

# Alice Neel

## 26 February – 11 April 2015

Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to present the gallery's first exhibition dedicated to the work of Alice Neel (1900–1984). Drawn from the artist's estate, the presentation includes paintings from all periods of Neel's career, together with a selection of drawings. This is the first showing of her work in Belgium.

Born in Philadelphia in 1900, Alice Neel trained at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women and carved out a career as an artist in New York, often in difficult circumstances. Neel's dedication to the 'unfashionable' art of portrait painting and social realism – and this during the decades of abstract expressionism, pop art and minimalism – ensured that her work remained permanently out of kilter with avant-garde artistic developments. To quote Jeremy Lewison, advisor to the Alice Neel Estate, 'she was isolated in a sea of changing styles'. While this was reflected in a lack of commercial and critical success during her most productive years, a retrospective organised by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974 confirmed a groundswell of belated recognition. After her death in 1984, critical interest in Neel's work further intensified and led to a series of landmark exhibitions in Europe. Alice Neel is today recognised as one of the greatest American figurative painters of the twentieth century.

Neel's posthumous success is intimately connected to her profound social conscience and idiosyncratic choice of sitters. Working across six decades of radical social and political upheaval, Neel's approach to her art was uncompromising and unwavering. Passionately interested in the trials and tribulations of everyday life, and the desperate struggle to survive in what she called the 'rat race of New York', Neel interacted with people from all walks of life. A self-described 'collector of souls', Alice Neel's work provides an illuminating insight into the cultural, countercultural and multicultural circles in which she moved. Furthermore, she often tackled subjects that were perceived as 'risky' during her lifetime: Neel is known for painting gay people long before homosexuality was legalised, transvestites, members of the poor, immigrant communities in Spanish Harlem (where she lived), candid portraits of nursing and pregnant women as well as unflinching male and female nudes.

Among Alice Neel's greatest gifts were her remarkable mastery of her chosen medium and her unique ability to plumb the inner psychological depths of her sitters, whom she always painted from life. She began painting in the 1920s but it was not till the early 1930s that she really got into her stride, a period represented in the exhibition by her sober portrait *Martin Jay* (1932). When she moved from Greenwich Village to Spanish Harlem in 1938, she turned her attention to the local immigrant community, many of whom lived on the margins of society and were afflicted by the poverty of the Depression years. *Alvin Simon* (1959) and *Mother and Child* (1962) are classic works of this type. Neel's gradual acceptance into the art world saw her not only begin to paint her fellow artists, but also a whole host of other figures involved in the vibrant New York art scene of the 1960s and 70s. Her portraits of the writer, poet and editor Michael Benedikt (1967) and the graphic designer and scenographer Ron Kajiwarra (1970) are typical in this respect. Neel also painted infants and members of her own family. Three portraits of children, painted at different periods of her life, and one of her daughter-in-law Ginny, a frequent sitter, are also on display.

While Neel perfectly captured the zeitgeist of her age, the visceral honesty and analytical clarity of her work renders it both timeless and universal. Reflecting upon painting, she explained: 'It was more than a profession. It was even a therapy, for there I just told it as it was. It takes a lot of courage in life to tell it how it is.'

In recent years, Alice Neel's work has been the subject of a major survey of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (touring to the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Moderna Museet, Malmö, 2010) and a retrospective exhibition of drawings at the Nordiska Akvarellmuseet, Skärhamn (2013). Smaller solo exhibitions have been held at Victoria Miro, London (2014), the Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, Korea (2013), David Zwirner, New York (2012) and Aurel Scheibler, Berlin (2011). Her work has been included in many important group shows, most recently *Face Value. Portraiture in the Age of Abstraction*, National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C. (2014), *Paint Made Flesh* at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville (touring to the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C., and the Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, New York, 2008) and *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles (touring to PS1, New York and Vancouver Art Gallery, 2007). Her work has also been written about extensively.