympathy and acuity men, women, and children of color. Neel’s work offers images of people as they had rarely if ever been seen before in high art: hugely pregnant naked young women, sophisticated, wily middle-aged New York art world figures, ambitious young male artists, a Holocaust survivor become Fuller brush salesman, black and Puerto Rican children from the barrio, naked male intellectuals, Communist poets, old women. This is in contradistinction to the more recent type of female representation by artists from Sherman to Yuskavage, whose appropriational techniques bind them to more standard (male-oriented)—however dystopic—representations of women based on pornography, celebrity culture, and commercial standards of beauty.

However, if Alice Neel's paintings are distinguished by her psychological insights, at the same time, these insights are interesting as art works because she draws incredibly well and uses paint in an inventive and immensely informed and skilled manner. Hers is a muscular manner, I might even say, using the kind of gender-coded word usually reserved as praise for male artists. There is inventiveness, a sense of conscious commitment in each paint stroke, and an ability to use any type of mark necessary for each individual work.

Neel is as great a painter of abstract expressionist marks as de Kooning or Chaim Soutine, and I tend to look for those marks in her work as much as I may read the expression and character of the subject. When viewing the paintings, I look at painterly details, the weave of the canvas, the importance of what is drawn, what is painted, what is left out, what
is sketched, what is impasto. My attention is perhaps not so much formal-
list, to echo Lippard, as it is cathected to Neel's expressive deployment
of painting marks and signs, inserted not only as structuring agents of
representation but also as references to the history of painting's indexi-
cal vocabulary. Here, my perception of her work is that of a painter: each
brushstroke engages me in a conversation with the specific painting and
with the history of painting. Thus, when looking at a painting like The
Spanish Family (1945), a portrait of a young Puerto Rican mother and her
three small children in front of a wrought iron fence, I am drawn to the
individual brushstrokes that make up part of the baby’s diaper, at the top
giving a sense of the volume of material of the cloth diaper but giving way
to drawing of labial folds, and to the way in which the baby’s hands are
quickly sketched rather than rendered, creating a sense of the infant in
motion, right at the center of the painting. Or, in looking at what at first
seems like a fairly conventional portrait, Mimi (1955), my eye is diverted
from the strong features of the woman model to the painterly events that
frame her, including the painterly strokes of grey that press upon her waist,
or at the upper left, the drift of grey from the pages of one book over the
black outline of the cover of the book on top of it. That small painterly event
is in no way in the service of any representational program; it is there for
the conversation with painting only.

My perception of Neel as a great abstract painter has its roots
in three experiences. It was first crystallized in the viewing of an exhibi-
tion of her work at Robert Miller Gallery some years ago, when I became
extremely aware of how expressively and richly painted the background
and details of clothes were in some portraits of children from Spanish
Harlem, paintings such as Two Girls, Spanish Harlem (earlier title, Two
Black Girls) (1959). The expression on the girls' faces, one of shyness
and tremendous curiosity about this white lady who is painting them, is
certainly the principal subject matter of the work as a representational
painting, but what makes it interesting as a painting is what is in surplus
to that representational content: the completely abstract painterly strokes
of pink and gray that swirl around the two girls, containing them within
the rectangle and also separating them from each other, and the separate
paintings within the painting of the skirts of each little girl.

