

ALICE NEEL

PEOPLE COME FIRST



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KELLY BAUM and **RANDALL GRIFFEY**

with contributions by

MEREDITH A. BROWN, JULIA BRYAN-WILSON,
and **SUSANNA V. TEMKIN**

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SIEMPRE EN LA CALLE

SUSANNA V. TEMKIN

In a 1975 interview, Alice Neel invoked the Spanish phrase “*siempre en la calle*” (always in the street) while reflecting on her brief, but formative time in Havana, where she was launched into bourgeois Cuban society through her marriage to artist Carlos Enríquez.¹ Ever the rebel, Neel surely relished this intended insult directed toward independent women like herself, who eschewed domestic responsibilities in favor of artistic aspirations. Indeed, although Neel’s practice has long been associated with the intimate environment of her home studio, the phrase brings to light the impact of the street as a site and source for her art. Such imagery appears throughout her oeuvre, including in the work she created in Spanish Harlem (East Harlem/El Barrio).² Despite the fact that she lived in this neighborhood for more than twenty years, much of the literature on this period emphasizes Neel’s separation from the downtown art scene in New York, describing her location uptown as one of exile and isolation or even as a retreat into an “alien world.”³ Beyond exposing the racism undergirding these analyses, such language also implies that Neel was somehow disconnected from her surrounding environment. While more concerted attention has been dedicated to this body of work since the 1990s, culminating in Hilton Als’s revelatory 2017 exhibition,⁴ only three paintings from Spanish Harlem were featured in the artist’s major 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, evidence of the lingering oversight of this aspect of her career.⁵ Positioning Neel both physically and conceptually “*siempre en la calle*,” this essay offers a novel approach to Neel’s practice by foregrounding her proximity to, active participation with, and observation of the street and urban culture.

CUBAN PRELUDE

Critics have frequently interpreted Neel’s sojourn in Havana as a primer for her future experience in Spanish Harlem; yet, while Cuba and Puerto Rico have been called “two wings of the same bird,”⁶ such assertions overlook the striking differences between Neel’s life in Havana as a pregnant newlywed to a man from a wealthy, well-connected family, and her life as a single mother in a working-class Manhattan neighborhood. These biases also occlude the profound impact her time in Cuba had on her approach to and observation of daily life and culture. In fact, Neel’s arrival in Havana in 1926 coincided with an important moment in the young republic’s artistic development.⁷ Moreover, her husband, Enríquez, was not simply an anonymous amateur but rather one of the nation’s foremost modernist artists, and shortly after coming to Havana, the young couple was catapulted to the center of the island’s artistic and intellectual

FIG. 34 *Beggars, Havana, 1926*. Oil on canvas, 20 × 18 in. (50.8 × 45.7 cm). Private collection



FIG. 49 *Memories*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 43 x 25 in. (109.2 x 63.5 cm).

personal photographs in a rage, including *Isabetta* and another painting of the girl made at the same time. Following *Isabetta's* destruction in this traumatic domestic episode, Neel created an almost exact replica of the striking nude portrait, based on the photograph and her recollections of her daughter. The confidence of *Isabetta's* pose in both the original and its replacement is matched by the bold line of Neel's brush, physical proof of a mother at work depicting her daughter in a shared familial space. Although several of Neel's slashed canvases were able to be semi-repaired (including a painting of *Isabetta* as a baby that Neel made from memory in 1930 shortly after Carlos had taken their daughter to Cuba), most of her work was completely destroyed. Already missing her actual daughter from her daily life, Neel now found her painted daughter obliterated in a violent attack in and on her home. The act of repainting *Isabetta* was one of recuperation, as Neel symbolically worked to heal the doubled loss of her daughter and her art. Having held on to the picture for some thirty-five years, Neel sold *Isabetta* to Jonathan Brand, the son of her friend, the novelist and poet Milton Brand, in 1971 or 1972, telling him "I love the *Isabetta*. Do you know why? Her elegance."¹⁷ In 1981—now a grandmother of six—Neel painted "the *Isabetta*" once again, this time in a remarkably unfinished sketch of her young, naked daughter standing inside their summer rental cottage at the Jersey Shore in 1934 (fig. 49). The painting is evocatively titled *Memories*.

