Encountering Alice Neel’s paintings of mothers while pregnant

Her complex portraits reveal an alchemy of desire, pain, power, and weakness.

by Catherine Ricketts in the July 14, 2021 issue

The Spanish Family (1943). Below: *Margaret Evans Pregnant* (1978). (Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women / © The Estate of Alice Neel)

I am seven months pregnant when I visit *People Come First*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's retrospective of the work of 20th-century painter Alice Neel. At the entrance I encounter myself disrobed: *Margaret Evans Pregnant* hangs five feet tall by three feet wide beside the exhibition title, and it portrays, with vivid presence, an expectant White woman, nude. Her belly is a globe—she is carrying twins—and her seated body bears the discomforts and exaggerations of the third trimester. Fatigue is implied in the jaundiced tones of her skin. Her navel protrudes. Her nipples seem disproportionally large, and a blue vein splinters across her breast. Her calves are purple, evincing the burden these children impose on her frame. At the same time, white brushstrokes lend luster to her green irises and suggest that quiet gladness lights this woman from within.

In pregnancy, I am exhausted and elated. I am weak and also in awe of my body's secret vigor, of cells blooming in the dark, shaping tissue and bone. In *Margaret Evans Pregnant,* I see another woman who holds multiple experiences of pregnancy at the same time.

In Western art, motherhood has often been portrayed in a single dimension, serenity pervading the familiar subjects of the annunciation, the Madonna and child, and even the pietà. Marian art has been heartening to me in the past, as I've revered the Virgin's obedience, her quiet wonder, and her dignity in the vocation of motherhood. I have spent hours with Henry Ossawa Tanner's *Annunciation*, Michelangelo's *Pietà*, and countless gilded icons of Mary and the infant Christ. Yet, as the mother of a two-year-old, expectant with my second, I crave a more dynamic visual language for motherhood.

Alice Neel painted dozens of portraits of pregnant women and mothers over the span of her 60-year career. These paintings, rendered through a woman's gaze, complicate and deepen the feminine ideal I observed in religious art, advocating for those doing mother work by painting maternal experience in all of its nuance and variety.

Neel is lauded for preserving portraiture through the rise of abstract art while using the tools of abstraction to portray psychological complexity. *People Come First* also positions Neel's work as advocacy, as the painter "tried to assert the dignity and eternal importance" of every one of her subjects, from her neighbors in Spanish Harlem to queer artists in Lower Manhattan to activist-intellectuals on the Upper

West Side. The very act of painting a person is a gesture of activism for Neel, for it insists, *You are worthy of being seen*. Significantly, she was one of the first painters to take on the subject of the pregnant nude.

Historically, in Western and Byzantine art, paintings relating to pregnancy depicted the Annunciation. These paintings portray Mary before she is pregnant, when the life she'll bear is only an idea. Pregnancy is one of the most powerful corporeal experiences, when a woman becomes acutely aware of her body's excesses of frailty and power. Yet most annunciation paintings do not draw the eye to the body at all. Instead, a slender form is shrouded in a robe. Our eyes might be drawn to the radiant blue of Mary's clothes and to her expression of surprise or timidity or calm as she squints at the herald and prays, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

While the primary devotional purpose of such icons and frescoes was to help the devout reflect on the incarnation, annunciation imagery has also served as the exemplar for maternal disposition. Even as doctrine insisted, through centuries of dispute, that Mary was fully human—for Christ's dual nature depended on his mother's humanity—Marian iconography underscores her obedience and chastity, suggesting that motherhood at large ought to be characterized primarily by these ideals. Neel's nudes respond to this history with depictions of pregnancy that are fleshy and emotionally knotty, depictions in which I recognize my own experience—my radiance, fatigue, fear, sexuality, and strength.

portrait-of-pregnant-woman

Neel carried four children, and her maternal experience was characterized by a tangle of grief, ambivalence, and satisfaction. At 25 years old, days before graduating from art school, she married Carlos Enríquez Gómez, a Cuban painter and fellow art student. She gave birth to their first child, Santillana, the next year. In 1927, they moved to New York to be close to the heart of the art scene and found a city plagued by diphtheria, called "the strangling angel of children" because it coated infants' throats and obstructed their breath. Santillana contracted the infection and died just before her first birthday.

Afterward, mourning haunted Neel's canvases. In 1930 she painted *Futility of Effort*, a small and stirring composition. The image is simple, a near caricature: a baby stands in a white gown in what might be a crib but might also be a tombstone. The palette is grayscale. In 1936, Neel reproduced this image in an art periodical with the new title *Poverty*, using her own story of loss to speak to the broader

implications of financial distress on women and children. Her young and struggling family had lived without heat the winter Santillana died.

Most mothers I know live with a splinter of maternal grief. It cuts across class lines. In the United States today, 10 to 15 percent of known pregnancies end in miscarriage. Even mothers who go on to raise healthy children live with the ghosts of those they've lost. New mothers often live with anticipatory grief, acutely attuned to their children's fragility. Even women without children might cradle maternal grief, whether childless due to their own glad choice or to unwelcome singleness or infertility. When my mother lost her firstborn to overdose he was 32 years old, yet she held him for hours, combing her fingers through his fine hair, before the police carried his body away.

