THE ART WORLD

WILD LIFE

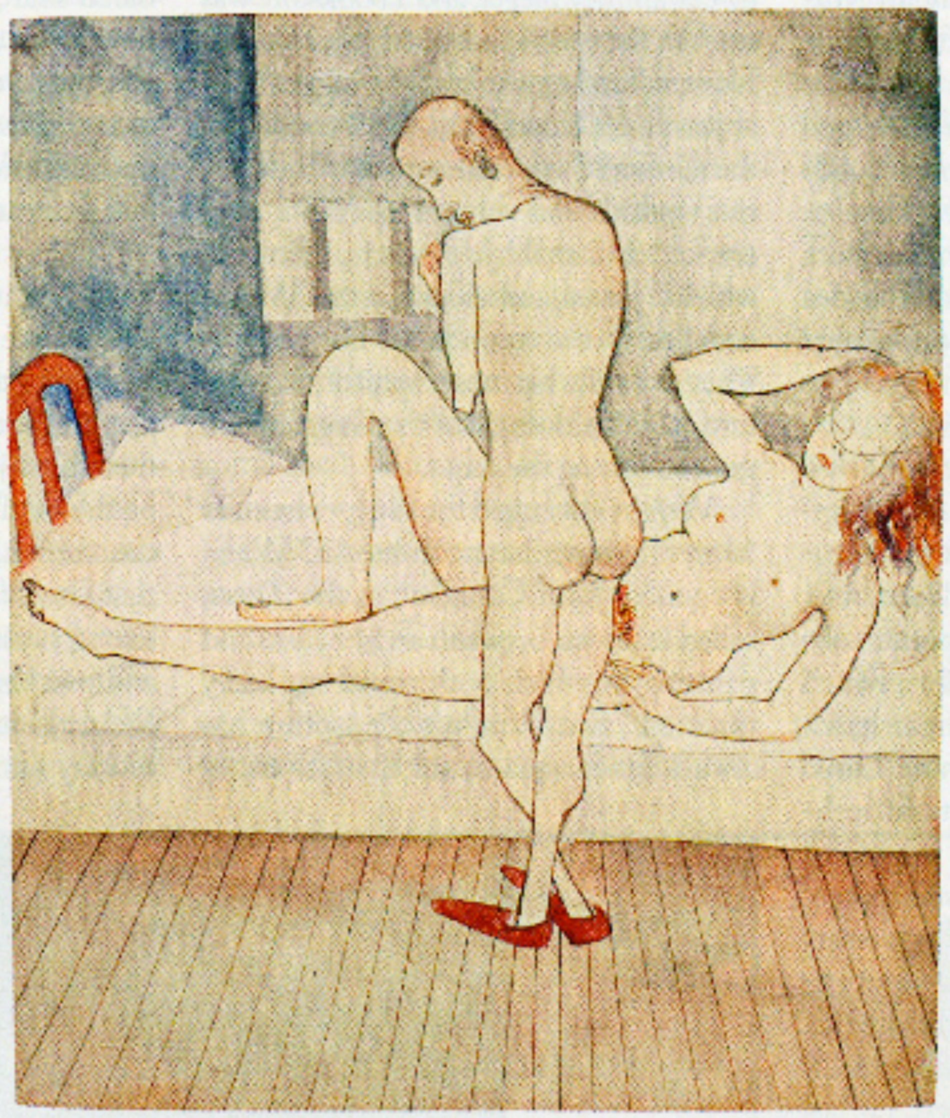
Alice Neel's people.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

"All experience is great providing you live through it," Alice Neel said, adding an implied caution: "If it kills you, you've gone too far." She spoke from authority. The great American portrait painter (1900-84), who is the subject of two current New York gallery shows, led the kind of dishevelled life that was thought of, in praise or in blame, as bohemian, before it got stamped dysfunctional. She was a character. Remember characters? Joseph Mitchell published two Profiles in this magazine, in 1942 and in 1964, of a prime specimen, the unwashed Greenwich Village rapscallion Joe Gould, who claimed to be at work on a revolutionary literary opus, "An Oral History of Our Time." Mitchell's fascination eventually became the basis of a movie, "Joe Gould's Secret" (2000), in which Susan Sarandon logged an airy cameo as Alice Neel. In 1933, Neel painted Gould, a casual friend, naked. He grins demonically and sports two uncircumcised penises, with a third dangling from the stool he sits on. For Neel, the savoring of foibles, in herself and in others, was the most reliable entertainment in a life beset by the loss of one baby daughter to diphtheria and another to an absconding husband; a severe mental breakdown; chronic poverty; and the irksomeness, or worse, of assorted lovers. Her invincible commitment to painting won Neel a fitful career in New York, first in Depression-era radical circles—she was briefly a Communist and always a leftist—and then, starting in the nineteen-fifties, after a decade of near-total obscurity, as a living legend. Outlasting insult and condescension, a woman among competitive men, and a figurative artist in times agog for abstraction, she triumphed, and her star continues to rise.

