

Alice Neel Viva la Mujer

This episode focuses on Alice Neel (1900–1984). Joining host Helen Molesworth are artists Simone Leigh and Moyra Davey. Neel is known for striking, expressionistic portraits of family, friends, lovers, and neighbors in Spanish Harlem. In interviews from 1971 and 1975, she discusses inequality, economic hardship, and her own mental health challenges.

Additional Resources

- ◆ Estate of Alice Neel, David Zwirner Gallery (<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/alice-neel>)
- ◆ Cindy Nemser Papers Finding Aid (<http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/2013.M.21/2013.M.21.xml>)

Transcript

Episode transcripts are provided to make this podcast accessible to a wider audience. Please note that interviews featured in this episode have been edited for concision and clarity.

Original interviews: Cindy Nemser interview with Alice Neel, August 2, 1971, box 20, C29a–b, Cindy Nemser papers, 2013.M.21, Getty Research Institute; Cindy Nemser interview with Alice Neel, May 14, 1975, box 27, R37a–b, Cindy Nemser papers, 2013.M.21, Getty Research Institute.

ALICE NEEL: My mother used to say to me, “I don’t know what you expect to do; you’re only a girl.” But this, instead of destroying me, made me more ambitious because I’d think, you know, I’ll show them, I’ll show her, I’ll show everybody.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: This is Recording Artists, a podcast from the Getty dedicated to exploring art and artists through the archives of the Getty Research Institute. I’m your host Helen Molesworth.

In this season we focus on audio interviews with six women artists whose lives span the twentieth century. These recordings were made by the New York-based art critic Cindy Nemser and art historian Barbara Rose. Most of these interviews come from the 1960s and ’70s, in the midst of the civil rights movement and the feminist revolution. Hearing these artists in their own words talk about their work and about their experiences as women making art is a revelation.

This episode focuses on Alice Neel. You will hear two recordings from Cindy Nemser. The first was recorded in Neel's apartment in August 1971. The second in front of an audience in May 1975. Neel was in her 70s at the time.

I've invited the artists Simone Leigh and Moyra Davey to listen to these interviews with me. Both women are artists and mothers, like Neel herself. I asked Simone because the sensuality of her sculptures shares something with the frankness of Neel's nude portraits. And I was curious what Moyra would have to say, since both she and Neel are astute chroniclers of the everyday details of their time.

Painter Alice Neel was born in 1900 and died in 1984. This means her life runs nearly concurrent with the twentieth century. Many of the world's defining events—from the Great Depression, to the civil rights and women's movements, to gay liberation—impacted her work deeply. She was an acute chronicler of her time, and practiced portraiture throughout her career. Her pictures of her fellow human beings are resolute in their straightforwardness. Her sitters always meet her gaze. Painted in a loose expressive brushstroke her pictures convey a sense of immediacy. Neel painted people as she saw them: asymmetrical, eccentric, and filled with life. I confess it's hard for me to talk about Alice Neel without being a complete and total fan girl. When I asked Simone Leigh to join me on this podcast she couldn't hide her fan girl energy either.

SIMONE LEIGH: I'm just so honored to be spoken of in the same breath with Alice Neel, because I feel like her courage was way beyond anything I could muster.

Especially with the multiple children and how much earlier the context and the lack of rights women had at her time. It's just baffling to me, how she accomplished what she did.

MOLESWORTH: Baffled is a great word for it. Alice Neel currently enjoys a reputation that eluded her during her lifetime. Because she stayed true to representational painting in the face of abstract expressionism, minimalism, and conceptual art, her work was not viewed as serious or avant-garde. In New York, she chose to live uptown, first in Spanish Harlem and then on the Upper West Side. This meant she was not part of the downtown, Greenwich Village, or Soho art scenes. The vast majority of her paintings went unsold during her lifetime. Nevertheless, during the 1960s and '70s many of the artworld's most prominent curators, critics, and artists came to pose for her, including Cindy Nemser, with her then husband, who posed in the nude.

