

Flash Art

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1998

O U V E R T U R E

BILLY SULLIVAN

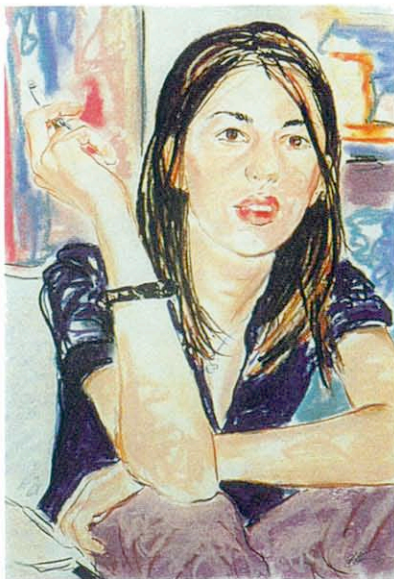
GIOVANNI INTRA

IF THERE WAS a science of fun, who would be its Bruno Latour? Gazing at the pastel lines, india ink washes, and oils on canvas by the New York-based artist Billy Sullivan, one is bombarded, on a molecular level, by a contemporary manifesto of pleasure. Pleasure is an antique and playful excess which can only happen between human beings. The kind of pleasure depicted in, and produced by Sullivan's portraits and still-lives is one which basks in a much more temperate climate than many of today's "hard-core" proponents of fin-de-siècle nihilism. A litmus test: when people talk about Sullivan, they perk up and flush with health, reminisce about parties, golden beaches, flashing diamonds, "commissioned portraits," the artist's friends and lovers, stories, and anecdotes from Manhattan and Long Island, and fleeting encounters with stars (movie, art, literary) of many persuasions. These stories, funnily enough, all cite the artist Sullivan at the center of this activity, "a leather-boy bullfrog, completely at home croaking away in his pond," as Jack Pierson once affectionately wrote.

Sullivan is a practiced renderer who, since 1964 with his first solo show in Texas, has been busy putting his life down on paper. Working through a time when the visually describable context of American social life has dwindled, diminished, reconfigured, and come out anew, painfully traversing, as it has, the intellectual and health-related regimes of the 1980s which threatened to bury it under a plague of irony, Sullivan has persisted with drawing without a hint of irony and without the slightest wish of going off-track. It's not so much the theory vs. fun problem which Sullivan's works deliver their pleasing anecdote to, but the very serious concern of having a really good time and describing it technically in the work of art.

Count the smiles in Sullivan's pictures... I lost count. Sullivan's world certainly isn't Warhol's, but neither is it Alex Katz' or Elizabeth Peyton's, although it's true that all of these artists have skillfully convinced the fleeting moment, which would otherwise be wasted by time, to sit for them, long enough at least for a picture to be made.

Giovanni Intra is a critic based in Los Angeles.



Pleasure is an antique and playful excess which can only happen between human beings.



Clockwise from top left: Sofia, 1997. Pastel on paper, 21 x 15". Sofia, 1996. India ink on paper, 12 x 8". Evi, 1997. India ink in paper, 57 x 26". Brian & Gigi, 1997. Pastel on paper, 30 x 21". Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Billy Sullivan was born in New York in 1946 where he lives and works.

Selected solo shows: 1981: Komblee, New York; 1985: Holly Solomon, New York; 1990: Fischbach, New York; 1994: Stux, New York; 1997: Regen Projects, Los Angeles; 1998: Ibel Simeonov, Columbus (OH).

Selected group shows: 1987: "Portraits," Ginza Art Space, Tokyo; 1988: "The Art of Music," The Bronx Museum,

New York; 1989: "Don't Bungle the Jungle," Tony Shafrazi, New York; 1992: "Slow Art," ICA, P.S.1, New York; 1994: "Swan," Tom Cugliani, New York; "Landscapes... Ideas," Apex Art, New York; "Oeuvres Choisies," Allez les Filles, Columbus; 1995: "Face Value," Wexner Center, Columbus; Tampa Museum (Florida); 1996: "Beaches," Rene Fotouhi, East Hampton, New York; 1998: "Drawings," Meyerson & Nowinski, Seattle.