Neel was noted for her informative, rather gossipy, and highly
entertaining commentaries on the people who posed for her. In 1985,
Patricia Hills collected many of these narratives for the first time in Alice
Neel. They were important ways of talking about artworks at a time when a
formal, nonnarrative approach was privileged. Neel had lived an amazing life, several lives, really, and was clearly a brilliant and witty woman. Her rich narratives, filled with pungent asides, astute psychological observations, and personal revelations, in themselves constituted a feminist act in the face of the repression of the personal by much art criticism and art history in the modernist era. The fact that such an anecdotal approach makes an artist seem less significant needs to be critiqued, indeed, some feminist criticism has pointed to the discriminatory nature of the opprobrium about a gossipy biographical narrative, unless of course it is gossip about de Kooning, at which point it becomes myth. Griselda Pollock amusingly notes that she was struck “when researching painting in the 1950s by the wealth of gossip about the artists, their dealers, their marriages and friends. So immense is the wealth of anecdotal detail—interviews, oral history and plain old-fashioned gossip—that I felt I would sink under the unmanageable weight of all the words that rarely touched on the question of the structure, necessity or affect of painting except in lyrical celebrations of the formal innovations that served to celebrate the greatness of
the always male artists” (262). There are two types of myth in art: the wild man’s stories, which coexist with and enhance his myth as a great artist; and the wild woman’s story, likely to create a lot of appeal without necessarily enhancing the perceived aesthetic value of the work. If lurid biographical details are belabored in the many studies of artists such as Pollock or de Kooning, the personal is always balanced by formal analysis and aggressive art historical contextualization of the artist.
In what might have been a deliberate effort to confront this double standard head-on, Neel was a primary source of the biographical and anecdotal approach to her work, one that has continued to dominate the critical and historical perception of her work, focusing on the character and circumstances of her subjects and of her engagement with them. One might also intuit that it is a familiar mechanism for an artist working from a marginal position to collapse into biography and the personal in an effort to engage the sympathy of the viewer or the reader. Certainly, this approach is a function of Neel’s way of seeing the world, with a lively awareness of personality and a sharply observant understanding of the foibles and failings of the human beings she encountered. Typifying her chatty tone in her presentation of her own work, Neel says, speaking of her 1930 portrait of Ethel Ashton—in which the model, a fellow painter, is depicted naked, with big belly and drooping breasts, and a small mousy shadowed face looking up abjectly at the viewer: “[D]on’t you like her left leg on the right. You see, it’s very uncompromising. I can assure you, there was no one in the country doing nudes like this. Also it’s great for
Women’s Lib, because she’s almost apologizing for living. And look at all that furniture she has to carry all the time” (qtd. in Hills 30).

Neel does not feel it necessary to point out certain formal elements of the painting. We note the way she replicates the drooping breast shape three times in the work, so that the dark face is only a smaller version of the woman’s breasts; the figure sitting in a pool of dark brown that may represent a piece of cloth on the patterned bed, or just the shadow of the indentation created by the heavy body; how her brush strokes vary so that the face is sketched in quickly with key black outlines such as the nipple-like end of the nose, while the breasts are painted with thicker, wetter pigment. All these elements add to the pathos, the humor, but also to the abstract, plastic qualities of the work. In fact, although I am sure Neel was absolutely aware of all of her skills as a painter and understood them completely, she did not think it was necessary to spell them out. They were something she could take for granted in the process of working; it was just something she could do, single out the telling form or sketch in a ground with painterly élan. Perhaps many viewers, tending to overprivilege subject matter at the expense of form, also take the visual, painterly inventiveness for granted, engaged and distracted as one can be by the merely literal reading of representational art—where what it is a picture of can overwhelm one’s ability to see that it is painting first and a record second.

The second experience was a conversation I had with the realist painter Raphael Soyer after a slide lecture that Neel gave in Provincetown, Massachusetts, toward the end of her life. She spoke very much as
she does in Hills’s book, repeating many of the stories and regaling her audience with them. I really enjoyed it, was thrilled to get to hear her; it was a kick to hear her tell the stories I already knew from the book. Nevertheless, her self-presentation made me slightly uneasy. I feared that it encouraged a view of her that was consolidated by her very well-received February 21, 1984, appearance on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson as a slightly scandalous but endearingly cute little old lady, a performance that obscured her skills as an artist and her depth as an intellectual.

Neel deserved the attention and at that point in her life was entitled to have an audience in the palm of her hands. Since, as I have suggested, there was a revolutionary power to Neel s presentation of self, my concern is not to eliminate one kind of self-presentation of the woman artist—the biographical, the anecdotal, the humorous, naughty, or outrageous. But what might it have meant for how women artists are perceived, or how young women artists might imagine themselves, if Neel had also revealed something of her more serious aesthetic views, if not on Johnny Carson then in her slide lecture? If the intellectual were allowed space along with the personal, it would build another idea of what a woman artist could be. This would particularly serve young artists at a time when celebrity and thus biography are paramount, while the higher levels of criticism and art history remain concerned with conceptual issues. Soyer, who had known Neel for many years and admired her work, must have experienced the same concern because he said to me, “You know she is very intelligent, very well read, a real intellectual,” in other words, you should not judge her solely on the basis of the lecture. Neel s reputation is both built upon but perhaps also limited by her own emphasis on her human relationships with her sitters/subjects and by the anecdotal approach she brought to the construction of her public identity as an artist. In some way I wish to rescue her from her own self-presentation, even though I love the stories and believe they emerge from the importance, perhaps the primacy to her, of her engagement with her sitters as a social contract, an intersubjectivity.

