



Survival Mode

Describing herself as a “collector of souls,” Alice Neel willfully focused on the human figure when abstraction held sway. Unflinching portraits of her Spanish Harlem neighbors, like this one of Carlos Negrón, both dignify individuals and provide trenchant social critique.



T.B. Harlem, 1940

Take a closer look

Alice Neel (1900–1984) positioned the 24-year-old against a plain background, focusing attention on his face and physical condition. Heavy black outlines, oppressive space, physical distortions, and a mournful palette elicit shock, empathy, and anger at conditions that allowed such suffering.

Something to talk about

Neel intended paintings like *T.B. Harlem* to highlight the struggles of the urban poor and effect change. Abstract artists at the time typically ignored the everyday in favor of the timeless. What role do you think art can/should play in society?

In her own words

"I'll tell you what you can see [in their faces]. Their inheritance, their class, their profession. Their feelings, their intellect. All that's happened to them. You see everything in their faces."

Who knew?

In the 1940s, tuberculosis spread rapidly in overcrowded urban neighborhoods, and treatments were invasive. Negrón's bandage covers the wound from a procedure to collapse and "rest" the infected lung by removing ribs. Despite his dire appearance, Negrón lived into his late 60s.

Alice Neel, *T.B. Harlem*, 1940; Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; © The Estate of Alice Neel; courtesy of David Zwirner, New York

