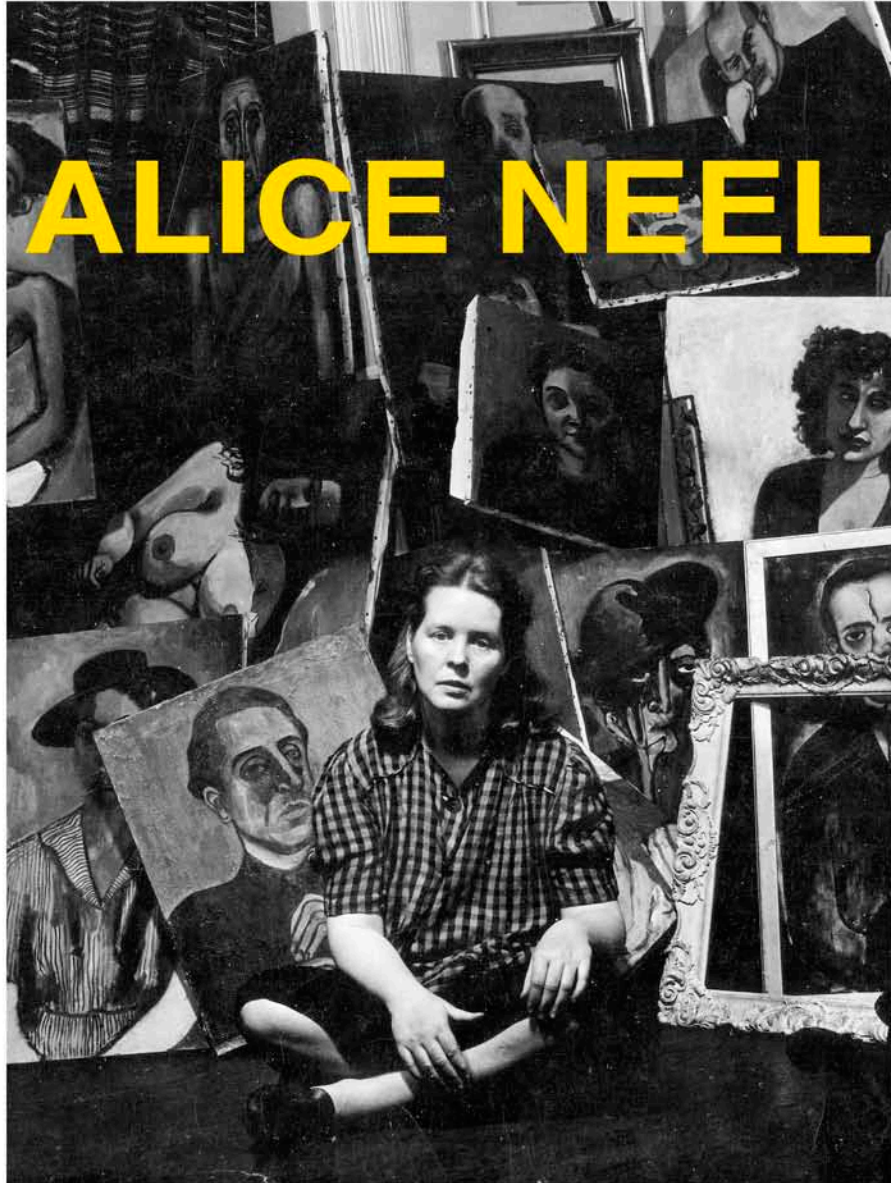


SeeThink Productions presents



a documentary by Andrew Neel

PRESS CONTACT:
Christine Richardson
Jeremy Walker & Associates
212.595.6161 / christine@jeremywalker.com

www.aliceneelfilm.com

Filmmakers

Directed by.....Andrew Neel

Produced by.....Ethan Palmer

Cinematography.....Andrew Neel
Ethan Palmer
Hillary Spera

Editor.....Luke Meyer

Supervising Editor.....Brad Turner

Original Music.....Jonah Rapino

Sound.....Raphael Laski

Featuring

HARTLEY NEEL

RICHARD NEEL

PHIL BONOSKY

JEREMY LEWISON

ROBERT STORR

CRISTINA LANCELLA

JUAN MARTINEZ

and

CHUCK CLOSE

Synopsis

Portrait painter Alice Neel (1900-1984) was a self-described collector of souls who recorded her sitters on canvas through six decades of the 20th century, among them Andy Warhol, Bella Abzug, Allen Ginsberg and Annie Sprinkle. Neel always sought the "authentic," moving from Greenwich Village to Spanish Harlem just as the Village was gaining reputation in the art scene. She sacrificed almost everything for her art, delving so far into the psyches of her sitters she would almost lose herself. Yet Neel was also a dedicated mother, raising two sons in the bohemian world she inhabited.

