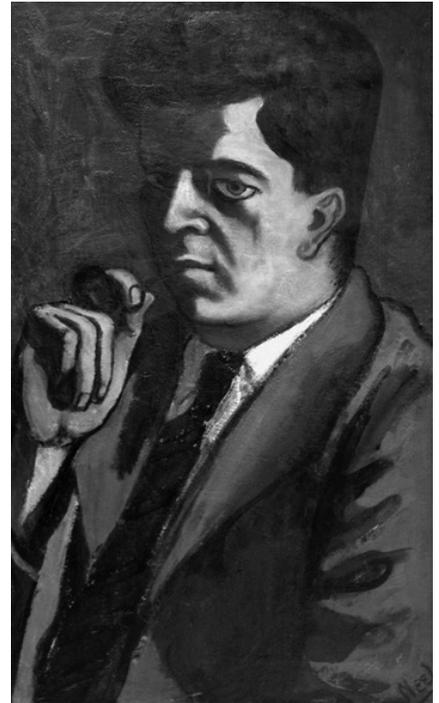


Portrait of the Artist: My Visit with Alice Neel

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BETH KAPLAN



MY FATHER WAS TWENTY-SEVEN IN 1949, when he posed for the artist Alice Neel. A veteran who'd served

in a US Army medical unit during the war, he was a handsome *bon vivant* with a salty sense of humour and a voracious love of wine, women, and song. She portrayed him as a sombre man in a tie and dark jacket, with green eyes, thick dark hair, and a pipe clenched in his narrow hand. He paid her \$50 for the painting.

This year, nearly four decades after her death, the Metropolitan Museum in New York produced a huge retrospective of the work of Alice Neel—now called one of the greatest and most radical American painters of the twentieth century. From *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith: the exhibition “confirms Neel as equal if not superior to artists like Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon and destined for icon status on the order of Vincent van Gogh and David Hockney.”

Yet for much of her lifetime, this visionary artist struggled to make a living.

In the late nineteen forties, Alice Neel was one of my father's dearest friends. While Gordin Kaplan was studying for his Ph.D. at Columbia, he, Alice, and her lover Sam Brody were part of a gang of lefty rabble-rousers that included both young graduate student scientists like my father and mad bohemian artists like Alice. They were all targeted and relentlessly hounded by Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, to the extent that when my father received his degree in 1950, he took a job in Canada and never returned to work in the land of his birth.

He carried with him to his new country a treasured souvenir—Alice's painting. She only painted faces she found unusual and interesting, so to have a Neel portrait, even in the days of her relative obscurity, was an honour.

I grew up with that portrait hanging on the wall of every childhood home, my father's sober demeanour, pipe in hand, always suspended behind us. He was a man of few possessions. Alice's painting was one of his most cherished.

In December 1980, I flew from Vancouver to Ottawa to visit my parents for Christmas and decided while there to take a quick trip to New York. Thirty years old and five months pregnant, I wanted to do as much as possible before being tied down by parenthood. My life was in a period of unsettling transition. After spending my twenties as a busy actress, I'd fallen in love and left the stage to take a graduate degree in creative writing. I was—temporarily or perhaps permanently—leaving a profession in which I'd achieved success but had long felt was wrong for me, to explore one I was eager to be part of but knew little about. In New York, there were lots of Kaplans to visit, but I thought it'd also be interesting, if possible, to visit an artist and family friend who'd laboured in near anonymity for decades before becoming, at eighty, something of a sensation.

Nervously dialling the number Dad had given me, I was relieved to find Alice friendly and welcoming. I told her I was Gordin Kaplan's daughter, an actress on a brief visit to New York, and asked if I could come and say hello.

"Kappy's daughter? An actress?" she boomed. "Come on over—have tea!"

In a shabby building at 107th and Broadway, the door to apartment 3A was opened by a teenaged girl, Alice's granddaughter, Olivia. The flat was basic, unfancy, long and narrow with bright windows. The walls, not to my surprise, were covered with art by Alice and others. Lining the halls were rows of unframed canvasses, portraits stacked two or three deep.

Alice was waiting in the living room. She scruti-

nized me.

"You have Kappy's face," she said, with satisfaction. "It's a wide face; it goes out across here, not down, like your mother's."

I didn't understand. Though my eyes are like Dad's, my mother and I share the same very long chin. But the portrait painter spoke with authority, so perhaps I'd passed some kind of test. She noted my belly; I told her I was pregnant. She had no comment.

We sat in the cluttered living room. Alice Neel was not at all what I'd expected. With a generous motherly body and billows of white hair floating about a soft round face, she looked the farthest thing from the activist painter my father had described—a woman who'd always lived on the margins, who had two sons by different men, neither of whom she'd married. Revolutionary behaviour in the late thirties and early forties.

She asked about Dad, and I told her that though he missed New York a great deal, he was grateful to Canada, which had sheltered him. For decades he'd been a voluble leader of protests against nuclear proliferation and nuclear fallout and then the Vietnam War. She nodded.

