

Capturing the Moment



A Journey Through Painting and Photography



'I paint my time using the people as evidence.'

– Alice Neel

Alice Neel

Puerto Rican Boys on 108th Street 1955 Oil paint on canvas, 1066 × 1221 mm

Tate, presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of Hartley and Richard Neel, the artist's sons 2004

Alice Neel***Puerto Rican Boys on 108th Street 1955***

Amelia Groom

I love you Harlem / Your life your pregnant / Women, your relief lines
 / Outside the bank, full / Of women who no dress / In Saks 5th Ave
 would / Fit, teeth missing, weary, / Out of shape, little black / Arms
 around their necks / Clinging to their skirts / All the wear and worry /
 Of struggle on their faces / What a treasure of goodness / And life
 shambles / Thru the streets, / Abandoned, despised, / Charged the most,
 given / The worst / I love you for electing / Marcantonio, and him / For
 being what he is / And for the rich deep vein / Of human feeling buried
 / Under your fire engines / Your poverty and your loves¹

Untitled, undated and unpublished in her lifetime, the above poem by Alice Neel is a clear testament to the love she felt for the uptown Manhattan neighbourhood where she lived for several decades. It was 1938 when Neel moved from Greenwich Village to East Harlem – also known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio – with her then-lover José Santiago Negron, a Puerto Rican musician. The romantic relationship didn't last, but Neel's love for the working-class immigrant neighbourhood did. *Puerto Rican Boys on 108th Street* is one of the many street scenes she painted during the 1940s and 1950s, showing neighbours, friends, tenement exteriors, corner stores and the life that, as she wrote, 'shambles / Thru the streets'.

When she painted these anonymised 'Puerto Rican Boys', Neel had been living on welfare and raising her two sons on her own.² She painted constantly throughout her life, but widespread appreciation for her work would only come much later, thanks in large part to the feminist art movement. Neel had her first retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in 1974, when she was seventy-four years old. In earlier decades she sold very few paintings, and many had never been exhibited. Her apartment was also her studio and the place where she stored all her work, and the art critic Robert Storr has described the sense of 'sedimented painting' that could be felt in this space, with many layers of history – all these pictures, 'all these people' – stacked up against the walls.³

Neel was deeply committed to emancipatory politics. She painted portraits of union leaders and civil rights activists, and published illustrations in the American Marxist journal *Masses & Mainstream*. In 1951, the Communist writer Mike Gold organised an exhibition of Neel's work, describing her in the catalogue essay as a 'pioneer of socialist realism in American painting'.⁴ Her

'I love you Harlem' poem mentions her love for Vito Marcantonio, the socialist congressperson who represented East Harlem and was an avid supporter of working-class, immigrant and African American civil rights.

In 1955, the same year she painted *Puerto Rican Boys*, Neel was interviewed twice by the FBI, whose files show that she was under investigation for several years due to her periodic involvement with the Communist party (though she was never an official member). A former acquaintance had contacted the FBI to inform them that Neel was an 'avowed, uninhibited' Communist. The outraged informant declares that Neel had a reputation for being 'a swine in human form', and that she was stubbornly "fixed" upon equal rights for all the coloured, yellow, and brown races via Communistic ways and ideas for these races'.⁵

Critics have often noted that one of the ways Neel went against the grain of her time was that she painted figuratively right throughout the reign of abstract expressionism – a time when, in Neel's words, 'they wouldn't let people-painters even get a foot in the door'.⁶ Clement Greenberg, the modernist critic who was at the helm of the abstract expressionist movement, had insisted that painting needed to differentiate itself from photography by transcending depiction and becoming 'pure'. This was during the Cold War; historians have since revealed the extent to which abstract expressionism was instrumentalised and indirectly funded by the CIA in an attempt to pit the ideology of American 'freedom' against the Soviet Union's mandate that artists conform to socialist realism.

While Neel was a (small c) communist and, as she put it, a 'people-painter', she also went against the dominant grain of socialist realism, in that she eschewed heroic depictions of the able-bodied male worker and instead painted women, children, sick people, pregnant people, overtly queer people and other outcasts who had rarely made it into the frame of conventional portraiture.