Beginning in 1938 (after she had left Doolittle and begun a relationship with the musician José Santiago Negrón), and for the next twenty-four years, Neel lived and worked in the ethnically mixed, impoverished neighborhood of Spanish Harlem.¹⁸ From within the confines of a railroad apartment on the third floor of a tenement building at 21 East 108th Street, where she settled as the mother of two young sons in 1942, Neel struggled to balance caretaking responsibilities with professional ambitions, stealing moments to paint while her toddlers napped during the day or slumbered at night.¹⁹ Now a single mother with limited funds, time, and space, she set up her studio in the living room, reflecting her domestic duties in her art, blurring the boundaries between home and work, or, as Second Wave feminists would make plain thirty years later, the personal and the political.

A photograph from 1946 taken by Sam Brody, the father of Neel's younger son and a professional photographer and documentary filmmaker, captures the muddling of their domestic life, of Neel's simultaneous mothering and painting. In it, Neel stands at her easel in a smock, her left hand touching the canvas while her sons, Richard and Hartley, ages six and five and dressed in their matching school uniforms, huddle together on the couch behind their mother (fig. 50). In contrast, a 1944 photograph by Brody of Neel seated cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a



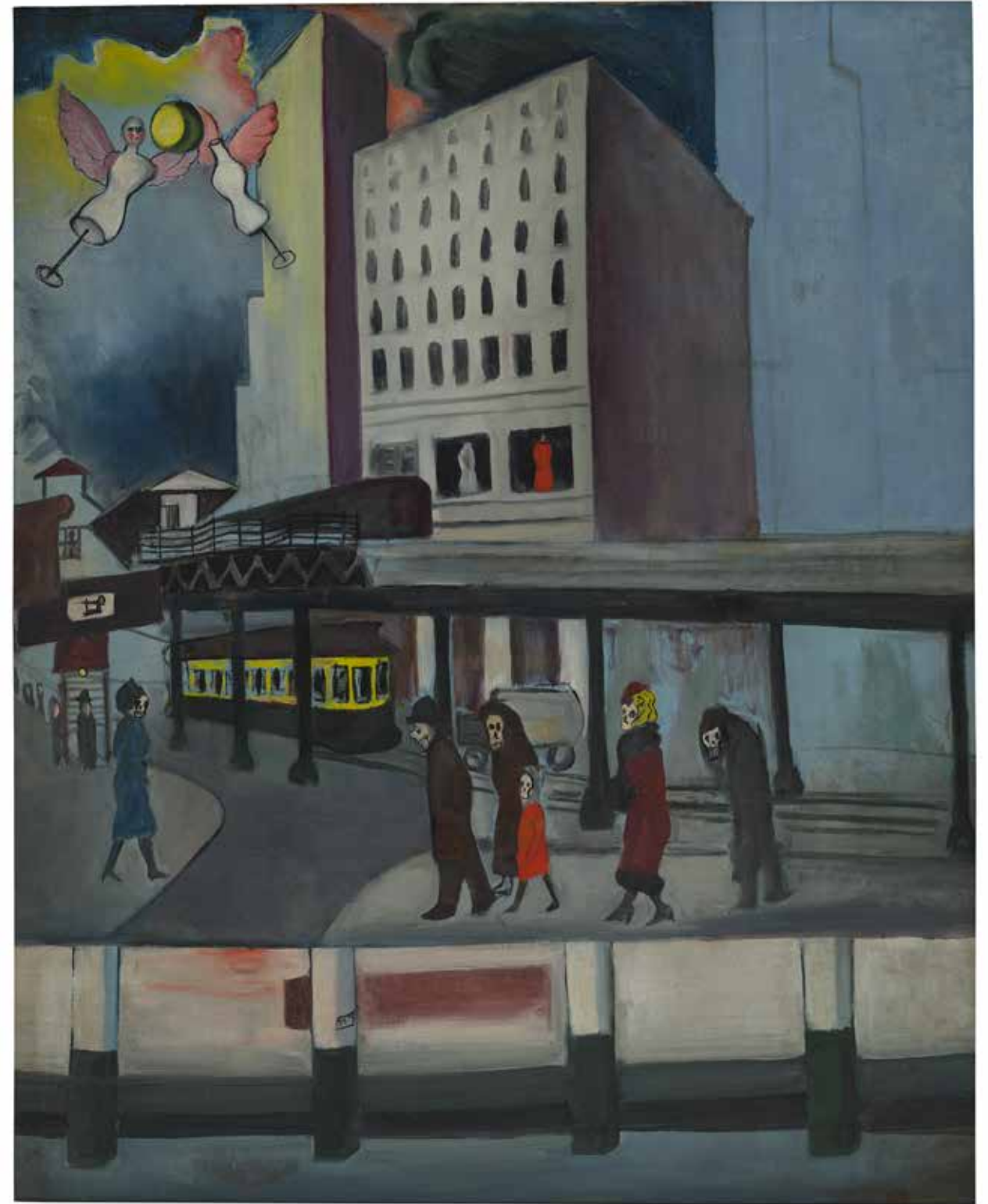
FIG. 51 Alice Neel, 1944. Photograph by Sam Brody



