

Silent Dialogues: Photos and Paintings by Billy Sullivan

By Elizabeth Fasolino

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For the past 37 years, the artist Billy Sullivan has been chronicling the worlds of fashion, art, and style, capturing, in photographs and paintings, that most ineffable quality — charisma. The artist, who divides his time between New York City and East Hampton, is known for portraits of glamorous people in private moments, depictions that reveal a complex equation of psychology and bone structure that add up to real beauty.

Throughout his career, Mr. Sullivan has used his photographs, which are projected onto canvas, as the starting point for his paintings. On Saturday, a new exhibit of the artist's work, including 16 paintings, a wall installation of pastel and watercolor portraits, and a video installation of 35-millimeter slides, will open at Guild Hall in East Hampton.

In 2005, his eldest son, Max, was killed in a hang-gliding accident in Colorado at the age of 32. (His younger son, Sam, is 33.) The intense grief inspired Mr. Sullivan to return to his archive of photographs, taken in the 1970s and 1980s, and begin a series of paintings.

“Instead of the pain of the last few years, through to the present day, I thought it would be fun to go back and play,” the artist said during lunch at his studio on the Bowery, where he has worked for more than three decades.

Mr. Sullivan, 61, is a slight man with iron-gray hair. He still has some of the street swagger of an Irish-Italian kid who grew up in Brooklyn's Sunset Park. Pausing to look down at a plate of prosciutto and cantaloupe, he continued.

“Photography becomes history right away. You don't remember the moment until you see it again. Working from photographs, making paintings of earlier images, my mind thinks about the connection with the person. Our dialogue — and it's a silent dialogue — continues. I can go back in time.”



Morgan McGivern

His work owes a good deal to 17th-century Flemish genre paintings, and the Post-Impressionist work of Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. But the strongest influences are contemporary, recalling the seductive voyeurism of Nan Goldin and Andy Warhol.

In Mr. Sullivan's paintings, the smile of a bather, the sweep of a girl's heavy long hair, or the seductive curve of a bared back are framed by a rear window, a foreshortened bed, or a carefully placed mirror, amplifying the compositional relationships between the people and places seen in his photographs.



“Klaus & Clarissa, 29 Palms” by Billy Sullivan

Mr. Sullivan's personal life has always been closely intertwined with his work. “Wherever I go, whatever I'm doing, my work is my diary,” he said.

His life as an artist began with a visit to an allergist on 54th Street in Manhattan. “He knew I liked to draw,” Mr. Sullivan said. “And he said, ‘You should apply to the High School of Art and Design,’ which was around the corner.”

The young Mr. Sullivan, whose previous academic accomplishments had been marred by dyslexia, applied and was accepted. His daily commute, which involved a trek through Bloomingdale's, changed his life. “Everything was different. Daisy Alden, a poet, was my teacher. After I got started there I didn't want the Pontiac Grand Prix anymore. I just started loving school. There were all different kinds of people, rich kids from Forest Hills in the 1960s, crazy drag queens. We were all hanging out. It was wild. The school had terraces and escalators. My girlfriend was a leftist, and her family had a dishwasher.”

Mr. Sullivan met his former wife, Amy Goodman, at the nightclub Scene East while in college at the School of Visual Arts, and they married in 1970. “We went around the world really fast in about a month,” he said of their honeymoon, and then he began working for Malcolm Morley, the painter and photographer.

Soon afterward, Mr. Sullivan and his wife began coming out to East Hampton. “I always wanted to go there,” he said. “I was from Brooklyn. To my parents it seemed like the farthest they could go. I once drove my dad out and he hated it. But it was where you wanted to go if you were young. The first time I went in the early '70s was with Warhol. I was in the back seat. And later Amy and I rented a house on Sayre's Path.”

In 1994, The New York Times asked Mr. Sullivan to photograph fashion shows in Europe. The experience of working and living in such an intense creative milieu, and the instant intimacy it spawned, made an indelible mark on Mr. Sullivan. “It's grueling work,” he said. “You travel with a tight group of people. I worked in Paris. I worked in Milan, in New York City. It's like the Biennale in Venice, where you're with the same people in an intense way for a period of time.”

