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Alice Neel

Hot Off The Griddle

CURITY INFOR MATI[redacted] FIDENTI

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

CASE ORIGINATED AT NEW YORK

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NEW YORK	NOV 20 1953	5/4;6/2,4;7/8,10,15;8/7,10,11;9/14,15;10/11,12;11/5/53	

CHARACTER OF CASE

ALICE NEEL, was: Alice Neel Brody, Mrs. Samuel Brody — SECURITY MATTER - C

SYNOPSIS OF FACTS:

The subject resides at 21 E, 108 St., NYC. She is self-employed as an artist at her home. A reliable informant advised that the subject was sympathetic to the Communists and associated with a number of Communists. She i reported to have painted portraits of several individuals wh were Communists. Another reliable informant advised that in 1951, the subject became engaged in a political discussion at an art gallery, at which time she expressed pro-Soviet views. Reliable informants advised that subject and husband, SAM BRODY, are CP members as of 1948. Their apartment was reported to be the main storage place for Communist literatur in the Harlem, NY, area.

- P -

DETAILS: This investigation is predicated upon informa tion furnished by T-1, of known reliability, who advised that the subject was sympathetic to the Communist Party and painted pictures c Communists.

BACKGROUND

DECLASSIFIED BY [redacted] ON: 06/04/98 391,570

Birth

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T-16, of known reliability, advised that the subject was born on August 7, 1914 in the United States. Informant did not know the state or city.

APPROVED AND FORWARDED: [redacted] SPECIAL AGENT IN CHARGE

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p. 10
Still Life, Rose of Sharon, 1973
Oil on canvas, 102.2 × 76.5 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Arthur M. Bullowa Bequest. Inv.: 93.69

Introduction

Alice Neel was not one for conformity. Born in 1900 in an artless Pennsylvania town, she soon realised that she 'couldn't stand Anglo-Saxons ... their soda-cracker lives and their inhibitions'.[1] She decided to study at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, spent time in Cuba, and settled as a young artist in Greenwich Village, New York. The 1940s scene around 9th Street was dominated by abstraction, but Neel was a political creature who eyed the atomic threat and felt the urgent need 'to trot back to human size and human feelings'.[2] Painting people – whether labour leaders, pregnant women, Black intellectuals, neighbourhood children or queer performers – was an expression of her 'anarchic humanism'.[3]

When Neel welcomed sitters into her home – all the while talking, talking, talking – she invited them to reveal the troubles and delights of their unvarnished lives. She understood what it means to feel seen. As she put it, 'One of the reasons I painted was to catch life as it goes by, right hot off the griddle ... the vitality is taken out of real living.'[4] The result is pictures packed with life force, which radiate what Hilton Als has called her 'ethos of inclusion', featuring 'a pouring in of energy from both sides'.[5]

This book follows the Barbican's exhibition in presenting a selection of Neel's work from across her 60-year career, focusing on her political commitments and shifting cultural context, as sweeping social justice movements and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s created the conditions in which her significance could begin to be appreciated. Neel was 74 by the time she was offered her first museum exhibition, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, but she was no less charmed for the wait.

his torso, emphasising how much of the rest of the canvas has been left unpainted. For Neel, who rarely made preparatory sketches, the work succeeds because of its emotional economy: 'It gets down to the raw essentials.'[4]

Neel joked that she should maybe have been a psychiatrist given how much she 'love[d] plumbing the depths of the human psyche'.[5] If so, she might have followed the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who understood the psyche as fundamentally interpersonal – forged in the 'transitional' space between subject and object, in that fertile ground between you and me.[6] Neel's works are not images of a sovereign being so much as a record of her *encounter* with that person. Her paintings are charged with the reciprocity of seeing and being seen; or, in the haptic terms of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, they relate to how the toucher, in touching, is also touched.[7] This lends a tone of intimacy to her paintings, which already have intimate settings: out of necessity as much as instinct, she had always created makeshift studio spaces at home, first in Greenwich Village and then in Harlem and on the Upper West Side. When her boys were young, sitters had to pass their sleeping beds to get to the far end of the railroad apartment.

An electric blue line traces Warhol's edges, becoming more pronounced in his jaw and left shoulder and the knot of hands sketched onto his lap. This sinuous line, a signature of Neel's later work, was partly a residue of her process: she would begin by using a stiff paintbrush to draw the outline of her sitter before applying colour to flesh them out. But it was also a device to draw attention to the porousness of human boundaries. As Judith Butler has written: 'When we think about who we "are" and seek to represent ourselves, we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one

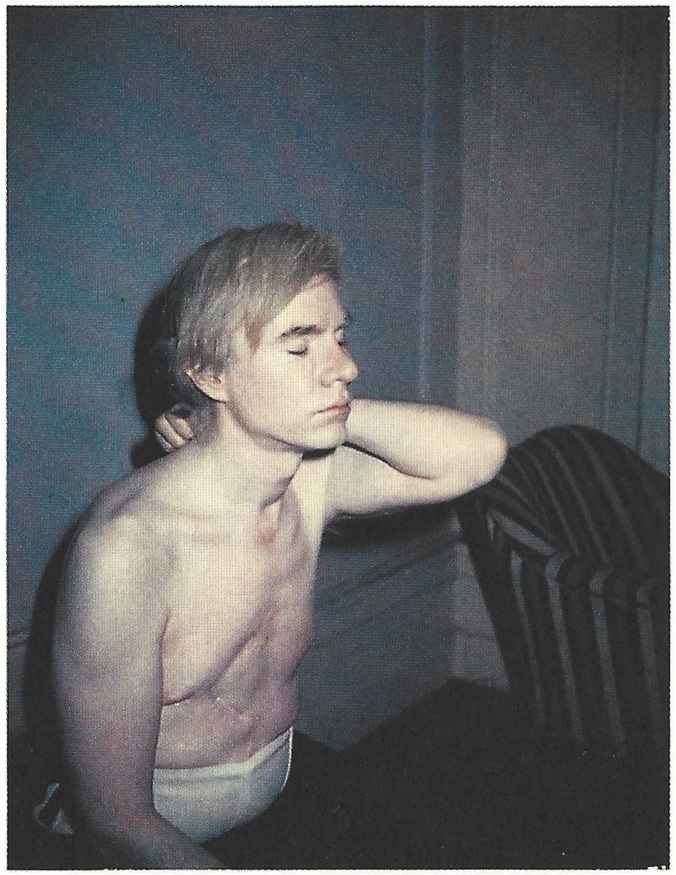

fig. 2 *Andy Warhol sitting for Alice Neel*, 1970
Polaroid by Brigid Berlin