

ALICE NEEL: NUDES OF THE 1930s

May 6 – June 20, 2009



Rhoda Myers Nude (1930)

Neel's ability to capture the individuality of her sitter in an unforgiving yet compassionate manner is reflected in this psychologically compelling portrait of Rhoda Myers. Here, Myers poses naked on a bed with a weary expression of exhaustion; her eyes seem hollow and her bones are accentuated, revealing the fragility of her body. Neel went to art school with Myers, who was also a painter, and briefly shared a studio in Philadelphia with her and Ethel Ashton during the summer of 1930. Both Myers and Ashton served as models for Neel during the early 1930s; she portrayed them in several paintings, including *Rhoda Myers with Blue Hat*, 1930 (see entry below).



Rhoda Myers with Blue Hat (1930)

In this curious painting, Neel presents Rhoda Myers seated and nude, dressed only in pearls and a large blue hat. Neel's stylistic portrayal of Myers, reflected in the dark outlines and flat form of her body, is indicative of Neel's unconventional resistance to depicting the female nude as sexually enticing. As Carolyn Carr has written, "The bored, distracted visage, the roughness of the flesh, and the flatness of the breasts are rendered so that nothing invites the viewer to touch, gaze, or be aroused. Moreover, the manner in which the form occupies the foreground and fills the frame of the canvas metaphorically forbids the viewer to enter the space of the observed."¹ (See *Rhoda Myers Nude*, 1930, for further information on Myers).

[1] Carolyn Carr, "Alice Neel: Women. Mirror of Identity," in *Alice Neel: Women* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), p. 8.



Standing Nude (1932)

Neel's early nude compositions deconstruct, contradict, and satirize the limitations of traditional gender ideologies. Her strong powers of observation and unique ability to empathize are reflected in her daring and intimate figurative works from the 1930s. Here, Neel displays an intentional naïveté, which is expressed in the bold anatomical contours and the unbalanced proportions of the body.



Nadya and Nona (1933)

This compelling painting of two nude women lying on a bed examines issues of sexuality while deliberately eschewing erotic and seductive overtones. Both women display contrasting characteristics; Nadya appears somber yet open and confidently faces the viewer, whereas Nona projects apprehension by hiding her nakedness. As a subject, Nadya Olyanova, a close friend of Neel's and a graphologist by profession, personified the bohemian woman, and Neel was drawn to her casual willingness to immodestly flaunt her sexuality.



Florence Lasser (1933)

In this drawing of Florence Lasser (a friend of Neel's who was a public relations specialist for the international Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and whose husband at the time was David Lasser, the founder of the Workers Alliance of America), Neel demonstrates her unique ability to express the individuality of her subject using minimal detail and a seemingly simplistic technique.



Katherine Hogle (1935)

This provocative watercolor presents an elegantly attired woman whose outfit exposes her bare body. Katherine Hogle was an attractive figure that Neel met in Greenwich Village; they remained life-long friends. This portrait exemplifies Neel's bold and innovative compositions from this period.



Untitled (Alice Neel and John Rothschild in the Bathroom) (1935)

This watercolor depicts Neel and her longtime friend and lover John Rothschild in a bathroom urinating in an unglamorous yet jovial manner, with the implication that intercourse has just taken place or is about to. Both have their eyes closed and seem to be preoccupied with their private activities while comfortably relaxing in intimate circumstances. Neel met Rothschild, who owned a travel agency that specialized in sending students to Moscow, in the spring of 1932 and would eventually turn to him for emotional and financial support after her passionately destructive relationship with Kenneth Doolittle. This particular work has the potential to shock by virtue of its confessional intimacy and sexual imagery, while it also conveys the affectionate qualities of Neel's relationship with Rothschild.



Alienation (1935)

This watercolor, which shows Neel lying voluptuously in bed while John Rothschild stands over her, exposes the confessional intimacy inherent to her work. Here, the conflicted, affectionate aspects of her relationship with Rothschild are pronounced. Neel later reflected: "I did *Alienation* down in Spring Lake, in that little house we rented in the summer of 1935. I didn't realize what it was when I painted it. I didn't realize...until 1978, when I had a show of my watercolors at Graham Gallery, what the title should be. It had nothing to do with sex. It was alienation. He had just left his wife and a couple of children." (See *Untitled [Alice Neel and John Rothschild in the Bathroom]*, 1935, for further information on John Rothschild).



Untitled (Alice and José) (c. 1935)

Although she rarely appears in her own work, this intimate watercolor shows Neel naked with José Santiago Negrón, a Puerto Rican musician she met at a downtown nightclub. Neel and Negrón lived together (first in Greenwich Village, later in Spanish Harlem) between 1935 and 1939, and he was the father of her first son Richard. In this watercolor, both Neel and Negrón stare out sullenly at the viewer; he remains remote and impassive, while she seems to express a tone of apprehension. In 1936, Neel produced a series of paintings, watercolors, pastels, and pencil drawings of José Santiago Negrón, many of which seem to divulge his impenetrable nature.



Katherine Nude (1935)

In this watercolor Neel depicts a young nude woman (Katherine Hogle, a lifelong friend she met in Greenwich Village) wistfully staring out at the viewer. Neel's extraordinary ability to convey the psychological state of her subject is reflected in the gesture of the subject's immodest body and in the expressionistic field of color in the background of this work on paper.



Nude (1936)

Here, Neel presents a straightforward and unadorned nude portrait of an unknown woman. The melancholic tone of the image is conveyed by the woman's closed eyes and limp arms. Neel's deliberately uncomplicated approach to depicting the subject's body is typical of her early drawings, as seen in *Standing Nude*, 1932, and *Florence Lasser*, 1933.



Winifred Mesmer (1940)

Neel's ability to depict the people around her with compassion, accuracy, and freedom is seen in this portrait of Winifred Mesmer, a woman that both of Neel's boyfriends José Santiago Negron and Sam Brody were romantically involved with. Here, Mesmer is shown posing nude against a somber background, her face bathed dramatically in suggestive shadows.