



The Muses

Painter Billy Sullivan's beguiling haute bohemia

by Leslie Camhi

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Having squandered my youth in scholarly pursuits, the "charmed circle" school of art holds a bittersweet appeal for me. I adore Florine Stettheimer—the brilliant painter who, early in the 20th century, picnicked with Duchamp—but representations of fêtes galantes by more contemporary downtown denizens, from Andy Warhol to Nan Goldin, often leave me feeling wistful.

There's someone I know quite well, though, whose portrait is included in painter Billy Sullivan's collection of the bright, the beautiful, and the now nearly forgotten, currently on view in this mostly beguiling show of paintings, pastels, and photographs. She's a small white dog—the ultimate art-world insider—who, when we meet in Chelsea or on a Hamptons beach, still deigns to acknowledge me.

Sullivan, you may remember, contributed one of the knockouts of last year's Whitney Biennial: an installation/slide show drawn from his three decades' worth of snapshots of New York's haute bohemia and nightlife. On the center screen, pictures from the 1970s were projected of a lithe young woman, naked with a towel around her head, perched on an unmade hotel bed and playing with her breakfast. The effect was uncannily moving. No one had to tell you that the woman, a minor Finnish film star, later died of AIDS; her extreme openness before the camera amounted to a kind of innocence, a recklessness we witness and survive but ruefully.

Sullivan's extensive photographic archive forms the basis for his recent paintings, which are the major news here, rendered in loose brushwork and sometimes jewel-toned colors. "Sirpa" and her breakfast return in them, alongside other muses: androgynous Missy of the impossibly long eyelashes; Alessio, wearing riding cap in a London taxi; exquisite Christian, smoking a cigarette, pale and lost in thought. And the artist himself, elegant in a pin-striped jacket on an evening out. The tables around him have begun to empty, yet he's still clear-eyed, taking the measure of what remains, and what is lost.