How should we look at *Puerto Rican Boys* in the context of *Capturing the Moment*, an exhibition that explores the relationship between painting and photography? Comparisons between these media often posit photography as the more objective of the two, insofar as it can capture whatever appears before the lens. This familiar characterisation can be complicated through investigation of the ways that photographic pictures are in fact loaded with subjectivity; questions about what the photographer allows into the frame and how they relate to what they are photographing can remind us that the photographic encounter is never neutral. In the case of Alice Neel, though, we have the inverse to this line of inquiry, because she would claim, surprisingly, that her paintings were 'quite objective'.

'One of the reasons I painted', Neel once remarked, 'was to catch life as it goes by, right hot off the griddle'.⁷ When the art historian Cindy Nemser asked Neel if she put a lot of herself into her paintings, she replied, 'I think they're quite objective, don't you?'⁸ The writer Hilton Als has said that Neel's paintings often make him think of jazz musicians like Cecil Taylor, who insisted on an

openness to the world. Als recounts how, once, someone was trying to stop a child in the recording studio from playing with a ball, and Taylor said, ‘no, don’t do that, that’s what’s happening now, that’s part of the recording, that’s part of the experience’.⁹

This principle of remaining open to whatever was happening *in the moment* is palpable in *Puerto Rican Boys*, which has a quality of spontaneity reminiscent of a photographic snapshot. Consider the group of people hanging out on the stoop in the background; these three East Harlem neighbours seem to be looking over at the encounter between Neel and the boys, giving the impression that we are witnessing a fleeting moment, and that the scene has been permeated by the contingencies of the street.

At the same time, Neel’s paintings are also incredibly painterly. She invites us to think of them as ‘quite objective’, and in doing so, she proposes a new kind of objectivity – a wonky objectivity that is full of idiosyncrasy and awkwardness. Her subjects might appear amid strange patches of negative space. Proportion is often wayward. She makes her figures radiate with intensity by painting areas of high-contrast colour around their edges, as we see in this work, where the grey of the pavement becomes lighter around the boys’ bodies. Many of her later subjects vibrate with electric blue outlines. ‘I paint my time using people as evidence’, Neel said.¹⁰ But she had a thoroughly particular way of looking at – and being in – her time. ‘Should thoughts be said plain’, she once mused in her notebook, ‘or wasn’t it more fun to play hide and seek – to hide them artfully in little corners?’¹¹

Notes

Painting in the Time of Photography

1. The artist cited in David Sylvester, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, London, 2000, p.98.

The Paradox of the Moment

1. Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', *October*, vol.19, 1981, p.23.
2. For a commentary on time and photography see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York 1981.
3. Jeff Wall, 'Restoration: Interview with Martin Schwander' (1994), in *Jeff Wall*, London 1996, p.134.
4. Laura Mulvey, 'A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai): From After to Before the Photograph', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.30, no.1, 1 Mar. 2007, pp.27–37.
5. Lennard J. Davis, 'Migrant Mother: Dorothea Lange and the Truth of Photography', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4 Mar. 2020. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/migrant-mother-dorothea-lange-truth-photography/>.
6. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London 1978, p.4.
7. John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy, London 1966, p.13.
8. Susan Rosenberg, 'People as Evidence', in *Alice Neel*, exh. cat., Ann Temkin (ed.), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia 2000, p.43.
9. *Paula Rego*, exh. cat., Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid 2007, p.268.
10. Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews, 1962–1993*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist, Cambridge, Mass.; London 1995, p.218.
11. Robert Enright, 'Painting in an Explained Field', *Border Crossings*, August 2018, pp.80–93.
12. Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham 2016, p.13.
13. *Ibid.*, p.9.

