

"Pictures of People, Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery," *Women Artists News* Book Review, 1998
Pamala Allara, University Press of New England, 1998

Pamela Allara's study of Alice Neel reads almost like an exciting novel. At the same time, it is a major work of scholarship. Neel's life covers the entire cultural history of the twentieth century, but this is the twentieth century of the "other."

To begin with, a portrait gallery is an incongruous subject for a political radical. Allara faces all the contradictions of Neel's career head on. She traces the artist's roots in a privileged background in Philadelphia, where she learned of the Ash Can School of Robert Henri and married a Cuban. Allara discusses Neel's connection to the Cuban avant-garde in Havana in the mid 1920s, including discussion of the cultural dissonance that Neel experienced. In the 1930s Neel was painting portraits of Communist writers and editors while the WPA supported her, in spite of her radical politics, for the program's entire duration. She moved from Greenwich Village to Spanish Harlem in the 40s, raised two children alone, and painted portraits of her neighbors.

By the 1950s Neel was again moving in the Bohemian circles of the Village and she even appeared in the Beat classic *Pull My Daisy*. In the next decade she was a friend of Andy Warhol and painted his portrait after he was shot, as a virtual sacrificial victim of contemporary culture. Neel, as she turned to serious promotion of her career in the 70s, painted dealers, curators, and artists, but continued to break new ground by doing portraits of gay men and gay couples well before that group was "out" in the art world. Neel also painted some of the leaders of feminism in the 1970s, the best known phase of her career, although as Allara points out, up to that point she was really not a feminist.

Neel's career charts the history of twentieth-century culture from the particular places that the artist occupied, alternately, among the marginalized groups and the leaders of the time. Allara, adroitly but thoroughly, contextualizes each phase of the artist's career in terms of recent theory, as well as brilliantly analyzing the layers of codes and metaphors in the portraits. In addition she deconstructs Neel's mythmaking during her celebrity years, without in any sense lessening her stature. In fact, Allara's book reveals a multidimensional woman who is much more complex than she let on. Neel understood that the identity of the artist needed to be salable in (whoops, I don't have the end of it)