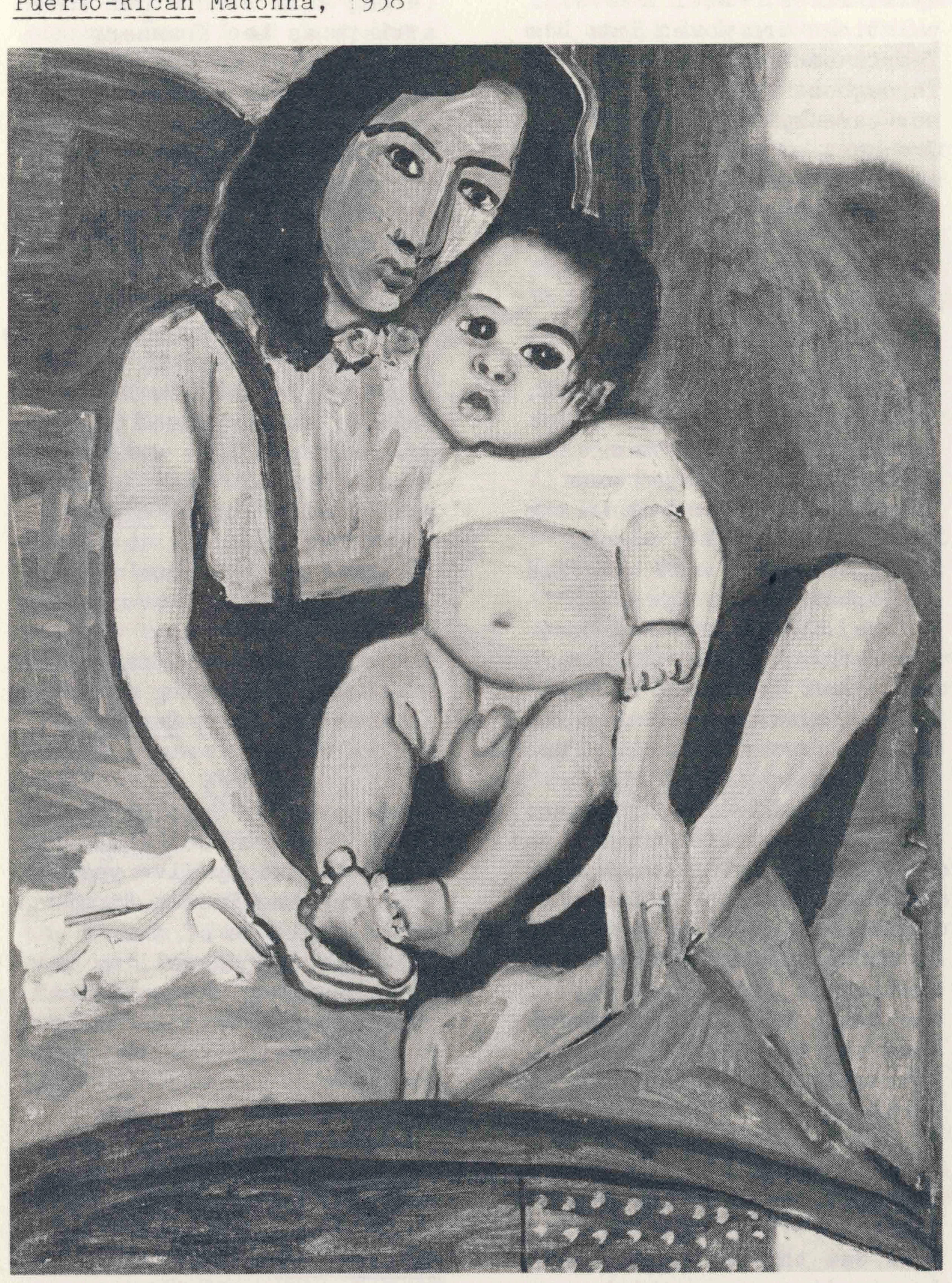
Puerto-Rican Madonna, 1938



By the time Alice Neel died last October at the age of 84, she was recognized as one of America's foremost contemporary portrait painters (or "painters of people," as she preferred to say).

The works in this exhibition date from 1930 to 1969 and include not only portraits but also Neel's lesser-known street scenes, landscapes and still lifes. Neel's paintings are woven into the fabric of her life. Throughout the sixty years of her career, Neel's most frequent subjects were family members, neighbors and friends. When she wasn't painting people, she often recorded views from her window or objects in her apartment.

Neel painted Isabetta, 1930, the earliest work in the exhibition, soon after recovering from a nervous breakdown. The child in the painting is Neel's second daughter (the first had died of diphtheria two years before). Isabetta had been separated from her mother and taken to Havana by Neel's Cuban husband, a painter she had met in art school. Painted from memory, Isabetta, a forlorn, doll-like creature, clutches a stuffed animal and symbolizes Neel's own feelings of desperation and loneliness. Later Neel said of the painting, "That's emotion in its purest form." The small scale and somber hues are typical of Neel's intensely expressionistic early work.

In a later painting of
Isabetta, made during the
summer of 1934--the last time
Neel saw the child--Isabetta
is standing, arms akimbo, on
a boldly striped, handmade
Bulgarian rug. Displaying a

precocious sexuality,
reminiscent of Balthus's
child-women, Isabetta looks
out at the viewer defiantly.
Similar in composition to the
first Isabetta, the larger
scale, firmer structure and
stronger palette of Isabetta,
1934, indicate Neel's growing
artistic confidence.

