

LONDON

Alice Neel

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY

Alice Neel's magnificently independent art practice is remarkable for its allegiance to figuration at a time when abstraction dominated the New York world and for her intense portrayals of inner turmoil. Her work can verge on caricature, yet she is never condescending, never rushed. She can, however, be cruel, as in 1962's mustard-colored, freakish portrait of gallerist Ellie Poindexter—one of the sixty works, painted between 1930 and 1984, in this exhilarating touring exhibition of Neel's portraits (along with some cityscapes), curated by the Neel Estate's Jeremy Lewison and organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The show's title, "Painted Truths," presumably refers to each portrait's alleged psychologizing accuracy, but maybe the word *truths* implies something more stable than what Neel's work captures. For in expressing the brief, changing relationship between subject and painter, it is unable to arrive at any truth other than the inevitable, special distortion of vision born of the artist's profound emotional investment in each painting. Early canvases, from the Munchlike *Ninth Avenue El*, 1935, to the de Kooning-esque, brushy *Baron's Aunt*, 1959 often suggest outside influences. Perhaps partially owing to feminism and her wider recognition from the late 1960s, Neel's later portraits are characterized by a singular, highly idiosyncratic painterly form that, though hinted at in previous works, really flourishes here: outlined in blue and redolent of the spirit and fashions of the day, these portraits are colorfully stylized and mercilessly observant.

Neel rarely worked from photographs; she probed her subjects in conversation and painted them in her Manhattan apartment. Each sitter emerges as a complex, unresolved individual, taking a break from whatever important activity—raising children, fighting for communist principles, curating for the Museum of Modern Art in New York—makes them the interesting person we see. Often featuring enlarged eyes and

oversize heads, balanced atop small bodies, Neel's subjects resemble thoughtful children. *Andy Warhol*, 1970, arguably her best-known and most reproduced portrait, is especially remarkable. In reproduction the work seems little more than a sketch, though in fact over much of it—especially the face and the sutured torso—the paint is painstakingly applied and worked. Neel wrote that Picasso's Cubism "dismembered" figures; this scarred human body is literally on the verge of dismemberment, barely held together by a strange elasticated corset. Yet Warhol has never appeared more integrated, not just a recognizable head and personality but a full-fledged, reflective human being. What a contrast with the stark photograph that Richard Avedon took the year before, rendering Warhol a kind of semihuman, anatomical curiosity with a robotlike white body beneath a tough leather jacket, fueling the construction of Warhol as a wild and dangerous artist-machine. Neel somehow prefigured the more "human" Warhol we came to see the artist as after his death—in consequence of his *Diaries*, researched biographies, queer theory, and more.

In fact, Neel's work seems to feed into many cultural situations and viewpoints active today: the returned relevance of old-fashioned communism, the acceptance of painting as an emotional and social pursuit, a cross-disciplinary art world that includes not just artists and curators but radical political thinkers, poets, and students—even the nature of the cityscapes where art can thrive. What emerges overall is an impressive community of vibrant, left-leaning, midcentury American intellectuals, and viewing them one grows nostalgic for this pre-Facebook world of intense urban encounters. Neel's subjects seem opinionated, flawed, tormented beings whom she briefly loved for those very reasons. Through her portraits, we can almost love them back.

—Gilda Williams

Alice Neel, *The De Vegh Twins*, 1975, oil on canvas, 38 x 32".