In 1974, at 74 years old, she had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum. It was brutally panned by the then powerful *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer. He wrote: "Thus the Whitney, which can usually be counted on to do the wrong thing, devoted a solo exhibition to Alice Neel, whose paintings (we can be reasonably certain) would never have been accorded that honor had they been produced by a man. The politics of the situation required that a woman be given an exhibition, and Alice Neel's painting was no doubt judged to be sufficiently bizarre, not to say inept, to qualify as something 'far out.'"

Kramer's tone is indicative of how Neel's paintings were viewed in a male dominated art world. And Kramer's abhorrent gender politics highlight how Neel's life and career present us with an interesting case. On the one hand, her work was neglected for being out of step with her contemporaries. On the other hand, she had a full-dress retrospective at the Whitney, made appearances on the Johnny Carson show, and had her photo taken by Robert Mapplethorpe. She was both an art world insider

and outsider.

Always forging her own path, both in her daily life and in her art, she exemplified what it meant to be an independent thinker and a true bohemian. To this end, she made a lifetime's worth of deeply unconventional choices. She chose to be poor. She chose not to marry. She chose to give up a child. And, when everyone else seemed to be painting abstractly, she chose to paint portraits.

Throughout all of this she used humor and candor to navigate the considerable difficulties of being a woman in a man's world. You can hear her sly liveliness as she tells critic Cindy Nemser why she chose a women's art school.

NEEL: The reason I went there was because the boys were very attractive and I thought, you know, if you really want to paint and draw you have to be able to concentrate and not think about anything else.

And the one good thing about it was there was a certain freedom. You could more or less paint as you wanted. And I really liked that much better than the academy, where they taught a school.

CINDY NEMSER: I see. So you were kind of exploring on your own even then?

NEEL: Yes, yes, yes.

NEMSER: Right.

MOLESWORTH: If a women's college was advantageous due to the lack of male distractions, Neel opts for a somewhat contrarian position on the merits of female students having female teachers. Nemser tries to get Neel to state the importance of female art teachers and Neel refuses:

NEEL: I don't think the quality of being a good teacher or a good artist has anything to do with sex.

NEMSER: No. No, that's—

NEEL: I think it's great. [Nemser: Yeah, yeah, yeah] It's just objective. You either are or you aren't.

NEMSER: Right. No, it's that sense that—

NEEL: Your sex is unimportant.

MOLESWORTH: Sex is unimportant.

Even though Neel was well aware of women's inequality, she maintained that art was something to be judged separately from the inequities produced by gender. Neel's subject matter—a steady stream of pregnant women, African American intellectuals, women and children, and nude couples—signaled for many her radical embrace of feminism. This was solidified when she painted the famous feminist Kate Millet for the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1970. As feminism began to infiltrate the art world painting "like a woman" was no longer a completely pejorative statement. However, like many women of her generation she was often ambivalent about the category "woman painter."

NEMSER: I mean, it's funny. Pat Menardi says that when she looks at your painting, she knows it could only be painted by a woman. Now, I don't know if I could go along with that.

NEEL: No. On that— on the— on the Art Project, there was some Puerto Rican. He used to say, “Oh, Alice Neel, the woman that paints like a man.”

NEMSER: Right.

NEEL: You know I don’t think— Thank God that art doesn’t bother about things like that.

NEMSER: I agree with that.

MOLESWORTH: I asked Simone Leigh what she thought about Neel’s negotiation of gender in this clip.

LEIGH: There’s just a sense that what was necessary was to get rid of these kind of rigid, essentializing categories so that, you know, true freedom would be when people are able to perceive you as an artist without any sense of it needing to be attached to any gender, race, ethnicity whatsoever.

And I think it really speaks to this function of white supremacy as claiming this idea that there’s this generic space where power exists, that we can all have access to if we just rid ourselves of these, you know, isms.

MOLESWORTH: Neel was instrumental in breaking down a lot of boundaries for subsequent women artists. And while she may have been personally ambivalent about attaching gender to art, her commitment to painting the specifically female experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood made her a bit of a feminist hero.