The third experience that makes me interested in drawing attention to the zones of abstraction in Neel’s painting goes back to something Miriam Schapiro mentioned in an art history class lecture in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in the early 1970s. She put forward a theory of the “weak fourth quarter”: I am not sure she had thought this up; it may have been suggested to her by a feminist art historian in those early years of the movement, when people were struggling to develop a
new field of art history. The theory was that even in excellent works by well-known women artists, one quarter of an otherwise successful, strongly structured composition would inevitably lose compositional integrity, as an unconscious expression of women artists’ struggle with gendered visual languages and their unequal access to social agency.

This theory is easily disproved in both directions. Many male artists’ paintings are troubled by inert fourth quarters, and many women artists, from all time periods, have painted fully animated compositions. What interested me at that time was that this obviously flawed theory nevertheless represented an effort to find a metaphor for the obstacles to full subjectivity experienced by women within the formal visual language of artworks by women. As a young artist, I was interested in how a painting could express in painting language the experience of femaleness. Now, I have become particularly interested in the backgrounds of Neel’s portraits, where Neel was able to mobilize the fourth quarter where earlier women artists’ confidence on the field of painting may have faltered.

A major trope of portrait painting has been the barely differentiated brown soup that lurks behind the foregrounded subject. Neel’s treatment of the background goes through a number of phases that trace the movement from realism toward abstraction. In her paintings from the 1920s and 1930s, Neel generally engages in an imaginative use of peripheral space for additional psychological emphasis and for informative narrative. In a work such as the portrait of the American poet, Kenneth Fearing (1935), the background includes a kind of alternate, symbolically biographical representation of the subject, situated in the urban setting of his poetry, with various symbolic references to his work and his personal life surrounding him like a Lilliputian supporting cast.

In 1935, when I finished his portrait, he said: “Take that Fauntleroy out of my heart,” meaning the skeleton. But that was to show that even though he wrote such deadpan verse, he really sympathized with humanity, that his heart bled for the grief of the world. You see, there in the painting is the material of his poetry. This is the Sixth Avenue El that he lived near, and that’s the light bulb because he always lived at night. And the figures in the street are characters from his poems. You see the police knocking people down, and a man lies shot on the sidewalk, and one chap is selling The Daily Worker. The baby is there because Kenneth’s wife just had a baby boy in the hospital. Meyer
Alice Neel,
*Kenneth Fearing*,
1935. Oil on canvas, 50" × 26".

Alice Neel,
*Kenneth Fearing*,
details, 1935. Oil on canvas, 50" × 26".
Schapiro said about this: Ah the empty pot of the Depression.
(qtd. in Hills 62)

In this illustrative use of the background, Neel benefited from the permission created by Surrealism and the kind of multiple spaces that Surrealism adapted from early Italian Renaissance and Flemish painting to suggest more than one narrative space, to include biographical information in the side detail, to suggest internal spaces, and in general to propose more than one reality on one canvas.

In a second phase, her experiences with this unconventional use of the side space of traditional portraiture opened the way, in the 1940s and 1950s, for her to reach into the vocabulary of abstract expressionism, placing thick, violently embodied strokes of paint to the side of and to some extent independent of the figure and the conventions of portrait painting. If the style and quality of these marks is similar to marks by expressionist artists such as de Kooning or Soutine (an artist whose reputation was restored by the Abstract Expressionists' interest in his work as a progenitor of their own), Neel activates the relationship between figure and ground in a manner consistent with the goals of artists such as Barnett Newman and critics such as Greenberg, who emphasized the essential flatness of panel painting. Neel, however, does so within a representational frame that includes the rendering or referencing of three-dimensional space.

The background in Neel's 1952 portrait of Dore Ashton combines both these trends in an almost didactic manner. Bold, intensely brushed areas of orange, red, and purple crowd the uncharacteristically flatly rendered portrait, so that the figure has the sculptural boldness of a Picasso from the same period. But these abstract areas of color may be exactly as narrative and literal as the background images in the Kenneth Fearing portrait, identifying Ashton as one of the foremost critics of the Abstract Expressionist period, married to an abstract artist, Adja Yunkers, and committed to writing about such artists as Philip Guston and Jack Tworkov. It would seem likely that the orange and red marks are representations of a specific painting in back of the figure or of a remembered image of such a painting. Certainly, this is one work where Neel can overtly, even self-consciously, play with something that is in fact active in all her paintings.

The excitement of an Alice Neel painting is consistently located as much in the inventiveness and the sense of conscious commitment in each paint stroke and area as in the figurative subject. Not only is Neel's portrait of Robert Smithson (1962) redolent of his intensity and intelligence,
but many a painter could make an entire career from the richness of abstract painting she deploys in the small area of his cheek alone.