Filmmaker Andrew Neel, Alice Neel's grandson, puts together the pieces of the painter's life using intimate one-on-one interviews with Neel's surviving family and personal archival video. The documentary explores the artist's tumultuous biography and the legacy of Alice Neel's determination to paint her era.

Director's Statement

I am Alice Neel's grandson. The intimate connection between Alice's story and my own creates a rare proximity between director and subject that informs this film in both conscious and unconscious ways. Integrating myself into the film as a character, without eclipsing Alice's life story, was critically important to me. My hope was to present Alice's life and work free from judgment yet from the intimate point of view of a family member.

The most vital addition that I felt I could make to the film was an investigation of the consequences that Alice, and those around her (namely my father and his brother) had to endure. My father does not discuss his childhood a great deal, and much of Alice's earlier life exists only in mythological tidbits and anecdotes that surface year after year at family gatherings. I have transcended these myths in order to unearth the difficult private aspects of her story. I have not done this for the sake of sensational details. Nor was it to further galvanize the inaccurate myth of the bohemian artist that is so often propagated by art historians, critics and other filmmakers. My hope was to start a discussion about the difficult personal choices that an artist must often face and how this affects the people around them.

In the 20th century, marked in the art world by abstraction and other non-figurative traditions, Alice's portraits are a brave and lonely reaffirmation of the individual. Her 'paintings of people,' as she liked to call them, pay tribute to the unique, un-sanitized, aspects of each person that mass media and middle class culture are still threatening to destroy today.

Despite the extremities of Alice's professional and personal lives, her ideals remained remarkably consistent and her style and approach to her work un-flagged by the whims of the contemporary art world. For that I respect her. Tenacity, and a genuine interest in the world around her are what allowed her make powerful paintings. This film is an investigation of the sacrifices she made in order to live and paint the way she wanted.

Alice Neel Biography

Alice Neel's prolific collection of portraits, created over the course of sixty-four years, depicts the joy and pain of sexuality and family, as well as the distinctly urban anxieties of modern life in New York City. Neel rejected traditional notions of propriety both in her life and art, raising children out of wedlock and revealing the essence of the human struggle through her daring work.

The complexity of Alice Neel's life, be it in her turbulent and unstable relationships with men, the loss of two children, or suffering a nervous breakdown, influenced an equally complex and illuminating body of work. Her biography informed the intimate style and personal nature of her subject matter; she painted those closest to her, from her colleagues, lovers, and neighbors, to her children and grandchildren. Despite the extremities of Neel's professional and personal lives, her ideals remained consistent and her artistic vision unchanged by the whims of the contemporary art world.

Early Years

Alice Neel was born in 1900 in the rural town of Colwyn, Pennsylvania. Growing up, Alice was bored with small-town life and felt suffocated by the lack of culture. Her father was a humble man who worked most of his life as a railroad clerk, while her mother was a strong-minded,

often depressed woman who provided Alice with the sole intellectual and creative stimulation that she would have as a child. As she watched her mother suffer the consequences of unrealized intellectual potential, Alice developed an awareness of the limitations that society placed on women.

When Alice graduated from high school, she took the Civil Service exam and got a high-paying clerical position in order to help support her parents. After three years of work, taking art classes by night in Philadelphia, she finally enrolled full-time in the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. Alice often said that she chose to attend an all-girls school so as not to be distracted from her art by the temptations of the opposite sex. Young, attractive, and flirtatious, Alice “liked boys, and they liked me,” she said.

From the beginning, Alice was uninterested in painting ‘pretty pictures,’ as was expected of a young woman artist of her generation. Despite her distaste for the majority of her teachers at art school, Alice found an important role model in teacher Robert Henri, an early social realist painter. Henri’s work laid the foundations of Alice’s social realist approach to painting, which came to be a defining thread in her work.

Marriage, Motherhood and Loss

Shortly after finishing her studies, Alice fell for a handsome Cuban painter named Carlos Enriquez, the scion of a wealthy, aristocratic Havana family. They married in 1925 and moved to Havana the following year to live with Enriquez’s family.

