Arts & Humanities

Moving Picture

Alice Neel made art on her own terms; but as a new film by her grandson Andrew Neel '01CC suggests, her family paid a price.

By
Margaret Moorman
|
Summer 2007

Alice Neel, "Hartley and Andrew," 1983, oil on canvas, 48 x 34 inches. © The Estate of Alice Neel.

A crowd carrying signs reading, “Nazis kill Jews.” A baby clinic in which grotesque mothers hold squirming bits of wretched flesh. A drug-addicted lover as Mephistopheles. A self-portrait, nude, at 80. Columbia art historian Meyer Schapiro, bony and open-mouthed, speaking with apparent urgency, painted when he was 78 and the artist was 83. Decades after they were made, the images are still riveting.

“She had to be an open nerve to make these paintings,” Andrew Neel ’01CC says in his new film, *Alice Neel*, a documentary about his grandmother, who worked in relative obscurity for 50 years before her “discovery” by the art world during the feminist movement of the 1970s. After a life of poverty, Alice was honored during her last decade with a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art and even became something of a celebrity, appearing twice on *The Tonight Show*. Her work is now included in the collections of every major art museum in the United States.

Alice Neel was born January 28, 1900. She died on October 13, 1984, in her apartment on West 107th Street. Before moving there in the early 1960s, she lived for decades in Spanish Harlem, where she raised her two sons, Richard ’61CC, ’64LAW and Andrew’s father, Hartley ’63CC, in poverty.

Except for a period during the Great Depression, when Alice painted New York scenes for the Works Progress Administration that were in sync with the radical social realism of the time, her style was at odds with the artistic mainstream, which seemed to flow inexorably toward abstraction. Even those few artists who worked in a realist mode, or who rediscovered figurative painting in the 1970s, painted their human subjects with a detached minimalism. Neel’s sitters, by contrast, emerged on the canvas pulsing, unfinished, uneasy, with all their quirks and warts, their pride or their failure, openly displayed. She painted friends and acquaintances from all walks of life, including socialites (John Rothchild, who was her lover for a time and became a lifelong friend), artists (Benny Andrews), writers (Frank O’Hara), and other inhabitants of her daily life: pregnant women, poor neighbors, sick mothers, a Fuller Brush door-to-door salesman, drug addicts, jazz musicians, poets, her elderly mother, her growing children, the mentally ill, the tubercular, the dying, the exhibitionistic, the openly erotic, the depressed.

It was only when Alice was in her 70s, and the 20th century was three-quarters over, that critics and museum directors began to realize that she had captured, individual

by individual, most of the social issues, movements, and upheavals of her time.

Facts and Friction

Andrew, who grew up in Vermont, where Hartley is a radiologist, was a newly graduated filmmaker when he realized that someone would one day make a film about his grandmother. “I decided that I should probably be the one to do it,” he says. He was already at work on *Darkon*, a film he describes as a documentary about “a suburban stay-at-home dad who embarks on an epic quest to topple a mighty empire in a full-contact, live-action, role-playing game.” *Darkon* won the audience award at the 2007 South by Southwest Film Conference and Festival in Austin, Texas, and will have its New York premiere in September, at Cinema Village. Andrew is now completing his second feature film, which is about people who believe in a new-world-order conspiracy theory and who “chase around groups of elite who meet for various reasons.”

Andrew started at Columbia as a pre-med student and then switched to philosophy. He “got hooked into film” after watching *M*, the Fritz Lang classic, and listening to adjunct film professor Larry Engel “dissect the mise-en-scènes.”

“It was an intellectual interest that led me to film,” he says, “so it was important to me to study with people like Richard Pena and David Sterritt. The undergraduate film courses were mostly theoretical, which was great. The technical stuff comes with doing it. If I’d had to sit down in a class and learn how to create a budget, it would have been a waste of my time.”