By 1935 Neel had joined the easel project of the WPA (along with such other women artists as Lee Krasner, Louise Nevelson and Isabel Bishop), which provided a small but steady income over the following eight years. During this period, Neel painted many brooding cityscapes, including New York Tenement Backyard, 1933, one of several unpeopled urban views that bear a resemblance to similar scenes by Edward Hopper. In the 30s Neel was sharing an apartment in Greenwich Village with her lover, Kenneth Doolittle, a sailor with intellectual views and an addiction to opium. In a jealous rage, Doolittle slashed over sixty of Neel's canvases. Isabetta, 1930, bears the scars of that devastating incident, as does New York Tenement Backyard.

Neel moved to Spanish Harlem in 1938 where she lived for the next twenty-five years, painting the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans of the neighborhood as well as her friends among the political radicals and intellectuals. Her compassion for the poor was always expressed through her portrayal of unique individuals. Puerto-Rican Madonna, 1938, for example, depicts the wife and baby of the suffering man in T.B. Harlem, one of Neel's early masterpieces.

Edward Pinckney Greene, 1946,

and Puerto-Rican Girl, 1949, typify Neel's dark portraits of the 40s. Edward Pinckney Greene is a portrait of an impoverished writer. His profile is placed against a dull green, undifferentiated background and his grey-green skin tone is accentuated by the dark brown of his shirt. Neel often cited Cezanne's statement, "I love to paint people who have grown old naturally in the country," adding, "And I am just the opposite. I love to paint people who are torn to pieces by the pressures of the city."

Neel's fortunes improved in the sixties with the receipt of the 1962 Longview Foundation Purchase Award and increased requests to exhibit her work (she had the first of many one-person shows at the Graham Gallery, New York, in 1963). Her works of the period are brighter and larger. Neel said that Thanksgiving, 1965, was her answer to Pop Art, referring particularly to the can of Ajax on the sinkboard. The thickly painted capon defrosting in the sink suggests in an amusing way the less sentimental side of a family dinner. Later landscapes, New Jersey Water Tower, Blue, 1963, and Riverside Drive, 1967, are light in color--blues and greens predominate -- and exemplify the strong, formal composition and simplification of elements that distinguish many of her outdoor scenes (as early as New York Tenement Backyard, 1933).

The pregnant woman is a subject Neel has returned to often. Nancy, Neel's daughter-in-law and favorite model, posed for Pregnant Woman, 1967, two days before the birth of her first child. The curves of the breasts,

stomach and legs of the recumbent nude figure resemble a great mountain range. By eliminating the details of the setting and outlining the body with a wide blue line, Neel focuses all attention on the woman's condition.

Although a '982 exhibition at the Robert Miller Gallery,
New York, sparked a new interest in Neel's landscapes and still lifes, Neel will doubtlessly be remembered most for her penetrating portrayals of people. She has said, "For me, people are the first premise. My work is a monument to them."

Neel attended the Philadelphia School of Design for Women from 1921 to 1925 (now Moore College of Art) and received an honorary doctorate in 1971. Among her awards are the Benjamin Altman Figure Prize of the National Academy of Design (1971), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1976), and election to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1976). Her work found favor among a new generation of artists and admirers in the 70s and 80s, in part due to the increased attention paid to women artists but also because the recent revival of figurative expressionism has resulted in a new respect for the veteran realist artists.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX (all the works are oil on canvas and, unless otherwise noted, lent by Jonathan and Monika Brand, Berkeley):

- 1. Isabetta, 1930, 31 x 24".
- 2. New York Tenement
 Backyard, 1933, 29-1/2 x 251/2".
 - 3. Isabetta, 1934, 43 x 25".
- 4. Canary, Girl, Fire Escape, 1938, 32 x 22".
- 5. Puerto-Rican Madonna, 1938, 30 x 24-1/2".
- 6. Edward Pinckney Greene, 1946, 20-1/4 x 16-1/2". Lent by Katharine H. Cole, San Francisco.
- 7. Puerto Rican Girl in Chair, 1949, 30 x 24-1/2".
- 8. <u>Carol Brand with Cat</u>, 1953, 30 x 20".
- 9. New Jersey Water Tower, Blue, 1963, 50 x 33".
- 10. Untitled (Still Life), 1964, 48 x 25". Lent by Katharine H. Cole, San Francisco.
- 11. <u>Side of Building</u>, 1965, 50 x 29".
- 12. Riverside Drive, 1965, 44 x 36".
- 13. Thanksgiving, 1965, 36 x 24".
- 14. Pregnant Woman, 1967, 33 x 54".
- 15. Snow, 1967, 80 x 60". Lent by Katharine H. Cole, San Francisco.
- 16. <u>Jenny Brand</u>, 1969, 35-1/2 x 26".

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Contemporary Arts Gallery,
NY, '38; Graham Gallery, NY,
'63, '66, '68, '74, '76-'78,
'80; Maxwell Gallery, S.F.,
'67; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, '74 (catalogue);
Portland Center for Visual
Arts, OR, '75; Georgia Museum
of Art, Athens, (catalogue);
Artists' Union, Moscow,
U.S.S.R., '81 (catalogue);
Robert Miller Gallery, NY,
'82, '84; Loyola Marymount
University, L.A., '83.

Selected group exhibitions:

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Contemporary American Realism Since 1960, '81 (traveled, catalogue); S.F. Museum of Modern Art, CA, The Human Condition, '84 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Hills, Patricia. Alice Neel (NY: Abrams, 1983) (Contains complete biographical and bibliographical information through 1982.)

Brand, Jonathan. Fire and Alice (unpublished manuscript), '83.

Castle, Tom. "Alice Neel," Artforum, Oct. '83.

Higgins, Judith. "Alice Neel: Collector of Souls," Art News, Oct. '84.

Blair, William B.

"Alice Neel, Unconventional Artist, Dies at 84," New York
Times, Oct. 15, '84.

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