In Havana, Alice was embraced by the burgeoning Cuban Avant-Garde, a set of young writers, artists and musicians who opposed the inequities of the Capitalist system. Disturbed by the harsh class differences that she saw around her, Alice developed the foundations of her lifelong political consciousness and commitment to equality. Her art and politics began to inform each other, as she spent her days painting portraits of the Cuban proletariat.

Alice had serious reservations about motherhood, fearing that its demands would interfere with her ambitions as a painter. In 1926, however, she became pregnant with her first child. In Cuba, under the roof of Carlos’s conservative family, abortion was not an option. Following the

birth of her daughter, Santillana, Alice returned to her parents' home in Colwyn. Carlos followed soon after and the young family moved to New York City. Just before Santillana's first birthday, she died of diphtheria. The trauma caused by Santillana's death infused the content of Alice's paintings, setting a precedent for the themes of motherhood, loss, and anxiety that permeated her work for the duration of her career.

Immediately following Santillana's untimely death, Alice became pregnant with her second child, Isabetta. Isabetta's birth in 1928 inspired the creation of *Well Baby Clinic*, a bleak portrait of mothers and babies in a maternity clinic more reminiscent of an insane asylum than a nursery. Once again, Alice felt ambivalent about motherhood, torn between her roles as wife, mother, and artist.

Alice's relationship with her husband, Carlos, soon began to deteriorate as financial stresses compounded their already damaged union. Work was hard to come by and Carlos felt humiliated by the commercial jobs that he was forced to take in order to support his family. In the spring of 1930, Carlos returned to Cuba, taking Isabetta with him. Shortly thereafter, Carlos sent Alice a letter explaining that he was taking Isabetta to Paris, but there was no money to send for Alice.

The Difficult Years

Alice was devastated. Mourning the loss of her husband and daughter, she suffered a massive nervous breakdown. After a brief period of hospitalization, Alice attempted suicide for the first time by sticking her head in her parents' oven. Her brother discovered her the next morning, still alive.

Alice was placed in the suicidal ward of the Philadelphia General Hospital, where she continued to attempt suicide. She developed bruised veins on her neck where she would try to choke herself with a stocking. After being transferred between several different hospitals and suicide wards, Alice was placed in a more pleasant sanatorium under the watch of a sympathetic psychiatrist. As always, Alice keenly observed her surroundings and later made drawings from memory of her fellow patients suffering the agony of mental illness.

Finally deemed stable, Alice was released from the sanatorium in 1931 and returned to her parents' home. Following an extended visit with her close friend and frequent subject, Nadya Olyanova, Alice returned to New York to pick up where she left off as an artist.

Greenwich Village Years

Back in New York, Alice moved in with the first of a string of unreliable, and in the case of Kenneth Doolittle, unstable, boyfriends. Doolittle was a rough, alcoholic and drug-addicted sailor whom she had met while staying with her friend Nadya. They lived on Cornelia St. in Greenwich Village, where Alice immersed herself in the flourishing bohemian scene. Alice painted the local characters, including Joe Gould, whom she famously depicted with multiple penises in 1933. Her world was composed of artists, intellectuals, and political leaders of the Communist Party, all of whom became subjects for her paintings. Her work glorified subversion and sexuality, depicting whimsical scenes of lovers, provocative nudes, and the gay men in her social and political circles.

At the end of 1933, Alice was hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which helped to relieve financial stresses. Still living with Doolittle, Alice began dating John Rothschild, a well-to-do member of the New York social elite whom she had met while participating in the Washington Square Outdoor Art Show. In a drug-induced, jealous rage, Doolittle slashed and burned more than 260 of her paintings and drawings. Rothschild, though married, became devoted to Alice and would remain her most constant lover for the duration of her life. Rothschild was also the closest thing to a patron that Alice ever had, providing her with much needed financial support throughout her career.

In the 1930s, Alice gained a degree of notoriety as an artist and established a good standing within her circle of downtown intellectuals and Communist Party leaders. While she was never an official Communist Party member, Alice's affiliation and sympathy with the ideals of Communism remained constant. Mike Gold, a well-known Party leader, emerged as a political mentor of sorts for Alice during the 1930s, and she later developed a romantic relationship with filmmaker and Communist intellectual Sam Brody.

The end of the decade saw major changes in Alice's life. In 1939, she gave birth to her first son, Richard, the child of José Santiago, a Puerto Rican night-club singer whom she had met in 1935 while he was playing at a downtown club. Despite her previous reservations about motherhood, Alice now felt ready to take on the responsibilities inherent in raising a child. By the time Richard was born, Alice thought that the Village, where she had lived for almost ten years, had lost its vitality. Wanting to be close to José's family and needing a change of environment, Alice moved uptown to Spanish Harlem, leaving behind her Village life.

