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What Can We Learn from Alice Neel?

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 2 September 2016)

Alice Neel (1900-84) was an American artist whose drawings and paintings, mainly portraits, are currently on show at Edinburgh University's Talbot Rice Gallery, running till 8 October. The exhibition has been curated by Pat Fisher, who has presided over the Gallery for the last ten years, and has done sterling work in a whole series of excellent exhibitions under the auspices of Edinburgh University, including that of John Duncan, a precursor of the National Museum's Celts exhibition. This is her final exhibition before she retires. It is a remarkable achievement, raising questions especially vital for us in Scotland today.

If we consider Alice Neel's work alongside that of the Scottish women we wrote about in *The National* (April 15, 2016), a similar story emerges of artists "shockingly overlooked" and in need of revaluation. As with the Scotswomen, Neel demands not only an aesthetic appraisal but also full political contextualisation. Arguably the Scots were overlooked because they were women; Neel was neglected also because her work was intrinsically political, an active critique of social priorities inimical to human well-being. She moved from Philadelphia to New York in the late 1920s, where she lived and worked for the rest of her life. New York was her territory and ground base, ever after.

Moreover, after 1945, her commitment to painting portraits was deemed old-fashioned, as abstract expressionism gained ascendancy. The abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock were considered exemplary of American democracy in the anti-Soviet cold war. The State Department invested in abstraction because it seemed to oppose Stalinist socialist realism. Abstraction was the badge of freedom, opposed to totalitarianism, while painting portraits – especially of the poor people of Spanish Harlem – was not a good way to sell America. Neel was undaunted. She never stopped. This exhibition presents work from every decade, from the 1920s to the 1980s.

What did it mean to be a politically engaged artist, committed to socialism, indeed to communism, in the United States in the 20th century? Neel's answer is a uniquely powerful blend of the highly personal, intimate, unhesitating depiction of people in various states of naked reality, in a political context that permeates the domestic scenes. Priorities of gender, ethnic cultural history, social conditions, are all inescapably vivid. Her mother is depicted in an old people's home in "City Hospital, 1954", isolated, lonely, reflective, in a drawing of compassionate intensity. The fact that her mother was a direct descendant of one of the signatories of the American Declaration of Independence might suggest a quality of pathos in her vulnerable loneliness. It might also confirm something of her strength. Children are one of Neel's main subjects, her own children particularly. The contrast for us in Scotland is immediately with those paintings of Glasgow tenement children by Joan Eardley. Neel's drawings are compassionate portraits but without a trace of sentimentality. Affectionate, yes, but never in any way saccharine. There is a sense that potential is more dangerous than definition.

One of the most haunting pictures is "A Quiet Summer's Day, 1963" in which a group of adults stand helplessly before a mother leaning and crying over her child, who has drowned in a canal of industrial waste-water, with a factory building looming behind them all. This is a secular pieta, and the pathos is understated. You have to look closely to see what's going on.

Yet it balances with strength and delicacy a social critique and a personal sense of involvement: you're never in doubt about its reality. Nor is it exaggerated. Its nearest relations, and close to some of Neel's other drawings, might be the German artists, Otto Dix, George Grosz and Max Beckmann, but the Germans normally infused their work with what we might call sarcasm: a scathing quality of confrontation inheres to their depictions of beggars, prostitutes, industrial workers. In Grosz's case, the industrialists with their big cigars and smug faces, the sense of attack is paramount. Not so with Neel. Her drawings expose the horrors but keep the sense of common decency. They offer a human bonding in hard times that it would be easy to caricature, except for their firm understatement. They do not indulge in pastiche. These are permanent reminders of what compassion is for.

What did American nationalism mean in the 1930s, at the time of the Depression?

Thomas Hart Benton represented the city and modern life in America and is often considered the great artist of the Depression, mainly known for his depictions of new arrivals, folk coming in on wagon trains. His paintings are aspirational: people are setting out to make something of themselves and hoping to do well. In huge murals, he depicted industrial workers in the cities in the East, black workers in the South, farmers in the West, but the epic scale of these works usually delivers an optimistic sense of striving for virtue. They are a vision of the American Dream, but they don't confront the harsh realities of the Depression years as Neel does.

In a society where individuals were increasingly under pressure to conform, Manet, not Cezanne, becomes a key figure of influence. Direct engagement with reality rather than formal perfection in the work of art becomes the priority. The "Ash Can" school of artists addressed such realities far more vigorously and in fact aggressively than any more polite groups with other formal preferences. Neel takes something of their aspect but adds patient critical attitude and depth of understanding. Her commitment to socialism and communism never wavered and was consistently processed through her art, so that no blind belief in state authority blinkered her sensibility. It was rather a political choice expressed through drawings and paintings, where honesty enacted its own self-criticism. She could never have done what she did without such self-criticism.