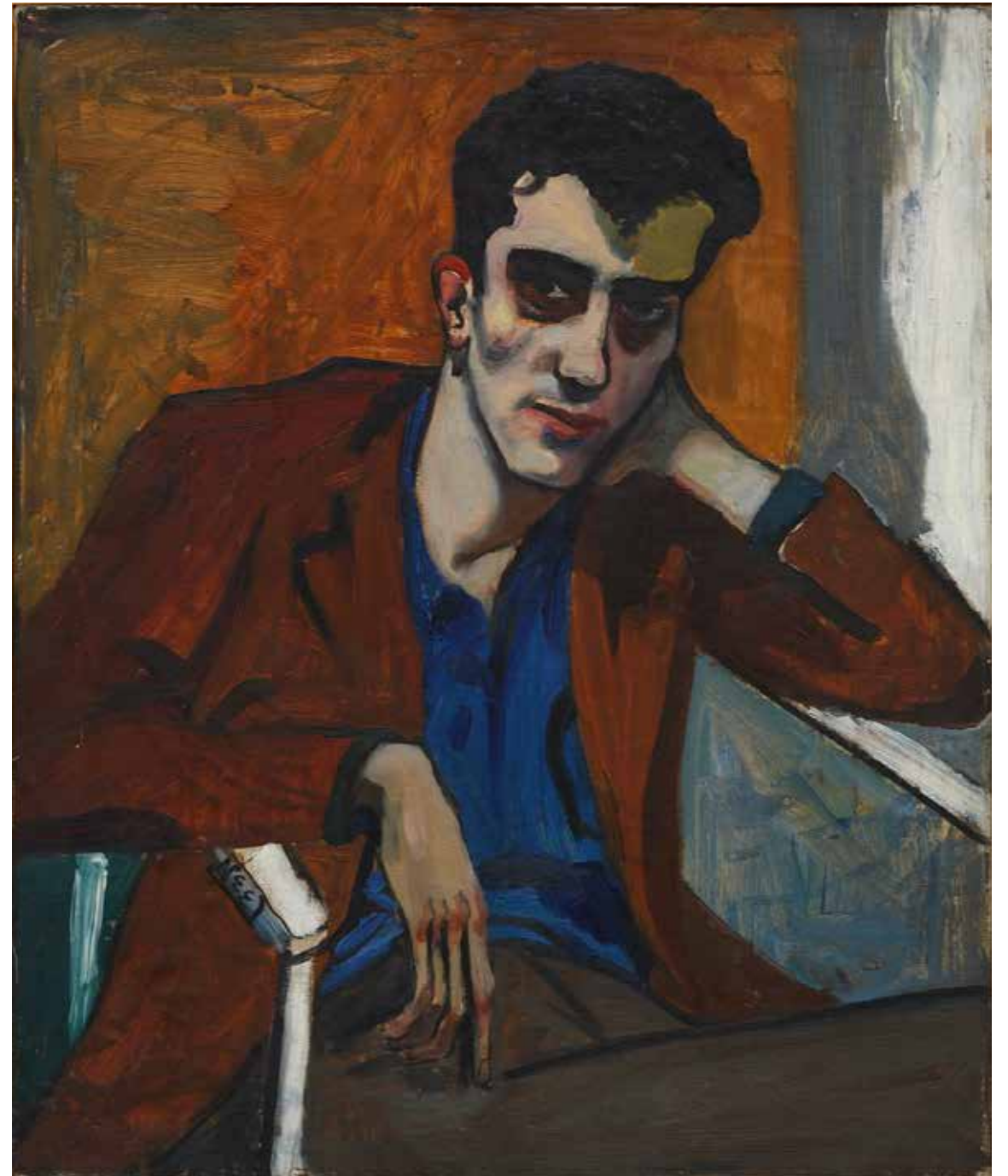
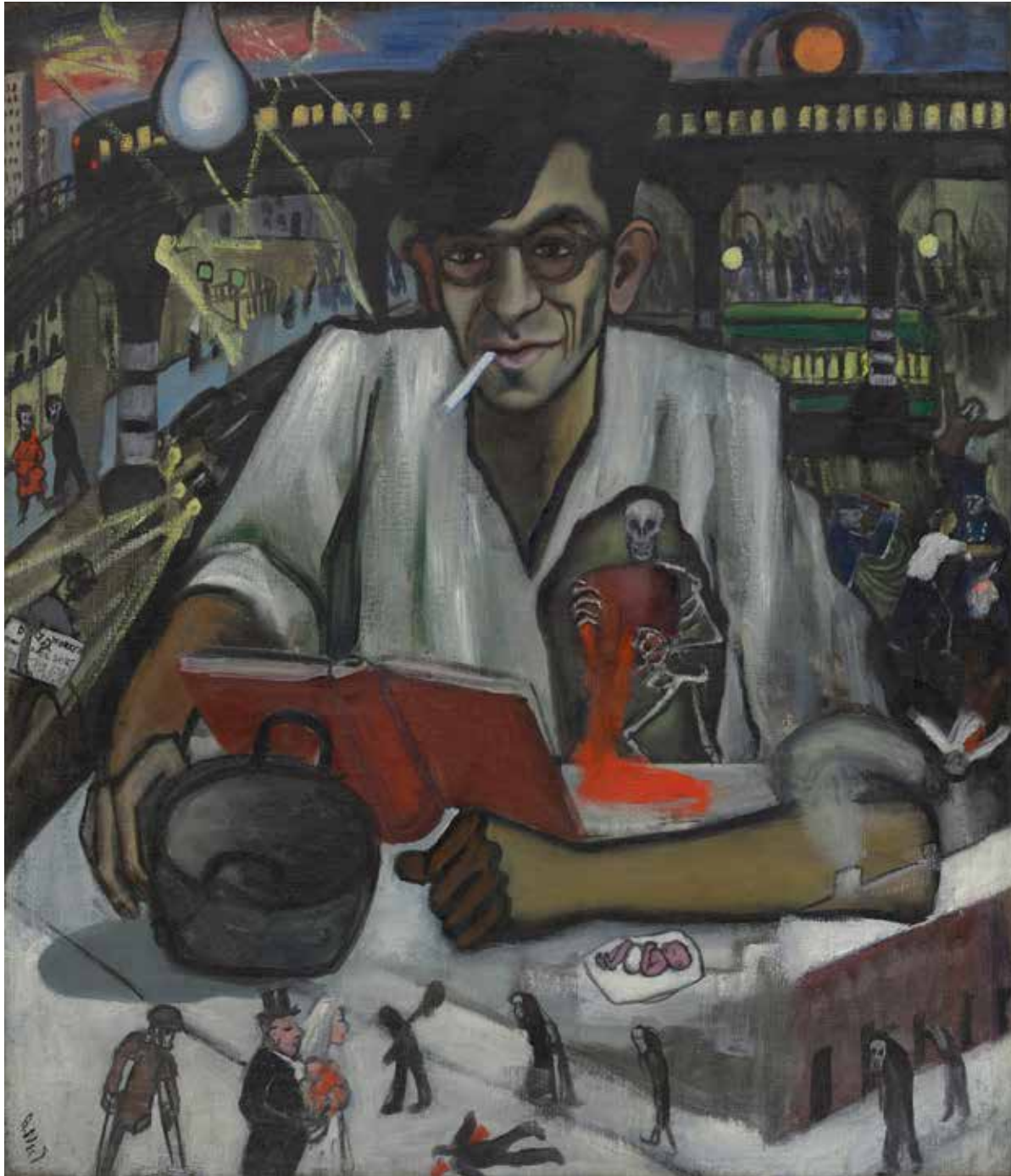