Here’s how Moyra Davey understands the problem of “painting like a woman” in relation to Neel:

MOYRA DAVEY: She paints like herself. She paints like no one else. She is sui generis as an artist. And I mean, sure you can say, oh, you know, she’s like certain German painters. But even then, it’s a very superficial. I would never think to put her in a category and say she paints like a woman artist. I don’t think it would occur to me, frankly.

MOLESWORTH: Is there any artist you would put in the category of woman artist? Like work that you would look at and say that had to have been made by a woman?

Because there is something about Neel’s images of naked women and pregnant women, those pictures in particular, that do seem possible because they are being painted by a woman who has had children of her own...

DAVEY: Right.

MOLESWORTH: ...that I do wonder, like, could a man have painted such a thing?

DAVEY: I mean, I wonder if, like, as women looking at those paintings, we just feel a certain kind of empathy, knowing that they are painted by a woman and knowing that she has a biological closeness to these subjects that she’s painting. I think there’s definitely some kind of female connection that we feel, we intuit, we project onto those paintings, knowing that Alice Neel painted them.

MOLESWORTH: Her paintings’ emphasis on the specificity of women’s lives, made Neel a feminist before feminism. We can catch a whiff of this in a story she tells Nemser before a public audience about her choice to become an artist:

NEEL: I always thought you should do as you wanted. My mother used to say to me, "I don't know what you expect to do; you're only a girl." But this, instead of destroying me, made me more ambitious because I'd think, you know, I'll show them, I'll show her, I'll show everybody.

MOLESWORTH: We also hear her nascent feminism in a story from her early days at art school, where she was acutely aware of how gender, and perhaps even more importantly poverty, limited what certain women could do in life.

NEEL: I always felt very guilty being an artist. I always felt that this was somehow wrong. In the beginning, I felt so in that little town, because you know, the American work ethic. And art was not considered work. Useful work. You know, that was work. Not art.

And when I went to the Philadelphia School of Design, I felt terrible because when I'd go in that big building—the ceilings were twice this high. Beautiful. Wonderful. But do you know who would come out of the buildings around it? Old scrubwomen with graying hair, you know? They looked about sixty-five, you know, with buckets. They had been scrubbing floors all night. And I would think, isn't it awful that I'm young and healthy and everything and I go in and draw Greek casts, and these old women have to scrub floors all night? I still think it's awful.

MOLESWORTH: I asked Simone Leigh what she thought about this story:

LEIGH: It never occurred to me to ever apologize for what I was doing. And it helps to be a black woman, in this regard. In every arena, people are so not considering black women, or thinking of them at the very last, you know, that it gives you this freedom that I think has been, like, profoundly useful for becoming an artist. Maybe it's by dint of personality, but I never felt apologetic for what I was doing, although I was aware that the world was interested in shaming me at every turn, for being an artist and a mother at the same time.

MOLESWORTH: I think Neel was also resistant to shame. We can see this in her disarmingly frank paintings of nude women, and in the many unconventional choices she made. Her life was marbled with the difficulties and pleasures of motherhood. Young and romantic, she fell in love with a fellow artist from Cuba. They married and Neel soon found herself pregnant. Tragically, her first child died of diphtheria before her first birthday. Neel quickly became pregnant with a second child, but by the time the baby arrived her young marriage was dissolving. Her husband's affluent family was not at all pleased by their artistic lifestyle. And being an artist and being a mother were increasingly incompatible positions for Neel. She was remarkably honest about this.

NEEL: I couldn't bear losing this child, so I immediately had another one.

NEMSER: Oh.

NEEL: Another daughter. And then when she was a year and a half old—that was 1930—the family had promised to send us to Paris. So he went down with her. Now, I must admit that I always felt guilty about art, because in a way, it divided my soul. Of course, I loved this little girl. I loved that life. But at the same time, I was very anxious to paint. So when he said he'd go down there for a month or two, I said, "Oh, isn't that great? I'll paint all these pictures that I want to paint."

MOLESWORTH: Neel was profoundly torn between being a mother and being an artist, and her marriage did not survive this struggle. Ultimately her husband went to

Paris and their child remained in Cuba with her grandparents. Both Neel and her artist husband chose making art over “respectable” family life. This choice came with a heavy toll for Neel. In the wake of giving up her young daughter she suffered an extreme mental breakdown.