The cultural historian Jackson Lears began a review of Steve Fraser's *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organised Wealth and Power* (London Review of Books, July 16, 2015), with a pertinent quotation: "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" the German sociologist Werner Sombart asked in 1906 – it was also the title of his most famous book. The question was misconceived. During the several decades before the Bolshevik Revolution, socialism was as American as apple pie. In the presidential election of 1912, nearly a million Americans – 6 per cent of the electorate – cast ballots for the Socialist Party candidate, Eugene Debs. There were two Socialist members of Congress, dozens of Socialist legislators, and more than a hundred Socialist mayors. The leading socialist paper, the *Appeal to Reason*, had more than 500,000 subscribers. And this was only a portion of a much broader swathe of the electorate who considered themselves Progressives or Populists rather than Socialists, but were just as committed to challenging corporate power in the name of a 'co-operative commonwealth'."

These people, Lears tells us, were farmers, artisans, small businessmen as well as industrial workers. They did not fit the Marxist model of opposition to capitalism. "Many were small-town or rural folk from the Midwest or the South." Their idiom came from republican

tradition and Christian morality. Religion for them was “not an opiate but an elixir” and “rooted in concrete experience of the present and past, in older ways of being in the world, depending on family, craft, community, faith – all of which were threatened with dissolution (as Marx and Engels said), in ‘the icy waters of egotistical calculation’.”

Lears connects this account to E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and concludes that there was a common pattern on both sides of the Atlantic, After “the grand bargain of 1950, when unions in the steel and car industries traded their control of shop-floor rules in return for security and steady wages” there was a hidden cost: “the erosion of any notion that organised labour could foster an ethos of solidarity – an alternative to the dominant culture of individual accumulation.” And the connection is there from this “loss of a larger vision to the contemporary neo-liberal consensus.”

Alice Neel’s work runs through this story, but looking at the drawings and paintings in the exhibition, there is a deep and constant sense of resistance to this “sell-out”: the essential and fundamental qualities of human worth are maintained and act as lasting resistance – as they can do so effectively in works of art – to the corporate world we seem to be immersed in today.

Moira Jeffrey, in the exhibition catalogue, tells us of the artist’s life: “Neel experienced loss after loss, personal mistakes, disasters, estrangements including the death from diphtheria of her first daughter Santillana just before the child’s second birthday in December 1927 and the loss of Isabetta to [her first husband] Carlos’s family in Cuba in 1930. Neel experienced crisis, hospitalisation and recovery. Neel painted these experiences as well as living through them. She drew the economics of her age, the grinding poverty of the Depression and the activism against it. Her life was marked by extremes of poverty, by domestic violence and by moments of privilege, by love affairs and sex, and the ordinariness of parental love for her two sons Richard and Hartley, born in 1939 and 1941, amidst the chaos. In the foreground was her painting. In the background the dreadful scramble for survival and then for the attention and status her art demanded. And finally in the seventies, in *her* seventies, she found the art world at her door.”

A portrait, “Kenneth Doolittle (seated), 1933” is unsparing: the tortured mind behind the hopeless face is immediately present, but there is no outpouring of pity or idealisation of the victim. This is the lover who was to destroy 300 of Neel’s works, which might have devastated any artist. Yet compassion is most evident in the drawing.

Her vexed relationship with John Rothschild is evoked in “Alienation, 1935” and “Untitled (Alice Neel and John Rothschild in the Bathroom), 1935”. Again and again, she presents double portraits, a couple, a father and son, a mother and daughter, pinning down both the differences and the connections between the sitters. Neel painted these characters and her own experiences with forensic objectivity that delivers the sense that she has lived with them, through their experiences of the world and each other, as well as observed them.

She wasn’t an entirely isolated figure. Among her friends and associates were the Beat poets of liberation. A portrait, “Aaron Kramer, 1958”, depicts a poet and scholar whose work was published alongside that of Langston Hughes and other anti-establishment writers in the anthology *Seven Poets in Search of An Answer* (1940). Neel herself appeared in the film *Pull My Daisy* with Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Jack Kerouac.

One of the most striking portraits in the exhibition is “Stewart Mott, 1961”, a bearded young man, seated, resplendent in white shirt, green waistcoat, tartan tie and full dress kilt, smiling out at the viewer. The Scottish component is immediate and strong. Who was he? A self-styled “avant-garde philanthropist” who supported a whole range of liberal causes, and who in the 1970s featured on Richard Nixon’s list of principal enemies. Apparently he helped fund the Democratic opposition to Nixon. Closer inspection reveals that his grandmother was Isabella Turnbull Stewart, so the Scots connection is undoubted.

Neel’s art of resistance is a contrast to the self-pity of many of today’s celebrity “artists” and alerts us to the serious contemporary confusion about radicalism and value. What is worthwhile in what currently holds sway? How can anyone tell, without serious critical sensibility? When works of art are seen, not in terms of quality, but rather of novelty, their critical value is deeply undermined. How do we learn about this?

There are no Scottish artists of Neel’s vintage we could name, who created anything like the work she produced. William Gillies and John Maxwell, two of Neel’s Scottish contemporaries, whose work is running concurrently in an exhibition at the City Arts Centre Gallery, produced major work of a completely different character. We’ll look at their work next week. They were embedded in European traditions, and while they achieve real distinction in landscapes and still life paintings, their achievement is utterly different from Neel’s.

Alice Neel is a unique figure in 20th century painting. Perhaps it could be said that only America could have made her make her work. That’s a permanent antidote to Trumpery.