Spanish Harlem Years

Alice, now isolated from the downtown art world, quickly felt right at home in the lively, immigrant neighborhood of Spanish Harlem. She began painting her neighbors, particularly women and children, who would sit for her in the apartment on 108th St. Alice was inspired by her new subject matter and dedicated a great part of the next twenty years to painting the residents of Spanish Harlem. José eventually left Alice in 1940 and she found herself alone again with her newborn child and very little money.

Alice's second son, Hartley, was born in 1941 to Alice and her lover, Communist intellectual Sam Brody. Alice became a devoted mother, making sure that both her sons attended the best schools despite financial hardships. In the 1940s, Alice's fortunes turned for the worse, as the WPA project was terminated and the rise of Abstract Expressionism pushed her work to the periphery. Regardless of the art world's rejection of representational figure painting, Alice continued to paint the people around her. In this decade, Alice made illustrations for the Communist publication, *Masses & Mainstream*, and painted portraits from her uptown home.

Between 1940 and 1950, Alice's art virtually disappeared from galleries, save for one solo show in 1944. In the 1950s, Alice's friendship with Mike Gold and his admiration for her social realist work garnered her a show at the Communist-inspired New Playwrights Theatre. Still, her work was ignored by prominent art critics who viewed social realist painting as a form of journalism.

Success in the Art World

After more than two decades of painting with only a handful of exhibitions to show for it, Alice's perseverance began to pay off as her work gained more exposure. She even made a film appearance in 1959, after director Robert Frank asked her to appear alongside a young Allen Ginsberg in his classic Beatnik film, *Pull My Daisy*. The following year, her work was first reproduced in ARTnews Magazine.

It was also in the 1960s that Alice came to know Andy Warhol and members of his Factory. When Alice first met Warhol in 1963, he requested that she appear in one of his films in exchange for painting his portrait. Though Alice never appeared in a Warhol film, she finally painted his portrait in 1970. Her painting of Andy with a bare chest, revealing his fresh gunshot wound, became one of Alice's most iconic images.

With the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Anti-War Movement of the 1960s, American culture finally caught up with Alice Neel. Toward the end of the 1960s, interest in her undeniably progressive work began to grow as the national consciousness awoke to new ideas of sexual and racial freedom. Simultaneously, Alice began to feel that it was important that her work be in the public domain. Wherever her work was exhibited around the country, she would try to honor her invitations to lecture, adding to her growing popularity.

The momentum of the Women's Movement demanded that women artists get their long over-due recognition and Alice Neel became an icon of sorts for Feminists of the time. In 1970, in fact, she was commissioned to paint Feminist activist Kate Millett for the cover of Time magazine. In 1974, Alice Neel finally had a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, marking her acceptance by the art world.

By the mid-1970s, Alice Neel had gained celebrity and stature as a great American artist. Finally vindicated in her later years, she delighted in the attention. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter presented her with a National Women's Caucus for Art award for outstanding achievement. Interest in Alice Neel's work continued to grow until her death in 1984, and continues to grow today. The legacy of her life and work is that of a great artist, a radical woman, and a fearless individual

About the Filmmakers

Andrew Neel – Director

Director Andrew Neel was born in Vermont. Neel's first feature length film, *Darkon*, won the Audience Award at the 2006 SXSW Film Festival. Neel founded SeeThink Productions in 2002 for the making of his first 35 mm short film, *billy 528*, which won Best Experimental Drama at the New York Film and Video Festival in 2002 before airing on Showtime in 2003. He is currently directing a film with video artist Michel Auder.

Ethan Palmer – Producer

Ethan Palmer joined SeeThink in 2002 and has developed and produced a variety of work including *Darkon* (Feature Documentary), *Alice Neel*, the shorts *Helen & Vincent* and *Initiation* (Cinemantics) and music videos for TV on the Radio and The Stills.

Luke Meyer – Editor

Luke Meyer joined SeeThink in 2003 when he and Andrew Neel began directing *Darkon* together. He is currently editing SeeThink's next film, *The Feature*, as well as completing *32 Acres*, a documentary about a community in Missouri displaced by a Wal-Mart shopping center.