NEEL: I made the mistake of going home. And while my own life didn’t shock me, it shocked my mother. And I suppose that worried me. And then I worked very hard every day [inaudible] studio. In one or two months, I painted a terrific number of very good pictures. They were even shown in the Whitney, you know?

So then I just collapsed. I had some kind of a chill, and then I went to nervous hospitals and— I always had a rather desperate nature. Although I lived a double life, because you know, I don’t look that way. I look smiling and nice and everything, but just the same, I’ve always had a certain desperation.

MOLESWORTH: Even in the middle of this abject tale of loss, grief, and nervous breakdown, Neel maintains her irreverent sense of humor.

NEEL: Anyway, I got well in a private hospital out in Gladwin. A great man ran that, Dr. Ludlum. You know, it’s a strange business. Although I am delighted to tell you that I never was insane. The diagnosis was no psychosis. Yeah, they’d say to me, “Do you ever wonder who you are?” I said, “No, I wish I could.”

And the psychiatrists were very dumb. I would tell them I had a show in Havana and they thought I had a Napoleonic complex.

MOLESWORTH: After a year spent in and out of treatment, Neel settled in New York’s Greenwich Village. For most of the 1930s she worked as an artist in the Works Progress Administration, before ultimately moving uptown in the 1940s. While living in Spanish Harlem she painted her mostly Puerto Rican and Black neighbors and friends and many of the black intellectuals and freedom fighters of the civil rights movement. Needless to say, it was highly unusual for a white woman to invite people of color into her home, much less to paint their portraits. Neel was an avowed anti-racist and as such she had a dual aim: to produce a record of individuals as she saw them and to document the inequity of her historical period.

NEEL: I’m not really an expressionist completely, because I don’t believe in complete subjectivity. I mean, I believe that when you paint, like, black people, if you do them really the way they are, you have to show a difference in their position, just like the social position of everyone makes you look different.

MOLESWORTH: I asked Moyra Davey what she thought about this quality of Neel’s work:

DAVEY: How she spoke about— You know, when she painted uptown in East Harlem and she was painting Latina and African American subjects, that she had to make visible in the painting, their class status. You know, that as people of color, they were almost always of a lower class to white. And she felt that she had to make that visible in her paintings. I personally thought that was extraordinary, the way she articulated that. And after reading that, I just saw it immediately in the paintings.

MOLESWORTH: This is not to say that Neel was without prejudice. I can’t help but chuckle a little about her perceptions of lesbians.

NEEL: I loved Greenwich Village. It was wonderful. Although I finally left it because so many lesbians walked up and down the block. And I don’t know, maybe I should’ve

been more tolerant. Should I? Is that anti-women's lib?

NEMSER: Well—

NEEL: But I don't know, in those days, they looked very butch, you know, with snub shoes.

MOLESWORTH: Apparently, jokes about lesbian sartorial choices have a long half-life. Though, to be honest, Neel's homophobia doesn't upset me. If anything, it proves to me she was human, a person with blind spots, capable of mistakes, and capable of airing those mistakes publicly. Not to mention that I think that I, or any artist I know, could have easily talked her out of this position.

Neel's move uptown solidified the deeply unconventional choices she had made. She chose poverty over dependence on a rich family. She chose to give up a child and get divorced rather than assume the conventional role of mother and wife. And she chose to paint everyday black and brown people.

She would go on to have two sons, by two different fathers. She frequently painted them, and later their wives and their children (Neel's grandchildren). Her paintings offer us one of the most consistent set of images of pregnant women and mothers and infants. In these images Neel's role as both mother and artist merge. Nemser asked her how she was able to do both jobs:

NEMSER: It's extraordinary that you found the time to work, having a little child.

NEEL: Oh, listen, I used to work at night, while the baby was sleeping. I was— I was really more an artist than anything.

NEMSER: But that is— It takes a great deal of strength.

NEEL: Well, if you don't want to lose it, you have to.