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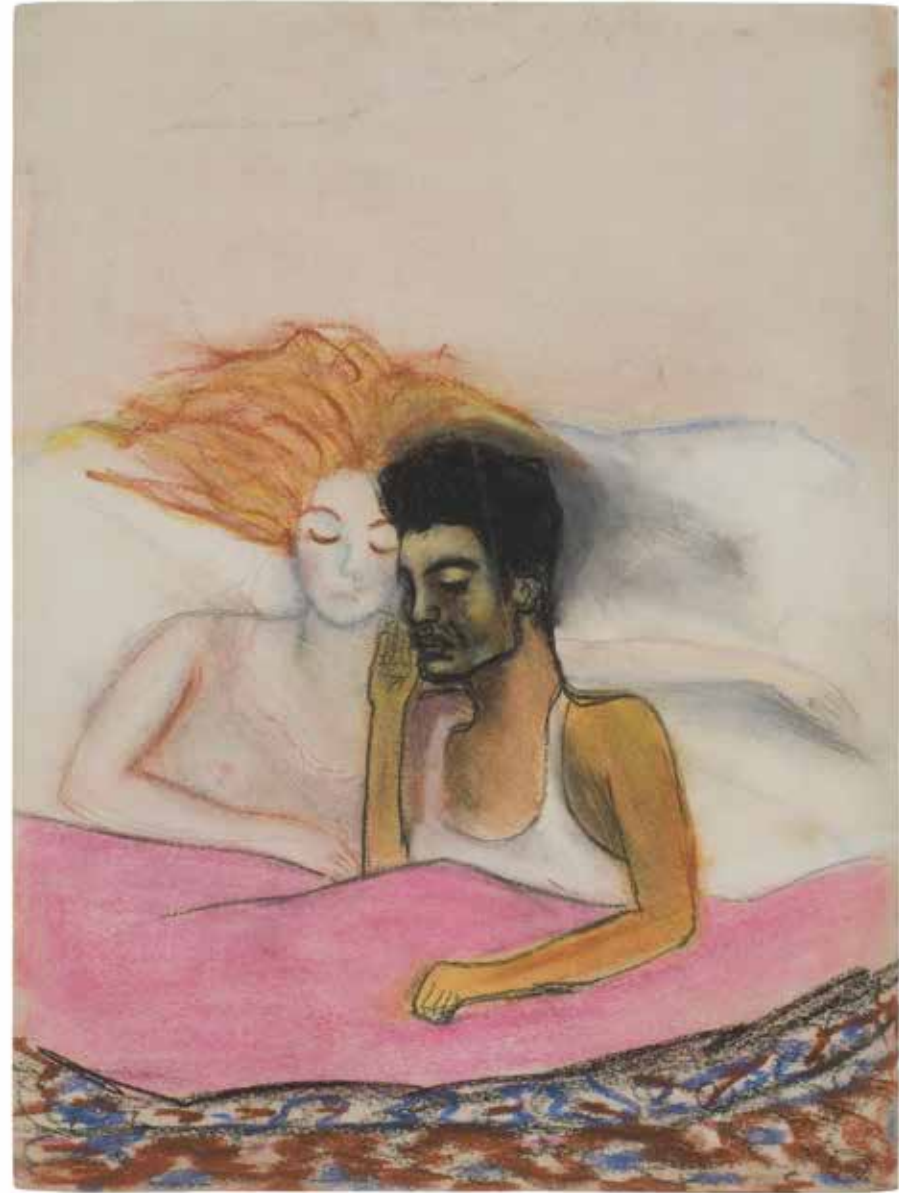
Ninth Avenue El 1935