Alice Neel

Puerto Rican Boys on 108th Street 1955

1. Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty*, New York 2010, p.140.
2. While many of the people in Neel's paintings from this period are anonymised, there are also portraits in which the subject's name is recorded in the title, as with her pictures of Georgie Arce, a Puerto Rican boy from the neighbourhood whom Neel painted and sketched a number of times.
3. *Alice Neel*, dir. Andrew Neel, SeeThink Films, New York 2015.
4. Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel*, New York 1983, p.90.
5. Alice Neel Park 01', FBI Records: The Vault. <https://vault.fbi.gov/alice-neel>.
6. *Alice Neel: People Come First* [podcast], The Met, 9 Mar. 2021. <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2021/3/alice-neel-people-come-first>.
7. 'Alice Neel: They Are Their Own Gifts, 1978' [online video], The Met, 18 Dec. 2020. <https://youtu.be/MQtSDLOgo5c?si=zy7P-KSYCuRLWRa>.

8. 'Alice Neel: Viva la Mujer', *Recording Artists: Radical Women* [podcast], Getty. <https://www.getty.edu/recordingartists/season-1/neel/>.
9. 'Alice Neel as seen by Hilton Als' [online video], David Zwirner, 10 Jun. 2021. <https://youtu.be/2SnAyYprXiA?si=l84LL-ON27qz835T>.
10. 'Artists on Their Art', *Art International*, vol.12, no.5, 15 May 1968, p.48.
11. Randall Griffey, 'Painting Fruit(s)', in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2021, p.81.

Francis Bacon

Three Studies for Portrait of Lucian Freud 1965

1. 'John Deakin', The Estate of Francis Bacon. <https://www.francis-bacon.com/life/family-friends-sitters/john-deakin>.
2. Alex Clark, 'Frozen in time: artists at lunch in Wheeler's, March 1963', *Guardian*, 15 Nov. 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/nov/15/frozen-in-time-artists-at-lunch-in-wheelers-march-1963>.
3. Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, London, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg 1996, pp.192–3. Cited in 'Lucian Freud', The Estate of Francis Bacon, cited in 'Lucian Freud', The Estate of Francis Bacon. <https://www.francis-bacon.com/life/family-friends-sitters/lucian-freud>.
4. 'John Deakin', The Estate of Francis Bacon.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Daniel Farson, *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon*, London 1993, pp.238–9. Cited in 'Lucian Freud', The Estate of Francis Bacon.
7. 'Lucian Freud', The Estate of Francis Bacon.
8. Tom Shone, 'Inside the Complicated, Enthralling Friendship of Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon', *Avenue*, 18 Jan. 2021. <https://avenuemagazine.com/lucian-freud-francis-bacon-friendship-new-biographies/>.
9. Dalya Alberge, 'Secret tapes shed light on Francis Bacon's bitter battle with Lucian Freud', *Guardian*, 28 Jan. 2018. <https://amp.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/28/francis-bacon-secret-tapes-lucian-freud-battle>.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Michel Archimbaud, *Francis Bacon In Conversation with Michel Archimbaud*, London 1993, p.72. Cited in 'Lucian Freud', The Estate of Francis Bacon.
13. 'Francis Bacon – The South Bank Show (1985)' [online video], *Under Pressure Magazine*, 28 Sept. 2015. <https://vimeo.com/140651929>.

Hiroshi Sugimoto

Aegean Sea, Pillion 1990; Tyrrhenian Sea, Scilla 1993; Ligurian Sea 1993; Tyrrhenian Sea, Conca 1994

1. Karen Chernick, 'Hiroshi Sugimoto: Photography That Fools the Eye', *Art & Object*, 28 Jan. 2019. <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/hiroshi-sugimoto-photography-fools-eye>.
2. 'Hiroshi Sugimoto Interview: Between Sea and Sky', Louisiana Channel, 11 Sept. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWh4t67e5GM>.
3. Emily McDermott, 'Hiroshi Sugimoto's Future', *Interview*, 11 Feb. 2016. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/hiroshi-sugimoto-sea-of-buddha-pace>.

Andy Warhol

Self Portrait 1966–7

1. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, 1975.
2. Blake Gopnik, *Warhol: A Life as Art*, London 2020, p.372.
3. Paul Carroll, 'What's a Warhol?', *Playboy*, September 1969.