NEMSER: Yes. So women really can't afford to take off ten years and stop painting.

NEEL: [over Nemser] No. No, if you give up— if you decide that you're going to have children and, you know, give up painting for the time when you have them, you give it up forever. Or if you don't, you become just a dilettante. You know, it's not serious.

NEMSER: Yes, you can never stop what you're doing.

NEEL: I don't think you can. I think it's sort of a continuous thing. Oh, you may stop for a few months, but I don't think you can decide to stop for years and do a different thing.

MOLESWORTH: Both Moyra Davey and Simone Leigh are also artist-mothers. I was curious how Neel's comments would strike them.

Moyra Davey:

DAVEY: I couldn't agree with her more. I think she's really speaking the truth about being an artist and motherhood. You know, Margaret Mead talked about giving your child, quote, "the gift of full attention," unquote. But it's impossible, if you're an artist or a writer. I think it's always a struggle. And you're always going to feel guilty, to one extent or another. If you continue with your work and have a child, you're going to have some guilt that you've neglected the child, the child has suffered in some way. That's what I believe.

MOLESWORTH: Later on in our conversation, Moyra said something that made me realize one of the hidden reasons Neel is such a lodestar for artists who are also mothers:

DAVEY: I read that one of her sons turned out really well. What was the word she used? That he was very much like his father and he had a sense of justice, or he wasn't judgmental.

You know, it spoke to this idea of a woman painter who's also a mother, whose child did not turn out to be a wreck because she neglected him as an infant, in order to do her work. He turned out to be a really good person. I thought that was a great story.

MOLESWORTH: Simone Leigh also talked about the intensity of the role of artist-mother:

LEIGH: What I did notice was the experience of being a mother did improve the work, even when I felt like it might've been sleeping.

MOLESWORTH: I wonder if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit more about what it was about motherhood that you think improved your work.

LEIGH: Oh, and it continues to improve my work. There's things that you're forced to do, raising a girl in New York City, where you would have to step outside of your personality to protect her or to make sure she gets the best education that you can possibly muster.

But you know, before I had her, I would go to my studio. I would have to stop by the bodega and get, like, chicken rice. And then I would, like, sit and eat, and then I would cry for three hours, and then maybe I would make something. But after she was born, I would immediately get to work. There was a kind of aggressiveness and seriousness that I brought, because I appreciated the time so much more than before birth.

MOLESWORTH: Despite Neel's many images of motherhood and how demonstrably her experience of motherhood shaped her life, Neel tended not to privilege gender in her discussions of her work. Indeed, she often suppresses gender per se to discuss her view of the human condition instead.

NEEL: I don't think women should take any crap, any insults, or any putting down. They should fight all of it. Because we're all creatures. [Nemser: Exactly] We're all wretched in a way, aren't we?

NEMSER: True, and we're all human beings.

NEEL: [over Nemser; inaudible] And both men and women are wretched.

NEMSER: Right.

NEEL: It's often a matter of how much money you have, rather than what sex you are

MOLESWORTH: Moyra Davey:

DAVEY: Yeah, if you have money, you can disguise some of that wretchedness. But if you don't, it's just exposed. There's nothing you can do about it.

MOLESWORTH: Neel's compassion when it came to seeing people's hardships, to understanding the weakness of people, her consideration for how wretched life could be—especially for the poor—was amplified by her dogged commitment to

individuals. Her portraits are a marvelous record of the specificity of her sitters. No two ever look alike, even though they all clearly look like they've been painted by Alice Neel. In her quest document her time she also found the freedom to be herself.

NEEL: I'm not sure that I was ever myself, really, because I think I always— Well, I was myself, but myself in our social system.

NEMSER: Yes.

NEEL: I think many, many women are. Now, the place where I had freedom was when I painted. When I painted, I was completely and utterly myself. [Nemser: inaudible] And for that reason, it was extremely important for me. It was more than a profession, you know. It was even a therapy. Because there, there I just told how it was.

NEMSER: Yes. Yes, I understand.

NEEL: You see, it takes a lot of courage in life to tell it how it is.