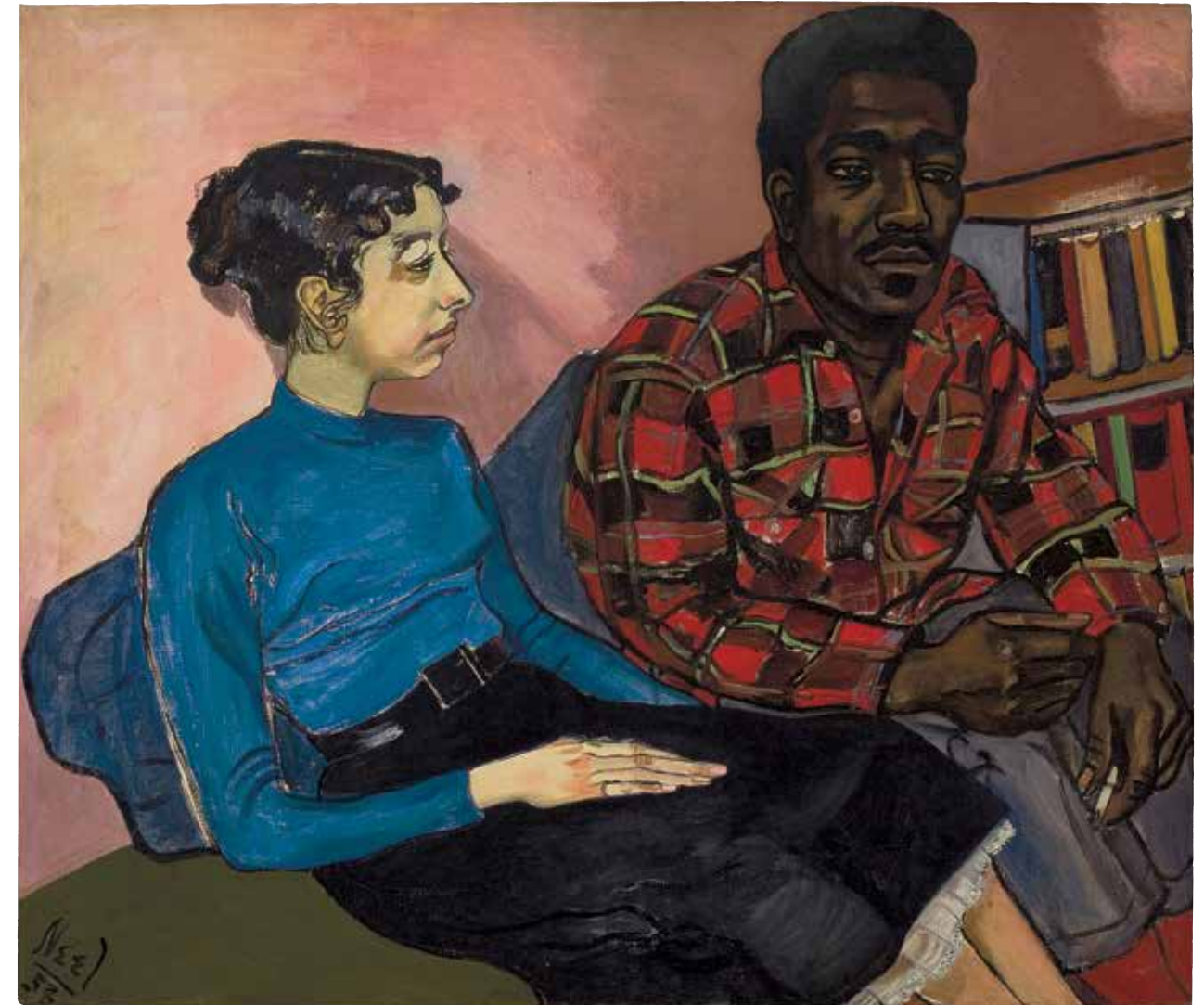
Synthesis of New York - The Great Depression 1933