"I think I'll see nuclear war in my lifetime, and I'm eighty," she said gloomily. "What a terrible thought. And this new president, I don't think much of him." The month before, to the horror of progressives, Ronald Reagan had won the presidency in a landslide.

"Olivia," Alice said, "dig out that canvas—"The Actor." She turned back to me. "Aren't you glad to be in the theatre, Beth, not an ordinary mortal? You should be glad, to be so special."

I didn't feel special, and I certainly didn't feel anything in common with Ronald Reagan; my proudest accomplishment as an actor had been to help found a small communal theatre company that wrote its own topical plays. As I opened my mouth to explain, Olivia brought us a tray with tea and slices of buttered bread,

then vanished to another room.

“Kappy was like a bear,” Alice said as she poured tea. “He used to tell the stories of the *Iliad* to my son Richard. Richard was only seven, but he remembers to this day. He has a memory like mine.”

I wondered aloud if that’s why, when I was very young, Dad chose as a bedtime story for me a picture book of the *Iliad*. The stories he read were not only beyond my grasp, they were in French. Recounting this made me chuckle. Not Alice, though. That, I guessed, was the Kappy she’d known and painted: the man who’d read the *Iliad*, in French, to a four-year-old.

I told her how much the portrait meant to him and congratulated her on her artistic success. “The only secret to success is hard work,” she said sternly. “Did you know that? Picasso said, ‘I was born with an obsession for hard work.’ Very modest of him. Now young painters won’t begin until they have a loft in SoHo.” Her lip curled in disgust. “A loft in SoHo! In art today, publicity is what’s important. I was unknown until my fifty-ninth year, imagine that.”

Taking in the canvasses propped against the wall, imagining the decades of work that had gone into them, it was hard to comprehend that this artist had been disregarded for almost her entire career. I knew that although recently she’d been championed by the women’s movement for her humanist vision, her realism and craft, and especially for her empathetic depiction of the lives of women and children, she was still not well-off, nor a member of the artistic establishment. I couldn’t fathom the kind of stubborn strength it must have taken, as a woman and a mother, to remain personally and professionally committed to her own unfashionable ethos, not just for a few years but for a lifetime.

I sat sipping my tea in the messy room, surrounded on all sides by great art, happy to listen as Alice launched into a monologue.

“I was born in a small town. It was so boring I’ve

been making up for it all my life. I’ve never left New York. Oh, the strange people we knew, your parents and I,”—she leaned toward me as she exclaimed—“the artists in The Village. The woman who was deported for having an affair with a dog. Yes, a dog! She used to smash pill bottles and dance on them.” She sighed.

“I don’t know what to make of New York any more. I was held up in this apartment only two years ago. Two young men.”

I gasped.

She shook her head. “They ignored all the paintings,” gesturing to the work against the wall, “and only took the television!” This time, we both smiled. “I used to be always ignored,” she said. “Not like you.”

I was uncomfortable with how glowingly she spoke of my theatrical life. A few months before, my last show before pregnancy had been the worst experience yet, a soul-destroying disaster with a venomous director. My hostess was peering intently at me again.

“I’ve never liked my face,” she announced matter-of-factly. “What a boring face, little round face, a real Anglo-Saxon face. I hated it.”

I thought she had a lovely, expressive face.

“Now it’s more interesting, now that I’m old,” she carried on with enthusiasm, “and my body is interesting, the flesh falling off my bones. I have deformed feet, you know; they’re interesting, my feet. I decided to paint myself in the nude, at eighty. The painting made a big stir. Olivia,” she called, “go get the *Newsweek* that has the canvas reprinted.”

She swivelled back to me. “I used to sit here naked and paint, Beth, and one day I realized that a man was standing on the street outside, watching. So I moved. Now I get phone calls. A man just phoned to take a photo of me in the bathtub.”

I exclaimed in shock again.

She shrugged. “I said no. Some publicity is good. Some publicity is not good.”

Looking at the magazine, the way she'd conveyed her own sagging breasts, protruding belly, and strangely twisted feet, I marveled at the fearlessness it took to paint oneself in the nude at any age, let alone this one.

Alice said her granddaughter had considered becoming an actress, what did I think of that?

It was finally my turn to rant. I wanted to warn this lovely young woman. "It's a grueling way to make a living, Olivia," I said. "I'm trying to get out of the business myself. So much rejection and excess—feast or famine, too much work, then none. Actors are mostly self-centered and deeply insecure, directors can be manipulative and callous, the money's almost non-existent ..."

Alice interrupted, her face furious. "What are you saying?" she cried. "Why would you spoil her dream? You're making fun of the theatre. You're making fun of your work! Are you a good actress? You can't be. To me you sound lazy and thoughtless and spoiled. There you sit, complaining. Why aren't you working now?"

She stopped and picked up a slice of bread.