MOLESWORTH: For me Simone Leigh's response says it all:

LEIGH: Wow. It's incredible. I've always been anxious when people have talked about the therapeutic nature of art making, because often with women, it's a segue into devaluing what the work is about and what it can do. But I really hear her when I say that there's something life-saving about the practice of being able to walk into a studio and create what you want to see and how you want to see it. I completely identify with what she's saying.

MOLESWORTH: Moyra Davey:

DAVEY: I think for a lot of artists, art making is the thing that they need really badly, just to keep their sanity. Many artists have kind of needed it all their lives. Like, they've needed it since they were children. You know, some people joke their practice is their antidepressant. But it's not really a joke in a lot of cases, it's really true.

And it sounds like she needed it. She needed to keep painting. Like, it wasn't a choice for her to stop and just devote those first four years to the child.

MOLESWORTH: I think Moyra is right. There's something almost compulsive in Neel's drive to make pictures. She made literally hundreds of portraits. Ironically, portraiture has not been the place where artists "tell it like it is." Painters have tended to use portraits as a beautification process, making the history of portraiture one riddled by narcissism, flattery, and patronage.

Alice Neel:

NEEL: If anyone wants to go into art to make money, they shouldn't paint portraits, because it's very close to the nerve. You know, everybody's concerned about what people think of him, how he looks.

MOLESWORTH: Or, as Moyra Davey describes Neel's pictures:

DAVEY: Humans are imperfect, and her portraits always conveyed that idea of human imperfection. That kind of truthfulness to what human bodies really look like, that's what always struck me about them.

MOLESWORTH: This truthfulness, this "warts and all" quality of Neel's work, can be seen in the myriad details that make up her paintings. Her sitters' faces are rarely

symmetrical. No one is conventionally beautiful. All of her subjects have odd little quirks, whether its unruly hair, arthritic hands, or bony knees. Not to mention the nearly monstrous bellies of her pregnant women.

After people left Neel's living room, which doubled as her painting studio, she would more often than not put the finished painting in storage racks that lined the hallways of her apartment. It was an apartment filled with unsold pictures. Rather than see this as part of a tragic narrative of the poor, bohemian, under-sung woman artist, Neel is clear about having chosen this path of poverty over compromise. She explains this to Nemser:

NEMSER: You've done so many portraits, and so few of them bought.

NEEL: [over Nemser] Oh. Well, you see, I never wanted to work for hire, because I don't want to have to do what's gonna please some subject. If they're pleased, I love to sell it. But I don't want to have to turn out a product.

NEMSER: I can understand that.

NEEL: Don't you think that's what ruins the portrait?

NEMSER: Absolutely. Absolutely. You'd be too inhibited. Also, do you feel that you put a lot of yourself into these?

NEEL: Well, you know what it is? I enjoy doing it. For me, it's an aesthetic trip, like an LSD trip.

NEMSER: Right.

NEEL: But also, I think they're quite objective, don't you?

MOLESWORTH: One of the reasons Neel's paintings are so good is because they are suffused with her sensitive apprehension of her subjects. One never feels that she is on auto pilot. All of her portraits have a keen intensity, especially the ones where the sitter's body is outlined with her signature electric blue line. Neel herself would say that she was merely following the lead of her subjects.

NEMSER: I feel as if you get into the essence of the person.

NEEL: I do. And not only that, but even the person themselves, to a certain extent, dictates the way they're done.

NEMSER: Mm, you kind of follow the person.

NEEL: Well, if they are very liberated people, I in turn feel more liberated and can paint them in a more liberated way. I mean, they, in a way, participate. [Nemser: Mm] Not completely, because you have to be in control of the situation. If you aren't, no painting comes out at all, you know?

MOLESWORTH: We know from interviews that sitters often sat for a long time or came for multiple visits. We also have accounts that Neel could be very chatty while she was painting. Artist Benny Andrews said that her chatter "lulled" him into a state of relaxation. Cindy Nemser sensed that these painting sessions must have taken a toll on Neel, revealing an emotional labor as well as an aesthetic one:

NEMSER: I think in your greatest portraits, I feel that, that you really [Neel: Yes] completely become that person, in a way.