James Farmer 1964



Henry Geldzahler 1967



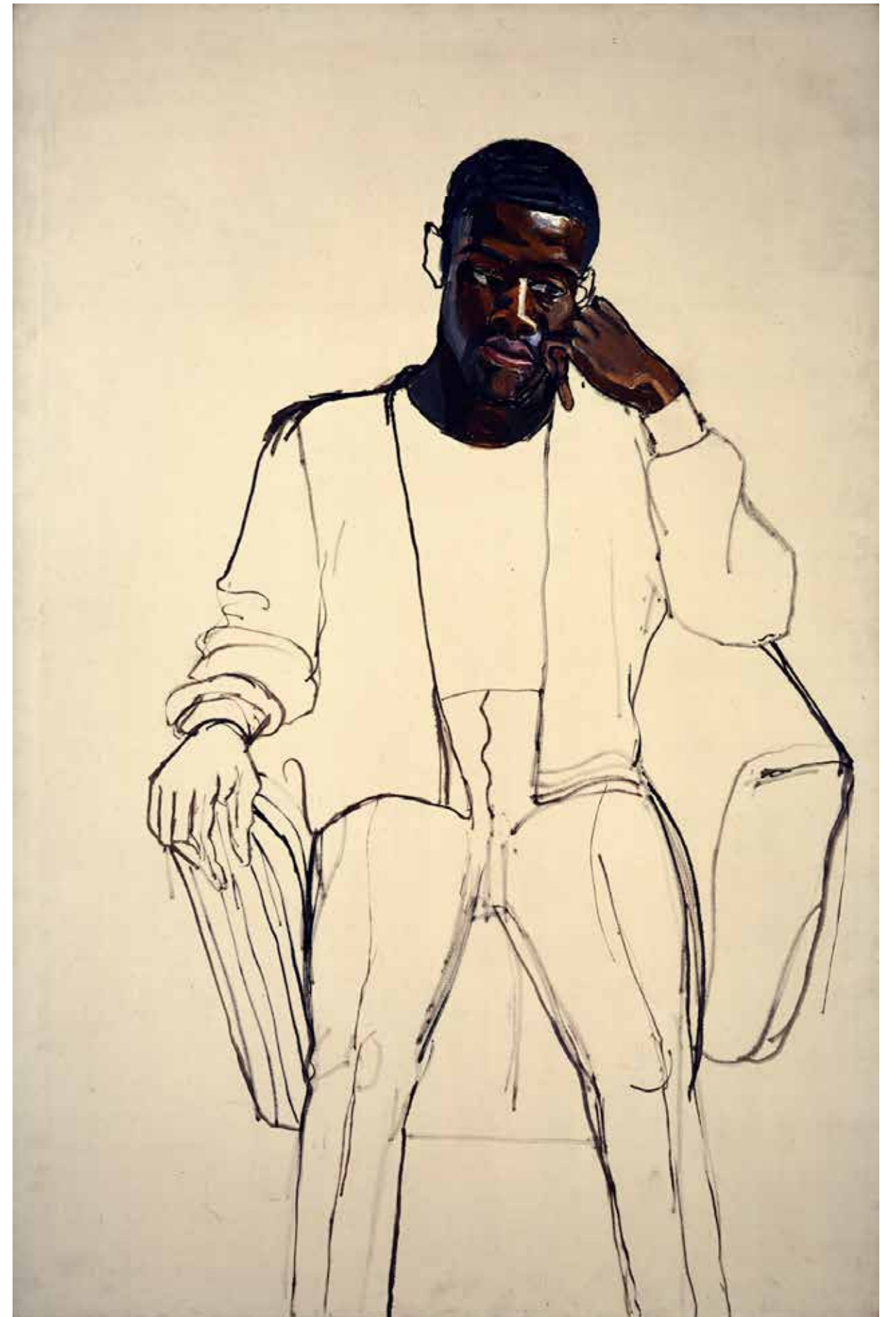
Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian 1978

Richard Gibbs 1968









ALICE NEEL: PEOPLE COME FIRST

KELLY BAUM and RANDALL GRIFFEY

Positioning Alice Neel as a champion of civil rights, this book explores how her paintings convey her humanist politics and capture the humanity, strength, and vulnerability of her subjects

Alice Neel's (1900–1984) uncompromising artistic vision and deep engagement with humanity in both art and politics have earned her legions of admirers. Surveying Neel's nearly 70-year career, this book features more than 130 works by the artist. Including her compelling portraits of individuals of all ages, both famous and unknown, the publication also considers her remarkable nudes, still lifes, cityscapes, and erotic pastels and watercolors through the lens of the radical humanism that informed so much of the artist's work. The authors address Neel's paintings of LGBTQ subjects; her unique aesthetic language, which merged elements of abstraction and figuration; and her commitment to progressive politics, civil rights, feminism, and racial diversity. The book's essays also explore Neel's highly personal preoccupations with death, illness, and motherhood while reasserting her place in the broader cultural history of the 20th century.

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EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

March 15–August 1, 2021

Guggenheim, Bilbao

September 17, 2021–January 30, 2022

de Young Museum, San Francisco

March 12–July 10, 2022