It felt as if she'd slapped me hard, taking my breath away. I wanted to say yes, I'd been considered a good actress, and now my dream was to be a good writer. But I couldn't speak. In Alice's tirade I heard my father's voice. During my childhood and adolescence, Dad would often rage at me, accuse me of being spoiled, selfish, lazy. This woman who'd just met me had said the same thing. It hurt beyond measure. What if they were right?

The tea was cold, and Olivia was hovering. But Alice continued as if nothing had happened, serenely offering me a plate.

"Have some bread, Beth. Have some tea. Do you like my new sculpture?" She gestured vaguely. "See that canvas at the end of the hall, there?" I turned to look. "Two homosexuals. One in his underwear, and his lover, not a happy man. I thought it was right to

paint him in his underwear. This year he was killed in Puerto Rico, a lover's quarrel. He was in his underwear. Isn't that strange?"

Yes, I agreed, it was very strange.

"You must meet Richard. Olivia, phone Richard."

"Another time, thank you, Alice," I said, exhausted. "I should get going and leave you to your work."

"You must go? We've had such a lovely talk," she said as I rose, and held her hand up for me to stop. "Was I very hard on you about the theatre? I don't like sarcasm. Do not mock your art. Painting keeps me alive. What else is there for us to do?"

What else is there for us to do? I wasn't sure, but I wanted to find out.

"Thank you for making time," I said. "Dad will be very pleased I met you."

We did not embrace.

"Do you see that self-portrait by the door on the way out?" she called after me.

"It's so ugly. That is how I saw myself once!"

Alice Neel died of cancer almost four years later, on October 13, 1984. I was too preoccupied to register this momentous loss, because that's the day my second child was born. Year by year, Alice went on becoming more famous worldwide. Critics acknowledged that she saw not only faces and bodies but souls and represented them in a way no other artist did, as in her ground-breaking portraits of a scrawny, scarred Andy Warhol or the eccentric writer Joe Gould, whom she painted naked, with three penises. No one saw people like Alice.

Four years after her death, in the summer of 1988, my father too was dying of cancer. I tried to be with him as often as possible, though it meant leaving my children and husband behind. When I was young, my father could at times be harsh and even cruel, but over the years our fraught relationship had evolved into a

bond of warmth and mutual respect. He'd apologized for the way he used to treat me and said how proud he was of me, my family, my writing, how grateful for the loving care I was giving him now. I didn't know why he'd once made me his scapegoat, but the why no longer mattered. This man had worked all his life to make the world a better place. Between us now there was, simply, devotion.

A few days before he died, as I sat massaging his feet and trying not to cry, Dad spoke about Alice's painting. Because my younger brother had such a rootless, unsettled life, and I did not, after my mother's death, Dad wanted me to inherit the portrait.

Hearing this made my eyes overflow. I knew what the Neel meant to him. In all our years together, this gesture—wanting me to have the portrait—was his most overt expression of love.

But he did not write down that bequest, and so it did not, could not, happen.

When my mother died two decades later, my brother and I were tasked with settling her estate. He and I didn't get along particularly well, and I dreaded the thought of what we faced, especially dealing with the portrait. I absolutely did not want to sell it—not only a great work of art but my youthful father's soul! But there was no choice; my brother and I owned it jointly and would never agree on what else to do with it. In any case, neither of us had much money. We imagined the Neel would be our fortune. Some of her works had sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars. My fantasy was to use the money to secure my old age and to help my grown children put down payments on places to live.

I had superb digital copies made and framed, one for me and one for him, and we began the complicated

process of selling.

It turned out that a small dark portrait of an unknown scientist and social activist, even one painted by Alice Neel, was of no interest to anyone. The painting went through two modern art auctions at Sotheby's, where it was ignored before, finally, a private buyer appeared. After paying various fees and factoring in our expenses, my brother and I each received \$11,000.

The copy, of course, has pride of place on my wall. Dad and his pipe are still there, as they have been throughout my life. But what hangs there is not the real thing, and it makes me sad that his beloved face, as visualized by a brilliant friend, now animates the home of a stranger. I think my father would be sad, too.

Also left by my mother were stacks of old letters. As I went through them, I found one written in 1951 by Sam Brody, father of Alice's younger son, Hartley, and was surprised by the effusiveness of his and Alice's affection for my parents. Sam applauded Gordin's "wit, humor, 'bonhommie,'" and finished, "Alice loves you both in a very special way reserved for you alone."

I imagine this young couple—clever, beautiful Sylvia from an English village and Gordin, the vigorous noisy Yank—breaking bread and drinking wine in Spanish Harlem with the unconventional artist, her Communist partner, and their crazy comrades. In 1949, the year of the portrait, Sylvia and Gordin would marry. Eleven months later their girl child would be born, a daughter with green eyes, thick dark hair, and a forceful chin, who after various turns and twists would grow up to be a writer. A writer who would one day do her best to immortalize them all in words, as the magnificent Alice Neel had done in paint.

What else is there for us to do?