Alice Neel is a mixture of archival footage and contemporary interviews with art historians, old friends, and family, especially his father and uncle. “My perspective — my whole generation’s perspective — involves playing with the documentary form, blurring the lines between fact and fiction, and so I felt a tremendous amount of friction with *Alice Neel* because I had to stick to the facts,” he said in a telephone interview. He presents these facts in a tumbling, informal, but chronological interweaving of views of the subject: friends reminiscing, art historians reflecting, Alice painting, Alice talking and laughing in home movies, Alice at her Whitney retrospective, Hartley examining MRI films at his hospital, Richard in the apartment on 107th Street, Alice being greeted by Andy Warhol at a reception in her honor at

Gracie Mansion, the old black-and-white clips and the sometimes painfully clear contemporary film of family members.

Despite his commitment to the facts of his grandmother's life, Andrew "went off and tried to make the film idiosyncratic anyway, to make something real that has real resonance, to make it honest," he says. "Alice's paintings were like that. She lived the only life that she could have lived. It wasn't built into her personality or her way of working to have a more stable life. She needed something more stimulating. I didn't want to make a sentimental, trite film that would be a disservice to her legacy."

No Picnic

Alice Neel grew up a small-town girl in Pennsylvania in a family that "never had much money." Her mother encouraged her to paint. After high school, she enrolled in secretarial school and went to work as a stenographer to help support her parents and siblings. By the time she was 21, she had some savings, and she used them to enroll at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art and Design), a women's school, repudiating the more prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. "You know what they were painting?" she asks. "Yellow light and blue shadows. I didn't see life as happy like that. I didn't see picnics on the grass and all that stuff. I always had a more or less serious view of life."

In Philadelphia, she fell in love with Carlos Enríquez, a Cuban artist who was expelled from the academy for wooing her. They married in 1925 and moved to Cuba, where Neel gave birth to a daughter, Santillana. The couple moved back to New York, made art, and took jobs to support themselves. Just before her first birthday, Santillana died of diphtheria. In 1927, they had a second child, Isabetta. Carlos left Alice in 1930 and took Isabetta to Cuba, where she was raised by his parents.

"Did you feel abandoned?" someone asks Alice in a segment of archival footage in Andrew's film. "I was abandoned," she replies vehemently. "I didn't feel it; I *was*!"

She had a breakdown in August 1930 and was hospitalized until December for depression. Released, she tried to commit suicide twice and was hospitalized again from January through September 1931. In an interview for *Ms.* magazine in the early 1970s, she described a point when she gathered all her strength and willed herself

to become well. Her depression is glimpsed throughout the movie, revealed largely in footage shot by the artist Michel Auder, a close friend of Alice's who filmed her over many years. She is utterly frank about it. "Instead of jumping out the window," she says, "I'm putting in the time."

In 1934 she met nightclub singer José Santiago; two years later, the couple left the artistic hub of Greenwich Village and moved to East 108th Street, in Spanish Harlem, to be near his family, in a neighborhood that felt more "real" to her. Richard was born in 1939, and three months later Santiago moved out. Alice soon met left-wing documentary filmmaker Sam Brody; Hartley was born in 1941.

Alice was determined that the boys have the best possible education. Both attended the Rudolf Steiner School on full scholarships and then went to boarding school at the High Mowing School in New Hampshire, also a progressive Steiner school. Neither he nor Richard "ever wanted to go to college anywhere but Columbia," Hartley says. "It was the premier school in the city. Richard went first, and he liked it, so I went there, too."

Richard went to Columbia Law School immediately after college. Hartley took a bit longer to decide on medicine (he taught chemistry for two years at Dartmouth, then earned his medical degree at Tufts), and briefly toyed with the idea of following in Richard's footsteps. "Alice put a quick end to that," he says, laughing. "She said, 'There's only going to be *one* lawyer in the family.'" Alice originally wanted Hartley to be a ballet dancer and had sent him to the School of American Ballet for four years.

Columbia became a family habit. Andrew graduated with honors in film studies. Richard's daughter, Olivia, attended Barnard. Andrew's mother, Ginny, one of Alice's frequent sitters, earned her master's degree in elementary education at Teachers College, and his older sister, Elizabeth, who was ten when her grandmother died, earned a master's in fine arts in painting this spring. "Alice encouraged her," Hartley says. "She got her materials, a little smock, and taught her quite a bit. You know, the art may have skipped a generation."