_He had acne, which for me was just an interesting surface, but he was very angry when he saw the painting and made me take some of the blood off his cheek. Another day I went to see him in his studio where he was making papier-mâché Christs all covered with blood. “Why Robert,” I said, “you wouldn’t let me have even a little blood and look how much blood the Christs have.”_ (qtd. in Hills 112, my emphasis)

I emphasize the words “just an interesting surface” because they point to the way that Neel abstracted from the real, or rather, was attracted to the abstract within the real (while at the same time understanding representational painting as a transubstantiation of the real, highlighted here by the Catholic imagery that she interposes as one motivation for her focus on embodied painting marks). Perhaps this is the paradoxical effect of realism and physical presence: because Neel worked from the model, occasionally creating a second painting more liberated from verisimilitude than the
first, she could elaborate on pure painting elements. She also sometimes worked from memory, which enhanced her access to abstraction or the life of individual painterly marks.

In her later years, her use of the background space of the portrait as filled with pure painting marks is displaced by confidence with emptiness and telegraphed indications of a site for the figure, with just enough thin color where once was the brown soup of academic portraiture and where Neel in earlier work might have had symbolic narrative or expressive strokes. In many cases, the ground is white, simply primed canvas, and the barely rendered figure is situated through economically deployed areas of color surrounding it at key points. In her portrait of Andy Warhol of 1970, Warhol is posed naked to the waist, revealing the massive scar left by Valerie Solanas’s attack. His eyes are closed. The fragility of his body is emphasized by his isolation on a nearly blank canvas. He sits on the sketched outline of a divan that floats into the canvas from the left, and only small areas of blue, asymmetrically placed behind his back and to the side of his head and intimations of brown shadow at his feet stabilize his existential quandary. In a portrait of the museum curator Tom Freudenheim, where only the face is at all rendered, the ground is white, with patches of ochre and blue directly behind the upper torso of the figure. Here again, as in the portrait of Dore Ashton, the ground might be an abstract painting on the wall. If so, it is not an intensely painterly one, but rather, an example of flat, postpainterly abstraction, which would have given Neel the opportunity to sample an artist like Robert Motherwell, perhaps.

Of the paintings from this period, one of the most extraordinary is her Self-Portrait of 1980. My memory of Neel’s appearance on the Tonight Show included her gleefully showing a picture of this painting and saying something like “And look at those legs, don’t they just look like pieces of furniture,” eerily reprising her comments on her early portrait of Ethel Ashton. Neel used humor to engage the audience in a painting that achieves something important in the history of representation by foregrounding the body of the artist in a stage of life that normally would not be figured in representational art because it is beyond its use value in a homosocially structured economy. If the paradigmatic body of the modernist painter is the indexical, performing body of Jackson Pollock, whose work leaves its seminal mark and also opens the field of art to the real space beyond the confines of the canvas, then in that sense, Neel’s self-portrait remains a relatively conventional representational portrait:
Alice Neel,
_Self-portrait, 1980._
Oil on canvas,
54” x 40”.

© Estate of Alice Neel. The National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.
the painter depicted painting, the subject sitting on a chair in a room in a legible space. Nevertheless, her subject is revolutionary: the old woman’s body presented without a trace of abjectness.

In the painting, she sits in the blue striped chair that figures in many of her paintings, against dynamically oriented indications of blue, ochre, and green ground on an otherwise white primed canvas. In her left hand, she holds a white paint rag that hovers at the edge of the meeting between a few strokes of blue and the white upper right of the canvas, as if she has wiped away the background. The diagonal line created by the meeting of an area of ochre (floor) and an area of green (rug) can be traced directly back to her crotch, suggesting through its formal energy the reserve of sexual potency of this grandmother.

In *Pictures of People: Alice Neel’s American Portrait Gallery*, Pam Allara contextualizes these shifts in Neel’s composition style and facture in changes within art movements: “Just as in the 1950s and 1960s she had adopted an abstract expressionist facture, so in the 1970s, her paintings became larger and brighter under the influence of pop art and new realism” (164). The spatial emptiness of her later works is also a defining characteristic of the phenomenon of “old age style,” as is evident in the late works of Cézanne, for example—looser, quicker, “unfinished” insofar as areas of blank, primed canvas show through. But these most minimal indications of painterly space are also the most mature embodiment of Neel’s strengths as a purely plastic, abstract painter, as well as an astute psychologist and caricaturist. The painting is, of course, important in terms of what she is depicting, the naked body of the woman artist painting, the older woman’s naked body as the subject of the female artist’s gaze (a subject rarely seen in the foreground of art, usually relegated to the background of a picture of the beautiful young lady). But it is also important to look at this work as the culmination of the development of the painterly and formal in her work.