Miriam Cahn

The Beautiful Blue (Das Schöne Blau), 2008–17

1. Daniel Trilling, 'How the media contributed to the migrant crisis', *Guardian*, 1 Aug. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/01/media-framed-migrant-crisis-disaster-reporting>. Adapted from an essay in *Lost in Media: Migrant Perspectives and the Public Sphere*, eds. Ismail Einashe and Thomas Roueché, Amsterdam 2019.
2. By 2022, the global situation had worsened, with the UN reporting that over 100 million people were forcibly displaced. 'More than 100 million now forcibly displaced: UNHCR report', UN News, 16 Jun. 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1120542>.
3. Deborah Lauter, "'It's Society's Problem, and That's Why It's Interesting": Artist Miriam Cahn on Painting Controversial Subjects in an Age of Correctness', *Artnet*, 18 July 2022. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/miriam-cahn-profile-2143197>.
4. Myria Georgiou and Rafal Zaborowski, 'Media coverage of the "refugee crisis": A cross-European perspective', The Council of Europe, 2017. <https://rm.coe.int/1680706b00>
5. *Lost in Media: Migrant Perspectives and the Public Sphere*, eds. Ismail Einashe and Thomas Roueché, Amsterdam 2019.
6. Chris Tomlinson, "'Invasion": 5,000 Illegal Migrants Arrive in Lampedusa in One Day', *European Conservative*, 14 Sept. 2023. <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/>

First published 2023 by order of the Tate Trustees
by Tate Publishing, a division of Tate Enterprises Ltd,
Millbank, London SW1P 4RG
www.tate.org.uk/publishing

on the occasion of the exhibition
Capturing the Moment

Tate Modern, London
15 June 2023 – 28 April 2024

YAGEO 國巨基金會
Foundation

Capturing the Moment is realised in collaboration with
the YAGEO Foundation, Taiwan. The YAGEO
Foundation was founded by Taiwanese collector,
entrepreneur and philanthropist Pierre Chen in 1999.

© Tate Enterprises Ltd 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be
reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form
or by any electronic, mechanical or other means,
now known or hereafter invented, including
photocopying and recording, or in any information
storage or retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers or a licence from the
Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, www.cla.co.uk

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84976-898-6

Distributed in the United States and Canada by
ABRAMS, New York

Library of Congress Control Number applied for

Project Editor: Emma Capps
Production: Bill Jones
Picture Researcher: Bill Jones
Designed by Joe Hales
assisted by Sam Eccles, Joe Hales studio
Colour reproduction by DL Imaging, London
Printed and bound in Wales by Cambrian Printers

FRONT COVER: Andy Warhol, *Self-Portrait 1966–67*
(modified detail from the original) as seen on p.84

Measurements of artworks are given in millimeters,
height before width

Interview for Benjamin H.D. Buchloh published in
Gerhard Richter: Paintings by Roald Narsgaard
© 1988 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London
Three Studies for Portrait of Lucian Freud, 1965
© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved,
DACS / Artimage 2023.
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd
Study for Pope VI, 1961.
© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved.
DACS 2023
© Peter Doig. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2023
© LFA Lucian Freud Archive (Bridgeman copyright)
© Andreas Gursky / Courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin
London / DACS 2023
© David Hockney
Photo Credit: Art Gallery of New South Wales /
Jenni Carter
© Louise Lawler / courtesy of the artist and
Sprüth Magers Berlin, London
© Pushpamala N.
© Laura Owens. Courtesy the artist; Sadie Coles HQ,
London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.
© Succession Picasso / DACS, London 2023
© Christina Quarles
Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Pilar
Corrias, London
© Gerhard Richter 2023 (22082023)
© Wilhelm Sasnal / courtesy of YAGEO Foundation,
Taiwan.
© Lorna Simpson / courtesy the artist and
Hauser & Wirth
Photo: James Wang
© Hiroshi Sugimoto / courtesy of the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery
© 2023 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the
Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by DACS, London.

All works from the YAGEO Foundation and
Tate collections.

All efforts have been made to trace copyright holders.
The publisher apologises for any omissions.