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# University Museum to show artwork by contemporary painter Alice Neel

By Marcia Danab  
University News Bureau

An exhibition of paintings by Alice Neel, a renowned contemporary American artist, will be on display Oct. 7 through Dec. 10 at the University Museum of Art, 1430 Johnson Lane.

The exhibition features 15 paintings from the collection of Jonathan and Monika Brand of Eugene. The canvasses include portraits, landscapes and still life representing four decades of Neel's long career.

By the time of her death in 1984, Neel was recognized as one of America's foremost contemporary portrait painters, or "painters of people," as she preferred to say. In her last years, she painted many well-known people in the art world, including Andy Warhol, Marisol and Red Grooms.

"For me, people are the first premise," Neel said. "My work is a monument to them."

According to Larry Fong, registrar for the University Museum of Art, Neel hoped to express the spirit of her times by probing the psychology of the individual to reveal the unique essence of each of her sitters. Neel habitually refused to work on commission so that she could retain the freedom to paint the truth as she saw it.

Throughout the 60 years of her career in New York City, Neel's most frequent subjects

"Isabetta," the earliest work in the exhibition, was painted by Neel in 1930 soon after she recovered from a nervous breakdown. The child in the painting is Neel's second daughter who had been separated from her mother and taken to Havana by Neel's Cuban husband, a painter she had met in art school. Her first daughter had died of diphtheria two years earlier.

Painted from memory, Isabetta is portrayed as a forlorn, doll-like creature clutching a stuffed animal. The painting symbolizes Neel's own feeling of depression and loneliness. Neel later said of the painting, "That's emotion in its purest form."

In 1935, Neel joined the easel project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided a small but steady income during the following eight years. During this period, Neel painted brooding cityscapes, including "New York Tenement Backyard," one of several unpeopled urban views that bear resemblance to similar scenes by Edward Hopper.

Neel moved to Spanish Harlem in 1938 with her new lover, Jose Santiago, a Puerto Rican nightclub singer who was the father of Richard, her first son. Neel remained with Santiago for only a few years but lived in Harlem for a total of 25 years, painting the Puerto

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were family members, neighbors and friends. When she wasn't painting people, she often recorded views from her window or objects in her apartment.

Ricans and Dominicans of her neighborhood as well as her friends among the political radicals and intellectuals.

Neel had a strong empathy for the underclass of American



Courtesy photo

Artist Alice Neel's painting entitled Jenny Brand one example of her less serious pieces.

society and took an active role in leftist movements of the 1930s. Neel's compassion for the poor always was expressed through the portrayal of the unique individual.

"Puerto Rican Madonna," painted in 1938, depicts the wife and baby of the suffering man in "T.B. Harlem," one of Neel's early masterpieces. Although the subject is traditional, it has none of the serenity of the Raphael Madonna or the sentiment of a Mary Cassatt mother and child.

"Puerto Rican Girl," painted in 1949, typifies Neel's dark portraits of the 1940s. Neel's financial condition was at its worst during the period after the termination of the WPA program, and it would be years before she received any commercial success. A difficult relationship with Sam Brody, a photographer and filmmaker and father of her son, Hartley, provided little comfort or relief from the demands of two small children.

Neel's fortunes improved in the early 1960s with the receipt of the 1962 Longview Foundation Purchase Award and with increased requests to exhibit her work. The popularity of photo realism and Pop Art contributed to a new interest in realism, although Neel disliked both of these styles because they were not concerned with human emotion.

She had lightened her palette even before this period, marked also by her move to a more spacious and brighter apartment on the Upper West Side. "Carol Brand with Cat," one of Neel's few commissioned portraits, is

lighter in color and mood than earlier works. Painted with Neel's characteristic spontaneity, it heralds a less troubled period in her life and career.

Neel's works of the 1960s tend to be brighter and lighter. She said that "Thanksgiving" was her answer to Pop Art, referring to the can of Ajax on the sideboard. The thickly painted capon defrosting in the sink suggests in an amusing way the less sentimental side of a family dinner. Neel often employed this type of skewed perspective as an expressive device.

"Jenny Brand" is less expressionistic and more decorative, with airy juxtapositions of patches of color with bare areas of canvas. It is a portrait of a healthy, pink-cheeked child that contrasts markedly with the stiff and sorrowful "Isabetta," reflecting the change in Neel's own psychological state.

Neel grew up in a small suburb of Philadelphia and knew since childhood that she wanted to be an artist. From 1921 to 1925, she attended the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, now Moore College of Art, from which she received an honorary doctoral degree in 1971.

The University Museum of Art is open to the public free of charge from noon to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays except state and University holidays. Free weekend parking is available within one block of the museum in the University lot at East 14th Avenue and Kincaid Street.

For more information, call the Museum of Art at 686-3027.

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