Loss has been central to the church's portrayal of Mary's motherhood, and mothers for millennia have found company in the pietà. The image of the lifeless Christ draped over his mother's lap is ubiquitous in Christian art, present from the earliest icons; it became increasingly popular as a subject in the 1300s. Michelangelo's *Pietà* , completed in 1499, is known for its realistic rendering of Jesus' body, which the artist based on his study of the human corpse. Yet for all of its anatomical realism, the emotional tenor of his pietà is subdued. As Mary contemplates her son's limp body, her face is almost serene. In other examples, Mary is rendered with a slanted brow, a curved lip, or a single tear to suggest the gravity of her sorrow.

Twentieth-century artists, of course, have advantages over early iconographers and painters when it comes to portraying emotional complexity. Formal progress enabled by mathematical advancement endowed painting with more dimension and realism, both spatially and psychically. The visual vocabulary of abstraction also lent metaphorical richness to 20th-century painting, using color, shape, and texture to help us see beneath the surface of the body to the life of the spirit. Though Neel shunned the abstract expressionism of her time as anti-humanist, she noted late in her career that all great painting has "good abstract qualities," a sentiment evident even in her early works.

Neel's *Degenerate Madonna* (1930)—absent, unfortunately, from *People Come First* —relies on color and texture to evoke the emotional enormity of maternal loss. Stormy hues express the internal chaos of the mother, her skin yellowed and breasts deflated as she mourns the ghostlike infant in her arms. This is Neel's pietà, and she used all the tools available to her to capture the desperation, fury, shock, and

sadness that animate a grieving body.

Neel painted *Degenerate Madonna* after another loss. Months after Santillana's death, Neel and Enríquez welcomed a second daughter, Isabetta. Under the weight of grief, financial hardship, and the intensity of caring for an infant, the couple ruptured. Enríquez took the 18-month-old to Cuba, supposedly to ask for money before meeting Neel for a trip to Paris. Instead, he left the child in the care of his family and went on to Paris alone. She considered going after her daughter but thought that to care for the child alone would keep her from painting. Isabetta was raised by her Cuban grandparents, lost to her mother not because of illness but because of Neel's maternal ambivalence. "I always had this awful dichotomy," said Neel. "I loved Isabetta, of course I did. But I wanted to paint."

While Neel's maternal ambivalence might be seen as extreme, mothers often grapple with that "awful dichotomy," whether negotiating the demands of motherhood and professional ambition or simply navigating the challenges to one's identity that often come with giving birth and raising children. Motherhood is not characterized by the gilded calm of traditional religious iconography but by an alchemy of desire, pain, power, and weakness. Images like Neel's honor the complexity of women's experiences.

That complexity is perhaps most evident in Neel's mother and child paintings, her response to the art historical tradition of the Madonna and child. She painted portraits of nursing mothers, of women with toddlers, of women seated beside their growing children. They are Cuban, White, Latina, Indian; they sat for Neel throughout the 20th century. While the historic Mary is typically depicted with uncomplicated poise, in these mothers' eyes, Neel captures the paradoxes that war within women during their children's early years.

In *The Spanish Family* (1943), I see weariness and composure. In *Nancy and the Twins* (1971), I see boredom and contentment. In *Carmen and Judy* (1972), I see wisdom and wear. In *Nancy and Olivia* (1967), Neel paints a mother and infant as if they're a single figure, the child's temple pressed to the mother's cheek, her body enfolded in her mother's arms. While their outline illustrates the profound intimacy of the mother-baby relationship, Nancy's big, bewildered eyes seem to cry for escape. Perhaps on this day, the work of care makes her want to run. To their right, a blue wall is only half painted, a deliberate omission, negative space adjacent to the new mother as an abstract suggestion of emptiness or need. Opposite stands a

pitcher. I wonder if Nancy feels she's all poured out, desiring both intimacy and independence.

By the time Neel painted *Nancy and Olivia*, it seems she had synthesized these desires for herself. Her son Richard was born in 1939, followed by another son, Hartley, in 1941. Neel raised both boys without marrying either of their fathers. Her home housed her studio, and she mothered even as she painted prolifically, at last integrating maternal attention and professional ambition.

While I browse the room of mother portraits, a young woman glides her stroller beside a bench, lifts her infant into her lap, and opens her shirt. As she gazes at images of nursing mothers, the silver-haired women beside her must express their amusement, because I hear the young woman laugh and reply, "It's the only bench in the whole exhibit, so I'm taking it as an invitation." I wonder if she also felt affirmed by the power of Neel's maternal gaze, which penetrates to the heart of her subjects and helps us to see our whole selves dignified.

As I move through the exhibition, I find another of the seven expectant nudes that Neel painted in the 1960s and '70s: *Pregnant Maria* (1964). Maria reclines in bed, looking entirely at ease. One arm props up her head while the other drapes casually over her hip. Her face is self-assured, her posture sexually confident and emotionally open. That a woman can be both visibly tenanted by another person and utterly self-possessed speaks to the paradoxes at the heart of Neel's work and of every woman who has carried a child. In this room full of mother portraits, a woman beside me smiles, gesturing toward my middle. "This must be especially meaningful to you," she says. "It is," I reply.

Alice Neel: People Come First is on view until August 1 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Beyond Madonna and child."