

Art in America

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Billy Sullivan at Nicole Klagsbrun

In Billy Sullivan's previous exhibition at Nicole Klagsbrun there was a vertical painting of a figure in a shower stall that was reminiscent of Bonnard in its luminosity, patterned light and subject matter. Intimacy with a hint (or more) of sexuality has been present throughout most of Sullivan's long career, but where the figures in his work were once characters in a distracted bohemian drama, they are now more formally comfortable, seemingly at ease in a decorative schema that is classically modernist. He appears to be headed toward larger degrees of both abstraction and diffidence.

Sullivan's most recent show, titled "Friends," is largely made up of medium-sized pictures (mostly around 30 by 40 inches, all 2006) of one or two people in medium close-up. With the exception of two large, light-raked nudes of Sullivan's friend Sirpa, all, including a portrait of a dog named Ralph, have an immensely attractive and sociable demeanor that is just a little otherworldly. Looking at the show, I was reminded of Sylvia Sleight's painting *The Turkish Bath* (1973), which depicts a group of naked, male art critics posed as odalisques. Her composition is arranged in such a way that though painted naturalistically (Sullivan caresses flesh with the brush similarly), the figures are pushed up against the frontal plane of the picture. Partly from the removal of shadows and partly due to the patterned rug in the rear, Sleight's canvas suggests Islamic decoration.

This association led me to notice the subtle Byzantine undercurrent that Sullivan may have picked up via Bonnard and Matisse. The figures in Sullivan's paintings seem sinless, returned

to a pre-sybaritic innocence. They also seem aware that they are the motif and are relaxing in pure, bright color. *Louie and Ricky*, which depicts two blue-jeaned figures in conversation, one in a black jacket, the other in yellow with a red, boalike parka collar, suggests a kind of ode to "visual people," as if the subjects were making the picture for the artist by their very existence. The glow given off by all the paintings—lime green, fuchsia and other touches of party colors over white ground—seemed to fill the gallery and add to the feeling that Sullivan's subjects are the hardiest of flowers.

In the past, Sullivan's dependence on the snapshot sometimes foregrounded the performance of the personalities in his milieu. Now, it is used more as a kind of armature which organizes the rectangle while Sullivan improvises painted descriptions of various textures and patterns. For example, in the very beautiful *Alessio Reading* (oil on linen, 30 by 21 inches), the subject's hair, which looks mussed and coiffed as much as painted, is one among a group of optically sensual events—his red and orange striped shirt, the contrasting greens of the plant and webbed chair behind him and his pink flesh—that shift and rub up against one another.

In the work of David Hockney and Elizabeth Peyton, to whose art Sullivan's is often compared, we are never permitted to retreat from the force of the artist's personality (Hockney) or *l'ordina* (Peyton). Sullivan's work seems wider ranging, modest and intelligent in its ability to intercede between photo and painting, character and depiction, viewer and subject, color and light. Just as he doesn't exhaust the options available in a given photograph (one always feels there are more versions available), he keeps his own personality in check, and lets us observe along with him.

—Joe Fyfe

Billy Sullivan: *Sirpa's Back*, 2006, oil on canvas, 64 by 42 inches; at Nicole Klagsbrun.