Hillary Spera – Cinematographer

Hillary Spera's cinematography has been featured in music videos, narrative and documentary films with screenings in festivals from Palm Beach to Tribeca, including a nomination for the 2003 ASC Conrad L. Hall Heritage student award for cinematography. She is currently working on both a documentary feature on the life of performer Billie Holiday and an experimental narrative feature in Boston. Hillary resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Jonah Rapino – Composer

Jonah Rapino is a composer and electric violin player based in Boston Massachusetts. As a performer he has worked in many musical styles including: rock, modern classical, country/bluegrass, noise, eastern European folk, improvisation, and more. His career in composition for film began with the performance of live soundtracks to silent film. As a principal member of the [Devil Music Ensemble](#), Jonah has scored soundtracks to nine silent

films. This ensemble tours the country 10 weeks a year performing in movie theaters, museums, college campuses, performing arts centers, and at film festivals. Prior to scoring "Alice Neel", Jonah composed the music for the documentary "Darkon" and is composing a new soundtrack for the 1920 silent film classic "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde", starring John Barrymore.

Additional Credits

With:
Tom Armstrong
Michel Auder
Richard Brilliant
David Brody
Sam Brody
Marlene Dumas
Mary Garrard
The Guerilla Girls
Julie Hall
Patricia Hills
Kate Horsfield
Alex Katz
Lee Krasner
Pablo Lancella Jr.
Pablo Lancella Sr.
Ginny Neel
Nancy Neel
Linda Nochlin
Joel Rothschild
Mira Schor

Made possible in part with the support of Carolee &
Nathan Reiber

Sound:
Raphael Laski

Assistant Editor:
Masato Ota

Additional Cinematography:
Karl Schroder

Director of Research:
Asha Canalos

Research Assistants:
Katie Vida
Shelley Walker
Justin Terry

Interns:
Max Gleason
Nick DeWind
Robbie Gregson
Chris Schmidt

Vicky Hely-Hutchinson
Jemima Kirk

Legal Counsel for SeeThink Productions:
Sarah Hsia

Video Archives of Alice Neel provided by Michel
Auder

Archival Footage & Audio:
Streamline Video, NYC
National Archives
Patricia Hills
Moore College of Art
Fresh Air from WHY?
Jonathan Brand
Nancy Baer
Hartley Neel

Mary Lance – New Deal Films

MUSICIANS
Arik Grier Tuba
Liz Horwitz Bass
Robin Ryczek Cello
Laura Smolowitz Flute
Dave Utzinger Piano
Robert Marlatt French Horn
Todd Brunel Clarinet
Kaethe Hostetter Viola
Vessela Stoyanova Marimba
Jonah Rapino Violin Vibraphone & Keyboard

POST PRODUCTION

HD Conform:
Silver Screen Post Production

Online Editor:
Gavin Rosenberg

Audio Mixing Facility:
Ground Control Studios

Mixers:
Raphael Laski
John Bosch
Murray Trider

Film Processing:
The Lab at Postworks

Film to Tape Transfer & Color Correct:
Moving Images

Special Thanks:

Billy Mauer
The Robert Miller Gallery
Hartley & Ginny Neel
Richard Neel
Phil Bonasky
Michel Auder
Nancy Neel
Jeremy Lewison
David Grubin
Mary Jordan
Dominick Balletra
Caleb Woods
Mollie Davies

IN KIND SUPPORT:

Michel Auder
Nils Folke Anderson
Kristin Baker
Sebastian Blanck
Gideon Bok
Louise Bourgeois
Beth Brideau
Nicole Cherubini
Benjamin Cottam
Renee Cox
Ann Craven
Peter Doig

Christoph Draeger
Joel Dugan
Janet Fish
Lars Fisk
Sharon Horvath
Shelby Hughes
Dennis Kardon
Gillian Laub
Jose Lerma
Judith Linhares
Marci MacGuffie
Jacquie Mauer
Seth McBride
Ryan McGinness
Richard Merkin
Martin Mull
Robert Nadeau
Alice Neel
Chris Ofili
Olly & Suzi
Robert Olsen
Phyllis Palmer
Robert Andrew Parker
Eric Payson
Jim Peters
Lamar Peterson
Danica Phelps
Zac Posen
Faith Ringgold
Rafael Sanchez
Alejandra Seeber
Ben Snead
Francesca B. Stevenson
Leah Tinari
Kathleen White
Katherine Wolkoff

All Alice Neel paintings used with permission from Neel Arts & the Estate of Alice Neel

©2006 Alice Neel Documentary, LLC