What is notable, again, are the “just enough” marks where once was the brown soup of portrait background, where Neel in earlier work might have placed the enlivened symbolic, narrative, pictorial, or expressive strokes. Looking at the late self-portrait, I am struck not only by the drip at the bottom that recalls Morris Louis but also the abstraction of the diagonally oriented yellow and green floor, perhaps, in fact, a faithful notation of something actually visible to her, but also an abstract painting in its entirety, a Mark Rothko or Kenneth Noland within a Neel.
The goal of the early feminist art and art history movement, particularly in its American version, is to recover, create, enable, and support great women artists. The subject matter of great art throughout history is form and materiality, just as much as it is what Meyer Schapiro called the “object matter,” that is to say, that which is represented. Thus, to say that Alice Neel was a great abstract painter is to say that she was a great painter whose abilities with drawing and paint, and the risks she took in paint, complimented and enriched the other skills she brought to her representation of women and men. Those skills were based on the risks she took in her life.

Since this essay may seem like a case of “A Funny Thing Happened to Me on My Way to Writing about Women and Abstraction,” I turn full circle to a 1974 Whitney Museum catalog essay on Alice Neel by Elke Solomon, an artist then working as a curator at the Whitney:

*Critics writing about Alice Neel seem more interested in her personality than in her painting. They speak of her wit, her biting candor and her sharp intelligence, but not as manifested in her work. Yet it is precisely Neel’s ability to tell something both of herself and her sitter that distinguishes her as a portraitist within the academic tradition. To a lesser extent than Gertrude Stein, though similarly, Neel’s biographies are autobiographical.* (qtd. in Carr 18n10)

I say “full circle” because Solomon was the woman artist on the 1997 panel on “Women and Abstraction” at A.I.R. Gallery bemoaning the lack of attention to women abstract artists by feminist critics, art historians, and theorists.

As Solomon suggested in her comment, made at the moment when feminists were first turning to Neel’s work for its contribution to the new pictography of the female gaze, Neel’s painterly intelligence animates her portraits just as much her skills as a psychologist or a “collector of souls” (Neel qtd. in Carr 4). This is of particular interest at a time when many figurative painters pursue simulacral smoothness or even simulacral “painterliness,” without the expressive inflection, variety, or material substance that emerge from the intersubjectivity, with her subjects and with the subject of painting, of Neel’s painterly practice. In the context of women and abstraction, a study of the background in Alice Neel’s paintings suggests the continued importance of intrinsically abstract “surplus” painterly information to the aesthetic as well as the expressive content of representational painting.
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Notes

1. “Women and Abstraction,” A.I.R. Gallery, November 21, 1997, was one of three events that coincided with “Generations,” an exhibition of small works by women artists.

2. The report was titled “Jack the Dripper” and broadcast on January 11, 1999, on PBS.

3. See Pollock, Saltzman, and Brennan, particularly “How Formalism Lost Its Body but Kept Its Gender,” Brennan does not reference Pollock. Saltzman does acknowledge Pollock’s essay as a text she became aware of “since [my] essay first took shape” (qtd. in Broude and Garrard 581n3). It is hard to keep up in any field, but my extended consideration of Lippard, Brennan, and Saltzman’s comments on abstraction is generated in part by my sense that feminist art history and criticism seem more prone to, and more endangered than other disciplines by, a lack of collective memory or perhaps of a collective and constant reiteration of germinal feminist texts that would serve as an effective counterdiscourse to the critical hegemony enacted by almost all art historians whose field is modernism. To this day there is no text on modernism that does not deal extensively with the writings of Clement Greenberg, just as there is no text by someone associated with October magazine that does not extensively refer and defer to at least one other Octoberite. The research set in motion by my interest in the subject of women and abstraction has revealed a number of texts that have dealt with this theme, yet they seldom refer to each other.

4. Frankenthaler’s technique was quickly appropriated by male artists, in particular the Washington-based artists Louis and Noland, who in 1953 were brought by critic Clement Greenberg to visit Frankenthaler’s studio where they saw her first major work done in this manner, the landscape-based abstraction *Mountains and Sea* (1952). Shortly after this visit, they adapted Frankenthaler’s technique to abstraction with more standardized systems of form.

5. The connection to Barnett Newman is also made by Jeremy Lewison in his description of another Neel portrait from this period, *Black Spanish Family* from 1950, where the background is a richly painted Indian Red: “Behind them the red wall, an interesting echo of Barnett Newman’s *Onement I* (1948) and *Onement III* (1949), creates a somber if not mournful backdrop to life in Spanish Harlem” (n.p.).

Works Cited