Neel grew up in Colwyn, Pennsylvania, a small town that she hated, in a family dominated by her cultured mother, whom she adored. Her shyly ineffectual father, from a family of opera singers, was a railroad clerk. Neel made art—largely in secret, she said—starting in childhood. After high school, she acquired secretarial skills and landed civil-service jobs. She attended art schools, including the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art and Design), but avoided the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, because she "didn't want to be taught Impressionism, or learn yellow lights and blue shadows. . . . I wasn't happy like Renoir." She met and married an upper-class Cuban artist, Carlos Enríquez, and lived with him in Havana for a year. In 1930, he left her in New York, taking along their surviving daughter (who later killed herself). Neel fell apart. Suicide attempts and hospitalizations, in nightmarish wards, followed. "I died every day," she said of the experience. The spell lifted in the autumn of 1931. The next year, she moved to Greenwich Village, with a sailor, Kenneth Doolittle, who proved a bad bet—he destroyed much of her work in a fit of rage. Then she lived for five years with José Santiago Negron, a Puerto Rican night-club performer, who left her soon after the birth of their son, Richard, in 1939. Next was an ill-tempered leftist photographer and critic, Sam Brody. In 1941, they had a son, Hartley, whose son Andrew Neel made a well-received documentary about his grandmother in 2007. In "Selected Works," a show of sixteen portraits, from 1942 to 1982, at David Zwirner, we see Brody grasping a frightened-looking Hartley with a clawlike hand, around 1945, and, in another painting, gloomily reading war news. ("How Like the Winter," that work is subtitled.) Living for twenty years in Spanish Harlem, Neel often made sitters of neighborhood children. "George Arce" (1959), a terrific painterly cadenza, portrays a boy with whom she stayed in touch even after he was imprisoned for murder, in 1974.

"Nudes of the 1930s," the other new show, at Zwirner & Wirth, samples a theme in which Neel excelled, and an epoch of stark poignancies. It includes a watercolor, from 1935, that is the funniest and funkiest visualization of intimacy I know. Cute, blowsy Alice urinates on a toilet while her solemn boyfriend John Rothschild does the same in a sink. Another watercolor from that year, and perhaps from a memory of the same day, has Alice voluptuously supine on a bed, while Rothschild stands over her, wearing only slippers, in a tense, withdrawn posture. Neel titled it "Alienation"—Rothschild was in anguish, having "just left his wife and a couple of children." (A successful travel-agency entrepreneur, who specialized in trips to the Soviet Union, Rothschild was the steadiest of Neel's men, a friend until his death, in 1975.) Both pictures are beautifully drawn. Rougher, and ruthlessly honest, are paintings and drawings of women Neel knew. A psychoanalyst once asked her, "Why is it so important to be so honest in art?" Her answer: "It's not so important, it's just a privilege." She visits unsentimental dignity on bodies that are pert or sad, and on the spirits, robust or pinched, that animate them. The nudes aren't erotic, but they exude carnal wisdom. They share with much other American figurative painting of the nineteen-thirties a bituminous tonality; the sun of that decade struggled to shine. They are modern in their frontality, nudging subjects off the wall and into the room, while utterly free of stylistic affectation. Neel liked Cézanne but preferred Munch and Soutine; she came to admire the taciturn violence of the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still. Her psychologically jangling, impulsive manner can look awkward until you notice that it is a sum of swift, local accuracies, both descriptive (a peculiarly knobby knee) and expressive (a whiplash contour like a shoreline). When most engaged, she was superbly indifferent to overall design.



Neel's "Alienation" (1935)—*not erotic, but exuding carnal wisdom.*

© ESTATE OF ALICE NEEL/DAVID ZWIRNER, NY

"Selected Works" is a bit disappointing in its undoubtedly market-conscious emphasis on formally accomplished pictures, which make me realize that Neel's most elegant works tend to indicate her relative lack of emotional exchange with her subjects. She makes it obvious that people with pulled-together public faces bored her. She titled an arrogantly assured, plaid-shirted, long-haired hunk of an unnamed guy "The Druid" (1968). Good luck to him, and to the "Young Woman" (c. 1946), whose jewels and fur shield a dishearteningly timid niceness. "Annie Sprinkle" (1982) observes the porn actress and militant feminist in dominatrix regalia, with exposed breasts and pierced genitals and a sappily self-approving smile. Sprinkle is painted off-center on a big canvas, with lots of blank surface that says, to me, "No comment."

Neel jolts us in portraits of couples and children. In "The Family (Algis, Julie and Bailey)," from 1968, a pretty woman appears as a doll-like appendage to her macho, wired-looking husband, who casually holds their unhappy baby boy. There's trouble afoot, but also surging vitality. The family is young. It's 1968. The picture is a spiritual snapshot of a convulsive time.

"Cindy" (c. 1960) is a little girl in a jumper, with a pageboy haircut, anxiously clutching one knee while gazing out, wide-eyed. She is rendered on a narrow, vertical canvas; she might be falling down a rabbit hole. Neel conveys her vulnerability—she's a target for the unseen incoming missiles of life—without alarm. Cindy will likely be O.K. the way most people are: O.K. enough.

Neel liked quoting, with amusement, a strange remark made to her by Malcolm Cowley: "The trouble with you, Alice, is you're not romantic." In truth, she was a capital "R" Romantic in a very late, modern way: starched by experience. Art was not a refuge for her—she had no refuges, only respites. It was her life lived by other means, in which she enjoyed some moment-to-moment control. Rather than reflect on the peremptory realities of other people, she took them head on, turning their force around and sending it back out. At times, every brushstroke can feel like a victory, against tall odds, of high humor fringed with deadly seriousness. Lots of celebrated twentieth-century art has seemed dated and tame lately. Not Neel's, which, beyond being something to look at, is something that happens to you. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Marquette (Mich.) Mining Journal.

1:04 p.m., skunk with jar on head, officer broke jar off, skunk uninjured.