Bohemian Rhapsody

Andrew’s interviews with Hartley and Richard are the backbone of *Alice Neel*, and the brothers are remarkable in their maturity and their willingness to reflect on life with their mother. “Because Alice wasn’t alive,” says Andrew, “I didn’t have any ‘blood.’ But I bled my father and uncle. I extracted emotional plasma from them in order to power Alice’s story. They’re very immediate people, so through them I could get at her rich, emotional, complicated life.”

The brothers express discomfort about their unconventional childhoods. “I don’t like Bohemian culture, frankly,” Richard says at one point. “I think a lot of innocent people are hurt by it. I consider I was hurt by it.” Hartley says bluntly, “People want security and stability. That’s human nature.”

Despite the sometimes-harrowing aspects of a childhood lived close to the bone, both Richard and Hartley bear testimony to their mother’s care, both indirectly and directly. “Alice was the one who loved us,” Hartley says. “Alice was the one whom we could depend on, who really loved us in an unqualified way.” Richard describes her as “a very good friend.” “The fact that she might not have been able to give me the protection that I might have gotten somewhere else, that’s a fact. But suppose I got the protection, but I didn’t get something else. Well, it’s just one of those things. . . . It was a gift to have her as a mother.” Richard seems more candid, while Hartley seems painfully reticent, but both are indulgent with a filmmaker whose speaking voice marks him as very young, and very sheltered.

“One of the subtexts of the movie,” Andrew says, “was my own limitations in understanding what Alice lived through. I really cannot emotionally or viscerally understand it,” he admits. “I had it easy.” More than once he questions a subject about how Alice survived financially. Although viewers of a certain age will remember when it was possible “to live again on four dollars a day / in the little blocks between 96th and 116th,” as poet Gerald Stern wrote in 1977 (“At Bickford’s”), Andrew, who was born a year later, cannot fathom it. At first it sounds as if he’s expecting some revelation, but soon it becomes clear that he is simply at a loss to understand how an artist can live in a cultural mecca that in 2007 only the privileged can afford. How had it ever been possible?

At one point the writer Phillip Bonosky, Alice’s close friend, says simply, “But you know she had nothing. She was on relief. The kids were born on relief.”

“What’s relief?” says the voice of the filmmaker. “I don’t even know.”

“Oh, my God,” Bonosky replies. “Welfare.”

Never Give Up

Alice Neel was one of the “great, sad artists” of the 20th century, to use a Diane Arbus phrase, and she was never anything but herself. Her relentless creative pursuit — with canvas upon canvas piling up through the decades in the hallways and corners of a rundown apartment in a rundown neighborhood — looks not just heroic, but also almost enviable, given her eventual recognition. “I’d rather paint than anything,” she says, and that is what she did.

“She had a turbulent life,” Andrew says, “and the question at hand — the ‘to be or not to be’ — is: ‘Is it valid only if everyone else says it’s good?’ That’s the question that anyone who makes anything asks over and over. You may have to wind up on your deathbed with no one telling you it was any good. She certainly took that risk. I don’t know if I’d have had the fortitude to go as long as she lasted.”

“She’s inspiring,” Andrew says to his father toward the end of the film. “Yes,” Hartley agrees, “she teaches you to never give up.” Andrew lets the camera linger and doesn’t respond, clearly waiting for more. The silence is uncomfortable, and eventually Hartley seems to hear the inadequacy of his own tidy remark. In the seconds that follow, his face falls, just slightly, and he looks away. The viewer somehow grasps the length of Alice’s obscurity and the weight of that passage of time for both the artist and her sons. “I can’t verbalize everything,” Hartley finally murmurs.

Andrew interrupts him. “That’s OK. You don’t have to.”

“But I’m trying — ”

“No, it’s all right.”

Read more from
Margaret Moorman

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from
Margaret Moorman