NEEL: I do. Oh, listen, I sometimes feel awful after I paint. You know why? Because I go back to an untenanted house, you know? I go up to someplace where there isn't anything. [Nemser: Mm] And I leave myself and go out to that person. And then when I come back, there's that desert. Oh, I feel awful for a while, for maybe a half hour.

MOLESWORTH: Another part of Neel's life and career trajectory that makes her so legendary for contemporary viewers is how little public attention she garnered for most of her life. Her retrospective at the Whitney came when she was 74 years old. In the wake of her great public acclaim she made a remarkable self-portrait at age 80. In it she sits nude in front of her canvas, palette in hand. Her soft and bulbous flesh has given way to gravity. Her breasts hang low and sit on top of the girth of her abdomen. Her gaze is unwavering and holds the very slightest hint of sparkle. It's clear she knows there is no history of 80-year-old women painting nude self-portraits. She knows it is an image that demands courage.

And for Simone Leigh it's not only courage that makes Neel's pictures great:

LEIGH: You know, the paintings just sing. And the over-the-top-ness part of it is because of that deep, deep humor that she brings to them.

MOLESWORTH: In addition to humor, Moyra Davey sees Neel as possessing:

DAVEY: Gall, she had hutzpah. You know, she wasn't afraid to paint it, you know, exactly how she saw it. And that's what makes the paintings so extraordinary.

MOLESWORTH: I opened this episode by talking about how Neel tends to bring out the fan girl in folks. I closed my conversations with Moyra and Simone by asking them to tell me why they found Neel and her work—much of it made over 50 years ago—so inspiring today.

Moyra Davey:

DAVEY: It also speaks to her resilience, you know, that she was able to kind of suck it up. She was clearly a person with a lot of strength. You know, to be able to paint like that and not have her paintings shown for so long, and to continue, is no easy feat, for any ego, no matter how tough, how strong that ego is. It speaks to just a kind of crazy kind of determination.

MOLESWORTH: Simone Leigh:

LEIGH: She decided how she was going to make a portrait and she really stuck with that. There is a remarkable amount of resilience with the way she insisted on showing her point of view, her kind of ideas of intimacy. The way you can feel her presence in every painting. You can feel the relationships that obviously would have had to have taken place for those paintings to have the kind of emotional tenor that they have.

They're relentless. They're relentless.

MOLESWORTH: It's with no small amount of glee that I can plainly state that Hilton Kramer's sense of Neel's ineptitude has not withstood the test of time. Her legacy is multivalent. In her work we have a record of world historical events as they appeared in the faces and comportment of everyday people. Her paintings of pregnant women remain unique in the history of art. And her commitment to figuration means her work has an active presence in today's contemporary art scene. Neel's mixture of determination, idiosyncrasy, honesty, and humor leaves many of us in awe. I want to

end by reading you Neel's response to Cindy Nemser's 1970 questionnaire about the role of women artists in the art world. It's a good one.

All discrimination is stupid. Black, White, man, woman[,] rich, poor. However in the rat race if a little ledge is secured slightly above the others it is used to kick them in the face. With overpopulation this will undoubtedly become worse. Apriori [sic] decisions of a person's value should be abandoned and we should all scratch, bite and tear as equals. Women in this culture often become male chauvinists thinking that if they combine with men they may be pardoned for being a hole rather than a club. This is an empty and shameful victory, —All insults, all attacks on, all down grading and exploitation of women as such should be fought by all women. To permit a psychiatrist to say you suffer from "penis envy" is wrong. It is like singing "Old Black Joe" to a Black Panther and is simply used because psychiatry was discovered by a man. History must be rewritten. Viva La Mujer.

Alice Neel

For episode transcripts, images, and additional resources, visit our website at getty.edu/recordingartists.

This season was produced by Zoe Goldman with audio production by Gideon Brower.

Our theme music comes from Bryn Bliska.

Mixing and additional music and sound design by Myke Dodge Weiskopf.

Special thanks to Ginny Neel and the David Zwirner Gallery.



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