In 1979, after Mr. Sullivan's first solo show at Jill Kornblee's gallery in New York City, his marriage began to unravel. The intensity of the time coincided with many of Mr. Sullivan's most famous images of the discotheque era.

"Carol, 250 Bowery," a painting in the show at Guild Hall, is from a photo taken during this period. "I was thinking of Bonnard," Mr. Sullivan said of the composition. "And then I remembered I was looking at Carol in the tub, and I did a watercolor. Bonnard used the wife, the dog, and the mistress as subjects. My pictures are just my life, and it looks pretty good," he said, more with the wisdom of experience than with the folly of hubris.



Billy Sullivan's "Carol, 250 Bowery"

"Here's how Sirpa started," he said of two portraits of Sirpa Lane, a Scandinavian model and actress who went on to star in a series of films under the tutelage of Roger Vadim. "We were just hanging," Mr. Sullivan said of the nude photographs taken at New York City's Regency Hotel. The paintings, "Sirpa Milk, 2003" and "Sirpa's Back, 2006," show a lithe, narrow-hipped, un-selfconsciously beautiful young woman without the musculature that has come to define contemporary nudes. Her skin, fresh from the bath, glows as she guzzles milk straight from the carton while lying on an unmade bed. Ms. Lane died of AIDS in 1999.

"Klaus & Clarissa, 29 Palms" started as a photo taken in 2003 following a show of the artist's work at Regen Projects, a gallery in Los Angeles. Klaus Kertess, a noted art historian, writer, and curator, has lived with Mr. Sullivan since 1980. Clarissa Dalrymple, an old friend and one of Mr. Sullivan's favorite subjects, curated the Los Angeles show.

In the painting, Mr. Kertess and Ms. Dalrymple are shown under a sun umbrella at the artist Jack Pierson's house. A tapestry-covered divan links the foreground and background, forming colorful and decorative shapes that compel the viewer to take a second look. It also reinforces the link between the two figures, as if they were content under their umbrella and oblivious that they were being observed.

Many of Mr. Sullivan's photographs and paintings echo work by Edgar Degas of women at their toilette.

"The dressing up," in Mr. Sullivan's parlance, is about self-expression as much as it is about grooming: "It's like being a kid and going to clubs — the whole preparing. It's part of going out. People inventing their art."

Another painting, "Cookie and Sharon, 2003," shows two women, friends of Mr. Sullivan, side by side against a dark horizontal background, seemingly unaware of being observed. Cookie Mueller, an actress and writer at Details magazine, died of AIDS in 1989. Sharon Niesp, a singer and actress, was featured with Ms. Mueller in John Waters's "Desperate Living" and "Polyester."

In the back gallery at Guild Hall, visitors will have an opportunity to view Mr. Sullivan's familiar stream-of-consciousness curatorial style in a wall installation of portraits, similar to one he made for the Whitney Biennial in 2006, and a video display with a musical score, "Masque et Travesti," by Alessio delli Castelli.

"Putting it together went really fast," Mr. Sullivan said. "It's like having an idea when you speak on the phone, only you have time to see it through. Plus, I had an assistant. We moved through it like the ViewMaster my parents got me when I was a kid."

In the dimly lit back room adjacent to his studio space in East Hampton, Mr. Sullivan sat in front of a large flat-screen monitor, scrolling through images from his past: happy scenes of children playing at birthday parties, pretty boys in skimpy outfits dancing at nightclubs, young couples taking their wedding vows, drag queens dolling themselves up for a night on the town. “So many of them are dead,” he said.

“Building the wall piece was an education,” the artist explained. “You have a memory of how it was and then you look at it again years later. The pictures stay the same, but putting them together makes stories of relationships. You look at them and they make sense. It’s personal, very personal.”

Billy Sullivan’s work will open with a reception at Guild Hall on Saturday from 4 to 6 p.m. The show can be seen through Oct. 14. More information about related talks and events is available online at www.guildhall.org.