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ARTFORUM

Alice Neel

AUREL SCHEIBLER
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In Alice Neel's paintings there are people and then there are the People. *Longshoremen Returning from Work*, 1936, shows a streetscape as stage set: figures populating the thoroughfare as the setting sun cuts a cone of light across the pavement. Meanwhile, *The Great Society*, 1965, from which the exhibition takes its title, shows a bar scene in pale colors, carving the very grain of life into the harrowed faces of a party of drinkers. Much more than representing figures, in this picture Neel has captured spirits.

Spanning the decades between these two pieces, the other paintings in the show provide succinct insight into the artist's political commitment as it developed over time. The sinister *Synthesis of New York. The Great Depression*, 1933, encountered in a gallery a stone's throw from Germany's Alte Nationalgalerie, is easily comparable to the urban scenes of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (several of Neel's characters even have skulls for faces). But this use of symbolism is quickly eclipsed by a much more objective method, which the artist went as far as to call historiography. Like a witness in a trial, these works would seem to testify to this protest, or that funeral, as if simply to say: This took place.

What is most striking about these paintings, however, is how Neel's brush seems to defy those earnest intentions, instead tinting the canvases with light discomfort and private thoughts. When she painted, the distinct anxieties intrinsic to looking and being looked at blended into a single surface. In the eyes of *Grimaldi*, 1955, we see history's unraveling into the present.



Alice Neel, *Synthesis of New York. The Great Depression*, 1933, oil on canvas, 4 x 3'.

— Kristian Vistrup Madsen

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